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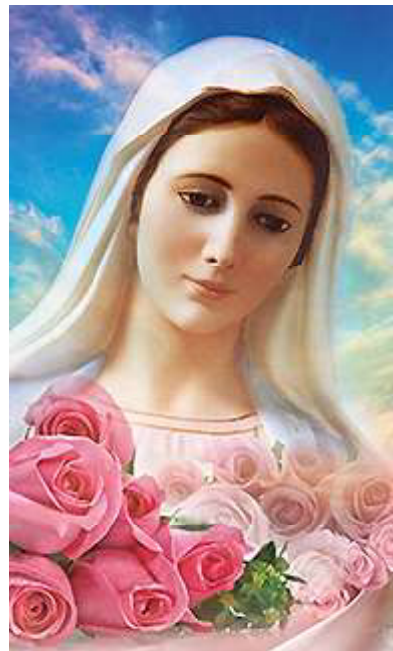
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***Grant to us, who find  
 joy in the Solemnity  
 of the holy Mother  
 of God,  
 that, just as we glory  
 in the beginnings  
 of your grace,  
 so one day we may  
 rejoice in  
 its completion.***

*The Solemnity of the Mother of God*

**From The Editor's Desk**

*JUST LIKE US*

Recently, a friend of mine gave birth to a baby boy. The news spread through the clan with excitement and cries of joy, while baby Jack basked unsuspectingly in a world filled with love. This nurturing environment would help shape him into the child and man he is destined to become. The rituals of babyhood and childhood may seem simple: a mother's arms gently holding her baby, a father's hand patting a child's head. Yet, these actions are among the most profound influences on human development.

It is easy to forget that Jesus also grew up along this same path. He did not enter the world fully formed; he had to grow and develop like any other baby. This can sometimes confuse us, but it is an undeniable truth since he truly lived among us as one of our own.

What was it like for Jesus to experience childhood, knowing all the joys and anxieties that come with growing up? In one of his meditations, Carlo Caretto imagines Mary reflecting on those early days in Nazareth: *"Nazareth was undoubtedly the best time of my life as a mother and my life with him. I watched him as one watches a mystery. I had conceived him in my flesh once and for all, but conceiving him in faith was a continuous process that lasted until the end."*

Like Mary's faith, our faith helps us recognize the significance of St. John's phrase, *"The Word became flesh and lived among us."* We begin to see Jesus, the Son of God, as a young Jewish boy. Through the care of a loving home, he developed an awareness of his special vocation and ministry in life.

We remember the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple, already aware of his mission: *"Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?"* He understood that this relationship with God was the primary focus of his life. Once again, Carlo Caretto has Mary reflect on these formative years of Jesus in Nazareth: *"I was with God twenty-four hours a day, and so was he. You could see it; there was perfect unity between his thoughts and actions. He was always in harmony with himself, yet he obeyed an inner reality that dwelled deep within him. 'You are in me, and I in you,' he often whispered, and I knew he was speaking of the Father."*

Jesus' childhood memories must have been filled with harmony and happiness during which he grew in favour with God and everyone who shared his life. It is no wonder that the days of his childhood in Nazareth provided him with the criterion for entry into his Kingdom. 'Unless you change,' he said to his disciples, 'and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.'

In a sense, Jesus never left his childhood behind. He grew into manhood, but never lost the child's openness, trust and wonder. We too, whatever our age, need those childlike qualities if we are to live at peace with God and with each other

*Fr. Ian Doultton, sdb*

## A LOOK AT LOVE

by Bishop Gianpaolo Dianin

*It is not a matter of a few days or weeks, but is about the journey of growth together, without false idealism, and lasts a lifetime.*

Love is a magic word with innumerable meanings. Everyone uses it, and each person assigns a different significance to the experience, which can be hard to define as it evolves with personal growth and maturity. For an adolescent, love often represents an irresistible attraction that brings both joy and turmoil. For a young adult, it becomes a life-enriching experience that makes days beautiful and carries a promise of eternity. For adults, love may take the form of a committed choice marked by mutual fidelity and dedication. For older adults, love transforms into a profound friendship that contributes to

their shared identity.

Two dynamics are present in all these experiences: eros, which represents a desire for the other because they enrich our lives, and agape, a willingness to give oneself to the other for their well-being. On one hand, there is erotic passion, characterized by attraction, emotion, feeling, and drive. On the other hand, there is benevolence, encompassing gifts, altruism, generosity, and sacrifice. These two forms of love interact, sometimes giving more emphasis to one than the other during different phases of life. However, they remain inseparable and both are essential.



Eros and agape represent two aspects of conjugal love. *Eros* is like a fire that ignites passion; it compels one to seek and desire the other as something essential—like a gift that can satisfy my longing for love. *Eros* can be seen as a collection of words, but it is *agape* that creates a meaningful discourse from them. *Eros* embodies a promise of fulfilling my desire for love, but that promise can only be realized through the *Agape* that sustains the fire of *Eros*.

To the couple, love involves the responsibility of building a bridge that connects them. This bridge rests on two pillars: *eros*, the passionate love, and *agape*, the unconditional love. On this bridge, two distinct individuals—a man and a woman—can come together and love each other, knowing that their journey of becoming one flesh will take a lifetime. Their relationship will always be a craft, requiring ongoing dedication and effort.

The Apostle Paul, in his beautiful hymn to charity, tells us that love is generous and kind. It is not envious or arrogant; it endures, believes, forgives, and makes excuses. Love is not just a set of definitions; it is about ongoing actions and aspirations. It resembles a horizon—an ever-promised land we approach but can never fully possess. The guiding principle behind this love is *agape*. This is not simply a patient love; rather, it is a love that teaches me to be patient over time. It is also not a love that allows everything to go unpunished, but one that gradually leads me to forgive everything through life's ups and downs, achievements,

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and failures.

It is striking that the hymn to charity contains three affirmative verbs and eight negations. On one hand, love is described as magnanimous, benevolent, and faithful. On the other hand, it emphasizes what love is not: it is not envious, does not boast, is not arrogant, does not act disrespectfully, does not seek its own interests, does not become angry, does not hold onto grievances, and does not take pleasure in injustice. These terms reveal both the beauty and the complexity of love, highlighting that love is a task and involves genuine self-work and effort in relationships. Ultimately, the Pauline hymn culminates in statements that outline the pinnacle of love, transcending all excuses, beliefs, and hopes. □



## STARTING A NEW STORY

Carlo Broccardo

*We are not the first to face changes. Consider the community of disciples who had to learn to live 'without Jesus', meaning without the presence they were accustomed to.*

**R**eflecting on our journey, I realized that since we started this column together – we have never explored a passage from the Acts of the Apostles. How odd! Additionally, the book of Acts consistently appears in the liturgy during Easter each year. But don't worry; we will make up for this oversight by dedicating all of 2025 to it.

The journey begins on the book's first page, which we typically encounter 40 days after Easter, during the solemnity of Jesus' ascension to heaven. To enhance the narrative, we extend the liturgical text slightly so that we don't leave the disciples alone on the Mount of Olives; instead, we accompany them until they return to Jerusalem, where a new story begins. This is precisely what the Acts of the Apostles recount: a new chapter. In this story, Jesus is no longer the central figure. In fact, besides his final appearance on earth in the first episode, Jesus is no longer present as a character.

