

## **The Venerable, FR. LODOVICO LONGARI,**

### **Superior of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation**

His gift of possessing a firm, but kind, paternal nature, allied with an understanding of the hearts of others, soon proved to be valuable for the direction of communities. Hence we see him first as a local Superior, then Provincial and finally Superior General of the entire Institute.

The servant of God accepted the cross of responsibility, with much personal suffering, in a difficult time of transition from a centralized government to a division into provinces, carrying it out tactfully and with the gift of being broad-minded in his outlook.

He took his inspiration from the example of the Founder, whose teaching he passed on to others and whose spirit he renewed, updating it to the time and interpreting it in a way that corresponded to his own particular gifts. How desirable he made the Eucharistic vocation by his enthusiasm to be a part of the Blessed Sacrament family: “Our vocation is truly a beautiful one, beautiful like the beauty of Jesus, gentle like the gentleness of Jesus, warm like the love of Jesus, spotless like the spotless sacred Host!”

He considered the Blessed Sacrament family to be a gift which God had given to the Church in an era that was lacking in warmth, in order to make the Eucharist central, to bring it out of the tabernacle by means of solemn exposition, in a movement which had already led to Eucharistic Congresses and, under the Pontificate of Pius X, to the promotion of frequent communion, the communion of children and the cult of perpetual exposition with day and night adoration by the faithful. And how much he worked to bring in vocations and open up the Congregation to expansion with twenty-eight foundations of new houses in fourteen nations and in mission countries. But above all, he sought passionately that the Congregation might live its spirit with a great fervor of prayer and fidelity to Eucharistic adoration. For the family of Eymard, first in Italy and then throughout the world, he was like a breath of Spring.

### **A Formator of Youth**

He was involved in the formation of young religious for many years; first, from 1920 to 1931 and then from 1949 until his death. His method, like that of St. John Bosco, was to lead them by example and to arouse enthusiasm, presenting the beauty of the ideal and giving them a taste of the Lord’s love, a fascination for virtue and for that total gift which responds to the needs of the hearts of the young.

The testimony that has been given about his method of formation is quite considerable. “He won us over with his sensitivity and tenderness. He possessed a temperament that was more inclined towards kindness than towards severity. And the kindness became more evident at certain moments, especially after his Mass in the morning or after his hours of adoration...” Though teaching the young to practice self-denial there always shone forth in him the primacy of love.

“He was a humane, understanding, thoughtful Superior; he enjoyed recreations, laughter. His love was manifested above all by his attention to the younger ones, to those who were suffering, to whoever was in some difficulty”.

“He urged whoever was tired to take some rest; he encouraged them, was concerned about the health of others; he took an interest in the food, in the conditions under which they lived, he was attentive to those who collaborated with him; he was ready to help in any family problems they had”. He preferred a gentle style of government and aimed more at convincing a person and making him understand rather than being domineering.

### **A Special Concern for Priests**

The Servant of God had a particular charism for priests, the “multipliers” as the Founder considered them to be. He loved them, he helped them to open themselves to the Lord, to be happy in their particular calling. In his ministry, he always showed preferential concern for priests. Innumerable were the retreats he preached to priests throughout the whole of Italy, both in religious Institutes and in Seminaries; we find on the list Benedictines, Basilians, Dehonians, De Montfort Fathers, Trappists; among the Seminaries there was that of Rome as well as Propaganda Fide, Venegono, Molfetta, Bergamo. He kept returning to the need for prayer and love for God. He spoke of the Eucharist from the abundance of his heart and found the opportunity to mention it in every theme he dealt with. “To my recollection, I do not remember having ever heard sermons like those of Father Longari, with such piety and doctrine, permeated, almost perfumed, with the Eucharist...”. And even more than through his words, he communicated through his very physical presence.

An anonymous witness, a priest, described him in these words: “His physical appearance was that of one who calms you, comforts you, making you enter into yourself as if in order to examine your conscience; it was like an invitation to imitate him. There emanated from him something that is difficult to define but which acted upon you through irradiation, through osmosis. It was a presence, a witness. His words were an expression of his very being from which they drew their forcefulness. His face was calm and radiant, his gaze always peaceful and clear, turned towards the here and now but at the same time directed towards the future...”. And he continued his description with an expressive analogy: “He was a priest, an adorer, but like someone who by nature seems to have been born a poet or an aviator!”

In his final years, when he could no longer move around, he did not cease his contact with priests, but would paternally welcome them when they came to see him; many came who were going through periods of trial or were in need of enlightenment, for the most part directed to him by the Bishop of Bergamo. The cure he offered them: to live their Eucharistic celebration as the central moment of each day. And as a key, a prescription: “Sense the need of letting God take possession of your heart!”.

