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*As we look forward,
 O Lord,
 to the coming festivities,
 may we serve you
 all the more eagerly
 for knowing that
 in them
 you make manifest
 the beginnings
 of our redemption.*

(From the Solemnity of Christmas)

From The Editor's Desk

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Many, many years ago when I was still a very young priest, green in the gills to be sure, I was fortunate enough to have been invited to spend my Christmas holidays, which amounted to the better part of a month, to a little church in a hill station in the northern climes, helping out as a young priest. It was a lovely little town with some old British cottages and a few other stately bungalows that were requisitioned by the Army since much of that hill station was the Cantonment.

The town rose at dawn unusually late. The weather was freezing for me, coming from the plains, but the days were beautiful, crisp and bracing. Everything seemed so clean and fresh. No one spoke loudly nor did you hear loud music blaring at the street corners. It was a quiet little town. You could say 'Christmas was in the air.' Around early evening before the shadows lengthened, one could hear the little parish choir practicing to the accompaniment of the old asthmatic organ the Christmas standards. It was all out of a picture book. As the day wound down, I would sup early with the old pastor and we would chat a little, downing a snifter, before retiring to our rooms.

It was a truly memorable Christmas that I can still remember very vividly and fondly. And yet, despite all that, I was glad to head home in time for New Year...at least. It wasn't that I was lonely or homesick. It was simply that Christmas didn't feel like Christmas without the company of my near and dear ones. Strange, even though nature and the weather seemed to conspire to give me a truly nostalgic Christmas, one that I could remember to this day, yet without my loved ones and the excitement of decorating the tree and dipping my fingers into the marzipan dough, singing carols in the garden as the sun went down in the Sahayadris that could not be matched by any other Christmas even in the most picture-perfect of climes.

As Christmas gets more and more commercialized and even though the Christ Child is put to sleep beneath the tree, the presence of loved ones and the memories of Christmas past warms the cockles of the heart bringing back to our memories, the true spirit of Christmas, because it was "love that was born on Christmas Day." Our street lights, however gaudy they may be, really do cheer us up during those dreary winter evenings. Our Christmas trees send their tiny beams into the murky nights and transform our houses into wonderlands. The candles we place on our dining tables glow and beckon warmly in the surrounding gloom. And that's what Christmas is all about. It's about family and a light that shines in the darkness, which the darkness cannot overcome. It's about a tiny flicker of hope that is more powerful than all the darkness of despair. It's about a new-born child who, in his helplessness, is stronger than all the forces of evil in our world.

Fr. Ian Doulton, sdb

CHILDREN AND PARENTS: THE RIGHT DISTANCE

by Bishop Gianpaolo Dianin

The marriage of children also demands important changes by parents which, if not processed, contribute to tensions, especially if the pain of separation emerges

We continue journeying through the first years of a young couple's life in the aftermath of marriage. A delicate and precious time where the load-bearing walls of married life are being built. The engagement was the time of foundations, but inevitably life together has been thought out, imagined, dreamt of, but it does not yet have the endorsement and confirmation that can only come from real life, from that everyday rhythm that allows one to better calibrate challenges, style and priorities.

We talked about the impact of real life and that everyday rhy-

thm that was so desired, but which now demands that we work on the details and the nuances that are often the occasion of little stresses, misunderstandings and tensions that must be addressed immediately. Life does not come coloured in black and white tones or through health or illness, there are also those small but annoying headaches that are not an illness but which weigh heavily when you are together side by side. There is not only everyday life with its exciting discoveries, its heart-warming sunrises and sunsets, but the inevitable small or big struggles. There



are other 'evolutionary tasks', i.e., challenges that sooner or later knock at the door and that one must face no longer theoretically, but in a concrete manner that has to do with one's personality, character, and temperament.

One of these developmental tasks is the proper management of relations with their respective families of origin; an issue that is always simmering and sometimes even boiling at a good start in married life. It is an issue that can be looked at from two points of view: that of the parents and that of the young couple.

The marriage of children also demands important changes from parents which, if they are not processed, contribute to tensions, especially when parents experience the 'empty nest syndrome,' that is, when they have not welcomed the departure of their children with serenity and feel the weight of this rupture strongly. In these times of ours, the parent's investment in children is so great that the parental couple often puts the spousal relationship in the background to invest everything in their parental duties. So, when the children (or very often the only child) leave home, not only does the couple experience the emptiness caused by this departure, but they have to reckon with their life that has to be rebuilt because thus far everything has invested everything in their children. We will never cease to remember the primacy of the young couple's bond over parenthood. One can only be a good parent if one's life as a couple is cherished and cared for.

What can happen when chil-

dren have become the primary reason for the marriage? In such cases, and they are not few, those intrusions into their children's lives arise with petty emotional blackmail and with excessive and misplaced expectations. There are expressions that highlight this: "You never come to see me"; "You forgot about us." The good intention to help and support the young couple often conceals the search to still feel like parents and not to abandon that role that has become a priority and gives meaning to dad and mum's lives.

Parents, with the departure of a child are called upon to reset their lives by rediscovering the joy of being husband and wife. For the young couple, everything is new, but for the parents, too, there is something new that has to be faced with patience, taking into account the inevitable suffering associated with separation.

The issue must also be looked at from the perspective of the young couple, called, as Scripture reminds us, to leave father and mother. To leave, it is not enough to change an address and a residence; it is the heart that must make a new cut of the umbilical cord, necessary for the life and growth of the new couple. For the young married couple, it is a question of leaving the model of married life that they have shared for so many years in their parental home, leaving a style, a way of running the home, a model of man and woman represented by the male-father and the female-mother.

Leaving does not mean abandoning or rejecting, but saying firmly to oneself: 'We are us.' The dowry, especially spiritual, that each one brings to the new life as a

couple is very important, but we are us, different, distinct, called to write a new and unprecedented page.

The young married couple may not have left their father and mother and, faced with the hardships of the new married life, be nostalgic for the time when, for example, on returning home, they always found someone to look after them and dinner was ready. The new life may not have left behind the old one with its habits and comforts. This is not an easy issue to deal with because the young couples' desire for autonomy today comes to terms with the need for help,

especially with childcare when both spouses work.

It is important to establish a "right distance," to defend oneself against emotional blackmail, to try to avoid forms of dependence even for very simple things such as food, laundry and cleaning. All this takes into account the history of each of the two young spouses: one may be very attached to his or her family, another very free and independent. An alarm bell may be the conflicts that the young couple may face because of their respective parents. It is a telltale sign that must be addressed by both of them, together. □

THE FOUR CANDLES

In a quiet room there were four lit candles. As the four candles burned, they were slowly consumed.

The place was so quiet that one could overhear their conversation.

The first one said: "I am peace, but men do not want me, they prefer war: I think there's nothing left for me to do but extinguish myself!"

So, it was and, little by little, the candle allowed itself to be extinguished completely.

The second said: "I am faith, but men want none of me, they prefer fairy tales; unfortunately, I am of no use, there is no point in my remaining lit."

As soon as she had finished speaking, a light breeze blew over her and extinguished her.

Sad, very sad the third candle in turn said: "I am love, I do not have the strength to remain lit. Men do not consider me and do not understand my importance. Too many times they prefer hate!"

And without waiting any longer, the candle was extinguished.

At that moment, a child entered the room and saw the three candles extinguished. "But what are you doing! You must stay lit. I'm afraid of the dark!" So saying she burst into tears.

Then the fourth candle, pitying her, said: "Fear not little one, weep not: as long as I am lit, we can always light the other three candles again: I am the hope."

With eyes shining and swollen with tears, the child took the candle of hope and relit the three others. □



CHRISTMAS: THE TRIUMPH OF LIGHT

by Chino Biscontin

The Christian faith is expressed through celebrations and festivals that glorify the events of redemption in close connection with what happens in creation

The solemn first prayer that we raise to God in the Christmas Mass is expressed as follows: "O God, who in a wonderful way made us in your image, and in a more wonderful way redeemed us, make us able to share in the divine life of your Son, who today wished to take on our human nature". In this text, God's historical action to give us salvation (with the events narrated in the Scriptures and culminating in Jesus) and his work as Creator are kept well united, and it could not be otherwise, since there is only one Creator and Saviour.

Thus, it is not surprising that the Christian faith is expressed with celebrations and festivals that glorify the events of redemption in close connection with what happens in creation. Already the daily prayer with the psalms is called Liturgy of the Hours, because it is placed according to the solar rhythm of day and night, sunrise and sunset. But the great feasts of the Liturgical Year also have this characteristic. Easter, which in its earliest origin was a spring festival linked to lunar rhythms, is fixed on the Sunday following the spring full moon, the one that is seen in the sky after the March equinox.