Luke describes that Jesus "was lifted on high, and a cloud took him out of their

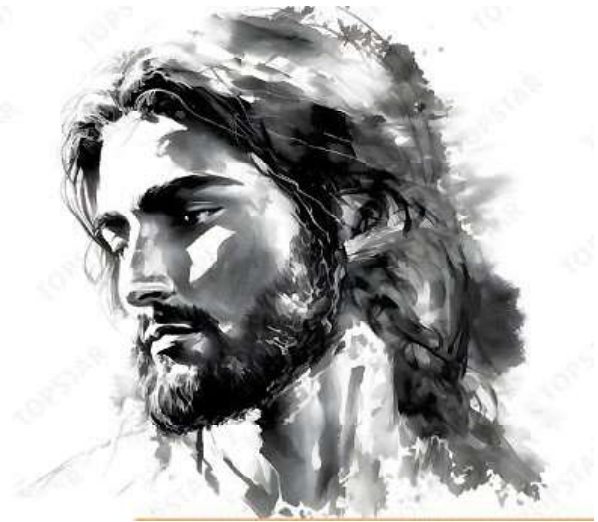
sight." Many artists, from anonymous Byzantine creators to Salvador Dali, Giotto, and Rembrandt, have brought this scene to life. However, imagining what Luke wrote can be challenging. The evangelist used language rooted in specific passages from the Old Testament that depict righteous individuals, like Elijah and Enoch, being "raptured" to heaven. This imagery is not meant to provide a precise account of what happened: What does it mean for Jesus to be lifted to heaven? Where is he physically



now? Previously, he walked among us, shared meals, prayed in our synagogues, and healed the sick; now he "dwells" with God. To convey this concept—at least to help us understand it—Luke employs "spatial" language: Jesus ascends to heaven. In contrast, John uses "relational" language. Jesus says, "I came forth from the Father and have come into the world; now I leave the world again and go to the Father" (John 16:27).

This passage, despite the imagery used by the author of Acts, marks a significant transition: Jesus will no longer be present in the narrative, but his disciples and their successors will continue the story. It's important to read a few verses beyond the ascension to understand that the story doesn't end there.

As Daniel Marguerat points out, "To the invisibility of Jesus corresponds the visibility of a community of men and women in prayer." This community, through its collective devotion, reveals the hidden presence of the Risen One. It's comforting to know that, although Jesus is physically absent, he remains present in his body, the Church, keeping us spiritually connected and reassured.



The passage from Acts signifies an important transition: moving forward in the narrative, there will no longer be Jesus present; instead, the focus shifts to his disciples and subsequently to the disciples of those disciples. It is crucial to continue reading a few verses after the ascension to understand that the story does not end here.

We are often reminded that we are living in a time of significant change, even in a transformative epoch, as Pope Francis often expresses. We are not the first to encounter such changes. Consider the community of disciples who had to adapt to life without the physical presence of Jesus, which they had grown accustomed to. Let us ask these brothers and sisters to accompany us on our journey; their choices will help us feel less alone and provide us with guidance. □

## REASONS TO BELIEVE - 1

by Franco Molinari

### I don't know if there is a God

Polls indicate that over a billion people identify as atheists. But is this accurate? Statistically speaking, if one person is starving while another eats two chickens, they each effectively consume one chicken. Surveys should be interpreted with careful consideration of the context.

Now, let's hear from an atheist who is also an avid blasphemer.

The protagonist was Abbé Pierre, who was world-famous for providing shelter to people experiencing homelessness. He was a French priest who risked his life in the Resistance against the Nazis. In 1945, he was elected as the deputy of Paris through a popular vote. However, after a few months, he abandoned parliament, feeling it was just a place filled with inconclusive discussions. Meanwhile, people were starving, the homeless slept on station benches, and many families lacked even basic shelter.

Determined to make a difference, the deputy priest decided to become a bricklayer and build houses for the poor at no cost. His first collaborator was a man struggling with alcoholism who had previously attempted suicide

and failed.

Abbé Pierre told him, "I have nothing for you, but you can give everything to the homeless." Inspired by this message, the homeless person became a cornerstone of the charity organization.

The project not only flourishes in France but also spreads worldwide. Homes for the destitute thrive, symbolizing a springtime of love.

Abbé Pierre took joy in providing homes to countless women and children. Their happiness—the joy of having a home of their own and the satisfaction of living in a loving environment—served as a testament to the uplifting power of charity.

One Saturday afternoon, the Abbé felt a wave of sadness. A flat was ready, and he was looking forward to the joy of having a family to spend Sunday there. However, the floor tiles were missing, and everything had to be postponed until Monday because the shops were closed. Noticing Abbé Pierre's melancholy expression, one of his coworkers suggested an idea: "Father, there's an old Italian bricklayer who sells tiles. But he's such an atheist that whenever he sees a priest, he erupts



with blasphemies like a volcano." Abbé Pierre replied, "Blasphemies are merely expressions if they are accompanied by acts of love."

The bricklayer greeted him with an overwhelming flood of words, sharing two local anecdotes. He recounted the story of an owner who had died, describing him as worse than a criminal for exploiting workers while wasting money at the casino. The deceased's family offered a generous donation to the parish, leading the parish priest to deliver a glowing eulogy, portraying him as a saint. In contrast, he mentioned an elderly woman who had devoted forty years to caring for her paralyzed husband. The parish priest conducted a secretive funeral for her, seemingly embarrassed by her life.

After a series of anti-clerical remarks, the bricklayer's demeanor softened as he exclaimed, "I don't know if God exists. But if He does, this is what you are doing." He then provided the materials to support his claim.

This bold statement from the blasphemous bricklayer carried the weight of a theological defini-

tion.

He meant: God is Love. The self-proclaimed atheist worker embodied this idea when he selflessly donated tiles for the house under construction. His act, free from any desire for personal gain, served as a testament to the selflessness of love.

Reflecting on this episode, it becomes clear that many atheists can be seen as profound believers. Conversely, those who do not love may find themselves excluded from the far reaches of paradise.

### If God exists, he must be shot

During the Paris Commune of 1870, the communards expressed their anger by declaring, "If God existed, he should be shot." They shouted beneath the barricades, condemning the figure of an "old man with a white beard" who had created a world where children suffer. They believed he should not evade responsibility for his actions.

The concept of God's existence often encounters challenges, especially when considering the suffering of innocent people.



Many atheists question the existence of God in light of those with cerebral palsy and other severe disabilities.

What respect can one have for a Supreme Being who allows cancer, leukaemia, tooth decay, insanity, and suffering in both the elderly and the young? If God is all-powerful, why doesn't He prevent natural disasters like earthquakes? If He is a loving Father, how could He permit atrocities, such as the torture of children by the Nazis?

To address this profound dilemma, some overly rational theologians offer the flawed notion that while God does not desire evil, He merely tolerates it. In contrast, the true answer can be found in the Gospel.

They argue that this represents the duality of good: on one side, we have the heroism of the martyrs, and on the other, the bestial cruelty of the persecutors.

Hans Küng observed with sharp irony that these justifications for authority serve to console those who suffer, much like a detailed lecture about food comforts a hungry person.

No argument can validly justify evil, except for one: Christ crucified.

The Son of God entered history and made a paradoxical choice: He chose not the path of triumph, but the path of Calvary. This paradox invites us to explore the nature of suffering and divine

love more deeply.

His cross, representing the sum of all human sorrows, becomes a symbol to which we can all relate and symbolizes the greatest love.

Only if Christ was crucified as the Son of God can evil, rather than being an unbearable scandal, become a mystery – albeit an unfathomable one. But it is, nonetheless, a mystery of love. The wicked ones who executed him condemned him to death, yet Jesus transformed that web of evil – the cruel conspiracy of inhuman ruthlessness – into a masterpiece of supreme goodness.

The only solution to the problem of pain is love.

Benedetta Porro, a girl who was deaf, blind, and paralyzed, expressed her joy in being able to connect her serene suffering to the sacrifice of the most innocent man in history. Through this, she became a symbol of hope for others.

The Cottolengo sisters, who care for the 'little children' reduced to a vegetative state, represent an earthly reflection of the divine love that led Christ to Golgotha.

One can conclude with Vittorio Messori: "Only if God was manifested in the man Jesus does He retain any probability of existence. Only the Almighty, who made Himself tangible in Jesus, is not constrained by the scandal of Evil." □

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*This series originated from the author's desire to make complex ideas more accessible. This passion for explanation and understanding stems from Molinari's background; before becoming a university lecturer and scholar, he trained to be a priest and has always aimed to engage young people in discussions about faith. The outcome is this collection that is both enjoyable to read and a valuable resource for contemporary catechesis.*

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## THE LAUNCH PAD METHOD

Carmen Laval

**R**emember, new habits should not be forced but should be fuelled by your deepest desires. This desire will keep you motivated, even when the going gets tough. The Launch Pad Method is a useful tool to help you transition from your current lifestyle to the one you aspire to have. Start by identifying the healthy habit that benefits you and ignites your passion.

