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*Seek refuge in Mary
because she is the city
of refuge. We know that
Moses set up three cities
of refuge for anyone
who inadvertently
killed his neighbour.
Now the Lord
has established
a refuge of mercy.
Mary, even for those
who deliberately
commit evil.
Mary provides shelter
and strength for the sinner.*

Anthony of Padua

From The Editor's Desk
SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

After Mass one Sunday, an elderly woman came up to me as I descended from the sacristy at the Shrine. She was a friendly, chatty person, and we soon got into conversation. She spoke about her deep trust in God, and how she loved to come to Mass as frequently as she could.

"I look forward to the sermon on Sundays," she said, "although sermons nowadays are not what they used to be."

"Why is that?" I asked, perhaps a little uncomfortably.

"Well," she said, "for one thing they're mostly over even before they begin. Where I grew up, the sermon would go on for a good twenty minutes, and it was solidly based on the word of God which gave you something to think about on the way home. Another thing I miss," she went on, "is the fine voices the priests had then. They would have you on the edge of your seat, and you could catch every word at the back of the church. And anyway," she added, getting into her stride now, "sermons today are too soft. But maybe it's my ears aren't as good as they used to be, considering that I was able to hear the running commentary about dresses on show and the price of vegetables or the irritating neighbours in the next apartment, behind me that would often get me off centre..."

Of course, she was right for the most part. The popular priests today are those whose sermons end before they've actually begun. And I'm pretty sure there's a lot of talk about this and that at the canteen after Mass which is certainly not the the priest's reflection on the Scriptural reading of that Sunday.

What puzzled me, however, was the woman's belief that this was a sign of softness, as if Scripture was something easy and undemanding. I must admit that I often don't find it that way. Of course, it's not hard to love those who are kind and agreeable. It's easy to care for those who are considerate and generous. It's a pleasure to be with those who show their appreciation. But not otherwise...I easily resent those who criticize me, particularly behind my back. As for loving enemies, giving blessings for curses, turning the other cheek: I sometimes wonder if such heroic love is possible at all.

Yet I know it is. In his passion, Jesus shows us that it is possible to love in the face of hatred, to pay back violence with kindness, to offer forgiveness to those who condemn. Such love is not soft or weak: it is stronger than hate, stronger than death, stronger than sin. In a world of great bitterness, I think we need to hear more about love, not less.

Fr. Ian Douulton, sdb

LOVE IS A COVENANT

by Gianpaolo Dianin

The space in a couple, is vital to each of them that must always be respected and can only be entered if the other allows the other to.

Three months have passed since the dramatic death of Giulia Cecchettin, which has overflowed the vase already full of femicides. (www.corriere.it/23_novembre_22/) Many words have been spoken and written to try to answer a question that has affected us all: "How can such things happen?" We do not pretend to have an answer, but from several quarters, there has been talk of emotional maturity and immaturity, the urgency to educate people to live healthy relationships and not relationships



Giulia Cecchettin

that suffocate one another, and cause the man-woman relationship crisis.

A couple consists of a man and a woman, each of whom should have their own identity, be able to walk on their own two feet, and be aware of their uniqueness to the point of experiencing even loneliness, the good kind, linked precisely to the uniqueness of each one. "I am me" one could say, and consequently "you are you." You are other than me with your own identity and also your loneliness. It happens often, and dramatically in femicides, that one does not perceive boundaries simply because one of the two does not have a precise identity, does not live a healthy autonomy and thus pretends to encompass the other, to eliminate their otherness in the name of a mistaken love whose roots psychologists know well! In the beginning was the couple, that of every mother with the creature she carries in her womb, a symbiotic relationship that continues when that child is born. There is no distinction between the two; the mother serves all the needs of the child, and he or she unconsciously expects everything from her. Affective maturation begins when that path of gradual separation and distinction finds in the father figure a good ally. The father has

a different relationship with the son and is an obstacle to his pretended fusion. Each child learns to come to terms reckoning with some frustrations, with healthy no's that educate them not to demand everything and all at once. These are the first tastes of the uniqueness that is part of everyone's identity!



When one starts an affective relationship, especially when s/he starts falling in love, the possibility of another fusion experience like the one lived with the mother reappears. These are the typical dynamics of beginnings when the investment in the relationship has the traits of need, the necessity to see each other all the time and distance is experienced as suffering. If there has not been that healthy distinction, the young couple experiences similar dynamics to the symbiosis with the mother, who, this time, is the woman they fell in love with!

To this, we must add the ferocity of sexual relations in which one experiences the collapse of every boundary and that fusion already experienced in the first steps of existence. They are called intimate relations, but intimacy is not fusion but the possibility of opening one's own living space to the other while remaining oneself and recognising that the other remains itself.

Phrases such as 'I cannot live without you' are verbalising

what the child lives unconsciously. The child cries when he does not feel the closeness of his mother. The young person and the adult express themselves in other ways, such as the logic of possession, the control of the other, the need to have exclusivity, exaggerated forms of jealousy and, for the mystery that we all are, sometimes even in dramatic ways. □

*"I am me"
one could say,
and consequently
"you are you."
You are other
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with your
own identity
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A MOTHER'S GIFT

Sr Marzia Ceschia

Gianna Beretta lived her spiritual life very passionately, her love for her spouse, her dedication to her family and the medical profession; all without forgetting the poorest

At the Angelus of 23 December 1973 referring to Gianna Beretta Molla, Pope Paul VI expressed himself thus: "Let us think of a mother from the Diocese of Milan, who in order to give life to her child sacrifices, with meditated immolation, her own." Certainly, Gianna's gesture recalls the unconditional, total dedication of so many mothers who - in order to protect the lives of their children - had no regard for themselves, perceiving in the lives entrusted to them a greater gift, a mystery and a task. In various ways the offering of mothers has been consumed and is being consumed. Many of them we will never know, either the decisions or even their names, but the saints are their spokespeople, they

summarise in themselves and restore to the world the infinite possibilities of charity lived in the world.

Gianna Beretta Molla was born in Magenta (Milan) on 4 October 1922, the tenth of thirteen children (five died in infancy and three consecrated themselves to God). She grew up in a family firmly anchored in faith and trust in Providence, she particularly experienced her First Communion, as a powerful moment at the age of five and a half, that urged her to constantly attend the Eucharist.

Her childhood and youth also knew some difficult moments: three of her brothers died of the Spanish flu, a sister fell ill with tuberculosis (she died in 1937 at



only 27 years old) and the family - in search of a healthier place - moved from Milan, where they lived until 1925, to Bergamo. Gianna's father - a Franciscan tertiary, like her mother - worked as a clerk in a cotton mill and with great sacrifices managed to support the education of all his children until they graduated.

Gianna was a lively young woman with a strong faith, a lover of painting, beauty and mountains. In 1938, during a course of the Spiritual Exercises, she wrote: "O Jesus, I promise to submit myself to everything you allow to happen to me, just let me know your Will..." She took an active part in Catholic Action meetings, she was also a teacher of young girls. In 1942, the year she graduated from classical high school, she lost both her parents and a few months later she returned with her brothers and sisters to Magenta, her birthplace. She decided to enrol in the Faculty of Medicine first in Milan and then at the University of Pavia, where she graduated in 1949. In 1950 she opened her own medical clinic, doing her best for mothers, children, the elderly and the poor, and in 1952 she specialised in paediatrics in Milan.

In 1954, she met engineer Pietro Molla, also very active in Catholic Action, with whom she shared her love and faith. The two married on 24 September 1955: it was a happy marriage, cheered by the birth in 1956 of Pierluigi, in 1957 of Mariolina and in 1959 of Laura. In September 1961, while she was nearly at the end of the second month of her fourth pregnancy,

she was diagnosed with a fibroid in her uterus. She had no hesitation in deciding, when faced with the prospect of surgery, despite the risks, to save the life she was carrying, still trusting in God's Providence. A few days before the delivery, her husband testifies, Gianna had resolutely expressed her choice: "She explicitly told me in a firm and at the same time serene tone, with an intense look that I will never forget: "If you have to decide between me and the baby, no hesitation: choose - and I demand it - the baby. Save him." On 21 April 1962, by Caesarean section, she gave birth to Gianna Emanuela. Only a week later, on 28th April, at the age of 39, she died.

Beatified by Pope John Paul II on 24 April 1994, she was canonised by the same pontiff on 16 May 2004. Her votive feast day is 28 April. Touching is the testimony of her husband reported by Giuliana Pelucchi (cf. G. Pelucchi, *L'amore più grande*. Santa Gianna Beretta Molla, Paoline, Milan 2004, 15): "... My wife's choice was the coherent result of a whole life. A choice whose roots are to be sought in her childhood years... [...] Her life, up to the final gesture she made, was all an evolution in this line of donation. Gianna never expected anything in return. What she did... she did not do in order to go to heaven. She did it mainly because she felt like a mother..." The consistent result of a whole life: what could be a more concrete definition of holiness? □

ASPIRING TO BE "GOOD"

by Anastasia Dias

"Look there's a lone traveller on the road," said one thief to the other. "Let's loot him, come on. Let's go" replied the other. "But he may tell people about us, so let's give him a good thrashing till he's unconscious or even better, dead". "Sounds good", the thief said, grinning wickedly.

