

CONTENTS

From The Editor's Desk:  
*Respect: A Step at Unity*.....3

Once Upon a Time There Were Lovers  
 - *Gianpaolo Dianin*.....4

Feast of the Month: Mary the Mother  
 Of God - *Chino Biscontin*.....7

Youth On the Move - A New Year -  
 A New Look - *Anastasia Dias*...9

The Salesians For You  
 Mgr. Giovenale Flavio  
 - *O. Pori Mecoi*.....10

Witnesses In And For Our Times:  
 St. John Neumann  
 - *Ian Pinto, sdb*.....13

Lectio Divina: God's Language  
 - *Carlo Broccardo*.....16

Quietspaces: The Ultimate Instrument  
 - *Pope Francis*.....18

No Greater Wealth  
 - *Pierluigi Menato*.....20

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

Reflecting on Mary: Mother of the  
 Incarnate Word  
 - *Carlo Caffarra*.....28

Vocation Story: Always in God's Hands  
 - *Ajay D'Monte, sdb*.....30

Guided by God's Glory  
 - *Vivia Christopher-Samuel*.....33

In a Cheerful Mood.....32



*O God, you chose  
 the Blessed Virgin Mary,  
 foremost among  
 the poor and humble,  
 to be the Mother  
 of the Saviour,  
 grant, we pray,  
 that, following  
 her example,  
 we may offer you  
 the homage  
 of sincere faith  
 and place in you  
 all our hope  
 of salvation.*

From The Editor's Desk

RESPECT: A STEP AT UNITY

In a large store, a lady bringing a heaping bag of groceries out of the shop was helped to carry them to her car by a teenager, who happened to be wearing an earring. Her initial comment – *He was such a kind boy for a fellow wearing an earring* – was followed by the realization that there's more to people than what they wear or how they adorn themselves. Respect means *having another look*, and when you do that, you see more about people and churches than you might think at first.

My regard also grows by remembering people of different churches whose lives highlight central aspects of the Gospel: figures like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a martyr and theologian of the Lutheran Church, Gordon Wilson of the Church of Ireland whose example of forgiveness touched the world. Valuing the people of every church and their way of life commands respect for each church.

Then, there is a matter of individual respect. So often we find ourselves surprised by the goodness of people we reject because of what they seem to be. We quickly apply labels to others, and, as a result, people suffer. Even Christians can use labels to one another. For many years I've realized that people from different persuasions have lived labelled lives. Respect for others may mean the difference between life and death.

I am thinking of this theme of unity because during this month of January we celebrate Church Unity Week but I must admit I get lost in such a lot of other 'things' that I forget how significant this week ought to be, because now more than ever with the Synod already in progress in our dioceses we should respectfully revisit the theme of respect for those "not like ourselves."

The disunity of Christians has caused much heartache in parishes, communities and families, so that our desire for unity should be an urgent prayer with enormous repercussions.

Respecting those who are different can seem threatening. If we respect the beliefs of another, we may appear to lose something we value ourselves, or perhaps, we may be jolted out of false securities.

If we believe that we have something to learn from every person, then our attitude of respect will grow. Respecting others will not take away what is essential to our Christianity – our following of Jesus, our prayer and our way of life, our search for the truth and our concern for the poor.

Our gift to God in this first month of the New Year is to do our bit towards reconciliation with others. This is what we promise when we pray *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven – forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*. I hope we can resolve to do our bit, knowing that respect is the foundation of all institutional as well as personal reconciliation.

*Fr. Ian Douulton, sdb*

## ONCE UPON A TIME (MAYBE STILL) THERE ARE STILL YOUNG LOVERS

by Don Gianpaolo Dianin

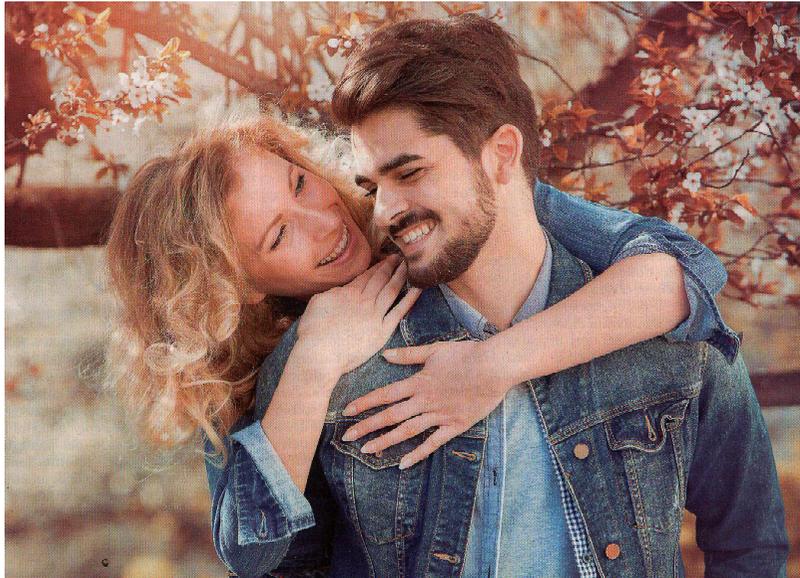
*Is it really taken for granted that nowadays cohabitation should replace that path of discernment and research that characterized the engagement? Why not rediscover it?*

The term “engagement” seems like a word that time has worn away, an experience from another era, or at the opposite end of the spectrum, a vague term that simply defines a couple that is together, but with no immediate purpose other than to enjoy the joy and gratification that being together provides.

Freedom and spontaneity seem to be the real rules implicit in the love experience, without realizing that love seizes and involves the protagonists and that keeping the right distance without commit-

ting too much is just a theory, while reality leads far beyond the protection of one’s own boundaries.

It is not a discovery to note the strong emotional involvement and the equally intense superficial tendency that accompanies the journey of many young couples who arrive at the wedding with the concreteness of practical tasks, but little attention to the inner foundations of their bond. Cohabitation is the new name for engagement, which has now taken into account a certain



amount of pre-marital training, for which there are various reasons: for some, the rejection or insignificance of an institution such as marriage; for others, the search for a “determined time” as a guarantee of an indefinite bond; for the majority, simply the acknowledged and popular way of living the experience of being a couple: no rejection of marriage, but for now, it’s okay, living together, basing everything on the desire to be together.

And yet, we know that good intentions are not enough, dreams require concreteness. The challenges that our culture poses to those who want to love each other and build a family should not be underestimated. Wouldn’t it be important, in this context, to rediscover, to give back body and substance, even institutionally, to this time for the couple, that tradition has called engagement? Is it really taken for granted that cohabitation should replace the path of discernment and search, that characterized the engagement?

Pope Francis writes, “The complexity of today’s society and the challenges faced by the family require a greater effort on the part of the whole Christian community in preparing those who are about to be married” (AL 206). The theologian Pierangelo Sequeri would say: “The theme of the Church’s concern for the family is not a metaphysical ideal that does not know the fatigue and uncertainties of history in which the family is sought and built up, can be lost and can find itself again. Taking charge of the family, of its life and its vicissitudes, is not a gesture of condescension. It is a story of passion,

not only of compassion” (*Osservatore Romano*. April 13, 2016).

It is first of all a matter of clarifying some terms: affection, emotion, feeling, bond. Emotions, which are very instinctive, should mature into feelings that also involve intelligence and will, and feelings seek a bond that goes beyond the moment. We ask ourselves: what loving feeling is equal to the choice to live together for life? What is the relationship between bonding and freedom? Only after having focused on the meaning of these terms will it be possible to ask the next question about how we should prepare to live this love, what personal attitudes are required, what stages and even what structural supports are useful and perhaps even necessary for its proper development.

If we want to rethink engagement, it cannot be a choice made from above without an understandable concern to prepare well for marriage. Any pastoral action in favour of engagement must come from below, when people, couples, pastoral workers and the Church itself have grasped the challenging aspect of love and the experience of being a couple. Love and bonding in this cultural context demand not only a different quality of preparation for marriage, but also a true re-foundation of the institution of engagement.

This is a historic challenge that many Bishops had already foreseen. In 1993 already, the Italian Bishops came out with this statement: “The premarital ministry, in all its forms, constitutes one of the most urgent, important and delicate chapters of the entire

family ministry. This pastoral ministry is at a historical turning point. It is called to a clear and precise confrontation with reality and to a choice: either to renew itself profoundly or to become increasingly irrelevant and marginal. Hence, in particular, the need for a pastoral care of the engaged that helps to rediscover and live its human and Christian meaning, and for a more attentive, timely and articulate preparation for marriage" (CEI, *Directory of Pastoral Care for Families in the Church in Italy*, n. 40).

We find in this statement issues that are close to our hearts: the awareness of being at a historical turning point; the necessary confrontation with reality and

therefore with the way of feeling and living affections, sentiments, choices and bonds; the importance of verifying what exists in order to arrive at pastoral choices; the priority of taking care of the engagement in order to rediscover and live its human and Christian meaning; a more careful, punctual and articulated preparation for marriage and therefore the whole question of itineraries and proposals for accompaniment.

