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Christmas Giving
By Iris W. Bray

*Christmas is for giving
And for showing that we care,
For honouring the Christ Child
With the loving gifts we share*

*The wise men gave of riches;
The shepherds, faith and love.
Each gift, in its own measure,
Was smiled on from above.*

*Let every gift be treasured;
Not always size or price
Determines the extent of love
And willing sacrifice.*

*Handsome gifts with festive trim
Brings smiles of sweet content,
But modest gifts of humble means
Are oftimes heaven sent.*

*Whether it be large or small
Each gift will share in part
The message of true Christmas joy
If given from the heart!*

From The Editor's Desk
BE A BETHLEHEM BLESSING

In the bustling city of Bombay, people from all walks of life have different ways of celebrating Christmas. Some try to imitate Western traditions by hiring someone to dress up as Santa Claus and give their children gifts. Others get more creative by hiring a choir to sing carols. Meanwhile, I came across a young couple who, (despite it being September), are already planning a Christmas programme for less fortunate children, lonely seniors or orphans in the many orphanages around the city. Their aim: to bring some joy to kids who may not be having a happy childhood. This couple has been doing this for a few years now, and they always come back with heartwarming stories of the impact that the experience made on them. They have no expensive gifts to distribute, only what the Lord endowed them with, voices of joy and cheer, love and compassion which bring more joy than anything else. The adventure becomes more than just a holiday spree. Hearts are touched and warm tears of comfort and joy are shed which is more than many of us will have this Christmas.

The stable at Bethlehem tells us of a child born in humble circumstances. He is surrounded by the love and security of his family. He is loved also by his neighbours and by the wider community, as the Shepherds and the Magi indicate. In the absence of any material luxuries Mary and Joseph found a deeper comfort in the loving support of these visitors. Not all of us are called to be parents or even adoptive parents but we can be shepherds, neighbours and royal visitors bringing light and joy to the dark spaces where the Christ child sleeps amid the trash and garbage that the affluent discard.

It is difficult to believe that there is something genuine about Christmas when all around everything is synthetic; cotton for snow, plastic Christmas trees for real evergreens, piped-in carols in place of lustily singing the songs of Christmas. The real spirit of Christmas is the spirit of presence and sharing. The manger is anywhere where there is someone in need and vulnerability is on display. You're sure to find it in a city like ours but do you have the eyes to see this powerlessness that the Christ Child manifests in the powerlessness of children at the traffic lights begging for something to fill their stomachs. They're trying to sell you a Santa cap to be able to feed a little brother or sister or a sick mother too weak to stand by. Christmas will not come to your heart and home if you only drive by these scenes which are in no short supply.

Economists say that in a city like ours where there is so much opulence there is maximum poverty and degradation. But like the kings of old can you offer your gold and frankincense and myrrh to bring a smile to an emaciated youngster with dirty fingernails and a snotty nose?

So, instead of just praying for these children to find joy this Christmas, we are summoned to take action and be a Bethlehem blessing to someone this Christmas.

Fr. Ian Douulton, sdb

EDUCATIVE EMERGENCY

by Bishop Gianpaolo Dianin

Parents are also influenced by the cultural climate we live in, and we cannot separate the parent-child relationship from our cultural context.

We are witnessing an unprecedented wave of violence among children and young people. It's a stark contrast to the past, when violence was mostly associated with the adult world. Today, we see incidents like a teenager punching a teacher after being reprimanded in class, another being stabbed for looking at someone's girlfriend, and even the killing of a girlfriend by a former partner.

Today, education is an urgent issue that we are all aware of. In the past, things were almost automatic: it was enough to follow in our parents' footsteps and it was natural to adopt the same values and lifestyle. However, in today's diverse society, we are

surrounded by a multitude of values, offering both everything and its opposite. Replicating the past is no longer feasible, and each individual must now take charge of shaping his or her own life, which is much more challenging.

Families are also affected by the dominant culture. There is a strong focus on children's intellectual development, with parents trying to provide them with numerous opportunities and skills as if life were a competition where only the best person succeeds. The deeper meaning of life and the values that can inspire and guide it are often overlooked. This is also true in the emotional realm, which frequently remains



at a childish level, characterized by primal and uncontrolled, almost instinctual emotions.

Education requires both affection and rules. Affection is important because the experience of being loved and loving is essential, while rules are necessary because education aims to develop autonomy, which is the ability to set rules for oneself. However, there has been an imbalance between affection and regulations, with an excessive focus on affection. There is an overemphasis on the maternal role, care, and control, with parents obsessively catering to their children's every need. There has been a shift from the authoritative father figure to a more indulgent one, which has its own negative effects. The father should act as a boundary that allows the child to grow without being overly indulgent. The father should set and enforce rules to help the child become autonomous. The paternal figure should set limits, encourage autonomy, promote the exploration of life, and not shield the child from challenges. True manhood involves respecting boundaries, promoting autonomy, and understanding others' perspectives. A man who is brought up to respect rules, foster independence, and acknowledge others' viewpoints is less likely to be violent towards women and will be a better man overall. It's important to distinguish between patriarchy, which is often discussed today, and healthy fatherhood. The master father exercises violent power, while the paternal principle introduces laws to contain violence and educate within limits. The root of violence

In a pluralist society, we all live in a kind of value mall that offers everything and the opposite of everything

lies in the desire to be all-powerful, and the paternal principle corrects this notion.

Parents want what's best for their children more than anything else, and they should be supported rather than blamed. They, too, struggle with emotional and moral challenges, and a lack of genuine and meaningful communication. When they encounter their children's troubling behaviour, they often feel at a loss because they haven't recognized the signs of distress. Parents are influenced by the societal pressures around them, including friends, media, and societal expectations. It's not fair to place all the responsibility on parents. The broader social context places an emphasis on producing successful, intelligent, and flawless children, and parents strive to present a perfect image to the world, often without considering the process involved in achieving this outcome. □

THE MYSTERY WITHIN

Pierluigi Menato

The mystery is not in the crib, but in the heart of man who does not forgive, makes war holy and says God while causing death.

Merry Christmas! We exchange good wishes, seeking reasons for happiness and holding onto optimism. But joy seems intricate now, requiring courage. Hope seems challenging now, needing a miracle.

During this Christmas season with its sparkling lights and festive displays, we cannot ignore the shadow cast by the ongoing misfortunes that darken our world. The persistent wars in various parts of the globe, the spreading reach of terrorism, and the unsettling realization that the world has evolved into a place where it is both prey and hunter of itself, all serve as haunting reminders of innocence lost.

Christmas is a celebration of faith. However, the world's resistance to salvation and understanding love creates a contradiction. People speak of God while hating each other and make war holy, not realizing that saying 'God' means that God loves humanity. Today, Christmas seems to clash with the mystery of history. It has become a consolatory ritual played once a year, with the same playful attraction for children as an expected toy.

The Gospel proclamation contains one sign: light, but we are in darkness. The other is joy, and we are in anguish. The third is trust ('do not be afraid'), and we are afraid. Finally, it is the proclamation 'for all peoples,'

and we are killed. This hostility, this unlove, this forgetfulness of human brotherhood made David Maria Turoldo say: "If there is no peace, then 'Christ has not come.'"

Please do not say it is in the crib; it is a mystery. It is so simple, after all, this unreachable, unthinkable mystery if man's heart allows itself to be reached by such a revelation, such madness of love, by a 'God who loves him'. And one hears that salvation is possible, that salvation has come, that we are not damned to torture ourselves in our despair, that the invocation of hope is anticipated to a great extent by the certainty that we are not abandoned to our sundials of death. In the depths of the soul are the awaited words, the dream of a newly discovered identity, the 'logos' of life.

No, the mystery is not in the crib but in our homes. It is a mystery that, while we seek peace, we are still, as Salvatore Quasimodo recalled, "those of the stone and the sling, of the evil-winged vehicles with malignant wings, of chariots of fire, of gallows and wheels of torture, of 'exact science persuaded to extermination, without love, without Christ'. Today, history has provoked us to do the most atrocious and paradoxical things: to call war necessary and destruction virtuous. But to shake off the simplified hypotheses of 'just vengeance' there remains an unhappy conscience

within us. We look for the auspices of each new year, almost peering into the double face of a Janus, who this time seems to have the eyes of the past gouged out by bombs and the eyes of the future barred with terror or grim with vengeance. And in this damned compulsion, we will be remade as brothers, brutally, by the symmetrical tears that encounter pain on all sides; those of children, first and foremost, of the children who have died in all the wars of history.

