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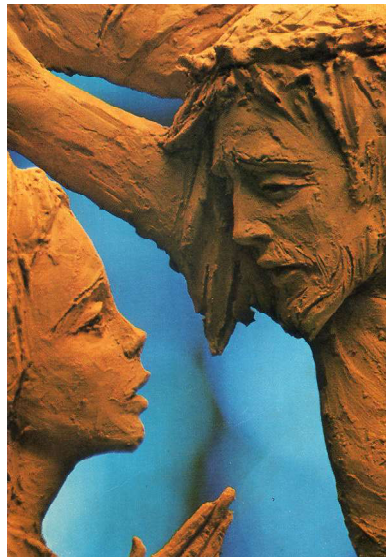
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*O God, who willed that,
when your Son
was lifted high on the Cross,
his Mother should stand close by
and share his suffering, grant
that your Church,
participating with
the Virgin Mary
in the Passion of Christ,
may merit a share in his
Resurrection.*

*Opening prayer for
the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows,
September 15)*

From The Editor's Desk

YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE!

I think I've reached that age when I can look back with nostalgia but also with some regret at my teenage years, when I was rather brash and insensitive (as teenagers are). I couldn't care less about the inconvenience I caused to others or the barbs of my cynical comments that raised quite a few eyebrows and more than a few tempers at the time.

Yet, some years later, when I was a bit older towards the end of my teens and into my early twenties, I started beaming a little more self-conscious and empathetic and I realised that my relationship with my elders changed. I was more respectful and concerned and I realised that they too seemed to treat me a little differently.

I would sit on the side of the bed of my elderly Gran, reading snippets from the newspapers. I would tell her what happened in college and how I spent my free time and who I met at the supermarket. She listened, occasionally her face lighting up as something struck her as funny. I had never really seen her laugh before. But that was my gran and we did spend quite a few afternoons when I visited her in hospital.

On my last visit before she died, I remember promising her, as I left the room that I would bring her our photograph album the next time I visited, so we could pull out some funny memories. She seemed eager and I was almost sure that she wanted to get up and come for a walk down the corridor with me.

In her last weeks, my Gran had shown me something that I've never forgotten. In the face of suffering, we can either stand or run. By standing, by being there at her bedside each Friday, we both became strong. I discovered someone I had never really known before, and I met God there in the midst of that odd friendship.

An English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, told his listeners once that when he laughs at someone's misfortune, it is not really because it is funny, but it is our way of saying, 'Thank God that wasn't me.' That may be a bit harsh, but the truth is that nobody wants to suffer, or even to witness someone else's suffering. Still, we can never really manage to hide from that more painful side.

The God of the Old Testament heard the cries of the people in Egypt. He spotted the way the rich in Israel were hurting and stealing from the ordinary people. Jesus took that compassion even further, and was so much on the side of those who suffer that he was eventually put to death for his solidarity, crucified outside the city walls.

As Christians we know that the story didn't end there. Jesus rose from the dead, and continues alongside us, just as he accompanied the bewildered disciples on the road to Emmaus.

We know that we will not be alone on that journey, and that together with the Risen Christ who promises to be with us 'until the end of time,' we can work towards a better world for everyone especially for those who suffer.

Fr. Ian Doulton, sdb

THE RIGHT TO BE LOVE (LIKE MILK)

by Mons. Giampaolo Dianin

The Second Vatican Council used very strong words to delineate the task of two spouses faced with the choice of giving life to a child: "They should realise that they are thereby cooperating with the love of God the Creator and are, in a certain sense, its interpreters" (GS 50).

Parents cooperate with God, the Creator. It is as if God, having created the heavens and the earth and, man and woman, had said to them: "Now you do it, I entrust

you with the task of continuing creation, I will be by your side, I will be with you, I will not leave you alone." Parents are said to "procreate," recalling precisely what God did when creating man and woman.

And then, there is the other *verb*, 'to interpret' the wishes and the will of God. An interpreter is one who knows a language, listens and translates it for those who do not know it. God entrusts spouses with the interpretation of



God's thoughts and they can do this by listening to His love for life and at the same time in their concrete condition and the possibilities whereby they have to welcome, love and bring up a child. The conciliar text gives the spouses criteria to carry out this discernment in the best way possible, and at the end, peremptorily states that it is up to them alone to decide when and how many children to welcome.

The spouses' cooperation with the Creator does not end here because there is much more. They are "co-operators of God's love" says the Council calling spouses to give that child the "spark of God's love." These are the words of Pope Francis in *Amoris laetitia* (AL 172). The Pope links those natural gestures of love that two parents make, to the very love of God.

"New-born children begin to receive as a gift, along with nourishment and care, the confirmation of the spiritual qualities of love." The term is very precise: they receive confirmation. Children need love like a mother's milk, like the care of a father and mother. They have the right to be loved because love for them is as necessary as nourishment and care. It is a love that does not come through words, but is delivered to them in many ways and particularly through non-verbal language.

"This love is shown to them through the gift of their personal name, the sharing of language, looks of love and the brightness of a smile" (AL 172). The name tells an identity, it tells the uniqueness of that lime tree; the language inserts it into a history

and a culture; the glances and smiles, accompanied by the warmth of contact, are and first cell words of the affective alphabet.

"They thus learn that the beauty of the bond between human beings, points to our souls, seeks our freedom, accepts the diversity of the other, recognises and respects him as an interlocutor" (AL 172). It is incredible to think that the tenderness with which one cares for a new born child can convey all these things, and yet it does. Love touches the soul, not just the body. Love offers itself to the freedom of that child because at times it likes certain gestures and at other times it cries because of its first little problems, and the parents do and together they back off, trying to harmonise with that child's times; these are the first little exercises in respecting freedom. Respect for freedom in turn becomes recognition and acceptance of his diversity and uniqueness. Little by little, that child, who at the beginning is totally dependent on his mother, becomes an 'interlocutor', becomes other than his mother and father. It is the long path of autonomy that moves between attachment and distancing.

All this the Pope calls a 'spark of God's love' because that is how God acts. He desired and loved that child even before it was conceived, just as the parents conceived and desired it before they conceived it. God calls him by name, recognising him as a son, and at the same time respects him in his freedom and autonomy. He exposes his free and gratuitous love to the

possibility of rejection, as often happens with so many little ones to whom no one tells that before and above the love of father and mother there is another love that preceded and accompanied them. God first accepts the freedom of each child in the expectation that, if he so desires, he can become an interlocutor, that is, a partner in a relationship.

The image of the spark is very beautiful. Christian initiation, the Pope seems to affirm, does not begin when two parents ask for baptism for that child, nor with the catechesis that introduces him or her to the Christian life, but it begins from the womb and then with that grammar of love that is

natural in the gestures of every father and mother. Without knowing it, without being fully aware of it, father and mother cooperate in God's love, they interpret - that is, they translate - his love with the gestures of their love. Without being fully aware of it, they light a spark that could become a fire that burns if, in the journey to come, someone will help that child to read in the love he has received the traces of a greater love, the love of the Father from whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth comes, and the visceral love of a mother God who speaks and works through that father and that mother, instruments of his love. □

REBUILD THE WORLD

A child and his father were sitting on the train. The journey would take about an hour. The father sat comfortably and started reading a magazine to distract himself.

At one point the child interrupted him and asks: "What's that, Daddy?". The man turned to see what the child had pointed out to him and replies: 'It's a farm'. He starts reading again when the child asked him once more: "When will we reach, Daddy?" The father replies that it is still a long way off.

He had started reading his magazine again when another question from the child interrupted him again and again. The desperate father tried to find a way to distract the child.

He saw in the magazine he was reading a picture of a globe, he tore it into many pieces and gave them to his son, inviting him to reconstruct the globe figure. So he sat happily in his seat convinced

that the child would be occupied for the rest of the journey.

He had just started reading his magazine again when the child exclaimed: 'I've finished'.

"Impossible! I can't believe it! How could you rebuild the world in such a short time?" But the globe had been rebuilt perfectly. Then his father asked him again: "How could you rebuild the world so quickly?"

The child replied: "I didn't fix the world... behind the pieces was the figure of a man. I reconstructed the man and the world fixed itself". □



FROM EARTH TO HEAVEN

Sr. Marzia Ceschia

The tree of the Cross saves us from the consequences of those other trees where pride and arrogance began

"For you placed the salvation of the human race on the wood of the Cross, so that, where death arose, life might again spring forth and the evil one, who conquered on a tree, might likewise on a tree be conquered, through Christ our Lord." Words from the preface on the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (14 September) offer us some significant elements to enter into the profound sense of what the Church intends to celebrate.

First of all, let us 'exalt' the Cross as a place of salvation, a place where death is reversed into life: where does this surprising and mysterious re-signification of an infamous scaffold derive its reasons? From Jesus' attitude on the Cross: he is the one of whom it is said "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not be lost, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:16-17).

