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*Through the fruitful
virginity
of Blessed Mary
may we experience
the intercession
of her, through whom
we were found worthy
to receive
the Author of life.*

*(The Opening Prayer of the
Solemnity of the Mother of God)*

From The Editor's Desk

WHAT A LOVER OF LIFE!

Bobby was a great human being; (she was actually *Hertha Constantine Mantzouranis*) and we had some lovely, lazy afternoons together. I used to join her after I had finished my last lecture at the University, I peddled my way up to her bungalow on the quiet lonely road in my little home town. There she would be snipping flowers in her garden to vase them and place them strategically in her beautifully adorned and rather opulent drawing room. By the time I had caught my breath, parked my cycle and entered the cool confines of that serene space, there she was, with a glass of chilled sweet lime juice for me and a gin and tonic for herself.

She was a widow of many years but a lady who loved life, loud laughs, good food and was great company, to boot. Bobby was her 'pet-name,' for all who knew her. We chatted about this and that and life in general. She told me about her days in Potsdam before she came to our shores just on the eve of WWII and how she gelled with the Britishers who were the 'occupiers.' Of course, she was allowed to spend her days as a free person because she had married Costa, her Greek husband, who was also a wonderful soul. Though I had never met him, she got me to love him by the way she described him to me.

Generous to a fault, Bobby was someone who lived her faith on her sleeve and made no secret about the way she expressed her love for all and sundry. The painters who came to give her trellises a lick of paint every now and again, the occasional gardener who dug around her garded and repotted indoor plants or planted seedlings in the newly mulched beds, and people like me who just dropped by to bask in her company, sharing bits and pieces of her experience. We all left very blessed that we had met someone who lived fully the proclamation of Jesus: "I have come that they may have life and *have it to the full.*" (Jn. 10:10)

Those were glorious days when we all knew one another, and I - 'still green in the gills' as they say, was warmly taken into her fold most affectionately. It's strange, isn't it, how things happen in life? A casual meeting or maybe a spilled drink, draw people into your life and you into theirs, for good. Happy and lasting friendships emerging from such unlikely beginnings. Is it that the chance encounters of life seem to give God *his* opportunity? Is it that on these occasions, our defensive alarm systems are switched off, and God can slip past quietly into our lives?

The saints believed that our purpose in life is to find God in all things and in everyone and to seek to recognize him in his many different guises: the Skillful Weaver who works a pattern from the random strands of life: the Watchful Shepherd whose unseen hand gently guides our steps.

Fr. Ian Doulton, sdb

LIKE AN OVERFLOWING JAR

Bp. Gianpaolo Dianin

Conjugal love is a personal asset, but it is also a social asset. Bringing some of this love that is essential to the family into social life is one of the faces that God entrusts to spouses.

In the life-project of spouses, children certainly have a priority of place. Marriage finds its two focuses in spousal love and openness to life. Christian tradition speaks of the unitive and procreative significance of marriage, and the consent on which marriage is based is precisely about the willingness to love each other for life and the readiness to welcome children.

Children are a gift, a choice, they are the fruit of the love of two spouses, but first and foremost they are a great and profound desire inscribed in the very dynamic of love. Which has written that before being a choice, children are a 'destiny' of marriage, as if love were a vessel that slowly fills with the love of the spouses and then overflows and comes out of that vessel to become fruitful beyond the two spouses. In the gift of love of a man and a woman, there is already the shadow of a third protagonist that can be born from that love. Love is an intense and passionate gaze on the beloved, also on someone who is beyond the two lovers and who has the contours of fruitfulness, of the future.

Today, much more than yesterday, we come to terms with a condition that affects many couples:

low fertility or even sterility. More and more couples are unable to have children despite wanting them. Some statistics speak of 20% of cohabitations failing to produce a child. Medicine says that of these, for 40% the cause is in the man, for 40% the cause is in the woman, and for 20% it is not known, in the sense that clinical examinations find no problem, but the children do not come. Not many words are needed to describe the suffering associated with the news that there will be no children forthcoming.

A fundamental aspect of a couple's project cannot be realized, and it is a real "grief" that demands to be worked through before taking any further steps. Children are a gift, a blessing, but their arrival is not guaranteed by the very fact of being united in marriage.

Pope Francis in *Amoris laetitia* dwells on this condition and begins by recalling the dignity of marriage even when there are no children. The Council's words are precise: 'Even if the offspring, very often longed for, is not there, marriage endures as a community and communion of all life and preserves its value and indissolubility' (GS 50). One might have expected the Pope to deal with the various medically assis-

ted procreation techniques to which many couples turn and which are the subject of so much debate even in the Catholic world, but instead the Pope speaks of adoption, focusing on children, those who do not have a family and who could find one in couples who for various reasons are unable to have children.

The Pope writes: "Adopting a child is an act of love, offering the gift of a family to someone who has none [...] Adoption is a very generous way to become parents. I encourage those who cannot have children to expand their marital love to embrace those who lack a proper family situation. They will never regret having been generous" (AL 179). And after having wished that legislation could facilitate adoption procedures also for those unwanted children who might be abandoned and also to prevent abortion, he gives us the prophet

Isaiah's very intense words: "Even if your mother should forget, I will never forget you" (Is 49:15). The Pope thus conjures up this biblical reference: Those who accept the challenge of adopting and accepting someone unconditionally and gratuitously become channels of God's love," of a God who loves life and suffers for all those children who have come into the world without finding the warmth and love of a father and mother (AL 179).

In his reflection, the Pope recalls a fundamental truth concerning the presumed right to a child: "In the light of those situations where a child is desired at any cost, as a right for one's self-fulfilment, adoption and foster care, correctly understood, manifest an important aspect of parenting and raising of children. They make people aware that children, whether natural, adoptive or taken in foster care, are persons



in their own right who need to be accepted, loved and cared for, and not just brought into the world." (AL 180).

The fruitfulness of a marriage also calls to mind other aspects because that overflowing jar fertilises not only the children that may arrive, but also society and the Church. The Pope writes: "Let Christian families not forget that faith does not remove us from the world, but draws us more deeply into it" (AL 181). And so, Francis gives us one of the pearls of *Amoris laetitia* when he affirms: "God has given the family the job of "domesticating" the world and helping each person to see fellow human beings as brothers and sisters" (AL 183). A strong and precise statement to

remind us that conjugal love is a personal good, but also a social good. It is a strong invitation to break down the wall that clearly separates the private world from the public one, and gives opposite rules and behaviour to one and to the other. In the private world, words like gratuitousness, welcome, hospitality, gift... make sense. In the public world, none of this exists and other criteria prevail. Bringing a little of that love that is essential in the family into social life is one of the faces of the fruitfulness that God entrusts to married couples. "The 'mystique' of the sacrament has a social character," he affirms, recalling, finally, that the poor knock not only on the doors of the social services, but also on the doors of our homes (AL 183). □

THE ROSE PETAL

One day a great Guru (a revered teacher, in the Eastern tradition) visited a monastery and his arrival caused uproar among those present.

"Will he," said the monks, "still want us to make place for one more? There are already too many of us here. Everyone wants to have his say and we end up not understanding anything. Let us make him understand, with some sign, that will not offend him, and tell him that our monastery is full and there is no place for him'.

So the leader of the monks had a cup filled with milk brought to him, wanting him to understand that the place was already overcrowded with teachers and there was no room for anyone else.

When the cup was presented to him, the great guru looked at it, then smiled and, picking up a rose petal, gently laid it to float on the milk.

The message was meant to signify that, just as the rose petal floated on the milk without overflowing the cup, so too the wisdom of the master could find a place there without upsetting anyone. □



IMMERSED IN THE WATERS OF THE JORDAN

Chino Biscontin

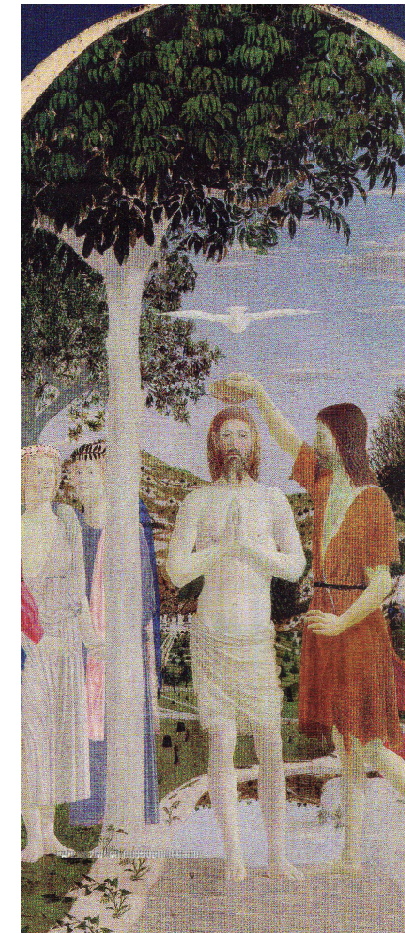
With baptism we have taken on the responsibility to follow Jesus, and reproduce in ourselves the features of his humanity

The feast of the Baptism of the Lord (12 January) forms part of our Christmas celebrations, and helps us to grasp more deeply the value and meaning of the human birth of the Son of God. Arising as a man in the midst of men, he immersed himself in the river of our history, which came forth limp from the hands of the Creator, but was made corrupted by the immense quantity of sins committed over the millennia. Contamination that could have led humanity to its ultimate ruin, as the account of the universal Flood suggests. By the will of the Father, the Son-made-man wanted to be our salvation.

