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*Once upon a Christmastime,
 The Angels sang with joy,
 To herald the coming
 Of a precious Baby Boy.
 Their shouting filled the heavens
 And shook the mighty earth,
 And sent the shepherds searching
 For the place of His glorious birth
 And when they found the manger
 And gazed upon His face
 They knelt in adoration
 In that low and holy place,
 Oh, Father, fill me with the love
 That filled the earth that night,
 A love that reaches throughout
 the world
 and fills it with Your light*



Dona M. Maroney

From The Editor's Desk

LIGHT FROM A STAR

When the second person of the Trinity descended from heaven to be born as a little baby, he was coming among us to remain with us forever. From that time on he would always be "Emmanuel, that is 'God with us'" (Mt 1:23). This simply states that once Christ comes, he wishes to remain with those to whom he comes.

He's got a way of coming to fill our emptiness especially at Christmas when even the most gregarious of us can get very lonely and depressed, but as God-with-us, nothing keeps him from us. Being God, he orchestrates the scenario for us to allow him to enter our lives. That was what happened to him one Christmas eve.

His name was 'Ted' he told me, and I was willing to accept it. He asked if he could sit at my table and I said that was fine. We talked about this and that and I had a feeling that he was struggling to say something, I couldn't imagine what. But Ted's face grew darker as he looked into the beer before him, staring idly and then he lapsed into a deeper repose as he contemplated the trails of bubbles surging upwards to the top. Some time elapsed and he was still hunched over the mug, the evening paper folder under his arm, his drink untouched, his gaze fixed on some inner reality.

For no apparent reason, he felt like talking about his father. "He was such a good man," he reminisced, "so simple in his ways. A good father, always there for us, ready to listen and understand." One by one, the memories emerged from the past and paraded before him, leading him slowly and gently towards the anguish of the present. Even after two years he could feel again the pain in the old man's voice on the night Ted left home. "What happened to you at all, Ted? What came over you to walk out on Mary and the children?" It was a voice he could not silence, a pain he could not ignore. Barely excusing himself and leaving his paper beside the unclaimed drink, he slipped away quietly and set off on the long journey home, taking the train to the next stop and the connecting bus.

He got off at his stop and tracked down the parish priest who hadn't yet turned in for the night and poured out his story. "God never gives up on us," the priest responded. "God the Father is always drawing us to his Son: Sometimes through others, sometimes through signs. The shepherds were drawn to the manger by the message of angels. The wise men were drawn by the light of a star. And now, Ted, you have a star of your own up there: all you have to do is follow it."

The next morning when Ted made his way home, down that familiar road; he was greatly relieved to find Mary on her own. "It's yourself," she cried, "You've come back to us!" "I have, Mary," said Ted. "Is this just for Christmas?" she frowned. "No Mary," he said firmly, "This is for good." She paused to take in the deeper meaning of his words, and then sighed "Oh Ted, I don't know whether to hug you or to hit you" "I'll settle for either." Ted smiled.

Fr. Ian Doulton, sdb

FATHER AND MOTHER: MORE THAN DAD AND MUM

by Bishop Gianpaolo Dianin

It seems that men and women are going through a real identity crisis and are in the middle of a crossroad that will hopefully lead to a new way of living fatherhood and motherhood

Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* touches on some hot topics of current debate, at least in our Western world: the essential presence of the mother and the father near the child. Many children, the Pope says, experience a “sense of being orphaned” that leaves deep scars on their growth (AL 173).

On the one hand, there is the woman who has long been trying to emancipate herself from the maternal role that had almost imprisoned her within domestic walls; on the other hand, there has long been talk of a “society without fathers.” It really seems that men and women are going through a real identity crisis and are at a crossroad that will hopefully lead to a new way of experiencing fatherhood and motherhood.

The Pope writes: “Nowadays we acknowledge as legitimate and indeed desirable that women wish to study, work, develop their skills and have personal goals. At the same time, we cannot ignore the need that children have for a mother’s presence in the first months of life” (AL 173). We know that one of the great

challenges in the world of work is to hold together the demands of work with those of a family and motherhood. Many professions are not limited to a specific schedule, but demand time, flexibility, mobility, commitment in the face of competition, all conditions that often conflict with the time a child demands. Child-birth is also linked to this aspect: we postpone the period of motherhood, even limit it as much as possible.

The pope mentions the feminist movement and praises some of its struggles, but at the same time he fears that in order to highlight something that has been denied for too long, we will go to the opposite extreme by giving little emphasis to the maternal vocation of women. “The weakening of this maternal presence with its feminine qualities poses a grave risk to our world” (AL 173).

From many quarters there is a certain allure to the term “feminine genius,” as if one once again wants to enclose women in a role or adorn them with a saintly aura rather than recognize their dignity, freedom, and potential on every front of existence. How-

ever, Pope Francis’ remarks are not expressions of a vision from another era, especially when he states, “Mothers are the strongest antidote to the spread of self-centred individualism [...] It is they who testify to the beauty of life [...] Mothers are always, even in the worst of times, witnesses to tenderness, dedication and moral strength. [...] A mother who watches over her child with tenderness and compassion helps him or her to grow in confidence and to experience that the world is a good and welcoming place. This helps the child to grow in self-esteem” (AL 174-175).

The Pope is not naïve and immediately adds, “There can be a certain flexibility of roles and responsibilities (between mother and father) depending on the concrete circumstances of each particular family. But the clear and well-defined presence of both figures, female and male, creates an environment best suited to the growth of the child” (AL 175).

And then there is the father figure who appears to be symbolically absent, missing or vanished. “At first this was perceived as a liberation: liberation from the father as master, from the father as the representative of a law imposed from without, from the father as the arbiter of his children’s happiness and an obstacle to the emancipation and autonomy of young people,” seemingly unfit for the caring tasks that seemed exclusive to the woman. Yet, as often happens, one goes from one extreme to the other. In our day, the problem no longer seems to be the overbearing presence of the father so much as his absence, his not being there.” (AL 176).

Fathers, too, are going through a rough patch in their search for a new way of being fathers; many turn into “great moms” and are praised and appreciated for it, except that they have to take note that a child needs something that belonged to yesterday’s (motherly) role and was too hastily cast aside.



In the educative relationship today, the affective dimension prevails while the value and ethical dimension (the rules) remains in the background. We have moved from the ethical or fa-

LET'S GO BACK TO LOOKING UP

by Antonio Barbierato

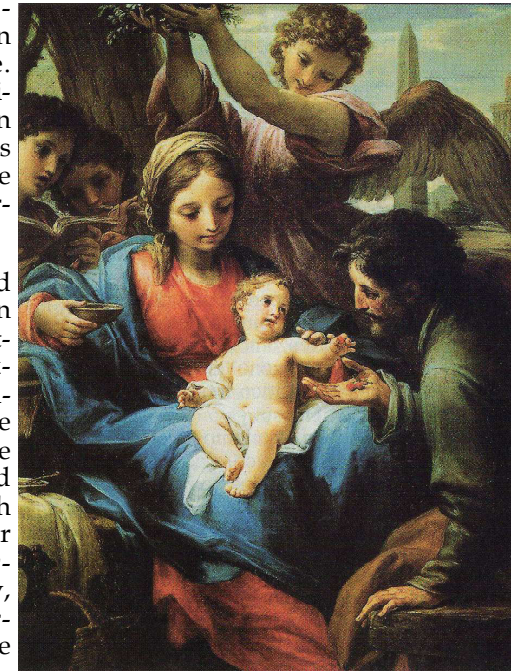
It's Christmas, in spite of everything. In spite of our weaknesses, our doubts, our fears, our infidelities, our uncertainties, our contradictions, our many serious omissions.

In spite of everything Christmas once more offers us the chance to begin again. Perhaps there is no greater gift than this. In the light of Bethlehem we can once again entrust all that ails and dismays us, oppresses and disorients us, to a hope of renewal. While it is true that every birth marks a turning point, *that* Birth represents something even greater, immeasurable. The most radical and definitive transition that can be imagined or perhaps only attempted, for there are impassable boundaries to reason.

Today, as two thousand years ago, the redemption that comes from the Grotto becomes the most exceptional and extraordinary opportunity to leave behind the cumbersome rubble of our conflicts and poverty. Those that weigh in the depths of our hearts, stifling the ferments of our interiority, and those, equally burdensome, linked to the

concrete difficulties of every day.

Christmas does not erase any of this, it does not magically resolve either the afflictions of the soul, or the social, political and family disputes, or even the disappointments at school or at work. It does, however, present us with a new and original key to interpretation; it invites us to recapitulate every square inch of ourselves, every thought, every action, every choice, every moment through the luxuriant freshness of a mystery of love that renews itself to urge each one to change.



mily-rules to the family of affections. Affection is important because it highlights the importance of relationships, but it is not enough. Ethics are important because they set boundaries, define good and evil, and deliver appropriate norms. Without rules, a child does not find identity because he is not yet autonomous.