Jesus, unjustly nailed to the wood broke the logic of revenge, of vindication. He did not confront evil with just as much evil, but emptied evil of its disintegrating power by loving to the end. Exalting the Cross therefore means celebrating Christ's com-



munion with the Father, with his plan for man's redemption, in a total, full fidelity to love, to the point of giving his own life so that nothing is contradicted in love. It was in this logic that the martyrs handed themselves over and in this logic that every Christian is called not to give in to the suggestions of "those who drew victory from the tree of Eden," to the temptation of winning through oppression, competition, the

clash of powers and deception.

It is a seemingly weak, loser's perspective, but this was how the Lord Jesus drew all to Himself, this is how He is "lifted up" (cf. Jn 12:32), this is how He overcomes all that kills man in order to offer him a guarantee of Life and Joy without end.

The words of the holy Carmelite nun and martyr Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), who was killed in Auschwitz on 2 August 1942, resonate with particular intensity in this context: "Behold the Lord hanging before you on the wood, for he was obedient unto death on a cross. He came into the world not to do his own will, but the will of the Father. [...] The Crucified One stares at us and asks us if we are still determined to keep faith with what we promised Him in an hour of grace. And he does not question us without reason. Today more than ever, the Cross has become a sign of contradiction. The followers of the antichrist offend it more gravely than the Persians did when they stole it. Violating the Crucifix, they make every effort to snatch the Cross from the hearts of Christians and all too often they succeed in their intent... The world is in flames: the fire could set even our house on fire, but above all the flames stands the Cross, which cannot be burnt. The Cross our way from earth to Heaven. Whoever embraces it with faith, love and hope is carried upwards, up to the bosom of the Trinity."

How can these words be made concrete today? What meaning does this feast ultimately have

The Crucified One stares at us and asks us if we are still determined to keep faith with what we promised Him in an hour of grace. (Edith Stein)

today? What does it mean to carry the Cross in our hearts? It means adopting a peculiar key to interpreting the world, our personal stories, the stories of our communities, of all humanity. It means to choose courageously and radically not to go along with the spiral of evil in any way, but to implement opposite practices that neutralise it. In how many areas of our concrete existence are we challenged in this? It means protecting at all costs that which nourishes life, that which preserves life. It means having the audacity of gratuitousness, of justice as Jesus showed it to us, referring to the mercy of the Father and the action of the Spirit that reconciles.

To carry the Cross in one's heart is to remain steadfast in love and in the determination to love, so that Christ may be exalted in us. "This is the path of human history: a path to find Jesus Christ the Redeemer, who gives his life out of love," says Pope Francis. "This tree of the Cross saves us, all of us, from the consequences of that other tree, where self-sufficiency began; pride, the pride of wanting to know - each of us - everything, according to our mentality, according to our ways of thinking, even according to that presumption of being and becoming the only judges of our world. This is the story of man: from one tree to another." □

DO YOU REALLY WANT TO SEE AGAIN?

by Anastasia Dias

"What is that noise," asked the blind man. "There's a crowd coming this way," replied his friend. "What are they coming here for," the blind man questioned rather irritated. "I'm not sure. Have you heard of a man named Jesus?" Then suddenly he paused and continued eagerly: "I think that's him and people are following him here." "I've heard that Jesus works miracles," said the blind man, "Maybe, I should ask him for my eyesight. There's nothing to lose, is there?"

"Give it a try. I don't think he'll even hear you. The crowd that's following him is huge." "Let's see. I'll try screaming my lungs out and hope he hears."

Jesus passed by the blind man Bartimaeus. The man took a deep breath and shouted, "Jesus, heal me!" A few people came towards Bartimaeus, "What is wrong with you? You were not born blind. You lost your eyesight. Don't even consider trying to call Jesus."

That didn't stop the man. He screamed louder, "Son of David, heal me." His friend exited the scene because he was too embarrassed. The blind man remained undeterred. "Jesus, Son of David, do you hear me? Please, please, please, heal me..."

Jesus heard him. He stopped and said, "Call him." Someone beside him said eagerly: "Get up. He's calling you." The man was overjoyed.

The Biblical narrative tells us, 'Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus' (Mark 10:49).

Jesus asked him, "What do you want from me?" "Lord, I want to see, again," Bartimaeus replied.

The story goes on to say that Jesus was moved with compassion and healed Bartimaeus. That was how Bartimaeus regained his sight.

I'd like to draw an analogy between Bartimaeus and my life. I'm born with sight, the ability to see and distinguish what is right or wrong for me. Somewhere, along the way I lost my sight and am blinded by my selfishness.

And then there comes the time where I can regain my sight, by shedding my old ways, throwing my cloak if you will, and regain my sight. But the hard part is shedding my old ways. I'm so blinded; I must admit, I'm so used to it. And now I think there's no way out. Even if there is, I don't seem to care. If I do seem to care, the hard part is shaking off my old habits.

But to regain my sight I must



shed things of the past.

I love the way Bartimaeus is undeterred by what people say, he's confident he will regain his sight. Note: Bartimaeus wasn't born blind. He lost his sight. I love the way he's portrayed throwing his cloak and rising up to see Jesus, to regain his sight.

I'm sure most of us would relate to Bartimaeus and my story too.

We are born perfectly well, we are given opportunities, we grow up healthy. Then, life hits us and we are blinded. So blind that we forget we've been given so much, even our health and sight and yet blind to the calls of our loved ones, our friends and family.

Spiritual authors term this as 'spiritual blindness'. I feel this is a state of total, complete blindness. For, if we can't see the graces we've been given and can't feel the love our family showers on us, aren't we totally blind?

If we can't hear the pleas of the needy and marginalised, are we really born with sight and may be deaf too?

These are questions I've asked



myself while I was trying to regain my 'sight'.

I'd like you to pause, think of what causes this blindness in you, ask yourself questions like I did. Now, when you're ready and confident to regain sight comes, the most important part: throwing your cloak to the ground, leaving your old ways and habits behind.

When you've finally done this, you will notice that you can see clearly, you will start being grateful for life, the gifts and opportunities you've been given and most importantly all the love of those around you.

This is the time to choose to be open and receptive. Do not lose hope and be willing to take risks and challenges even if those around you try to shush you. Don't be afraid to ask for help, talk to a friend if you need help. Be willing to reach out to people in need. When you're on this path, you'll notice you always had the gift of sight. You'd just forgotten that you possessed it. "Lord, I want to see again" and your sight will become a reality for you! □

THE GUARDIAN ANGEL OF GUAYAQUIL

At the tender age of 18, Paúl Cuadrado took on the responsibility of caring for an entire religious community infected with the coronavirus. This young man, while completing his year of voluntary service, became the 'guardian angel' of the Salesians of the 'San Juan Bosco' community in Guayaquil, most of them elderly. His work was instrumental in keeping most of them alive.

"The Salesians told me that thanks to me they were alive and I replied that it was God who put me there so that they would be OK. I was an instrument of God in that situation," says this young man from Riobamba, who at first did not want to go to Guayaquil because he did not like the heat of the Costa area; but after what happened, he understood the mission the Lord had prepared for him.

This life-changing experience began on 19 March that year, when everyone was confined to their rooms because one of them had symptoms related to the coronavirus. After nine days of isolation, the first problems arose. The one in charge of the kitchen did not come and so, they had no food.

Everyone was locked in their rooms, except Paul, who from that day on became the only one who moved around the house and had contact with the outside. The first thing he did was to prepare breakfast and distribute it to everyone.

During that crisis period, he continued to help with cooking the food, cleaning the house and even washing clothes, as there was no one else to take on those tasks.

After a few days, the test results

confirmed our suspicions: they had all been infected with the coronavirus. Thus began Paul's odyssey to

search for Anti-Covid-19 medication. "One morning I went out at 7am with all the protection I could get and had to wait for five hours to talk to someone. Even though I didn't get what the doctor had prescribed, because those drugs had run out, I was able to buy something to help the Salesians."

Time passed and the outlook was not encouraging. Paul's first emotional blow with the death of Fr Jorge Bustamante, followed a weeks later by a second, Fr Néstor Tapia, to whom Paul was very close and whom he accompanied until the final moments of his earthly life.

As he went from room to room, he asked God for strength not to collapse

It was hard for Paul, but he had no time to stop: he had to go on working for the other living Salesians. There were days when he slept three or four hours a night.



As he went from room to room, he asked God for the strength not to collapse. Then came Holy Week, which was a balm for the health of the elderly Salesians. Paul managed to get them to attend the Holy Week services with smartphones or TVs and this lifted their spirits. Such was the recovery of the various Salesians that on 24 May, feast of Mary Help of Christians, they were able to meet in the dining room, to have lunch together, albeit at the appropriate distance. The joy on their faces was evident, after two months of confinement. On 6 June, the community met again, albeit tinged with a moment of sadness and nostalgia for their brothers who were no longer there.

From that moment on, community life returned to normal, and everyone began to gather for times of prayer and the celebra-

tion of Mass. The most difficult times were behind them and everyone thanked Paul for being their protector.