But in order to be our salvation, it was necessary for him to be in full solidarity with us, despite his innocence and our guilt. The Baptism that John was offering was intended for sinners in need of purification and conversion. After an attempted resistance by the Baptist, Jesus asks to receive that very Baptism and does so as a choice of full union with us, well understanding that it would entail a dramatic price for him, the innocent one. And he does so, because this is the mission that the Father entrusts to him. For Jesus, entering the waters of the Jordan meant immersing himself totally in the Father's love for mankind, and this is because he loved the Father infinitely. In a

dramatic phrase, St Paul wrote: "He who knew no sin, God treated as sin for our sake" (2 Cor 5:21).

In this twofold, total love



**Everything is done
that you may become
as suns, that is,
a life-force for others.
Be perfect lights
before that
immense light.
You will be bathed
in its supernatural
splendour.**

*(Gregory of Nazianzus
329-390 CE)*

towards the Father and towards his brothers, Jesus fully realises in his humanity his being the Son of God. Above him, the heavens open wide, the Spirit of God descends in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaims: "This is my Son, the Beloved: in him whom I delight" (Mt 3:17). The prophecy of Isaiah, which is proclaimed as the first reading in the Mass of the feast, helps us to understand what that sentence means: "This is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am well pleased. I have put my Spirit upon him; he shall bring forth the law to the nations. I, the Lord, have called you for righteousness and taken you by the hand; I have formed you and established you as the covenant of the people and the light of the nations, that you may open the eyes of the blind and bring out from prison the captives, from confinement those who dwell in darkness" (Is 42:1, 67).

That solidarity with sinners demanded a very high price is shown by the fact that, right after his Baptism, Jesus underwent harsh temptations during forty days and forty nights of fasting and solitude in the desert. The tempter, who coalesces into his power the whole dark mass of evil in the world (he is the prince of darkness), will try in every way to break Jesus' bond of trust with the Father, to make him hijack his being a Son to his own advantage and thus make him abandon his solidarity with his brothers. He will not succeed: Jesus will remain adamant in his total abandonment of love to the Father, in his understanding with Him concerning the salvation of mankind.

Jesus was aware that this first Baptism would result in a second one. During his ministry he would exclaim: "There is a Baptism that I must receive, and how distressed I am, until it is accomplished" (Lk 12:50). It will not be a Baptism of water, but of blood: when the anguish becomes mortal, during the agony in the Garden of Olives, his body will be bathed in a sweat of blood, waiting to pour out, from his heart pierced by the lance, blood and water. The evangelist John interprets that water and blood as the gift given to us of Baptism in the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist. The Baptism we receive in the Holy Spirit is immersion in the Lord Jesus; the Eucharist we receive is sharing in his life as the Son of God. The words that the Father spoke about Jesus he speaks about us: "You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter." □

THE RESOURCE WITHIN YOU

by Anastasia Dias

"I've never felt loved in my entire life," he murmured in his girlfriend's ears. He thought to himself, "Not even when I'm with you," though he didn't tell her.

"What?" she glanced at him furiously. "What about the times when you were with me?" she questioned. "I've never felt loved even when I was with you," he whispered under his breath. "That's it. I've had enough of your nonsense. I'm leaving." she declared sounding hurt.

He didn't try to stop her. She was the fourth woman to leave him in the past four months. "You're the most ungrateful human being I've ever seen. All that you have isn't even yours. It's your father's money. Once it's over you can go on your quest for true love. We'll see if you find it then."

He didn't have the energy to fight back. Besides, she was telling the truth. It was his father's money alright. He hadn't worked a single day in his life; he had taken his share of ancestral wealth and squandered it all.

Party after party, girlfriend after girlfriend: this was the life he had always desired. When he achieved it, he realised that it couldn't fill the void he possessed, which he assumed it would.

It was 3 am. He lay in bed, tears in his eyes. He had finished almost all of his money, his girlfriend had left, his friends didn't care if he was dead or alive. "I should work," he thought to himself. He lay in bed, tossing and turning, throughout the night. Finally, he got out of bed at 7 am.

He left the flat and started walking, crossing houses and fields; then he stopped at one. "Hey, I'm looking for work. Do you need help with your field?" he asked the man who ploughing his field. "Yeah, I have cattle that need to be cared for. You could do that, could you not?" the man replied. "Absolutely!" the boy replied, excited. "Go to the backyard. First, milk the cows. Then, feed the pigs. When you've finished with that, you can clean up the mess they've made. Go, get on with it," the man ordered. The boy went into the backyard. He felt his stomach churning. He hadn't eaten a morsel since last night. And there wasn't any food left at the flat. He started doing his job. His hunger only increased. The man came to check on him.

"Do you, by any chance, have some food?" the boy asked bashfully. "I'm sorry, I don't," replied the man. The boy began feeling



dizzy. He couldn't control himself. He started eating the food he was supposed to be given to the cattle. Shortly after, he started to throw up. One day of work and that was how he felt.

"What should I do," he whispered to himself in the barn, "what should I do?" he thought to himself, his head in the palms of his hands. He was devastated.

"I will go back to my father's house and work there," he decided. He left the place and started walking again. He crossed forests and rivers; he passed by a beautiful sunset. He didn't notice any of this; he simply felt terrible inside. He didn't know if his father would recognize him, much less, accept him again. He had no clue what he would do if his father too would tell him to get lost.

He was quite some distance away. He could see the gates of his father's house. There was a man standing outside leaning on the gate post. He recognised him, only now, he looked much older. He had aged a lot in the past few months. The man recognised the boy too. He ran towards the boy, embraced him and brought him home. The boy couldn't believe it. He expected his father to tell him to go away. The boy now knew that he had found what he was looking for. It had taken several years and a life-changing experience for him to realise he had always possessed the things he was looking for. He had sought acceptance, validation and love from external sources while it was right there with him. While he felt his father's warm arms around him in a

firm embrace, he finally realised that he had finally come home.

I'm sure many of you have heard or read this story before. This is the story of the "Prodigal Son," the "Lost Son" or the story of the "Loving Father."

I love this parable so much. I heard it for the first time when I was little but as I grew older it made so much more sense to me.

How many times have I sought acceptance, validation and love from external sources? How many times have I felt unloved? How many times have I gone on long journeys hoping to find meaning and purpose and to discover myself? How many times have I thought I would find what I was looking for, along the way? But you know what? I was completely wrong. I was stupid.

All that I was looking for was already with me, within me. I just didn't know; I wasn't aware. And like the lost son, I kept searching for something I already had.

This is a new year. It is a time to look within, reflect and find the huge reserves of acceptance and love that only you can give yourself and in turn share it with others. This is a season to rediscover purpose and meaning. Take this opportunity to find your true self, ever-grounded in love and happiness and move forward with what you possess. Add meaning to the lives of those who think they are lost, just like we once were. "Embrace" each and every human being you meet with unconditional love, with the love of the father who found his "lost" son! Have a blessed New Year. □



LIVING AND WORKING IN A REFUGEE CAMP

THE SALESIANS IN PALABEK, UGANDA

"Time is a very sensitive issue in the refugee camp, because they spend a lot of free time. The Salesians take responsibility for generating propositions for that free time: theatre, dance, workshops, music," says Maximo Herrera.

"In 2015, Pope Francis invited congregations not only to work in the refugee camps, but also to live there. So we Salesians took up the challenge to be inside Palabek," explains Salesian Maximo Herrera, an Argentinean and missionary in Africa. "Other organisations work there don't live there. They leave every day, but the Salesians are the only ones allowed to live inside Palabek and Kakuma, Kenya."

Uganda is the African country with the largest number of refugee camps - there are twenty-eight in total - and they are for people from Ethiopia, Somalia, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Sudan. It is estimated that a total of 1,700,000 refugees live there. In the particular case of Palabek, which belongs to the UN and covers an area of 400 square kilometres, some 72,000 people are staying there, mainly from South Sudan.