Family ties are characterized by affective and ethical aspects. The maternal prototype of affective aspects is the binomial trust-hope that refers to the maternal function, which is capable of giving life, care, and warmth. The paternal prototype of ethical aspects is represented by the binomial loyalty-justice that refers to the paternal function that transmits

belonging and legitimacy, material and moral inheritance. Affection allows the child to feel loved, to assimilate warmth, security, trust in himself and in the world; the rule hands him a criterion to distinguish right from wrong, demarcates a path, points a direction, also helps to experience limitation and frustration.

Without nostalgia for the past and without going so far as to say that there is no difference but that everything is culturally conditioned, let us take note that we are crossing a ford, and to do it right we need to leave aside nostalgia and ideology and work together for the sake of children who have the right to a real father and mother. □

THE GIRL

She was in a very bad mood. She had all her quills out, like a porcupine tormented by a dog. Too much homework, too many questions, too much everything - that's it!

Her mother repeated the usual lecture to her, with reasoning, explanations and recommendations.

The girl grew even darker. Then she looked her mother straight in the eyes and remarked, "Mother, I am tired and fed up with your preaching. Why don't you just take me in your arms and hold me instead? No advice will do me as much good!"



The mother gasped. Her daughter's eyes begged for a hug. With her voice broken with the urge to cry, the mother said, "Do you...do you want me to hug you? But do you know that I-I want you to hug me too?"

She welcomed her daughter into her open arms and held her close, as if she were still a child. □



for love, addressed above all to those who suffer most, to those who most sharply and heartbreakingly raise their cries of pain in the night, to those who despair most, staring into the impenetrable darkness of suffering, convinced that they will never again see the dim but joyful light of morning.

To propose to every woman and man of good will to set aside everything that risks being a ballast, a stumbling block, an obstacle or impediment.

With the explosive and overwhelming force of a nuclear fission, that Birth unveils before our eyes, numbed by too many misleading and deceptive images, the simple but decisive truth of life recommencing, wanting to assert itself, demanding space, demanding attention.

One cannot remain indifferent, nor pretend that everything always flows the same way, with the almost motionless and desultory slowness of those who no longer have anything to ask or hope for. No, if once again the light returns to shine on Christmas night, it means precisely that everyone can once again look up, to peer confidently at the way ahead, to plan new paths, to imagine a more serene future. That Birth is God's warm caress for all those marked by the fatigue of days. And the outburst of an embrace that is mysterious yet tangible in its unfathomable reasons

So many problems for everyone! Immigration, disability, joblessness, crime that rules entire regions of the world; corruption, garbage, collapsing schools, limping health care, the judiciary im-

*In the light of Bethlehem
we can once again
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ploding in infighting, scandals, ever-increasing family breakdowns, traffic accidents, bullying and so much more, in which we are immersed and by which at any moment we risk being overwhelmed. But in this endless toil of ours, in this vortex of difficulty that seems to centrifuge men and things, families and institutions, truths and values, hope sustains us. A birth, that Birth, reignites the engine of the world. Two thousand years ago as today. Despite everything. □

THE VISIT, THE COURAGE

by Anastasia Dias

"Is there anyone in here?" asked the old man as he peeped inside the dilapidated structure. "Yes, may I know who it is?" replied a voice from inside. "Well," continued the old man, "there are three of us. We're here to see an infant whose birth was predicted by a star. He's destined to be a great man and that is why we're here to visit him."

The three men could hear footsteps approaching quickly. A younger man stepped outside cautiously, and whispered, "Come inside, come in!"

The infant was with his mother. The young man, his wife and son were huddled there in the dim light, in dire poverty.

The three men seemed wonderstruck, and so knelt in front of the infant and paid him homage. "Your son is going to be a King one day. It is predicted by his birth star," they told his mother who was looking at them in wonder.

"We've done our work. We will leave soon and head back home. Thank you for allowing us to see your son," said the eldest of the three gratefully to Joseph.

Joseph nodded his head, still confused, scared and at a loss for words all at the same time.

Things had been difficult for Jo-



seph and his family. He had run away from home with his pregnant wife because he was instructed to do so. He was now living in that run-down shack. There were people who knew of the baby's birth even though he hadn't told anyone. What was he supposed to do? He was frightened and exhausted and so he fell asleep. While he slept, he had another dream. He was directed to leave the place and



go to another country. "Oh my God, how will I do this?" he thought to himself. Earlier, it was just his wife and him, moving from one place to another in the same country. Now it was his wife, the baby and him moving to a totally different land with a new culture. What was he supposed to do?

He did what he had to. He obeyed what he was told. He fulfilled his duty. He took the long and arduous journey on foot with his wife and the infant, moving from place to place and entering the new country, the land his ancestors had fled from due to persecution. He was afraid, what if the same thing happened to him and his family? What would he do? But he trusted the voice that told him to go there in the first place. Slowly, steadily, his wife and he began to adapt to the language, to the culture and the traditions that the foreigners followed. They began feeling less anxious and made home of whatever was around them. Their son was a little older now and had begun to speak. This land didn't scare Joseph anymore. Why?

It was all because he believed in who and what had brought him here.

Man! I wish I was like Joseph. If I was told to leave my country and move to a totally different place because of a plan I knew nothing about, I'd never do it! I've heard all about duty and duty above self, I've tried following that too; but it just doesn't happen. And here's a guy who not only does his duty but risks his life and his family's wellbeing for a greater purpose.

If you look at it, even though Joseph is mentioned very few times in the New Testament, it doesn't affect his popularity today. Many



people would like to believe that it was because of his obedience. But, if you look more closely, there was something more. The man was obedient, of course.

But, he was also selfless, he was courageous and he trusted the power that had told him to undertake that difficult journey. And based on that trust he survived so many years, with his family, in a foreign land.

That is how I wish I could be. I would like to be selfless, put the wellbeing of others before my own selfish interests. I'd like to be courageous, instead of thinking: 'what if this happens?' But, most importantly, I'd like to trust in the power that has brought me so far. I've spent many days of my life, unbelieving and worrying myself crazy.

As this year ends and we plunge into a new year, I choose to trust in the power within and around me. Do you? □

Photographs: Jörg Böhling

IVORY COAST

Challenging Poverty

As is often the case: people like to talk! Especially when there is interesting news. Patricia Konan and Lyliane Sanogo have just taken a short coffee break and are chatting. They are talking about a young woman named Souhela. They have just found out that Souhela has recently opened her own shop in town. A 'beauty salon.' It's not that easy, says one. It takes courage, says the other, and you have to think hard about what kind of business you want to open. A pastry shop? 'These days you can find them on every corner,' says Ms Sanogo. "The market is overcrowded." It is similar with hairdressing salons. The conversation goes on like this for a while.

Why are the two ladies so concerned about the future of a small beauty salon? Well, they know the owner, because the two women work as carers in the 'Foyer Marie Dominique,' a social centre of the Salesian sisters in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. And Souhela has been trained. Patricia Konan and Lyliane Sanogo are proud that the 26-year-old has now dared to take the next step after several years of training with the Salesian sisters. She runs her own small shop: 'Yeri's Beauty

Salon.'

In the Salesian sisters' centre, there are regular primary school classes and craft training courses for girls. Some are learning to be bakers and pastry chefs; others are graduating as seamstresses.

One of the biggest challenges: what happens when they finish training? Not all of them will be able to open their own shops straight away. "Yes, it is difficult," says Sister Ruth Cediél. "When they leave here, they often don't find work right away. Sometimes it is discouraging." That is why the sisters seek contacts with shops, companies and enterprises.

And sometimes new doors open unexpectedly. Today, for example, a man introduced himself as someone who would like to do something to benefit the girls in the centre. A free lunch! The donor comes from Taiwan and has already worked in Austria in the restaurant business. "I now have an Asian



Souhela with Sr Ruth Cadiel, fma

restaurant in Abidjan," he says as the girls line up for food. A couple of large pots of rice with fresh vegetables, and that as a donation, is fine here. "And I am always looking for workers," the restaurateur tells the sisters. "Maybe one day I can offer an internship?" They agree to keep in touch. It would be a promising collaboration.

Escape from domestic violence

There is also a girl at the table whose real name should preferably not be mentioned. Let's call her Caroline. "No one knows she is with us," says Sister Ruth Cediél. Because Caroline ran away from home, more precisely: she ran away from her abusive husband. They had married her against her will. Once, when it became too much for her, she must have fought back. Then she ran away. "You know," says Sister Ruth, "the whole point of forced marriage is the bride price for a girl. Once the money has been paid by the family, no one is interested in the woman anymore."