After finishing his voluntary service, he realised that this experience had left its mark on his heart and it was decisive for the direction his life would take. "The determination about my vocation was not so strong when I arrived here. But in the wake of the pandemic, I became very attached to the community. My fears and doubts melted away when I began to feel that they were my family and I made the decision to follow in their footsteps."

Shortly after that experience he began following in Don Bosco's footsteps. He started his aspirantate and was very happy because this call from God would allow him to serve others, just as he did in Guayaquil. □



Paul and a group of friends in Guayaquil (Ecuador)

Witnesses in & for Our Times



ST SIMON de ROJAS (September 28)

Ian Pinto, sdb

Marian Saint

Twice in the last century the Church has celebrated a Marian year. Possibly these were the only two times that such an event has occurred in the Church calendar. A Marian year is simply a dedication of a year to the honour and devotion of the Blessed Virgin Mary. You might remember that the last year, 2021 was dedicated to St. Joseph. Similarly, there have been years like that dedicated to Mary.

The first Marian year was announced by Pope Pius XII. He wanted the year 1954 to be celebrated as a Marian year as it marked the completion of a century since the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The year was spiced with initiatives that promoted Marian devotion and knowledge about Mary particularly, the field of Mariology - that branch of theology that deals with Mary and her role in the economy of salvation. Besides, there were cultural events and social gatherings organized. The Pope instituted the feast of the Queenship of Mary on October 11 as a crowning celebration during the Marian



year.

The second Marian year was declared by Pope John Paul II and ran from June 1987 to August 1988. In keeping with the celebration, the Pope issued an encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater* which is the largest Marian encyclical ever written! In it, he presents the status of Marian belief and study up to the 21st century. As in the

previous Marian year, a number of activities promoting Marian devotion were organized. One of the special things that happened during this year was the canonization of a great devotee of the Blessed Virgin: St. Simon de Rojas. It was fitting that Simon be canonized a saint during the Marian year because of his tender love and contagious devotion to the Blessed Virgin. Legend has it that the first words he spoke as a baby were "Ave Maria!"

Simon came from a deeply religious family in Valladolid, Spain. He was born on October 28, 1552 to Gregorio and Constanza. His parents were staunch devotees of the Blessed Virgin. In the biography of the saint published by the Vatican, it is written that looking at the parents of Simon, it isn't surprising that his first words were "Ave Maria" and not "mama" or "papa." The biography says, "The veneration that she (Constanza) and her husband Gregorio constantly gave to Mary, makes it easily understandable why the first words that Simon, who had been a slow learner and stuttered, said at the age of fourteen months, were 'Ave, Maria'. He was only repeating the prayer so frequently recited by his parents."

Simon inherited a deep love and devotion to Mary from his parents but he didn't remain with the faith he inherited; he made efforts to personalize his experience and strengthen his personal devotion to the Mother of God. It was his greatest joy to visit Marian shrines and to spend time there praying to Mary and with Mary. He strove to imitate her virtues and to sing her praises.

From Pious living to Religious Life

Simon came from fertile and pious ground. The seed of his vocation was nurtured well within his family. As a young boy, he felt called to live a life of total commitment and dedication to the love and mercy of God. Mary, played a crucial role in his life right from his youngest days. As mentioned earlier, he suffered from a speech impediment as an infant. But through the instrumentality of the Virgin Mary, he was able to speak well and as if to acknowledge the mediatrix of the grace, his first words were an exclamation at once, of praise and of thanksgiving to the Blessed Virgin.

At the tender age of 12, he left home to join the monastery of the Trinitarian order in his hometown of Valladolid. There he spent his teenage years, growing in faith as he grew in maturity. When he reached the acceptable age, he professed to be a Trinitarian monk and began his preparations for the priesthood. Given his intellectual acumen, his superiors found it suitable to task him with the teaching of philosophy and theology to young brothers who were on the journey to religious priesthood. His teaching had a distinctive Marian quality. He found ways and means to reference Mary in the subjects he taught and to draw on examples from the life and devotion of the Blessed Virgin to make a point or to create an impression on the young minds he was shaping.

Such was his fascination with the Virgin Mary that he grew convinced that the only way for

a person to dedicate themselves totally to God was by becoming her slave. St. Louis de Montfort, who would come a century later and write perhaps one of the greatest Marian treatises of all time, *True Devotion to Mary*, would develop this idea of being a slave of Mary. For Simon, faith in God the Father necessitated devotion to Mary, the Mother of His Son. He took for his motto: *Totus Tuus* which is Latin for "totally yours." Pope John Paul II would make this his personal motto too.

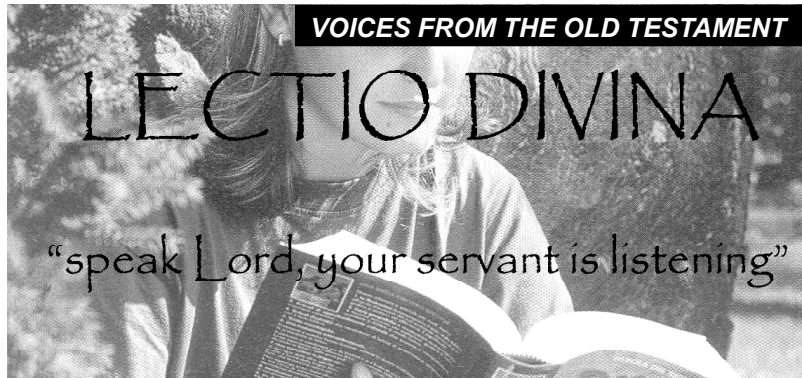
Simon went on to found a congregation that he christened the Congregation of the Slaves of the Sweet name of Mary, established to bring about the greater glory of the Trinity, in praise of the Virgin through the service of the poor. Curiously, this wasn't a congregation for religious men or women. He established it for ordinary believers. Persons from every class were welcomed. The members included the King of Spain and his children, on one hand, and simple townfolk on the other.

He was chosen to the personal confessor of the Queen. Once in 1611, she became critically ill during childbirth and went into a coma. Her husband, King Philip III feared for her life and was saddened that she would not be able to make peace with God before she passed. Nevertheless, Fr. Simon was called. He came to her bedside and greeted her with the words, "Ave Maria, Señora" (meaning, Hail Mary, my lady), she is said to have immediately responded to him, "Gratia plena, Padre Rojas (full of grace, Father Rojas). The saint was then able to

administer the last sacrament to her and help her finish her earthly life with peace and the grace of God. The King asked him to be the tutor to his children which he did on the condition he would be allowed to carry on his work for the poor. The King obliged. His congregation, the Trinitarians, also appointed him at various times to important posts of leadership. These he took up and carried out with great dedication, always with a heart for the poor and a thrust toward Marian piety.

Such was his legacy that he came to be known as Father Ave Maria. Every picture he commissioned of the Blessed Virgin had the inscription 'Ave Maria.' He had rosaries made and distributed across Spain and beyond to promote devotion to the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. He used his influence at the Royal Court to have the words 'Ave Maria' painted on the facade of the palace in gold. His efforts were instrumental for the Church to recognize and declare the feast of the Holy Name of Mary (September 12).

By the time he passed, Simon was hailed as a saint. His death was celebrated in a manner similar to his canonization centuries later. He is remembered fondly as one of the greatest contemplatives of his time! His work, *The Greatness of Prayer* is a brilliant guide to eager persons on the path of contemplation. He stands out as a true devotee of Mary and a sincere lover of the poor. His example ought to inspire each of us to learn to love Mary as a Mother and the poor as our very own brothers and sisters. □



THE LORD'S WAYS

(Is 55:6-9)

by Carlo Broccardo

The prophet Isaiah almost pleads with us: the Lord is merciful, take advantage of it! Seek him and you will find him; he is not far away; you do not have to "steal" his mercy, but only receive it as a gift

We need to know that on Sundays in ordinary time (i.e., excluding Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter) the first reading is chosen according to the

Gospel passage; in this liturgical year, for example, from Sunday to Sunday we read some passages from the Gospel according to Matthew and, as the first reading,



a text from the Old Testament to serve as an outline or perhaps, it is better to say an introduction.

On Sunday 24 September, there will be the famous parable of the labourers called to work a day's work; some start work early in the morning, others at nine o'clock, some at noon and some even at five in the after-noon. In the end, they all get the same wage: one salary. The first ones complain, because they hoped for more, and the master replies to one of them: "Can't I do what I want with what is mine? Or are you envious because I am good?" Jesus concludes the parable with a teaching: "So the last will be first and the first last" (Mt 20:15-16).

It is a parable of mercy, which tells us how great is God's love for us; God is good: he does not treat us according to our merits, but - says the letter to the Ephesians - "according to the riches of his grace" (Eph 1:7). He gives us much more than we deserve, indeed more, than we even dare to hope for. And this is the message of the prophet Isaiah's oracle (55:69) that has been paired with it as the first reading for Sunday and which we are going to meditate on today.