Pope Francis is well aware of this urgency and writes, "Learning to love someone does not happen automatically, nor can it be taught in a workshop just prior to the celebration of marriage" (AL 208). □

### THE INCIDENT

A young woman was driving home from work. She was driving very carefully because the car she was using was brand new, picked up the day before from the showroom and bought with her husband's savings. He had made many sacrifices to be able to buy that model. At a particularly crowded intersection, the woman had a moment of indecision and with the fender she hit the bumper of another car. The young woman burst into tears. How could she explain the damage to her husband? The driver of the other car was sympathetic, but explained that they had to exchange license numbers and registration information.

The woman looked for the papers in a large brown plastic bag.

A piece of paper fell out. In bold, masculine handwriting were these words, "In case of an accident...remember, honey, I love you, not the car!"

All of us should remember this, always. People matter, not things. And it is only this that will take us to God. Us and our ability to love. Not things, not even clothes, not even this body....

Bruno Ferrero (*Sometimes a ray of sunshine is enough*, Elledici)



## MARY, THE MOTHER OF GOD

by Chino Biscontin

*Accustomed as we are to calling Our Lady the "Mother of God," we risk not being well aware of how much this appellation contains a fascinating and extraordinary mystery!*

In 420 A.D. Nestorius was elected Patriarch of Constantinople. He decisively took over the leadership of that Church, undertaking reforms regarding monks and clergy and even civil laws. This caused him much hostility, which broke out at a popular level when he preached that one should not call Our Lady "Mother of God" but only, "Mother of Christ." In the Churches, for a long time, Our Lady had been venerated with that title, that was why the scandal was great. He entered

in controversy with the Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria, who defended himself clumsily. According to his words, "one could have the impression" that the Word of God was one person, while Jesus born of Mary was another person; these two distinct subjects, then, would be united by the harmony of their respective wills. Jesus, therefore, would not have been the true Son of God, but only a man in a perfect and unique moral union with the Word of God.



In 431 a Council met in Ephesus. The discussions led to the condemnation of Nestorius and the legitimacy of the title given to Mary was proclaimed, that of "Mother of God" (which is an abbreviated form of: Mother of the Son of God, who is God like the Father). The people's joy was great. In Jesus there are not two subjects, but only one subject: The Son of God has an eternal existence of divine nature, generated by the Father, and equally in time an existence of human nature, generated by Mary Most Holy.

Accustomed as we are to calling Our Lady "Mother of God," we risk not being fully aware of how extraordinary this is. Can a woman really be called the mother of the Son of God, who is God like the Father, generated by Him in eternity without beginning, He through whom all things were created, He whose power governs the billions of galaxies that make up our universe?

Certainly, it is not in his divinity that the Son of God is conceived by Mary, but in his humanity. But the man whom Mary carries in her womb for nine months, whom she gives birth to in Bethlehem and nourishes at her breast, that man is personally the Son of God, who wanted to grow up as a man among us. He is not another person; he is the Son himself. So, she who is the Mother of Jesus must also be recognized as the Mother of the Son of God in his humanity. And since He is God, it must be said of Mary that she is the

Mother of God. Mother in the fullest sense of the word, became so, freely, having given her conscious consent to the action of the Holy Spirit, according to what the angel asked of her in the name of God.

Andrea della Robbia's glazed terracotta, which can be admired in the Franciscan Shrine of La Verna (photo above), comes to mind. It is a beautiful Annunciation scene. On one side is the angel Gabriel, kneeling: he has already made the announcement and now awaits the response. Above, God, the Father, with all the Universe, in turn spreads his arms in a sign of anxious expectation. In the centre is the dove of the Holy Spirit, who holds back his flight in anticipation of what Mary will say. For her part, Mary, seated on a poor stool, holds in her hands the Scriptures opened to the page where the prophecy is read: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son." She rests the book of Scripture on her womb, for it is the Word (that is, the eternal Word of God) that asks to be begotten as a man in her. God, the Holy Trinity, the messenger angel, and all humanity await Mary's answer! Isn't this surprising and adorable? At La Verna (Arezzo) Saint Francis had written that God is humility. At the foot of the Della Robbia terracotta is the inscription: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord: let it be done unto me according to thy word." □

## A NEW YEAR - A NEW LOOK

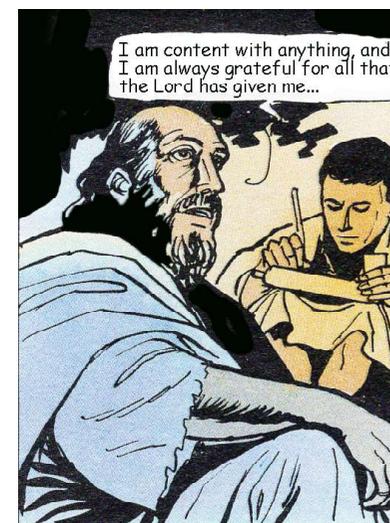
by Anastasia Dias

It had been raining the entire day. The guard returned after a full meal. He glanced at the prison door, unlocked it and entered. The prison was dark, damp and cold, and the prisoner wasn't in sight. Afraid that he might have escaped somehow, the guard rushed out and came back with a torch in his hands. He squinted as he looked around. In one corner of the room, the prisoner sat and scribbled on a scroll. They needed more security here, he thought to himself. After all, the prisoner was an influential man. The guard had heard rumours that the prisoner's friends were from around the world. Even though the guard had never been interested in reading any of his writings, he had heard that the prisoner's letters had enormously impacted Europe and Asia. He had requested the senior guards to stop providing the prisoner with ink and paper to discontinue writing. But they rejected his plea because the letters were harmless. They liked reading the man's letters and urged him to continue writing.

In all his letters, the prisoner spoke of a man they had only heard of. The man whom he wrote about was alive until a few

years ago. However, the Roman guards killed him before they even saw him. They enjoyed reading what the prisoner wrote about the "mystery man" and ensured that he never fell short of ink and paper.

It had stopped raining. The guard had overeaten and was feeling drowsy. He drifted off to sleep as he dreamed of devouring bread and cheese, washing them down with a good glass of wine. His dream was interrupted by a sharp cry. 'Wake up!' Frightened, the guard woke up. It was the



Chief who had come to check on the prisoner. 'What is he doing?' he asked the prison guard in a gruff voice. 'Writing, sir', replied the guard. 'Good', said the Chief and went inside the prison. 'How are you feeling today,' he asked the prisoner. 'I feel grateful,' replied the prisoner. 'Grateful?' questioned the Chief, hearing his unusual reply. Again, it was the same prisoner who always gave strange answers. 'I'm grateful in every circumstance, particularly now, because I am alive,' said the prisoner. The guards roared with laughter. Their sounds of laughter faded after a while when they realized that what the prisoner had said was partially true. This trait was what set him apart from the other prisoners; his way of looking at things. They held their torches over his letter so they could read what he was writing. 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, give thanks. I have learnt to be content whatever the circumstances,' he wrote. He finished writing the letter, and the guards made their way out. 'What a strange man he is,' the younger guard remarked. 'Were I in the same situation, I would never have come even close to being thankful for my life,' said the Chief, giving the prisoner's letter some thought. By now, you would have guessed that the prisoner was Paul, the disciple being held captive in Rome for preaching the Gospel. It isn't easy to imagine what conditions Paul would've been living in. All I can think of is a cold, dark cave with a small opening for a window. What surprises me is Paul's perspective in challenging times. In those days, it was

mainly the enemies of the emperor who were imprisoned and later beheaded or served as food to hungry animals. Paul was innocent but imprisoned because he preached the love and forgiveness of a man killed under the Roman regime. What other prisoners saw when they looked out of the tiny windows in their caves was a life that was passing by them while they awaited death by execution. What Paul saw was a mission that he had to accomplish while he was still alive. Hence, he refused to be disheartened and chose to be grateful, and he wrote down whatever he could to help strengthen the faith of the early Church. Think of it; perhaps Paul was grateful because, at the time, he didn't face the same fate as the other prisoners did. While he was awaiting trial, he had the chance to fulfil the mission he was called to: writing letters of hope and guidance to the early Church. He remembered his purpose on Earth and persevered. This trait was what set Paul apart from the other prisoners: his perspective. It's the same thing that sets those people apart who make a difference in the world from those who live for the sake of living. This New Year, what you and I need to do is to shift our perspective. First of all, look at everything around you. Second, be grateful for what you have because many people can only dream of what you already have. Third, look within yourself. Try to remember your purpose and calling in life and work towards fulfilling your long cherished dreams. Stop waiting for things to happen. Get up, get going and make them happen. □

## BISHOP GIOVENALE FLAVIO

**When did you learn you had been elected bishop? How old were you and what position did you hold in the Salesian Congregation?**

In 1997 I was in Manaus (Brazilian Amazon) as a provincial bursar. Every now and then there were rumours of episcopal appointments, but I thought I was "out of the race." Then a phone call and the letter from the Nunciature on September 22. I was 43 years old.