This was what happened to Caroline, who now has to hope that one day her family will not find her. Especially here in the densely populated neighbourhood you can quickly find shelter somewhere, but it is just as easy to be spotted by chance by an acquaintance. There are actually laws for cases like this, but a country like Côte d'Ivoire has long years of political conflict behind it, which have definitely shaken the state. Nevertheless, the sisters cooperate with the state authorities on a daily basis.

Often it is police officers or employees of the city's social

welfare office who bring the sisters children and young people and ask them to take care of them. So it was with the two girls Lisette and Ange. They lived on the streets. At night they were looking for a place to sleep under a plastic tarpaulin or under one of the many wooden market stalls, which then lay there deserted. One evening a police patrol passed by. "The officer picked them up and brought them to us."

A path with many obstacles

"I like it here," says Lisette as she sits in the classroom, sewing and fitting a piece of fabric. She learns how to make those famous colourful African dresses out of coloured cloth. Perhaps this is a way to a better future for them too. But her past will not let her go so easily. She would like to return to her family, but her parents are no longer together, they have both remarried. As the eldest daughter, there is no room for her at the moment, they say. One can only imagine how hard conditions must be in a neighbourhood like this. The Salesian sisters experienced it themselves. They lived in the middle of Divo for a while, but it became too dangerous for them. Their little house was visited by all sorts of strange creatures. "We decided to leave," says Sister Ruth. The Foyer Marie Dominique is only a few hundred metres away, and guarded and locked with an iron gate.

The students should be safe there, but those in charge of them should also be safe. "However, we are not afraid," says the sister. They are confident that their work will certainly bear the fruit it deserves. □

Witnesses in & for Our Times



ST. NIMATULLAH YOUSSEF KASSAB AL-HARDINI (December 14)

Just reading this saint's name would probably have raised a few questions in your head. What's going on? Has the author made a blunder? Frankly, these were the two questions I imagined might come to mind, so let me begin by answering them. Firstly, this is still the saint of the month column. Secondly, there is no error here. The reason for the Islamic sounding name is because this saint comes from Arabic speaking Lebanon!

Here's an interesting fact you never heard in history or geography class: Lebanon was one of the foremost centres of Christianity from as early as the 4th century up to about the 16th century. Lebanon was part of the Byzantine Empire or the Eastern Roman Empire. Once Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the state religion, it spread all across the empire. It took deep roots in certain areas, one of which was Lebanon. The chief language spoken in Lebanon is Arabic but French and English are also spoken. The influence of Christianity began to decline once the country was captured by the Ottoman (Islamic) Empire. However, Sultan



Abdulmejid I allowed for the creation of the first Lebanese protostate in the 19th century which would be reserved for the Christians.

Lebanon has its own unique Church known as the Maronite Church; this Church is in full communion with the Church of Rome and is hence considered to be a Catholic Church albeit with a unique rite. The centre of the Maronite Church is in Beirut, Lebanon. It is highly influenced by the Syrian Catholic tradition and follows that

liturgical style. The Maronite Church has few adherents who are mostly in Lebanon but there are others in Syria, Cyprus, Israel and Jordan.

MONASTIC AUSTERITY

Youssef Kassab was born in the village of Hardine in 1808. He was one of seven children. His maternal grandfather was a Maronite priest. Youssef studied in a school run by the monks of the Lebanese Maronite Order in the village of Houb. Since he was living and studying with the monks, he was strongly influenced by them. After completing his elementary education, he asked to join the Order. Since he was still young, he was asked to live in a monastery and discern his vocation at least till he had reached the age of adulthood.

Accordingly, Youssef joined the novitiate of the Order in November 1828. There was a monastic practice of assuming a new name to signify a new identity when one joined a monastery or convent. Youssef chose the name *Nimatullah* meaning 'the grace of God.'

As a young novice, he was given charge of binding books. Since he was practically surrounded by books all day, he developed an interest in reading and growing in knowledge. When he wasn't working, Nimatullah spent his time praying. His fellow monks noticed him spending long hours before the Blessed Sacrament and were edified by his example of prayer. There are reports that he occasionally even spent entire nights in prayer. After two years of training, he took his monastic vows and was sent to study in order to become a priest.

After his ordination, he was assigned to the seminary as Director

of seminarians and professor of theology. He immersed himself in teaching the young monks about the truths of the faith and about Sacred Scripture. He wonderfully integrated academics with an exemplary life of austerity and prayer. Nimatullah's life was a powerful witness and source of inspiration for the young seminarians. One of his students, Charbel Makhlouf would go on to become an extraordinary saint! Certainly, the seeds of holiness were either sown or nurtured by Nimatullah who was an exemplar par excellence.

He served on the General Council of the Order for many years. He was asked by the Pope to become the Assistant Abbot General. Actually, he was supposed to become the Abbot General but he insistently turned down the appointment. While most would puff their chests with pride at such an honour, Nimatullah bowed his head and humbly rejected the offer.

Nimatullah was strict with himself; he lived frugally, fasted often and performed penance regularly. Despite his strict self-discipline, he was not harsh with others. In fact, he was so patient and understanding towards his fellow monks that the Abbot reprimanded him for being too lenient! This bears testament to the personality of Nimatullah. He was a person with a large heart and strong convictions. He kept his convictions to himself, sharing them only by witness of life. He never imposed them on anyone else. His heart was large enough to allow people to make their own choices and develop their own convictions. This is a mark of a spiritual person and a person of integrity.

MIRACLES

Nimatullah, while he was still alive earned the name "The Saint of Kfifan." It is said that numerous miracles were performed by him. There are two incidents when Nimatullah displayed uncanny foresight. One day as he was taking class for the seminarians outdoors, he suddenly asked the students to move away from the wall in whose shade they were sitting. They sprang up and hardly had they moved a few steps, the wall came crashing down. Another instance was Nimatullah asking the monk in charge of the cows to remove them from the shed. The monk was taken aback with the strange request but on Nimatullah's insistence he finally did move the cows. A little later, the roof of the shed fell down. The cows were spared and so was the monastery spared a huge financial loss.

There is a report of Nimatullah healing a young boy who would regularly serve at his Mass. One day the boy did not show up. Nimatullah saw it fit to postpone the celebration of the Eucharist until he found out what had happened to the altar server. He went to visit him and found him lying on the bed with fever. He prayed over the child and ordered the fever to leave him. At once, the boy felt better and he went to serve mass with the saint.

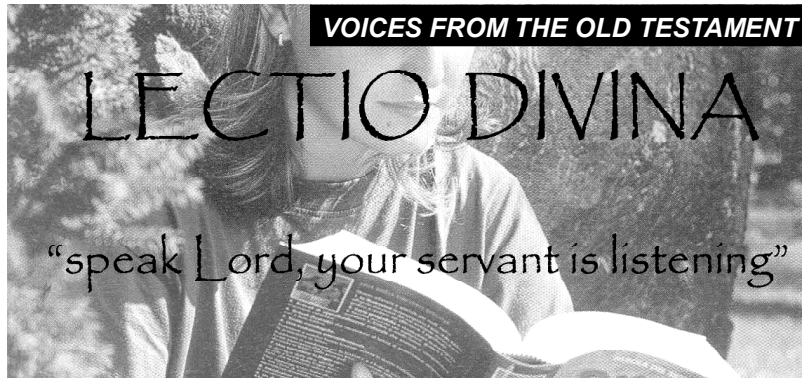
One day the provisions in the monastery were running frighteningly low. The monk in charge was anxious as he did not know and from where to procure the necessary items since they were struggling financially. Nimatullah perceived the anxiety of the monk and innocently walked over to the provision box and prayed over it. After some time, the lid of the box fell off and the provisions began to

overflow onto the table and the floor. All who were present were shocked at what they had witnessed.

Even after his death, miracles continued to take place. A blind man named Moussa Saliba visited Nimatullah's tomb and prayed for healing. As he prayed he began to feel very sleepy and curled up near the tomb. He dreamt that Nimatullah appeared to him and healed his eyes. When he woke up he could see!

In another instance, a crippled man named Mickael Kfoury went to the tomb to pray. Since he reached late in the evening, he asked the monks if he could spend the night in the monastery. In a dream, Nimatullah appeared to him and told him to help the monks carry grapes from the vineyard. The monk said, "Take this pair of shoes, wear them and walk." As he stretched out his legs to wear the shoes he found that he had regained sensation in them. When he woke up he felt strong enough to walk and did as the monk in the dream had told — he spent the day helping the monks gather grapes.