But Christmas is also part of this search for dialogue and union between salvific meanings



and cosmic events. Since the New Testament does not give us the date of Jesus' birth, when decisions were made in the Church on the composition and ordering of the Liturgical Year, it was considered significant to place that feast at the same time as the

*The heaven of heavens
does not contain thee,
most holy Word, but thou,
most merciful,
hast deigned
to make thyself man
in the womb of the most
pure Virgin Mother.*

*Glory to you Creator of
the world.*

Byzantine Liturgy

winter solstice, already occupied by a pagan festival in honour of the victorious Sun. Starting from that solstice, in fact, the hours that pass with the sun in the sky increase and reject the hours of darkness. Jesus is the Sun of righteousness who has conquered our darkness, sin and death, and brought us the light of participation in divine life, eternal life, he, the Word of God in whom the sun and all creatures were made.

With this choice, it was natural that the feast of Jesus' conception in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit should be celebrated exactly nine months earlier: in fact, the 25th of March is the feast of the Annunciation, close to the spring equinox: in which sun and darkness share the hours of the day equally, from that date the hours taken by the sun increase. It remained to imbue a solstice, the summer solstice, and an equinox,

the autumnal equinox, with salvific significance. For the former it was decided to place, albeit not with scientific exactitude, the feast of St John the Baptist (24 June) who said: "I must decrease, He must increase" (and in fact from that feast the sun goes down, until Christmas); while for the latter it was chosen the feast of the Archangel St Michael (29 September) who defeated Satan with the triumphant cry: "Who is like God?" Indeed, after that equinox it seems that darkness, which steals more and more time from the sun, is victorious.

At Christmas, it will be clear that the Light, which is Jesus, will triumph: thus, as we celebrate the feast of Jesus' birth, we also imbue with gratitude the conclusion of an annual cycle and the opening of a new one, both gifts from the Creator God.

With regard to Christmas, we must remember the great resistance that first the Jewish religious culture, and then the Greek one, put up to the claim that the Son of God, who is God like the Father, with his birth is also man in everything like us (except sin). Jesus God and man. That little conjunctive 'and' between God and man guards the novelty and identity of Christianity. But the temptation to put a disjunctive 'or' in its place lasted for a few centuries.

Appropriately, the feast of Christmas is followed by that of the Holy Family, which emphatically affirms that the Son of God did not just have a human appearance, but was a real man, a man among men, a member of a human family. □

COURAGE TO BE BIG-HEARTED

by Anastasia Dias

"Have we reached yet?" his wife feebly asked, her skin pale as the circles beneath her eyes seemed darker.

Even he was exhausted walking beside the donkey on that dusty road. He glanced at his wife sideways. She was heavily pregnant and the journey was hard on her. He murmured, "We've reached." He was fervently hoping to find a place for the night at least.

"Could we stop somewhere, I think it's almost time." she pleaded weakly. He just nodded, too exhausted to even reply.

He saw a house right in front of them all lit-up; from within, with the sound of children playing. He walked up to the house and knocked on the door. An elderly woman opened it. "What do you want?" she demanded gruffly. "Ma'am my wife is pregnant..." But before he could finish, the door was slammed in his face.

As he walked away from the door up to his tired wife on the donkey, he noticed the house next to it. He went up to it and knocked on the door. A young man stepped out. "Yes?" he asked. "My wife's pregnant. Do you think you have a place for us for the night?"

"I'm so sorry' my wife's pregnant too and there isn't enough

place for ourselves either. But if you go down to the corner. There's an old man there, I think he could provide you some accommodation for the night."

He seemed hopeful as he walked down the street. It was turning dark when he knocked on the door of what looked like a dilapidated house. The old man who opened the door had a lantern in his hand. "Who is it?" he asked, squinting. "Sir," pleaded the young man, "my wife is pregnant and I need a place for the night. Do you have a place to spare?" "No place here," came the rough reply. The young man pleaded as fervently as he could: "Sir, please ...we have nowhere else to go."

"What can I do? You come at this hour and ask for accommodation and that too when your wife is with child. I'm sorry, I can't help you." The old man was grumpy but he had a kind heart. He thought of the time his own wife had been pregnant and he reconsidered what he'd just said. He said softly: "See I really have no place here, but there's the shed at the back of the house where I keep my cattle. Given your situation and seeing you have no other options, would you want to stay there?" Joseph's eyes brightened:



“Oh yes, yes, of course! That would be great,” Joseph replied. He heaved a sigh of relief. He rushed back to his wife, now bent over in much pain and led her carefully down the street to the old shed where, a few hours later, she gave birth to her son.

That must have probably been one of the most memorable journeys Joseph would ever take in the course of his life, the other than their escape to Egypt.

That first journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem on a donkey would have taken Joseph and Mary around three days and then the other much longer journey to Egypt would have taken at least a month.

What sounds so incredible about Joseph’s story was his willingness to do all that was needed in that particular situation, not what he felt was right or what he wanted to do. The dream in which the angel Gabriel appeared to him was proof of this. It was the same angel that told him not to be afraid and all he had to do was to take Mary to Bethlehem.

He could have objected: “but the journey is too long,” or “why should I get mixed up in this?” or “Fine, I’m leaving my job just to carry out this plan; what’s in it

for me?” But that wasn’t the way he thought. Something nudged him to look at the bigger picture for him, he not even have thought of his family or his friends or the world at large. And just he said, “Fine, you know what? I’ll do it. It might be tough and tiring, but it will be worthwhile and I’ll do it. It may be long or tiring, but, it’s well worth it. I’ll do it!”

This is why Joseph is remembered even today. It is because of the largeness of his heart. He was never inclined to think about himself, or his job or the reward he might get. He left everything behind and did what needed to be done. He was incredible! He was willing to accept whatever was placed before him and he faced every situation with great courage. We could learn that from him.

2022 is coming to a close so, can you put to rest all those hurtful memories that may have tormented you this past year? It would be important for us to embrace 2023 with whatever it brings. Like Joseph we must learn to look at the bigger picture but enjoy the little things of everyday life. Perhaps, therein we might find what we’ve been looking for, if not, then we’re sure to find something much greater like Joseph did. □



TURNING ON THE SUN IN ABADAN

The Salesians’ environmental challenge in Nigeria

In 2020, Nigeria was among the top 20 economies in the world. However, on the (Human Development Index) based on education and life expectancy, Nigeria ranks 161st out of 189 countries.

Nigerian soil offers an astonishing number of natural resources such as minerals, gold, natural gas and, above all, oil of which the African giant, as the country is called, is the leading producer in Africa, sixth in OPEC and tenth worldwide. It is the most populous country on the Continent, with a population of more than 209 million people in 2019, grouped into more than 250 ethnic groups that often degenerate into outright conflicts. More than half of the population, 53.5%, is of the Islamic faith, while 45.9% are Christians. This causes ethnic conflicts to escalate further, creating adherence and consensus towards jihadist movements and armed groups, Boko Haram above all, known throughout the world for the brutal and violent attacks it carries out against civil society, especially against girls and young girls in education and training.

The green choice

The Salesians of the young Delegation of Nigeria, flanked by the Anglophone West Africa Province, although operating in an urban and apparently growing context, take on the most disparate needs of those who, fragile and alone, are not included in this

transformation of the country.

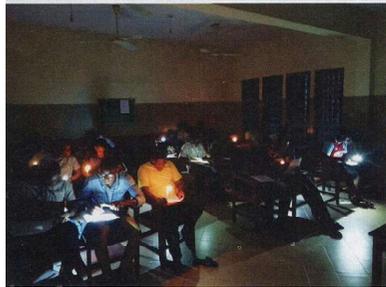
These are mainly so-called ‘street’ girls and boys at risk of social exclusion, exposed to all sorts of dangers and exploitation. For them there is no place in society, they do not attend school and do not have access to the minimum levels of security and protection.

In particular, the *Don Bosco Foundation* in the World today supports the missionaries of Abadan, a small community of 6 missionaries in the south-western part of Nigeria, with the project ‘Improving the lives of vulnerable street children, young people and students through access to solar energy at the Child Protection Centre’.

In Nigeria is a complex and environmentally risky country, the Salesians are working to ensure that ecological choices are made and technologies are used to produce energy from alternative sources to fossil fuels, in order to reduce CO² emissions and make the activities of the works more sustainable.

The ecological choice of the Salesians in Nigeria corresponds to the call of the international community, which is expressed in various fora and through various modalities, such as the identification, among the Sustainable Development Goals, of Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy systems for all.