The Salesians are the only organisation authorised to live inside the Palabek refugee camp. Maximo Herrera is a Salesian coadjutor, Argentinean and former student of the works in Salta and Cordoba. He has been living and working as a Salesian missionary in Africa for 28 years, and among the places he has had to serve is

the Salesian community of Palabek.

What is it like living in a refugee camp as a Salesian?

The Salesians have a small house, most people live in mud or thatched houses, but ours at least had a tin roof, we have light, which people don't have, and well water. Until last year, we were six Salesians from six countries: a Venezuelan, two trainees - one from Burundi and the other from Uganda - a Congolese, an Indian and me. It was a very beautiful experience. Our daily life in the country was a surprise, because human conditions are very limited, the town where you buy food is 80 kilometres away on a mountain road, and we share the basics that people eat, maize and beans.



I remember the first Sunday I came I went out running and found a lot of women and children breaking stones, and I thought "what a sad life, a Sunday breaking stones." When I got home I talked about it and they said: "And what else does that woman do, she has nothing to do." Time is a very sensitive issue for them because they have a lot of free time. Our house is like the mission headquarters, and eight kilometres away we have the school, which is for vocational training, it's the only one there. And then we do all the leisure activities: sports, theatre, music. The most difficult thing for a refugee is time, because he is eternal, he has nothing to do. The Vocational Training proposal is characteristic of the Salesian work in Palabek and, as Maximo says, "responds to the desire to learn, to feel useful, to graduate in order to find work."

In the face of such a difficult reality, how do you sustain the faith?

I think there are two keys: first, the depth of faith of each missionary. I think I learnt to pray while I was in Africa, because I saw the effort and conviction with which they pray. There are two details that caught my attention: first, they enter the Church barefoot because they say it is a sacred, holy place. And also that when they go where the sanctuary is, they cover their faces. This is from Moses and Exodus, because they said that the light was so strong that you could not see. They took that expression from the Bible literally, but it is a precious expression.

In the refugee camp they remember a lot when Jesus went to Egypt, they celebrate it as the day of the refugees, because there Jesus was also a refugee, he was one of them.

And finally I rediscover devotion to Mary, in Covid's time it was forbidden to go to Mass, but Christians gathered to pray the Rosary, because this was allowed. In the country they are very devoted to the Vergine. And as Salesians we work to spread devotion to Mary Help of Christians, who, as in Don Bosco's time, is the mother who accompanies us in difficult times. I think this has a lot to do with the context of Africa, where women are the ones who run away with their children. You see that they come walking with the little ones, they come to the camp and they continue to look after them.

And it also seems to me very important to support faith, community life, the Salesian missions are communities. The mission is entrusted to the community. We are very close to the people, we spend all day in the workshops and you constantly hear or discover difficult situations and even if they don't seem to affect you.

But the community helps you to soften it, to bear it, it is important to understand the Salesian mission as a whole, it is not handed over to a missionary. The missionary does his job, but all the brothers do the mission. So when we win the "campionato" we all win it, and when we lose it, we all lose it. This helps us to live with a certain normality. □

Witnesses in & for Our Times



ST. ANGELA MERICI (January 27)

Ian Pinto, sdb

CHALLENGING CHILDHOOD

Angela was born on March 21, 1474, into a family of farmers in a small town sitting on the southwestern shore of Lake Garda in Lombardy, Italy. In an insignificant village on one of the lesser-known shores of the biggest lake in Italy, a great educator and saint was nurtured, however, it would not become apparent until many years later.

Angela's story begins quite tragically as she is left orphaned with her sister and brother as her only family before completing eleven years of age. A well-to-do uncle of theirs graciously accepted the young orphans into his home and provided for them. Angela was very close to her sister and when she became seriously ill and ultimately died, Angela's world was completely shattered. To add insult to injury, her sister did not remain alive long enough for the priest to arrive and give her the last rites. This troubled Angela all the more. Since she belonged to a devout Catholic family, she couldn't imagine her sister's salvation without the last rites of the Church. The young teenager fell into melancholy but contin-



ued to fervently pray for the repose of her sister's soul. She received consolation through a vision that showed her sister in heaven in the company of the saints.

This vision brought consolation to Angela but changed her outlook on life. Her demeanor turned serious and she began desiring to offer her life to the Lord. As an outward sign, she dyed her blonde hair black with soot and sought out ways and means of dedicating herself to God. She entered the Third Order of St. Francis with

the view of growing in spirituality and discerning her religious vocation. The spirituality of St. Francis made a deep impression on her and she tried to imitate his total trust in Providence and rejection of material things. She began sleeping on the floor and removed all excess furniture and accessories from her room. She also restricted her diet and fasted often.

VOCATIONAL JOURNEY

When she was about 20 years old, she left her uncle's house after he passed away and returned to her parent's house. On the way, she had a vision in which she saw a ladder of light stretching from earth to heaven. A group of maidens were ascending the ladder while being accompanied by angels. What she made of this vision is unknown but in hindsight, it shows us how God revealed to her the path her life would take.

She was quite appalled by the situation of girls that greeted her in her hometown. Considering the remoteness of the village, education was sparse, and in keeping with the spirit of the times, whatever form of elementary education was available was directed to the boys rather than the girls. This did not sit well with Angela who was fortunate to receive an education and who knew firsthand, the benefits it brought not just in terms of opportunity but also with regard to self-esteem. So she set out to gather the village girls and teach them. As she taught them the skills of reading and writing, she realized that they were poorly informed about the truths of the faith. Accordingly, she supplemented their education with catechetical instruction.

As the numbers of students began to swell, Angela realized that she would not manage by herself. She approached friends and neighbours to volunteer their services and soon, a merry band of women were successfully running a homegrown village school. News of this success began to travel around the towns and villages of the countryside and Angela was invited to establish a similar school in the city of Brescia, which was a few kilometers away. Angela and a few companions went to Brescia and began the work. Within a short period of time, the school was up and running. If Desenzano had been a success, Brescia was a triumph. With it came fame and a host of admirers from all sections of society going up to the Pope. In 1525, she visited Rome with the desire of gaining the indulgences that were offered as part of the Jubilee Year being celebrated. Pope Clement VII invited her as a special guest and wanted her to remain in Rome to establish another branch of her apostolate. But Angela could not stand the notoriety that came with being a successful educator much less a special guest of the Pope. She thanked the Pope for his solicitude and returned to Brescia.

There she continued to instruct the ignorant, reach out to the needy and pray for sinners. Her life was marked by an austere spirit of prayer and sacrifice owing to her Franciscan background. By the age of sixty, she was an accomplished educator but spiritually restless. She felt that she had not yet fulfilled God's plan for her. Her regular discussions with her spiritual director

helped her realize that the vision that she had seen on the way to Desenzano had not been realized. Guided by the Holy Spirit, she conceived the idea of forming a religious society that would be dedicated to the education and upliftment of women. However, she did not want her sisters to be cloistered like the religious nuns of the time rather she wanted them to move freely among the people so that they could be more effective as educators and models of Christian life.

On November 25, 1535, Angela along with 28 cooperators gathered in the Church of St. Afra in Brescia and committed their lives to this noble goal. They instituted the Company of St. Ursula, who was the patroness of education. Effectively, they had formed the first congregation of women religious who were dedicated to the work of education. They continued to live in their own homes while observing the rules of the Company set down by Angela including poverty, chastity and obedience, and set times for prayer and contemplation. Official approval for the Company came only in 1544 when Pope Paul III approved the Constitutions of the society. Unfortunately, Angela did not live to see that day since she passed away on January 27, 1540. By the time of her death, there were 24 branches of the Company of St. Ursula spread out across Italy.

THE URSULINES

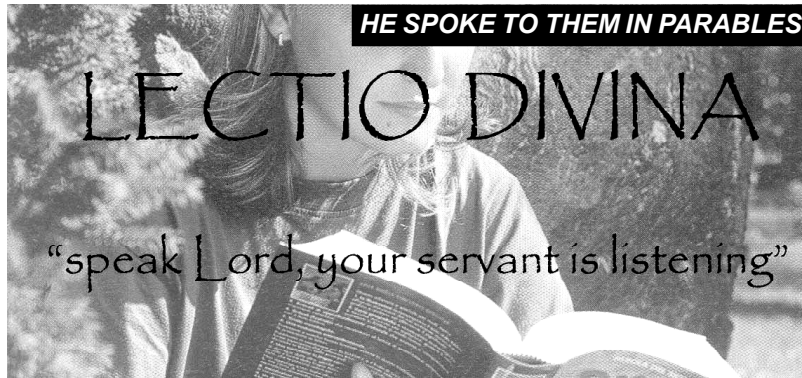
While she was still alive, Angela was already gaining the reputation of a saint. The people of Brescia honoured her as one and generously patronized her work. In 1512, when Brescia was at the

centre of war between Italy and France, civilians were forced to vacate the city. With a heavy heart, Angela moved to Cremona. However, when peace was restored, the citizens of Brescia welcomed her back with great enthusiasm and pomp. This simply shows how highly they respected her.