Contemplating the Infant in the

manger, who is considered the saviour of the world, helps us see the common humanity in every child, regardless of their race or nationality. Whether they are Palestinian, Israeli, American, Iraqi, Afghan, Chechen, Beslan, Hutu, or Tutsi, each child represents the hope and potential of the next generation.

The suffering of the innocent and the tragedy that defies the idea of 'just' revenge is triggered by the perception of tangible, intense, human evil. What propels it is the clear or distorted per-



*The adoration of the shepherds
(Giorgione, 1498, Washington, National Gallery)*

But a person's needs are not just food, land, life, work, and dignity; a person also needs to be loved.

ception of an ancient evil, linked to an even more distant and justified evil. Consequently, a person becomes consumed by the cycle of 'evil for evil' for so long that nobody can recall when it all began - when the first light saw the first act of violence and the first experience of pain. History does not adhere to specific dates; perhaps the origin of today's misfortune goes back to a distant time when Cain said to his brother, 'Let's go out into the fields' and he killed him. Thus, we continue endlessly, without respite, without escape, dreaming of a peace that will follow the final war - always the last war, which may only lead to a peace resembling that of a cemetery.

Yet the Christmas of Jesus is a reality that cannot be destroyed. It lies within the deepest layer of truth, unreachable by our eyes blinded by blood and weeping and by our stubborn adventures along the recursive paths of vengeance. Resisting evil, repelling it, is the first stage; overcoming it is something else. We have to cut the roots of evil and go further down, further upstream, further back in time to trace the tear, the laceration, the supreme sin of selfishness and abuse, unlove, and hate. There is no peace without justice; justice is giving each person what they deserve. But a person's needs are not just food,

land, life, work, and dignity; a person also needs to be loved. In a world unloved and hostile, in fierce contention, refined by cruelty, there is no justice; it does not happen. Vengeance will not bring life to the slain, nor will shedding tears in symmetrical quantities pay for the pain. Doing justice demands a disproportion that will restore the finality of the given evil. It would take a miracle. It would take remaking the world.

At this precise moment, a word as great and tremendous as forgiveness is hurled over our hapless despair. Not as a human, incomprehensible word. As a miracle that remakes the world in the same way that it made it from nothing. As a gift from God, as an advent of God into the dull clay of the world. Like Christmas, he so loved the world that he sent his Son. Dag Hammarskjöld (Secretary General of the UN from 1953 to 1961, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1961) wrote that forgiveness is like the answer to the dream of a child who has broken a toy and finds it new again, and is told that the stain that fell on her dress is not there anymore; and that God is capable of this because forgiveness is like creation.

Today, in our frantic confusion, we feel that this unforgivable world will not survive without forgiveness. It becomes an extreme invocation, a bridge thrown over our broken logic, over the fatal impotence of perennial revenge. Being forgiven is equal to being loved. To accept the miracle of Christmas is precisely to kindle the hope of peace, however thick the darkness that now oppresses us. □

LIFE, THE GREAT HEALER

by Anastasia Dias

Recently, I was asked about some of my most life-changing experiences, taken by surprise, I was lost in thought for a bit as there were so many. Then, I narrowed down my research to a few. One of which I would like to share with you:

I often think about my life from two years ago. I was entering my last year of college, and, I faced a lot of challenges. I had my own personal struggles; I was subject to a lot of discrimination on the college campus because I was doing a course that was very popular with men. There was very meagre support from my close friends and family. The reason I still remember that was because the predicament made me wonder, *what kept me going?* And I ask myself this question often.

Today, I am fortunate enough to live in a safe environment, to work with some of the most intelligent people on the planet and most of them are men and what is even more pleasantly surprising is that I feel accepted and respected.

I think that is why my mind - even now - drifts back to life two years ago when things weren't the way they are today.

So, a few months ago, I travel-

led back to the places that I had lived in two years ago.

I didn't feel or seem to remember any of the pain that I had felt then.

Instead, I felt happy to be back visiting the places where I met some wonderful human beings and made a few beautiful memories too. It's strange, isn't it?

In those moments of pain, everything seemed like the end of the world. But, once I was past it, it doesn't seem to matter anymore. Or at least, it doesn't hurt as much, if anything, not at all. I'd like to believe that it's time that heals everything.

But I sincerely believe that there's something deeper and more profound than time.

There's life that we experience and keep experiencing that heals.

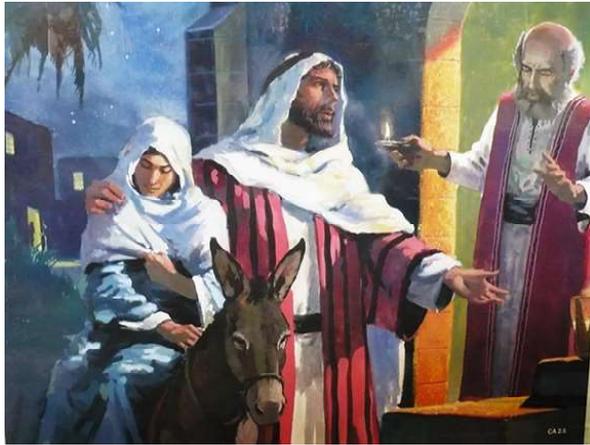
If I had stopped in those moments of self-doubt and run away, I wouldn't be where I am today.

Even though I had no comfort zone at the time, if I had chosen to turn my back on my problems, I wouldn't appreciate what I have now and who I have become.

If I had tried escaping things at the time, I wouldn't be respected today.

This is what I've been thinking





right now? What is one thing that you desire most from life?

Ponder over these questions, meditate on them, ask them to yourself again and again. And, when you receive an answer for each of them, work towards what you desire from life.

of: this must be Joseph's journey over two thousand years ago. Joseph, who took Mary as his wife, no questions asked and embarked on his journey to Bethlehem and subsequently to Egypt. It was the journey of the three wise men when they wanted to see the Son of God. It was the journey of the prodigal son.

It's the journey of the lost sheep; the journey of Paul; the journey that Jesus himself undertook.

This is the journey of life.

Life is a journey that involves facing our challenges head-on, with or without questions and doubts that arise. There may be sleepless nights and troubled days. There may be no one to help or support you. There may be people who deride you. But, if you, like Joseph are courageous enough to face the very things that daunt you, you will have a homecoming like no other, like the lost sheep or the prodigal son.

Friends, think about your life. What is it that frightens you?

What are you trying to escape from? Does life seem challenging

If I had not endured all the pain yesterday, I would never appreciate the beauty that I witness today and every single day since then.

This is my advice to you: Do something each day that daunts you. Be brave. Don't let people get to you. Work hard. Give your best.

Once you do this, in a few days you will notice that life has changed.

And it isn't time that has healed you, it is life and your very self.

In that moment, you can delve into yourself and see that you have the power to face any of the challenges that come your way.

Just like Joseph did; and Paul did; and Jesus too.

With this in mind, let's be thankful for the year gone by and be willing and ready for the New Year ahead.

Whatever happens, let us give our best and make the best of what life deals out to you.

I wish a joy-filled Advent season. □

THE SALESIANS FOR YOU!

THE PASSING OF SOME PROTAGONISTS

Francesco Motto

The "unknown story" of Don Bosco is increasingly reduced thanks to historians and scholars. In this end-of-year update, we want to briefly mention four key contributors to this ongoing work: Fr. José Manuel Prellezo, who passed away in March 2023, and three colleagues who preceded him — Fr. Pietro Braido and Fr. Francis Desramaut (2014), and even earlier, Fr. Pietro Stella (2007).

Memoirs before Historiography

Before their writings emerged over fifty years ago, the Salesian houses primarily featured the well-known *Biographical Memoirs* of Fr. Lemoyne, Fr. Amadei, and Fr. Ceria, along with their condensed versions in the successful volumes of Lemoyne. These works were the most famous and widely used biographies of the saint. They were inspired by the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, wherein Don Bosco described himself as an 'instrument of the Lord' serving the needs of the time in support of poor and abandoned youth. Everything was viewed from this perspective, including 'designs of providence, ways of the Lord, and prophetic dreams.' Don Bosco was celebrated, admired, and loved as an apostle of Christian charity. This historical approach

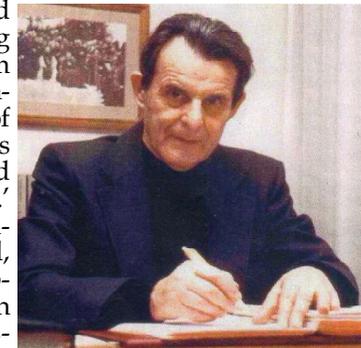
reached its peak in the writings from the beatification-canonization period (1929-1934). Following World War II, there were developments in religious-hagiographic and pedagogical aspects in the Phenomenon we called Don Bosco.