However, it adheres, in the



The Salesians gather the most diverse needs of those who are not included in this transformation of the country.

more specifically vocational sphere, to the proposal contained in the post-chapter reflection on CG28 "Which Salesians for the youth of today?" according to which the Sons of Don Bosco, listening to "the cry that rises from so many of today's youth" at the world level, commit themselves "to be credible witnesses of conversion, in the care of Creation and in Ecological Spirituality".

The objectives of the Salesians' project proposal are to improve training and access to quality training and learning processes at the School of Philosophy; to empower the beneficiaries themselves towards sustainable environmental practices; and to improve services and livelihoods.

Solar energy

Considering the frequency of power outages in Nigeria in gene-

ral, and in Ibadan in particular, solar technology will be an essential alternative to solve the problem, with a view to making spaces safer and the benefits of a systematic provision of goods and services for all and sundry constant. With a regular supply, young people will be guaranteed a better education and quality learning processes. Furthermore, solar technology will help reduce, high unemployment and environmental pollution and, finally, by promoting a healthy and environmentally friendly lifestyle, it will reduce health risks.

The installation of a solar-powered panel system in the Salesian centres has the added benefit of reducing the high costs incurred by using fossil fuels to power and maintain the generators.

The solar system that the project plans to install to cover the Abadan works will provide regular energy to the community, the refectory, the library, the chapel, the Don Bosco Centre's long roadways for security reasons, the classrooms, the home for street children and youth, the Youth Centre and the staff offices, and with a well-structured monitoring and evaluation plan by the PDO (Planning and Development Office). With the direction of the Salesians of Don Bosco of Abadan, it will be possible to unite, in Faith, with the environmental vocation of the universal Church described by Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si* of 24 May 2015: "Everything is connected, and that the authentic care of our life and our relationship with nature is inseparable from brotherhood, justice and fidelity to others." □

Witnesses in & for Our Times



ST. MELANIA (December 31)

Things Money Can't Buy

The story of Melania is prophetic for our times. She challenges us to rethink our priorities and to question the values the world places before us. She shows us by her life that there is much more to life than superficiality.

Melania was born in Rome around 383 C.E. into the wealthy Valerii family. Her parents, Valerius and Albina were generous with her from a young age. Since there was enough and more wealth around, they ensured that she was never in want of anything. Her grandmother was also Melania; she was distinguished by adding 'the Elder' to her name. She had an interesting life herself!

She was born in Spain and was a relative of St. Paulinus of Nola. She was married at the tender age of 14 into another noble and wealthy family. She migrated to Rome with her husband and there gave birth to three sons. However, she lost two of her sons and her husband by the time she was 22! This terribly upset her and she quite probably slipped into a depression. She left her son,



Valerius in the care of a guardian and retreated to the desert in search of consolation and answers.

During that time, the desert lifestyle was growing in popularity. What was happening was Christians were no more being persecuted as a result of Emperor Constantine declaring Christianity to be the state religion. Hence, Christians tended to become more complacent in the practice of their faith. This was not appre-

ciated by a section of believers who felt that they needed to practice it more radically. To do so, they cut themselves off from society and retired to the desert. There they spent their days fasting, praying and studying the scriptures. This lifestyle grew in popularity due to the fabulous effect it had on those who embraced it. In many ways, this was the origin of what we call religious life today.

Coming back to Melania the Younger; she herself was married off at 14. Just like her grandmother she was married to a rich nobleman named Pinianus. Pinianus was actually a cousin of Melania. Valerius and Albina had no other children and hence looked to Melania to carry on the family. Valerius' mother had left them a fortune as she was one of the richest people at the time. Melania was obedient to her parent's desire but she was enamoured by the example of her grandmother. Something about her caught Melania's fancy. She had all the wealth and possessions anyone could hope to have and yet, she chose to leave everything and live as a poor hermit in the unforgiving desert. Melania realized that there was more to life than wealth and possessions. Money can buy one lots of things but it can't buy the most important things like happiness, wisdom and love.

Discovering a Vocation

Melania embarked on married life with a desire to live like her grandmother. She knew that she would not be able to emulate her

life totally but she could at least try. Probably, she desired to have the benefits that came with ascetic living. Despite her riches, Melania was never boastful or proud. She tried to be generous and kind to the needy.

She had two children but unfortunately both of them died as infants. This loss proved tough to handle and very soon she became mortally ill. Legend says that Pinianus pleaded with the Lord for her life and promised to dedicate his life to the Lord should she be spared. She recovered and Pinianus kept his promise. He explained the situation to Melania, who was happy with the proposal, and they both practiced continence from then on.

This dramatic turn around required an external sign as well, and so the couple went to Messina in Sicily to live in a monastery. After spending two years there, they left for Thagaste, Africa. Interestingly, they did not part with their wealth all at once but used it in small amounts to finance the running of the monastery and to support the Christian mission. When they reached Thagaste, they put themselves under the guidance of St. Augustine and devoted their time to prayer and charitable works. Under Augustine's tutelage, they set up convents for men and women.

After a few years there, they decided to take a trip to the Holy Land. They joined a hermitage near the Mount of Olives and very soon, Melania set up her

own convent nearby. While in the Holy Land, Pinianus passed away. In his honour, Melania established a monastery and built a Church.

Living One's Best Life

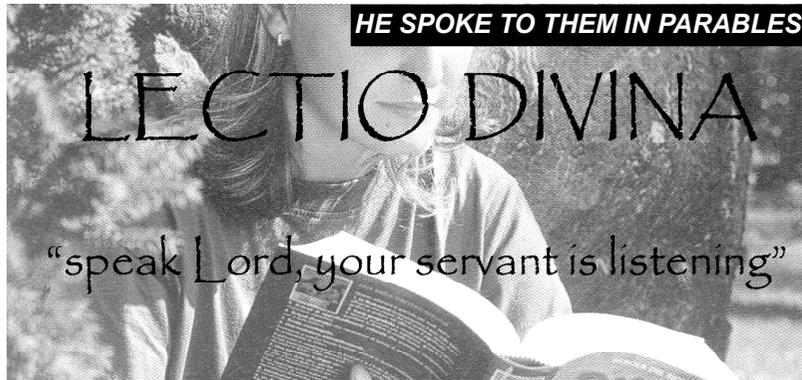
Melania the Younger along with her grandmother are counted among a group of influential women who pioneered and publicized the desert lifestyle. They are known as Desert mothers or *ammias*. They were a group of pious women who desired to offer their lives totally to Jesus and to live out the Gospel radically through asceticism and renunciation.

Melania was fascinated by this life from a young age but due to her parent's wishes she could not pursue her interest. Nevertheless, God had His own way of bringing her back. This is an important lesson for all of us. God has endowed each of us with a vocation. We might stray away from it for a variety of reasons but God will continuously lead us back to it provided we are open to His inspiration. Finding our vocation in life is of extreme importance for it is the very thing we were made to do. We can never be truly happy if we are not following our vocation. We might be happy with what we have chosen but there will be a void within. Melania experienced something like this when she was married. Marriage didn't fit well. Many times, we might be led to think there is a problem with the situation or with someone else when we face dissatisfaction and discontentment in our life but the

real issue might be that we are simply in the wrong place!

In order to truly be ourselves we have to live out our vocation, and the basic vocation that is given to every one of us is to be children of God. At our baptism, we were given this vocation. This is the foundation of our Christian life. In order to help us live out our Christianity, we have the teachings of the Church, the sacraments and so many other aids. All of this is simply a help to find true happiness. But God has called us to greater things. He wants us to make something of our life. Just as parents desire their children to be successful, God does too. Hence, he calls some of us to a single life, some to a married life and some to a religious and priestly life.

Melania discovered that her calling was to live as a hermit and so she gave up her property and wealth. She put all her wealth at the disposal of the Church. She used it to support convents and monasteries as well as to establish Churches and convents. She generously offered what she had so that many others could benefit. Thanks to her, so many men and women could discover their own vocation to live as monks and nuns. Today we have many young people across the globe trying to find out whether they are really called to offer their lives totally to God. We can support them with our prayers and if possible, offer them some financial support as well. By doing so we would be doing a great act of charity and a valuable service to the Church. □



THE JUDGE AND THE WIDOW

by Carlo Broccardo

In a city there lived a judge, who neither feared God nor had regard for anyone." He was a character without nuance, without hesitation; he himself repeats it later: "I neither fear God nor have regard for anyone." In short, he is the opposite of what a judge should be.

Looking through the Bible, in fact, we see that the characteristics required to be a good judge are precisely that of fearing God and caring for the weakest people: "Look at what you do, for you do not judge for men, but for the Lord, who will be with you when you pass sentence. You shall act in the fear of the Lord, faithfully and with an upright heart" (2 Chr 19:6, 9). For Israel there is only one Law: that of God; kings and judges must not invent anything; they must only enforce it; they must act in the fear of the Lord, that is, recognising his authority. And they must be especially attentive to the weakest, to those who have no other help: "Seek justice, succour the oppressed, do justice to the

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Lk 18:1-8)

orphan, defend the cause of the widow" (Is 1:16-17).