After her death, the Company of St. Ursula or Ursulines as they were commonly called grew in numbers and set up communities in different nations of Europe and America. Gradually, there arose a tension within the Company; there were some who felt that they should take up the cloistered way of life while continuing to educate girls within the walls of their monasteries while others preferred the lifestyle recommended by the foundress. The former took the title 'Ursuline Nuns' while the latter were called 'Federated Ursulines.' Both factions follow the Rule of Saint Augustine which was given to them as their rule of life by Pope Gregory XIII.

The Ursulines are known for their educational work. They have numerous famous Catholic colleges for women and continue to serve the Church and society. Today, there are a number of congregations that go by the name of Ursuline. All of them draw inspiration from the Company founded by Angela Merici and come under the patronage of St. Ursula on account of the educative mission they carry out.

Saint Angela Merici, you were not afraid of change. You did not let stereotypes keep you from serving. Help us to overcome our fear of change in order to follow God's call and allow others to follow theirs. Amen.



THE STORY OF THE EPIPHANY MT 2:1-12

by Dinesh Vasava, sdb

1. Lectio (Read): Take a few moments to read the Gospel passage slowly and attentively. Allow the words to sink in and listen to what God may be saying to you through this text.

2. Meditation (Meditate): Ponder on the message in the passage. Try to picture the journey of the Magi; their encounter with Herod, and their adoration of the newborn King. Reflect on the significance of their gifts and their willingness to follow the star. What does this story tell you about the nature of God and His plan of salvation? Here is an extract from a reflection by Pope Francis:

“On the day of the Epiphany, God manifests himself to all peoples, represented by the Magi. Its light reaches and illuminates every nation, language, and population. Pope Francis, in his homily on January 6, 2019, emphasizes the fact that what is particularly surprising is the way in which he manifested

himself: not by Herod, Pontius Pilate or Caiaphas, but in a humble dwelling in Bethlehem.

“The light of God does not go to those who shine with their own light. God proposes himself; he does not impose himself; It illuminates but does not dazzle. There is always a great temptation to confuse the light of God with the lights of the world. How



many times have we pursued the seductive glow of power and limelight, convinced that we are rendering a good service to the Gospel! But so, we turned the lights on the wrong side, because God wasn't there. His gentle light shines in humble love.

“As Isaiah says (60:2), it is necessary to get up to ensure that the light shines in those who are willing to receive it, that is, not to stand still but who walk daily. To do this, it is necessary to follow, like the Magi and the shepherds, the path of humble love. It is not the scribes; it is not Herod who goes to Jesus. Only those who leave their worldly attachments and set out on a journey can find God.

“It is not enough to know where Jesus was born, like the scribes, if we do not reach that were. It is not enough to know that Jesus was born, like Herod, if we do not meet him. When his where becomes our where, his when our when, his person our life, then the prophecies are fulfilled in us. Then Jesus is born inside and becomes God alive for me. Today, brothers and sisters, we are invited to imitate the Magi. They don't argue, no, they walk; they do not remain to watch, but enter the house of Jesus; they do not put themselves at the centre, but prostrate themselves to Him, who is the centre; They do not fix themselves in their plans but are willing to take other paths. In their gestures there is a close contact with the Lord, a radical openness to him, a total involvement in him. With him they use the language of love, the same language that Jesus, still an infant, already

speaks. In fact, the Magi go to the Lord not to receive, but to give. We ask ourselves: did we bring any gifts to Jesus at Christmas for his feast, or did we exchange gifts only with each other?” (<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-01/pope-francis-epiphany-mass-homily-full-text.html>)

To let God's light shine on us, we must not believe ourselves to be self-sufficient, we should not be interested in something only superficially, we should not just give in order to receive something in return. It is necessary that the gesture should be gratuitous.

3. Pray Silently: Try conversing with God. Share your thoughts, feelings, and questions that arise when you read the passage. Thank God for the gift of Jesus and His revelation to all people. Ask for the grace to have a heart like the Magi, open to seek and adore Christ in your own life.

4. Contemplate: Enter into a moment of silence and stillness. Allow the words and images of the Gospel passage to settle in your heart. Simply rest in God's presence, allowing Him to speak to you beyond words.

5. Take Action: Consider how you can apply the message of the Epiphany to your own life. Are there areas where you need to seek Christ more diligently? Are there gifts or talents you can offer to Him? How can you be a light to others, guiding them to encounter Jesus? Make a commitment to take an action based from the insights you have gained. □

Quiet Spaces

THE MOTHER OF GOD AND THE PRINCE OF PEACE

54th World Day of Peace, 1 January 2023 - The homily of Pope Francis

Holy Mother of God! This was the joyful acclamation of the holy People of God echoing in the streets of Ephesus in the year 431, when the Council Fathers proclaimed Mary the Mother of God. This truth is a fundamental datum of faith, but above all, it is a marvellous fact. God has a Mother and is thus bound forever to our humanity, like a child to its mother, to the point that our humanity is his humanity. It is an amazing and consoling truth, so much so that the most recent Council, which met here in Saint Peter's, stated that, "by his incarnation, the Son of God has in a certain way united himself with each individual. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, he acted with a human will, and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, he truly became one of us, like us in all things except sin" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). That is what God did by being born of Mary: he showed his concrete love for our humanity, embracing it truly and fully. Brothers and sisters, God does not love us in words but in deeds; not from "on high", but "up close", precisely from "within" our flesh, because in Mary the Word became flesh, because Christ continues to have a heart of flesh that beats for each and every of us!

Holy Mother of God! Many books and weighty tomes have been written about this title of Our Lady. At the beginning of this year, we need hope, just as the earth needs rain. This year that opens with the celebration of God's Mother and our own, tells us that the key to hope is Mary and that the antiphon of hope is the invocation, Holy Mother of God.

Let us pray to our Mother in a special way for her sons and daughters who are suffering and no longer have the strength to pray, and for our many brothers and sisters throughout the world who are victims of war, passing these holidays in darkness and cold, in poverty and fear, immersed in violence and indifference! For all those who have no peace, let us invoke Mary, the woman who brought into the world the Prince of peace (cf. *Is* 9:6; *Gal* 4:4). In her, the Queen of Peace, was fulfilled the blessing we heard in the first reading: "May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace" (*Num* 6:26). Yet what must we do to receive that peace?

Let us be guided by the people we meet in today's Gospel, who were the first to see the Mother and Child: the shepherds of Bethlehem. They were poor people and perhaps somewhat uncouth, and that night they were working. Yet they, not the learned or the powerful, were the first to recognize God among us, the God who became poor and loves to be with the poor. The Gospel emphasizes two very simple things that the shepherds did: things simple but not

always easy. They went and saw. Two actions: Going and seeing.

First, going. The Gospel tells us that the shepherds "went with haste" (*Lk* 2:16). They did not wait around. It was night, they had their flocks to keep, and naturally they were weary: they could easily have waited for dawn, held off until sunrise in order to go and see the Child lying in the manger. Instead, they went with haste, because where important things are concerned, we need to react promptly and not wait, for "the grace of the Spirit brooks no delay" (*Saint Ambrose*, Commentary on Saint Luke, 2).

This year, where do I want to go? Who is it that I can help?" So many people, in the Church and in society, are waiting for the good that you and you alone can do, they are waiting for your help. Today, amid the lethargy that dulls our senses, the shepherds are summoning us to set out and get involved in our world, to dirty our hands and to do some good. Brothers and sisters, let us imitate the shepherds: let us set out with haste!

When they arrived, the Gospel tells us, the shepherds "found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger" (v. 16). It then says that "after having seen" the Child (cf. v. 17), they set out, filled with wonder, to tell others about Jesus, glorifying and praising God for everything that they had heard and seen (cf. vv. 17-18, 20).

How many times, in our busy lives, do we fail to stop, even for a moment, to be close to the Lord and to hear his word, to say a prayer, to adore and praise him. We do the same thing with others: caught up in our own affairs or in getting ahead, we have no time to listen to our wife, our husband, to talk with our children, to ask them about how they really are, and not simply about their studies or their health. And how good it is for us to take time and listen to the elderly, to our grandfathers and grandmothers, in order to remember the deeper meaning of our lives and to recover our roots. Let us ask ourselves too, whether we are capable of seeing the people next door, the people who live in the same building, the people we meet each day on the street. Brothers and sisters, let us imitate the shepherds: let us learn to see! To understand by seeing with our hearts. Let us learn to see.