Nimatullah's life was characterized by a strong devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and a sincere love for the Blessed Virgin Mary. After the Angelus, he would add the invocation: "Blessed be the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin." Even as he breathed his last, he clung to an icon of the Blessed Virgin and prayed, "O Mary, to you I entrust my soul." He died at the age of 50. When his cause for canonization was introduced, his body was dug up and to everyone's amazement, it was incorrupt. It was kept for public veneration till 1927 after which it was probably buried. He was canonized by Pope John Paul II in 2004. □



HE CARES FOR US

by Carlo Broccardo

Jerusalem has been transformed by God in his image; now it must try to make this new reality visible, so that all can admire its splendour

In the season Sunday of Advent, we will have the opportunity to read a page from a book that we have not dealt with so far. It is the book of the prophet Baruch (Jeremiah's closest collaborator), which is set during the exile in Babylon. The passage we read, to be more precise, is set at the end of the exile. The prophet imagines the city of Jerusalem as a woman distraught and humiliated because her children are no longer with her: sitting on the ground, in the dust, dressed in mourning; he says to her: Arise and dress up for a feast, for your Lord is with you!

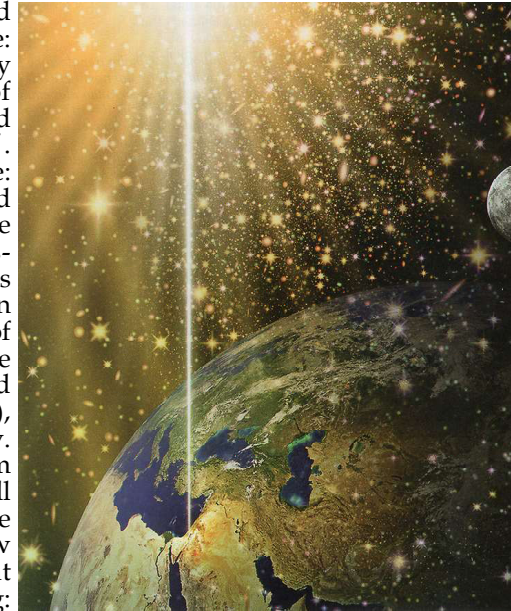
In the first verses, many images return concerning the clothing of the woman-city: lay aside the garment of mourning and affliction, put on the splendour of God's glory, wrap yourself in the mantle of his righteousness, place

on your head the diadem of the glory of the LORD. A few lines earlier, Baruch had imagined the city addressing its children with words filled with sadness: 'Go, my children, go, I am left alone. I have laid down the garment of peace, I have put on the robe of sackcloth for supplication, I will cry to the LORD all my days' (Bar 4:19-20). But now this time is over: now is the time to dress up; now, Jerusalem, you must be beautiful, for "God will show your splendour to every creature under heaven"; now put on the robe of God's glory, place on your shoulders the mantle of his righteousness and as a headdress his crown. In a few words, Baruch is saying to Jerusalem: put on the robe of God, he is your beauty!

If the dress speaks of the appearance, what is first seen of a person, the name instead indicates the inner life, the profound

being of the person. And here too there is a change: "You shall be called by God forever: "Peace of righteousness" and "Glory of godliness". And a programme of life: from now on - as God wants - Jerusalem will be the home of righteousness, of that righteousness towards God and men that is the foundation of peace; it will be a place where one respects and honours God (godliness), and this will be his glory. Ezekiel would say: 'From that day on, the city will be called: "There is the Lord"' (Ez 48:35). In a few words, we could say that Baruch repeats one thing: Jerusalem has been transformed by God in his image; now it must try to make this new reality visible so that all can admire its beauty.

Baruch had made us imagine Jerusalem as a mother mourning her scattered children every day, and there are no words to console her. Only a message convinces her to wipe away her tears and get to her feet: Look, they are coming back, all of them; "they went away from you on foot, pursued by enemies; now God brings them back to you in triumph, as on a royal throne". God himself will set to work to pave the way for his people, to "fill in the valleys by levelling the ground, that Israel may proceed safely under the glory of God". Not only that, God will also intervene in the climate to make the journey easier: on the journey



from Babylon to Jerusalem there is only desert, but in those days, there will be lush vegetation to support the prophets returning home.

If the history of Israel is turning over a new leaf, it is because at a certain point God takes matters into His own hands. The subject of all that is happening is God: it is He who gives Himself to Jerusalem to make it His garment, He gives it a new name, He smooths and sweetens the path of His children so that they may return to gladden the mother who awaits them. As Juliana of Norwich wrote, God "is our garment, and out of love He wraps and swaddles us, He embraces us and encloses Himself all around us, He lies close to us with tender love, and never abandons us." □

Quiet Spaces

CLOSENESS, POVERTY, CONCRETENESS

Pope Francis' Homily (edited) at St. Peter's Basilica on Saturday 24 December 2022

What does this night still have to say to our lives? Two thousand years after the birth of Jesus, after so many Christmases spent amid decorations and gifts, after so much consumerism that has packaged the mystery we celebrate, there is a danger. First of all, where do we go to find it? The Gospel of Jesus' birth appears to have been written precisely for this purpose: to take us by the hand and lead us where God would have us go. So let us follow the Gospel.

It starts with a situation not unlike our own: everyone is bustling about, getting ready for an important event, the great census, which called for much preparation. In that sense, the atmosphere was very much like our modern celebration of Christmas. Yet the Gospel has little to do with that worldly scenario; it quickly shifts our gaze to something else, which it considers more important. It is a small and apparently insignificant detail that it nonetheless mentions three times, always in relation to the central figures in the narrative. First, Mary places Jesus "in a manger" (Lk 2:7); then the angels tell the shepherds about "a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" (v. 12); and finally, the shepherds, who find "the child lying in the manger" (v. 16). In order to rediscover the meaning of Christmas, we need to look to the manger. Yet why is the manger so important? Because it is the sign, and not by chance, of Christ's coming into this world. It is how he announces his coming. It is the way God is born in history, so that history itself can be reborn. What then does the manger tell us? It tells us three things, at least: *closeness*, *poverty* and *concreteness*.

Closeness. The manger serves as a feeding trough, to enable food to be consumed more quickly. While animals feed in their stalls, men and women in our world, in their hunger for wealth and power, consume even their neighbours, their brothers and sisters. How many wars have we seen! And in how many places, even today, are human dignity and freedom treated with contempt! As always, the principal victims of this human greed are the weak and the vulnerable. I think above all of the children devoured by war, poverty and injustice. Yet those are the very places to which Jesus comes, a child in the manger of rejection and refusal.

In the manger of rejection and discomfort, God makes himself present. He comes there because there we see the problem of our humanity: the indifference produced by the greedy rush to possess and consume. There, in that manger, Christ is born, and there we discover his closeness to us. He comes to touch our hearts and to tell us that love alone is the power that changes the course of history. He does not remain distant and mighty, but draws near to us in humility;

leaving his throne in heaven, he lets himself be laid in a manger.

Dear brother, dear sister, tonight God is drawing near to you, because you are important to him. From the manger, as food for your life, he tells you: "If you feel consumed by events, if you are devoured by a sense of guilt and inadequacy, if you hunger for justice, I, your God, am with you. I know what you are experiencing, for I experienced it myself in that manger. I know your weaknesses, your failings and your history. There is no evil, there is no sin, from which Jesus does not want to save you. And he can. Christmas means that God is close to us: let confidence be reborn!

The manger of Bethlehem speaks to us not only of closeness, but also of *poverty*. Around the manger there is very little: hay and straw, a few animals, little else. People were warm in the inn, but not here in the coldness of a stable. Yet that is where Jesus was born. The manger reminds us that he was surrounded by nothing but love: Mary, Joseph and the shepherds; all poor people, united by affection and amazement, not by wealth and great expectations. The poverty of the manger thus shows us where the true riches in life are to be found: not in money and power, but in relationships and persons.

And the first person, the greatest wealth, is Jesus himself. Yet do we want to stand at his side? As a saintly bishop once said: "The Church supports and blesses efforts to change the structures of injustice, and sets down but one condition: that social, economic and political change truly benefit the poor" (O.A. ROMERO, *Pastoral Message for the New Year*, 1 January 1980).

We now come to our last point: the manger speaks to us of *concreteness*. Indeed, a child lying in a manger presents us with a scene that is striking, even crude. It reminds us that God truly became flesh. As a result, all our theories, our fine thoughts and our pious sentiments are no longer enough. Jesus was born poor, lived poor and died poor; he did not so much talk about poverty as live it, to the very end, for our sake. From the manger to the cross, his love for us was always palpable, concrete. From birth to death, the carpenter's son embraced the roughness of the wood, the harshness of our existence. He did not love us only in words; he loved us with utter seriousness!