The profile is clear: our judge is a negative character. It is not only Jesus who says this, introdu-

cing him (even at the end he will repeat it, calling him 'dishonest'); it is not only he who says it, talking about himself; his actions also say it: when a poor widow goes to ask for justice, he just doesn't think about it. He does not even pay attention to her.

At this point we might ask: why insist so much on saying and reiterating the judge's dishonesty? The answer is: to highlight the widow's insistence. For in the end the judge will relent and give her justice. But he will not do so because he fears God: how many times has it been said that he cares nothing for the Law of God! Nor will he do justice to her because he considers it important to help a person in need; his total disregard for others has also been said many times. If our judge had been average, we would have had a doubt: perhaps he helped her because he is a good judge,



Lorenzo Lotto, Pala di Santa Lucia (part.) 1523-1532, Palazzo Pianetti, Jesi (AN)

one of those who follow God's Law, who care for helpless people. Instead, it is clear beyond any possible doubt: he helps the poor widow only because he is fed up with having her there every day asking for justice, just to get rid of her once and for all. At the heart of the parable is therefore the widow's insistence, such that it bends even the most contrary will.

Jesus recounts this parable "about the necessity of praying always, never tiring"; that is, he says: as the widow persisted with the judge, so must you, with God. For if the judge who is dishonest did justice to the woman, do you want God (who is not dishonest) not to do justice to his elect? Of course, he will, and promptly too. There is only one problem: "but when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth?" (v. 8). Will there be people able to persevere, like the widow? Or will we all tire immediately?

This parable is all too simple; perhaps - one might say - we need only insist to be sure that God hears us... It is a story that does not tell the whole story; it does not hint at the question which troubles us all, as to how God hears our prayers; and then there is that 'promptly' that seems all too often belies reality. Of course, this is not a complete reflection on confident prayer; it is "only" a strong invitation to be persistent, similar to what we read in the parable of the importunate friend (Lk 11:1-13). What if we tried to put it into practice anyway? □

Quiet Spaces

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Pope Francis' General Audience, Paul VI Hall, Wednesday, 22 December 2021

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today, just a few days before Christmas, I would like to recall with you the event which history cannot dispense with: the birth of Jesus.

To comply with the Emperor Caesar Augustus' decree that ordered them to go to their place of origin to be registered, Joseph and Mary went from Nazareth down to Bethlehem. As soon as they arrived, they immediately sought lodging because the moment for Mary to give birth was imminent. Unfortunately, they did not find any. Thus Mary was forced to give birth in a stable (cf. *Lk* 2:1-7).

Let us think [about this]: the Creator of the universe... He was not given a place to be born! Perhaps this was an anticipation of what the evangelist John would say: "He came to his own home, and his own people received him not" (*Jn* 1:11).

It was an angel who announced the birth of Jesus, and he did so to some lowly shepherds. And it was a star that showed the Magi the way to Bethlehem (cf. *Mt* 2:1, 9-10). An angel is a messenger from God. The star reminds us that God created the light (*Gen* 1:3) and that the Baby would be "the light of the world", as he would define himself (cf. *Jn* 8:12, 46), the "true light that enlightens every man" (*Jn* 1:9), that "shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (v. 5).

The shepherds personify the poor of Israel, humble people who interiorly live with the awareness of their own want and, precisely for this reason, confide in God more than others.

The Magi are also around the newborn Jesus (cf. *Mt* 2:1-12). The Gospels do not tell us that they were kings, nor how many there were, nor their names. The only thing we know for certain is that they came from a distant country in the East (perhaps from Babylon, or Arabia, or Persia of that time). They set out on a journey seeking the King of the Jews, whom they identified with God in their hearts because they said they wanted to adore him. The Magi represent the pagan peoples, in particular all those who have sought God throughout the centuries, and who set out on a journey to find him. They also represent the rich and powerful, but only those who are not slaves to possessions, who are not "possessed" by the things they believe they possess.

The message of the Gospels is clear: the birth of Jesus is a universal event that concerns all of humanity.

Dear brothers and sisters, *humility is the only way* that leads us to God. Humility alone opens us up to the experience of truth, of authentic joy, of knowing what matters. Without humility we are "cut off", we are cut off from understanding God and from

understanding ourselves. Humility is needed to understand ourselves, all the more so to understand God. The Magi may have even been great according to the world's logic, but they made themselves lowly, humble, and precisely because of this, they succeeded in finding Jesus and recognising him. They accepted the humility of seeking, of setting out on a journey, of asking, of taking a risk, of making a mistake.

Every person, in the depths of his or her heart, is called to seek God: we all have that restlessness and our job is not to snuff out that restlessness, but to allow it to grow because it is that restlessness that seeks God; and, with His own grace, [we] can find Him. We can make this prayer of Saint Anselm (1033-1109) our own: "Lord, teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek you if you do not teach me how, nor find you unless you reveal yourself. Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you; let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you." (*Proslogion*, 1).

Dear brothers and sisters, I would like to invite every man and woman to the stable of Bethlehem to adore the Son of God made man.

In approaching and praying by the Nativity scene, I would like to put the poor in the front row, those whom – as Saint Paul VI used to exhort – we must love "who in a certain way are a sacrament of Christ, for with them – the hungry, the thirsty, the exiles, the naked, the sick, and those in prison – He has seen fit to identify Himself in a mystical fashion; we must come to their aid, suffer with them, and also follow them, for poverty is the surest path to the full possession of the Kingdom of God" (Homily, 1 May 1969 – ore, 8 May, p. 7). For this reason, we must ask for the grace of humility. It is the only way; without humility we will never find God: we will find ourselves.

Then, brothers and sisters, just like the star did with the Magi, I would like to accompany to Bethlehem all those who have no religious restlessness, who do not pose the question of God, or who may even fight against religion, all those who are improperly identified as atheists.

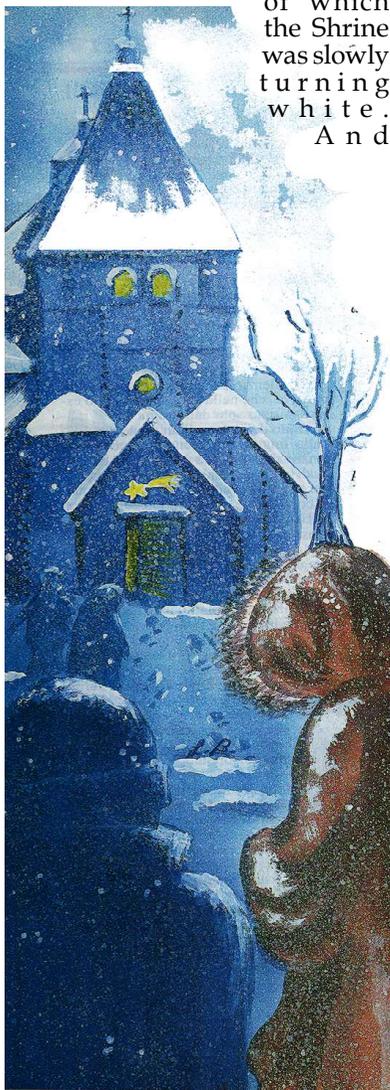
Let us return home with the angel's song: "On earth, peace among men with whom he is pleased". Let us always remember: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us [...] he first loved us" (1 *Jn* 4:10, 19), he has sought us. Let us not forget this.

To look at Jesus, to look toward the horizon, to look at God who comes to us and who touches our hearts with that restlessness that brings us hope. Happy and holy Christmas! □

THE CHRISTMAS PAUPER

By Pierluigi Menato, Tr. Ian Doulton, sdb

As at all respectable Christmases, it snowed there, a continuous, light and silent snow, which came down, as if to caress the slope of the hill, at the summit



of which the Shrine was slowly turning white. And

trudging slowly up were groups of people who, in the night that was a luminous white were going to hear Mass, the Mass that would precede the birth of Jesus by a few minutes.

The midnight bell, the one that had the loudest and most sonorous sounding call, the bell of Santa Rosa, as it was called, was just about to ring out its summons, and its clear chime now seemed to be shrouded by the ever thickening and quiet snow as if not wanting to disturb the peace of that holy night.

Among all those worshippers walking towards the church door appeared a figure of a woman, hooded, wrapped in a large fur cloak. She had no umbrella; she walked slowly, without turning around, as if absorbed in pained thought and intimate prayer. Someone recognised her, greeted her; someone else said in a whisper:

"It's the lady..."