Both of them stopped the man midway and emptied out his pockets. Then they punched his face and began thrashing him till he fell down. "Looks dead to me now," said one to the other, dusting off his hands. "Come on, run. Quick," both the thieves whispered together.

The man lay on the ground, bleeding. An hour later, a priest passed by him on a horse but looked away so as to avoid the man. "He's probably dead by now," the priest said, convincing himself.

Another man passed by that road and saw the man who lay there unconscious. "Goodness, I don't want to get my hands dirty with his blood. I'll just look away and walk on. Besides, this road looks rather dangerous", he muttered under his breath.

A little later, a Samaritan riding

a donkey happened to be taking the same road. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed when he saw the man. He quickly, got down from his horse and checked for vital signs. The man was still alive (thank God!). He bandaged his wounds and gave him some water to drink. Then, he lifted him on his shoulders, putting him on his donkey. He then led his donkey into town. The Samaritan stopped at an inn and sat taking care of the man for the entire day, checking to see if his wounds were healing, giving him food and water at regular intervals and ensuring he was recovering rapidly. The next day, he told the inn-keeper to take care of the man and paid him money. "In case I need to pay you anything more, I'll pay you on my way back," said the Samaritan.

If you're reading this, you may say, "Yeah, so what? We've heard this story a million times. It's called the parable of the Good Samaritan."

Dear friend, that's not all, try to look at this story from the historical perspective that we now possess.

It's highly likely that the man

who was mugged was a Jew.

Jews and Samaritans despised each other.

The manner and the locale where the man was robbed is a vivid and such muggings take place there even today; its known as the "Way of Blood" because it was a place where people were often robbed and killed.

There was a priest and a Levite who passed by the man but ignored him.

Only a Samaritan who had been instructed to never have contact with a Jew, helped the man.

What does this parable mean to you now?

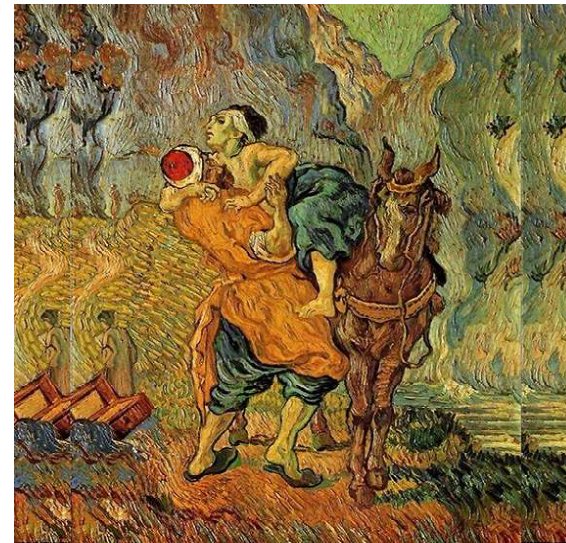
How many of us look at our family, friends, neighbours, colleagues and acquaintances struggling and say "not my problem"? How many of us ignore them and pass by the other side of the road,

convincing ourselves there's nothing we can do? How many of us avoid even looking in their direction, sometimes even shunning them completely?

We have all done this at some point in our lives to someone. I definitely have been the priest and/or the Levite and it's okay if you have too.

Sisters and brothers, this Easter season, we are faced with a choice. The choice is to look at a suffering friend or look away. The choice is to go to the ailing family member or to cross to the other side. The choice is to keep going or to stop to ask, "Are you okay?" It's the choice to be the priest or the good Samaritan. While I'm choosing and trying my best to be like the kind Samaritan, I do have tendencies to be like the other two. Again, it's okay if you do too. The most important thing is to keep trying.

As we celebrate a new season, a season when all things become new, let us also become new people. Let us leave behind the people we used to be and embrace our neighbours, friends, family members and tell them we love them. Let us help those around us who are going through a difficult time and support them in every way that we can. Ultimately, all you and I can aspire to, is to be "good." □



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF LUIGI BOLLA

You will be a missionary in the jungle among the natives and you will give them my Word. You will walk a lot." The 12-year-old Luigi Bolla heard this prophecy when he was in the chapel of the oratory in Schio (Vicenza) and had been wondering about 'becoming a priest' for a year already. It seemed to be the continuation of Don Bosco's dream that announced the path that his spiritual sons would take deep into the South of the American continent. That same summons was addressed to other youngsters, fascinated by the fatherliness of the saint of Valdocco and by the landscapes. They were still confused with the fantasy of a faraway land.

The second part of the 'prophecy' addressed to the future Salesian gave him precise connotations: jungle, natives and journeying. As soon as he came of age, Luigi left for Ecuador where, in addition to Spanish, at the invitation of the missionaries already there, he also studied the native language of the Shuar people. Amazonia was ready to engulf him with its enthusiasm. But the frontier he must cross was even more distant: it was that of another people, deep in the forest. They are the Achuar, largely attributed - by the conquerors - to the territory of neighbouring Peru. But for a brave man in love with his vocation, it was not an insuperable challenge. He changed his province, but above all he

was ready to face alone the effort of sharing, detached from the comfort of the Salesian community, to live in the huts of the Indios for the rest of his life.

In the footsteps of Fr Bolla

Such a missionary could have remained an "isolated case," leaving neither a trace of his path nor a community able to walk it. Instead, today we meet a young Salesian who carries out his ministry by retracing exactly paths in the Amazon rainforest that were those of Father Luigi Bolla trod.

He is Don Rogger Valdivia Hidalgo, a 35-year-old Peruvian who, by Italian standards, would look like a young man of 25. It was he who, with sandals on his feet, walks for three days through the jungle to arrive at a village, where he stays for two long days at the disposal of the people and he leaves again, and walks for three more days to the next village. Certainly in his DNA is the long history of pre-Columbian civilisations. He was born in the city of Huancayo, the ancient capital of the Wanka civilisation. History speaks of a people of in-



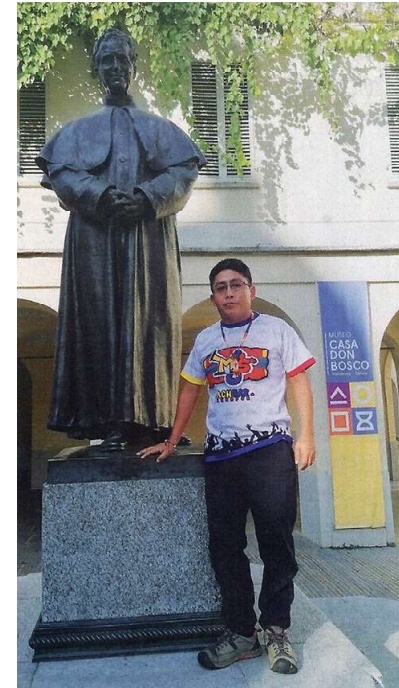
Don Bosco's Madonna

domitable warriors, who resisted the conquests of the Wari and Inca emperors and, after these, the King of Spain. "I was born in the unconquerable city," Fr Rogger emphasises as he introduces himself. Behind his humility his face reveals, the religious, healthy pride in his origins.

At the age of 19, Rogger entered the Salesian formation house and emerged a priest fourteen years later. He is now parish priest of Hacioa, an area that maps can barely identify, straddling Peru and Ecuador. It is a "Zone" and not a "locale" because the 17,000 people who live there are scattered in 64 communities. Of these, 34 have embraced the Catholic faith and await Father Rogger, at least once a year. For the Salesian, it is like diving into a green ocean, on the side of the Andes that faces the Pacific.

A house of palm fronds

Fr Bolla accompanied him along his long journey. He got to know him personally during his years of formation. When he was a pre-novice first and later when he was in theology. But it was the Salesian Youth Movement that gave him the impetus. They had also suggested that he works in the Amazon in the area of Andoas. In 2011 he spent his summer in the villages along the Pastaza river, a tributary of the Marafion which flows into the Amazon. Rogger admitted: "I liked that experience because I met very sensitive people. They still lived without cell-phones and the internet...yet there was a tremendous willingness to communicate."



Good organisation

Today, he is responsible for a parish whose extent is difficult to measure. It is intertwined with Protestants and affects another 30 villages. Living with them he says: "I live according to their schedules and what they have. My house is made of palm fronds. We eat yuca (cassava) with plátano (cooking bananas) with river fish. The men hunt a couple of days a week and meat appear on their plates a couple of times a week. The families with around 6 to 10 children.