Going and seeing. Today the Lord has come among us and the Holy Mother of God sets him before our eyes. Let us rediscover in the enthusiasm of going and the wonder of seeing the secret that can make this year truly "new", and thus overcome the weariness of being stuck or the false peace of seduction.

And now, brothers and sisters, I invite all of you to look to the Virgin Mary. Let us invoke her three times, as the people of Ephesus did: Holy Mother of God! Holy Mother of God! Holy Mother of God! □

THE CARNIVAL FLOAT

By Pierluigi Menato, Tr. Ian Douulton, sdb

The traffic policeman, a stone-face gruff man, came up behind Carlo as he was about to pick up another handful of dirty litter from the pavement with the obvious intention of throwing it.

"I've had my eye on you for a while, you brat! Throwing dirty litter into the faces of people isn't polite, you know, but downright hurtful and thoughtless. Now, come with me to the station."

"But I don't have any money," whined Carlo, "and I was just beginning to have fun."

"How can you be having fun? That's no way to have fun! No, let's go, quick!"

He grabbed him by the arm. The people, and all the strewn litter all around the two of them and the bystanders all laughing and approving. In so much merriment, and fun there wasn't a word of compassion or indulgence for this fifteen-year-old, ragged, bold but friendly lad with two black eyes that sprouted mischief but stared at you with piercing loyalty.

The Carnival floats were beginning to parade down the Mass to the sound of trumpets, fifes and drums.

The policeman, pretending to be distracted by the entire choreographed spectacle, loosened his grip on the boy's arm. Carlo took advantage of this and slipped out of his grasp, running wildly through the crowd. He was frightened of being chased; he could already hear the thumping footsteps of the police officer (who, on the other hand had not moved an inch). What was he to do?

He jumped like a grasshopper into the middle of the Mall. A float, all decked out in scarlet, in the shape of a funnel and from which strips of paper to mimic flames came from this demonic float of satanic creatures that looked like the mouth of hell, came rolling up slowly in front of him, barring his way.

That red funnel, crammed with devils, advanced slowly, pausing from time to time to be admired and 'feared.' It looked like a vain peacock strutting out its dance. Carlo did not stop to think: with another leap he reached the iron bar that was all adorned with serpentine tongues of flame and clung to it.

"Help!" he begged, suspended in mid-air.

A bald, pot-bellied devil, looking like a commander took pity on him and stretched out his claw-like hand and helped him over the railing. And so, without realising it, Carlo found himself ...in Hell. He knew it was a 'mock inferno'; a papier mâché inferno. From its gaping jaws (or rather, an enormous dragon crouching in the centre of the float turned skyward) came fake flames of flame. However, the setting and the characters made a certain unpleasant impression on him.

"Come, come," sneered the 'devil-commander' mockingly as he pulled him to safety. I'm Beelzebub and I will make you eat fire embers instead of sweets and chocolates..."

Carlo, a clever lad, gradually regained his swagger.

"Mr Beelzebub," he answered with spirit, "is your litter really made of fire? It is so cold at home! I would need some of it to fill the absence of wood at my grandmother's stove... it's always off," he explained bitterly, "and she, poor thing, chatters her teeth and I am so pained to see her."

"Mr Beelzebub," she answered him with spirit, "your confetti were really made of fire! It is so cold at home! I would need them to fill, in the absence of wood, my grandmother's stove.... it's always off," he explained tenderly, "and she, poor thing, chatters her teeth and it's a pain to see her."

The 'commander' Beelzebub, who had been staring at him with a strange intensity for some moments, softened his voice.

"You have no fire at home?"

"No, sir."

The pot-bellied bald devil stood for a moment in disbelief, and as the infernal float resumed its route and passed vamping between two thick wings of people, he slowly lifted his hideous, comical mask.

"You?"

"That's me. If the copper hadn't generously 'dumped' you, I would have gotten off the float to pacify him..."

He affectionately placed a claw-like hand on the boy's shoulder: it felt like the caress of an angel. Carlo, for once, felt himself fixed by two humane forgiving,

paternal eyes. Suddenly, his mind went back six months ...the gentleman, now in a devil's mask, was rowing a small single-rigger boat, perhaps to exercise and lose weight. Then one small manoeuvre and suddenly the boat capsizes and the unwary rower fell into the water... barely able to keep himself afloat, a fledgling swimmer... Carlo, on the other hand, a fish! He dove in and in a couple of strides reached him, held him up and 'pulled' him to the steps of the pier... There, there were a few willing people to him hoist him, all dripping and huffing...

"I looked for you, as soon as I could breathe calmly again, and you had disappeared. Why did you run away? Maybe... a policeman?"

"I can tell, you're a very clever devil, Mr..."

"Alto, Sergio Alto."



"It wasn't a policeman I was running from at that time, it was a customs officer. Well, I would be in hell by now, I can tell you that... before I fell into the water, I was acting as a look-out for some fishermen-smugglers; they smuggled foreign cigarettes. They were waiting for the "go-ahead" sign to get off the boat..."

"From "Palo"? inquired a surprised and disgruntled Sergio Alto.

"...cigarette smugglers belonging to Mr Leo and co..."

"I'm Alto, the film director..."

"You? Are you the one whose name is on the posters, like an election candidate?"

Alto laughed modestly, if modesty befits a devil.

"That's me..."

"Congratulations!"

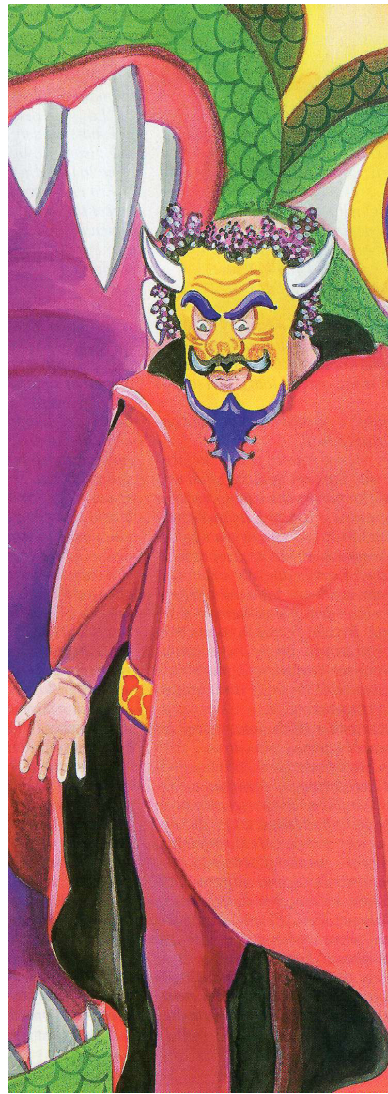
"You're welcome. But I'll go on and not digress.... "Palo" huh?"

"Yeah, they were cigarette smugglers, yes sometimes, but thieves, never ever!" He planted those two mischievous loyal eyes of his on to his face.

"And then, Mr Alto, why was I doing it? To earn some money for my grandmother who is so old and so poor.... And she's not even my grandmother, you know? She found me with two guns, on the corner of an alley ... I was a derelict you, see? And she raised me and fed me, slaving away at washing clothes." Now she is old and can no longer put her hands in the cold water. As for me, I can't find a 'stable' job. So, I 'make do,' but theft and bad deeds never! If it were otherwise, I would bribe her..."

"To confess to a devil," laughed the director, "would be a waste of time."

At that moment, a horned and



cadet sidled up to him. Greenish as a lizard, he stuck out his palm-long tongue that looked like a mascot." "Burlish, this is Carlo."

Burlish whispered a few little words in Beelzebub's ear.

"An excellent idea. Bravo, Burl-

ish! Yes, I really think this boy can replace Farfarello."

He took the lad by the hand and led him down a ladder, into the interior of the float, into a sort of changing room.

"Here are Farfarello's stuff and mask. Get it on and get out there" And he helped him ably to turn into a little devil with a pair of little goat's horns and two cunning little eyes, as big as pinheads, that huddled under a receding forehead; from on high they watched over a little upturned nose with two little holes on the nostrils: they looked like two little tomatoes.