Gretchen Rubin, the author of the popular website "The Happiness Project," has broken down positive resolutions for a year into twelve monthly themes. Inspired by her approach, we can choose our "launching pads" for each month of the year.

**In January**, I focused on decluttering and organizing. An assessment of my flat revealed that I had an accumulation disorder of various types. First, there was a nostalgic accumulation consisting of relics from my past that I held on to. Then, there was a contradictory urge to hoard useful items, even though I had no practical use for them. For example, I questioned why I kept twenty-three glass jars.

**February:** Remember to cherish family love. Show it and avoid unnecessary complaints. What you do every day matters more than occasional gestures. Always keep in mind that in relationships, such as between spouses or parents and children, it generally takes at least five positive actions to counterbalance one negative or harmful action.

## TIME FOR THE SPIRIT

**March:** Cultivate empathy and acknowledge the realities of others' feelings. Empathy, the ability to understand and recognize what others are experiencing, is a fundamental moral quality. Be loving, and love will find its way back to you.

**April:** Smile and cherish a treasure chest of happy memories.

"Smile at each other – smile at your wife, smile at your husband, smile at your children, and smile at one another, no matter who it is. This will help you grow in love for each other." This valuable advice comes from Saint Mother Teresa.

Keep a mental 'treasure chest' where you store all the beautiful moments that life has given you.

**May:** Spend ten minutes on meditation.

The goal of meditation is to quiet the busy mind and reduce its tendency to jump around. By calming your mind, you improve your chances of seeing things clearly and deepening your understanding of whatever you focus on.

**June:** Make time for friends.

We all need lasting friendships, trust, and a sense of connection with others. Studies show that individuals who have five or more friends with whom they can discuss important topics are much more likely to describe themselves as "very happy."

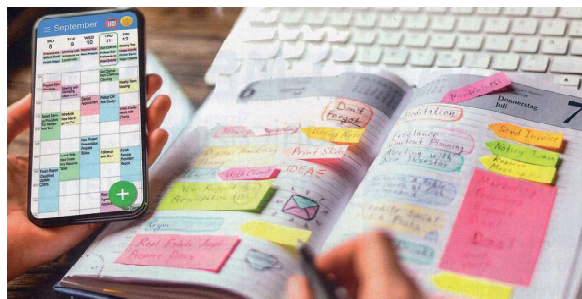
**July:** Getting Family Finances in Order

One of the biggest concerns for many people is anxiety about their financial situation. This worry can stem from various issues, including health problems, job insecurity, and the burden of monotonous tasks. When managed wisely, money can help alleviate these challenges. However, when financial issues spiral out of control, they can be destructive to a family.

**August: Listening**  
Communication involves both talking and listening. While talking allows us to share, listening expresses love. Children who feel listened to grow up to be more positive and trusting adults. In fact, listening is the foundation of all healthy relationships – whether with children, partners, friends, parents, or colleagues.

**September: Nurturing our Bodies Through Nutrition and Exercise**

Let's create a list of seven small challenges aimed at improving our physical well-being. These could include undergoing a short fast, walking regularly, playing a sport, going to bed early, or being mindful of food choices. We can implement these challenges throughout the month to promote better health.



**October: Start broadening your mind**

The benefits are numerous and varied. By consistently training your mind, you will enhance your cultural awareness and improve your ability to learn from and overcome challenges. Frequently visit libraries, museums, cinemas, and cultural events together. This will inspire you and keep your mind open to new experiences.

**November: Nurture Your Spirit**  
Remember to nurture your spirit and reflect on your faith. Each morning, recite this beautiful prayer: *"I adore you, my God, and I love you with all my heart. I thank You for creating me, making me a Christian, and preserving me through the night. I offer You the actions of this day; may they all be in accordance with Your holy will for Your greater glory. Preserve me from sin and all evil. May Your grace be always with me and my loved ones. Amen."*

**December: Celebrate Family**

Emphasize love for your home and celebrate family traditions. Start with the threshold ritual: embrace everyone who enters and leaves. Pray and give thanks before meals. Take a moment to share highlights from your day and say goodnight to one another. Attend Mass as a family. Celebrate liturgical feasts such as Christmas and Easter, and commemorate name days and birthdays with creativity and joy. □

**SAINTLY YOUTH AS SIGNS OF HOPE**

Ian Pinto, sdb

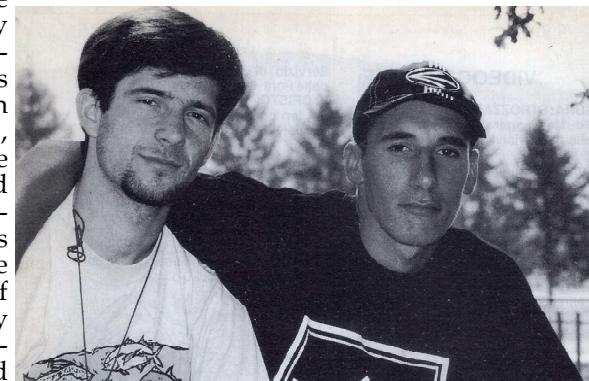
The year 2025 has been designated by the Holy Father, Pope Francis as the Jubilee Year of Hope. He recognizes hope as "the desire and expectation of good things to come, despite our not knowing what the future may bring" (n. 1). All of us have our moments of anxiety, discouragement, waywardness, disillusionment, disorientation and perhaps even hopelessness. For some of us, these feelings are prolonged and dominant. Those of us who have moments of such experience, know how difficult and even painful they can be; how much more then is it for those who live in such conditions. The celebration of this Jubilee is not just to encourage each of us to cultivate hope but to become aware of those who fail to see and experience hope and to go out of our comfort zones to reach out to them in a way that encourages them to hope.

One of the sections of society which is challenged by hope is young people. On the one hand, young people are full of hope and promise for the future; Pope Francis calls them the "embodiment of hope." They dream dreams, aspire to be and



achieve lofty ideals, and to leave a mark on the world. On the other hand, there are young people who have their hopes stolen from them due to war, violence, abuse, trafficking, prostitution, slavery and other socio-economic factors. The Pope draws attention to the close connection between young people and hope (n. 12). He says that during this Jubilee year, they need to feel encouraged to live with hope and to keep away from vices and situations that rob them of that hope.

In the Bull announcing the Jubilee, Pope Francis pointed out that one of the significant







Bosco wanted to help young people to develop and mature as good human beings and honest citizens. For him, young people were not simply building blocks for a better society but the instrument for the renewal of society. In order to be effective instruments, they need to be moulded

and taught. Hence, he set out to *educate* and *evangelize* them. It is only with an education based on Christian values that a young person can truly become leaven in society.

Being a man of the cloth and a devoted son of the Church, Don Bosco believed that the vocation of every person was to be holy. Inspired by St. Alphonsus di Liguori and St. Francis de Sales, Don Bosco devised a system for facilitating a young person's growth in holiness even as they received an education. His ultimate goal was not to transmit knowledge or skills to the young, even though those were proximate goals; the ultimate goal was to help a young person recognize and live out the Will of God in their life. To this end, he encouraged the frequent reception of the Sacraments of Penance and Communion, the constant and friendly, though vigilant presence of the educator, the practice of virtue and the avoidance of vice, the scrupulous use of time, and participation in peer groups with noble ideals called *sodalities*.

### Don Bosco and Youthful Sanctity

Don Bosco is renowned as the Father and Teacher of youth. He was drawn to young people because the Lord filled his heart with compassion for them just as the heart of Jesus was full of compassion for the people: "When He saw the crowds, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt 9:36). Don

and taught. Hence, he set out to *educate* and *evangelize* them. It is only with an education based on Christian values that a young person can truly become leaven in society.