We get up every morning at 3 am and breakfast consists of tea made of gwayusa leaves (which contain caffeine) then we celebrate the Eucharist or the liturgy of the Word depending on our availability there is also the Sacrament of Reconciliation which I

make myself available for and takes me around 3 hours. They prepare themselves well for it. This is all the formation given by Fr Luigi who insisted a lot on this sacrament."

Fr Bolla was already accompanied by a young priest through the forest and there was also Signor Puanch Makuin Makuin who was the first deacon to be ordained in that frontier region. He also acts as an interpreter for those who do not speak Spanish, being already the right-hand man of Fr Diego Clabvijo Illesca who was the immediate successor of Fr Bolla.

His name is 'Tuna'

This pastoral team is also at the service of the families to address every day, but not trivial issues. Many youngsters move to the cities and they return with habits that already taint and even corrupt them. They have taken to drugs and drink and even promiscuity. "Being a moral problem" observes Fr Rogger, "it is primarily a social issue because it touches very closely the collective life, the relations between the people and their sense of security. The village deacon thus becomes a 'justice of the peace', trying to enforce the rules and find just compensation.

But then there is the serious environmental problem. "From the knowledge of the Word of God, from the knowledge of our own original culture, we learn respect for others. The protection, the defence 'of the Amazon is an acquired awareness. The massive assault on natural resources, the subdivision of vast areas of the forest for oil extraction are the

danger they must defend themselves against'. In the Ecuadorian area, the popular pressure groups are more organised, while there are difficulties among the Peruvians. Certainly, one limitation is the communication to keep in touch: it takes three days to know what has happened in the nearest village. "Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si* is certainly a message for us that strengthens the defence of indigenous peoples. We live better if we respect life, if we embody it in our daily lives. The Achuar and others who live in the forest respect creation, they do not exhaust food resources, they cultivate and do not use fertilisers, they go fishing or hunting with elementary tools, they do not hoard everything they find. They use nature but respect it: we must all follow the path they show us."

In photographs taken of him, Father Rogger wears a hat on his head with the pride of an unconquerable Wanka warrior. It is the same headgear that Father Luigi Bolla wore, it is like a travelling relic: it is the crown (tawasap) awarded by the Achuar to those who brought him Jesus Christ. And the skirt (itip) that the minister wears in rituals recalls the continuity between tradition and Christian faith. The young forest pastor also wears a ritual necklace, which belonged to his predecessor, who left it to him.

But even more sacred to Father Rogger is the name given to him by the Achuar: Tuna. This is the term they use to call the waterfalls of their rivers, which are for them a meeting space between man and God. □

Witnesses in & for Our Times



ST. JULIE BILLART (April 8)

Growing in Faith

Julie Billart was born on 12 July 1751 in a little village in Northern France called Cuvilly. Her father was a farmer who also ran a general store along with his wife. They were devout Catholics who brought up their nine children to love and revere God. Unfortunately, most of the kids died in infancy as infant mortality was pretty high at the time.

Julie's growth in faith was remarkable for her age. By the time she was seven, she had learned the catechism by heart and would readily teach it to other children. Observing her progress and keen interest in the spiritual life, her parish priest, Fr. Dangicourt allowed her to make her First Communion earlier than usual and also subsequently be confirmed at the young age of nine! It was at this time that, we are told, she took a vow of chastity. She developed a reputation for holiness in her little village. Older people respected her and were taken up by her impeccable behavior and piety. She earned for herself the nickname, 'the saint of Cuvilly.'

Faith in Tragedy

Already at such a tender age,



she felt called to the religious way of life. However, circumstances did not permit her to pursue her vocation. Calamities plagued the Billart family. They had to cope with the loss of many of the kids; the family shop was ransacked and robbed - the family could never recover financially from the robbery. Some years later, there was another incident at the shop that changed their lives forever - while Julie was helping her father at the shop, her father was shot in an attempted robbery.

This experience traumatized

her and she developed a mysterious illness that no doctor could diagnose. It is assumed that she had a very serious nervous breakdown that disturbed the normal functioning of her body. Things became so bad, probably compounded by improper medication and misdiagnosis that Julie lost sensation in her lower body. She was confined to her bed and would spend the next 22 years in that condition!

Yet, she did not let this severe drawback discourage her from her calling. All those who met her during this time were fascinated by her demeanour – she seemed resigned to carrying the cross that was put on her shoulders. She dedicated most of her time to prayer and that reflected on her face which seemed to glow with supernatural light.

Her paralysis took away the use of her legs but her mind was sharp and so was her upper body. She had picked up the skill of tailoring as a teenager. She put this to good use by preparing linen and laces for the Church and liturgical functions. She also volunteered to teach children the catechism. Her parish priest took her up on her word and entrusted her with the preparation of young children for the sacrament of Holy Communion. This she did with total dedication despite her physical limitations.

Life-altering Revolution

In 1789, the French Revolution began. It radically reshaped society and its values. The Church was one of the pronounced targets of the revolutionaries. While church people, that is, priests and religious brothers and

“Be like a sunflower that follows every movement of the sun, and keep your eyes always turned toward our good God.”

St Julie Billart

nuns were soft targets, active Catholic lay people were also on the receiving end of the revolutionaries’ anger and blade.

During this time, Julie went to live in the home of a Countess named Baudoin. While living there, she chanced to meet Françoise Blin de Bourdon, Viscountess of Gizaincourt. Françoise would become a close collaborator with Julie and would help co-found a religious society for women. At the time of their first meeting, Françoise had just escaped from certain death at the hands of the revolutionaries along with her family. They were fortunate that Robespierre’s death marked the end of the Reign of Terror and caused the tide of the Revolution to change.

Françoise grew enamoured by this pitiful paralytic who lived with her friend. Over time, she began to perceive that Julie had rare spiritual gifts. She brought her friends along and there developed a little company of dignified ladies who would gather regularly to learn about the spiritual life from Julie. Their company resembled a religious society in almost every fashion except that they had no vows and did not wear a habit. They had fixed moments for prayer and spent

their days being of service to others particularly the poor. Though the company did not last, its purpose did. Françoise and Julie were convinced of the good a company like this could do for the Church and for society but they knew they had to have something stronger to bind the members together and so the idea for a religious society was born.

Sisters of Notre Dame

In 1803, with the approval of the Bishop of Amiens and the support of Fr. Varin, Superior of the Fathers of Faith (a French Congregation that was dedicated and promoted devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus), the Sisters of Notre Dame were formed. Fr. Varin had requested the sisters to help out with caring for young orphan girls and catechizing the young. On Feb 2, 1804, the first sisters took their vows. They were Julie Billart, Françoise Blin de Bourdon and Catherine Duchâtel. This day is observed as the founding day for the Congregation.

A few months later, Julie was advised by her confessor to make a novena to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Miraculously, midway through the novena, she was completely cured of her paralysis and was able to walk again. In thanksgiving, she accompanied her confessor and other Fathers of Faith on a mission to St. Valery-sur-Somme and Abbeville.

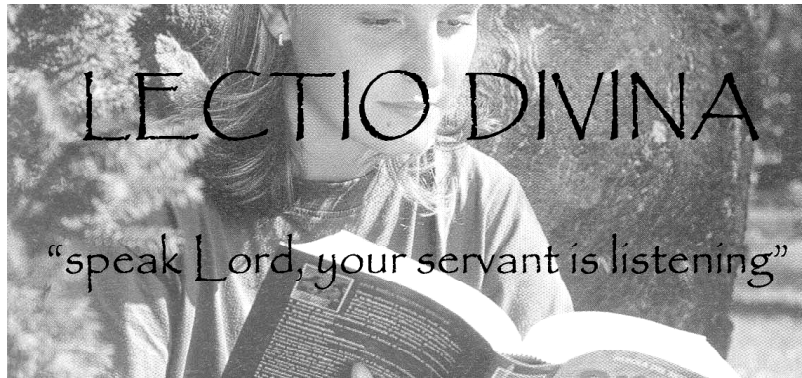
The charism of the Congregation was the salvation of poor children through the imparting of Christian education. On the third anniversary of the founding of the society, Julie had a vision in which she saw her Sisters going

across the seas to other parts of the world. This spurred her to take up missionary activities with her sisters. She pioneered many apostolic works and opened convents in different parts of France and Belgium.

A few years after their foundation, the congregation ran into some trouble with the ecclesiastical superiors of Amiens who were not supportive of the expansionist activities of the Sisters. Accordingly, the Sisters were forced to shift their center of activity from Amiens in France to Namur in Belgium where they were welcomed. Hence the Congregation changed its name from *Sisters of Notre Dame de Amiens* to *Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur*. By the time, Billart died in 1816, the Congregation had over 15 convents and 30 sisters working in different parts of France and Belgium.