Let us start at the end, when the prophet uses an image to tell of the abysmal distance between our thoughts and God's, between his ways (i.e., his way of acting) and ours. Who can measure the distance that separates earth from heaven? Let us put ourselves in the shoes of a man who lives hundreds of years before Christ and imagines the firmament as a sheet of metal marking the boundary between God's world and the world of men; who can reach that high? Who can touch it even with their fingertips?

Heaven is higher than the highest mountains; it is so high that no one can reach it.

That is how God's thoughts are, his reasoning, his way of seeing, judging, loving: he is so far removed from us, that we never fully understand him. We, for example, would put a proportional rule: whoever works harder is entitled to a greater reward; God, on the other hand, reasons with the measure of gratuitousness: he gives all of himself to all. We judge with the logic of 'he who breaks pays'; God, on the other hand, is one who 'widely forgives' - as Isaiah says.

In ancient Greece, there was the myth of Prometheus, the one who dared to challenge the gods: he secretly climbed to the top of Mount Olympus and stole fire from them, hiding it inside a reed. The gods in fact - this is how the myth imagines it in one of the many versions in which it has come down to us - were jealous of their own things, they did not want to share them with men. On the contrary, Isaiah almost begs us: the Lord is merciful, take advantage of it! Do not miss the opportunity; seek him and you will find him; he is not far away; you must not 'steal' his mercy, but only receive it as a gift. A document of the Second Vatican Council, the **Dei Verbum** (1965), says that he acts *ex abundantia caritatis suae*; that is, his love for us is so great that it overflows and becomes a cascade of mercy. All we have to do is open our hands and collect, quench our thirst, wash us, restore our vigour.

It may seem impossible to us; it may seem too much. Yet God is like this, says Isaiah: his love for us is greater than we can imagine. □

Quiet Spaces

THE DIFFICULT SCIENCE OF LOVE

Pope Francis' homily (edited) at Domus Sanctae Marthae on the occasion of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Friday, June 7, 2013

Ezk 34:11-16, Lk 15:3-7

The science of love has two supports: closeness and tender-ness. And Jesus knows this beautiful science well," Pope Francis said this morning, Friday, June 7, when he celebrated Mass on the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the chapel of St. Martha's Guest House.

Referring to the readings for the day – taken from the book of the prophet Ezekiel (34:11-16), Paul's letter to the Romans (5:5-11), and the Gospel of Luke (5:3-7) – the pope described the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus as the "feast of love." Jesus "wanted to show us his heart, that heart which loved so much. That's why we commemorate it today. God's love. God has loved us, loved so much. I'm thinking about what St. Ignatius said to us, to us. He gave two criteria for love. First, love shows more in doing than in speaking. Second, love lies more in giving than in receiving."

These are the two criteria about which "Paul tells us in the second reading: 'While we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.' Jesus loved us not by speaking but by doing, by his life. And he gave to us, gave to us without receiving anything from us. These two criteria are like the supporting pillars of true love: doing and giving yourself." Explaining the meaning of these two criteria, the Holy Father noted that Jesus' self-giving is depicted well in the story of the Good Samaritan. "Today," he said, "the liturgy shows us, God's love in the figure of the shepherd. The responsorial psalm we recited was the beautiful Psalm 22 [23]: The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord also shows himself to his people as a shepherd."

But, asked the pope, "in what way is the Lord a shepherd? - And he explained: "The Lord tells us so many things, but I will only dwell on two of them. The first comes in the book of the prophet Ezekiel: I myself will search for my sheep, and will look them over. Looking them over means that he knows each one of them, by name. Look over. And Jesus tells us the same thing: I know my sheep. Know each one by name. That's how God knows us. He doesn't know us as a group, but one by one. Because," the bishop of Rome continued, "love isn't abstract or a general love for all. It's love for each one. That's how God loves us."

All this translates into closeness: "God," the pope noted, "has come close to us. Let us remember that beautiful passage from Deuteronomy, that loving reproach: What

people have had a God so close to them as you?" A God "who comes close through love," he added. "And walks with his people. And that walking with us goes to unimaginable lengths: never would we have thought that the Lord himself would become one of us and walk with us, and stay with us, remain in his church, remain in the Eucharist, remain in his words, remain with the poor, remain with us on the journey. That's closeness. The shepherd close to his flock, to his sheep, whom he knows one by one."

Then turning to the other aspect of God's love, the pope noted that both "the prophet Ezekiel and the gospel speak of it: I will go and seek my lost sheep and bring the one who has strayed back to the sheepfold. I will bind up the injured and cure the sick, I will care for the fat and strong, I will feed them with justice, tender-ness. The Lord is familiar with that beautiful science of tenderness. God's tenderness: he doesn't love us only in words; he comes close to us, and by being close to us he gives us his love with all possible tenderness." So closeness and tenderness are "the Lord's two ways of loving, who comes close to us and gives us all his love, even in the littlest things with tenderness." But it's "a strong love. Close-ness and tenderness enable us to see the strength of God's love."

"And as for our love – doesn't the Lord tell us: Love as I have loved you? – it too must come close to our neighbour and be tender like that of the Good Samaritan, or like the love the church shows us in the gospel today," added the pope. But how can we give back to the Lord "so many lovely things, that closeness, that tenderness?" Of course, said the pope, "we may say: by loving him, coming close to him, being tender with him. Yes, that's true, but it isn't the most important thing. It may sound like heresy but it's the greatest truth: more difficult than loving God is letting ourselves be loved by him. And that's the way to give back all that love to him: to open our hearts and let ourselves be loved. Let him come close to us, and feel him to be close. Let him be tender and caress us." That, he concluded, "is so difficult: allowing our-selves to be loved by him. And perhaps that's what we should ask for today in this Mass: Lord, I want to love you but teach me the difficult science, the difficult habit of letting myself be loved by you, of feeling you close and feeling your tenderness." □



THE WEDDING DRESS

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

The morning was clear, crisp and transparent like a clear crystal. On a hedge a large clump of dog roses was a clear, almost luminous patch. On the high branches of an aspen tree, swallows sang.

"I can give up anything you want, but not this," said Maryann, looking at the leaves of the poplar quivering in the wind. Mathilda laughed, softly.

"Oh, sorry! So many boys, our age, are struggling, aren't they?"

"So what? I won't get married unless I have my white dress with a train, veil and orange blossoms. I've always dreamed of that."

"I dreamed of a man who would love me," Matilda said without laughing anymore; her little brown face had become sad; her little mouth had a bitter crease.

"Oh!" said Maryann. "You haven't forgotten him yet?"

"No."

It had been a sad story: Matilda



had loved someone very much, but then she had been let down. Now she believed that the joy of loving and being loved no longer existed for her. And her heart ached.

Maryann approached her, endearing and affectionate.

"Oh, come off it! All men are not the same. Look at Albert."

Albert was Maryann's boyfriend: a handsome boy, who was now in Iraq, fighting. He had left immediately and was now on the front line, near the fiery desert, but he was always writing to her, and when he returned, they would be married.

"And does Albert know you want a white dress?"

"Oh, he knows."

"And what does he say?"

"He says I'm right, that a woman going to be married must be dressed like that."

"So ...?"

Then everything was straightforward and Matilda didn't laugh either.

Then came winter, and all that remained of the dog roses were bare branches and reddish berries. Then the berries disappeared too, and the small kitchen garden behind Maryann's house turned barren and deserted. On the poplar the swallows no longer sang. Sometimes there was, on the tree, only the rapid fluttering of the wings of a lost sparrow whose feathers were ruffled by the wind.

Maryann had volunteered for the "Red Cross" and went to the 'Military Hospital' in her hometown, where soldiers who had received initial summary treatment at a field hospital around Baghdad or Kabul in Afghanistan were admitted once a week. The first few days had been tough. Those dull faces, that continuous suffering made his heart ache. But then, she felt no better being there.

Early one morning, when Maryann arrived, she found a great commotion: a plane packed with wounded people had just arrived.

"From where?"

"From Iraq."

Her heart gave a thud.

"From Iraq?"

"Yes."

An elderly lady passed by, a little plump.

"Oh, miss!" said Maryann quickly, quickly!

In the bright corridor, doctors and nurses were rushing about: a nurse came out of one door and shot into another.

Maryann hurried up the staircase at the bottom and reached her ward in an instant.

"There are severely injured people," Matty, who was her ward mate, told her.

"They've put them in room number nine."

"Shall we go?"

"Let's go."

But Maryann's legs weren't holding up well enough and that made Matty angry.

"Why are you so worked about because the wounded have arrived? What kind of a nurse are you?"

"Good morning, Miss," a big

blond boy walking on crutches said smilingly. His voice was cheerful and clear. It had been so bad, they all thought he would not make it. Instead, here he was taking his first steps.