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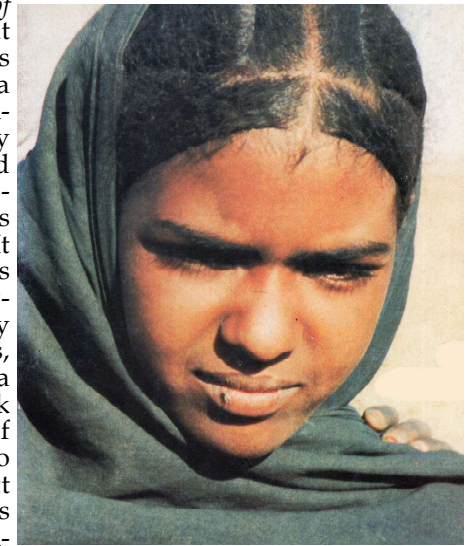
In his proposal of this project of life to the young, he was adept at presenting it as a viable and

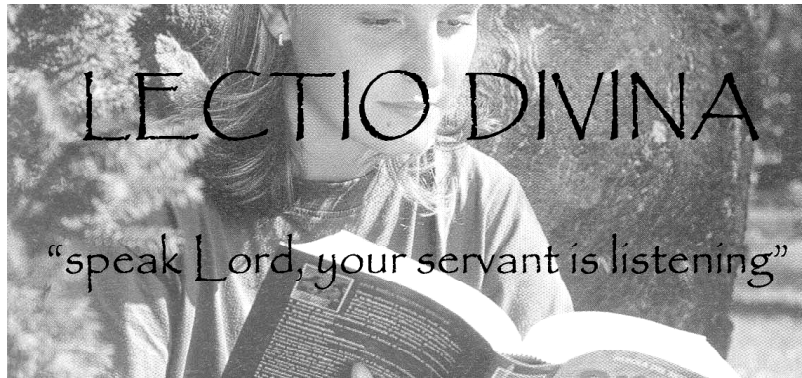
ordinary way of living. In one of his sermons to the boys, he emphasized that it is easy to become a saint and that the path to sanctity is trod with cheerfulness. Inspired by his words, one of his boys, Dominic Savio accepted the project with a seriousness that was hitherto unseen in the Oratory. He went on to fulfill that project while he was in the middle of his teens—he died at the age of 14. He became, not just for Don Bosco, but for all in the Oratory and for the whole world, an example and model of youthful holiness. Dominic proved that young people are just as capable of achieving great good as any one else. Obviously, Don Bosco did not need such proof but he capitalized on it to impress upon other young people the viability of the Christian project of life and the capacity to fulfill it irrespective of one's age and station in life.

In his little book for young people titled *The Companion of Youth*, Don Bosco wrote that the devil usually tempts young people away from a godly life of virtue by convincing them that to be holy means to be melancholic and shy of pleasure and enjoyment. This continues to be his tactic of choice even today. It is noticeable in many places that young people tend to avoid spiritual activities. Many come for the fun and games, and even as volunteers for a cause but they appear to lack the commitment to make of their lives a gift to God and to others. The Christian project of life—holiness—invites young people to open them-

selves up to the grace of God through whom they will be able to do all things (Phil 4:13). It is ultimately God alone, who can fully satisfy the deepest yearnings of a person; therefore, it is possible to live a holy life and to be supremely happy, contented and successful.

In this series, we will consider the lives of youngsters who accepted the Christian project of life. We will come to know of young girls and boys who surrendered their lives to God and who had the courage to carry out His Will in their life. By no means did any of them live an easy life but they all succeeded in living a significant life. We will honour their memory and celebrate their courage, as we look to them with hope as intercessors and models for our earthly pilgrimage. These young saints will teach us simple and ordinary ways by which we also can fulfill our project of life and walk the extraordinary path of holiness. □





## THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

by Dinesh Vasava, *sdb*

**Reading:** Take a few moments to read the Gospel passage slowly and attentively. Allow the words to sink in and listen to what God may be speaking to you through this text. Read the Gospel Passage: Matthew 2:1-12

**Meditation:** Reflect on the message of this passage. Imagine the journey of the Magi, their meeting with Herod, and their adoration of the newborn King. Consider the significance of their gifts and their willingness to follow the star. What does this story reveal about the nature of God and His plan for salvation? Here is a brief reflection.

The Son of God was born at night in the humble town of Bethlehem, described as “the last of the principal cities of Judah” (Matthew 2:6). According to Luke’s account, which we heard during Mass on Christmas Eve, the news of His birth initially reached only a few shepherds. The Evangelist sees in these shepherds a symbol of the poor, the humble, and those who are

able to recognize and accept God’s revelation. In contrast, the Gospel of Matthew, which we read today on the Solemnity of the Epiphany, narrates the manifestation of Jesus to the Magi, who serve as another significant symbol. Their journey represents the fulfillment of the pilgrimage of all peoples to Jerusalem, as the prophets had foretold. “The nations will walk by your light, and kings by the brightness of your rising. Lift your eyes and see all these gathered; they are coming to you. Your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried in your arms” (Isaiah 60:3-5).

It is important to acknowledge the combined emphasis of both Luke and Matthew: the manifestation (epiphany) of the Lord is for all people. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in the second reading, “the nations are called in Christ Jesus to share the same inheritance, to form the same body, and to share in the same promise through the Gospel” (Eph 3:6). At the same time, recognizing this manifestation

requires a heart that is poor and humble. This is true for the shepherds, as well as for the Magi. Although the Magi are often portrayed as wise men or kings, they also embody the humility of those who seek truth by setting aside their preconceived notions and biases. It takes a humble heart to adore the Lord without succumbing to the power of Herod. Instead, they bow down and offer their gifts to the vulnerability of a child, who is found with his mother.

The Magi came from the East, a region in the history of Israel that has often symbolized invasion, destruction, and oppression. It was also a place of exile. Isaiah prophesied, “A crowd of camels will invade you, dromedaries of Midian and Ephah” (Isaiah 60:6), transforming what had once been a death threat into a promise of joy. Now, camels and dromedaries are arriving in Jerusalem, but this time they bring gold and frankincense to proclaim the glory of the Lord. Abraham also left the East to reach the land that God promised him, trusting in the inheritance through which all nations of the earth would be blessed. Like Abraham, the Magi were willing to leave their homeland, placing their faith in signs and a mysterious word that resonated in their hearts. In the child they adore – the son of David and son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1) – they recognize the fulfillment of the ancient promise: at last, God’s blessing reaches all peoples.

Abraham departed because of his faith; similarly, the Magi were moved by a faith like his, leading them to seek not a land or a son,



but the King of the Jews who was born (v. 2). They believed in the star that shone in the night sky. Wasn’t this the promise made to Abraham? “Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can count them... Such will be your descendants” (Gen 15:5). God invited Abraham to raise his gaze upwards towards the heavens. At the beginning of his journey, God urged him to walk and look towards a land He would show him; now, Abraham must look to the heavens. He can only contemplate the land of God’s promise by first raising his eyes upwards. He had to do this at night, stepping outside the safety of his tent and risking exposure to the outdoors. The night is a space of danger, where many enemies can threaten life, and it can also be a time of confusion, making it hard to discern which path to choose or where to step next. Nevertheless, one can only appreciate the starry sky above by venturing out into the night. Only in this way – and only then – do we see “his star rise” (Mt 2:2).

The Magi saw the star not only in the night sky but also in the Holy Scriptures. They recognized it as the star of the king of the Jews, knowing that it was not just any star. This revelation was in accordance with the prophecy of Balaam, son of Beor. (Num 24:17)



# Quiet Spaces

## NEW WINESKINS

*Pope Francis' morning meditation in the chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae on Monday 18 January 2016*

**A** Christian who hides behind the notion that “this is how it’s always been done...” is committing a sin, becomes idolatrous and disobedient, and lives a “patched up, half-and-half life”, because his heart is closed to the “newness of the Holy Spirit”. The invitation to free oneself from the customary in order to make room for “God’s surprises” was offered by Pope Francis during Mass at Santa Marta on Monday morning.

In the First Reading, taken from the First Book of Samuel (15:16-23), the Pope began, “we heard that Saul the king was rejected by God for not obeying: the Lord told him that he would win in battle, in war, but that everything had to be utterly destroyed”. But Saul “did not obey”.

Thus, “when the prophet rebukes him for this and then in the name of God rejects him from being king of Israel”, Saul — the passage continues — “gives an explanation: ‘I have heard the voice of the people who took the best of this livestock to sacrifice to the Lord’”.

“It is a good thing to sacrifice”, Francis explained, “but the Lord had ordered, he had given a mandate to do something else”. Thus Samuel says to Saul: “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord?”. Therefore, the Pope affirmed, “obedience goes further” and surpasses even Saul’s words of justification: “I listened to the people and the people told me: this is how it’s always been done! The most valuable things go to the service of the Lord, either in the temple or as sacrifices. This is how it’s always been done!”.