The Sisters of Notre Dame are primarily educators. Initially, they were focused on educating the poor however, in the decades following the French Revolution, they noticed the detestable state of education and decided to expand their scope to include children from the upper classes as well. They used the profits earned by educating the rich to offer free schooling to the poor.

In 1969, Julie Billart was canonized by Pope Paul VI and the Congregation underwent considerable reform in the light of the teachings of Vatican II. They reformulated their charism: “To make known God’s goodness.” At present, there are around 2000 sisters working in the Americas, UK, Africa, Asia and Europe. □



DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY

by Dinesh Vasava, sdb

1. Reading: Take a few moments to read the Gospel passage slowly and attentively. Pay attention to the story's details and imagine yourself in the scene. Try to understand the emotions and actions of Jesus and His disciples during this encounter.

2. Meditation: Ponder on the message of the passage. Consider the significance of Jesus' appearance to His disciples after His resurrection. Reflect on the fear and doubt the disciples experienced and how Jesus offered them His peace. Focus on the encounter between Jesus and Thomas and the importance of faith in recognising the risen Lord's presence. What does this story reveal about God's mercy and His desire to bring us peace?

DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY:

A reflection on Jn 20:19-31

Today, the Second Sunday of Easter, we celebrate Divine Mercy Sunday, established and promulgated by St. John Paul II on the Second Sunday of Easter, 2000.

"This gift of faith manifests God's mercy towards us. Faith is the gift of God's mercy. Faith is man's response to God's revelation of himself. Although we say it is our response to God, notice that it begins with God's revealing of Himself and that human response is God's grace and gift because no one comes to faith alone.

Our faith is not constant; sometimes, our faith is strong, and sometimes weak- or something in between. We mirror the apostles. Remember that the apostles were ordinary men chosen and invited by Jesus to be intimate with him and that their faith in Jesus grew and was shattered with the death of their Lord. Moreover, belief in the Risen Lord came in stages. Most probably, everyone was in disbelief when Mary Magdalene announced the empty tomb on Easter morning."

Jesus' appearance was needed to convince the apostles of the Resurrection and to reinforce their confidence. However, by extending his peace—his first words—he

appealed to calm their anxieties and re-concile with them. "Peace be with you," he said, showing them his nail-pierced hands and side.

Blood and water flowed from his side to redeem us; this re-emption was an act of divine kindness. This blood and water would subsequently represent the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, both acts of God's immense love in rescuing us.



Now, on to Thomas. He only desired a firsthand encounter with the Risen Jesus. Thomas values clarity and concreteness; he is the one who questions Jesus' lofty remarks about going ahead of them, saying plainly, "Lord, we do not know where you are going." "How can we find our way?" (Jn 14:5).

Again, it was an act of kindness for Jesus to grant Thomas' request to stick his finger in Jesus' hands and side. Like the one he did a week before, that deed was a gesture of peace and healing. Moreover, Thomas' declaration of "My Lord and My God" is more than just a declaration of trust in Jesus. It might be a realisation on his part that following the resurrection, all of reality has altered and that he, like the other disciples, can no longer return to who they were or what they did be-

fore. In other words, nothing will ever be the same. Jesus' resurrection altered and will continue to alter our reality.

How does this relate to us?

3. Prayer: Engage in a conversation with God. Share your thoughts, feelings, and questions that arise from the passage. Thank God for His mercy and the gift of His Son's resurrection. Ask for the grace to deepen your faith and trust in Jesus. Pray for the peace that only He can give. Offer any doubts or fears you may have to Him and ask for His healing and guidance.

4. Contemplation: Enter into a moment of silence and stillness. Allow the words and images of the Gospel passage to settle in your heart. Imagine yourself in the room with the disciples, witnessing Jesus' appearance and His words of peace. Reflect on how you can open your heart to receive His mercy and experience His peace. Rest in His presence, allowing Him to speak to you beyond words.

5. Action: Consider how you can apply the message to your own life. Reflect on any areas where you may be experiencing fear or doubt and how you can invite Jesus to bring you His peace. How can you deepen your faith and trust in Him? Reflect on extending God's mercy to others in your words and actions. Commit to taking action based on the insights you have gained.

Lectio Divina is a personal and intimate encounter with God's Word. Take your time, be open to His guidance, and allow the Holy Spirit to lead you deeper into the message of the Gospel. □

Quiet Spaces

WE ALL HAVE ONE SHEPHERD:

Pope Francis' homily (edited) at Domus Sanctae Marthae on May 4, 2020

Introduction

Let us pray today for families trying to do many new things; there is a lot of creativity with children, with everything, just to keep going. And there is also another thing: at times there is domestic violence. Let us pray for families, that they may continue in peace creatively and patiently, during this quarantine.

Homily

When Peter goes up to Jerusalem, the faithful reproach him (see Acts 11:1-8). They reproach him because he had entered the house of uncircumcised men and had eaten with them, with the Gentiles: this was not allowed, it was a sin. The purity of the law did not permit it. But Peter had done it because it was the Spirit that led him there. There is always, in the Church - and often in the early Church, because matters were not clear - this spirit of "We are the righteous ones, the others are sinners." This "us" and "them", "us" and "them", divisions: "To think that, in Jesus's time, there were at least four religious parties: the party of the Pharisees, and the parties of the Sadducees, the Zealots, and the Essenes, and each one interpreted the law according to their idea of it. And this idea is "beyond the law" when it becomes a way of thinking, a worldly spirit that then interprets the law. They even rebuked Jesus for entering the house of tax collectors (see Mt 15:2,20). Always that reproach that causes division: this is the important thing that I would like to emphasise.

There are ideas, positions that cause division, to the point that division becomes more important than unity. My idea is more important than the Holy Spirit that guides us. There is a cardinal "emeritus" who lives here in the Vatican, a good pastor, who used to say to his faithful: "The Church is like a river, you know? Some are closer to one bank, some closer to the other, but the important thing is that everyone is in the river." This is the unity of the Church. No one outside, everyone inside. But why does the Church have such a broad river? It is because the Lord wants it that way.

The Lord, in the Gospel, says: "There are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock, and one Shepherd" (Jn 10:16). The Lord says: "I have sheep everywhere and I am the shepherd of all of them". This "all of them" is very important. Let us think of the parable of the wedding feast (see Mt 22:1-10), when the guests did not want to go: one because he had bought a field, one had got married. Each one gave his own reason for not going. And the master became angry and said, "Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find" (v. 9). Everyone. Old and young, rich and poor, good and bad. Everyone. This "everyone" has

something of the view of the Lord who came for all and died for all. "But did He die even for that wretch who made my life impossible?" He died for him too. "And for that rascal?" He died for him. For everyone. And even for the people who do not believe in Him, or who are of other religions. He died for everyone. This does not mean that one must proselytise, no. But He died for everyone, He justified everyone.

Here in Rome there is a woman, a good woman, a professor, Professor [Maria Grazia] Mara, who when there were difficulties for various things, among the different parties, used to say, "But Christ died for everyone: let us go forward!". That constructive capacity. We have just one Redeemer, one unity: Christ died for everyone. Instead there is the temptation to say, and even Paul suffered from this: "I am Paul's, I am Apollo's, I belong to this one, I belong to the other..." (see I Cor 3:1-9). And think of us, fifty years ago, after the Council: the divisions that the Church suffered. "I am on this side, I think this way, you that way...". Yes, it is right to think in this way but in the unity of the Church, under the Shepherd, Jesus.

Two things. The apostles' rebuke to Peter because he had entered the house of the Gentiles. And Jesus who says: "I am everyone's shepherd", I am the shepherd to everyone, and who says, "There are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock, and one Shepherd" (see Jn 10:16). And the prayer for the unity of all humanity, so that everyone, men and women, we all have one Shepherd: Jesus.

May the Lord free us from that psychology of division, of dividing, and help us to see this aspect of Jesus, this great reality of Jesus: that in Him we are all brothers and sisters, and He is the Shepherd of all. That word, today: everyone, everyone. May it accompany us throughout the day.