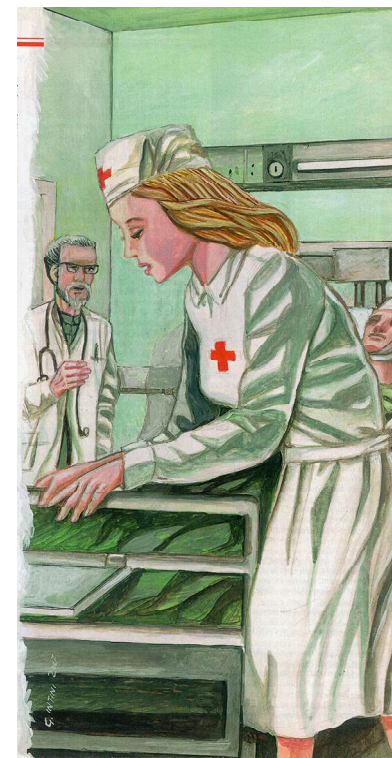
"Good morning," she replied. But this time Maryann did not stop as she was wont to do. She walked into the room and said to Matty:

"I'm really scared, Matty."

"Of what?" quipped the other slowly.

"I don't know."

Over there, at the bed by the window, was the head doctor. He was serious, and his stubble was pointed, black and white, his nervous hand twitched. Maryann



approached him slowly, very slowly. Whenever there were new wounded, she thought of Albert fighting "over there," of Albert who was to return in the spring. Now it was winter, it was cold and spring was far away. She stopped at the end of the bed. It seemed that the doctor hadn't noticed her. Instead, he must have seen her because he said: "Lift the sheet, please, miss, and hold the wounded man's arm a little higher, like this."

The wounded man had his head and face covered by bandages: his lips were swollen and burning, his eyes closed. He was breathing badly, a heavy, laboured breath. The arm that the girl had lifted was burning as if it were glowing embers. The doctor looked, listened, tapped, bent, examined, and then walked over to another cot, and Maryann followed behind him, meekly. But as she approached, she heard a voice, a voice that came from far away and spoke her name: "Maryann!"

She turned whiter than her uniform and had to lean on the rail of the bed to keep from falling.

"Albert," articulated the wounded man with effort.

"Is that you, Albert?"

But she thought she was dreaming, a bad dream from which she would soon awaken.

"I was badly bruised," said Albert, reaching a hand out from beneath the blanket. "But since you're here, I'll soon get better! I can feel it."

But no, he wouldn't get well soon: on the contrary, he grew worse every day. Maryann was always alert, ready, attentive, but

it seemed as if the infection had taken hold of him. Albert got worse. His mind was clear, and those big black eyes fixed themselves in Maryann's blue eyes that tried, and failed, to smile.

"Maryann," said Albert, one evening, "I would like to ask you something."

"Tell me."

"I would like to marry you."

The young lady looked at him frightened. Was it delirium, perhaps? And, then, she pleaded with all her heart, desperately, for the Lord to help her.

She smiled.

"Oh, Albert!"

"Don't you want to?" He took her hand.

"Why don't you want to, Maryann?"

Maryann desperately wanted to cry, but said:

"I don't have the wedding dress; you know, the white one with the long train, the veil and the orange blossoms. I can only get married in that."

"Then, you don't want to?" insisted Albert. "You don't want to, because you don't love me!"

"Oh, Albert!"

She repeated. And she could say no more. But she met his eyes looking at her, and she read in those eyes a great sorrow. Then she said, quickly.

"Why, do you say that I don't love you?"

"Because if you loved me, you would say yes."

"Then, I'll say yes, Albert."

"And what about the wedding dress?"

"This," she said, pointing to her uniform.

"Darling!"

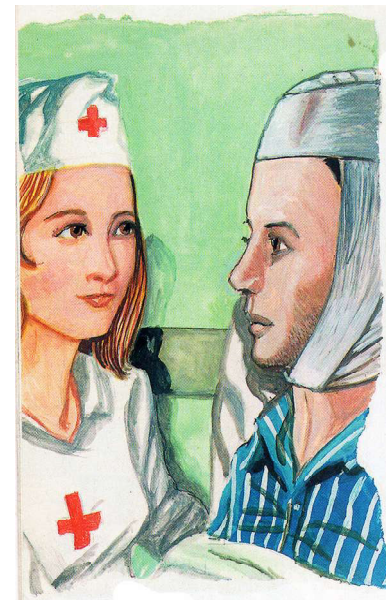
No words sounded sweeter to her, but no sacrifice seemed more painful.

"You'll have to ask permission," said the young lady in a soft, nervous voice.

"Of course, I will."

Maryann thought she would find it difficult, but no, she found everyone ready to help her, to smooth the way. And she did not think that this could also be because Albert was sick, so sick that....

That morning the room took on a new, festive look. There was a large bouquet of flowers on the table and all the war veterans tried to sit up in bed, to watch the ceremony. The ceremony with the priest would be in half an hour, but Maryann was already there. Everyone whispered something to her and she smiled.



But her eyes were full of tears.

Maryann's father asked the head doctor if Albert would recover, and the doctor said there was, yes, a thread of hope.

A thread! What if that thread broke? No, no: that was not possible. She knew that the Lord would help her. She had prayed to Him so fervently!

"How are you, Albert?"

"Fine," he said. "I am fine now. Come here, Maryann."

The young lady came close to him. Her pale face was framed by her beautiful blond hair that fell down over her white dress, which had a red cross on her chest.

"If the Lord blesses our union, I cannot die, Maryann," he said softly, his voice moved.

"Ah!" She felt too that it was so, that it "had" to be so. It seemed to her that Albert's recovery had become a sure and certain thing, and she explained why Albert had wanted their marriage.

Albert said:

"You never looked more beautiful, Maryann! If you had had your dress with the train, the veil, the flowers, you would not have looked more beautiful."

There: the renunciation had cost Maryann more than Albert could have imagined. And Albert did not know that even this renunciation had been offered as a flower on the altar of love, because every girl dreams of her white wedding dress, as something white and light, which has in its folds the enchantment of youth and the offering of a heart in love: two precious gifts, the only ones that can make life truly beautiful. □

FIORETTI OF DON BOSCO - 44

by Michele Molineris

204. Reserved for mothers (1872)

In 1930 Antonio Bruno died in Paisandú (Paraguay) at the ripe old age of 84. Sixty of these he had spent as a coadjutor in the Salesian Congregation, founded by Don Bosco. He was born in Rubiana (Turin), in the Susa Valley, to Giuseppe and Tabone Maria on 18 August 1845. His job was that of a cook and he did it so well and so willingly that neither he nor the others ever tired of doing it. He had been a pupil at Valdocco while Don Bosco was still living and with him, he had been the protagonist of some events that cannot be explained except by the extraordinary intervention of the Lord. Listen to some of them.

In June 1872 he was ill in the Valdocco Oratory infirmary. He had not taken any food for a week and the doctor had not yet been able to define the illness he was suffering from. Having heard about it, Don Bosco came by late one evening to see him. He exchanged a few compliments with the sick man, encouraged him to hope, blessed him and finally ordered him to get up with the others the next morning.

Astonished Antonio replied that he could not have done it even if he had wanted to, because he was in such bad shape that his legs could hardly bear him up. Don Bosco listened with satisfaction to this apology, but he did not give in and repeated to him, this time in a tone that did not admit of reply: "Tomorrow you will get up and go for a walk with the others outside the city."

Antonio had no choice but to obey; in fact, the next day he too got up with his companions and went for a walk with them. The destination was the Tesoriera, a locality towards Rivoli, a good stretch of road beyond the city walls. He went, came back and felt no harm whatsoever. On the contrary, he felt improved and with an appetite that he could hardly satisfy with the meagre portions served at the Oratory table.

Antonio had two brothers who stayed at home with their mother. One fine day, one of them decided to go to France to seek his fortune. While he was carrying out the paperwork for his expatriation, he took advantage of a break to take leave of Antonio. He went to visit him at Valdocco, and Antonio took the opportunity to introduce him to Don Bosco. It took no more than that for him to be told once again to renounce that intention and to stay in Italy near his mother.

He did not want to know and left, despite Antonio trying in every way to make him understand that Don Bosco had not spoken to him at random, but with good reason. Unfortunately, a month had not yet passed when the news of his death arrived unexpectedly from France. Don Bosco had foreseen it.

His brother, who had stayed at home with his mother, was to go a soldier in 1872 and Antonio was to leave the Oratory.

He turned for advice to Don Bosco. This time too Don Bosco was no less peremptory: "Put your heart in peace and be calm; your brother will not be called to arms."

In the meantime, called to the draft, the brother left Rubiana with his conscripted comrades the day

before, and walked all night to reach the Susa district in good time. Along the way, no one knows how, he began to feel discomfort in one of his eyes, which then swelled, for no apparent reason, in such an unthinkable way that his entire face was deformed. He thus presented himself deformed at the barracks and it was enough for him to be unexpectedly declared unfit for service by the doctors.