Thus, “the king, who had to change this notion of ‘this is how it’s always been done...’ says to Samuel: ‘I feared the people’”. Saul “was afraid” and this is why “he allowed life to continue contrary to the Lord’s will”.

It is the same attitude — the Pope continued, referring to the day’s passage from Mark (2:18-22) — that “Jesus teaches in the Gospel, when the doctors of the law rebuke him because his disciples do not fast: ‘This is how it’s always been done. Why don’t your [disciples] fast?’. Jesus responds with this principle of life: ‘No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; if he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; so new wine is for fresh skins’”.

Hence Francis asked, “what does this mean, that the law has changed? No!”. It means, rather, “that the law is at the service of man, that it is at the service of God, and for this reason man must have an open heart”. The attitude of those who say “this is how it’s always

been done...”, in reality, is born from “a closed heart”. Instead, “Jesus told us: ‘I will send the Holy Spirit and he will lead you to the full truth’. Thus, “if your heart is closed to the newness of the Holy Spirit, you will never reach the full truth”. Additionally, “your Christian life will be a half-and-half life, a patched up life, mended with new things but on a structure that is not open to the Lord’s voice: a closed heart, because you are not capable of changing the wineskins”.

This was precisely, the Pontiff explained, “the sin of Saul the king, for which he was rejected”. And it is also “the sin of many Christians who hold onto what has always been done and do not allow the wineskins to be changed”. Thus they end up living “a halfway, patched up, mended, meaningless life”.

So, the Pope asked, “why does this happen? Why is it so serious, why does the Lord reject Saul and then choose another king?” The answer is given by Samuel, when “he explains a closed heart, a heart that does not listen to the Lord’s voice, that is not open to the newness of the Lord, to the Spirit who always surprises us”. One who has such a heart, Samuel affirms, “is a sinner”. “For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry”. Thus, Francis said, “Christians who are obstinate, saying ‘this is how it’s always been done, this is the way, this is the path’, are sinning: the sin of divination”. It is “as if they were to go to a palm reader”. In the end, “what has been said and what doesn’t change — by me and my closed heart” — becomes “more important” than “the Word of the Lord”. This “is also the sin of idolatry: stubbornness. The Christian who insists, sins. The sin of idolatry”.

The question to ask with regard to this truth is: “What is the path?”. Francis suggested that we “open our heart to the Holy Spirit, discern what is the will of God”. It’s true, “always, after battles, the people took everything for sacrifices to the Lord, also for their own benefit, also gems for the temple”. And “it was customary, at the time of Jesus, for good Israelites to fast”. However, the Pope explained, “there is another reality: there is the Holy Spirit who leads us to the full truth”. And “this is why he needs open hearts, hearts that are not obstinate in the sin of idolizing themselves”, believing that what’s “most important” is “what I think” and not “the surprise of the Holy Spirit”.

The Pope then remarked that this “is the message that the Church gives us today: which Jesus says so firmly: ‘New wine in new wineskins!’”. Because, Francis reiterated, “even customs must be renewed in the newness of the Holy Spirit, in the surprises of God”. Francis expressed the hope that “the Lord give us the grace of an open heart, of a heart open to the voice of the Holy Spirit”. □

## A LOVE STORY

By Chiara Salvagno, Tr. Ian Douulton, sdb

*To meet, to love, to part: that is Earth. To meet, to love, and to never part from each other for a blissful eternity is Heaven!*

**M**aturity had come and gone, and Anna now devoted herself with greater joy and freedom to her friends and interests. It had been months since she last saw Fabio. They had first met a year earlier in a meadow illuminated by fireflies during a small airplane competition. They met again one evening beneath a beautiful, starry sky, where they shared their first kiss. Anna could hardly remember all the songs they had sung together, but one stood out: Cocciante's 'Margherita.' Fabio dedicated it to her many times, singing while they drove toward an undefined destination. But really, who cares? When two people are in love, any place can feel like paradise!

Anna and Fabio shared a few intense months filled with love and life. They gradually grew alongside each other, embracing their individual freedoms and commitments. Although they were a few years apart and had different hobbies, they found common ground. Fabio was an enthusiastic diver and loved snowboarding, while Anna zipped around on her motorbike and dedicated her winters to skiing. He enjoyed dancing, and she was passionate about playing football.

Unfortunately, like many couples, their paths began to di-

verge. As Anna focused on completing her final year of high school, Fabio embarked on his new job.

The first month was terrible for Anna. She just wanted to escape and be alone; what was the point of everything else without her love for Fabio? Anna was angry with everyone, including Jesus. Why did the adventure have to end like that?

Winter came and went, followed by spring, but apart from a few quick messages of greetings, there was no sign of Fabio. In the meantime, Anna had grown introspective, and although she felt sad, she had almost forgotten her sweetheart. When summer arrived, she wasn't thinking about boys—she had state exams to focus on! She excelled in those exams; she worked hard and emerged as a winner with excellent results.

Barely two weeks had passed since the exams when one evening...

Anna was collaborating with other educators who were planning the parish school camp when her mobile phone rang. It was a text message from Fabio. He asked if he could say goodbye to her before leaving for Switzerland. Fabio had often mentioned his desire to work



*"The Girlfriend with the Blue Face" (1960), an oil on canvas by Marc Chagall, is part of a private collection. The artwork captures the joy of love and celebration, featuring musicians playing as the two fiancés are enchanted by the music. This melody also stirs the animals in the sky and the musicians themselves. The scene represents happiness and youth in their native country. The green on the boy's face symbolizes his spontaneity, while the blue on the girl's face reflects her spirituality. Additionally, the green and blue colours of the violin played by the musician symbolize the union of the couple*

abroad, and now he had finally found the opportunity. He would be moving there in a month, and for an indefinite period—possibly a year or even longer. Imagine Anna's feelings

after receiving that simple text message. She had almost forgotten about Fabio, but that small spark was enough to reignite the fire within her. She immediately rushed home on



her motorbike, barely able to contain her excitement, and quickly ate something – a restless energy coursing through her. She pulled out Fabio's favourite T-shirt from the wardrobe, slipped into a pair of jeans, and chose a necklace as colourful as her cheeks. Once again, Anna was racing on her motorbike towards her beloved's house. She felt joyful and alive. When she arrived, she rang the bell, and there he was – Fabio, looking a bit tanner than usual but still full of life with those captivating black eyes. He welcomed her with a warm hug, and then they began to share everything they had experienced during their months apart. Anna talked about her last school year, exciting trips, football championships, and plans for the summer. Fabio shared stories about his job, winter weekends spent snowboarding, and recent diving adventures in the deep blue sea. They talked and walked for hours, surrounded by the stars and a few dancing fireflies, just like when they had first met. Anna felt so at peace; it was as if she had never left Fabio's side.

As the magical evening came to a close, it was possible that this would be the last time the two young people would see each other. "Anna, one day our paths will meet again; it must be fate! Never live with any regrets. Embrace life like a grapefruit and drink deeply from it. Don't let anything scare you!"

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**A love story of Anna and Fabio**

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These were the words Fabio left for the beautiful Anna. Before saying goodbye, he invited her to visit his new flat in Switzerland. She would always be welcome there, and if she was interested, he promised to give her snowboarding lessons during the Swiss winter. Anna wished to express more, but she recalled her beloved's advice. Instead, she hugged him tightly and bid him farewell with a heartfelt smile.

As she climbed onto the motorbike, a wave of strange emotions washed over her as she set off toward an undefined destination beneath the moon and stars. She couldn't quite comprehend what was happening, and her heart raced with excitement. Yes, she still had feelings for Fabio.

However, Anna didn't dwell solely on her friend Fabio; instead, she sought her own path and embraced the many experiences with love and without fear. Meanwhile, Fabio had begun a new life in Switzerland. Who knows if he occasionally thought of Anna... was he perhaps waiting for her? Would those two ever reunite? Anna didn't have answers; she chose to live without excessive expectations but with always unwavering faith! □

*For a colour representation of the picture on the reverse please see the Don Bosco's Madonna website at: [www.donboscosmadonna.org](http://www.donboscosmadonna.org)*

## FIORETTI OF DON BOSCO - 60

*by Michele Molineris*

### 271. Today I need 30,000 lire (1880)

During the eight days that Don Bosco spent in Nice-by-the-sea in March 1880, Ernesto Harmel wanted to keep the children of that Salesian institute happy with lunch, to which he also invited other friends of Don Bosco.