The mid-20th century crisis

At the beginning of the 1950s, young Salesian theologians at the Studentate of Bollengo raised serious questions about the value of these 'Memoirs'. They claimed that Fr. Lemoyne, the author, was more of a novelist of history than a historian. They pointed out that there were too many facts in the Memoirs that did not stand up to even benign criticism. They also alleged that D. Bosco, the subject of the Memoirs, modified and added content to fit his own thesis. They criticized the Memoirs for containing contradictions, especially in the first volumes. Additionally, they argued that even the volumes edited by Fr. Ceria were not entirely

historical, but rather eulogistic and laudatory. They also noted that the Memoirs lacked the portrayal of D. Bosco's flaws and his connections with the historical events of the nation.

When questioned, the elderly compiler Fr. Ceria did his best to



Fr Peter Braido

answer on behalf of his predecessors. He was also assisted by another scholar, Fr. Eugenio Valentini, who defended him when he stated that we should have immense gratitude for the first collectors of Don Bosco's Memoirs. They put in the effort to pass on to us the abundant material we now possess, which is an immense treasure of facts and teachings. At that point, the decision had been made. The existing account, which consisted of a collection of stories and the linking of events, was now outdated. It was necessary to change the approach and provide a more accurate portrayal of the historical figure of Don Bosco. The theological analysis of the sources needed to be broadened to include social, economic, and political aspects. Not everything Don Bosco did could be attributed to supernatural intervention. In short, it was essential to transition from an appealing memoir to scientific historiography, so to speak.

A new season

The initial step was to review the documents and testimonies to assess their value. New scholars then began their work. In the 1960s, the French historian Fr Desramaut undertook the scientific study of the first volume of the Biographical Memoirs for his dissertation in Lyon. He examined its sources and, most importantly, explained the original working method. Shortly after, another esteemed historian, Fr Stella, utilized his position as director of the Central Salesian Archive to present a concise but updated biography of Don Bosco, placing his religious mindset within the context of Catholic Religiosity.

This groundbreaking work raised several questions. Subsequently, Fr Braido, a well-known pedagogy teacher and dedicated follower of Don Bosco, completely revised his 1955 volume in 1964, based on original archive documents that have since become accessible. It was an exquisite fruit of a historical moment. In the same wake of the renewal promoted by the Second Vatican Council, the following decades saw the foundation of the Salesian Historical Institute (1892), called to present Salesian sources in a scientific-critical form. Fr Desramaut and Fr Braido thus had at their disposal adequate materials (especially letters) to proceed to extensive biographies of Don Bosco, both significantly placed in the complex context of their time: *Don Bosco en son temps* (1996); *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libert * (2002). In turn, Fr Prellezo assessed the originality and authenticity of those texts, retrieved the sources used or inspired by them, and analysed their use. He brought new and authentic information, particularly about the "letter on punishments" and the "letter from Rome." A similar situation occurred with Fr Braido about ten years ago, in a comprehensive monograph on Don Bosco, he did not consider the nine-year dream to be of historical interest.

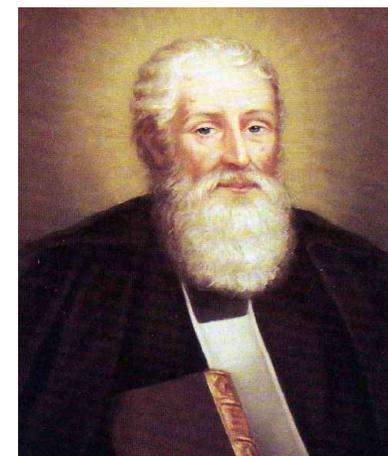
History is a great teacher, but it's important to understand it in its ever-changing "truth." Thanks to scholars, the "unknown history of Don Bosco" is now better understood and valued, even though the saint's own words, often not spoken or written. It's important to keep up with the latest developments in historical research and not just rely on anecdotes. This is more than an invitation; it's a duty. □

Witnesses in & for Our Times



ST. FOURIER (December 9)

Peter Fourier was born in Mirecourt, France on November 30, 1565. He was the eldest of three sons. His father was a cloth merchant and his mother was a housewife. They were devout Catholics and lived during the Counter-Reformation: the time when the Church sought to explain, clarify and defend its teachings against Protestant opposition. Incidentally, their native village was one of the centers for Counter-Reformation activity. Hence, the family was well catechized.



Since he was the firstborn son, Peter's parents in keeping with Biblical tradition desired to offer him to God. Accordingly, they encouraged him to discover his vocation and attempted to create an environment in which he could hear and respond to God's call. To facilitate this process, Peter was put into the Jesuit University at Pont- -Mousson (which eventually merged with the University of Lorraine) when he was 15 years old. Peter showed that he had an aptitude for study and added academic excellence to a devout and upright moral character.

'FOLLOW ME'

Studying in a religious institute helped him hear God's call but it wasn't to become a Jesuit. Peter expressed his desire to join the Order of Canons Regular of St. Augustine, a monastic order that was actually in decline due to their inability to authentically translate the high ideals of their calling into mundane living. Though this decision shocked everyone, Peter seemed convinced that this was God's will for him and so his parents encouraged him.

Accordingly, Peter joined the novitiate in 1585 and professed as a monk two years later in the Abbey of Chamounsey. At the tender age of 23, on February 24, 1589, he was ordained a priest. Usually, the day after the ordination, the newly ordained priest celebrates his first mass as a thanksgiving. Peter chose not to follow this tradition. Instead, he spent a few months in retreat completely dedicating himself to prayer and penance. Once he was satisfied with his retreat, he celebrated his first public Eucharist in thanksgiving.

As he was still quite young, his abbot sent him to pursue higher studies in theology at his alma mater. At the University, Fourier immersed himself in the study of Scholastic theology (Medieval authors who contributed much to Catholic thought and dogma). He became so well-versed with the writings of the chief Scholastic thinker, Thomas Aquinas that he was capable of reciting tracts from the *Summa Theologica* (Thomas' theological magnum opus) by heart! He completed his studies by topping the University and earning a doctorate in Patristic theology. His intellectual capacity coupled with his humble personality earned him the respect of all his professors and companions. The Bishop of Metz was fascinated by his capabilities and offered him a high ecclesiastical post in his diocese.

'I AM SENDING YOU AS LAMBS AMONG WOLVES'

Besides, the attractive offer of the Bishop of Metz, Peter received a number of attractive offers from his own diocese but he preferred to return to his Abbey and live in obscurity. Despite his show of hum-

ility, Peter did not receive a favourable welcome. Some of his fellow monks, probably threatened by his success or believing he had some ulterior motive for returning, treated him very badly. One of his biographers summarizes this phase as 'a persecution instigated by the forces of hell.' The biographer records that Peter was subjected to "raillery, threats, and intrigues;" so malicious was the persecution that even an unsuccessful attempt was made to poison him!

This is outrageous! I'm certain every one of you reading this will be as scandalized as I am with this information. However, facts like this provide a harsh reminder to us that we are only human. Just because someone takes vows and wears a religious habit or cassock, does not mean that they are necessarily better or holy people. Holiness does not lie in the clothes or in the activity one does but in the character of the person. Despite the degrading treatment, Peter showed his holiness of life. He never complained, he never grumbled and he never cursed. Such was his spirit of surrender that his Abbot had no idea that he was being persecuted in this way. On the contrary, he showed greater kindness and tolerance towards his persecutors.

Offers kept coming in for him to take up good posts but Peter resolutely declined. At last, he accepted to become the parish priest of a small parish that nobody wanted to go to. The parish of Mattaincourt was in a sorry state. The people had gotten into a culture of moral and spiritual laxity. To add to that it had earned for itself the name 'Little Geneva' on account of the infiltration of Calvinism. The conn-

ection with Geneva was made because Geneva was in a similar state before Francis de Sales became its bishop.

Peter channelized all his energies into revitalizing the faith of the people and leading them back to the source of orthodox faith—the Church. He began by addressing the socio-economic situation of the people. He found that the economic malaise played a role in encouraging immorality. Hence, he set up a community bank by pooling the wealth of the townsfolk and providing them loans without interest. On the spiritual side, he used a preaching style that was at once appealing as it was didactic. He used the dialogue style of question and answer or objection and rebuttal to get his points across. This not only engaged the congregation but helped them see the wisdom behind the Church's teachings. History is witness to the success of his ventures. He not only restored religious fervor among his parishioners, he revitalized many clergy who had declined into laxity and succeeded in converting many Protestants to the Catholic faith.