"The lady." That was all they called her, Countess Grace Mandelli, who had lived all alone for ten years in the villa on the hill. She appeared from time to time, her face pale, her hair still blond, her person thin and always plainly dressed. She had the constant smile of a woman

who was serene on the outside but whose heart bled from too heavy a burden. She only spoke to the poor, she did not frequent the gentry of the surrounding villas, she hardly ever went down to the village; she had with her a faithful woman servant, with a foreign accent, more closed and silent than she was. But everyone loved and respected her, making way for her when she passed.

So, there was even an old lady who, when she recognized the lady, who wanted to offer her an umbrella: "Madam, it is snowing on you.... Take it, take it: I don't mind...." She was affectionate and insistent; but Countess Grace gently pushed her away: "But no, my dear: you take cover; I have a fur coat and the snow doesn't get me wet...." She quickened her pace to enter the already crowded church, resplendent with candles, where the melodious sound of the ancient organ made hearts thrill.

Grace Mandelli went to take her place in her usual favourite corner, between the column and St Anthony's altar; a corner that was a little tucked away and dark, but where one could be cosseted without danger of being disturbed. Because at midnight Mass, the shrine was filled with children, running all over the place, waiting for the cloth at the foot of the altar, behind which the Baby Jesus was hiding, to start singing lustily with hearts so full of joy: A beautiful Child is born, white and red with curls.

But as she knelt down, the "lady" was startled as she realised that leaning against the pillar, a couple of steps away from her, was a man wrapped up to his ears as if he

were very cold. You couldn't see his face; in fact, you couldn't see him at all: all you could see was a wisp of hair, on his forehead, almost yellowish. Perhaps he was someone who had come down from the mountain, shivering and tired.

She paid no attention to him: kneeling, she buried her face in her hands, while the organ greeted the entrance of the priests celebrating Christmas Mass.

Distant Christmases... happy and bright, next to her mother, in the beautiful Venetian palace overlooking the silent lapping of the Grand Canal. Gone!... How many Christmases? Useless to count them... useless to reopen the ancient wound... And yet, no; sometimes it is necessary to go back down one's own path, to measure how much of ourselves has been given, or squandered or refused; a healthy balance to feel conscious of our responsibility in the face of life, to see clearly the give and take of good and evil, done or received.

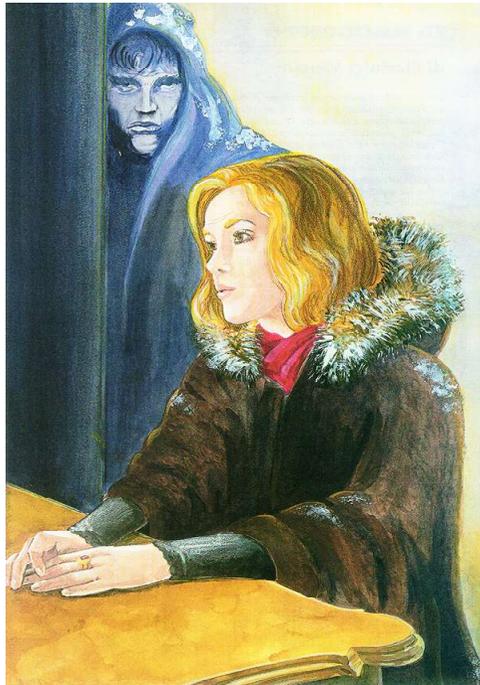
Distant Christmases... happy, bright, next to his mother, in the beautiful Venetian palace overlooking the silent lapping of the Grand Canal. Gone!... How many? Useless to count them... useless to reopen the longstanding wound... And yet, no; sometimes it is necessary to go backwards along one's own path, to gauge how much of ourselves we have given, or squandered or refused; a healthy balance to feel conscious of our responsibility in the face of life, to see clearly the give-and-take of good and evil, done

or received.

And despite her instinctive revulsion to return to the past, it was enough for Grace Mandelli to bury her face in her hands in the silence of a church, for that dreaded yesterday to reemerge from her soul to her mind, like the blooms of water lilies, driven by their stellar colours, resurface on the calm surface of a lake.

The organ was playing and she thought of last Christmas, the one when her life had ended forever. She could see herself, pale as death, frozen as if transmuted in-to an ice statue, kneeling by her mother, still able to hear her shaky voice "Perhaps it is for the best, Grace. Perhaps he was not worthy of you...."

And, as if in a trance, she loo-
ked



at the short note that bore a convulsive hand; "I must say goodbye. There's another woman in my life. Be happy!"

Happy!

And her mother had died and she, all forsaken, came to seal her fate forever in this humbled corner of the world where, after ten years, only her name was known, not her past.

She smiled feeling sorry for herself. Young, beautiful, rich, she could have erased or replaced with a new one that old love which had blossomed in her teenage years and persisted for eleven years, fresh, unchanged and unchanging from the day she had said to Aaron Green: "I will wait for you if you want, half my life."

He would travel, study and because of that their happiness would sparkle... Instead, all at once it had been brutally severed.

Aaron Green abandoned his Engineering degree and was soon caught up in plots of an obscure, torrid passion. In that fury he wrote to her, on that distant Christmas night, while mysterious gondolas glided by on the canal, perhaps bound for a distant church: "I must say goodbye to you. There's another woman in my life. Be happy...."

And he was never heard from again...

So, while the organ played joyful carols and the bells cast their sonorous peals across the white night, announcing the good news to the world, Countess Grace,

her face in her hands, prayed, still weeping for the man who had betrayed her.

"My Lady...."

Cautiously descending the short incline leading to the gate of her garden, hearing that voice, Grace Mandelli stopped and turned around. The cloaked man was behind her: she was not afraid. Groups of people on their way back from the shrine were already chatting, and a gleam of moonlight whitened the clouds, swollen with snow. She could be calm: indeed, she thought he was asking for alms, and made as if to open her purse. The man noticed and said hastily: "Not here, Grace, please...." At that voice she shuddered, but she held back a cry that suddenly swelled in her throat, and couldn't understand from where she drew so much strength to answer with an icy calm: "You, Aaron? How come?"

For a moment she hesitated, then murmured meekly: "I wouldn't like to speak to you here.... Perhaps you too are cold...."

Cold? No: with her blood boiling as if she had fallen into a fire. She did not even feel the lost anguish contained in that word: 'perhaps.' For Aaron Green was not only cold.... Yet she pushed the gate, saying only: "Come in."

She felt as if she were in the grip of a frightening nightmare; worse still: bordering on madness. Had she not heard behind her the rustling of the snow beneath her footsteps, she might have assumed she was being followed by a ghost. She opened the front door, flicked on light and did not turn

to look at him.

Having rid herself of her fur coat, she entered the small room next to the parlour and said: "Come in."

He entered. It was then that she saw him after ten years. It was no longer him: a yellowish whisp of an old man, poor, only his two beautiful sea-blue eyes, retaining his past virile beauty.

She saw him and remained mute, petrified, looking at him. The man noticed this, smiled sadly, clutching his broad cloak, still white with snow. "Yes, look at me, Grace," he said in a hoarse voice. "And forgive me if I don't take off this old rag; I would perhaps take more pity on you than the sadness I see in your face now. Do you want to know about me? I have nothing left, I have squandered and wasted everything with that woman, in a way I couldn't even begin to tell you. Two sons; one dead in Valparaiso, the other in a children's hospital in Rome... How did I track her down?... A coincidence...."

"I'm on my way to Rome, on foot, you see... to see my child again.... I've even been a bricklayer, a labourer just to scrape together some money to bring him what he so badly needs..." he interrupted himself, drawing a small tin object from under his cloak, placed it on the table, cautiously, as if it were a precious treasure: and went on:

"Passing through this town, I asked..." he still seemed to hesitate, but then swallowing hard he went on: "I asked for charity. They told me: 'Go to the lady, she refuses alms to no one: you will

find her at the Christmas Mass. I came and it was in the church that I recognised you."

Countess Grace had turned pale. She looked at him as if she couldn't believe her eyes.... He, the handsome, wild and happy young man! He, the man for whom she had inexorably cut short her life... But no, it was a dream, a horrible dream... and to banish it, she ran her hand over and over her eyes... Only then did she have the strength to murmur: "And... your wife?"

He replied with a shrill laugh:

"And who knows any more about her? She disappeared five years ago, leaving me with the little one: she ran off from Valparaiso as soon as her first son died... Is she at the bottom of the sea? Is she in hell? I don't know, I don't know...."

Now she almost stammered: then she realised that she could no longer stand it. Silently and mechanically, she motioned him to sit down at the table; the 'lady' went out for a moment, returned with a napkin, some plates and

two glasses.