While waiting for the table to be set, the zealous lawyer Michel and our saint began a friendly conversation. From one subject to the next, he remarked how insufficient the hospice chapel was for the number of pupils and how inappropriate it was to keep the Lord in a place like that, adding: "They have presented me with a project by your good architect Levrot, but it takes 30,000 lire.

"Thirty thousand liras!" the lawyer began to say, "I am afraid I will not be able to raise it in Nice these days because we have had so many lotteries and collections over the winter that the purses are dry."

"Yet today, I would need these 30,000 lire." Meanwhile, all the guests gathered and went to the table. When they reached the fruit, the notary Saietto got up and said to Don Bosco: "Don Bosco, please know that a charitable person has given me 30,000 liras to give to you and that you can collect it whenever you want from my office."

"Praised be Mary Help of Christians," Don Bosco replied by extending his hands and raising his eyes to heaven: "this is the beginning. Every one can

imagine how Michel felt when he saw the precise sum arrive like this, just a few minutes before the request was mentioned. (D'Espiney, *Don Bosco*, 206).

### 272. Consequences of Recovery

In April 1880, accompanied by the lawyer Ferraris, Don Bosco returned to Liguria to seek donations. In Porto Maurizio, he met a woman named Maria Acquarona, who was unmarried and had been bed-ridden for over ten years due to an incurable spinal illness. Everyone in the town knew her. Initially, she planned to send alms to Don Bosco, but she later decided it would be better to ask him to pray for her and to bring her his blessing.

Don Bosco was warmly welcomed by the sick woman, who showed signs of great joy. Accompanying her were her sister and brother-in-law, Lawyer Ascheri. The woman briefly explained the nature and circumstances of her illness, from which the doctors had given up hope of recovery. Don Bosco encouraged her to trust in Our Lady, blessed her, and provided her with some prayers to recite afterwards. He then went into another room to spend some time talking with the two lawyers.

Just as he was about to leave, the sick woman appeared, fully dressed, and announced that she no longer felt any pain. Lawyer Ascheri exclaimed in disbelief, calling it a miracle, and everyone was filled with intense emotion. The woman, who had not used her legs for many years, walked briskly to accompany Don Bosco to the street door, saying she would see him at the station.

However, he advised her not to be seen in the city to avoid attracting attention.

Don Bosco returned to Fr Cerruti and, speaking as a father would to a son, he candidly shared the news with him. At the end of his talk, he remarked, "I am sorry, however, that the lady wants to come to the station. It will create quite a commotion! Patience: God's will be done... But I am happy, dear Fr Cerruti." He continued with a kindness that brought tears to the Rector's eyes, "I am so glad that despite your sorrows, you have found this comfort. When you sing the hymn of St. Joseph and reach the part that speaks of *'miscues gaudia fetus'* (alternating joys and sorrows), remember to sing it well: it reflects the story of this life."

As the time to leave for the station approached, there was quite a surprise! News of the extraordinary event had spread quickly through the town, attracting a crowd eager to see Don Bosco. The lady, who had arrived at the station ahead of the travellers in a carriage, walked calmly in front of the entrance, drawing the amazement of her fellow citizens. They could hardly believe their eyes and asked her if she was Signora Maria.

"I saw her," Fr. Cerruti testified at the Process (of the beatification of Don Bosco), "and I must admit she looked like someone who had never been ill; she was so well."

She waited for Don Bosco to express her thanks. As soon as he arrived, the saint wanted to retreat to the waiting room to escape the crowds, but not before

complaining to the lady that he had not listened to her and asked her to go home. After making her excuses, the lady handed him a sealed envelope from which he took a 1,000 lire note.

Soon, the hall was filled with people. The train arrived, and lawyer Ascheri pleaded loudly to Don Bosco, asking him to bless those present. Everyone knelt to receive the blessing. Once he had blessed them, he climbed into the carriage with Fr Cerruti, who was bound for San Remo. During the short stop, curious passengers wanted to know why so many people were crowding around, and once the train was in motion, there was much discussion about what had happened, with everyone sharing their opinions.

In Don Bosco's compartment, a young man exclaimed, "I believe neither in miracles nor in God."

"But you will believe the facts proven by witnesses," Don Bosco replied. "You would have to be unreasonable to think otherwise." He began to tell the young man, in no uncertain terms, how a simple blessing had instantly healed a woman. The young man listened attentively.

When Don Bosco finished his story, he asked the young man how he would explain the event without resorting to the idea of supernatural intervention. He then presented a few arguments about the existence of God and concluded with the question, "So, is there someone above us?"

"Eh, I suppose I must admit it," the young man answered.

"And what then?" Don Bosco asked.

"I don't want to think about it!" came the reply.

"But why not?"

"Because I don't want to change my life, to be frank. But who are you?"

"You don't need to know," Don Bosco answered, as he was a man known to no one. He then stood up to leave, having arrived in San Remo. (M.B., XV, 140-142)

### 273. The wound disappeared without a scar (1881)

Fr. Albera, the Rector Major, heard a doctor's account of an extraordinary event that likely took place in 1881 and was recounted in 1921 in Allevard-les-Bains. He shared this account with the confreres in Marseille on February 7.

A man named Mr. Guérin from Marseille was suffering from tuberculosis of the bone in one leg. After scraping the bone, he experienced no relief, and the disease was declared incurable. The sore was kept open to allow the pus to drain. As a devout Christian, the patient had only one wish: to do God's will.

An acquaintance of his, who lived on San Giacomo Street, advised him to visit Don Bosco — not to seek a miracle of healing, but to find some spiritual comfort in his words. He went, was received warmly, and expressed his willingness to bear his cross with patience for the love of God. The saint encouraged him and blessed him.

The sick man lived on Meihlan Avenue. The distance from St. Leo's to his home was too far for him, considering his leg was in such poor condition. Therefore, he planned to take the tram at the

corner of Paradis and St. James Streets. However, as the tram was delayed, he decided to walk towards the Stock Exchange, hoping to catch the first omnibus going that way, but he did not see one. After waiting in vain, he slowly made his way through the Canebière, still hoping to find transportation, but again, nothing came. The same situation occurred on Noailles Street, and he ultimately arrived home, taking each step carefully, almost without notice.

He usually had to go to bed early, eating dinner afterwards. However, that evening, ignoring his family's complaints, he decided to do some chores that kept him up until dinnertime. After completing all his tasks and feeling no discomfort, he sat down to enjoy dinner with his family and take a rest. While loosening the bandage to replace it, he discovered that the wound had completely healed and left no scar. Although he had not asked for it, Don Bosco had performed this miracle. (M.B., XV, 55). □







## WHY OUR LADY IS BEAUTIFUL

by Pier Luigi Giudicci

### Beauty in Sacred Scripture

The topic of beauty is significant in the biblical text, as it highlights key themes. These themes include the following:

- Beauty should be complemented by other qualities and should not be regarded as absolute or allowed to dominate one's identity.

- In the context of love between partners, beauty contributes to daily happiness and should not be hidden or diminished.

- Beauty serves as a tangible expression of the magnificence of all Creation and should be appreciated carefully, without being misused.

These pedagogical directives provide a framework for an initial reflection on beauty. On one hand, the Word of God encourages us not to waste the gifts bestowed by the Creator. For example, in the Book of Sirach (Sir 9:8), it states, "for the beauty of a woman many have perished," and it advises that a daughter should "show not her beauty to any man" (Sir 42:12). On the other hand, it also notes

that "the beauty of a virtuous woman adorns her house" (Sir 26:16).

Moreover, significant female figures, often associated with action, are described as beautiful: Rebecca (Gen 24:16), Rachel (Gen 29:17), Judith (Jdt 10:7), Esther (Est 5:1b), and Susanna (Dan 13:2).