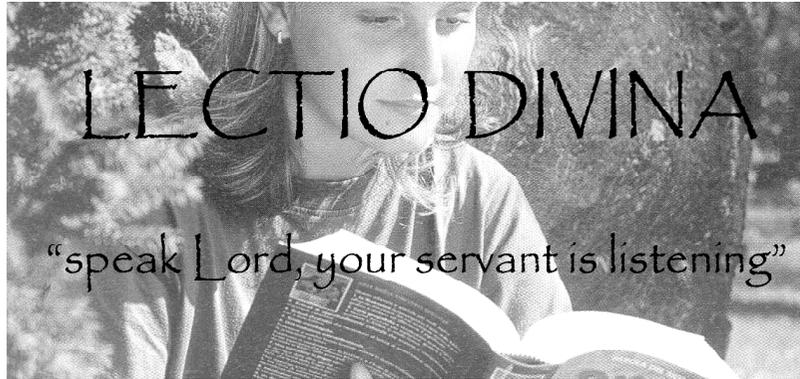
'FEED MY LAMBS'

His success garnered the attention of neighbouring bishops who insisted that he become a missionary preacher. While on his journey, he grew appalled at the ignorance and superstition that abounded among the faithful. This motivated him to found a congregation to address this deplorable situation. Along with Alix Le Clerc, a devout lady from his parish of Mattaincourt, he founded the Congregation of Notre Dame of Canonesses Regular of St. Augustine—a sort of feminine

branch of his own Order. Peter was convinced that an ignorant woman was more dangerous to society than an ignorant man because of the important role women play in the nurturing of children and consequently in the shaping of society. Thus, the new Congregation had as its mission providing free Christian education to children, girls in particular, so as to prevent them from growing up ignorant of their faith. They were made to take a fourth vow to that effect.

Peter was not just a spiritual father and founder to them, he was keenly following and assisting their work and their development. He is credited with inventing the concept of a blackboard for teaching. He also came up with the idea of teaching children in groups organized according to their aptitude and ability. Today we call this a standard or a grade. In those days, children were usually mentored on a one-to-one basis or in small groups that were created without consideration for the children's ability. Group education was usually a matter of convenience as it was expensive to employ a private tutor.

During his lifetime, Fourier witnessed the spread of the Congregation to other parts of France, Germany and England. Today there are about 350 nuns working in 80 Convents across the world. Fourier's zeal permeated into his own Order too and he found himself elected Abbot General. He tried to get his monks to do for boys what the Canonesses were doing for girls but he didn't succeed. Ultimately, he died while nursing victims of plague on December 9, 1640. □



JOHN THE BAPTIST

by Dinesh Vasava, *sdb*

1. Reading: Take a few moments to read the gospel passage slowly and attentively. Pay attention to the details of John the Baptist's message and the response of the people. Try to understand the significance of his teachings and the call to repentance.

2. Meditation: Sure, here is the revised text:

Reflect on the transformative power of God's grace in the context of repentance. Consider the significance of John the Baptist's call to repentance and the fruits of repentance he mentions. Ponder on the importance of preparing our hearts for the coming of Jesus. What does this story reveal about the need for repentance and the transformative power of God's grace?

In Luke 3:10-18, we find John the Baptist preaching. The passage begins with the crowds asking John what they should do to bear the fruits of repentance. John gives practical examples of how they can live out their repentance in their daily lives.

John's message is primarily a call to repentance or metanoia and a conversion of heart. Practically, he tells us to be sorry for our sins and to turn back to God. To prepare for the coming of the Lord, he has given specific instructions for everyone, such as sharing and being just to others. Otherwise, we will face the grave consequence of being burned with unquenchable fire.

John tells the crowds that if they have extra clothing or food, they should share it with those without any. Tax collectors are instructed not to collect more than required, and soldiers are told not to extort money or falsely accuse others. These instructions emphasize the importance of justice, fairness, and charity in our relationships with others.

John then proclaims that he baptizes with water, but there is one coming after him who is mightier, Jesus, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John recognizes that his baptism is preparatory, but Jesus's baptism will bring about a deeper

transformation and purification of the heart.

John's preaching also includes a stark warning about the impending judgment. He describes Jesus as the one who will separate the wheat from the chaff, gathering the wheat into his barn and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. This imagery conveys the idea of a final judgment where the righteous will be rewarded, and the unrepentant sinners will face eternal consequences.

The people respond to John's preaching with anticipation and wonder, questioning whether he might be the Messiah. John clarifies that he is not the Messiah but rather the one preparing the way for his arrival.

This passage underscores the importance of repentance and the need to bear fruits that demonstrate our conversion. It reiterates the call to live justly, generously, and honestly in our relationships with others. It also points to Jesus as the one who brings about a deeper transformation through the Holy Spirit.

Overall, this passage invites us to reflect on our own lives and consider how we can respond to the call of repentance, live justly,

and prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus."

3. Prayer: Engage in a conversation with God. Share your thoughts, feelings, and questions that arise from the passage. Thank God for the gift of repentance and the opportunity to turn back to Him. Ask for the grace to recognise and acknowledge any areas in your life where repentance is needed. Pray for the strength to let go of sin and to embrace a life of conversion. Seek guidance on how to prepare your heart for the coming of Jesus in a deeper way.

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 as one of the people listening to John the Baptist's message. Reflect on the ways in which you can respond to his call to repentance and bear fruit of conversion. Simply rest in God's presence, allowing Him to speak to you beyond words.

5. Action: Consider how you can apply the message of this passage to your own life. Reflect on any areas where you may need to repent and turn back to God. How can you bear fruits of conversion in your thoughts, words, and actions? Make a commitment to take action based on the insights you have gained. □



Quiet Spaces

THE THREE GIFTS FROM GOD

Pope Francis' Homily (edited) at St. Peter's Basilica on Monday 6 November 2017

During Mass at Santa Marta on Monday, 6 November, Pope Francis identified three “irrevocable gifts” from God, namely, those of “election, promise and covenant”. He explained that such gifts are freely given in mercy because of our disobedient nature, and we, the faithful, must allow ourselves to receive God’s mercy.

Reflecting on St Paul’s letter to the Romans (11:29-36), the Pope began by noting that in this passage, “Paul is finishing his reflection on God’s election of the Israelites and His election of the Gentiles”. This reveals a “theological reasoning that Paul must make” in order to persuade the peoples that they are both God’s elect. The Pope emphasized Paul’s phrase: “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable”. This means that “when God gives a gift, this gift is irrevocable: He does not give it today and take it away tomorrow” and, likewise, “when God calls, that call endures for life”.

In the history of salvation”, the Pontiff continued, God gave three gifts to his people: “the gift of election, the gift of promise and the gift of covenant”. Indeed, “the People of God are an elect people”, Francis affirmed. “It is the Lord who elects Abram – the first elect – and leads him forth with a promise, and makes a covenant with him and his successors”. And, Pope Francis continued, “it is the Lord who continues to emphasize and reinforce that election” the Pope asserted. In fact, in the narrative about Abram, “in Genesis, how many times does the Lord say: ‘yes, I have elected you’; and how many times does he emphasize and reiterate the promise: ‘I will give you a son, but not this one, another’ – ‘At 90 years?’ – ‘At 90 years!’”.

Here Francis remarked on the nature of “the promise”, that is, on the fact that “the Lord continually celebrates the covenant sealed by Him at the beginning”, and “this is the history of salvation”, the Pope explained. “But the Lord never turns back”. Therefore, “these gifts are irrevocable, for the People of God, for the Church and for each one of us”.

“Each one of us has been elected” Francis said. “Each one of us is elect; each one of us bears a promise that the Lord has made: ‘Walk in my presence, be irreproachable and I will do this for you’”. Thus, “each one of us makes a covenant with the Lord”, and one can choose whether or not to do so. The choice is ours, the Pope said, “and that’s a fact”.

In this prospective, Francis proposed a question for self-reflection: “How do I perceive the election: do I feel I am Christian by chance? How do I live the promise, a promise of salvation on my journey? And how am I faithful to the covenant: am I faithful, as He is?”. Because “He is faithful” and for this reason “the gifts and the call are irrevocable; He cannot disavow himself; He is faithfulness itself”.