Jesus we behold you lying in the manger. We see you as *close*, ever at our side: thank you Lord! We see you as *poor*, in order to teach us that true wealth does not reside in things but in persons, and above all in the poor: forgive us, if we have failed to acknowledge and serve you in them. We see you as *concrete*, because your love for us is palpable. Jesus, help us to give flesh and life to our faith. Amen. □

OCTOBER MORNINGS

By Pierluigi Menato, Tr. Ian Doulton, *sdb*

"Hello, Joan, at last!"

Sitting with his legs dangling over the crest of the wall that separated the two gardens, sixteen-year-old Mattie, lean and slender like a sapling that had grown too fast. He greeted the girl in a familiar fashion. At that moment she had stopped by an almond tree laden with fruit. She was dressed simply: she wore a little red velvet dress with long sleeves, tucked in at the waist.

She blushed when she heard Mattie and then replied her friend with a frank and candid smile.

"You're early today," shot back the boy, throwing back the beanie that came down over his eyes, preventing him from getting a good look at the girl's face. "Do you have a lot to do?"

"As always," she replied, blushing again. "See, I've already collected quite some vegetables. I especially chose those that mum and dad like: green beans, celery, lettuce... But I also added a bunch of flowers to put on dad's desk. They should delight his eyes. You, too, though, Mattie, are earlier than usual. Did you have to study?"

"Oh, as a rule I never study. I got up earlier so I could see you and talk to you. When I reach here, you are already back in the house - always."

"I have to help my sisters with the housework..."

"That's fine, but I have to tell you something before I leave for boarding school."

"When are you leaving?"

"Early next week. I'll be gone for quite a few months, and I

won't see you again, dear Joan! You can't believe how sad I'll be. I'm leaving everything... everything here. Can you understand?"

This awkwardly stammered confession, kindled a light in the girl's brown eyes. Trying to hide contentment she deliberately murmured lightly:

"Is that a 'lie' you're telling me right now or is it really true, Mattie?"

"It's not a lie, you know me better than that, Joan. My greatest pleasure is to see you, to talk to you. And when I can neither see you nor talk to you, I can only think of you. Until a few years ago, when we were still children and played together, I preferred you to everyone else. It was because I loved you very, very much. And now I have to tell you that I feel I want you even more... I stayed awake for several nights to write a poem.... I dedicated it to you. It's called 'To a cloud.' You know, I'm going to be a poet one day. With my poems I'll earn a lot of money and then we'll get married. It will take a few more years, but you are so young."

"Not so young: I'm almost fifteen and father calls me 'the queen of the house.'"

"Joan, will you wait for me till I'm in my twenties?"

"Without a doubt, Matt."

He leaned back over the masonry, stretching out his arm so that he could shake hands with "his" girlfriend and at the same time he handed her a letter.

"In here is the poem," he

whispered. "Read it and then tell me if you liked it. Now I want to recite the first stanza to you: Fair little cloud / that sails in the midst of the heavens, I marvel! / And you seem so lonely, you shining pearl, looking for a sapphire...."

Suddenly an abrupt call broke into their reverie from the other side of the wall to interrupt the boy.

"It's dad!" stammered the budding now fearful poet.

"I have to go, Joan. I'll be here again tomorrow." And he hastily descended from his lookout post.

Joan opened the letter and immediately scanned the writing with her eyes. As she started reading, her face, grew florid and beautiful with a fresh laughter that came from her soul which was tinged with an ever more vivid fire.

She repeated the verses over and over again, till she learned them by heart.

And when she thought she knew them, she carefully folded the paper and put it into the pocket of her dress. Almost in a hurry she recrossed the pathway that led to the house.

She seemed to be flying on a cloud of rapture like the one

Matt had written about. On that October morning all the gold almost gave the illusion of April once more.

Another October morning, some years later. A sunny blond morning like the one in which the love between Joan and Matt had blossomed; like the illusory one of spring that returned with its music calling to unspeakable



feasts,
to dre -
ams of et -
ernal and
s u b l i m e
unions, which
maintain in
the soul a fa -
bled other -
w o r l d -
liness.

But spring
no longer
sang in the
heart of the
young girl who
came down to
the garden that
daybreak after a
sleepless night.
There was no
one on the divi -
ding wall to
greet her: the
windows of the
neighbouring
house were

closed, because the house had been sold and Matt's family had gone to settle in town. For many months Joan had not seen the boy she had always considered her boyfriend, and that is good. She had to think of something else now. Now, there was someone new for her.

Alec Careni, the 35-year-old son of a large meat trader, attracted by young Joan's simple grace, asked her to marry him.

It would be salvation for Joan's family, which had unfortunately lost its head some years earlier. And the house was encumbered with mortgages: the two sisters, married to poor clerks and both were surrounded by numerous offspring, were continuously a serious embarrassment. The father of Joan's suitor, rich as he was, could prevent her father's small property from falling into the hands of creditors, putting his brothers-in-law's business in order, if Joan consented to the marriage. But Joan immediately said a firm "no." Then, frightened by the consternation that was aroused in the family, she withdrew that "no" and asked for time to think. She tried to feel some affection for Alec Careni but she could not. It is still too vivid, too dear the memory of Mattie....

Yet it would be necessary to forget her childhood friend, as he forgot her who even waited for him until her early twenties. Joan had learned from her married sister, now living in the city, that Mattie had not yet succeeded in getting settled, that he led a dissipated life. The news must have had a basis of truth, because her sister got it from a relative of

her husband, who was also close to Mattie's family. It is also confirmed by the young man's letters, which were increasingly fewer and shorter.

Hurt in the depths of her soul, Joan often had no answer, yet she still hoped, hoped so much because she loved him so much. They say, out of sight, out of mind. But her childhood friend would return one day. She was certain of that.

A sudden weakness overcame her, and she was forced to lean against that wall, where one day many years earlier she had first heard Mattie's words of love... How different everything had become since then! She still paused a little while gently caressing that wall. Suddenly she moved from her place. She would go to seek succour and counsel elsewhere, in the solitude and silence of God.

She slowly pushed open the gate to the vegetable garden and treaded the lane that led to the main road, along which she began walking aimlessly, driven by a mysterious inner force, until the rows of cypress trees pointed her to the place where she "must" pause, the place that always had the power to restore her serenity and strength: the cemetery.

It was closed, but from the grating of one of the open windows in the front wall, near the entrance, she could distinctly see her father's grave. A small marble headstone adorned it, with his portrait enclosed in a bronze locket.

Joan, kneeling on the step, stared at the tombstone as her eyes swelled with tears.

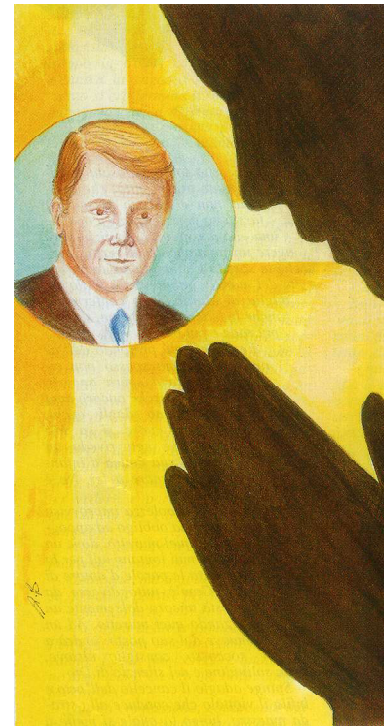
And then began the intimate

conversation between those two souls: one liberated and at peace and the other, aching and still clinging to earthly misery. The great cypresses listened in the wind.

"Forgive me, father. I haven't been here to visit you for quite a few days. My life has become so difficult!"

"I know, my daughter, I know! Courage!"

"Help me father. I see you standing here looking at me! Those eyes still deep and full of love as when you were alive! Other eyes once offered me their clear sweetness in which my heart was lost. Perhaps that was just passing sweetness but I'm trying to desperately find it again. Will it



ever be possible, dad?"

"I don't think so, my daughter."

"Your once strong 'queen of the house' now feels very weak. She would like to go to the city, to her sister, to see her childhood friend again, to tell him that without him life is unbearable.... You know our troubles.... Mother has always been ill after your death.... Two continuous years of struggles: of efforts, of strategies to delay our ruin... We're so oppressed under the unbearable series of small and great fatalities, we, poor lonely girls! ...