From this, an educational balance emerges within the biblical context. Guided by the Word of God, this balance leads the people of Israel toward understanding the "positive of God" through thoughtful reflection on precise references. It reassures us that understanding beauty is not a straightforward journey, but rather a balanced process of reflection and learning.

- the unity of the person;
- the unity and project of life;
- project illuminated by Wisdom (Wis 7:29-30).

### Beauty with reference to Mary

Over the centuries, the deep affection many Christians have for Mary has inspired explorations of her beauty. This theme

has been expressed in various sculptures and paintings, some of which have been mistakenly attributed to Saint Luke. The journey of reconstructing this understanding has been fascinating, with diverse starting points.

From an external perspective, considerable attention has been given to this intriguing aspect. Researchers have examined the historical context of Mary's beauty, particularly concerning her age. In the cultural norms of that time, the appropriate age for marriage was from 18 years for men and from the age of 12 for women. This context helps us understand that Mary's beauty was associated with the freshness of her youthful years.

- There are references to the physique of Jewish women, as seen in Luke 2:36, which highlights the prophetess Anna's lineage from the tribe of Asher, known for its beautiful women.

- Additionally, there are mentions of ornaments that enhance a woman's presence, such as in Psalm 45:13-14, where it states, "The king's daughter is all glorious within; her clothing is of wrought gold. She shall be brought unto the king in embroidered raiment."

This exploration of beauty, both in terms of physical attributes and adornments, sheds light on how Mary has been perceived



*Beautiful, eternally young, because she is full of grace and "all holy"*

throughout history.

### A sense of special beauty

The text highlights a perspective that links beauty too closely to formal concepts. This also applies to those who adopt a different viewpoint: they see in every mother a delicate representation of gentleness, caring, and warmth, which they perceive as a unique form of beauty. Instances of maternal examples can be found in texts such as 2 Maccabees 7:20, Isaiah 66:13, and St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians 2:7.

The central question that arises is: Is Mary beautiful? If so, what is the source of that beauty? The answer can be found in a contem-

plation of Mary’s motherhood. The Virgin Mary consented to become a mother (as seen in Luke 1:38), and the child she bore is Jesus, the Son of God (Luke 1:30-33). This leads us to reflect deeply on this divine event. In this context, the words of the angel Gabriel illuminate our meditation. Specifically, phrases like “full of grace,” “the Lord is with you,” and “you have found favour with God” convey more than mere goodwill. They highlight that Mary has received special gifts from God, which integrate her into a plan of salvation and make her “All-holy.”

The grace bestowed upon Our Lady creates within her the tabernacle of the Most High and simultaneously fosters a complete development of every virtue and positive quality at the human level.

She, who was preserved from all stain of original sin – thanks to the merits of Christ, the sole

Savior – is a woman whose very being, including her outward appearance, reflects a life in God and showcases His wonders (Luke 1:49).

### Beauty and a cosmic reality

With this in mind, one can better understand certain biblical teachings. In the Holy Scriptures, particularly in the Book of Revelation, there is a significant connection between “the woman” (representing the Church, with Mary, the Mother of Jesus the Messiah, included) and the cosmic reality. It would not seem logical, especially in such a dramatic moment of conflict between God and Satan (Revelation 12:1-18; 13:1-18), to spend time describing the beauty of this woman (“clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars,” Revelation 12:1) if that beauty did not carry its own sig-



nificance. The meaning derives from the setting of this “grandiose sign.”

The woman appears “in the heavens,” where, earlier, “the sanctuary of God” was opened to reveal the ark of the covenant, representing God’s definitive presence among the new glorified Israel. It is here that the woman gives birth to a male child “destined to rule all nations with a sceptre of iron” (Revelation 12:5). In this dynamic and salvific context, the woman’s beauty reflects the Light and Glory that come from “God with us” (see also Revelation 5:12-13; 7:17). Every soul can proclaim: “Now salvation is accomplished, the power and the kingdom of our God and the might of his Christ” (Revelation 12:10).

### Beauty and power

Another interesting aspect to explore is the relationship between beauty and power. A good example can be found in the Song of Songs. In this text, there is a prominent emphasis on the beauty of the bride (see, for instance, Song 1:5, 1:8, 1:10, 2:14, 4:1, etc.). At first glance, this may seem like a natural expression of admiration from a love-struck bridegroom. However, when we consider that this holy book allegorically represents the covenant (or marriage) between God and Israel – and, ultimately, the love of Christ for His Church – we must also recognize the significant role of the Virgin Mary as the Mother of Christ and the Church. This role deserves our utmost respect.

The description of the bride’s beauty goes beyond mere comparisons to other women (e.g., Song 5:9) or external observations (e.g., Song 6:9). It is portrayed as beauty that is also “terrible as hosts and banners unfurled” (Song 6:10) and is part of a unified reality enriched by a deep, enduring love. This love is depicted as a “flame” that cannot be extinguished, even by “great waters”; it is something that rivers cannot wash away (Ct 8:7). This context of strength, tenacity, and power emphasizes the idea that those who are connected to God can achieve anything through the gifts given by a Will of Love. Therefore, the bride’s beauty is not merely an outward attraction but serves to convey a deeper message about origins. Ultimately, the origin of everything is God Himself.

### Some observations

Considering the above, we can accurately speak of Mary’s beauty as one of the signs of the work of Grace. For instance, a sculptor like Michelangelo depicts a ‘Pietà’ where the Mother of Sorrows has youthful features. Similarly, in recent years, a religious artist like Sister Baldan has contributed many images of beautiful young Madonnas to local churches. This serves as a profound sign of filiality.

Mary’s beauty holds significant value because she is without sin. This allows her to always appear young (as seen at Lourdes) and eternally beautiful, serving as a source of inspiration and a reminder of the everlasting Grace she embodies. □





## MY VOCATION STORY

### JOSEF PREVOR

O. PORI MECOI

*Salesians in the Czech Republic*

#### Introduce yourself, Josef.

I am a Salesian, and I am 32 years old. I come from the geographical centre of the Czech Republic. Currently, I am studying theology at Crocetta in Turin.

#### What is your family like?

I have an older sister and three brothers, making me the youngest in the family. My father worked as a forester, while my mother primarily took care of us at home.

#### Who first told you the story of Jesus?

My parents were the first to tell me the story of Jesus. They had a deep faith and a strong connection to the spirituality of Don Bosco. I especially remember our evening prayers in the dark, with a candle in the centre, and the stories of missionaries that my father would read to us before we went to sleep.

#### How did you get to know the Salesians?

My parents were already familiar with the Salesians. During the time of communism,

when the Salesians were forbidden to engage in any public activities, my parents attended a secret group led by a Salesian. After their marriage, they lived in a house in the woods, where the Salesians organized summer camps in secret. One of the Salesians became a close friend of our family and visited us frequently, even though we lived far from any Salesian oratory. He became my confessor and spiritual companion, profoundly shaping my spiritual life and allowing me to participate in various activities organized by the Salesians.

#### How did your vocation come about?



*Fr Josef and his youngsters*

My vocation developed gradually over time, becoming more pronounced when I was 17. This marked the beginning of my discernment journey, which lasted about five years. During this period, I engaged with the Salesians and gained missionary experience by volunteering in Bulgaria for a month. In my final year at university, I also had the opportunity to live with the Salesian community in Brno. These experiences helped me understand what God was calling me to do. Throughout my discernment, I remained open to all possibilities regarding where God was guiding me. Although I did fall in love during this time, I discovered a deeper desire within me—a religious vocation—that compelled me to respond to that calling.

#### What is your current situation?

I completed a pre-novitiate year in the Czech Republic, a novitiate year in Slovakia, and a post-novitiate year in Slovakia. Currently, I am in my third year in Turin, where I study theology at our international institute. This experience offers a unique opportunity to connect with brothers from all around the world, which is a very enriching experience. At present, I am preparing for the diaconate. Last year, I made my perpetual profession.

#### What are young people like in the Czech Republic?

Like young people elsewhere in Europe, those in the Czech Republic share some common characteristics. However, I would point out that while material poverty is less prevalent, affective poverty is significant. Many young people

come from dysfunctional families, leaving them fragile and lacking direction in life.