On the way back, in spite of his eye, he was, and it was easy to tell, the most cheerful of the brigade. So cheerful that he did not even notice that the swelling was receding, gradually returning him to his natural features, momentarily overwhelmed by the sudden illness. He only realised this in Rubiana, when his eye had already returned to normal, making those who read the district's response incredulous. Conclusion, he did not go as a soldier and Antonio remained at Valdocco: just as Don Bosco had pronounced.

With these conditions in mind, it would seem natural to anyone that Antonio, asked a few years later by Don Bosco if he felt like signing up for the second missionary expedition, would declare himself willing to make any detachment. But this was not the case. At Don Bosco's request, he put his mother ahead of him again, playing on the sorrow she would have felt at knowing he was destined for a place so far away.

Don Bosco then said in his usual tone, without preamble: "You will tell your mother that if she agrees to your departure; after her death she will go straight to heaven... and you will live a long time."

So it was that Antonio Bruno left with the second expedition on 7 November 1876, bound for Buenos

Aires. In 1884 he went to Montevideo where he worked as a cook until his death. One day he saw his mother smiling at him amidst a glittering light. He wanted to know the explanation.

"I am going to heaven," she answered him happily and then disappeared. A few days later Anthony received a telegram from Italy announcing his mother's death. She had made the sacrifice of her son and God was rewarding her with a peaceful death and a reward without an anteroom (from M.B., X, 23).

205. Don Bosco the exorcist (1872)

Don Bosco was considered by all to be a great servant of God, a saint.

In 1872 at Mathi Torinese there was a certain Maria Sopetti, who was suffering from diabolic harassment. Archbishop Mgr Gastaldi was informed of this and suggested that Don Bosco bless her. The poor girl came to Turin on 30 November, and around 9.30am entered Don Bosco's antechamber. She waited until 10.30, looking grim, without uttering a word.

When it was her turn, she got up to go into the room to be blessed, but at every step she tried to take, she seemed to be repelled by an invisible hand; then she began to cry out violently, in an angry tone of protest, shaking her head and shaking her whole person, and: "No! no!" she continued to shout more than a hundred times.

Finally, she came in and with tremendous efforts he managed to get her to kneel down, while Don Ber- to, wanting to know if it was a real possession, took Don Bosco aside and said in his ear, softly, in a barely intelligible way: "Shall I go to the sacristy to get my surplice and stole?"

He had hardly finished these words when the poor girl gave a desperate cry, shouting: - No! no!

Don Bosco gave her the blessing, and in the meantime, she put her hands to her ears so as not to hear, and began to make a thousand maniacal actions and a thousand grimaces, each one stranger than the last, because she felt suffocated; until, as if all huddled together, she threw herself face down on the ground to hide, always continuing to cry out: - No! no! *diau! diau!* (devil! devil!) *cuntacc...*

Then she began to grunt like a pig and meow like a cat; she felt suffocated by the evil spirit. With incredible efforts, they managed to get her to kiss the medal, and when the blessing was over, she immediately calmed down.

When questioned, she said that for three years she had been so tormented that, every fortnight, if she did not go to the parish priest for a blessing, she felt suffocated; and "the mere presence of a priest," she said, "was enough, even without seeing him, to excite vexation... I cannot pray. When someone dies, even without knowing it, I almost feel suffocated. But these torments I feel now in his presence and because of his blessing, I do not find them so violent in the presence of other priests; only when I want to go to confession. And, if I do not say these words and do not make the gestures I have made so far, although involuntarily, I feel suffocated...." As soon as she came out of the room, she was seemed rather quiet. Don Bosco assured her that, on his way to Lanzo, he would come to see her at Mathi, or at least ask for news of her. He told her to kiss Mary Help of Christians' medal often and recite the *Hail Mary*,

that the Lord was giving her with such vexations as a means for her to make to gain many merits.

This poor woman continued to come from time to time to be blessed, and on 2 January 1883 she was almost entirely free from the serious tribulation. She no longer felt, at least externally, any repugnance or difficulty in presenting herself to Don Bosco and receiving a blessing from him. Thus narrated Fr Berto who witnessed it (M.B., X, 28).

206. Don Bosco said two terrible words to me (1872)

During Don Bosco's brief stay in Genoa in 1872 he made and received several visits. Among others Canon Ampugnani, who was then living at Marassi and had helped him in the purchase of the college at Alassio, came to visit him. He came to apologise for not having wanted to give it to Don Bosco at first as had been agreed in secret pacts, since he was merely a trustee buyer.

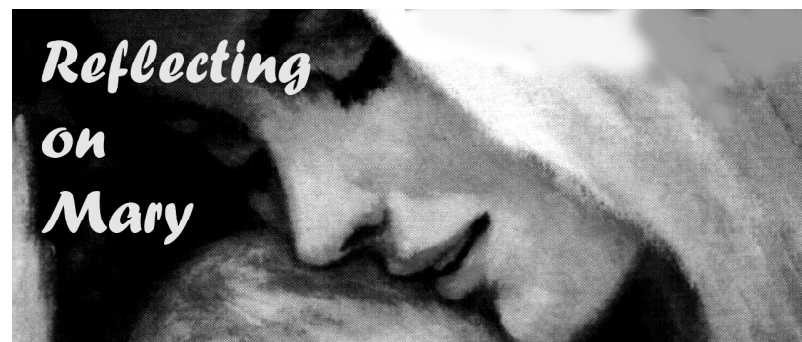
Don Bosco, changing the subject, asked him: "And now what do you do?" "Me?... nothing! I'm resting!"

"How? You're resting? You who are healthy, who are still young?"

"I did a lot of work worked in America and now I'm resting."

"And don't you know that the priest's place of rest is paradise? And that we will give God a very strict account of not having worked and of the time lost?"

The Canon was so mortified by those words that he did not know which way to turn to go out; and, the next day, he returned to the Oratory, to tell Fr Albera to make allow him to play, to make music, to preach: "Why," he exclaimed, "Don Bosco said some terrible words to me!" (M.B., X, 367). □



MOTHER OF HOPE

by Silvio Roggia

"Thou who art the mother of hope, watch over our path and over us" these were words from a song that young people used to sing.

Today we want to steal the secret of hope from Mary; how wonderful if we were men and women overflowing with hope!

Hope: it is a word that fills us with nostalgia; perhaps we do not always know how to give it precise content, but we all miss it, we feel we always have a very short supply of it.

It is good then to go altogether to Mary, as if we were there, literally, to Nazareth, knocking on the door of that poor house of Mary. She opens to us. Without saying anything, let her with her gaze, with her motherly caress, reopens in our weary hearts the paths of hope.

Mary takes us by the hand and leads us to the wellsprings of hope through three moments of her history. Three pictures of Mary's existence, as a fountain of hope. Dante also greeted her this way: "You are among us, mortals a fount of living hope." But let us leave the Divine Comedy alone and go to the deeper vein of this fresh water, hidden in the Gospel.

At Nazareth

Hope does not enter the scene timidly but last of all, with uncertain steps (as our fragile hopes usually do). On the contrary, it is the first word; it is a word that comes from above: it is a command! We repeat it over and over again but perhaps habit prevents us from grasping its unprecedented power. *Caire!* This is how Luke records it in his gospel. *Caire*, which we translate as *Ave*, *Ave O Mary*. In that '*Ave*' there is much more than a greeting of circumstance. It is an imperative that precisely means: Rejoice! You must rejoice! It is not a casual invitation, just another way for the angel Gabriel to strike up a conversation. It is a long-prepared imperative of the Trinity to mankind, with deep traces already in the Old Testament: "Rejoice, rejoice greatly daughter of Zion, do not let your arms fall, burst out in shouts of joy and gladness; for behold, your Lord comes into your midst." These are words of the prophets that we shall hear again in the Advent season. But in Nazareth it is no longer a time for prophecy: we are within the fullness of time, we are at the fulfilment of

all expectation: "rejoice, full of grace, for the Lord is with you!"

We are faced with the mystery of the Incarnation; the point that pivots the entire history of the universe, in space and time.

In this event, that is, the Incarnation event because it is a fact, not a figure of speech - in this event heaven and earth touch each other. The Result: hope invades us. It is the big-bang, the explosion of hope: rejoice!

Mary in all likelihood could not immediately gauge the enormous salvific significance of what was happening. The first very human and therefore blessed reaction was one of fear. So much so that the angel immediately took care to reassure her: "Fear not, you have found favour with God." But we need only run ahead a few lines in Luke's Gospel and we find Mary who, as soon as she arrives at Elizabeth's house, can no longer hold back the river of hope that floods her, and in her exultation, she sings the universal manifesto of hope, which is the Magnificat: "From generation to generation his mercy is stretched out over those who fear him. He has unfolded the power of his arm, he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, he has lifted up the humble as he promised to our fathers, to Abraham and his descendants for ever." It is all exultation and exaltation, that is, an irrepressible dance that starts from the heart. Everyone dances: even the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy.