Spiritual Communion

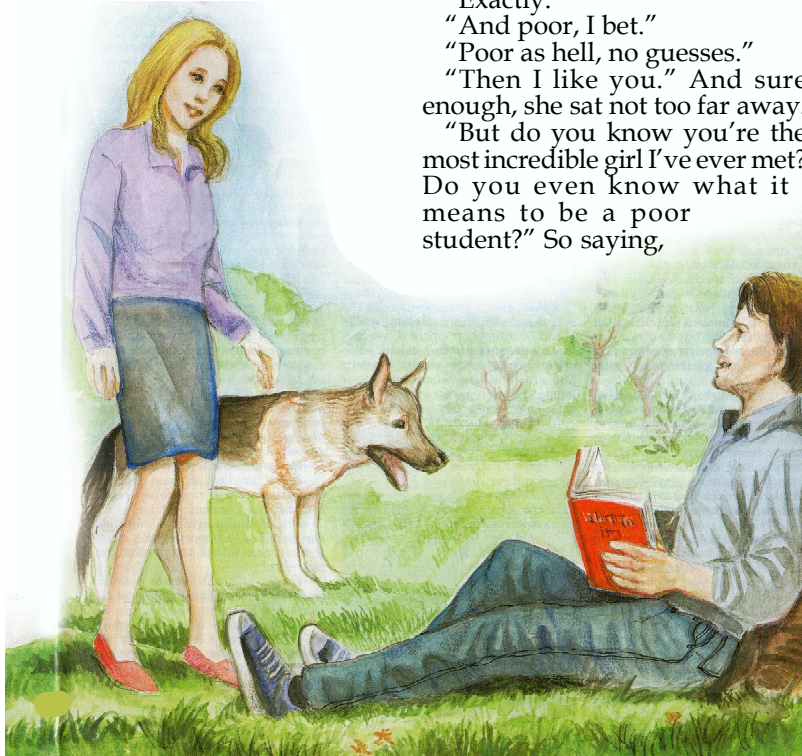
Those who cannot receive Communion may make a spiritual communion:

At Your feet, O my Jesus, I prostrate myself and I offer You repentance of my contrite heart, which is humbled in its nothingness and in Your holy presence. I adore You in the Sacrament of Your love, the ineffable Eucharist. I desire to receive You into the poor dwelling that my heart offers you. While waiting for the happiness of sacramental communion, I wish to possess You in spirit. Come to me, O Jesus, since I, for my part, am coming to You! May Your love embrace my whole being in life and in death. I believe in You, I hope in You, I love You. Amen. □

THE TREE OF HAPPINESS

By Pierluigi Menato, Tr. Ian Douulton, sdb

Here Bailey, heel!" The big wolfdog braked his run, retracing his steps, crouching panting by his mistress. Hair blowing in the wind, cheeks flushed, eyes bright blue, a pretty girl. Tired, she let her young body fall limply onto the cool grass, as Bailey stretched out his muzzle for a caress. The hand went over and over the intelligent animal's head and Bailey's tail hammered the grass with an accelerated rhythm. And it was while looking at the dog's tail that she saw, behind the large tree, two feet.



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Don Bosco's Madonna

"Whose are they? I just wanted a little peace in this quiet corner but.... no sir! Let's go and have a look...."

With her sprightly, boyish manner she leapt to her feet. Like Bailey, of course.

"Oh, sorry," she said a little confused, "then those feet are yours...."

"But until proven otherwise, at least those belong to me," laughed the young man, lifting his eyes from the large book he held.

"A student, I presume."

"Exactly."

"And poor, I bet."

"Poor as hell, no guesses."

"Then I like you." And sure enough, she sat not too far away.

"But do you know you're the most incredible girl I've ever met? Do you even know what it means to be a poor student?" So saying,

he comically turned out his pockets.

"Yes," she replied, "a smart guy, maybe at the top of his class. And never a penny in your pocket, and you're also handsome, by the way."

The young man raised his head in amazement, that it made the girl laugh heartily. Then she suddenly became serious.

"You must forgive me. I'm sick and tired of everyone around me. A frivolous and silly world that's always getting on my nerves, that's all."

"Don't you have parents?"

"My mother died when I was little!" she sighed with such sadness that it moved the young man.

"Father remarried, a little woman all whimsy and flippant. Not bad, but she could live forever between receptions and rowdy parties. I, on the other hand, don't like that," and shook her head gracefully.

"Don't any nice young men your age come to your home? Any nice classmates?"

"Too many and hollow to describe or inflated like balloons. The only one who loves me is Maria."

"And who's Maria?"

"She's mama's old maid, the only one who talks to me, the only one who understands me. Do you still have Mama?"

"Yes," said the young man gravely. An unassuming woman in appearance because she has no time to take care of herself, but she is all goodness and tenderness. Wait, now I'll show her to you. He rummaged in a worn wallet and out came a slightly creased photograph. He stared at it for a

long time before giving it to the girl, and with indescribable emotion he said: "My poor, dear mother! How many sacrifices she makes for me! If you only knew! She works from morning till night to pay for my books!"

"How very lucky you are! How I wish I had a mother like that who understood and loved me..." Two tears as big as pearls trembled for a moment on her long eyelashes.

The young man was stunned. He was living an absurd adventure, he, poor and unknown, found himself being the consoler of that beautiful, well-dressed girl who seemed a portrait of happiness. He did not know what to say. He was so closed and averse to any distraction, absorbed only by the obsession; that of his study, captivated by his great and wonderful dream that he considered almost like a mission; to become a doctor. Yes, he was going to be a doctor. He had nothing to offer, he, poor as dirt. Yet yes, he was now offering a gift of such value, perhaps the greatest gift the rich girl had ever received.

"I'll give you some of my mother's love.... Will you be my friend? I'm poor but honest and loyal. It seems a paradox, looking at our social positions, me not being able to offer you even a coffee! If you wrote some letters to your mother, I'm sure she would answer you."

A strong handshake was enough to seal this very unusual pact of friendship.

Sometimes she would arrive before him, sit under the old tree and wait for him to show up. And

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Don Bosco's Madonna

when Steve appeared between the trees, she would raise her arm high and wave out to catch his attention. By now she knew many things about him. She knew that he was fatherless; that he lived up there in a poor attic and perhaps dinner was not always enough. How she would have liked to help him! But that would have been too great a humiliation. So, he came with his little bucket bag and inside it there never failed to be two tasty sandwiches or some sweets.

"You know Steve, I'm not at all ashamed of my young appetite, but keeping me company makes me all the happier," so saying, she plunged her white teeth into the sandwich and took a big bite. Stephen accepted that with a smile as he read his mother's affectionate letters and went over some important lessons. Amidst all that greenery. He could breathe better.

But one sad day he was left waiting in vain under the old tree. His friend would not come anymore. Suddenly, an overwhelming disaster, a financial collapse reduced Martina to poverty as he suffered. The sudden departure seemed almost like an escape. And everything was reduced to a sweet, nostalgic memory. He felt he had lost more than a friend, though he dared not confess it. Sometimes he wondered how Martina could have retained such freshness and such wonderful innocence in such a frivolous environment, without any moral support in her youthful years. Perhaps it was the closeness of Maria, that good woman. At least she had followed her. Where?

"Where would they have gone?" Steve wondered.

Everything was sold at an auction: the palace, the rich furniture, the valuable paintings, the priceless items. What a pity, that was. Oh! if he had had the means, how he would have liked to buy everything and give it back! But his pockets were stubbornly empty. Until when? He doubly plunged into the study. To forget and to achieve. And he succeeded with flying colours. He immediately found a great position in a state-of-the-art clinic. He would then gradually set up a private practice. Finally, Mum would be able to get some rest!

Poor Mum! What had she been through? A continuous gift, like a generous fountain that denies no one refreshment. How many sacrifices, first to fight dad's illness she had never spared herself. Then, all her great love had poured into him: Steven. She wanted to make a man of him and possibly a great man. Soon the boy proved to be good-natured, studious, always at the top of his class.

The years passed, now the position was secure. He was now the head of the clinic; he had a well-established private practice too. A large clientele, as much as he could aspire to. But there was one thing he didn't want to hear a word about.

"Why don't you choose a good girl, Steven?"

"There's time, mum, there's time."

"I'm getting older and the years go by, I'd love to see you alright, to be able to cradle and kiss a baby of your own..."

A deep wrinkle crossed

Stephen's forehead.

There was a name carved into his heart that he could not erase.

"Martina, dearest friend! Where... Where are you?"

It was better not to talk about it. And the names his mother suggested passed without leaving any echo. All good girls yes, but what burned in him was like a wound that never closes, that first love that you never forget. It was true, the

first silver streaks were beginning to show on his temples. He worked very hard! But that took nothing away from his personality. A perfect person, gleaming white teeth and those strange eyes that had retained a childlike quality contrasting with his deep seriousness. What you would call a handsome man. And that good mother fell silent again. Maybe he was on to something.

That was a bad day. But now it had finally come to an end.

A delicate operation in a delicate being and the nervous tension stretched to the limit. Everything had gone well. He was still sweating thinking about it. A struggle to snatch that youth from death, and he had won, and he hoped, with God's help, to return that boy to his mother. Poor woman! She looked like a corpse, in the anxiety of waiting. Now little pink had even crept to her cheeks and she sat by the side of the bed, motionless like a statue,



following her creature's breathing. Steven would not leave the clinic. He had already phoned his mother.