Another notable characteristic of our country is its high level of secularization. Many young people no longer know what the church is or simply do not care. The poverty of faith represents the greatest challenge we face.

#### What kind of Salesian works exist in the Czech Republic?

Our works vary significantly. Each youth center has its own unique characteristics. We also engage with different groups of young people, including boys from the parish, boys from the oratory who are often non-believers, boys facing social challenges, and Roma (gypsy) boys. A key aspect of our work is our sensitivity to the issues faced by young people in difficult situations.

#### What challenges do you encounter?

Our Province faces several critical challenges, particularly in how to effectively evangelize our society and provide pastoral care for vocations. In our efforts toward evangelization, we must strike a balance between religious pastoral work in parishes and providing genuine social support. I believe that, in our secularized culture, there is a strong desire for spirituality, but also a level of scepticism towards institutions, including the Church. The challenge lies in offering authentic spirituality without fear of explicit evangelization, while also being sensitive to the realities of contemporary society. Additionally, it is essential to rethink the

structures of our youth centres to better align with this objective.

One challenge we face is providing pastoral care for vocations. Like many parts of Europe, we are also experiencing a decline in vocations. This situation prompts us to rethink our identity: Does our way of life attract young people? What can we offer them? Are we employing the right methods for vocational discernment? Do we know how to ask the crucial questions about the meaning and significance of life?

**What concerns weigh heavily on your heart?**

My deepest concern is that so many young people are leaving the Church. This occurs for various reasons: sometimes families fail to pass on their faith, sometimes young people feel they don't have a place within the Church, and sometimes the Church itself is a barrier. This reality pains me the most.

**What are your plans and dreams for the future?**

I prefer not to make extensive plans for myself, as I desire my plans to align with God's will. The current situation in our country indeed requires careful discernment. My wish is for our homes to become spaces where young people can find social, psychological, or educational support, and most importantly, where they can encounter Christ.

**How do you envision the future of the Congregation in**



*Young Czech Salesians*

**your Province and in Europe?**

The situation will undoubtedly change from what it is today. We will be fewer in number, and missionaries will be arriving from outside. We will need to rethink our activities, particularly regarding the involvement of the laity in our work. Your role in this process is crucial. While we may need to let go of some initiatives, this change should not lead to a decline in our mission. Based on my knowledge of the brothers, I would say that we are not in a defensive position; instead, we remain proactive and committed to our mission. □

**IN A CHEERFUL MOOD**

**No Alternative**

Departing guest to driver: "I hope I won't miss the train."

Driver: "No fear of that, gov'nor. The master told me I would be instantly dismissed if I brought you back!"

**Either Way**

Two battered old human wrecks were swapping experiences. Remarked the first: "I am a man who never took advice from anybody."

"Shake hands, pal," said the other, "I am a man who followed everyone's advice."

**Wanting Peace**

The prospective maid explained that she had left the previous job and wanted very much to work with this couple because she loved peace. The previous employers were constantly quarrelling.

"That must have been very unpleasant," commented the lady.

"It was," declared the girl, "they were at it the whole time. When it wasn't he and me, it was me and her!"

**First**

"I am reckoned to be the first actress in the world."

"Could be true - you are old enough."

**Instant Cure**

A man went to his doctor complaining of a pain that had been troubling him since morning. The doctor examined him and the

pain disappeared. "Quick word, doctor, your braces were twisted. Good luck."

**Big America**

An American guest was trying to impress on a British host how vast the area covered by the United States is.

"Why," he exclaimed, after several futile attempts to get his friend to understand what he meant, "you can get on a train in Pennsylvania at seven in the evening and be still in Pennsylvania at seven the next morning!"

The man seemed to understand at last and said: "Well, we've trains like that on our railways to, but we don't boast of them."

**Who?**

President Wilson once visited his old college, Davidson, and expressed his desire to visit his old room on the first floor alone. He knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" Inquired a voice from inside. "Woodrow Wilson."

"I'm George Washington," laughed the voice, "come in!"

When the door opened and the boy said it was the President, he leaped out of the window..."

**The Clue**

A physician who could not remember names, to get a clue asked his patient whether she spelled her name with an "e" or an "i". The lady brightly replied: "Why doctor, my name is Hill." □



### SAINT BRUNO AND THE FROGS

Once upon a time, there was a saint who was very virtuous. He was skinny and lanky and always dressed in a flowing white habit. His name was Bruno, but everyone called him "Saint Bruno" because of his goodness. He never ate meat or sweets and preferred to eat salad without any oil.

Saint Bruno cherished his conversations with God more than anything else, so he spent his days and much of the night in prayer.

Saint Bruno had built himself a hut in a wild valley, carpeted with thick woods and dense bushes. Unfortunately, there were also some ponds nearby. As is well known, ponds are populated by garrulous, chattering frogs.

Therefore, when Saint Bruno immersed himself in passionate evening prayer, the incessant and haunting 'croak ... croak' of the frogs filtered through the windows. This noise was only amplified by the buzzing of flies and mosquitoes, the clacking of herons' beaks, and the rustling of leaves.

Saint Bruno desperately tried to concentrate on his prayers and clutched his crucifix

tightly, but the tireless frogs took turns croaking without pause. In a last-ditch effort, he began to recite his prayers loudly, shouting with all his might to drown out the irrepressible croaking of the frogs. However, his attempts were futile; the frogs' endless 'croak croak' seemed to mock him, echoing throughout the valley.

Increasingly irritated, he looked out the window and shouted, "Quiet! I am praying!" He was a saint, and saints' commands are always obeyed. Immediately, the woods and ponds fell into silence, like a fire being extinguished, and Saint Bruno's hut was enveloped in deep, muffled quiet.

"Oh, at last!" sighed Saint Bruno. Toads and frogs no longer made



the slightest noise, herons gazed out of the hut window with their beaks closed. Flies and mosquitoes dared not take off from the leaves on which they had landed, and even the evening breeze became silent.

Satisfied, the saint resumed his prayer; however, he was not truly happy and felt a sense of unease. Within his prayer, he suddenly heard a voice asking, "What if God prefers the croaking of frogs to your prayers?"

Surprised and troubled, the saint responded, "How can God find the croaking of frogs or the buzzing of mosquitoes pleasing, or any other noise for that matter? Why would God create noise at all?"

Amid these questions, Saint Bruno looked out of the window

once more and, feeling repentant, said, "Whatever! Do as you wish."

Once again, the night was filled with the gentle rhythm of insects and frogs. This time, however, Saint Bruno did not resist the sounds. What he had once regarded as an annoying din now revealed itself as enchanting, wonderful music that embraced everything.

Amazingly, the saint felt his heart beating in unison with the universe.

The forest, the sky, the bushes, the wind, and both small and large creatures of the earth were a wonderful prayer. From that evening, Saint Bruno became known as "the saint who prays with frogs." □

#### LOVING CHILDREN TO THEIR LOVING MOTHER

My sincere thanks to Jesus in the Bl. Sacrament and Our Blessed Mother for all the blessings that have come to me through cousins, friends and well-wishers.

*M. Dodd, Pune*

My sincere and heartfelt gratitude to the Blessed Trinity and Mother Mary for a very special favour granted to my daughter and for the graces and blessings received.

*A Devotee*

Thank You Jesus and Mary for all the blessings and favours received.

*A Devotee*

Thank you, Mary Help of Christians, for heling my brother secure a job.

*Olfina*

#### POPE'S WORLDWIDE PRAYER NETWORK JANUARY 2025

##### For the right to an education

*Let us pray for migrants, refugees and those affected by war, that their right to an education, which is necessary to build a better world, might always be respected.*

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### **MARY WAS THERE**

This is what happened when Our Lady visited our home in the month of October 2024: Pauline and Ignatius Noronha, a Catholic brother and sister, faced a major challenge when Ignatius suddenly collapsed and was admitted to the ICU. After being unconscious for over 48 hours, he regained consciousness but couldn't swallow or speak. Doctors suspected a throat growth and referred him to a specialist at Dhervan Hospital where, a diagnostic procedure revealed no growth – just a minor infection that would resolve. Today, Ignatius is fully recovered and can speak and swallow again. We are deeply grateful for the intercession of Mama Mary throughout this difficult time. *Godwin Noronha, Ratnagiri*

**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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