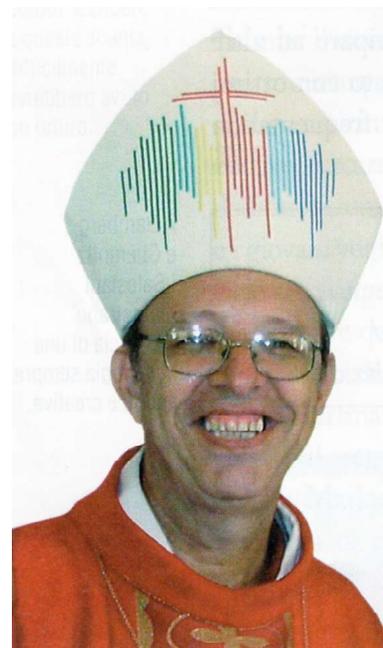
**What is the story of your vocation?**

My story is a very "normal" story. Since I was a child, I thought about being a priest or an astronaut (anyway I was attracted by the

sky!). From the age of 7, I was an altar boy together with my peers. Around my village (Murello, province of Cuneo) there were the Dominicans in Racconigi, the Capuchins in Bra and the Salesians in Lombriasco. The parish priest was a diocesan and pointed out the various vocation promoters the possible boys. I remember a mission of the Dominicans, but, at that time, I was too shy to be a preacher. And then came Fr Cesare Rosa, the Salesian who got me involved. And so, in October 1965 I began middle school in the aspirantate Madonna dei Boschi in Peveragno (CN). The Novitiate in Monte Oliveto (1970-71, the year of the Special General Chapter) and the post-novitiate in Lebanon. Finally, in September 1974, I landed in Brazil.

**What are the fondest memories of your childhood?**

There are so many. Family, friends, games near the church (there was the old mill to play hide and seek while the rosary was being said in church. When the bell rang, we would go peek to see if it was the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> mystery. We were so happy when it was the 2<sup>nd</sup> mystery, because then we still had a few minutes to play). I always felt very loved in my family (and how great it was to fight with my brothers, especially with my sister Maria Teresa!) and in the village. Among the best memories is the year of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, with the teacher Costanzo Liprandi, a passionate educator with a Salesian spirit. And one of the 2 figures, outside of my families (the Giovenale





family and the Salesian family), who contributed most to my education. The other person was Dr. Mario Lubatti, doctor of Murello, who helped me with his example of honesty, competence and sensitivity to social issues. God granted me the grace to be in Italy when he passed away and to be able to celebrate his funeral.

**Why did you leave specifically for Brazil?**

During my novitiate I applied to become a missionary (since I was a minor, I had to get my parents' permission and Fr Commisso - my first spiritual director and friend - helped me with this too). I didn't choose Brazil and the Amazon, but the Rector Major did. Since I had to finish my high school studies, they proposed that I do them in Beirut (Lebanon) at the Salesian International School. And so, it was: I received the missionary crucifix at the age of 17 and off I went! (and the Rector Major gave my mother a crucifix too!).

**Is it possible to give Don Bosco a Brazilian face?**

Don Bosco is very much identified with the Brazilian culture, made up of commitment and joy, of positivity with respect for life. And then... Don Bosco dreamt of Brasilia and the Salesians organized entire regions of Brazil, even socially, so that many are baptized named "John Bosco," "Dominic Savio" or "Mary Help of Christians." There are *Don Boscos* married to *Mary Help of Christians!*

**What are the youngsters like?**

They are young! Cheerful, restless, with a great desire to live, to dance, to participate. We don't always succeed in responding to their needs and anxieties. But we try! Is the challenge of the sects strong? Very strong! There is a difference between the "Churches" and the "sects." With the former, it is possible to talk and work together. With the latter, it is impossible because they have the mentality of raiders, who, when their "work" is done, they close their doors and go to raid elsewhere... but the damage has been done.

**Do you have any projects that are particularly close to your heart?**

The Salesians have never worked in the Diocese of Santarém, I would really like young people to feel loved by God. In this territory more than half the size of Italy, there is no oratory and there are almost no activities for young people. The Church of Santarém is empty, but too "adult" and without young people the Church has no future. This is why I dream of oratories and youth activities, so that young people feel at ease in the Church. □

**Witnesses  
in & for  
Our Times**



**ST. JOHN NEUMANN  
(April 23)**

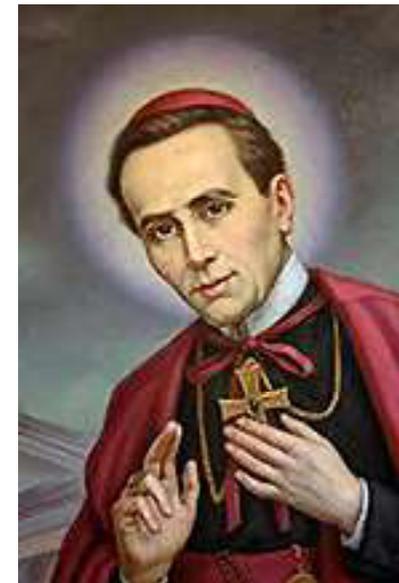
**OUT OF AMERICA**

It might sound surprising but it is true: the first American male saint was canonized as recently as 1977! When we think of America perhaps the first thing that jumps out at us is not holiness or faith or even religion for that matter. America is known for a lot of things but holiness doesn't seem to be one of them. That doesn't mean there aren't holy people or that there never have been such people.

Every place and every culture has seeds of sanctity. How and when they bloom is all part of the mysterious plan of God. How do human beings cooperate with God to realize the potential He has given them to be holy. This is the challenge of sanctity and the only difference between saints and ordinary people - saints open themselves to the grace of God and willingly cooperate with His grace through their personal effort at living a life of love.

**INITIAL YEARS**

John Neumann, the first Catholic American saint, was not originally from America! He was born in Bohemia (then part of the Austrian empire and now part of the



Czech Republic). He was the third of six children born to his parents Philip and Agnes. He came into the world on March 28, 1811 and was baptized that same day in the parish church. He grew up to be a precocious child and his mother would lovingly call him "my little bibliomaniac." His love for reading and for books helped him not simply grow in knowledge but also

broaden his horizons. After his initial schooling, his parents supported his decision to study further and so he began to take classes in Latin with the local catechist.

Neumann went to high school with the Piarist fathers. There he found the pace of education rather slow and felt he could have completed two years in one but he wasn't allowed to do so. Slowly, due to external factors, he began to lose interest in studies but his mother and sister pressed him to persevere, and so he did. Mathematics, however, was his Achilles heel. Even while he made progress in all other subjects, mathematics pulled him down. But he didn't let that bother him much. He took greater interest in the human sciences and went on to major in philosophy. As he progressed in years, he was able to overcome his earlier aversion and weakness in mathematics. He was taken up by the field of science and formed a club with companions to discuss scientific ideas and projects.

On completing his studies, he was faced with the choices of becoming a doctor, a lawyer or a priest. His father encouraged him to pursue medicine but his mother stepped in and encouraged him to try for the priesthood. Call it a mother's intuition if you like, but Agnes seemed to sense a divine calling in her son. With half a heart, John applied to the seminary. In those days, one required influence and contacts with people in high places in order to be accepted into the seminary. One would have to produce testimonials from influential persons. But John had none of that and yet, he was accepted.

### **PRIEST OF GOD**

John enjoyed his time at the seminary. The subjects they taught interested him and he applied himself to his studies to the extent that he would score very high marks. Incidentally, that same year, the seminary director at one of the academic functions, gave a stirring presentation on the missionary activities of St. Paul. Inspired by the talk, John along with a friend, Adalbert Schmidt decided to go to the American missions.

For this he would need to learn English and so he drove himself to study English. Interestingly, he learnt a lot by reading and would practice his English with some English workmen at a factory. Not only did he teach himself to read but also to speak and write English. When the time came for his ordination, John faced a setback. The Bishop who was supposed to ordain him fell seriously sick. Over and above that, the diocese found itself with a problem we might never hear of in our day – they had too many priests and too few parishes such that most of the priests ordained in the years prior to John were still without any postings. John was gutted because he would not be able to celebrate the joy of his ordination and first mass with his family around him. His family, on the other hand were gutted that John chose to become a missionary and would leave their country.

Finally, John found himself going to America while his companion, Adalbert decided not to go after all. Neumann burned with zeal for the missions. He couldn't wait to set foot on American soil and begin to preach the Good News. Perhaps he was too eager and a tad irritating, because the

captain of the ship did not grant him permission to leave the boat even though he petitioned him six times! It was on a sunny afternoon, the Feast of Corpus Christi when John finally stepped ashore in America. He had nothing with him save for a tattered bag of clothes and one dollar in his pocket!

John was incardinated into the diocese of New York and was shortly thereafter ordained by the Bishop of New York. His first posting was to the parish of St. Nicholas Kirche. When the need arose for a priest to care for the German speaking Catholics of Rochester, Fr. John was sent. He was saddened to find that the spiritual life of the people was failing due to shortage of pastors. Without wasting any time, he began to catechize the children who were in a difficult position due to their inability to understand either German or English well.