He sat in his office still in his white coat, absorbed in a thousand thoughts. Suddenly, however, the siren of an ambulance roused him, the urgent case and bell rang for a long time.

Stefano jumped like a spring. His tiredness, what did it matter? A life was in danger. His assistant was already rushing in, also ready for his duty. The stretcher carefully descended from the ambulance and was taken to the examination room. A scream almost escaped Steven's lips: 'Martina.' That was Martina, but how she had changed! A threat of peritonitis, a very serious case, given the patient's weak condition.

"Good God!" Steven invoked, "why are you making me find her and take her away from me?" It had been a moment of weakness. But, almost immediately, he gave terse orders, regaining perfect

control.

"Prepare her at once, I will operate immediately."

With a clenched jaw and a spasm that was indescribable, he cut through that young flesh to tear out that malignancy. His brow beaded with sweat and pale, he had done all that could be done and he anxiously checked her pulse, spied those closed eyes, that dear face.

In the little room three days wavering between life and death, Martina struggled unconsciously. She did not want to get well; she just wanted to die; she made very little effort to help her recovery not even hoping that her survival was possible. Finally, when Steven thought the time was right, he gently stroked her inert hand and spoke her name in a whisper. Two large, astonished eyes opened wide glaring at him as a wave of soft pink rose to that pale face.

"Steven!" she replied with a thin edge to her voice and a faint smile.

"Steven..." He placed his hand on her warm forehead, staring at her with boundless tenderness. He had read in those eyes a long-awaited answer... even though no other words had accompanied his name.

"Martina dearest, you won't

scare me now, will you? That gift I offered you one day, will you accept it more fully today? Do you want to be my wife? Mama has been waiting for you for so long..."

Tears of emotion glistened in her eyes.

"I have nothing and no one left, Steven... I am but a poor creature left to myself. Much poorer than you were when I discovered you at the foot of our tree."

"You must have suffered so much, Martina!"

"So much! Believe me. The only comforting thought was the memory of our encounter..."

"Now forget everything, Martina. There are a few white streaks in my hair, but my heart has always been yours and yours alone."

"Thank you, thank you Steven. If you know how much good these words of yours do me!"

"Shh, shh, rest now, I will send Mama to you." And he bent down to gently kiss her forehead.

The person who had been gloomy for three days and walked hunched over as if under an immense weight, now seemed rejuvenated. Martina was saved! Saved! And with her, he had found happiness again. □

From Someone Else's Perspective

There was a blind girl who hated herself because she was blind. She hated everyone, except her loving boyfriend. He was always there for her. She told her boyfriend, 'If I could only see the world I would marry you.' One day some donated her a pair of eyes, when the bandages came off, she was able to see everything, including her boyfriend. He asked her, 'Now that you can see the world, will you marry me?' The girl looked at her boyfriend and saw that he was blind. The sight of his closed eyelids shocked her. She hadn't expected that. The thought of looking at them for the rest of her life, led her to refuse to marry him. Her boyfriend left in tears and days later wrote her a note saying: 'Take good care of your eyes, my dear, for, before they were yours, they were mine.' That's how the human brain often works when our status changes. Very few remember what life was like before, and who was always by their side in the most painful situations.

FIORETTI OF DON BOSCO - 51

by Michele Molineris

232. Hosannal... Crucify him! (1877)

Having read in the rules that from time to time it was appropriate for Salesians to disclose to their superior and father the spiritual matters concerning their souls, Fr Vespignani wrote, 'I asked Fr Rua with whom I could make my manifestation. He replied: 'You should do it with Don Bosco; but he is very busy and you would have to wait a long time. So, if you want to do it with me, I am already at your disposal.'

"Here I am, I'm prepared," I said.

"Then take your hat and let's go to Valsalice, where, as it is Saturday, I must go to hear the confessions of the young boarders. We will talk on the way."

When we were on our way, his first question was this: "Tell me first of all what made the greatest impression on you on entering the Oratory; then tell me your difficulties and the unpleasant things you may have encountered."

"What I most admired," I answered immediately, "in Alassio and in the Oratory, was not only to see Don Bosco's holiness, but also to find superiors everywhere so united with him, or rather, let's say it, so similar to him in their bearing, in the way they behaved and interacted, so that in every way the spirit of the founder and the father was recognisable."

"You are right, my dear; this unity of thought, affection and

method comes from the family education that Don Bosco gave to those who were his, winning our hearts and stamping his ideal on them all... Now then, if you have observed anything else pleasant or unpleasant, tell me."

"For me, everything was uplifting. But among other things, I was struck by the beautiful group of altar servers who surround the altar of Mary Help of Christians on feast days, that choir of hymns that look like angels from heaven, that band that enlivens the solemn moments of the college, and above all I liked the St Louis, St Joseph and Blessed Sacrament sodalities, whose members, besides mutual edification, exert a salutary influence on their companions, promoting spontaneous piety and ensuring morality!"

"Now, I'll tell you something in confidence. I was a theology student there in Romagna, and one day, while the professor of canon law was making a digression on the apostolate of St Philip Neri in Rome, one of us, who had heard of Don Bosco, took the liberty of interrupting the teacher, saying to him: "They say that in Turin there is a priest called Don Bosco, who exercises the same apostolate in that capital city and they proclaim him the new St Philip." That famous jurist stared disdainfully at the questioner and replied: "What do you want a poor priest to do, surrounded by a hoard of brats that he picks up off the street and educates by means of spying?"

We looked at each other, deeply saddened and discou- raged, and at the end of the lesson we ran to the room of the spiritual director Fr Taroni and told him what had

happened. The good rector put his hands in his hair and told us: "You see how the world judges the saints! And to think that they said the same thing about Saint Philip!"

We later learned the reason for this. The former priest, who had come to Turin for military service, and had not attended the festive Oratory there, nor behaved appropriately, had been admonished by some superior, which had annoyed him fiercely. As a result, he returned to his native village and, wandered around the vestries approaching seminarians, he vented his resentment, saying that he was a spy here.

"These observations you made about Don Bosco's system will serve you well."

Thus ended my first meeting (Vespignani, *Un anno alla scuola di Don Bosco*, 23).

233. A dialogue with the sick (1877)

'Despite the fact that I remained in bed, I felt calm, immensely satisfied with my vocation,' Fr Vespignani wrote, 'Don Bosco had told me from the beginning: 'Stay calm; it's a small storm, which will soon pass; then will come a great serenity and a magnificent day with splendid sunshine.' Words that sounded like prophecy to me.

It seemed to my father, that there had been some kind of secret conspiracy concerning my vocation; therefore, he resolved to go himself to take my brothers away from Alassio. First, however, he thought of coming to Turin to hear me out. He really had great respect for me because

of my priestly character. He arrived at the Oratory on the morning of 4 February, when the transferred feast of St Francis de Sales was being celebrated. He entered the shrine of Mary Help of Christians during the community mass, with prayers, singing, the clerics and general communion. It was the first step to appease him and almost make him a Salesian.

When he went to the sacristy and looked at the first door, where the names of the priests in charge of the church were writ-ten, and next to them the number of strokes of the chime calls, he saw a line drawn with a pencil across my name, which was the last one. He then asked the sacristan why that name was almost crossed out. He replied: "Don Vespignani is seriously ill. He is spitting blood. He seems to have been to see the doctors."

My father went to church very distressed and prayed; then, coming out of the main gate, he tried to enter the Oratory. At that point, a carriage stopped in front of the gate, from which two priests got out and headed where he was going. He accompanied them, exchanging a few words with the elder.

"Maybe they come here to the Don Bosco Oratory?"

"Yes. And you also visiting the Oratory? Do you perhaps have some acquaintances or relatives here?"

"Yes, I have my son there, Fr Joseph Vespignani."

Then that priest took him by the arm and said: "It's going so well. Oh, we are such friends! Come, come with me."

In an instant the door swung open, "hurrahs" echoed from a

thousand breasts, cheering Don Bosco amid the festive notes of the band. It was Don Bosco himself, returning from Rome to celebrate the congregation's patron saint with his sons. Everyone ran to kiss his hand. My father, deeply moved, also bent down to kiss his hand. All clouds disappeared with that kiss; he too became a child and a son of that great father.

Don Bosco immediately introduced him to Don Rua, who, having greeted him and given him news in the least unpleasant terms possible, himself offered to accompany him to my room. However, while he was entrusting my father to another confrere, he had the delicacy to come to me very quickly and tell me: "There is a good gentleman in the porter's lodge, plump, short, of good colour, who is coming to visit you."

"Oh! is it Dad?! is he annoyed or outraged?"

"No, no; it's the best pasta in the world. He met with Don Bosco, he was so moved, and everything's fine. Don't worry."