### **“He Brought a Sense of Loyalty to the Eucharist”**

It was the Bishop of Bergamo, Bishop Giulio Oggioni, who with this expression summarized the activity of the Servant of God in his diocese. It seems significant to us and can be extended beyond the diocese to some difficult periods in his life when his zealous work was interrupted but he continued to manifest this joy.

When already a priest and a Blessed Sacrament religious he spent the period of the First World War at the front line as a soldier attached to a medical corps. We can imagine the difficulties and the dangers. But he remembered that time as among the most beautiful periods of his life. He lived it as a priest. He transformed his narrow hut into a chapel; in the morning, an early Mass and then Exposition for an hour of adoration. His kitbag served as a tabernacle, but adorned with flowers and candles... All around him was destruction: holes caused by unexploded shells, the smell of blood and the whistling of bullets. We can imagine the tiring work of attending to the wounded, helping to transport them to hospital, burying the dead. On one occasion he took care of a Major whom his companions wanted to throw into a ditch because he was so seriously wounded that he had no hope of living. He forcefully opposed this action. The moral attitude around him consisted of jeers and contempt for priests. This information came from his companions. From himself, there came only remarks such as these: “How much peace and security in the heart! Thank you, Jesus, for the Eucharist! For your love! Help us to use profitably the eucharistic talent you have entrusted to us.”

He experienced the other war, the Second World War, as Superior General. When, after 18 September 1943, it was impossible for him to visit the houses, he made use of the opportunity to accept the requests for preaching engagements. There were many requests; his simple and persuasive manner

gained entrance into hearts. To consecrated souls, he traced out the ways of living a life of generosity. Many monasteries and convents sought his help. He made their hearts expand. He used to say: “before proposing reforms, first arrange your hearts in peace”.

This was his style of preaching, also towards the most needy of the people, those he came into contact with during the “forty hours” devotions which he often animated. Here his “joyfulness” had a preferred subject: the merciful love of Jesus, because “from love he has made a sacrament, the Eucharist”. “We must be ministers of mercy”. And he used an example to persuade them: “If someone discovers that her new and beautiful dress has become torn she regrets it very much. But if over the mended tear, a skillful embroiderer embroiders a most beautiful flower to cover it, then the dress becomes even more beautiful and acquires greater value. Let us allow Jesus to embroider his flower over our mistakes”.

We can summarize his exhortations as follows. For those who were most in need of pardon: “Acknowledge your wretchedness and then trust completely in his mercy”. For all souls: “Our life is a blank page on which the Lord unceasingly writes one word: LOVE”. In this way, he opened his heart to all.

### **A Man of the Church**

“A Saint does not live for himself alone: he is a wonderful gift of God for his Church and for his brothers”. These words were said by St. Peter Julian Eymard.

What sort of person then was our Servant of God? He can be portrayed above all as one who was profoundly a man of the Church for the needs of our time.

He accepted in the depths of himself the teaching of the Church and communicated it with great fidelity.

A devoted son of Pope Pius XII, he often requested a personal audience when he had some grave problem.

He confided a secret to his sister: “For some time I have felt the inspiration to do this: this month I sent a letter to the Supreme Pontiff in which I humbly begged him to accept my poor life for the good of the Catholic Church and for the comfort of his heart as Vicar of Christ. I cannot explain to you the joy of my spirit in that action”.

The period in which he lived was both complex and glorious for the Church. It was an era of great contrasts: on one hand the surprising scientific and technical progress: on the other hand, a considerable obscurity regarding moral obligations brought about by the loss of a clear awareness of the presence of God. But then there appeared that blessing which was the Council and what a surprise it was. Our Servant of God lived through the beginnings of the Council though he was not able to enjoy its fruits nor enter into the new climate of pastoral and liturgical life. He died after the end of the first session, in June 1963, barely a fortnight after the death of Pope John.

What is his relevance for us today? It is to have prepared souls, building on firm foundations those dispositions that bring about a docile and faithful acceptance, teaching them to live by faith, by obedience, by love for the Church, so as to have an openness of soul towards the events of history seen as the will of God and to keep themselves in an atmosphere of inner freedom and peace in the face of all human situations. Those who have come to a knowledge of themselves from his teaching have been able to accept events and changes as gifts, in a supernatural light. God is wonderful in the way he sends precursors to prepare his ways! We are confident that from heaven he will continue to help us through his intercession. Also in this lies his relevance for us today!

*Father Norman Pelletier,sss*