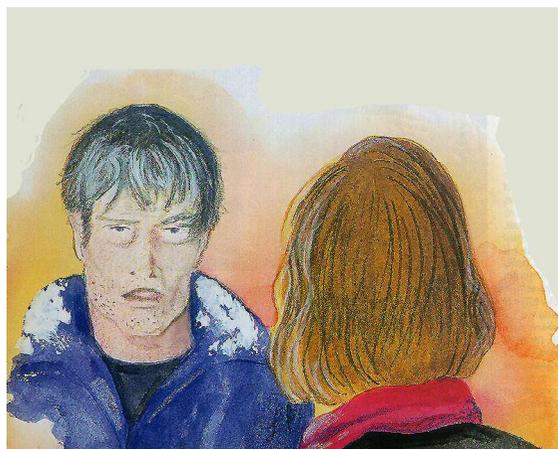
"Wait a moment," she said without looking at him. "Let's have dinner together. It's Christmas night... and I don't want to be alone..."

Aaron Green, wrinkled his forehead. "I don't deserve this," he murmured, "I have fallen too low."

She didn't reply. She set the table, went out again, tiptoeing so as not to be heard by her servant woman who was sleeping in the attic upstairs. The man *was* hungry: it pitiful to look at him and Grace saw him as one looks at a beggar.... She believed that Jesus indeed had sent her Christmas pauper, for whom a place must be made at her table... It did not matter that he had betrayed her and made her shed so many tears.

And while she was busy getting a hot and wholesome meal ready for the man who had walked so far in the snowstorm to bring a little tin toy to his sick child, his eyes fell on a small photograph in a frame on the mantelpiece. Grace: young and blond... a smiling Grace... He had taken it for her in Venice. Grace...and here she was the one who on Christmas night was giving her bread to satisfy his hunger He had no choice but to take the last step down...

A flush of blood rose to his face and stepping cautiously a thief, he opened the front door, rushed out into the snow, and disappeared. □



FIORETTI OF DON BOSCO - 35

by Michele Molineris

176. Don Bosco the dentist! (1868)

Anna Zanetti wrote the following to the *Salesian Bulletin* in 1919: 'I need to discharge a great debt of gratitude to Don Bosco.

Poor girl, I had been suffering from two large dental fistulas for eight years. My mother had done everything she could to see me cured, but to no avail: no less than seven doctors, who saw the already cancerous state of my face, said there was nothing more they could do. I cannot describe how much I suffered! One night, due to the excess of the suffering, I went out onto the balcony... to put my face on the railing, pleading for a moment's relief. My Papa and dear Mama, seeing my desperate case, said: "There's nothing left to do but go to Valdocco and see if Don Bosco is in Turin."

As it was said so it was done. In the morning, as soon as it was daylight, Mama and Mrs Del Bosco took me to the shrine of Mary Help of Christians. Being in such intense pain, I did nothing but cry, not only in the street, but also walking through the church, to the annoyance of those inside.

When we reached the first sacristy, we found Don Bosco making his confession to a priest. I kept crying loudly and he looked at me and motioned for me to be patient. After a few moments he got up, came to me and said: "Poor girl, you must be in a lot of

pain aren't you? Wait a moment; I'll just make my confession and then we'll get it right with Our Lady.

I told him: "But you're already a saint. You no longer need to go to confession.

And he answered me all smiling: "And don't you know that I am still in this world?"

He made his confession; then he made my mother and Mrs Del Bosco stay there and taking me by the hand he led me into the second sacristy. Making me kneel down on a kneeler, he said to me: "Do you want to be cured?"

I answered yes.

"Well then, let us pray the three Hail Marys to Our Lady Help of Christians?

"Yes, yes," I replied.

Then he took out a relic that he kept under his habit; then with one hand he made the sign of the cross with the relic, holding the other hand outstretched on my head; this he did three times, each time saying the Hail Mary with me. At the third time I felt something I cannot explain; it seemed to me that they had performed an operation on me, and poured balsam over my head. The fact is that instantly I was perfectly healed.

Then he said to me: "From today (it was the 25th July, I don't remember well the year) until the 1st November, you will say three Our Fathers, Hail Marys and Glory Be's to the Blessed Sacrament and three Hail Marys to Mary Help of Christians who cured you; I will say them too and I will have others say them for

you; you will never suffer this anymore; and... then you will bring me the two teeth that will fall out before the feast of All Saints.

And taking me by the hand, he led me to my mother, saying: "Do you want to stay a little while in church? Now I'll put on my vestments and go and celebrate Mass at the altar of Saint Peter.

With great joy I said yes, gladly; and he handed me over to my mother who was crying, just as the other lady was crying. Don Bosco asked them why they were crying so much: they answered that, not having suddenly heard me cry out, they thought I was dead. Don Bosco smiling replied:

"No, no, she's not dead; Mary Most Holy Help of Christians healed her straight away!"

In the three months during which I had to be careful to pick up and bring to Don Bosco the two teeth that he had told me would fall out, one evening strangely, while I was walking under an avenue, where in those days there were still streams of water, I felt a thing in my mouth, and, not thinking about anything, I spat into the water and immediately to my great distress, I realised that it was one of the teeth. I went home and told my mum about the mistake. And then, towards the end of October, another evening, while eating a soup of rice and cabbage, I felt the second tooth fall out; but I could not hold it back and swallowed it with the food.

On All Souls' day I went back with my mother to Don Bosco

and I told him that my teeth had fallen out, but that I couldn't give them to him for the reason I mentioned above and he laughed heartily (I think I could see him) and he touched my cheek saying: "See, Our Lady has taken them!" Then he continued talking to my mother, who made him what donation she could, and, kissing his hand, we returned home with an indescribable joy.

We then went to see some of the doctors who had treated me and declared that that was all they could do, as I said, due to my cancerous state. They examined me and, after several tests they wanted to make sure I was cured, they asked me: "Who was that doctor who risked such an operation?"

Then extremely jubilant, my mother and I replied: "Two great doctors worked this instant healing: Mary Help of Christians and Don Bosco!"

They concluded in admiration: "Surely only those doctors can do such operations!" and they too rejoiced at such a prodigy!

Shortly afterwards, one morning I was passing Piazza Castello, when I met the theology professor Fr Fornasio, the parish priest at La Maddalena, beyond Gaieno, who had previously been assistant parish priest at La Gran Madre. Knowing me, he knew the state I was in because of my illness, which had already produced two open holes in my face. Now this priest came up to me and wanted to touch my face with his fingers to verify the truth of the matter. Then he said to me: "Listen, when I heard of your

recovery, knowing the condition you were in, I could not believe it; but now I am glad to see you. When I return to the country, at the first opportunity to preach, I will proclaim this miracle, being able to say that I saw it with my own eyes and touched it with my own hands. And you look well: if a girl is sick, she is sick... but if you are bad, you will hurt twice as much. Remember that you have been graced by Our Lady and by that dear and Sainly Don Bosco' (Anna Zanetti in B.S., October 1919, p. 259).

177. But if the world knew the heart he had... (1868)

Two couples without children had given him six thousand lira on several occasions for the construction of the church of Mary Help of Christians. But a few years later, following a business deal gone wrong and above all due to the bankruptcy of banks

where they had deposited a large part of their fortune, they had fallen into such poverty that they were living in an attic in Milan, where they had retired. Don Bosco heard about this, went to visit them and offered to give them back the sum they had given him. The husband tearfully refused to accept it, protesting that he had made the donation as alms. "Well then," replied Don Bosco, "accept from Our Lady. what you have given, to the extent that you need it."

From that moment on he sent them one hundred liras every month. Once the repayment of the six thousand liras had been completed, the husband died and the widow found an excellent marriage partner within a short time and resumed giving donations to the church of Mary Most Holy, the Help of Christians. That was exactly what Don Bosco himself told Fr Francesco Cerruti (*M.B.*, V, 336).□





LET US CELEBRATE ADVENT WITH MARY

by Luigi Melotti

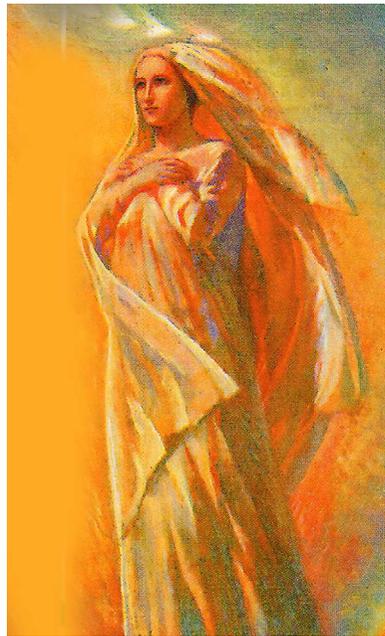
The Lord is coming!