### **PRIEST AND BISHOP**

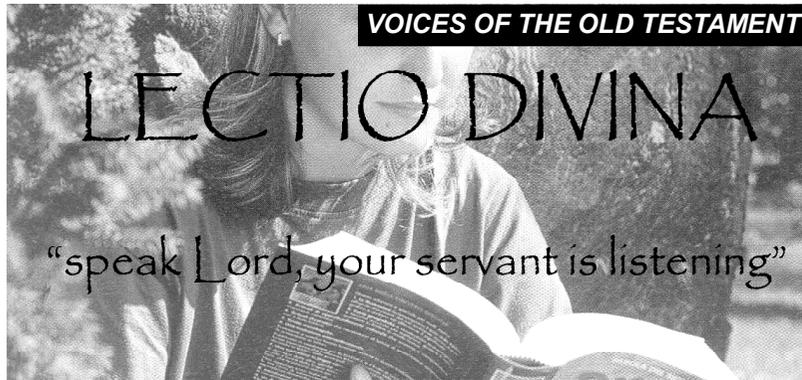
It was while he was working here that he first encountered a Redemptorist in the person of Fr. Joseph Prost. He would later go on to join the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (Redemptorists). Obviously, the Bishop wasn't very forthcoming with the permission to leave the diocese and become part of a religious order but he ended giving his approval. The Redemptorists were just setting down roots in America when John joined them. A few years after he became a Redemptorist he was elected as Provincial superior for the United States and a few years later he was named Bishop of Philadelphia which was an industrial area and hence there were plenty of migrant Catholics from

Ireland and elsewhere. Under his leadership, parish Churches were set up at the speed of one every month! Besides, he organized a bank called the Beneficial Bank that would help people grow their savings and meet their financial needs.

Neumann was a man of vision and pastoral creativity. He saw the needs of his people and took proactive steps to meet them. He pioneered the concept of a diocesan school attached to a parish. This allowed for the Catholic children to receive a Catholic education. John was not afraid to seek help. He knew that the Lord's harvest was plenty and extra pairs of hands were always welcome. Thus, he invited many religious institutes to establish themselves in various parts of the diocese and carry out missions in keeping with their respective charisms.

### **WITNESS VALUE**

St. John Neumann stands out as a man of and for the Church. He seemed to understand well the idea that the Church is the people of God. His erudition and fluency with languages helped him get in touch with people from different backgrounds and cultures. Petty politics did not worry him. His sole concern was the welfare of the people. To that end, he was ready to join hands with anyone who could lend a hand. This openness to collaboration and broadminded approach to the work of evangelization and pastoral care enabled him to achieve wonderful results. Perhaps, the Church of today can take this leaf out of the book of John Neumann and work it into a strength capable of making the Gospel relevant to those who hear it. □



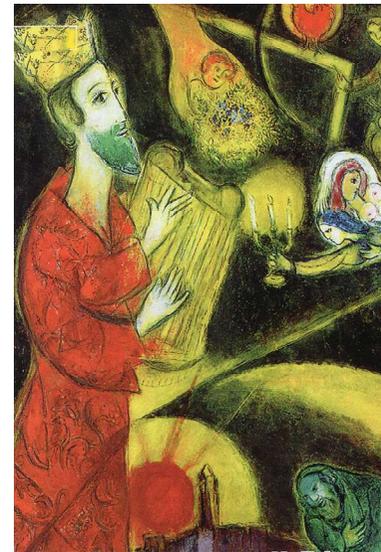
## GOD'S LANGUAGE

by Carlo Broccardo

*Parables are beautiful because of the content that each of them offers us. But, and even before that, they tell us about God's style: he chooses the aptest language to reach our hearts.*

**L**ast year we read passages from the Old Testament, and the gospels presented parables, especially from the Gospel of Luke. But did you know that even the Old Testament contained parables? Yes, Jesus was not the first to use parables in his teaching; they were a tool well known to the rabbis of his day and already known (though little used) in the Old Testament. "The English word "parable" derives from the Greek verb *parà ballo*, which means to approach, place next to, and compare. Usually, we speak of the parable when someone wants to communicate something but, instead of doing it through reasoning, Jesus does it with a story (or, in the simplest form, with an example), alluding to the reality that he wants to explain as he approaches a story. So, reflecting on that, he can draw light and better understand the truth

itself. But to reflect in general on the theory of parables risks confusing us; it is much better to read the very passage in 2 Sam 12:1-10. What happened? One day King David (in the picture: the work of Marc Chagall), while his army was fighting, had remained at court doing nothing; after lunch, he went to rest and then, as soon as he got up, he saw his neighbour while she was bathing; he fell in love with her and had her brought to court. When the woman, whose name is Bathsheba, lets him know that she is pregnant to cover up the adultery, the king has her husband (Uriah, the Hittite, who was fighting for him) killed in the meantime, and so saves appearances. Everyone thinks that he has made the generous gesture of taking a poor war widow to court, but God knows the truth and tells the prophet, who at the time was Nathan: "go to the



king and say to him that he has made a mistake." And, it is here that Nathan invents a story, the parable of the sheep that was like a daughter. "Two men were in the same town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had large and numerous livestock in great numbers, while the poor man had nothing but a single little lamb he had bought ...." Nathan takes David into a world of fantasy; we, too, reading the story, imagine the poor man's only lamb, we see her eating at his table and sleeping on his breast; she is like a daughter to him, like a sister to his children. We, too, like David, feel bad when we see that the rich man steals it so as not to "use" one of his many animals, and we spontaneously say: it's not fair! That evil man must give it back! That man must pay! And here comes the word of Nathan, who says to David: "that evil man is you!"

As king, you could have any woman you wanted (it was allowed in those days), but you "stole" your neighbour's only wife - and, indeed, to do so with impunity, you even killed him. "The prophet Nathan had at least three options for trying to convince David. He could go to him and throw the truth in his face: you have sinned! Or he could try to reason with him, arguing with him, trying to understand the causes and consequences of his actions. Would that have helped? Let's remember that David had just committed a murder, so much was he in love with his neighbour; he had just committed an enormous stupidity he would later regret when he realized it, but now was not the time to reason. And so, Nathan chooses the third way: he tells a story that allows him to get out of the "concrete case" and thus open the king's heart; by estranging himself for a moment from what has happened, David, himself will come to understand his mistake. Parables are beautiful because of the content that each of them offers us. But also, and even before that, because they tell us God's style (which then becomes that of the prophets and Jesus): he knows that we are not always capable of reasoning, he knows that we do not always have a clear vision of what we are doing. He knows that sometimes our hearts are hardened; he does not insist on making us "understand" but chooses the most suitable language today to open our hearts so that we may listen to his word. □

# Quiet Spaces

## THE ULTIMATE INSTRUMENT

*Pope Francis' homily (edited) at Domus Sanctae Marthae on Tuesday, January 21, 2016*

**O**n Thursday morning, during Mass at Santa Marta, Pope Francis cautioned against envy, a sin that can lead a person to kill. The first reading was taken from the First Book of Samuel (18:6-9, 19:1-7). It tells of "King Saul's entrance into the city after the victory against the Philistines" which, the Pope said, was won with the "duel between David and Goliath." Truly "it is the victory of the whole people." For this reason the people "celebrated: it was almost a ritual celebration." The Bible, Francis explained, recounts "that when King Saul died in battle, the army returned in silence after sunset: they were victorious, but did not celebrate because the king was dead." This time, however, "they celebrated as was customary."

Thus, the Scripture states that "the women came out of all the cities," singing and dancing to celebrate the victory. It was even "a ritual of joy: let's remember, said Francis, when King David danced before the ark: everyone sang, with timbrels, with songs of joy, and with instruments of music".

The Bible also adds that the women were dancing and singing: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands". They were words "that were improvised at the time, perhaps because they fit the song." Thus, "David had killed the Philistine – it's true! – he was the instrument, and the people had the sense that the king was the Lord's anointed one." And so "they sang: they knew the story of David and they broke out into song."

Meanwhile, "Saul, rather than being happy about this celebration, was very displeased by it." Evidently, "Saul's heart was somewhat askew," Francis explained, because "he did the math: 'They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands!'" In other words, "it was only a song, but he took it badly: why?"

The question, the Pontiff continued, is that there was something in Saul's heart "that incited him to take offence: he was jealous." He "felt an attack of jealousy there," because of that song. Thus the Bible tells us that "he was very angry." His heart "began to work in that direction." And "it worsened," inducing Saul to wonder about David: "what more can he have but the kingdom?" Therefore, he "eyed David from that day on," and constantly imagined: "This man will betray me!" For this reason, the Pope stated, Saul "decided to kill" David. And "the reason was not the song" but instead "it was his heart, sick with jealousy, that led Saul to envy."

Francis noted what an "ugly thing envy is!" Indeed it is an "ugly sin," and "jealousy and envy grow in the heart like wicked grass: it grows and smothers the good grass." Thus, "all that seems to make

shade for it harms it: it is not at peace. It is a tormented heart, it is an ugly heart." Thus, as we heard, "the envious heart leads to killing, to death."

Indeed, Scripture states clearly that "through the devil's envy death entered the world". It is no coincidence, the Pope recalled, that "envy is also one of the works of the flesh listed by the Apostles when they say: 'the works of the Holy Spirit are these; the works of the flesh are these...'"

Francis reiterated that "envy kills and it doesn't tolerate another having something that I don't have." It always creates suffering, "because the heart of an envious or jealous person suffers: it is a suffering heart." This kind of "suffering leads [the heart] to desire the death of others."

Indeed, Francis warned, "how often in our communities – we needn't go very far to see this – out of jealousy one kills with the tongue." It so happens that "one envies another and gossip begins – and gossip kills." The Bible passage also recounts that King Saul, on the advice of his son Jonathan, stopped seeking to kill David. Then, however, "after time, in an abundance of rage," Saul actually tried to kill David, "as he was playing the lyre." Hence, envy "is a malady that comes and goes."