"I know, I know, my dear. But I also know that Careni's son, if he does not have the charm of poetry, is nevertheless a good, hard-working and honest, loyal boy. He extends his help to you, he loves my 'queen of the house' very much, and I am sure that she will end up loving him and will not be seduced by the flattery of a vain dream, but will understand that life often has to adapt to harsh realities, even at the cost of sacrifice and renunciation. Here, in this holy place, made of earth, my 'queen' will understand that our short day, happy or sad, will still be beautiful and bright, if lived not for us, but for others, as a humble and sincere offering."

A ray of sunshine came shining down on the locket of the gravestone, and her father's eyes seem to be alight with so much light that Joan stared in fascination, taking in all its grace in her soul.

And all her weakness fell from her heart: her decision was made, forever. □

FIORETTI OF DON BOSCO - 47

by Michele Molineris

218. It is God calling! (1876)

Don Bosco did not easily pass over the safeguards desired by prudence and the Church.

In January 1876 a family, father, mother and son, who said they were sent by Monsignor Zappata, had presented themselves to him.

The parents said: "This son of ours wanted to become a priest: he made such promises, and now he doesn't want hear of it. Poor us!" They therefore badgered the poor youngster to make him say yes.

Don Bosco turned to them in the presence of their son, telling them: "But a vocation is not something that can be imposed! If he feels so inclined, he will reflect, pray and be able to decide for himself what he desires. But if he does not feel inclination to this state, he should in no way be forced into it."

After that, he spoke personally to the youngster who went away leaving him with the well-founded hope that he would pursue a career in the church (*M.B., XII, 12*).

219. Trusting in providence (1876)

In 1876 the Rector of Nice, on his arrival at Turin for the feast of St. Francis de Sales, had not forgotten to point out that the house was run down and inadequate and that near the playground there was a villa for sale. It was excellent in location and adequate. Don Bosco on February 3 authorized the Rector to buy it, and on the 23rd of the same month he was present at a conference of

Msgr. Mermillod, vicar apostolic of Geneva on his way to Rome, who was charged with making the public aware of the buying operation.

Don Bosco attended the conference, but it was reported that while the listeners admired the wonders of his charity, he quietly slept, so confident was he of Divine Providence. That trust was clearly expressed by him on two particular occasions, which allow us to know the man of God better and better.

The notary Saietto, who was lending Don Bosco his services free of charge, pointed out to him that the registration fee by the government for the deed amounted to more than six thousand; to which Don Bosco replied that, having just the four thousand francs from the collection, he was reassured to buy it on his word. Then the president of the society of St. Vincent, seeing in that gesture a pure act of ill-advised temerity, did not hesitate to tell him that that was madness.

"Man of little faith!" Don Bosco answered him. "You will see that in three months we will have found more than eighteen thousand francs here in this country and the contract will be signed. Write first of all to Pius IX: his name will take effect at the signing.

The advice was accepted, and behold, His Holiness through Cardinal Antonelli immediately sent two thousand francs. Then the general Council of the Society of St. Vincent sent one thousand; another thousand was donated by Monsignor Sola; several members gave one thousand francs each; one member, the least wealthy but perhaps the most attach-

ed to the *Patronage*, sold certain of his shares, and withdrew eight thousand francs, which he put into Don Bosco's hands. At the expiration of three months the eighteen thousand francs were found and the contract signed (*M.B., XII, 116*).

220. Who's a bigger sinner: Nicòtera or Zanardelli? (1876)

For the inauguration of the Turin-Ciriè-Lanzo railway, the prefect of Turin had asked the authorities of the Salesian College to serve refreshments to the guests. Don Bosco nodded, and made it his commitment to be at Lanzo himself, together with the band of the Oratory.

The ceremony took place on 6 August 1876 and was attended by the ministers Depretis, Nicòtera and Zanardelli, the king's representative, with a retinue of about 400 guests. Don Bosco waited for the entourage on the threshold of the college; he greeted the ministers and, having served refreshments, went with them to the far end of the garden, to a stone table.

Having conversed with them for quite a while, deputy Hercules exclaimed: "Don Bosco reads hearts. Let's hear from him who's the bigger sinner: Nicòtera or Zanardelli?"

The saint replied that he could not give an answer, because he did not want to and because could not judge by appearances.

Hercules insisted and Nicòtera interrupted him: "Oh! why do you want to use me as a term of comparison? I have nothing to do with it, you know? Ask Don Bosco instead, if you are a bigger sinner than the others.

"I don't feel like being converted myself!" replied Hercules.

"Then," replied Nicòtera, "you're the bigger sinner, because you know evil, and yet you do it. Do you not know, as the Bible says, *desiderium peccatorum peribit*? What does it say, Don Bosco?"

"What more do they want me to add, when you take the words out of my mouth?! Besides, to know one, it would be necessary for him to come here, not for an hour, but to make the spiritual exercises. He would then have to think about his past life, about death with which the scene of this world ends, about the vanity of earthly things, about the preciousness of heavenly things, about the judgements of God, about eternity!... he would think that, at the point of death, what will give him contentment will be the good he has done, and that all other things will only give anguish. After these reflections, if he made a sincere general confession to me, then I could give him a view of the inside."

"But tell me: do you think we will be saved?" those gentlemen questioned him with a mixture of curiosity and nonchalance.

"Eh! I want to hope so," Don Bosco replied, "because God's grace and mercy are so great..."

"But we don't want to be converted so soon."

"That means that they would like to be converted... but still keep going on... or they would like to, but they don't feel like it..."

"Yes, that's exactly how it is," they replied.

"And so," Don Bosco concluded, "I would have nothing else to say except what that gentleman said just now: *Desiderium....* and the rest (*Vita, II, 419*).

221. Don Bosco wants to buy the Mole Antonelliana (1876)

On 31 May 1876 Don Bosco, together with Fr Julius Barberis, left for Villafranca d' Asti. He wanted to pay a courtesy visit to a sick man and, at the same time, seek some respite from a persistent headache. He saw the sick man and comforted him, but the headache brought him back home without a shadow of relief. This persuaded him to have a coffee before tackling the road between Porta Nuova and Valdocco.

Walking along Corso Palestro, he ran into the theologian, Leonard Murialdo, right on the threshold of his college; he seemed to be waiting for him, in fact he accompanied him to Valdocco. The topic of that conversation was the Mole Antonelliana.

Work had been going on around it for 13 years at the time; but due to a lack of funds, construction had first been slow, then suspended completely while waiting for an acceptable solution. The Mole had been deliberated in 1862 by the Jewish community of Turin and was to become, according to their intentions, an Israelite temple, in other words, a synagogue. But at a certain point the donations collected by public subscription, had run out and they, fearful of not being able to realise the entire design planned by engineer Alessandro Antonelli, had thought of selling what had already been done to the highest bidder. Don Bosco and Prof. Murialdo spoke about this that evening, walking along Corso Valdocco and then lingering at the Oratory porter's lodge.

Encountering financial difficul-

ties, the Jews had therefore left it to the municipality to carry out the undertaking and the consequent action of making proposals. One of these proposals had also been made to Don Bosco, who was now examining with Prof. Murialdo on how to get possession of it and the use to which he could put it. Confidentially, because it was only on the following 12th September that Antonelli himself formally made the proposal to him. He who also offered to act as intermediary between him and the presidency of the Israelite administration.

Don Bosco was to open negotiations with an offer of 250,000 lira. The engineer thought the thing was convenient; and a good response from the Israelites seemed certain, and so Don Bosco sent to see. But, having studied the thing from every angle, he was convinced that he would not be able to get a bargain that conformed to his plans and he finally renounced it.

His plans were to turn it into a church, supported and encouraged by Fr Margotti's paper *L'Unità Cattolica*, which, in its issue of 29 September, carried a letter from a rabbi who was also of this opinion, in order to prevent the edifice in question from falling into the hands of a private individual who had already floated the idea of modifying the original design, in order to achieve it at a lower cost. And this was how he concluded his plea to save Antonelli's design from sinking: "The Jewish religion is the mother of the Catholic religion and nothing is more natural than for a mother to make a donation to her own daughter."

Instead, that storied monument of a building became a museum of the Italian *Risorgimento* and a

symbol of the city that hosts it with pride and also with trepidation (from *M.B.*, XII, 256).

222. Mary Help of Christians instead of medicine (1877)

Fr Giuseppe Vespignani had fallen seriously ill. There was no hope of recovery. Don Bosco blessed him and he was saved. Here is how he recounted the event: "Meanwhile the blood was not coagulating; the haemoptysis followed. The holy Viaticum was administered to me; the nurse begged me to remember him in paradise. The doctor made very brief visits, without now prescribing anything but turpentine pills to stop the bleeding. I waited resignedly for my last hour.