This is the central event we are invited to celebrate during the season of Advent. The four Sundays preceding Christmas already anticipate this coming of the Lord ('Advent' comes from the Latin: *adventus* = coming), and at the same time prepare us for it. It is for this coming that we must keep watch and prepare the way of the Lord. On the other hand, for us, Christ Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, is already present to our vigil and our waiting. For us, He is already Emmanuel, God with us, as the liturgy of this period emphasises.

Advent is divided into two periods:

- the 1st, the longer one, runs from the first Sunday until and including 16 December. In this first period, we are invited above all to prepare for the coming of the Lord in glory. This coming is called by a Greek term: *parousia*.

- The 2nd period, which is shorter, runs from 17 to 24 December. It is the proximate preparation for Christmas, for the coming of Jesus in the humility of human



flesh, in Bethlehem.

In particular, the Advent Prefaces emphasise the highlighting of these two periods: the Advent Preface I, which is said up to and including 16 December, is entitled by the missals: 'The twofold coming of Christ', but the second

is emphasised: "At his first coming in the humility of our human nature he (Jesus) brought the ancient promise to fulfilment, and opened for us the way to eternal salvation. He will come again in the splendour of glory, and will call us to possess the promised kingdom that we now dare to vigilantly hope for."

Instead, the Advent Preface II, is said from 17 to 24 December.

It is entitled: "The joyful expectation of Christ" (at Christmas): "He (Jesus) was announced to all the prophets, the Virgin Mother waited for him and carried him in her womb with ineffable love. John proclaimed his coming and showed him present in the world. May the same Lord, who invites us to prepare for his Christmas, find us vigilant in prayer, exultant in praise."

With the whole Church, let us put ourselves in the required dispositions to welcome him.

Get ready, the Day is near, but no one knows it!

This is the "Good News" that is announced to us on this first Sunday of Advent (Year A) by the evangelist Matthew: "Be ready, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come" (Mt 24:44). It is "good news," because the hour of the coming of the Lord Jesus will be that of his victory, according to the prophecy of Isaiah, announced in the first reading of this same Sunday: "He will be judge among the nations and he will be arbiter among many peoples. They will forge their swords into ploughshares, their spears into sickles; one people will no longer raise a sword against another people,

they will no longer practise the art of war" (Is 2:4).

This triumph heralds the eternal wedding of the Lamb and the new Jerusalem, described by St John in the book of Revelation at the end of time (cf. Rev 19:18; cc. 21-22). This glorious return of the Lord that is identified with definitive peace and endless happiness may come at the hour we cannot imagine. In every Eucharistic celebration, we renew our firm hope when we say, or sing, after the Consecration: "... as we await your coming." Therefore, Jesus tells us: "Watch... be ready." And St Paul, in the second reading: "Let us conduct ourselves honestly, as in broad daylight" (Rom 13:12-13). "Clothe yourselves instead with the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 13:14)

The great Rosmini, whom we hope to see soon on the honours of the altar, wrote, among his many works, a "Catechism arranged according to the order of ideas," very clear and very beautiful. Here he suggests how we spend the Advent season: "To spend the holy season of Advent well, it is fitting:

- 1. To abstain from sin, by the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist;

- 2. To yearn for the coming of JESUS CHRIST in our souls, in imitation of the Patriarchs, who fervently invoked him to come upon the earth;

- 3. To attend the sacred functions which the Church celebrates at this time;

- 4. To meditate on the mystery of the Nativity of our Lord JESUS CHRIST, arousing in us gratitude and tender devotion to His most holy Humanity;

- 5. To do works of penance.”

In the person of the Virgin Mary, we find the perfect model and effective help to celebrate Advent fervently. Paul VI said in a homily on 21 December 1966: “If we want to enter into the spirit of Christmas, into the secret of Christmas, we must approach Mary, the Christian, the bearer of Christ to the world. From Mary’s virginal motherhood we can introduce ourselves to the humanity of Christ the God-Man. This is the best liturgical season to venerate Our Lady meditating on what the Council teaches us about the veneration that is due to Her, and we should allow our souls to be invaded by the fervour and poetry that such worship arouses and demands.”

Paul VI returned at greater length to this theme in his Exhortation “*Marialis Cultus*” (MC), where he said, among other things, that the Advent season “as liturgy experts have noted, should be considered as a time particularly suited to devotion to the Mother of the Lord, and which we hope to see accepted and followed” (MC n. 4).

One might ask: how many have “welcomed and followed” him?

At the beginning of Advent, as this Exhortation reminds us, we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. This solemnity is “a joint celebration of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, of the basic preparation (cf. Is 11:1.10) for the coming of the Saviour, and of the happy beginning of the Church without spot or wrinkle” (MC n. 3).

Moreover, Mary is often remembered in Advent, “especially on the holy days from 17 to 24

December, and, more particularly on the Sunday before Christmas” (MC n. 3).

“In this way,” Paul VI concluded, “the faithful, living in the liturgy of the spirit of Advent, by thinking about the inexpressible love with which the Virgin Mother awaited her son, are invited to take her as a model and to prepare themselves to meet the Saviour who is to come. They must be “vigilant in prayer and joyful in...praise” (no. 4).

Thus, Advent becomes a time of beginnings, of happy beginnings, the blessed period that assures the entire liturgical year with graces of recollection and contemplation. What constitutes the enchantment so sweet and so penetrating of Advent is the presence of Mary. We do not yet see Jesus Christ in Advent, but we possess him in the promise: “Behold, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a son, whom she will call Emmanuel!” (Is 7:14). He is under the virginal veil of Mary. In Advent, we see only Her, the dawn from which the Sun of righteousness, Christ our God, will rise.

With Mary, the Church, and all of us who form the Church and prepare for the coming of Jesus in Bethlehem, to prepare for the ultimate coming of Jesus in glory. This will fill the expectation of the whole Church, the expectation of every person. We must make our own the last invocation of the Apocalypse, an expression of the believer who has reached his full maturity and who exercises his total responsibility as friend and servant of the Son of God: “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev 22:20). □



O. PORI MECOI

MY VOCATION STORY

JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF ST FRANCIS DE SALES

Fr. Gianni Ghilione sdb

An Encounter with Fr Gianni Ghilione, a Salesian, who has been studying the spirituality of St Francis de Sales for over 15 years and translating it into books and conferences in various parts of the world.

How did your vocation come about?

I was born in Saluzzo (Cuneo) and my family was a Christian family and, especially because of my mother, very practising. Dad worked the countryside and was often absent and then died in a car accident, run over in the fog by a van, when I was just 9 years old.

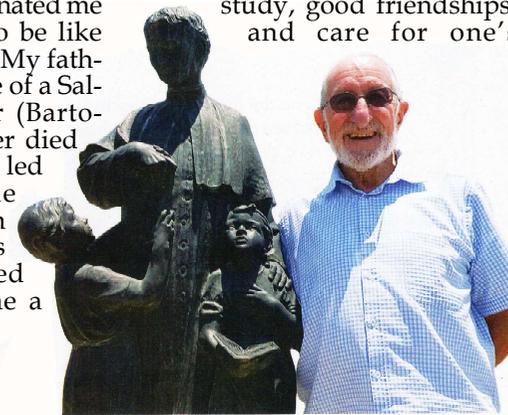
I attended the Salesian Oratory from morning to night. There I heard about Don Bosco; there I savoured the Salesian joy made up of games, walks, prayers, songs... Often I would come home and not have dinner: I would collapse from sleep! I met, as I did at the Saluzzo Oratory (which I attended less), happy Salesians, ‘Oratory graduates’ who, even though I was small, fascinated me and made the desire to be like them grow in my heart. My father’s death and the figure of a Salesian Uncle, coadjutor (Bartolomeo Lovera, who later died tragically in Avigliana) led me to attend middle school and high school in Chieri: 5 wonderful years during which I matured the decision to become a Salesian.

What is your Salesian experience?

I have been a Salesian priest for almost 50 years and looking back I see that my life has been marked by three great loves.

1. Music: I had promised my mother, who asked me, that I would learn the *Ave Maris Stella*, and, one note after another, I spent a good part of my training at the Conservatory in Organ, without reaching the diploma because it clashed with my study of theology.

2. University Studies: My studies in Rome in Educational Sciences gave me a solid base to continue my work with them as a Youth Pastoral Officer. For them I invented the Turtle Project, which offered and demanded three things: commitment to study, good friendships, and care for one’s



interior life. They were the three pillars of Don Bosco's Preventive System! For 20 years I offered, as the heart of their formation, a two-year Theology course for young people that saw more than a thousand young people pass through. I experienced what Cardinal Ballestrero used to say: "Save the young and the young will save you!"