Continuing on, the Pontiff added: "Thinking about and reflecting on this passage of Scripture, I ask myself – and everyone – to look to see if there is something in my heart that can be ascribed to jealousy or to envy, which always leads to death and inhibits me from being happy." Because, he continued, "this sickness always leads one to look at another's advantage as if it is to your detriment." And "this is an ugly sin: it is the beginning of many, many crimes."

"Let us ask the Lord," the Pope continued, to "give us the grace not to open our heart to jealousy, not to open our heart to envy, because these things always lead to death." He then recalled the attitude of Pilate, an intelligent man. "Mark says in the Gospel that Pilate realized that the chief scribes delivered Jesus to him out of envy."

Thus "envy – as interpreted by Pilate, who was very intelligent but cowardly! – is what led to Jesus' death." It was "the instrument, the ultimate instrument: they delivered Jesus to him out of envy."

Before returning to the celebration, Francis asked "the Lord for the grace to never deliver, out envy, a brother, a sister of the parish, of the community, or even a neighbour: each person has his or her sins, each person has his or her virtues. Each one has his or her own." He then recommended that we "see the good and not kill with gossip out of envy or jealousy."

## NO GREATER WEALTH

By Pierluigi Menato, Tr. Ian Doulton, sdb

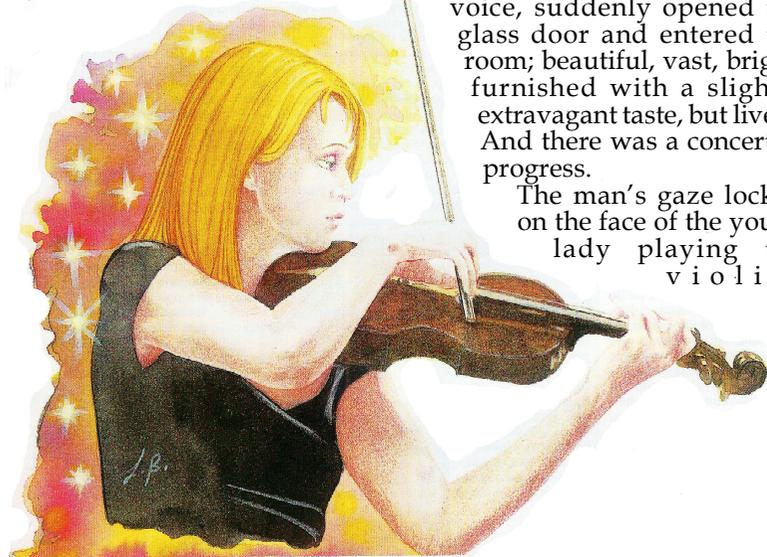
It was the bright flower-shaped sign that struck him. What to do? Go into that place? Or keep wandering in the rain? He smiled at the problem he was facing himself. What was happening to him? If his friends had known, they would have said: "Armando Sutter, the man of steel, is sick with sentimentality, a bad sign: either he's getting old or he's in love". Armando shook his head in irritation. Neither the one nor the other, dear friends. Today I was tired of the factory, papers, projects, invitations; today, I felt the need to be alone with myself, to go away on foot, in the rain, along the streets of a modest suburban district like an ordinary worker. Is there any need to cry scandal over this?"

A voice inside him, sick and gossipy, replied: "You shouldn't cry out for scandal, but for

stubbornness and insincerity". And Armando, angry: "I was sincere, frank even with myself". "It's not true," replied the malicious voice, "you're in love, and you suffer like a young novice, and you don't want to acknowledge it. Your character has lost its serene objectivity; you have become moody, a hypochondriac, unfair," Armando sneered, "And who would I be in love with?". And the little voice, ready and witty: "With the mysterious beauty you met last summer in that hotel by the sea, the mysterious beauty, who after having encouraged your feeling, after having made you understand that she reciprocated it, disappeared without a trace, like fog in the sun. Ah! deny it if you can."

Armando, constantly more irritated, unable to find words to contradict the implacable voice, suddenly opened the glass door and entered the room; beautiful, vast, bright, furnished with a slightly extravagant taste, but lively. And there was a concert in progress.

The man's gaze locked on the face of the young lady playing the violin.



Gemma! The same honey-coloured hair, the same round face, the same clear eyes. Just her, Gemma, and not someone impersonating her. Suddenly the young lady looked at him, but her eyes remained calm, steady, almost indifferent. "She doesn't recognize me," the man thought anxiously. "Is it possible that she does not recognize me? No, she doesn't want to recognize me. Why doesn't she want to?"

He called a waiter and whispered something to him. The waiter pocketed his tip with great dignity, bowed and then walked over to the platform where the orchestra was playing. To the young lady sitting at the piano, the teacher, he reported what the customer had told him.

"What an idea!" muttered the young lady. "Tell him we don't like the music of that romance, but to please him, we'll try to play it from memory." And she turned to give orders to her companions.

The old romance was entitled "A Road in the Woods," a sweet, flowing melody that meandered lazily, without regret or melancholy.

A few applause, distracted and listless, greeted that resumption. The young lady violinist looked for the man who had asked for that old romance, but he was no longer there.

Gemma stood in front of the door until everyone had turned the corner of the street, then coldly pulled on her coat and walked in the direction of her home, a cold and dingy rented room. The figure of a man suddenly appeared before her.

"Gemma!"

She stopped, silent, her eyes

downcast.

"Look at me, Gemma."

The young lady looked at him, and then he noticed that her eyes were strangely glistening.

"You shouldn't have gotten in my way yet," she said in a tired, dull voice.

He replied very politely: "I didn't know you played the violin."

And he walked with her, quietly, as if it were logical and natural that he should do so. It wasn't raining. From the clouds, torn in patches by the fresh night air, a sliver of moonlight appeared.

Gemma, with a little convulsive laugh that seemed more like a sob, went on: "To live I need to work."

"I need to work, too, to live," said Armando Sutter, quietly.

"It's not the same thing. I know what your job is. It's different for me. However, I know I owe you an explanation. You met me last summer at a hotel by the sea, and I'm sure you're wondering now, even if you don't want to admit it, how a modest young lady like me could have chosen that four-star hotel. Isn't that what you're wondering?"

The man did not answer. Gemma said: "See, I guessed right. Well, you know that the short stay in that hotel was a gift that I made to myself after many savings put aside for the first time. Perhaps another girl in my place, with money like that, would have bought a fur coat or a car, but I had only one desire. I cherished only one dream: to spend a few days of vacation in a beautiful and restful environment. I don't know if a man of your standing can understand

my apprehension. Think of a girl like me who is compelled to rent modest rooms and eat lunches at fixed prices, desires a kind of parenthesis to indulge in such warmth and comfort.

"I can understand it very well," he said in a grave voice, "because I too wished for this when my life was not as easy as it is today. Go on."

Instead, she remained silent. Now they were walking over a long bridge that joined the old city to the new one: under the arches of the bridge the river flowed lazily. They stopped, leaned against the parapet, and gazed out over the dark water, on which the moon's weak rays dropped a handful of silver straws.

"Last summer, at the seaside, one evening, I was sitting in the corner of the hotel terrace lulled by the rhythm of the music. Suddenly you appeared on the threshold of the window, and you stopped to look at the stars. You never turned your gaze in my direction, and I thought you hadn't noticed me; however, shortly after, you threw away your cigarette and approached me. 'How strange this piece is,' you observed. I answered: 'It's an old romance and it's called 'A Road in the Woods.'"

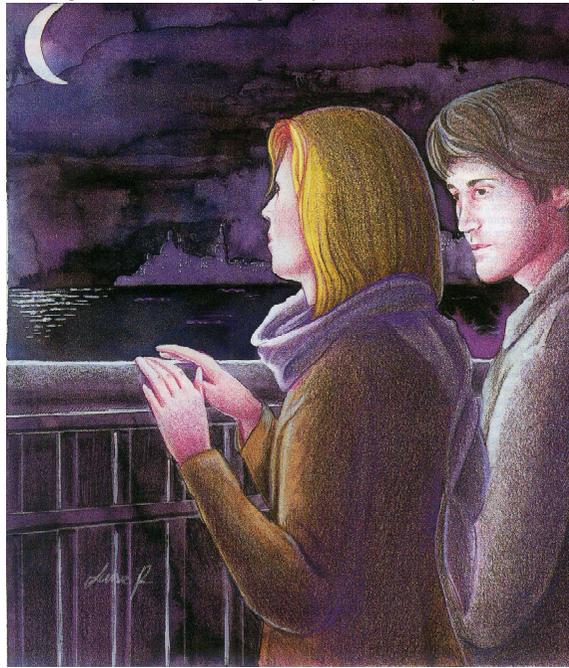
A long pause

ensued, during which the murmur of the river under the arches of the bridge could be heard. Finally, he said: "I could never forget that music." He turned to her, looking directly into her eyes, "And now, be honest. What did you think when you saw me appear in that hall tonight?"

She answered slowly, almost breathlessly, "I thought that if I bought a fur coat or a car, no pain would come to me."

"And you fled from the hotel, leaving no trace of yourself, so as not to make such a confession to me, did you not?"