God has truly entered our history. He is here. He is with us. Who can ever stop us? St Paul says it with great force: "If God is for us, who will be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him

for us all, how will He not give us all things together with Him, Who, then shall separate us from the love of Christ? Perhaps tribulation, anguish, hunger, nakedness, danger, the sword? But in all these things we are more than conquerors by virtue of him who loved us" (Rom 8).

Perhaps we want to get too much out of that initial **CAIRE**, that "rejoice Mary" uttered by Gabriel. But on closer inspection, no matter how hard we try we will always end up with the opposite exaggeration: not too much, but too little, because we are unable to truly realise what the event of God clothing Himself in my flesh through the womb of a woman means for human history and for my personal life, just as each of us was born.

It means that if this flesh, from nails to hair, He has taken it upon Himself, He who is God, then this flesh is precisely the right way for me to become like Him! To become like Him! This is not blasphemy, nor is it heresy. To become God: this is my destiny written in the Incarnation. "God became man so that man might become God," words of St Athanasius, great father of the Church.

One is happily shocked by this revelation written in the fact of the Incarnation. I therefore, with this flesh of mine in all its weakness, can and must become part of God's family. The Trinity is waiting for me at his table. In my own right: as a son!

It means that whatever happens to my life on earth I am always safe, because the destination of existence, my destiny, is already guarded by God, it is in my most trustworthy hands that it exists; it is forever, in eternity: those same hands that created me and will ne-

ver let me fall, as long as I live (it always depends on my freedom: the terrible power of human freedom!).

I can be rich or be poor, guaranteed three citizenships and twenty passports, or a refugee that everyone rejects: these are all details that in themselves do not affect my final destiny, that which lasts for eternity! Very important details only because through them, that is, through everyday life, I sign my yes or my no to this boundlessly beautiful heaven that God wants to give me for home forever.

The Incarnation: here is a source of hope to which Mary introduces us. And it must be said that there is hope here. There is much more than I can draw on. But if this is so, why is our life, even practising Christian life, so often short of breath? Do we stop, do we complain, and are we often generous in our contribution so that the valley of tears continues to be abundantly watered?

At Cana of Galilee

Mary returns to take us by the hand and from Nazareth she takes us to a village not far away: to Cana in Galilee, to the wedding feast (what is more representative of human hope than a wedding feast?), where, however, at the most beautiful moment, the wine is missing; precisely the wine, the fuel of every festive gathering. It would be like saying that hope dies in the bud here. We get off to a bad start in this wedding.

The episode at Cana, is it not a fact that we feel in some ways closer to us, more everyday than the great mystery of the Incarnation?!

We too often run out of wine; even with all our skill and pruden-

ce in drawing up budgets that should guarantee us from sudden failures.... Life always has some unwanted surprise in store for us. And hope? Sometimes there just isn't any!

What do we do? Mary does not lose heart. She doesn't pretend in any way, because she is invited anyway and the bride and groom are the ones who get the cold shoulder. She knows that the inexhaustible source of all hope is there, sitting next to her. She is not even afraid to upset his agenda, she anticipates "his hour": "They have no more wine," "My hour has not yet come," "Do whatever he tells you": hope wins. Perhaps Jesus was thinking of this episode when he said to his disciples: "Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you, for he who asks obtains, he who seeks finds, to him who knocks it will be opened."

Mary teaches us to do just that. Hope is not won at a lottery game on some lucky day. It is prayer that opens the way for us along with our daily bread, day after day. He who learns to make prayer the breath of his life no longer loses hope indeed he will have hope to give to all those he approaches. Not because obstacles and difficulties are erased in prayer, but because one learns to read every fact as an opportunity to be blessed for our growth in the capacity to love, even when it makes us suffer. We learn to no longer play with God as if He were a coin-operated machine for our whims, but to fulfil Him in ourselves, because in the loving acceptance of His will there is a peace that is worth more than anything else we could wish for. Teilhard de Chardin to a person he was

FR KAROL MANIK

By Josef Tomsik



following spiritually, wrote this way: "Accept what happens (whatever happens) as if you were receiving a host. When we have acted in the best possible way, everything that happens is adorable." And this is the last word of human wisdom and holiness."

Mary sees that when we come to these key moments, to the hope that is not extinguished even in sorrow, then our breathing becomes a little laboured; we become more attached to the valley of tears than enraptured by the horizon of heaven before us.

Mary, as a good mother, then accompanies us to the third source of hope that she has already prepared for us.

At Calvary

It stands on a hill, just outside Jerusalem. A bare hill like a skull, so much so that they call it that in Hebrew: Golgotha, place of the skull. In the middle is planted a cross. Above it her son is dying as a slave, amid unspeakable suffering. Under the cross STABAT MATER. There she is. Standing.

The prayers of Christians down the centuries have done nothing but offer our companionship to this mother pierced by grief: 'Holy Mother, you let the wounds of the Lord be imprinted on my heart. There are no words of consolation. There is silence.

Where has hope gone?

If there were not this tragic, yet central scene of Golgotha, we would really have reason to ask: where does hope end? For it is here that the true value of all hope is measured, in the crucible of sorrow. If Mary had stopped earlier, she could not have been an inexhaustible source for us. Instead, we

now bless her without end, because she is full of Grace, because at Cana she teaches us that by doing what He says one is always victorious in what God wants, but above all because STABAT MATER.

The cross seems to be the end of all hope. Instead, it is the end of all human reason. There is no more reasonable solution to be adopted when you are in agony, nailed to a wood. Everything from the rooftops down seems inexorably lost. Instead, if you have the courage to STAY, to remain anchored to that Jesus at all costs, like and with Mary, then the cross becomes the greatest moment of salvation, it becomes the fullness of love, it becomes the "unique hope," as Christians have always hailed it.

In the hours of Golgotha, one does not see, one does not understand.... One stands there, because one surrenders oneself with a faith and a love that is stripped bare, naked, transparent... but in the mystery of God's elusive love, this becomes the most fruitful moment, it becomes the seed that, by dying, multiplies its fruit a hundredfold. Can we deny it? Isn't that exactly what happened with the cross of Jesus? What changed history? Precisely that cross "scandal to the Jews, foolishness to the Gentiles, but for those who believe, wisdom and "power of God" (1 Cor 1).

Mary, what will we do when the cross makes itself felt with all its weight? We will not always be able to stand with a pure and strong love and faith as you have shown us. So, we ask you to stand beside us as you did at the cross of Jesus, confident that in those moments above all you will be for us a mother of hope. □

Can you introduce yourself?

My name is Karol Manik. I am 52 years old, a Slovakian from a family of political prisoners, marked by Communism. I have spent the last twelve years in Slovakia and Ukraine as a provincial

How did your vocation come about?

My vocation was born during Communism when there was no freedom to profess a religious belief: consecrated life was forbidden and monasteries closed, but the underground church was well organised and consecrated life developed within it.

Why specifically Salesian?

Because when I was converted and started attending the underground church regularly, I met some young people who invited me to a meeting where they talked about faith, prayed and shared their reflections in a relaxed and joyful atmosphere.

I continued to attend these secret meetings and gradually realised that the leader of this group was an incognito Salesian. The life of this comm-

unity interested me more and more and I was drawn in by their attendance. We went on trips, pilgrimages, I took part in retreats and other spiritual exercises. Later I became an animator, starting to help lead another community. That was how my vocation came about; to live for God and young people.

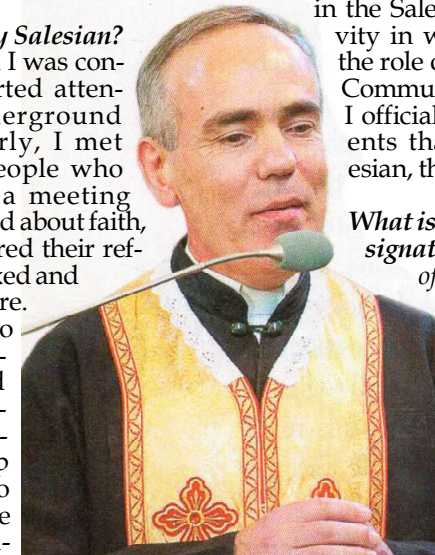
How did his family react?

My family did not know; my parents were believers. They definitely suspected something but I could not tell them anything. Officially I was a university student who lived on his own and came home at weekends. Unofficially I was an active animator involved in the Salesian secret activity in which I fulfilled the role of trainer. When Communism ended and I officially told my parents that I was a Salesian, they were happy.

What is your current designation? (at the time of this reporting)

I am the Provincial of the Salesians in Ukraine, who are of the Eastern Rite.

You left Slovakia, which is a peaceful



country with an excellent future, while Ukraine has some 'political' problems: how do you see the situation of the Church in these two countries?

While the ecclesiastical situation in Slovakia is relatively stable, Ukraine is experiencing the initial joys and worries typical of building a church structure: good relations are being established between the Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches as well as between the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Churches. Churches are being built, new relations with the state are being sought, and attempts are being made to heal the wounds of the past... And all this against the backdrop of economic and political instability also due to the consequences of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, which has now lasted six years and claimed 12,000 victims and counting.

