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A Humble and Impassioned Witness to the Gospel

by Luigi Nuovo, C.M.
Province of Turin

A Piedmontese priest of the 19th century was accustomed to say: “In Turin there are four saints: Don Bosco, Cottolengo, Don Cafasso, and Fr. Durando.” The last one mentioned is the least known, and has only now reach the honors of the altars. He is the least known, but in Turin during the time of the *Risorgimento* he was appreciated, esteemed, and thought of as a man of God and a spiritual counselor, rich in virtue, prudent and capable of discernment, a formator of numerous priests and men and women religious.

This consciousness of the holiness of Fr. Durando was also known within the Vincentian community. At his death, Fr. Giovanni Torre, his successor as the guide of the Province of Turin, wrote these words to the confreres: “We have lost a father, but we nourish the hope of having gained a protector in heaven.” He gave the order that be gathered together “as soon as possible the news about the particulars of his life and of the singular examples of virtue which he left us, so that they not be lost.” We can thus say that his reputation for holiness was alive both inside and outside the Vincentian family.

A priest of an intense spiritual life, he was above all a man of government, demanding in requiring the observance of the Rules, but measured and balanced with a sense of reality united to a exquisite and attentive charity, above all for the weakest, that grew with time. In him, provincial for over 40 years, Director of the Daughters of Charity and founder of the Nazarene Sisters, we find (at the school of St. Vincent de Paul) a man who walked on ordinary, simple, hidden ways, but, if need be, tenacious and courageous, overcoming his natural timidity. This lifestyle came from a profound conviction that manifested itself in his way of acting and in his words:

That which is extraordinary is always suspect. I love what is ordinary, what is common, the evangelical virtues, true humility, mortification, observance, but all this done well, in a perfect way, but simply done, and without noise.

He recognized that all this required the sustenance of the grace of God, and a constant working on oneself. He wrote:

With the grace of God, little by little, to form truly humble, simple, mortified, patient hearts, detached from everything and that only think about and draw life from Jesus.

He himself lived what he taught, there was nothing showy in the 80 years of his existence; he sought to live in Christ, clothing himself in the virtues of a priest, and those characteristic of a Vincentian missionary. He recommended everyone to be exemplary in these virtues, and he said with certainty: *We cannot give to others what we do not have.* Fr. Marcantonio Durando, with his thin figure, had a reserved and shy character, but at the same time he was cordial, richer in sensitivity than he appeared, capable of paternal and even maternal affection, but without affectation.

At the center of his spirituality was Christ the Lord, especially Christ, suffering in his passion and on the cross. On the pained and striking face of the *Ecce Homo* the new Blessed fixed a moved and admiring gaze. The passion of Christ was “his refuge, his favorite subject of meditation.” He recommended it to the people whom he directed: “do everything you can to make this devotion your own and to inspire it in others.” On another occasion he wrote: “Let your ordinary subject of meditation be the life, passion, and death of Jesus Christ.” For Durando, the Passion of Christ is a school of high spirituality, the most sublime *school of love*. In fact, he said of it:

In the Passion of Christ you will find humility, obedience, meekness, and all the virtues, and he taught his daughters, you will find humility and charity at the feet of the Crucified.

In another intense and significant passage, he expressed himself thus:

Calvary is the mount of lovers and the open wounds of Jesus Crucified are a shelter and a dwelling place for the Lord's doves. Whoever does not like being on Calvary or living in those wounds will never be a true lover of Jesus. If his love was such that it made him embrace the cross and nailed him to the hard wood, if in short he suffered and died because of the great love that he bore for each one of us, can we be indifferent to so much charity? Is it possible not to love an infinite good, a God who consumes himself out of love for us? It is on Calvary that all the saints of heaven were formed in love.

The devotion to the Passion of the Lord was linked to the celebration of the Eucharist, and was its prolongation, and from this inexhaustible font of love he daily drew both strength and joy. He said:

The Eucharist is unparalleled sign of the great and tender love of Christ and of his profound humility.

He felt the Passion of Christ as a spur to consume totally his existence for the Lord, and it moved him to be ready and generous in the service of the God and of his brothers, saying: *He sacrificed Himself completely for you, and you sacrifice yourselves completely for Him.*

He was guided in his daily life by the contemplation of the suffering Christ, but this did not make him closed or sad; on the contrary, he transmitted serenity and peace to those he met. He made his goal, as he wrote in a letter, *to act always in the charity that everything hopes.* He affirmed: “The perfection of the love of Jesus Christ is manifested not only when one suffers adversities and humiliations with patience, but with joy and thanksgiving.” On another occasion he exhorted:

One needs to have ever present the example of Jesus Christ’s life ... The contemplation of Jesus humiliated, of Jesus poor, of Jesus scourged, of Jesus crowned with thorns, of Jesus crucified, changes suffering into joy.

He taught that we must learn from Jesus, that he abandoned himself into the hands of his Father, to do God’s will and to live in obedience. He counseled in a letter:

Abandon yourself into God’s hands; do not have any thought other than doing the will of God; do not anticipate the counsels of God with thoughts and desires on your future. The will of God is that you do with heart, with commitment, with zeal the things, the duties that have been entrusted to you ... Meditate well on this great truth; make it your norm, your rule, your life, your good. In this consists all our holiness and perfection.

The certainty of being able to make the journey of holiness came to him from the strength that prayer gave him, and he affirmed:

Prayer is the source of all good and the mother of all virtues, — and, he added, — let the spirit of prayer, of interior and exterior recollection and of silence reign in the whole house and in all the religious.

Prayer was for him the fountain of serenity and interior peace, and because of this he taught:

Rigorous silence, great interior recollection, the spirit of prayer, a love of work, and a spirit of penance, but at the same time, nothing melancholy, no sadness or hypocrisy. You understand that when

the spirit of prayer and penance is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, there is always joy and holy spiritual happiness.

He himself had made this the style of his life. He sought evangelical perfection by living with passionate zeal the ordinary priestly life: the celebration of the Eucharist, the sacrament of Reconciliation, the preaching of parish missions and of spiritual exercises, of retreats and of conferences to clergy, and the spiritual direction of persons belonging to all social classes, welcoming them with availability and kindness.

Marcoantonio Durando, faithful disciple of Vincent de Paul, invites us to a humble and trusting sanctity, simple and prudent, meek and strong, lived in the exercise of charity, above all in the fidelity to the little things of everyday life, accepting adversities, tests, and sufferings that can come one's way when one seeks tenaciously to live in a consistent and faithful way with Christ and with his gospel.

In a writing of 1876, he recommended to his confreres:

Let charity always rule in our midst, and govern our actions, our words, and our thoughts, so that, with one mind we may honor Jesus Christ always, and may the peace of the Lord be always among us and in our hearts.

(ROBERT STONE, C.M., translator)