"Yes. In declaring your love for me, you asked me where my parents lived, to introduce yourself and ask for my hand in marriage. I was terrified. As sinister as lightning, the suspicion flashed through my mind that, by reveal-



ing the true state of things, my sincere and deep feeling, I swear to you, could be reduced to small change in my estimation. I preferred to remain silent, I preferred to put distance and silence between us."

Then he smiled. A clear, surprising smile that made his face look extremely young. She wondered if she had ever seen him smile before. No, she had never seen him smile. She, who remembered even the serious expression of his face, would not have been able to forget it if she had seen that fresh, youthful smile one more time.

Armando asked cheerfully, "Are you still thinking of the fur coat or the car you could have bought with the money you spent last year at the beach?"

Gemma shook her head. They had reached a small square, in the middle of which a fountain gurgled.

"We must leave each other," she said, holding out her hand. "I'm home."

He shook her hand, and held it between his own.

"But I...." He interrupted her with affectionate vehemence: "And won't say you're poor, you mustn't even think it. It is the worst wrong you can do to yourself. You possess something that is worth all the riches in the world: simplicity, dignity, integrity of character..."

She listened to him, motionless, her breath held, her eyes closed. He continued, still shaking that little hand, "And there are still some men who appreciate these gifts, thank goodness." □

## SUNDAY LUNCH

*From the kitchen, as usual, the lady of the house said: "It's ready!" Her husband who was reading the papers, and her two boys who were watching television and listening to music, noisily sat down at the table and impatiently brandished their cutlery. The lady came in.*

*But instead of the usual, appetizing aromas, she placed a pile of hay on the table.*

*"But...but!" said the three men. "But, have you gone out of your mind?"*

*The lady looked at them and solemnly replied: "Well now! How could I have imagined that you would have noticed? I've been cooking for you for twenty years and all this time I never heard a word that gave me to understand that you were not chewing on hay."*

To celebrate her tenth wedding anniversary, a woman asked the magazine that her husband read, to publish a message to him.

Here it is: "Thank you, thank you, my love, because if today I am a woman, a wife and a happy mother, I owe it to you. Thank you, because you make me feel that I'm the only woman in the world for you always and everywhere. Thank you because you make me feel beautiful. Thank you, because you make me feel important.

Thank you for your loving looks when we're among people. Thank you for the "I love you" notes you leave here and there when I least expect it. Thank you for being there. Thank you for these wonderful years of love."

We have an immense power to decide the happiness or unhappiness of people around us. Usually a "thank you" said or forgotten is enough.

## FIORETTI OF DON BOSCO - 24

by Michele Molineris

### 133. And it began to rain! (1864)

One day in 1864, Don Bosco's prayers and effective preaching brought abundant rain to the Montemagno countryside. This is how Don Lemoyne recounts the event at the insistence of the then assistant-parish priest Don Marchisio.

For three months a bronze sky had denied rain to the parched countryside and many public and private prayers were made but in vain. The whole harvest was bound to be lost. Don Bosco, invited to preach, went up to the pulpit and, in his first sermon, said to the people: "If you come to the sermons during these three days, if you reconcile with God through a good confession, if you prepare yourselves so that on the feast day there will be a general communion, I promise you, in the name of Our Lady, that an abundant rain will come to refresh your countryside.

His warm exhortation won the hearts of everyone. In the fervour of his sermon, he had no intention of making an absolute promise, but only an exhortation, leaning on the goodness of Mary; Our Lady however had spoken through his mouth.

In the sacristy Don Bosco observed that the people looked at him in wonder and emotion. The parish priest Fr Clivio approached him and said: "But good, but good; it's your courage."

"What courage?"

"The courage to announce to the public that rain will infallibly

fall on the feast day."

"Did I say that?"

"You certainly did." He had said those precise words: "In the name of Mary Most Holy, I promise you that if you all make a good confession, you will have rain."

"But no, you must have misunderstood; I don't remember saying that. I refuse to believe it."

"Ask the listeners one by one and see if they all understood what I understood."

In fact, this was the case, and the people were so convinced of it that they resolutely set about setting their consciences in order. There were not enough Confessors for the penitents.

In the neighbouring villages, comments and laughter were being made about the prophecy; indeed, in the village of Grana, a great dance was being prepared to celebrate the denial of the priest's prophecy.

During those three days the sky was always fiery red. Don Bosco continued to preach; on his way to and from church the people asked him: "And what about the rain?"

"Take sin away from your lives!" he replied.

On the feast of the Assumption of Our Lady into heaven, which that year fell on a Monday, everyone went for confession and communion like never before. On that morning the sky never seemed so clear. Don Bosco sat down to lunch with Marquis Fassati, but before the guests had finished, he got up and went to his room. He was in distress, because his prediction had caused quite a stir. Over the breeze he could hear the sound of the

trumpets of the dance at Grana. In Monte Magno itself, some people had organised demonstrations against him.

The bells sounded the hour of Vespers and the singing of the psalms began in the church. Don Bosco leaned against the window and questioned the sky, which seemed inexorable. A suffocating heat reigned. He pondered what to say from the pulpit, if Our Lady had not granted the grace.

In the meantime, Luigi Porta later told us, "I was going to the church with the marquis and we were talking about the promised rain; the sweat was dripping from our foreheads, although it was only a ten-minute walk from the palace to the church.

As we reached the sacristy, at the end of vespers Don Bosco arrived. The Marquis said to him: "This time, Don Bosco, you will fail. You promised rain, but it will be anything but rain."

Then Don Bosco called the sacristan: "John," he said to him, "go behind Baron Garofoli's castle to see how the weather is and if there is any sign of rain."

The sacristan went, returned and reported to Don Bosco:

"It's as clear as a mirror; just a little cloud, almost the trace of a shoe, towards Biella."

"So, was it like the little cloud of Carmel?"

"Well," Don Bosco replied, "give me the stole."

Some of the many men who were in the sacristy gathered round him to ask: "What if it doesn't rain?"

"It is a sign that we don't deserve it," answered Don Bosco. When he had finished the Magnificat he slowly went up to the

pulpit, saying in his heart to Mary: "It is not my honour that is in danger at this moment, but yours. What will the mockers of your name say if they see the hopes of these Christians who have done their best to please you disappointed?"

Don Bosco appeared at the pulpit. A packed audience occupying every corner of the church had their eyes fixed on him. He said the Hail Mary and it seemed to him that the sunlight had dimmed a little. He began the sermon but after a few moments, a prolonged sound of thunder was heard. A murmur of joy ran through the whole church. Don Bosco stopped speaking for a moment, in the grip of a most intense emotion. The thunder followed one another and a very heavy rain beat down on the glazed windows.

Think of the eloquent words that came out of Don Bosco's heart as the rain poured down; it was a hymn of thanksgiving to Mary and of comfort to his devotees. He wept; the listeners wept. After the blessing, the people stopped again in the church and under the large entrance hall, because the rain was still pouring down. The miracle was recognised by everyone, but in the village of Grana a hailstorm fell so terribly that it washed away all the crops, and it is worth remembering that not a single hailstone fell outside the boundaries of the village in all the surrounding villages (cf. *EBM*, VII, 433ff).

### 135. There's Providence (1864)

On 18 October 1864, after the prayers, Don Bosco was

surrounded by some clerics, who asked him to tell them something that would delight them. He told them how during the last winter he had been providentially helped by heaven.

"It was a day," he said, "when my purse was very light, when I saw the baker in front of me. He begged me to pay him for the bread he had already provided at the Oratory. I remained for a moment as if stunned and told him to return the next day he would be paid in full.

This answer had escaped me, without my knowing what I was saying, but I immediately felt a lively trust in Divine Providence reviving in me.

Tomorrow came and I had no money yet. I went down to the church thinking and rethinking the baker's debt. I went to celebrate holy mass; at that moment a very handsome young man was seen entering the sacristy, asking for me. When he saw a priest, he gave him a letter for me, and withdrew. At the end of Mass, that envelope was brought to me, and it was sealed. I opened it and found three bills for a thousand liras, the amount to which the debt was due. Note that I do not know the young man who was the bearer of that sum. You see how great Divine Providence can be! (M.B., VII, 785).

### 137. Such and such a book, page and paragraph... (1865)

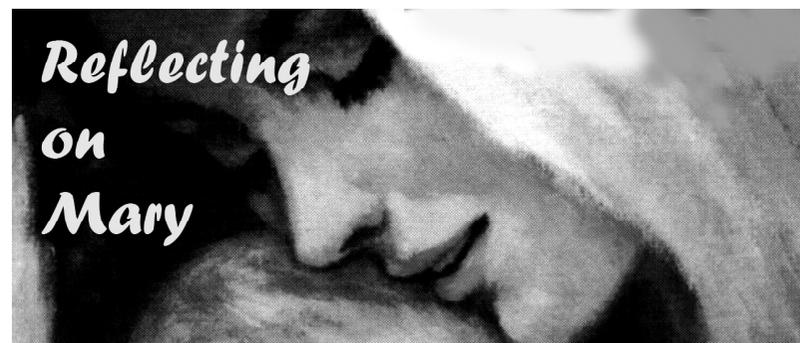
Don Bosco knew an infinite number of books inside out. He was a great help to his priests and they saved immense time because, when they had to preach



sermons, panegyrics, prepare for exams, write books, they turned to him, who always indicated five or six books, pointed out the most esteemed author, and specified the way they should use them.