Therefore, the Pontiff recommended, in light of God’s unwavering faithfulness, we should each ask ourselves: “Do I feel elected by God? Do I feel God’s caress in my heart? Do I feel that God loves me and takes care of me? And when I distance myself, does He come to look for me?”

The Pope then shared a personal experience. “Every time that engaged couples come to me so that I can bless their wedding rings, I see these three things there, in that gesture, and for this reason marriage is among the most perfect figures of the gift of God”.

Returning to the text, Francis noted that in the next four lines of the Letter to the Romans, the Apostle repeats the words “‘disobedience’ and ‘mercy’, and there is a tension between them: where there is disobedience there has been mercy”. Paul repeats those two words four times, Francis pointed out, which means “that on the path of election towards the promise and covenant, there will be sins, there will be disobedience, but in the face of this disobedience there is always mercy”.

“It is like the dynamic of our journey towards maturity”, the Pontiff said. “There is always mercy, because He is faithful, He never revokes His gifts”, and all this “is related: the gifts are irrevocable because in the face of our weaknesses, of our sins, there is always mercy, and when Paul arrives at this reflection he goes a step further: not in explanation to us, but in adoration”.

“O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”, the Apostle writes to the Romans. Such words are “an act of adoration, of praise”, said the Pontiff. “He kneels before this mystery of disobedience and mercy that frees us, and before the beauty of these irrevocable gifts as they are, election, promise and covenant”, Pope Francis observed. And “this is Paul’s reasoning: when he can go no further with his mind, because he has explained everything”, Saint Paul “kneels and adores”. He “adores in silence”.

“I think that it would do us good, each of us”, the Pope suggested, “to think today about our election, about the promises that the Lord has made to us, and about how we live out the covenant with the Lord.” But also, he continued, about how we receive mercy from the Lord, “in the face of our sins, of our disobedience”. And finally, the Holy Father said, consider “whether we are capable, like Paul, of praising the Lord for what He has given to us, to each one of us; to give praise and to perform that act of adoration”.

Concluding the homily, Francis invited the faithful “to never forget” that “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable; He is the faithful one”. □

THE CYCLAMENS

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

As she bent over the grass looking for cyclamens, Irene was singing to herself. She sang because she was happy. Every day after school she spent a good part of the afternoon in the woods looking for flowers.

"That's enough for today," she murmured suddenly. "Madame Giovanna will be pleased." Mrs Giovanna was the florist who bought her bouquets to sell them to the guests who crowded the pretty spa town.

Irene grabbed her basket of flowers and hurried down the steep path that wound in tandem with the main road below. As she reached the crossroad, she ran across the road without paying attention and was startled by the screeching of brakes, causing her to scream in terror. A car heading towards the town centre had almost hit, braking just a few centimetres from her.

"Is that the way to cross the road?" shouted the man sitting behind the wheel. "It's a miracle I managed to brake in time."

Still trembling, the girl looked at him uncertainly and confused, but quickly recovered when she saw a serious girl about her age smiling at her from inside the car.

"Where were you headed in such a hurry?" the man at the wheel asked. "I live in the village, sir," she replied.

"Oh, dad, let's give her a lift into town," said the blonde girl who sat at his side.

"Get in then. What's your name?"

The little girl turned as red as a

poppy, then said: "I'd rather not say, sir, because I don't want my mother to know that I'm picking flowers to sell them, while she's off at her work."

"Well, well. These things don't concern me. Come on, get in." The car set off briskly as the two girls looked at each other smiling.

"I'll call you Cycla, like the flowers in your basket," said the blonde girl as they paused in the town square. "My name is Cristina, and I hope we'll meet again. We live at the spa hotel where mom is being treated."

"Of course, we'll see each other again. I'll come there tomorrow and bring you some flowers."

The next day Cristina received a beautiful bouquet of flowers.

"It's a gift," said Irene, smiling shyly, "when I thought of the mishap that could have occurred due to my distraction. I'll sell the rest of the flowers to Mrs. Giovanna, the florist. I'm saving some money to buy a gift for my mom. She's been wanting a high-quality clock-radio for a long time.

"How thoughtful of you! What does your mum do?"

"She leaves in the morning at six and works all day at the hotel, she's so dear to me, I love her immensely."

"I too love my mum very much. At the moment she's experiencing some pain in one leg, but the treatment and the massages have already improved her condition significantly, and I'm so happy

about that!

One morning, Irene was pleasantly surprised to discover white cyclamens in the forest, delicately mottled with violet. This was a much sought-after bloom on the flower market. Not without pride, she pointed this out to Cristina when, as usual, she went to bring her the bouquet.

"They're so pretty," said Cristina. "I'll put them in Mum's room. You know her health is constantly improving. Her masseuse now comes to the room in the evening after the therapy closes. It was lucky that she agreed to come at such an inconvenient hour. They are all so tired after a hard day's work, but ours is particularly good and willing. She works hard to support her daughter and says she needs the extra income to buy her a new coat for the winter."

"Mothers! They're so good and so kind," Irene said thoughtfully. "But now I must go. The florist will be waiting for me."

Three weeks had passed like this. The day of Cristina and her parents were to leave was fast approaching, and the two girls were very sad about their imminent separation.

"I asked my mom, to invite you over on the last day for a little party," Cristina said. "That way, we can be together again before we say goodbye. You'll come, won't you?"

"Of course," replied Irene, smiling happily.

At the agreed time, Irene knocked on Cristina's door.

"I was waiting for you. Mom



has also invited the masseuse to the party, and she's already here. You'll see how nice she is."

At that moment, the door to the next room opened, and Irene saw Cristina's mother enter, along with a friendly, still young-looking woman with an energetic, smiling face.

"But this is Irene, my little girl," said the surprised woman.

"Don't you think I was right?" Cristina exclaimed to her mother.

"How did you guess?" asked Irene, surprised. "I never said anything to give you a hint."

"I found your address on a piece of paper that you used to wrap the flowers in. It was the address of Mom's masseuse. The other day, Mrs. Maria came with some cyclamens in her rainbow-colored lapel that you had brought us, saying that they were

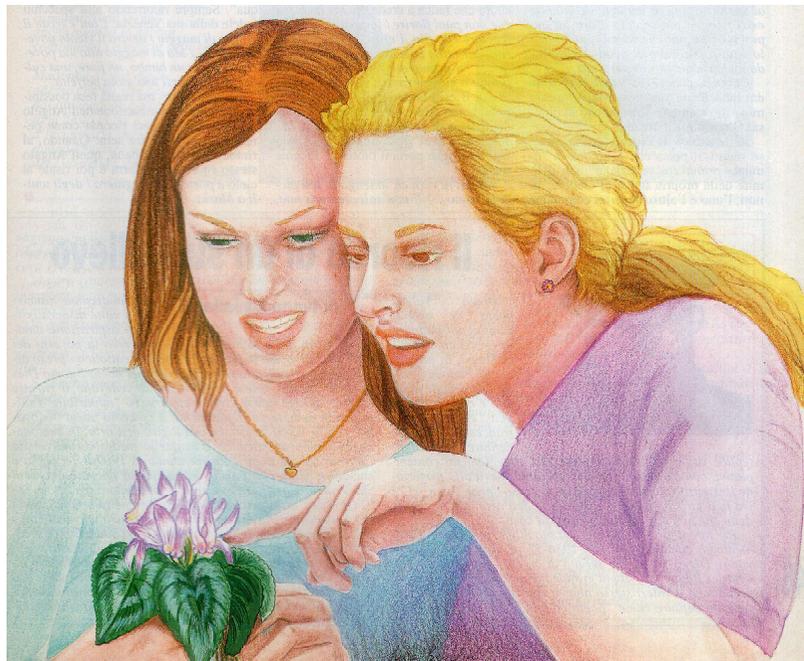
a rare variety."

"I found them on the kitchen table," said Irene's mother, "but I never imagined my little girl would become a famous florist."

"Now that everything has been cleared up," Cristina said cheerfully, "we will present you our parting gifts, which Mummy and I are pleased to offer you." For Mrs. Maria, it was a little girl's coat, and for Irene, a magnificent clock radio.

"How happy I am," Irene said, clapping her hands. "But I don't know how to thank you."

"It is I who must thank you," Cristina replied, "because you taught me that many loving and devoted mothers, like mine, and many little girls would do anything, like me, to give their mother some joy. Is this not a wonderful discovery?" □



FIORETTI OF DON BOSCO - 59

by Michele Molineris

262. And I want evil! (1880)

On April 3, 1880, a woman who was believed to be possessed by the devil was brought to Don Bosco to be exorcised. He performed a private exorcism on her in Rome, as he lacked the authorization to perform a solemn exorcism. As he blessed her and invoked the names of Jesus and Mary, the devil almost suffocated the woman.