"Perfect! And now to the test. Let's see if you can repeat this refrain in a tuneful, squeaky voice:

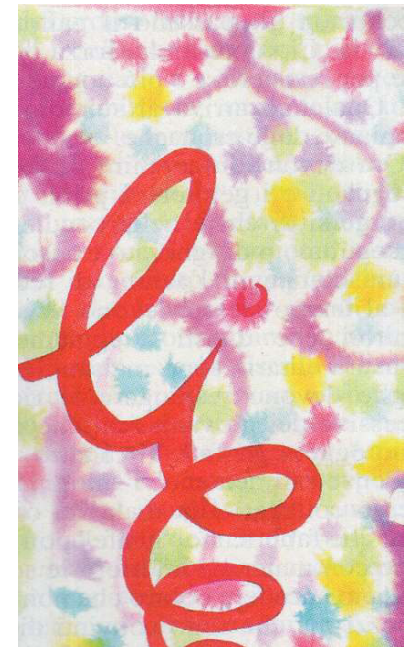
"The madness of Carnival is a skein without a thread; it's an infernal whirlwind, it has the life of coriander...."

It was like inviting him to a wedding. Carlo, i.e. Farfarello now, managed very well, wiggling his tail and bending his horns, which, being elastic, lowered and raised at the command of a pump as if they were alive.

"Bravo, set off a cannon shot!"

"That's just what we needed," approved the 'cavalier' Burlish with satisfaction. We'll win the first prize for sure."

They won it, in fact, "beating" the Tripponi Float, the Mangiohi Float and even the Beoni Float. The Inferno of...papier-mâché stopped in front of the stage of the Jury. Amidst the blowing of trumpets, the waving of cornets, jets of confetti and the throwing of streamers, Farfarello recited the verse so well and with such a lot of fuss that the judges became so enthusiastic, they applauded him. As a result, the coveted "Golden



Flask" triumphantly passed from the stage to Hell.

The 'Golden Flask', contrary to theatre jargon, marked Farfarello's first success.

"If I hadn't thrown that dirty litter into the faces of passers-by..." he says today to those who interview him.

Interview? Yes, Farfarello, keeping this *nom de guerre*, is today a 'promising' talent for the silver screen, a young artist 'in the wings' and you will soon be able to announce and applaud him on the screen and directed by Sergio Alto and which is entitled "Litter."

Needless to say, Giannina, the good boy's grandma, no longer needs to beg for a bit of wood for her stove. The good old lady goes into raptures whenever she sees Farfarello, 'her' Carlo, on the screen, amusing audiences with his cute little faces. □

FIORETTI OF DON BOSCO - 48

by Michele Molineris

224. An unnecessary inverted comma (1877)

Card. Dusmet, archbishop of Catania, had great esteem and veneration for Don Bosco and his work. From Catania, as early as 1877 some zealous priests had approached the apostle from Turin about a work to be opened in that city: a school for artisans. The saintly archbishop of Catania, despite the violent campaign opened by a local newspaper to discredit the Salesians with slanderous insinuations, endorsed that request with his extraordinary authority and insisted that even a single Salesian go immediately to run a festive Oratory and a primary school.

Fr Viglietti writes in his chronicle that in May 1887, when Don Bosco went to Rome for the consecration of the Sacred Heart temple, he received among other distinguished visitors, Archbishop Mgr Dusmet.

A graceful episode is recalled about alms sent to Turin by Card. Dusmet. The archbishop had made a request directly to Don Bosco, for his seminary, for some of Don Cagliero's musical compositions, asking for the bill to be paid. Don Bosco had them sent, writing on the bill this note: "The amount for the music is 14.75 lire. There is a comma in the figure, but in the total, it can be considered pointless."

To which the holy prelate replied: "I accept completely as a voice from heaven, your observation about the useless inverted

comma. I therefore send 14 lire in repayment of my debt to the Salesian Bookshop, and I add 1400 lire, without the inverted comma, to serve Don Bosco for the building of the new church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome. I had collected this sum by a penny, saving here and there, with the intention of using it for a pious work that I undertook and have not yet completed. But the misplaced inverted comma made me change my mind, because it reminded me of the well-known sentence: *Qui dat cito, bis dat*: he who gives at once, gives twice.

Let Don Bosco therefore receive my offer with a good grace and reciprocate it with a fervent prayer to that adorable Heart, which he loved so much and loves us so much. With respect to the bookshop, be happy with 14.00 with a comma, which will remain famous in the annals of Salesian finances."

This letter was published in the Salesian Bulletin of March 1883, without a name, and it paid off well, because other readers were encouraged to send Don Bosco donations for his works (*M.B.*, XV, 413).

225. But that is the youngster I saw in the dream(1877)

Navarre was the name given in France to a vast estate of 233 hectares which, through the munificence of Mr Roufou and the resourcefulness of Abbot Vincent, had been transformed into an agricultural colony. But goodwill was not enough to make it efficient and redeem it from the debts that had accumulated in the meantime for the adaptation. In

August 1877, the impressed Bishop of Fréjus, offered everything to Don Bosco on the condition that he would keep the agricultural colony he had started there. Don Bosco had never thought of agricultural colonies, in fact he had never hidden a certain aversion to them because there were few guarantees that would safeguard of the youngsters' morality.

Now, the night before the arrival of the letter proposing the colony's transfer of power, Don Bosco had a dream that he recounted the following month in Lanzo during the retreat. He dreamt of "a rustic house, with a small threshing floor in front of it that seemed to fence him in. That house, like that of peasants, was unadorned, and the room, where he was, had doors leading into various other rooms. These, however, were not on the same level as the first. In some one went up, in others down a few steps. All around one could see a rack that held tools for rural work."

The key to the dream was therefore in the evidence that reached him a few hours later from France. And that the explanation was nothing else but that which was later confirmed by the facts. Don Lemoyne, visiting the new house shortly after it opened, found initial proof of this. Entering where the management was, there was a room on the upper floor with a rack around the screens and doors through which one could enter by going up or down steps to other rooms. There was also, in front of the house a small threshing-floor and a very large

abandoned meadow, surrounded by a crown of trees, and further on, but not far away, a second, much larger threshing-floor, where the first youngsters lived, gathered and were seen at the threshing-floors by Don Bosco in the following dream.

But a greater wonder awaited Don Bosco himself when he went there for his second visit. As the saint advanced through the estate, the youths all moved towards him, preceded by a companion holding a bouquet of flowers. When Don Bosco came within a few steps of him, he was immediately moved and changed colour: the young man was the same height and features as he had seen in his own life. He was little Michael Blain, who, having become a Salesian, died at Bourbilly on 7 August 1947 at the age of 82. In the evening then, during the programme held in honour of Don Bosco, while the singers were performing a hymn and Blain was playing a solo, Don Bosco, pointing him out to the director Fr Perrot (24-2-1928 in la Navarre at the age of 74) said to him: "But that looks like the boy from the dream! (*M.B.*, XIII, 421).

It is still known of Blain that, fatherless, he also lost his mother on the same day that St Joseph's house opened, 8 July 1878. A Carmelite maternal aunt referred him to the Salesians, who received him on 16 October of that same year. Having a good voice and an excellent ear, he was immediately trained in singing and so Don Bosco was able to hear him on the second visit he made that year to the colony (*from M.B.*, XIV, 422).

The "Biographical Memoirs"

do not say more, but Don Mongour speaks of Michael Blain in a booklet entitled *"I Fioretti de Saint Jean Bosco,"* printed in Bologna in 1963. It recounts how, on a later visit to La Navarre, Don Blain, then pupil at the colony, was supposed to be the protagonist of an operetta prepared with special care in anticipation of the Saint's arrival, but when it was about to be performed, his voice suddenly failed him.

"Call me the boy concerned," Don Bosco told the messenger, clearly embarrassed by the unexpected complication. "Then you cannot sing?"

"No," he replied, more with gestures than with his voice.

"But I don't have a cold," said Don Bosco then; "let's swap voices: if you want, I'll give you mine, you give me yours. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Then get down on your knees, I want to give you a blessing."

When the rite was over, little Michael had regained his beautiful voice and Don Bosco could no longer express himself, for the hoarseness that had suddenly attacked him.

This lasted until the end of the performance, at the end of which, to everyone's great satisfaction, Don Bosco called him back to regain the voice he needed to address the community.

Before leaving, Don Bosco, having run into Blain again, did not re-frain from telling him: "Are you happy, Michelino?"

"Yes, I'm happy."

"Do you love Don Bosco?"

"Yes, I love him."

"Wouldn't you gladly stay with him to help him?"

"Why not!"

"Well, tell the rector to put you to study Latin; then you'll wear the habit and work for a long time among the French youth.

As we have said, Blain became a Salesian and died an octogenarian, parish priest of the parish of Mary Help of Christians at Nice-by-the-Sea.

During the summer, Don Bosco, who had not forgotten about him in the meantime, often called him to give him a hand in writing his French correspondence and more than once wanted him as a companion on the trips he made into the hills to escape the heat of the city.