3. The encounter with St Francis de Sales.

Today you are one of the greatest connoisseurs of St Francis de Sales. How did you meet him and what does he mean to you?

This is the most recent love. On the eve of my 60th birthday, I spent eight months in Annecy, the homeland of Francis de Sales. The aim was not to study the works of this Saint, but to prepare myself for the last quarter of my life. Little by little I read and studied most of his writings, and then I realised what a great gift Don Bosco had given to the entire Salesian Family, indicating him as our Model and Patron.

What is the essence of the Salesian spirit?

The Salesian spirit seems concentrated in this expression of Francis: 'Truth that is not charitable springs from charity that is not true'.

Two significant testimonies to the processes of Beatification: "He listened patiently to their difficulties without ever mounting in anger and without uttering insulting words against them, despite the fact that these heretics were heated in their disputes and usually used insults, mockery or slander; he showed them a very cordial love, in order to convince them that he was animated

by no other interest than the glory of God and the salvation of souls'."

"He never pushed them to the point where they were indignant and felt covered with shame and confusion; but with his ordinary gentleness he responded to them judiciously, slowly, without bitterness and contempt, and by this means he won their hearts and benevolence!"

What would Francis say to the Salesian Family today?

I believe that the Rector Major with the splendid Strenna has captured the message that 4 centuries later Francis de Sales launches to the Church and in particular to our Salesian Family: "Do everything out of love". This is the first recipe that Francis wrote to the Baroness of Chantal, whose spiritual guide he had become. It points to the centrality of the heart: 'Just as we learn to play the lute by playing it and to dance by dancing, so we learn to love God by loving Him, turning our gaze to Him as a child does to his mother. It is a simple, concrete, daily way of holiness, accessible to all! □



IN A CHEERFUL MOOD

The Saving Habit

John received his overcoat by air mail. When he opened the parcel he found the buttons missing and a little note:

Dear Johnnie,
I have cut out those heavy buttons to save postage. You will find them in the right-hand pocket. Mums.

Relief Sought

The lights in the crowded bus had failed, and the passengers were thrown into confusion. One of the standing passengers noticed a woman groping for something to hold on to. So, he offered her one of the strap-hangers.

"Thank you, Sir," said she, "I've already got one."

"Then please, leave my necktie," demanded the gentleman.

What a Vision!

Two revellers, Bill and Harry, driving home late at night, were halted by the closing of the railway crossing gates.

After dozing drunkenly they were awakened by the rumble of the passing train, and Bill, sitting upright, said: "Wasn't that a well-lighted village we passed through?"

"Yes, indeed" answered Harry, "and did you notice the first house was on fire?"

Already in use

A little boy called the operator and asked for the telephone number of a certain cinema house.

The operator gave it to him and then added, "You will find that number listed in your Telephone Directory."

"I know," replied the boy, "but, you see, I am standing on it at present."

Tiny grouse

Seaside Cafe Owner: "Was everything cooked to your satisfaction, Sir?"

Diner: "Yes, all except the bill. That's cooked a bit too much. Just take it back and boil it down a little."

Priceless

Short-sighted lady: "How much is that Japanese doll worth?"

Shop Assistant: "Which one, Madam?"

Short-sighted lady: "The one by the door."

"Shop Assistant: "That one is worth a great deal, madam. In fact, it's the proprietor."

Free Boarder

The boarding house of Mrs Smith was well-situated. Food was excellent. In the soft firelight even the sitting room looked cosy and attractive. The warmth and comfort thawed the heart of the star boarder. One day he asked the landlady if she would marry him.

"Let me see," said the lady, "you never grumble at my food. You pay my bills promptly. I'm sorry, you're too good a boarder to put on the free list." □

ONE LAST THOUGHT

ONCE UPON A TIME

Vincent Travers OP

The Christmas story, like all good stories, begins with, "Once upon a time." Only, unlike most good stories, no one made it up. Once upon a time, and in a place called Bethlehem, the Christmas story happened. The gospel tells us how Jesus came to be born. But supposing Jesus had waited a couple more thousand years, and was born today, where would it have happened? On which continent would he have been born? In which country? He would have been born a Jew. God keeps his promises. Would he have been born in a shanty town or refugee camp or in a back alley? The chances are he would have been raised on television. He would have known about computers, scud missiles, and designer jeans. His parables would not have been about mustard seeds or fig trees, but single mothers, latchkey children and homeless bag people.

If Jesus were born in our times, we would be able to trace every day of his life. There would be hundreds, even thousands of hours of videotaped interviews with his family, neighbours, friends, and teachers. Tapes of his homilies would be on the best sellers' list and sold in their millions. Politicians would woo him and the daily papers would do cover stories and report his current wisdom and right perspectives. The paparazzi and tabloid newspapers would have a field day covering the scandal and rumours put out by his enemies. I have a sneaking suspicion that he

would appear on live television to get his message across on the reign of God's kingdom of justice, peace, truth and love.

I wonder: Is it easier to love and have faith in Jesus because he was born two thousand years ago? I think a present-day Messiah might be very hard to take. Maybe we need twenty centuries to take in the reality of what happened that night, long ago on the far flung hills Bethlehem.

Two thousand years ago, there were no trees with tinsel and mistletoe, or coloured flickering lights. There was just a scared girl, Mary, in her early teens, having a baby in a cave used by shepherds on a cold winter's night. The girl's husband, Joseph, must have been out of his mind with wonder and fear. The witnesses were angels and illiterate shepherds.

Today, hundreds of thousands of people of all nations and backgrounds claim his name as their own. The Christmas trees with the coloured lights and fancy balls and the neon lights, charm and delight us. but they might be a terrible distraction. They are light years away from the meaning of what happened on that hillside in a village called Bethlehem. We seem so slow to get the point. Some of us never get it.

He was the Son of God. His coming into the world was an act of pure love. "God loved the world so much," St. John proclaims "that He gave us His only Son." Love sums up the meaning of Christmas. The message of Christmas is that

God loves us. That's the heart of it and the real explanation behind Christmas joy and rejoicing. God does not love only good people; He loves all people. God does not only love humankind, in general; He loves you and me, in particular. That's what we take to heart and that's what we tell our children. The Christmas message is that someone up there loves us, always and forever and will never let go. God the Son became man so that we might become children of God. God became more like us so that we might become more like him.

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word spoken by the angel to Mary: "You shall conceive and bear a Son and you shall call him 'Emmanuel' a name which means 'God-with-us.' Not God-with-us at Christmas, but God-with-us always! God-with-us, was the first Christmas gift. God has never taken back the divine gift. It is always on offer. It is ours for the taking. But there is a catch. The grace of Emmanuel (God-with-us) must be received. It can only be received where God finds empty hands. St. Augustine puts it beautifully when he writes, "A man/woman, whose hands is full of parcels, cannot receive a gift." □



THANKS TO DEAR ST. DOMINIC SAVIO

Our Sincere thanks to Saint Dominic Savio for his constant protection and intercession to God for the graces received by Diogo Piedade Jose Simplicio Fernandes, Aged 103 years who recently passed away. Diogo had an ardent devotion to Dominic Savio since his childhood and always wore the scapular of the Saint around his neck. He was a true believer in putting every-thing in Gods hands.



The family entrusted all their anxieties to the Lord and asked the Little Saint to mercifully intercede on their behalf. Being witness to the many miracles of Dominic Savio, gave Diogo a deeper connection to God. He was grateful and humbled by the experience. God was always there for him in his many difficult situations of his life which he overcame with a smile. Even when Diogo passed away peacefully without any ailment the scapular of Saint Dominic Savio was around his neck with a prayer on his lips till his last dying breath. □

POPE'S WORLDWIDE PRAYER NETWORK DECEMBER 2022

For volunteer not-for-profit organisations

We pray that volunteer non-profit organisations committed to human development find people dedicated to the common good and ceaselessly seek out new paths to international cooperation.

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MARY WAS THERE

We are on the "threshold of the house of Zechariah," in the town of Ain-Karim. Mary comes to this house, bearing within herself the joyful mystery. She comes to Elizabeth, someone who is very close to her, she comes to share her joy with her. On the threshold of Zechariah's house "a blessing awaits her," which is a sequel to what she heard from Gabriel's lips: "*Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb... And blessed is she who believed in the fulfilment of the words of the Lord*" (Lk 1:42,45).

And at that instant, "there bursts forth that song" which expresses the whole truth of the great Mystery. It is the canticle that announces the history of salvation and manifests the heart of the Mother: "My soul magnifies the Lord..." (ibid 1:46) - *St. John Paul II*

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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