Asked for his name, the devil said his name was Petrus. Note that the victim was a poor peasant girl; yet he even spoke English. He was asked: "For how many years have you owned this person?"

"For three years," he replied.

"And what are you doing here?"

"I am Santa's guardian (Santa was the name of the possessed).

"Where were you before?"

"In the air. It would help if you fought me a lot."

"Why don't you want to leave? Don't you see that you increase your pain, your evil?"

"And I want evil."

Present at the interview was a gentleman who did not refrain from saying: "I had never believed in the devil; now I believe because I have seen him" (M.B., XIV, 458).

263. An attempt (1880)

Towards the end of June 1880, a former pupil of the Oratory, who called himself Dasso Alessandro and lived from his art in Forino, presented himself at the Valdocco gatehouse, asking to

speak to Don Bosco. Being familiar with the house, he found the room he was ushered into. His eyes were troubled, and he seemed abstract, preoccupied with anything but whoever was before him.

Don Bosco greeted him with his usual loving kindness; but as the young man fell silent and a growing agitation seemed to put him into spasms, he asked him: "What do you want of me? Speak up! You know that Don Bosco loves you."

He then fell to his knees, broke down in tears, and sobbing, told him an ugly story. He had joined Freemasonry; the sect had condemned Don Bosco to death; twelve individuals were to follow that order to carry out the sentence.

"It fell to me to be the first, just me! And I came for that! I will never take such an action. I will bring the vengeance of others upon myself. To reveal the secret is my death; I am lost, I know, but I will never kill Don Bosco, never!"

He pulled out the concealed weapon and threw it to the ground.

Don Bosco picked him up and tried to calm and reassure him, but it was all in vain; the poor man rushed out of the room as if pushed by a mysterious force towards the abyss.

The saint immediately wrote a note to his father, a very prudent man, urgently inviting him to the Oratory, where he confided everything to him. But his son, torn by remorse, threw himself into the waters of the Po on 23 June. The customs guards, seizing him in time, handed him

over to two policemen, who took him to his home. Two days later the father wrote to Don Bosco to tell him what had happened and plead for help. "Reverend Father of wayward children," he told him, "To you and to your inexhaustible charity, I commend my son."

Don Bosco saw this unfortunate father several times, with whom he concerted the way to put his son on the right path while saving him from the vengeance of his accomplices. In fact, after having primarily helped him, he facilitated his escape abroad, providing him with a safe asylum, where he lived unknown until the end of his days. (M.B., XIV, 516).

264. What are you looking for, sir? (1880)

A young gentleman in his mid-twenties visited Don Bosco in December 1880, who courteously asked him to sit beside him on the sofa. At first, he had a face that inspired very little confidence; especially in his eyes, there flashed something sinister, which immediately prompted Don Bosco to be on his guard and watch his movements. An ill-repressed nervousness agitated him. As he sat, he spoke, jumping from subject to subject, at times getting heated and gesticulating like a holy man, and in his agitation, a small six-shot revolver slipped from his pocket.

Don Bosco, without him noticing, carefully put his hand on it and slowly slipped it into his pocket. The young gentleman also used provocative phrases in his ineffectual talk, as if he wanted to start a fight. At a certain point,

he suddenly turned his eyes around, put his right hand in his pocket, rummaged and rummaged with signs of wonder and spite, jumped up, looked this way and that, and couldn't rest.

Don Bosco, in stark contrast to the man's frantic search, had also risen from his seat and, with a calm demeanour, asked: "What are you looking for, sir?" he inquired.

"I had something here, in my pocket... Who knows how... But where did it go?"

He must have thought he had it with him, but instead...

"No, no!" retorted the man, running around and penetrating the neighbouring room.

Don Bosco quickly approached the door, put his left hand on the handle to be ready to open it, pointed his weapon at him, and without hesitation said to him, "Is this the weapon you are looking for?"

At this sight, he was stunned; he tried to get hold of the revolver. But Don Bosco, in an energetic tone: "Come on!" he ordered him. "Get out of here at once, and God have mercy on you!"

So saying, he opened the door and told someone in the ante-chamber to accompany the gentleman to the porter's lodge.

The assassin hesitated, but Don Bosco said: "Get out, and don't come back!"

Finally, he went out. Two from the house, having understood what it was all about, accompanied him as far as the street where a group of young men were waiting for him, talking in whispers by the side of a carriage. When they realised that the job had failed, some jumped into the

coach, which disappeared in a flash, and some clicked their heels. (M.B., XIV, 517).

265. Never again, these sins (1880)

Monsignor Costamagna was given full authority by the individual concerned to inform the first historian of the saint about the following incident, on condition that the person's name be kept confidential.

A young man from the Oratory unfortunately fell and relapsed into serious sins of impurity, especially during the holiday season. In the autumn of 1880, upon his return from the countryside with a burdened soul, he hurried to confess to Don Bosco. Don Bosco then did something with him that he had not been known to do with others.

Hearing the accusation, he pressed the penitent's face tightly against his own, saying: "I want you never to commit these sins again for the rest of your life!"

At that moment, the love of purity from the confessor's soul was transfused into the little sinner's soul. When the sinner grew up and became religious, this enduring act of love led him to protest his readiness to swear before God concerning the prodigious effect in him caused by what Monsignor Costamagna calls 'an extraordinary, exceptional caress in Don Bosco.'

The effect was that he seemed to feel the evil inclinations eradicated from his heart, so that he returned to his holidays, then became a soldier, and at one time or other he was exposed to grave dangers of offending God, but he never again fell into his old miseries. (M.B., XIV, 548).

266. What a hard head (1880)

In November 1880, Don Bosco had gone to preach the sermon for all Souls day at San Martino Tanaro. The parish priest, a man known for the stubbornness of his ideas, had founded a small religious congregation for women, employing a capital of twelve thousand lira and demanding from each postulant a thousand lira dowry, which he secured with a mortgage if it was not paid out immediately. He had invited several priests to lunch that day. A beautiful turkey appeared on the table.

Don Bosco took only the head for himself and, beating it with a knife, said: "Oh, what a hard head, what a hard head!"

The parish priest handed him the plate again so that he could serve himself better.

"Let me do my business," he replied. And he kept beating and repeating: "Oh, what a hard head!" Finally, he managed to break the bone. "Who would have thought," he then exclaimed, "that there would be so little brain in such a hard head!"

The neighbours who heard it understood that the lesson was meant for the parish priest, but he seemed not to mind. In fact, his end showed how much he needed a similar lesson. When he died in 1890, he left a will that was so ill-advised that the town council, while recognizing his merits for the town, did not even dare to decree a memorial plaque for him, as some proposed. (M.B., XIV, 556).

267. The moment of embarrassment (1880)

One day in 1880, Don Bosco

and others were dinner guests at the villa of a certain gentleman at Concalieri. To honour their host, most of the guests, including several priests – were wearing their knightly decorations. As the conversation warmed up, Don Bosco remarked, “How fine a figure I am cutting without decorations! I am neither commendatore, knight or professor. I am not even certified to teach the first grade. What I show up at St. Peter’s pearly gates he will ask me, “What is this? Was it worth your while to live so long and ever earn a single diploma or decoration? Out with you.”

They all laughed. When the guests were quiet again, the lady of the house remarked, “You have nothing because you never wanted to accept anything.”

“Did I say I never wanted to accept anything?” he retaliated.

“Just try to give me a few thousand lire for my poor boys and you will soon see whether or not I accept things.”

Embarrassed by this unexpected rejoinder, the woman tried to talk herself out of her predicament, but to no avail. Adroitly Don Bosco went to her rescue and gracefully steered the conversation to other topics. (M.B., XIV, 555).

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268. Reparative Mass (1880)

One day in 1880, Don Bosco stopped in Ventimiglia while waiting for the train on his way to France. A little boy of seven or eight, the innkeeper’s son, was amusing himself in front of him. He came and went, talked to one and the other of the patrons and servers; now he approached his father, now his mother: he had the quicksilver on him. But occasionally, the word *Chisto* came out of his mouth. Don Bosco followed the little blasphemer with his eye until he came near him with his mother.

“Come here, little one,” he told her. “May I have a word with

your son?” he then asked his mother.

“Go ahead,” replied the lady.

“Listen to me,” continued Don Bosco, addressing the little boy. “Do you want me to teach you how to pronounce words correctly?” The boy did not dare to speak.