On one of these outings, Don Mongour tells us, who certainly heard about it from the person concerned, Don Bosco had him pick up some hazelnuts, which he then distributed from the balcony to the youths cheering him on from the courtyard. But how could he please everyone if the pocket that contained them was no bigger than a knapsack? Every time Don Bosco dipped his hand into the pocket, he jumped for fear that he would not be able to satisfy everyone, and there were many! And yet in the end there were still so many left that even he, just knowing the origin and quantity, had experienced moments of anxiety and fear. If you go to Turin, you can still see some of them religiously preserved among the relics that belonged to the saint and are visited by many pilgrims. □



A MEETING OF TWO MOTHERS

by Mario Galizzi

This little tale is a jewel and a continuous burst of joy, culminating in the singing of the 'Magnificat' (1.46-55). Let us read it together and let our imagination run wild.

"In those days Mary set out in haste for the hill country and went to a town in Judea. She entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. To what do I owe that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Behold, as soon as thy greeting reached my ears, the child leaped for joy in my womb. And blessed is she who believed in the fulfillment of what the Lord told her.'"

One quickly realises that there is something human in this tale. Luke knows that he is working on real events, but he also knows that the meaning of this event goes far beyond appearances. Even the most inexperienced reader,



The church of Ain Karim was built as a witness to pilgrims of one of the most human and touching events that open Luke's Gospel and characterises the beginning of human redemption: here Mary sang her song of praise to God, magnifying the greatness He accomplished in the humility of her service.

reading the names of Mary and Elizabeth, knows that these are two mothers who are pregnant: Elizabeth for six months, Mary for a short time, and understands what the historical basis of the story is. Mary greeted Elizabeth and Mary's voice was immediately responded to by the child that was in Elizabeth's womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and began to praise Mary, recognising her as the Mother of her Lord and blessed for her faith.

This little tale, however, is not given to us in its naked reality, but is charged with the Easter faith of the Christian community. It is not a stand-alone tale but is placed in a precise context. Indeed, it acts as a transition between the accounts of the two annunciations and that of the two births, of John and Jesus respect-



Mary, by visiting her cousin Elizabeth, becomes the first announcer of the freshness and joy of the Gospel, which transforms attention and care into welcome and service to others.

ively. Add to this another reading of the Christian community, convinced that Jesus is the fullness of the Law and the fulfilment of all the prophecies. In our case, however, this reading does not appear directly: it is subjective, between the lines. To make it emerge means to see the event of the meeting of the two mothers in the whole framework of Israel's history. Let us take just one example. We know from the previous account that Mary is the Ark of the Covenant, the sign of God's presence in the midst of his people. Now at the beginning of our account it says that Mary sets out on her journey to the hill country and then stays three months in Elizabeth's house and then resumes her journey. This fact cannot fail to remind us of what happened in David's time (2 Sam 6) when the king wanted to transport the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem to the place where Solomon would build the temple. The Ark was then in Baalah of Judah, a town towards the west, David was transporting it towards Jerusalem when a man dared to touch it and was struck dead. David was afraid of the Lord and did not want to take the Ark to the city, so he had it taken to the house of Obed-Edom in Gath. God blessed that house. Then David "after three months" decided to

bring it to the place of the future temple. "Mary remained three months in the house of Elizabeth" (1:36) and from the reading of the text we know that the house of Elizabeth was blessed by the presence of Mary who with Jesus was the sign of God's presence. Then on the day of the "Presentation in the Temple" she would go to Jerusalem. It is a destination that Mary must reach, and when we speak of it, we will recall the three months that Elizabeth spent there and we will hear other prophecies resound. It is in this context of the prophecies that we must examine our text, seeing Mary as the Ark of the Covenant, the sign of God's presence.

Mary an instrument of God

Let us introduce ourselves by recalling the immediate context. The Angel of the Lord said to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will descend upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow." This happened when Mary joyfully accepted the mission of mother that God entrusted to her. As in the Old Testament (Ex 40:35), when the cloud covered the tabernacle with its shadow, the glory of the Lord, that is, the presence of God, filled the dwelling. Mary with her "yes" became a sign of God's presence and thus fully realised the Lord's dwelling among men. Therefore "Mary setting out for the mountain" is a sign of the presence of God walking with his people in the desert (Ex 40:36). Her going to Elizabeth is not an attempt to prove the truth of what the Angel told her, either because she did not ask for a sign as Zechariah did. She believed

the Angel's word and went to rejoice with her kinswoman in the Lord's gift. She entered Elizabeth's house unexpectedly and greeting her, a narrative expression without an explicit word. Yet something wonderful immediately took place: "As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb." The narrator describes this event in his own words (1:41), but it is later interpreted by Elizabeth who adds two observations: "Behold, as soon as the voice of your greeting reached my ears, the child leaped for joy in my womb" (1:44). What matters is how the voice makes the presence of the Lord, of the Son she carries in her womb, heard. There seems to be an analogy with the presence of God speaking to Moses. The Lord spoke between the two Cherubim who were above the Ark (Ex 25:22). There the Lord's presence was revealed with his voice, now through Mary's voice. Mary is like the Ark of the Covenant before which God's voice is heard. The greeting is heard in its true meaning first of all by John who immediately heard it as he was filled with the Holy Spirit. What was said to Zechariah is realised: "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb" (1:15). He leapt for joy on hearing Mary's voice, and Elizabeth, from the child's gasp, understood the profound meaning of Mary's voice because the Spirit is also communicated to her. It is the gift of the Spirit that leads Elizabeth to ask: "To what do I owe that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (To be continued)



MY VOCATION STORY

PATRICK FROM LUBUMBASHI

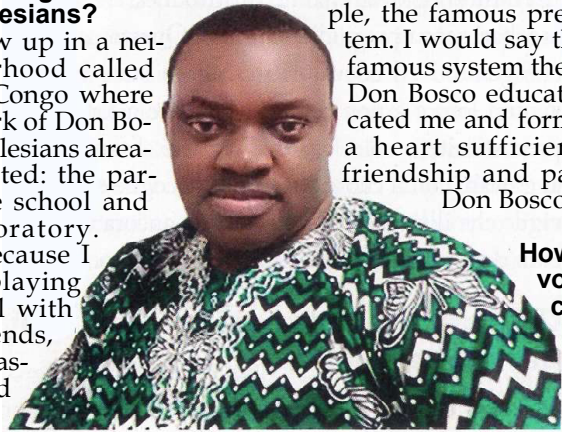
By O. Pori Mecoi

My identity card

My name is Patrick Mwenya Kizembe, a young Salesian student at the St Thomas Aquinas Theological Institute in Messina. I was born in Lubumbashi, a large city in the south of the Democratic Republic of Congo. This city has a remarkably young population. In my family we are eight children, four girls and four boys; I am the sixth. My father died on 25 April 2012. During his life he worked on a cattle farm. My mother still lives in Lubumbashi where she is involved in business. Both of them taught us the life of prayer in the family and instilled in us a Christian upbringing by showing us the way to the Salesian parish called Bikira Mwenyi Huruma (*Our Lady of Mercy*).

How did I get to know the Salesians?

I grew up in a neighbourhood called Tabac-Congo where the work of Don Bosco's Salesians already existed: the parish, the school and the oratory. And because I liked playing football with my friends, it was easier and a l s o



more spontaneous for me to meet the Salesians. I can say that I got to know the Salesians of Don Bosco from a very young age, practically at the age of 11, when I started going to the oratory to play. At the same time, I got to know the Salesians even more by going to study at a school in my neighbourhood called Kitulizo School Complex. This school is still run by the Salesians of Don Bosco. It was through this school that I got to know who the Salesians are and who Don Bosco really is. I did this through the morning words that the Salesians addressed to us every day before entering the classrooms to study, and the various evening words that the Salesians addressed to us in the oratory. These Salesians taught me a very rich pedagogical system for the education of young people, the famous preventive system. I would say that with this famous system the Salesians of Don Bosco educated me, educated me and formed me with a heart sufficiently full of friendship and paternity like Don Bosco.

How did my vocation come about?
Immediately after receiving the sacraments of

Christian initiation, I had the desire to attend various liturgical groups such as the altar servers' group, the group of Dominic Savio's friends, the lectors' group. So, as I said before, I had to attend the oratory, the Salesian school during my adolescence and post-adolescence. I liked the activities organised by the Salesians, especially because they were really educational and allowed me to meet friends and experience the family atmosphere in a joyful way. It was in this context that my vocation was born. What touched me very much was seeing the Salesians always with us, really active in our midst; their knowledge, their way of being with us teenagers, the way the activities were carried out, we always started with prayer and then followed the activities of the day and always ended with prayer to thank God through the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

But the choice to become a Salesian came a little later, after a sufficiently important moment of reflection. And then I had to decide to find a spiritual guide to help me clarify and mature my vocational motivations. That is how I got to know a young Salesian priest named Daniel Mafuta, who accompanied me right up to the beginning of my first Salesian experience as an aspirant in the Bakanja-Magone house, which takes care of young people who have been separated from their families, i.e., poor and abandoned young people.