"We hid everything that was likely to make a bad impression, tidied up the room a little, and here comes Dad smiling, and his first words are: "You are in a beautiful paradise! If I could, I would also stay here forever!"

He hugged and kissed me and sat by my side, unable to articulate any more words, so moved was he, under the impression of such beautiful happiness, on that day, at that hour, near a saint.

Here we must remember that as



children, when we recited evening prayers at our father's little table, we saw a beautiful book on it, which my mother told us to leave alone, because it was "daddy's book." When I got older and wanted to see what book it was, I found that it was the *Philothea* of St Francis de Sales. In the same room, hanging on the wall was a beautiful picture of the holy bishop of Geneva, before whose image Mummy sent us if we were mischievous, to recite an *Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory Be*.

That was why we even then believed St Francis as the saint who forgave and removed all the unruliness of the world. So, in the family, there was devotion to this saint, on whose feast day, 29 January 1886, our good father was to end his days, after having received Don Bosco's blessing, to whom he had by then offered all his filial affection. A marvellous trait of Divine Providence, which makes everything serve his glory and the good of our souls! (Vespignani, *Un anno alla scuola di Don Bosco*, 52). □



**A PROJECT OF LIFE INSPIRED BY MARY
PART THREE**

by Enrico dal Covolo

**III. THE HANDMAID
OF THE LORD**

The episode of Martha and Mary narrated by Luke taught us something about the relationship between serving one's neighbour and contemplating God. We have seen that listening to the Word is a "balancing act" between these two inalienable poles of Christian experience, and should therefore be regarded as "the better part," "the only thing needed."

But this is not the only passage in which Mary, Martha's sister, invites us to overcome the logic of profit - which leads to the degeneration of action - in order to open ourselves to the contemplation of God and the service of our neighbour.

In his Gospel, John relates that one day, Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus' feet with a precious perfume: according to Judas, it could cost three hundred silver coins. With this resounding gesture, Mary rejected the officiousness of the powerful, and as a humble handmaiden, she magni-

fied her Lord by 'wasting' the perfume of praise and service.

1. Reading (John 12,17)

"Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany where Lazarus was, the one he had raised from the dead. There they prepared a dinner for him: Martha served and Lazarus was one of the guests. Mary took a jar of pure nard, a perfumed ointment of great value, and poured it on Jesus' feet; then she dried them with her hair, and the perfume spread through the whole house. Judas Iscariot (one of Jesus' disciples: the one who would later betray him) was also there. Judas said, "You could sell this ointment for three hundred silver coins, and then distribute it to the poor!" But he did not say this because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief: he kept the common purse, and took what was in it. Jesus therefore said, "Leave her alone. She has done this for the day of my burial...."

2. Meditation

Two simple points can help our meditation. The first frames the scene in the overall Johannine narrative and firmly connects it with the death and resurrection of Jesus; the second emphasises an antithesis that is particularly rich in symbolic meaning.

a) While Jesus sits at the table, Mary sprinkles perfumed spike-nard on the Master's feet. Exegetes agree that the fact of the anointing of Bethany should be ranked in the order of the Johannine 'signs.' The same observation is valid for two other facts, also narrated in chapters 11 and 12: thus, the resurrection of Lazarus, the anointing of Bethany, and the request of some Greeks to see Jesus (with the concluding word about the grain of wheat, which bears fruit only if it goes into the ground) appear as signs that prefigure and anticipate the death-resurrection of Jesus. The anointing of Bethany, in particular, anticipates the mournful burial ritual.

b) The 'house full of perfume'

sounds a bit like the antithesis of Judas' 'bag full': Christ's logic rests on the law of gratuitousness and 'waste'; it is the logic of the grain of wheat that is delivered to the earth, and hopes and waits for life. It has nothing to do with the calculated efficiency of the world.

It reaffirms the absolute value of praise that expresses love for God, the meaning of contemplation and prayer (nard) even in the face of the world's enormous problems (poverty, injustice, suffering...). These problems should not be approached with the logic of Judas (the full purse), but with the logic of the Gospel (waste the ointment, pour out the praise).

3. For prayer and for life

But we do not intend to limit ourselves to simply reading or even meditating on the Gospel passage. Each of us is invited to celebrate in prayer and in life the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection. We are also invited to celebrate the anointing of



*If we want
to rise again,
we must live
the cross,
carry it
engraved
in our hearts
as an unceasing
reminder.*

Bethany, identifying ourselves - in some way - with Mary; and in that gesture, blessed by the Lord, we too will be able to bend down to wash and perfume the feet of the Master.

And immediately another episode of the Passion comes to mind. It is John again who recounts in chapter 13 of his Gospel the washing of the feet, and relates Jesus' peremptory conclusion: 'You too must wash one another's feet. I have given you an example, so that as I have done you also should do'.

Since then, to honour the person of Jesus, as Mary did, also means to honour the person of one's brother; and vice versa, to honour the person of one's brother means to honour the person of Jesus.

This was the experience of Sabatino, a young man who died at the age of 20 caring for the 'tramps' in Milan's Central Station. Shortly before his death, he confided that the first time - precisely on a Good Friday - when he had set out to wash the sore feet of a tramp, he had felt the mystical certainty of holding

the wounded feet of Jesus in his hands. "It was a unique experience," he confessed, "and will remain forever unforgettable."

In other words, identifying ourselves with Mary anointing the feet of Jesus, celebrating this gesture today in prayer and life, means making our own again - by the grace of God - the project of the cross and supreme service.

For it is not enough to meditate on the story of the Lord's death and resurrection: if we want to rise again, we must live the cross, carry it engraved in our hearts as an unceasing reminder.

The words of St Charles Borromeo, wracked with sobs before the cross of Jesus, come to mind: "Oh blessed are those who at all times cherish the memory of this life-giving Passion! I dare say that it somehow becomes impossible for them to sin..."

But what does it mean for me to carry "carved in my heart" the sign of the cross? What does this mean in the concreteness of my life in the family, at work, in society?

Here the celebration of the Word in prayer and in life imposes discernment and conversion, and invites one to pass through the "sacramental signs" of the Church.

Then, no longer blinded by selfishness and personal gain, we will make our own the praise of the humble handmaid of Nazareth: "My soul magnifies the Lord. He has done great things in me: holy is his name! He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has overthrown the mighty from their thrones, and raised up the lowly. His love endures for ever!" □



MY VOCATION STORY

A GUATEMALAN SALESIAN

Victor Manuel Barrios del Aguila

Sarah Laporta

electrical engineering.

Would you introduce yourself?

My name is Víctor Manuel Barrios del Aguila. I was born in Guatemala City, the capital of Guatemala, a small country in Central America. I have been a Salesian of Don Bosco for six years, during which time I have been able to live the most beautiful experiences of my life, especially being among the boys.

What's your family like?

I come from a small family of five. My father was born in western Guatemala, working as a child as a farmer among the coffee plants. Then he became a lawyer. He has been in heaven for seven years and I am sure he always intercedes for me and my vocation. He died when I was in the novitiate. That moment, however, helped me so much to grow as a religious, because I had to entrust myself and my father totally to God's will. My mother was born in southern Guatemala, near the Pacific, and she always acted with responsibility and dedication in everything she did. I have two brothers. Actually, one of them is a cousin, but my father has taken care of him since he was little, before he even married my mother. So, he is the elder brother to me. Now he is married and has three children. My other brother is younger than me and has just finished his university studies in

How did your vocation come about?

My parents have always passed on to us the gift of faith, and I think this is what moved me internally to think about becoming a priest. I did not know the Salesians. I had only heard about them. I got to know Don Bosco through the film I saw. I was struck by those beautiful scenes and began to think that perhaps the Lord was calling me to become a Salesian. In those years, the casket with Don Bosco's relics was travelling around the world and even arrived in Guatemala. More out of curiosity, I went to see the procession they went from the Salesian parish to the Salesian school. I saw that joy, that real cheerfulness and so many people, especially young people, and I was impressed. At that moment, the Lord sowed the seed of Salesian vocation in my heart.

How did you meet the Salesians?

In my last year of school, I started talking to a Salesian about my vocation. For me it was like discovering a new world, because I knew nothing about the Sales-



ians. This Salesian was a formator and the vocational animator of the Province of Central America, so the first Salesians I got to know, were the pre-novices and post-novices with their formators. I remember the first time I went to the post-novitiate for a get-together with other young people who had vocational intentions. I didn't know anyone, but the Salesians welcomed me with a smile and open arms. I felt at home.



nities, but many die on the way to the North.

And what are your plans and dreams for the future?

I still have to finish my theological studies to complete my initial formation. Once I have completed this course of formation, I think I will return to my Province to work

wherever the Lord wills and thus be able to put into practice all that I will have learnt, not only theoretically in the class-rooms, but also what I will have experienced in Italy. I dream of a Guatemala and Central America with many opportunities for young people, where they can realise their dreams, and where the Salesian family is an important support for them in their Christian, educational and social life.