“Answer!” his mother told him, almost annoyed, but with a tone that showed her concern for his education.

“Yes,” said the naughty boy rudely.

“Be careful,” resumed the saint, “how to pronounce words correctly... First of all, take off your cap.

The little fellow did not move.

“Come on, take off your cap,” his mother ordered.

The boy took it off. Then Don Bosco began to say, “Be careful. We say *Christ* and not *Chist*, and in this way, observe: *In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*” He made the sign of the cross and continued, “*Praised be Jesus Christ. Take heed: not Chisto, but Christ.*”

In the meantime, many people had gathered around, including the father, who, with a sudden realization, exclaimed: “You are right, Reverend. One picks up certain habits without thinking, and the little ones learn from the big ones. I too have this habit, and sooner or later I must stop.”

“I hope it will be soon,” Don Bosco remarked without adding a word.

The innkeeper had to withdraw immediately to serve the patrons; the little one followed him, and they all left. After a few moments, his mother approached him with a request that carried great weight: “Would you have the

goodness to celebrate a Mass for me?”

“Gladly.”

“Take this, then...”

“I don’t need alms. I’ll celebrate it anyway if you want me to.”

“No, take it; it pleases me.”

“When it is, so be it.”

The lady, with a deep sense of respect, handed him an envelope with 10 lire inside, then withdrew visibly moved. From that day on, every time Don Bosco passed by, she, having known who he was, always gave him 10 lire as a stipend for the celebration of a Mass.

In the year of the national exhibition in Turin, Don Bosco, entering the enclosure and passing a buffet, felt greeted by a lady who, revealing herself to be the lady of Ventimiglia and she asked him if he would allow her to pay him a visit at the Oratory. She wanted to speak to him about placing that son in the boarding school in Alassio and wished to obtain his acceptance. (M.B., XIV, 397)

269. The spirit of charity (1880)

In March 1880, Don Bosco, passing through Nice, gathered his Co-operators in a modest room that served as a chapel at the hospice of St. Peter. In spite of the narrowness of the place, the turnout was large. After making an attractive display of his works, he wanted to go around himself with a tray.

A gentleman had placed a gold coin on it, and Don Bosco roared: “God give it back to him.”

The gentleman, moved by Don Bosco’s words, not only gave more but doubled his offering, demonstrating his generosity and the power of Don Bosco’s teachings. (D’Espiney, *Don Bosco*, 24). □



THE TILMA OF MORENITA

by Fr Mario Morra

Mexico, known as the 'City of the Sun', was the capital of the Aztec empire. It was built on the waters of Lake Texacoco and appeared magnificent to the Spanish conquistadors who arrived on the coast of Yucatán in 1519, led by Hernán Cortés. After a siege lasting eighty days, the city was finally conquered and destroyed in August 1521. The surviving Aztecs found themselves not only physically scattered, but also culturally fragmented. Many Aztec texts describe the religious trauma they experienced, lamenting how their gods, in whom their ancestors believed, were unable to protect them from the invading forces from the sea.

Ten years after the fall of the "City of the Sun," an extraordinary event marked the rebirth of the Aztecs. In the first days of December 1531, Juan Diego, an Indian who had recently converted to Christianity, was met on the Tepeyac hill, just outside the City, by a young girl known as the "Ever Virgin Holy Mary" in

the local dialect. She asked him to go to Bishop Juan de Zumárraga, a Franciscan, to express her desire for a temple to be built in which she could help and protect all the people.

Juan Diego rushed to execute the command, but after opening up to him, the Bishop asked for a further sign to confirm the integrity of his story. The Indian was not discouraged. After reassuring him of the recovery of his dying uncle, Juan Bernardino, the Virgin asked him to return to the hill to pick roses despite the freezing winter. With these flowers, jealously guarded in his cloak, Juan Diego returned to the Bishop. When he wanted to show him "the sign" on his tilma (cloak), he saw the image of the Virgin imprinted. On December 12, 1531, the Bishop recognized the Virgin Morena as the portrait of the Mother of God. Around her, the people and culture of the Aztecs found the unity and identity they had lost ten years earlier with the fall of their empire.

The image imprinted on Juan Diego's cloak was completely understandable to the Indians and acceptable to the Spaniards. For the Indians, the image represented the synthesis of their culture: the colours, the face, the hands, the tunic, the cloak, the angel, the moon, and the stars all indicated that Christianity could bring their ancient Aztec culture to fruition. For the Spaniards, the apparition was reminiscent of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Extremadura, the homeland of Cortés, where Our Lady appeared in 1330 to a shepherd, leaving an image with a face similar to that of the Virgin Morena. It was, therefore, an image that was both Indian and Spanish. Two peoples, two worlds so culturally and politically distant, found in the image of Guadalupe the marvellous synthesis from which the

Christian civilization of today's Latin America springs.

The event of Our Lady's apparition has been the subject of study and debate. There are numerous documents in indigenous and Spanish literature, with the oldest being the primitive report: "This is the great wonder" written in the local language between 1541 and 1545. One of the individuals who studied the composition of the cloak and the texture of the Image was the painter, Michael Cabrera. In 1751, he was invited by the Abbot of Guadalupe to examine the Image closely and judge it 'according to the rules of art'. Cabrera published his judgment in 1756 in the book "*Maravilla Americana*." He considered the long life of over 225 years enjoyed by the Image to be a miracle, given the environmental conditions in



which the Shrine was located, due to the humidity and abundance of saltpetre. The cloth on which the Image was painted consisted of two equal pieces joined or sewn together by a fragile cotton thread, incapable of resisting any tension.

On the other hand, this fragile thread had resisted the natural force of the weight and pull of the two cloths it joined for more than two centuries now, despite their heaviness and roughness. The fabric is rough like the typical one made by the natives for their cloaks from the fibres of particular palms. However, its coarseness, which appears to the eye, is instead, to the touch, a pleasant softness, very similar to that of fine silk.

The cloth showed no preparation or 'background' on which the image was painted. In 1666, the painters examined it "on the front and back" and declared under oath that "the Holy Image has been transported there with all the colours that could be admired



on the right side, indicating the total absence of the background." The drawing of the Image was perfectly finished and remarkably symmetrical, following classical painting canons. The artist's adherence to tradition and continuity in the art world was evident in their work.

Recent studies have uncovered some exciting details, for example, in the eyes, the Virgin's tunic and mantle, and the angel's face. Mario Sanchez Rojas studied the position of the stars in the mantle, identifying the prominent constellations, and discovered an excellent correlation between these and those in the México sky at the winter solstice of 1531.

Santa Maria de Guadalupe, the Morenita Patroness of Latin America, still needs to finish impressing. □

CLAUDIO Perfetti, *Guadalupe, La tilma della Morenita* (Ed. Paoline 1987).



SARAH LAPORTA

MY VOCATION STORY

FR DEROSI RAJA GNANA PRAGASAM

Salesian In Hungary

Please introduce yourself

I am Fr. Derosi Raja, a Salesian missionary in Hungary. I am originally from India, specifically from Tamil Nadu in the southern part of the country. Sixteen years ago, I came to Hungary as a missionary. I studied theology and teacher training in Hungarian. I worked in my Province as Vice Provincial, Rector, and Provincial Delegate for Formation and Mission.

How did your vocation come about?

When I was three years old, the then Holy Father John Paul II visited India for the first time. His visit was not only a blessing but also an inspiration for me. As my family became friendly with the Salesian Sisters, through them, I got to know Don Bosco, the Shepherd of the Young. Eventually, I entered the Salesian minor seminary at 13, and now I am entirely for the Church and the Congregation.

How did your parents react to this?

My parents were God-fearing. When she was young, my mother wanted to become a nun, but her mother did not allow her to because she

was the family's only daughter. Instead, she married my father and gave birth to five children. She saw each of us as being placed in the five wounds of the crucified Lord. I was the last to be born, so she probably imagined me being placed on the wound of Jesus' side, where the lance pierced him—from this wound flowed water and blood, symbolizing baptism and the Eucharist.

Through the prayers and the example of my pious mother, I became a priest. Unfortunately, she passed away before my ordination. My parents willingly entrusted me to the Church. When I expressed the desire to go to the missions, my mother told me, "Derosi, go where God wants you. Who am I to block you?"

What is your work like?

I worked for seven years in a school and home founded by the Salesians in Hungary. I taught Catechism to children and teenagers. Thanks to my humble efforts, many came closer to Christ and joined the Catholic Church. Every year, I prepare a group of young people for baptism, confession, communion, and confirmation sacraments. Some parents



of my students have had their marriages blessed in church.