In 1865 Fr Cagliero had to beg a preacher, who, having taken the commitment, could not go out of town to preach a panegyric on a saint, whose name was little known. He was completely ignorant of anything he had done. Don Bosco was far from Turin. The sermon had to take place before Don Bosco returned. Fr Cagliero, in order to get out of this uncomfortable situation, wrote a note to Don Bosco, who replied by courier, indicating the volume and page of the Bollan-dists.

Although he was accustomed to these marvels, as soon as Fr Cagliero received the note, read it to a companion, and with him went up to the library to verify with that witness the veracity of the note. He took the volume, looked for the page, and there was the desired materials (M.B., I, 433). □



## MARY, MOTHER OF THE INCARNATE WORD

by Carlo Caffarra

The cornerstone of everything the Church teaches about Mary is indicated in the following words: "What the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, but what it teaches about Mary illuminates, in turn, its faith in Christ" (CCC 487). Marian doctrine is all framed with reference to Christ, in a twofold direction (if we can say so): all that the Church believes about Mary, she believes as a "consequence" of what she believes about Jesus Christ, but it is also true that Marian doctrine leads to a deeper faith in Christ.

And this is the perspective with which we must always "see" the person of Mary: her relationship to Christ the Lord. Now what does this relationship consist of? Fundamentally by her motherhood, she is the mother of Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father, made man.

Therefore, we must begin our reflection precisely with this central affirmation of the Church's faith concerning Mary, which we say each time we profess our faith: "He conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary."

### Divine Maternity

The title of Mother of God was solemnly proclaimed at the Council of Ephesus (431). This proclamation primarily concerns Christ. In the following sense:

From the beginning, the Church knew that Mary was the mother of Jesus (Gal 4). And since Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary, is the Only-Begotten Word God, Mary must be proclaimed as the true Mother of the Word-God. In short, to proclaim Mary the Mother of God is to proclaim that Jesus of Nazareth and the Only-Begotten Word God are not two persons, but one and the same person.

Let us now try to stammer out something about this mystery of Mary's divine motherhood, in order to gain some understanding of it. As I have already told you, it is the foundation of all Christian veneration rendered to Mary.

Let us try to introduce ourselves into this mystery by considering the part played by parents in ordinary generations. In the conception of every human person there is the simultaneous cooperation of the generative act performed by the spouses with the creative act

performed by God. By virtue of this union, a new human person comes into existence, of whom God is the sole creator and the spouses are the parents.

Let us now penetrate the mystery of Jesus' conception. Let us say immediately that there was no human intervention: it was a virginal conception. Mary biologically generated the human body into which God infuses, at the same moment, the created human soul: from the union of the body generated by Mary and the soul created by God; a concrete, individual human nature is constituted. But at the very moment in which this human nature begins to be, it is assumed by the Person of the Word: it is the Person of the Word himself who assumes it as his own nature. This is what is meant by the words: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

And so, Mary is the mother, true and proper, of this new member of the human race, this new man born into the world. She is the Mother of the Word for, this new man is none other than the Word. In human nature, He was generated by Mary and generated in our historical humanity, that he is inserted in history, in time: he becomes one of us, through her. Herein lies the entire meaning of Mary's existence.

We can now say something about the relationship of motherhood between Mary and the Word made flesh. It is in a unique, singular relationship of the person of Mary, with the person of the Word, in its distinction from the other two divine Persons, since only the Word became incarnate.

By virtue of this relationship, Mary has attained a unique dignity: "she has touched by her concep-

tion the limits of divinity" (Gaetano, in 22,103,4). Let us read what St. Thomas writes: "*The humanity of Christ, because it is united to God; the created beatitude, because it is the fruition of God; and the Blessed Virgin, because she is the Mother of God, have a dignity in a certain sense infinite, which comes to them from the infinite good that is God. It follows from this that there is nothing better than these three things, for there is nothing better than God*" (1:25,5, 4um).

Every motherhood is constituted by an interpersonal relationship rich in mutual knowledge, love, affection, donation and confidence: this is "natural." And we must think that all of this was present in the Mary-Christ relationship. But in the case of Mary, it is a matter of a son who is God. And so, this motherhood is "full of grace" and holiness.

Grace is first and foremost the very eternal love with which the Father loves the human creature: from this source flows all the gifts that divinize the human person in Christ. Since the Father decided to send the Word into our humanity, in the same act he simultaneously willed that Mary be his mother: for this reason, she has been enriched with the highest holiness.

### **Mary's Virginit**

Closely linked to the mystery of divine maternity is faith in Mary's virginit. Maternity and virginit are so closely linked that we should always say: Mary's virginal motherhood. It is a real and perpetual virginit.

Real, because it truly concerns the entire person of Mary, even her body. Perpetual, that is, before the birth of Jesus, during the birth and after the birth.

*Before the birth:* Jesus was conceived in Mary's body, without human intervention, by the work of the Holy Spirit. God, that is, miraculously made the generative action of Mary, incapable by her nature (as in the case of every woman) to give origin by herself to a new human individual, conceive by herself the new human organism. Any intervention by a man, Joseph, was excluded.

*During childbirth:* Jesus was miraculously delivered, without producing in Mary's body what childbirth inevitably produces in every woman's body.

*After childbirth:* Mary had no sexual intercourse or other childbirth after that of Jesus.

It is very important that we grasp the profound meaning of the Lord's gift of virginit to Mary. This meaning can be grasped by answering a question: why did Christ want to be born of a virgin? Because He is the new Adam, who inaugurates the new humanity, the new creation. Because by his conception he inaugurates our new birth as children of God.

But we must also ask ourselves a second question: what was the significance for Mary having allowed this call to virginit? Mary's motherhood, in order to be entirely true, implied a total surrender of Mary to the Incarnate Word: of this, surrendered virginit is the sign and the effect.

### **Why Christians are Marian**

In the doctrine of faith and in our Christian experience, Mary is not a marginal figure: one cannot be truly Christian without also being Marian. At the origin of everything is the inscrutable decision of the Father to communicate his divine

life to man, in the Son through the gift of the Holy Spirit (=predestination in Christ). The realization of this decision is the incarnation of the Word, the Incarnate Word, in whom all things subsist and in whose image each of us was created.

In the very decision to send his Son, the person of Mary is included as predestined to generate in human nature the Only-begotten Word, God. The Church's experience of faith has progressively deepened the mystery of Christ, true God and true man. Depending on this progressive discovery, the Church experiences the progressive discovery of the mystery of Mary within the Mystery of the Word Incarnate: a discovery which had its "milestone" in the dogmatic definition of Mary's divine and virginal motherhood.

In view of this singular mission, the Father preserved her from original sin, filled her with the abundance of the gifts of grace (full of grace) and, in his wise design, "wanted ... that the acceptance of her who was predestined to be a mother should precede the Incarnation" (LG 56; EV 1/430).

By virtue of this consent, she "as if formed by the Holy Spirit" (cf. LG 56; EV 1/430), consecrated herself totally to the work and person of her Son, presenting him to the Father in the temple and suffering with him as he died on the Cross. In this way, Mary, participating in the mystery of Christ's Resurrection in a unique way, was assumed into Glory in body and soul at the end of her life.

Because of this we must try to say more fervently the simplest and most beautiful prayer: *Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.* Amen □



## MY VOCATION STORY

# ALWAYS IN GOD'S HANDS

Fr. Ajay D'Monte, sdb

No vocation is born of itself or lives for itself. A vocation flows from the heart of God and blossoms in the good soil of faithful people. Did not Jesus say: "By this, all men will know that you are my disciples if you have a love for one another" (Jn 13:35)? – Pope Francis.

This is the very feeling I am experiencing, as I speak about my Priestly vocation. A vocation that flows from the heart of God and continuously blooms within me.

I believe my first vocation promoters were my very dear parents. If I am here today it was all because of my mother. A big thanks to her! It was she who showed me the way to the church. It was she who told me to join the altar servers, Sundays school, and the youth group.

But as usual, as grew older, I lost my interest in the priesthood. Since my family was poor I wanted to learn English in order to take up hotel management and then join a ship where I could earn good money. I did not know that God had altogether a different plan for me. After my X<sup>th</sup>, I wanted to learn to speak English so I contacted my aunt who was a nun in the congregation of The Holy Family of Nazareth in Goa. She took me to a priest who was of



the diocese of Kolhapur. He was very happy to get to know me. He also visited my family, but when the time came for admission he was transferred to some other place. This sudden transfer confused me. Unfortunately, I had to continue my college studies. After my XI<sup>th</sup>, I met a school friend who was studying in Don Bosco, Lonavla. I told him I had a desire to learn English. When he returned to Lonavla he suggested my name to the Rector of Don Bosco, Lonavla and I started receiving letters from Fr. Felix the Rector of the house of Lonavla.

One day I had a special visit from Fr. Franco Pinto, a very energetic Salesian. I was

extremely fascinated by his enthusiasm. He convinced my parents to send me to Don Bosco, Lonavla for a camp. I attended the camp; it was a thrill to be there. There in Lonavla for the first time, I saw priests in short pants playing games with us. I was more eager to come to Lonavla. I would have to leave home for the first time and a long duration.