How do you see the future of the Congregation in Guatemala?

I see a future with more vocations for the Salesian Family: young people who want to dedicate their lives for others as religious, religious or committed lay people. Although the last few years have not been so easy in this area, thanks to the Salesians' witness of fidelity and joy, I think there will come a time when this will motivate many to continue Don Bosco's mission. I see a Salesian presence more and more involved in responding to the needs of the neediest youth, a congregation involved with the families of the young. □

What is your current assignment?

I am currently finishing my first year of theology studies at the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome. I am part of the Salesian Community Zeffirino Namuncurà, which welcomes many theology students from all over the world. I get a very broad view of the congregation worldwide due to the cultural diversity, I have found myself in. Besides studying, I also have apostolic experience in the Don Bosco Oratory in L'Aquila, a city a hundred kilometres from Rome.

What are your biggest concerns?

I am concerned that in Guatemala the level of education is the lowest in all of Latin America. This means that many young people are not well-prepared for a decent job or university studies and thus overcome the situation of poverty in which more than half the population finds itself. For this reason, many children and young people have to migrate, seeking better opportu-

IN A CHEERFUL MOOD

Waist Deep

While driving through Buffalo after a heavy snow storm, a motorist noted a cop, apparently waist deep in snow, directing traffic. Feeling sorry for him, the motorist called out, "I'm sorry you have to work half buried in the snow."

The cop called back, "Don't feel sorry for me, feel sorry for my horse!"

Gift Excitement

The small girl had recently received a new watch and some perfume, which she was very excited about. Their family asked the pastor over for dinner. The girl wanted so badly to tell the pastor about her new gifts, but her mother insisted she wait until after dinner and not interrupt at meal time.

Not able to contain her excitement, and not wanting to disobey, the little girl leaned over to the pastor during dinner and whispered, "If you hear a little noise and smell something, it's me!"

Natural Antibiotic

While serving as an associate pastor in a church in the California gold country, I had an elderly gentleman attend some of our Bible studies.

When he missed one week, I called to see if he was alright. He told me he had started to feel sick, but a friend had told him of a natural supplement that had helped him to get better right away. When I asked what it was, he said it was available at health food stores and was like a natural antibiotic.

I again asked what this wonder supplement was called and he said, (meaning Echinacea) "Euthanasia, I think."

Picture Favour

Dining out one evening, I noticed six teenagers boisterously celebrating some event at a nearby table. Toward the end of their meal, one of them got up and produced a camera.

"Hey, wait a minute," one of her companions said. "You have to be in the picture too."

When I approached and asked if I could help, the girl who owned the camera was delighted. I snapped a picture of the group and then, being unfamiliar with the camera, I asked her, "Do you want me to take another in case that one doesn't come out?"

"Oh, no, that's okay," she chirped innocently. "I always get double prints."

The Cold Truth

On a cold night a man with reputedly poor eyesight was driving a friend home. The frost was thick on the windows, and after a couple of near accidents the friend tactfully suggested that it might help if they cleaned the windscreen.

"What's the use?" the driver replied. "I left my glasses at home."

Putting it Bluntly

An English master, confronted with what to put on a boy's report when he knew the child was cheating but couldn't prove it, finally wrote down: "Forging his way steadily ahead!" □

THE BLUE CAVE

He was a poor and simple man. In the evening, after a hard day's work, he would return home exhausted and in a bad mood. He would look with annoyance at the people passing by in their cars or at those sitting at cafe tables.

'Those ones are all right,' grumbled the man, pressed into the tram like a bunch of grapes into the winepress. "They don't know what it's like to struggle.... All roses and flowers for them. If they only had my cross to bear!" The Lord had always listened with great patience to man's complaints. And, one evening, he waited for him on the doorstep.

"Ah, it's you, Lord?" said the man, when he saw him. "Don't try to appease me. You know well how heavy the cross you've imposed on me is." The man was more peeved than ever.

The Lord smiled good-naturedly at him. "Come with me. I will give you a choice," he said.

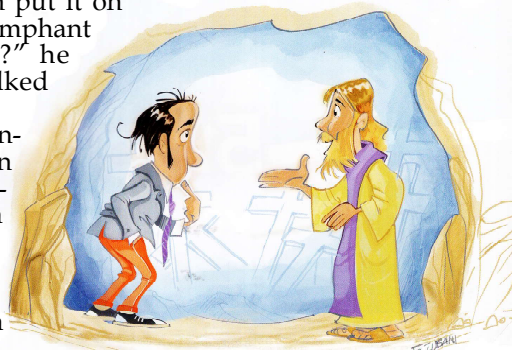
The man suddenly found himself inside a huge blue cave. The architecture was divine. And it was full of crosses: small, large, studded with gems, smooth, twisted.

"These are the crosses of men," said the Lord. "Choose one." The man ruefully threw his cross into a corner and, rubbing his hands together, starting to select one.

He tried on a light cross, but it was long and cumbersome. He put a bishop's cross around his neck, but it was incredibly heavy with responsibility and sacrifice. Another, smooth and graceful in appearance, as soon as it was on the man's shoulders it began to sting as if full of nails. He grabbed a silver cross, which was glowing, but was overcome by an excruciating feeling of loneliness and abandonment. He immediately put it down. He tried and tried again, but every cross had some defect.

Finally, in a semi-dark corner, he found a small cross, a little worn from use. It was not too heavy, nor too bulky. It seemed to have been made for him. The man put it on his shoulders with a triumphant air. "Shall I take this?" he exclaimed. And he walked out of the cave.

The Lord turned his gentle gaze upon him. And in that instant the man realised that he had taken up his old cross again: the one he had thrown away on entering the cave; the one he had been carrying all his life. □



It Couldn't Be Done

(Edgar A. Guest)

Somebody said that it couldn't be done, but he with a chuckle replied That "maybe it couldn't", but he would be one who wouldn't say so till he tried. So he buckled right in with a trace of a grin on his face. If he worried he hid it. He started to sing as he tackled the thing, that couldn't be done and he did it.

Somebody scoffed: "Oh, you'll never do that; at least no one ever has done it"; But he took off his coat and he took off his hat, and the first thing we knew he'd begun it. With a lift of his chin and a bit of a grin, Without any doubting or quiddit, he started to sing as he tackled the thing that couldn't be done, and he did it.

There are thousands to tell you it cannot be done, there are thousands to prophesy failure; there are thousands to point out to you, one by one, the dangers that wait to assail you. But just buckle in with a bit of a grin just take off your coat and go to it. Just start to sing as you tackle the thing that "cannot be done," and you'll do it. □

LOVING CHILDREN TO THEIR LOVING MOTHER

On 14 th January, 2024, my father and sister were proceeding to Church for Sunday mass on their bike, when a stray dog suddenly barged across the street right in front of them. My father who was driving lost control of the vehicle and they were both flung across the road. He suffered a serious head injury and was bleeding profusely while my sister who was bruised all over her hands and feet shouted frantically for help. Some kind passers by attended to them and they were immediately rushed to the hospital. My father sustained 16 stitches on his forehead and to the surprise of the doctor was fully conscious. The doctor later said that the injuries were quite grievous in nature and they were lucky to be alive. No doubt, Mary was there and it was her divine intervention that saved them from what could have been a fatal accident. We owe our heartfelt and deepest gratitude to our Lord and His Blessed Mother for this new lease of their life. St.Vincent De Paul beautifully states "Each of our days is marked with the protection of Mary, who is exceedingly anxious to be our Mother, when we desire to be her children." Thank You Mother Mary.

Maria Juliana D'souza & Family, Goa

POPE'S WORLDWIDE PRAYER NETWORK

APRIL 2024

For the Role of women

Let us pray that the dignity and worth of women be recognized in every culture, and for an end to the discrimination they face in various parts of the world.

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MARY WAS THERE

In April 2019, I conceived after six years of marriage and we were overjoyed. Alas, our happiness didn't last long and in August 2019, I lost my child owing to some complications. I was both heartbroken and frustrated. My faith was totally shaken. My dream was shattered and I gave up all hope of conceiving again. But I conceived again in November the same year. I was put on strict bed rest. Amidst all my doubts and anxieties I turned in prayer to Jesus and his Blessed Mother Mary Help of Christians to save my baby this time. We were blessed with a lovely baby boy in June 2020. Nathan Antonio was born premature in the seventh month but our Lord and his blessed Mother Mary have watched over him. I urge all who are troubled today to surrender to our merciful Lord and his blessed mother in full faith and prayer. Our Lord and his loving Mother have never abandoned their children. *M. Juliana D'souza, Goa*

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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