One afternoon I heard Don Bosco's footsteps that I knew well, at my door. He knocked, opened and entered. He wanted to know how I was getting on and how I was eating; indeed, seeing some remnants of an egg on my plate, he asked me if I would also eat some roast meat. I answered him that I was well, and begged him to hear my confession. Then I told him: "I had applied to go to the missions in America; but I had already gone and returned."

Don Bosco gave me a knowing look and, beckoning me with his outstretched hand towards me, said: "You will go, you will go! Now I'll give you the blessing of Mary Help of Christians." And, taking off his biretta, with his hands joined and, as usual, with a devotion that inspired confidence and trust in God's power and Mary's intercession, he blessed me.

From that point on, the bleeding ceased, the cough disappeared as if by magic, my appetite revived. I

felt reborn! It was mid-February, an unfavourable season for my ailments and in a room that did not receive the sun; yet every day I noticed improvements.

On his second visit, Don Bosco, feeling that his blessing had, so to speak, driven away my discomfort and given me a great appetite, gave me this rule: "Now you can have a little more to eat than before; you just have to make sure that nothing hurts you."

During my confessions, too, he used to tell me while assigning me my penance: "Ask the Lord for the precious gift of health, and then use it in his service..."

In spite of my conviction that Don Bosco's blessing had returned me from death to life, nevertheless during my convalescence a secret anxiety nagged at me to regain my strength at once and in its entirety; therefore, having heard of some restorative, I immediately tried it. Now it happened that one evening, after supper, while I was accompanying Don Bosco to his room, he asked me how I was, and I replied that I was in full convalescence, but that as a precaution I was taking some restorative; so that I would recover more quickly and completely and be able to resume my work.

Don Bosco let me speak, then with his usual paternal smile, but with a resolute accent he admonished me: "*Qui medice vivit, miserrime vivit.*" (Those who live by medicine, live miserably)

That word was for me the best remedy in the world, because I learnt to lay aside all solicitude and throw away all specifics, returning without unhesitatingly to the common life. (Vespignani, *A Year at the school of Don Bosco*, 51-58 passim). □



THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION NOVENA

by Card. Anastasio Ballestrero

Brief reflections by Cardinal Ballestrero on the Novena of the Immaculate Conception 1997 dictated to Fr Joseph his faithful secretary and to Sr Antonina, whom we thank for passing on this precious text.

Day 1. Let us begin the Immaculate Conception novena as preparation for the Advent of the Lord. In Mary all the prophecies are fulfilled, because with her "fiat" the Incarnation of the Word for the salvation of mankind is realised. Let us therefore love this Virgin. May she enter into our lives as Christ entered into her by becoming incarnate.

Day 2. We begin Advent with Our Lady. May she prepare us to receive Jesus with her faith, hope and charity. Christ's love never ends and only waits for us to welcome it everywhere and anywhere. Come Lord Jesus. May your Mother bring you to us, may she make us love you. United in this way with your Mother our living in Christ will be more fruitful in all of us.

Day 3. Faith teaches us that Our

Lady is without original sin. What a great gift! Unique. God preserved this creature from sin for the salvation of the world. We believe this with joy because it glorifies God, it glorifies Mary for the hope of the Church. Mary received this gift, yes, but she also preserved it. Immaculate in the deepest sense of the word. Let us rejoice in this privilege, let us praise God who is its author, let us glorify Mary for the good that comes from her for everyone, even for us poor sinners.

Day 4. The privilege of the Immaculate Conception is not only the preservation from all guilt, it is a mystery of the fullness of grace with which God filled her. Sanctifying grace, deifying grace. No being is such a child of God as Mary is. This grace involves the outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and all that adornment of divine charisms that makes her full of grace, a sanctuary and temple of God. Mary kept all this as bride and handmaid full of grace. *Ave gratia plena*: words to always meditate on, to bring us closer to the sanc-

tuary of the Trinity that is Mary, for in her all the splendours of God's glory are fulfilled.

Day 5. The Angel's greeting that calls Mary *full of grace*, the fullness of the Holy Spirit, is received by Mary with an attitude that should make us think: she does not glory in God's gift, but puts herself at his service, she accepts it: the fidelity of love, of faith, of dedication, fidelity that makes Mary the one who adores the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. The fullness of grace and of humility; thus Mary is an example to us. Mary obeys with a love equal to her dedication and readiness to do what the Lord wills. *Ecce ancilla Domini*: let us venerate her in this way. It is a teaching that we must apply to our whole life.

Day 6. Today we want to meditate on the fact that Mary offers her immaculate flesh to the mystery of the Redeeming Word. Mary's flesh and the flesh of Jesus Christ. Divine motherhood is a mystery in which God rejoices because He finds Our Lady's complete willingness to offer Him her flesh. Maternity that knows and experiences gestation, childbirth, breast-feeding... The flesh of Christ formed in Mary's womb becomes the flesh that the Son of God offers to the Father for the redemption of the world: flesh for the sacrifice, for death, for resurrection and for eternal life. Thus the vocation of man's flesh is realised in the resurrection of the flesh of Jesus and Mary. We worship this flesh of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist, where Christ's flesh becomes food for eternal life.

Day 7. Mary's divine and human motherhood is the crowning

glory of the Incarnation. God wanted her Immaculate, to be in reality, Mother of the flesh, the love and the fruitfulness of life. The fruit of this motherhood is Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world. Let us bless Mary and adore her Son. This unique and unrepeatable mystery grounds our hope.

Hail Mary Most Pure.

Hail Mary Immaculate.

Hail Our Mother.

May your life in us make us children, children of your Son, children of your Heart for life.

Day 8. While we believe in the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin and praise the Lord for giving her to us as the shrine of her Incarnation, we must think that this mystery has its realisa-



tion in the mystery of the Church. Mary Virgin Mother of the Church, is the Virgin Mother of Jesus. The Church celebrates this motherhood, finds in it an example of holiness. The Church, the Virgin Mother of believers, Mary Virgin Mother of the Church. Two realities that complement each other and become a reason for us to rejoice and hope. The virginal motherhood of the Church is not overshadowed by the temporality of history as a mystery, as Mary the Virgin Mother for eternity beyond time. Let us honour the Virgin and love the Church.

Day 9. The Immaculate Virgin at the foot of the Cross puts the seal of martyrdom on the holiness of her life. In this mystery, Our Lady's glory becomes luminous and reaches its peak of greatness and splendour. After the manifestation of the Risen One and the descent of the Spirit in the Upper Room, all that remains for the Virgin is the glorification of Heaven where she is today. Let us also go up there, let us join the heavenly court in glorifying Mary, let us join Jesus as he crowns his Mother, the Trinity overflowing in Her.

O glorious Immaculate one.

O most holy Immaculate one.

O shining Immaculate one.

O limpid Immaculate we venerate you, we admire you, we love you with all the faith of which we are capable and we give you our hearts.

On the feast day

It is right for us to join the feast of heaven to the feast here on earth. How many churches, chapels, shrines, wayside shrines are

dedicated to the Immaculate! The many religious families consecrated to her, inspired by her: today it is all a triumph around the Immaculate Conception. We unite to enjoy it and participate in this feast with faith. Let us be glad: it is the feast of our Mother, our Queen! Let us place our hearts in her heart, entrust them to her maternal protection and ask her blessing for our present life and for eternity. In the name of the Immaculate let us live this day in celebration, from her let us draw strength, grace, consolation and holiness. So be it.

A Marian canticle for each day of the Novena:

- Bless Mary, all the works of the Lord: praise and glorify the immaculate mother of God.

- Bless Mary, angels of the Lord: praise and glorify God's beloved daughter.

- Bless Mary, saints of the Lord: praise and glorify God's chosen bride.

- Bless Mary in her immaculate conception; bless her in her immaculate Christmas.

- Bless Mary immaculate in our youth; bless her in old age.

- Bless Mary in the angel's greeting; bless her in the conception of the Saviour Jesus.

- Bless Mary at the foot of the cross; bless her in the resurrection of her Son.

- Bless Mary in joy. Let us bless her in sorrow.

- Let us exalt her in life on earth. Let us exalt her in the eternal glory of heaven.

- Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, who preserved Mary Immaculate for ever and ever. So be it, Amen! □



FR. HUGO OROZCO

The Regional Councillor for Inter-America

Can you introduce yourself?

My name is Hugo Orozco, I am a happy Salesian of Don Bosco since 1989, a priest since 1997, Mexican by birth. I am the first in a family of three children, my father is a doctor and my mother died in August 2014. As a Salesian, I like the presence of young people, in their midst I feel like a pastor-educator and I really feel at ease. I like music, photography and cooking. I had the opportunity to obtain a degree in Educational Psychology and a postgraduate diploma in Social Pedagogy.