During the first year at Lonavla, I encountered a lot of difficulties and failures but these difficult moments somehow changed my attitude towards life. I failed at quite a few things but, at the same time, I took them up as challenges.

When I reached the Novitiate house in Nashik, I could say I recognized my vocation. That year

I prayed a lot. I was helped very much by my Novice Master.

As I look back, I can only see the hand of God guiding me all the time. There were many tsunamis and hurricanes but I have kept the candle of my vocation through the help of God, the love of my parents, and companions.

Today being a priest, the significant and fulfilling moments of my life are, though there were moments of difficulty and troubles, the hand of God kept guiding me on. It was prayer that kept me in the hand of God. Just two years after my ordination, I lost my beloved father. It was a moment of faith crisis, but today, when I look back, I can see that He held me, and my family into His hand. □

## TWO SPARROWS

Two sparrows were blissfully sitting in the shade of the same tree, a willow. One perched on the top and the other on the fork of a branch lower down. After a while, the sparrow standing on the top branch, just to break the ice after a siesta said, "Oh, how beautiful these green leaves are!" The sparrow standing a little lower down, found it a provocation and replied, rather annoyed: "But are you dumb? Can't you see they are white?" The one above was now annoyed: "Now you're dumb! They're green."

And the one below, with his beak up said: "I bet you my tail feathers, they are white. You don't understand anything. You're crazy!" The sparrow on the top felt his blood boil and without thinking twice, he rushed down to his opponent to teach him a lesson. The other did not move. They were close, facing each other with feathers ruffled in anger. But before starting the duel, they had the good-sense to look upward in the same direction. The sparrow who had come down from the top exclaimed: "Oh," in wonder, "Look they are white." But he said to his friend, "Try to come up to where I was earlier." Both of them flew to the highest branch of the willow and this time both of them exclaimed together: "They look green!"

*Don't judge anyone if you haven't walked an hour in his shoes.*

– Bruno Ferrero sdb



# IN A CHEERFUL MOOD

## Shopping Bags

It was very crowded at the supermarket, and the customer in front of me had a large order. As the harried looking clerk lifted the final bag for her, its bottom gave way, sending the contents crashing to the floor.

"They just don't make these bags like they used to," the clerk blurted out to the customer. "That was supposed to happen in your driveway!"

## Rice Preference

The young woman really thought she'd been very patient through a protracted period dating with no talk of marriage.

One night her steady boyfriend took her to a Chinese restaurant. As he perused the menu, he casually asked her, "So...how do you like your rice? Boiled? or fried?"

Without missing a beat, she looked over her menu at him and replied clearly, "Thrown!"

## Transcribing Confusion

We were thoroughly confused while transcribing medical audiotapes, my co-worker came upon the following garbled diagnosis: "This man has pholen-frometry."

Knowing nothing about that particular condition, she double-checked with Doctor Mike Wilson. After listening to the tape, he shook his head.

"This man," he said, translating for her, "has fallen from a tree."

## Dewey Check

I walked into my sister's kitchen and found my nephew

Dewey having a snack.

"Where's your mother?" I asked.

"She said she was going to have a shower. Just a second, I'll see."

Dewey went to the kitchen tap and turned the hot water on full blast. An indignant yell came from above.

Dewey calmly turned off the tap and said, "Yep, she's in the shower."

## Blind Date Slap

An 85-year-old widow went on a blind date with a 90-year-old man. When she returned to her daughter's house later that night, she seemed upset.

"What happened, Mother?" the daughter asked.

"I had to slap his face three times!"

"You mean he got fresh?"

"No!" she answered, "I thought he was dead."

## Fan Help

Although I have three sons, it was always my daughter who helped me with chores around the house.

One day we decided to install ceiling fans in the bedrooms. We thought it would take about an hour, but the task turned into an all-day job.

"Thanks, Sweetie," I said gratefully when we were finished.

"No problem," she replied as she put away the tools. "Just think of me as the son you never had." □

# GUIDED BY GOD'S GLORY

by Vivian Christopher-Samuel

The actual names and places have been changed for reasons of anonymity.

This heart-warming true story, was narrated to me by my mother, on a monsoon evening, over a big mug of steaming hot creamy coffee and two vegetarian samosas. It occurred about four decades ago in one of the major cities on the Indian sub-continent.

Those were the days when my mother was an executive of a well-reputed pharmaceutical company.

A few years later, after having taken charge of the administration department, my mother noticed that the regular in-house medical officer, often complained of some reoccurring health problems. Subsequently, he resigned and went abroad for further medical intervention. So now, this pharmaceutical enterprise urgently needed a general practitioner.

Incidentally, during that period an Ugandan family of five migrated to city for personal reasons.

The head of this family was a well qualified, experienced doctor. Being the only bread-winner he immediately started looking for a job. Let's call him Dr. David.

The departure of the former doctor coincided with the arrival of the Ugandan G.P.

Without further ado, the lat-

ter applied for the vacant position and was taken on as per the procedure of the company, as a part-time employee.

It took him no time to prove his competence. Effortlessly the new doctor conquered the hearts of the factory workers and the administrative personnel. His personality emanated grace and fatherly care. He always had an encouraging word, a tender touch and a radiant smile for everyone. His patients lovingly called him Dr. D. His "morning till noon" visits were much awaited by the sick and healthy alike; till this one very special day when he didn't arrive on time or rather, didn't come at all.

It happened in the month of November, in mid Autumn. During one of his daily, early morning jogs, in the public park; not far from the actual jogging track, Dr. David noticed a stray dog sniffing through a small but dense pile of cold, dry autumn leaves. The crackling sound of the rusty coloured leaves caught his attention.

As he went closer to shoo the dog away, his sharp eye was drawn towards a few strands of soft black hair waving in the blustery breeze. Drawing nearer he was shocked to see a newborn, naked, abandoned baby loosely wrapped in a few sheets of a local newspaper.



Early signs of hypothermia were already visible on the little fragile body. The baby's dwindling breath and its feeble pulse were major concerns.

Being an athlete in his younger days, Dr. D hurriedly rolled the shivering baby in his thick jogger's towel, held him close to his warm broad chest and ran as swiftly as his feet could carry him to a well equipped pediatric clinic just across the road opposite the park. It seemed as if God had granted him wings. He could hardly believe his running speed. The baby's Guardian Angel must have been there somewhere.

The medical staff at the clinic recorded that the helpless infant had no official hospital band around his tiny wrist and his umbilical cord was clamped with an ordinary blue rubber band. The little baby boy was a fighter and with God's blessing survived this ordeal.

The police, local authorities and a few volunteers did start an intense search operation but unfortunately for unknown reasons this futile search for the baby's parents came to an abrupt halt. Alas! Not a clue could be traced. Hence, the culprits could not be brought to justice.

Later, the little baby was taken into State Custody.

"The story doesn't end here," my mother added. Taking a sip of her favourite beverage. She went on.

Six months elapsed but not a soul came forward to claim the child.

During this period the doctor kept his family aware of this fact and later with the loving support and advice of his wife the kind

Ugandan physician forwarded his appeal to adopt the baby legally and positively it was God's inspiration that the judge granted him full custody of the little infant. After receiving such good tidings Dr. David was overwhelmed with paternal love.

In his initial days in the Ugandan household the little new addition was not welcome. Dr. D's children were hesitant to take him into their embrace. They had their own personal reservations in accepting this little bundle of joy.

With the passage of time, the baby's innocent gestures and soft joyful giggles, gurgles carved a niche in the children's hearts and drew them closer to their youngest sibling. Gradually the child blended well into the family and it was God's Holy Will that the new member became the apple of eye of the whole family.

The local parish priest baptized him "Benedict" due to the fact that he was a special gift and blessing bestowed upon this Ugandan family by God's immense grace.

Little Ben achieved all his milestones on time and also proved his intelligence in his fundamental school.

Like all parents Dr. David also wanted the best for his family so just after Benedict's fundamental education the whole family migrated to an European country in search of greener pastures.

A few years ago my mother came to know that Benedict had blossomed into a handsome young man and a well cultured human being.

Led by God's guidance he returned to his roots, the country of his origin to open an orphanage and to serve destitute, forsaken and abandoned children. □

### *The following prayer was found in the pocket of a Russian soldier killed during World War II*

**D**o you hear me God? Never before in my life have I spoken to you, but today I want to greet you.

You know that since I was a child, they said that you didn't exist ... And I was foolish enough to believe them. Never before have I realised the beauty of your creation.

Only today I discovered this beauty, when suddenly an abyss opened. Above me, a sky filled with stars. Amazed, I saw how they twinkled.

How could I have been so cruelly deceived! I don't know, Lord, whether you will stretch out your me, but for me, I will recognise you, and you will understand.

It's a miracle that in the depth of this terrifying hell, light illuminates me and that I have been able to see you. I won't tell you anything else, except what a joy it is to know you.

At midnight, we have received the order to attack: but I am not afraid. You are watching us.

Listen, there is the signal. I have to go. Yet, it was so good to be with you. What I still wanted to say:

You know what this combat will be mean. Maybe, tonight I will knock on your door.

Even though I never was your friend, will you let me enter, when I come? But — am I crying? Look what's happening to me!

My eyes have opened. Forgive me God. I am going, and surely I will not come back. But, O wonder, I am no longer afraid of death. □



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*(Pope St Paul VI)*

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