My Salesian story

I started my Salesian experience as an Aspirant in July 2012 in the Bakaja-Michel Magone



he Democratic Republic of Congo is one of the nations with three quarters young population

House. It is a work that welcomes and reeducates young people who have become estranged from their families. A year later, I was admitted to start the pre-novitiate in the *Cité des Jeunes* community, where I spent almost a year, and was admitted to start the novitiate in the St John Bosco Kansebula community. At the end of the novitiate, I made my first profession on 16 August 2015 at Imara College. I did three years in the post-novitiate in Kansebula, where I studied philosophy and educational sciences. After this post-novitiate I was sent to Tunisia to do my internship for two years. The first year I did my internship in Manouba, where they have a primary school and an oratory. Manouba is a

town on the outskirts of the capital Tunis. Most of the young people who attend our oratory in Manouba only speak Arabic, because most of them come from working-class neighbourhoods and many do not go to school regularly. This prompted me to learn some Arabic so that I could share and interact well with the young people and make my apostolate among them easier. It was truly a beautiful and unforgettable Salesian experience. The young people I met in Tunisia seduced me with their always smiling and welcoming faces. I will always carry them in my heart as a Salesian.

What are the Congolese youth like?

The Democratic Republic of Congo is one of the world's nations with three-quarters young population. In a post-modern perspective, these young people present some important cultural dynamisms, while maintaining their identity. They constantly throw themselves into the competition of the international market; they are young people who can easily open up external horizons. They adapt extraordinarily well wherever they are, thanks to their conviviality. Congolese culture is conveyed by the music of the 'Rumba', which has been recognised as intangible heritage by UNESCO since December 2021. These youth are also characterised by its elegant clothing, known as 'SAPE' (*Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Elegantes*). But this appearance often hides the real problems of the Congolese youth, plagued by many ills: unemployment, the phenomenon of street children, ju-

venile delinquency, insecurity, the manipulation and use of young people in armed conflicts, the imbalance of the education system, etc. This is due to the precarious security situation in some parts of the country and the crisis of governance in a country that is the victim of large-scale greed because of its immense mineral resources. The youth are also marked by a sense of tribal belonging, but language and all the values associated with it, such as respect for elders, the giving of family names, 'openness to the faith of ancestors, etc. Tribalism and syncretism then become a danger if exaggerated. Of course, these young people still have a long way to go in terms of patriotism.

In the big cities, economic and spiritual poverty cause the proliferation of sects at which young people are the main target. On the other hand, young Congolese, like all other young people, love life and respect it, despite globalisation advocating the inversion of fundamental values. Respect for life and human dignity are part of the aspirations of young Congolese. Young people have a communicative language of 'WE' instead of 'I'. Despite the various problems, I have the feeling that these young people will participate in the political succession of the country. For this to happen, they must be trained in the awakening of national consciousness. □



IN A CHEERFUL MOOD

The Good Samaritan

A Sunday school teacher was telling her class the story of the Good Samaritan, in which a man was beaten, robbed and left for dead. She described the situation in vivid detail so her students would catch the drama. Then, she asked the class, "If you saw a person lying on the roadside, all wounded and bleeding, what would you do?" A thoughtful little girl broke the hushed silence. "I think I'd throw up."

The Story of Elijah

The Sunday school teacher was carefully explaining the story of Elijah the Prophet and the false prophets of Baal. She explained how Elijah built the altar, put wood upon it, cut the steer in pieces and laid it upon the altar. And then, Elijah commanded the people of God to fill four barrels of water and pour it over the altar. He had them do this four times. "Now," said the teacher, "can anyone in the class tell me why the Lord would have Elijah pour water over the steer on the altar?" A little girl in the back of the room started waving her hand, "I know, I know," she said, "to make the gravy."

Lot's Wife

The Sunday school teacher was describing how Lot's wife looked back and turned into a pillar of salt, when little Johnny interrupted, "My Mummy looked back

once while she was DRIVING," he announced triumphantly," an she turned into a telephone pole!"

Did Noah Fish?

A Sunday school teacher asked, "Johnny, do you think Noah did a lot of fishing when he was on the Ark?" "No," replied Johnny. "How could he, with just two worms?"

Higher Power

A Sunday school teacher said to her children, "We have been learning how powerful kings and queens were in bible times. But there is a higher power. Can anybody tell me what it is? One child blurted out, "Aces!"

Sunday School Version

Nine-year old Joey was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday school. "Well, Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across safely. Then, he used his walkie-talkie to radio headquarters for reinforcements. They sent bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Israelites were saved." "Now, Joey," is that really what your teacher taught you?" "his mother asked, "Well, no, Mom, but if I told it the way the teacher did, you've never believe it." □

A NEW YEAR'S DAY PRAYER

As the dawn breaks on a new year, let us give thanks for all we hold dear: our health, our family and our friends.

Let us release our grudges, our anger and our pains, for these are nothing but binding chains. Let us live each day in the most loving ways, the God-conscious way. Let us serve all who are in need, regardless of race, color or creed.

Let us keep God of our own understanding in our hearts and to chant God's name each day. Let us lead the world from darkness to light, from falsehood to truth and from wrong to right.

Let us remember that we are all one, embracing all, discriminating against none.

May your year be filled with peace, prosperity and love. May God's blessings shower upon you and bestow upon each of you a bright, healthy and peaceful new year.
- Rev. Marcy Sheremetta

THEY ARE GRATEFUL TO OUR LADY AND DON BOSCO

My elder brother suffered a major cardiac arrest on August 17th, 2023. He suffered a 2nd attack on the same day during Angiography. He had multiple blockages out of which 4 were major ones. In two of the blockages stents were inserted on the right side. But on the left side doctors couldn't insert stent as those were severe blockages. And hence a bypass surgery was suggested within 8 days. We decided to get him operated in one of the best hospitals in Mumbai. On the 23rd morning they took him for the surgery and it was very successful. But on the same evening doctors noticed some variations on the heartbeat. As per the doctors, the right side on the stent was inserted had stopped working hence the heart was not pumping blood. The condition was very critical and they immediately took him back in the OT for a 2nd bypass surgery. From the time they took him inside I don't remember how many times I might have prayed the Rosary, till the doctors came out and said surgery was successful. That night I felt Mother Mary was holding my hand and comforting me. Holding the Rosary was like holding Mother Mary's hand. After the surgery he came to consciousness after 4 days i.e. on 28th August. From that day till date I have never keep the Rosary away from me. I thank Mother Mary for pouring her blessing and grace on my brother and our family. Truly Mary was and is always there with us."

Anita Peter

Thank you Mother Mary for protecting my son from a major fall. I always pray the Three Hail Marys before setting out on a journey.
Marisa, Mangalore

Thank you my precious Mother for the many graces and favours bestowed on me and my family.
Hazel

B.F. Art: Fabrizio Zubani

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

It was a Saturday night, in a famous restaurant on the top floor of a skyscraper. It was quite crowded. People were waiting patiently to be shown to their tables. An enthusiastic-looking young man arrived and asked for a table for a group of ten people. As his name was being written down by the waiter, the boy informed him: "Today is my birthday. I have organised a party with my friends". His innocent exuberance made everyone present smile. They gave him a table, as there was a very large one free. He sat down at the table and for about an hour, he kept making calls and sending messages. As the evening went on, he seemed more and more discouraged. No one showed up to join him at his table. The waiters kept asking him if he had any news, and each time he mumbled an excuse. Eventually he had to leave that table and sat down at a smaller table. He was still alone. For a long time, he sat, all alone. Then he got up and left the restaurant. Before we knew it, he was lost in the crowd. □



POPE'S WORLDWIDE PRAYER NETWORK JANUARY 2024

For the Gift of Diversity in the Church

Let us pray that the Spirit helps us recognize the gift of different charisms within the Christian community, and to discover the richness of different ritual traditions in the heart of the Catholic Church.

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MY MOTHER, MY HOPE

My sincere and heartfelt thanksgiving to the Holy Trinity and Our Blessed Mother Mary for my cousin Jennifer's clear medical results.

She had an operation for Thyroid cancer but when she got the biopsy results there was no cancer.

All glory and praise to the Holy Trinity and to our Blessed Mother.

*Mrs. de Souza,
Melbourne, Australia*

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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