I feel very close to Jesus. Ever since I was a teenager, the Gospel continues to fascinate and inspire me, I try to take certain steps on my own, such as my love for the little ones, the simple and those who are forgotten. I discover in life and in love two experiences that put me in touch with God: I am uncomfortable in the face of injustice or abuse of power by the stronger.

How did your vocation come

about?

In my family I learnt generosity from my parents, their capacity for empathy, their sensitivity to details, and how to relate to God. I was a student at a Salesian school in Guadalajara, Mexico, from the age of 7 to 15, where I got to know Don Bosco, who fascinated me from an early age. From the age of 15 to 18 I studied in a school of the Marist Brothers, where I learnt to love prayer and the apostolate.

When I was 15, I had a Youth Pasch experience that changed my way of living the faith. With other young people I was involved in social causes and

with a style of optimism and hope. I enjoyed it. A year later I met a group of street kids for the first time and I remembered that Don Bosco used to visit them in prison and on the streets, and it was then that I wanted to be like him for the first time. I also wanted to be a friend, especially of those young people, to be for them the presence of the





love with which God loves them. At the age of 18, I did voluntary missionary work for a year; the contact with the simple people of the countryside and the beautiful nature that surrounds them made my heart ready to strongly experience the desire to respond to the invitation to dedicate not just one year, but my whole life to Jesus Christ, in the style of Don Bosco.

And which realities inspire more hope?

All the countries in the region inspire hope, the consolidation of the charism today with the growing lay expressions and the significant presence of young people are expressions of this optimism.

What are the most acute problems of the moment?

For the Salesians of the Inter-American Region, the most urgent problem to be faced is how to organise themselves, since the number of brothers in each community is decreasing, while at the same time the promotion of charismatic, consecrated and lay vocations is a challenge,

especially for fidelity to their identity and mission.

What are the most urgent needs?

The most urgent needs of today's youth come up against a broad, diverse and constantly changing context. A generation with great technological resources, empowered in its ability to connect, with a beautiful simplicity and great vulnerability. All surrounded by expressions of social inequality, corruption, structural violence, compulsory delinquency.

How do you see the future?

I think the region is wonderfully young, lively, impulsive, creative. I believe that the charism is taking on more lay characteristics and that its future is oriented towards these scenarios of greater prominence in the Salesian mission and pastoral work. Our greatest commitment in life is to be the Salesians that Don Bosco dreams of for the young people of today, dreaming together with them of a future of greater hope. The educational and evangelising contribution of the Salesian charism continues to be current and significant in the American continent. □



IN A CHEERFUL MOOD

Missed Fortune

There had been a dreadful flood in Missouri. One man, who had lost nearly everything he possess-ed, including a lot of poultry, was sitting on the roof of his house, as it floated along. He was gazing out over the vast stretch of water, a neighbour in a boat approached and called out:

"Hello Bill! all your fowls washed away?"

"Yes, but the ducks can swim. I reckon they're alright."

"Peach trees gone too, eh?"

"Well, they said the crop would be a failure anyhow."

"I see the water is way above your windows."

"That's all right, Sam. them windows needed washing mighty badly, anyhow."

Take What You Get

Two women were discussing domestic troubles on a bus the other day.

"I'm worried about the mice in my house. Last week they ate up the roast-beef and yesterday they finished the cake."

"Why don't you get some rat biscuits?" suggested her friend.

"Don't be daft! If they won't eat what we eat, they can starve."

What's in a Name?

First Student: "Great Scott! I forgot who wrote 'Ivanhoe.'"

Second Student: "I'll tell you if you'll tell me who the dickens wrote the 'Tale of Two Cities.'"

The Professional Patient

Mr. Teller was in poor health and continually changing physicians.

At one time he called in a young man just beginning to practice in the town, and told him all his ailments, remarking that he had symptoms of heart trouble of a serious nature. "No necessarily," said the young doctor.

This did not please the patient and in his irritation he looked accusingly at the other, sternly remarking:

"It isn't for a young physician like you, just out of college, to disagree with an old and experienced invalid like me, sir!"

Meticulous Mistakes

The student reporter had just submitted his editorial for the day. Leaving the room, he began to reflect upon what he had written and decided to go back and change something in it.

"I have a few corrections to make on the editorial that I submitted," he told the editor.

The editor reached into the wastebasket and pulled out the article.

"All right, but make it snappy; the wastebaskets will be emptied in five minutes."

A Stern View

"Did you hear," asked the senior, "About our cross-eyed professor getting fired?"

"No," replied the innocent freshman. "Why was he let out?"

"Because he couldn't control his pupils."

The Nut Behind the Wheel

"How's your wife getting along with her driving?"

"She took a turn for the worse last week." □

DAD

My father had died that day. It was a cold, grey, blustery day in January. In the little hospital room, I was holding him in my arms, when suddenly his eyes opened wide, taking on a look of dismay that I had never seen in him before. I was certain that the angel of death had entered the room. Then my father fell back and I gently laid his head on the pillow; I closed his eyes and said to my mother who was sitting by the bed, intent on praying: 'It's all over, Mum. Dad is dead.

My mother startled me: I will never know why her first words to me after my father's death were: 'He was so proud of you. He loved you very much'.

Somehow, the reaction I felt to those words made me realise that they contained something very important about me: they were like a sudden ray of light, like a surprising thought on which I had never before dwelt; but at the same time, I felt a definite pain, as if I was aware that I would know my father better in death than in life.

Later, as a doctor pronounced him dead, I leaned against the wall in the far corner of the room, sobbing silently. A nurse approached me and put her arm on my shoulders to comfort me; I could not speak, overcome with tears, but I wanted to tell her: 'I



am not crying because of my father's death. I am crying because my father never told me that he was proud of me; he never told me that he loved me. Of course it was taken for granted that I knew these things, just as it was taken for granted that I was aware of the important role I had played in his life and the great place I occupied in his heart, but he never told me. □

"A strange curse sometimes blocks us and prevents us from uttering the words that would make us and those around us happy. They are simple words, such as 'I love you', 'You are really good', 'I am so happy to be by your side', 'Thank you for being there'. Even in the Gospel it takes a miracle to make the mute speak."

LOVING CHILDREN TO THEIR LOVING MOTHER

I have recieved multiple blessings through my devotion of 3 Hail Marys to Our Blessed Mother. We shifted to a new locality in Bangalore and we tried hard to find drinking water facilities but couldn't find any. We ended up spending money buying water daily. Neither could we find water suppliers anywhere. However I prayed to Mother Mary the devotion of 3 Hail Marys and after praying it just once we found a retail outlet providing water. I thank Mother Mary for this drinking water facility that she provided for us.

Elvis Pink, Bangalore

Our sincere thanks to Jesus, Mother Mary, Don Bosco and St. Dominic Savio for blessing Craig and Neha with a baby girl on May 8, 2023, a sister to Julian.

Mrs. Pushpa Fernandes, Pune

Thank you Jesus and Mumma Mary for healing me and my husband from COVID-19 and for many other blessings received.

Dorothy and Aloysius, Mangalore

POPE'S WORLDWIDE PRAYER NETWORK DECEMBER 2023

For persons with disabilities

We pray that people living with disabilities may be at the centre of attention in society and that institutions may offer inclusive programmes which value their active participation.

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MARY WAS THERE

On July 11, 2023, while attending to some house work, I felt the blood drain out from my left arm and had to use my right arm to bring it back on to my lap. Having realized that something was wrong, I called out to my wife for help and at the same time found that my speech was not clear. My wife assisted me to a sleeping position on the bed. Our family doctor answered our call promptly and advised me to take an aspirin and then proceed to the emergency ward of the hospital. The doctor also informed the emergency of my arrival and timely action was taken by the medical staff there. During my journey to the hospital, and my stay there, we continued to pray to Jesus and Mother Mary for a quick recovery. To the surprise of the doctors, all the tests performed for a Brain Stroke showed nothing abnormal with my vital organs. I am doing well, and was discharged from the hospital the next day.

Once again, there was Jesus and Mother Mary showering me and my loved ones with their Love and Blessings.

Ronald D'souza, Mumbai

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

The magazine is sent to all who ask for it, even though there is a fixed subscription (Rs 200/- India & Rs 400/- Airmail). We trust in the generosity of our readers/benefactors.

Whatever you send us will help cover the expenses of printing and mailing; the surplus if any, is devoted to the support of orphans and poor boys in our schools and apostolic centres.

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Please address all correspondence to:

**Rev. Fr. Edwin D'Souza, sdb.,
SHRINE OF DON BOSCO'S MADONNA,
Matunga - MUMBAI - 400 019 - INDIA
Phone/Fax: 91-22- 2414 6320, email: dbmshrine@gmail.com**