I greatly enjoy preparing volunteers for the missions. Many young people have participated in short-term and long-term volunteering in various European, Afro-African, and Asian countries. The mission experience has played a significant role in their lives. For example, a young man who volunteered is now preparing for his priestly ordination as a diocesan priest, and a young woman who volunteered is about to make her first profession as an FMA in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin.

What is the situation of young people in Hungary?

Young Hungarians are eager to find a sense of belonging and often seek out groups to join. If they are fortunate enough to find a reputable and ethical group, it can have a positive impact on their lives. From my perspective as a Salesian, it is important for me to introduce the different groups and movements within the Salesian family to young Hungarians.

How is your relationship with the local Church?

The Salesians have a good relationship with the local Church. Many diocesan priests are friends of the Salesians, and they are invited to mass celebrations in Salesian schools. The Salesians also assist the diocesan priests' parishes by providing replacements when needed. Since diocesan priests often live alone in their parishes, they frequently visit Salesian communities for fraternal lunches and lighter

moments.

What are the most significant achievements of your Province?

From a spiritual perspective, our province is honoured to have the martyr Blessed Stephen Sandor, a Salesian lay brother. It has been exactly one year since the Rector Major recognized and ceremonially placed his relic in the church. The location and the building where Stephen Sandor worked was requisitioned during communism. They have now been restored to the Salesians.

How do people regard the Salesians?

The Salesian family has a strong presence in Hungary, and this is evident in our visibility. We make valuable contributions in youth ministry settings such as in oratories, parishes, playgrounds, and schools, providing a sense of reassurance and confidence in our work.

Young people are drawn to Salesian festivals, camps, and spiritual retreats led by the Salesians, who are known for their youth work.

What are the main difficulties?

Few people in Hungary pursue the priesthood or lay consecration, presenting a significant challenge in keeping the Salesian charism alive there. □



IN A CHEERFUL MOOD

Real Name

"Name? queried the immigration official.

"Sneeze," replied the Chinese passenger.

The official looked up. "Is that your real Chinese name?"

"No, English name," said the man politely.

"Give me your Chinese name, please."

"Ah Choo."

On Training

They were training Mandy on her duties as a maid. After she answered the phone the first day, her mistress asked who had called.

"Twasn't nobody." Mandy said, "Jes' a woman says, 'It's a long distance from New York,'" and I says, "Yessum, it sure is," and hung up."

Who rules whom

Themistocles had a son who was the darling of his mother. "This little fellow is the sovereign of Greece," said Themistocles. "How so?" asked a friend. "Why, he governs his mother, his mother governs me, I govern the Athenians and the Athenians govern all Greece."

Seeing red

While Raffaello was busy painting in the Vatican, he was visited by two cardinals who began to criticize his work and found fault with everything without understanding much. "The Apostle Paul has too red a

face," said one.

"He blushes to see in whose hands teh Church has fallen," retorted the angry artist.

Straight

There was that old-timer who would take his shot of whiskey with eyes shut tight and fingers holding his nose, because he did not want his mouth to water and dilute it.

Highbrow

A person educated beyond his intelligence.

Well protected

An inebriated gentleman was weaving down the street carrying a box with perforations in teh lid and the sides. A neighbour stopped him and said: "My word, what have you got in that box?"

"It's a mongoose," said the drunk.

"What on earth for?" said his friend.

"Well, you know how it is with me. I'm not very drunk now, but I'll be soon, and when I am, I see snakes and I'm scared of them, that's why I got a mongoose, to protect me!"

"But," said the friend, "those are imaginay snakes..."

"Right" said the drunk, "and this is an imaginary mongoose."

Ahem...

She: "Oh, there goes Peggy Brown. Isn't she lovely? I wish I wee half as good looking!"

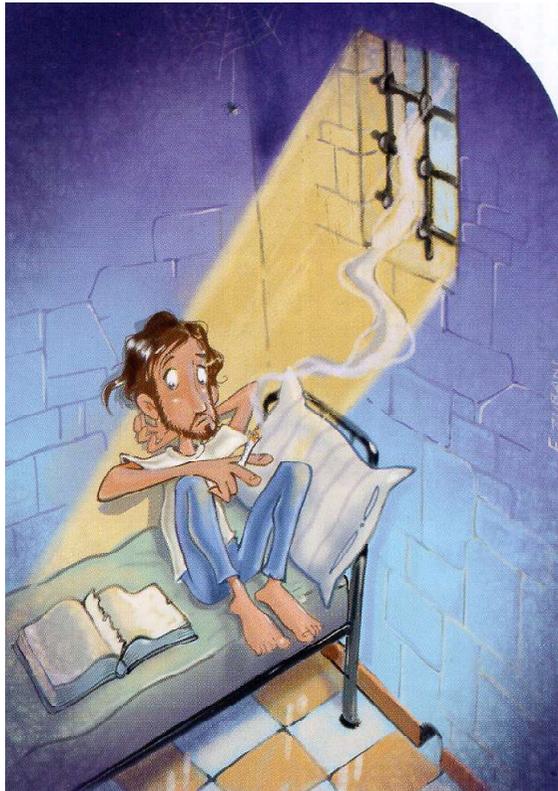
He: (consolingly) "Oh, but you are!" □

B.F.

THE MAN WHO SMOKED THE BIBLE

His mother abandoned Wilhelm Buntz as a child. This trauma left him with severe consequences. Framed as a 'maladjusted child', he moved from one family to another more than 30 times without ever really feeling at home and, at the age of 7, began to dream of becoming a gangster. He soon became known at school as 'Blood-bath Willy' because he constantly fought with his classmates. At 16, he ended up in prison for the first time: near Innsbruck, he decided to steal a car and try driving. Impractical, he caused an accident. In the crash, a policeman, father of five, lost his life, and another person ended up in a wheelchair.

Arrested and tried, he was sentenced to 14 years for manslaughter. After his juvenile imprisonment, Wilhelm Buntz became a full-fledged criminal. Bank robberies, arms trafficking, human trafficking, manslaughter: he committed almost 150 crimes and was finally caught at the age of 22. At the trial, the judge invited his father as a witness so that someone would say something positive about him. But



when the judge asked his father, the latter said tearfully: 'Please, please, please reinstate the death penalty.... It's not that I don't love my son, but we cannot bear it any longer; he has destroyed our whole family.'

Irascible and enraged at the whole world, he was put in solitary confinement. In his cell, he was only allowed to keep the Bible the chaplain gave him.

Wilhelm had never had much sympathy for God. On the contrary, he accepted that book

because its pages, as delicate as tissue paper, were an excellent substitute for cigarette papers. So he began to tear out the pages, and after reading them, he would roll tobacco he managed to smuggle in and make himself some rudimentary cigarettes.

Little by little, Genesis and the entire Pentateuch, the Psalms and wisdom books, as well as the stories of the prophets, went up in smoke. One day in 1983, he was given the Gospel of Matthew in a prize, on winning his hand it was a recorded version of the Mount.

"You are the salt of the earth and the world's light." That sentence knocked him down. He had until then been 'bitter poison and

darkness'.

'If you have a plan for me,' he said, turning to God, 'then you must change and win me over.'

And that Word, which until then had gone up in smoke, slowly began to burn in his heart.

He changed radically and was pardoned. Today, he is married and has two children. Until his retirement in 2017, he worked for blind people. When he thinks back to his time in prison, he feels only one thing: gratitude.

'I am thankful to God for every day I was allowed to spend in prison because I found something there that I could not have found otherwise. I found a precious treasure: I became a believer.' □

Christmas Lights

By Marie Irish

Bright Christmas Stars shine on high, golden stars in the wintery sky;
Christmas candles in windows bright, sends greetings into the night.

While in our hearts the Christmas flame,
Glow with a love like His who came;
The infant Christ of lowly birth,
To bring good will and peace to earth.



LOVING CHILDREN TO THEIR LOVING MOTHER

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

POPE'S WORLDWIDE PRAYER NETWORK DECEMBER 2024

FOR PILGRIMS OF HOPE

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THE RADIATED LIGHT OF THE MOTHER

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in a stable, because his family had to flee due to Herod's cruelty. After Herod died, Joseph brought Mary and Jesus to Nazareth.

That house was the setting for the daily life of the Holy Family, and it was considered the first temple and church where the Mother of God radiated her light, stemming from the great mystery of the Incarnation and her Son. (*Paul VI, The House of Nazareth, Sept. 1979*)

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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