What are the young people of the two nations like?

It seems to me that young Ukrainians are much 'simpler' than the Slovaks, they are not so demanding, they are well-disposed and also open to spiritual suggestions. This is the situation in western Ukraine, at least where I work.

What are the most significant and impressive Salesian works?

The work I have taken most to heart in Ukraine is the so-called Family House, where up to 70 children aged 7 to 18 can live. They are orphans, have lost one of their parents or come from families that are unable to raise them. It is a necessary, pleasant but also demanding job.

I am also very attached to our vocational school, which is the only

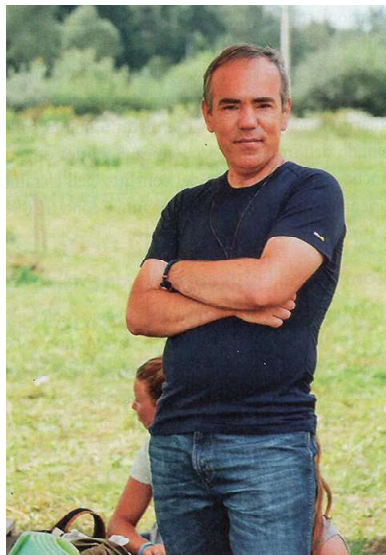
Catholic school in the whole of Ukraine and plays an important role.

What's your greatest satisfaction?

Seeing the faces of happy people, despite the difficult living conditions and trials they have to overcome.

What are your hopes for the future?

I don't make any more plans because I never have. I know that this year my service as provincial will come to an end, and after 12 years of provincialship I would like to "recharge my batteries" a little and deepen my understanding of Salesian spirituality so that I can continue to serve in the spirit and style of Don Bosco. □



IN A CHEERFUL MOOD

Coined Humour

It is not true that banks have no sense of humour. After all, they are the ones who coined the phrase "easy payments."

David Hart in The Citizen

Lure of the Media

A patient, lying in a hospital bed all bandaged up, was explaining to a visitor:

"So, I told my wife that when Monday-night football was on television, it would take wild horses to drag me away from the set. I still don't know where she got them."

Grooming Gusto

"Where have you been?"

"Having my hair cut."

"You know you can't have your hair cut on company time."

"Well, it grew on the company's time, didn't it?"

"No, not all of it."

"Well, I ain't had it all cut off."

Creative Lunacy

One of the greatest marksmen of the Army was passing through a small town, and everywhere he saw evidence of the most amazing shooting. On trees, walls, and fences there were numberless bull's-eyes with bullet-holes in the dead centre. He asked to meet the person responsible for this wonderful marksmanship. The man turned out to be the village idiot!

"This is the most remarkable shooting I have ever seen," said the Army champion. "How on earth did you do it?"

"Easy as pie," said the village idiot. "I shoot first and draw the circles afterwards."

Payment in Full

The owner had just insured his ramshackle house against damage by fire.

"What would I get," he asked the agent, "if the house should burn down tonight?"

"I would say about ten years," replied the agent promptly.

Increase in Transit

"Did that crate of chickens reach you safely?" asked the farmer.

"Well, yes," replied the poulterer, "but you didn't pack 'em properly, and after searching the neighbourhood I only found twelve."

"Umph, you did all right, I only sent eight."

Good Impression

When the visitor was shown into the manager's private room he remarked:

"That new clerk of yours seems a hard worker."

"Yes," replied the other, "that's his specialty."

"What? Working hard?"

"No, seeming to."

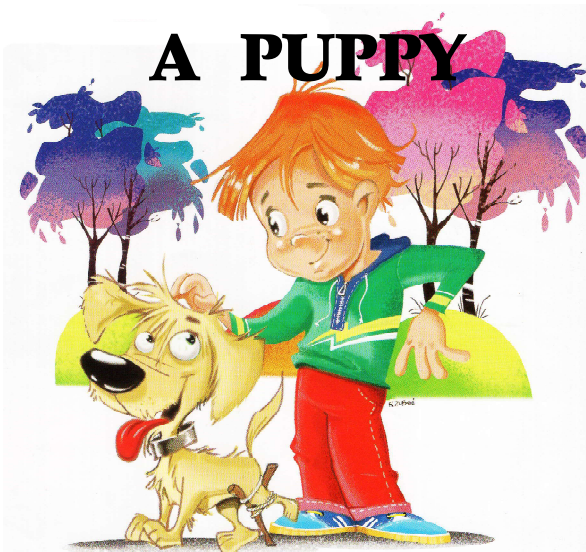
And Be Quick

Caller: "And you will walk with me as far as the bus stop, Tommy?"

Tommy: "I can't."

Caller: "And why not?"

Tommy: "Because we're going to have dinner as soon as you leave." □



A PUPPY

On the outskirts of town was a large estate with a villa and a garden of fruit trees, beautiful ornamental plants and colourful flowers. The little boy loved to walk along his fence.

One day, on the garden gate of the house, a sign was hung that read: 'Purebred puppies for sale'.

The boy reread the sign several times, then resolutely rang the bell. The owner came to open the gate. He was a kind gentleman who smiled at the boy.

The boy shyly smiled back, then put his hand in his pocket and said: "Here I have two euros and 37 cents, may I look at the puppies, please?"

The man blew a whistle and from a kennel bearing the inscription 'Lady,' out came a magnificent and elegant female dog followed by five beautiful puppies.

Only one limped slightly.

"What's wrong with him?" asked the boy, pointing to him.

"The vet claims he has a leg deformity and will probably limp forever."

"I'd like to buy him, if you don't mind," said the boy.

"I'll give him to you!" exclaimed the man. "I wouldn't be able to sell him anyway."

The boy retorted briskly: "No! He is just as good as the others. I'll bring the money every week until I reach the right amount."

"But why do you want to buy a sick dog? He will never be able to run with you or follow you to the park or the mountains!"

The boy bent down, tucked up his trouser leg and showed his leg.

It was malformed and caged in a metal brace.

Then he said: "I can't run well either. The puppy will need someone who understands him." □

LOVING CHILDREN TO THEIR LOVING MOTHER

Thank you, Jesus, Mother Mary and St. Jude for all the favours received.

The Pinto Family

I had fractured my left wrist and during my recovery I went through a lot of anxiety and stress. Through my devotion to the Three Hail Marys I was able to completely overcome my stress and anxiety and now I am leading a normal life. Thank you dear Mother for always protecting me.

Prescilla Monteiro, Udipi

A very serious incident left my husband and me in a very serious condition. He is 84 years old and I am 76. At 5 am on the morning of August 1, 2022, we were fast asleep when a portion of the ceiling in our bedroom came crashing down. The noise frightened us. There was a gaping hole about 4 feet by 3 feet. The iron rods were clearly visible. The portion of the ceiling that fell landed just 2 feet from our bed. Some part of the debris also fell on the beds. There was not a scratch on us. Only Jesus and Mary could have saved us. In our daily prayers we always recite the Three Hail Marys.

Maria Theresa, Chennai

Thank you Jesus, Mother Mary, Don Bosco, Dominic Savio and all the saints for saving my daughter, her special friend and some others from getting hurt in an accident. We always recite the Three Hail Marys and grateful to our Mother for keeping us safe.

M. Fernandes, Mumbai

Thanking Mother Mary, St Dominic Savio for healing my brother Noel from Jaundice and fever when he was 6 years old. Today he is 27years old. I thank you Jesus and Mother Mary for your abundant blessings bestowed upon him. Always guide him under your guidance.

Valentina DSouza

Thank you Jesus, Mother Mary and Don Bosco for all the blessings you have showered on us and our family.

F. D'Souza

We had requested prayers for Dipti Blossom Antoinette for a successful brain tumour operation. She is now fine and we offer her heartfelt thanks for this grace, through Our Lady's intercession.

Sunita Pereira, Bombay

My right eye was gone. All the doctors said that I would not see if the eye operation was done. I prayed to Don Bosco every day. I was checked up at another hospital and I can now see very well. I am grateful to the intercession of Don Bossco.

Mr. Brazine D'Souza, Camp Ahmednagar

POPE'S WORLDWIDE PRAYER NETWORK SEPTEMBER 2023

For people living on the margins

We pray for those persons living on the margins of society, in inhuman life conditions, may they not be overlooked by institutions, and never considered of lesser importance

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MARY WAS THERE

During regular checkups my doctor found that the baby I was carrying was underweight and was not taking food from the mother. The doctor advised us to carry out the delivery at the earliest through a C-Section to keep the baby and the mother safe. From that day onward with my family I started praying very fervently the Three Hail Marys adding the *Memorare* at the end. Through the intercession of the Infant Jesus of Prague and all the saints at 8 months my baby daughter was delivered, beautiful and healthy. *A devotee*

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.

To help a poor lad to reach the priesthood, is a privilege

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