Blessed Bartolo Longo: a model for the members of the Order

Interview with Msgr. Tommaso Caputo, Archbishop and Pontifical Delegate of Pompeii, Prior of the Section “Napoli – Blessed Virgin of the Rosary” of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre

Pope Francis in Pompeii, in silent prayer before the body of Blessed Bartolo Longo, Knight of the Holy Sepulchre, servant of the poor, and Apostle of the Rosary.

Could one say that Bartolo Longo represents for Pompeii what Bernadette is for Lourdes; that is to say, the true witness who, in a certain way, makes real the divine message of love given to pilgrims at the Marian Sanctuary?

Bartolo Longo was described by Pope John Paul II as “the man of the Virgin Mary”. In the homily of his beatification on October 26, 1980, the Holy Father also said of him that “by his love for Mary he became a writer, apostle of the Gospel, propagator of the Rosary, founder of the famous Sanctuary despite enormous difficulties and hardship; by his love for Mary, he created charitable institutions, he became a beggar for children of the poor, he transformed Pompeii into a living citadel of human and Christian goodness; by his love for Mary, he endured tribulations and slander in silence, passing through a long Gethsemane, always trusting in Providence, ever obedient to the Pope and the Church.” His human and spiritual journey is in itself a message of love.

Through him, his story and his work, the Lord wants to show us how great His mercy is and how powerful conversion can be. Every day here in Pompeii, pilgrims experience the love of the Virgin Mary, as did Bartolo Longo. Today too, she continues to say to all of us, “If you seek salvation, propagate the Rosary.” To see the Sanctuary and all of its charitable works, built from scratch with “a penny a month”, enables us to touch on the veracity of the message of love that God, through the Virgin Mary, has given Bartolo Longo, not only for himself, but for all of us.

Could you explain why the message of Bartolo Longo is more relevant today than ever?

Bartolo Longo was a man who always had a long-term vision; his intuitions have always been rightly described as “prophetic”. He took care of the children of prisoners when nobody else wanted to get involved. He built houses for the workers well before Rerum Novarum, the social encyclical of Pope Leo XIII. His fundamental message, uniting faith and charity, is very relevant today. From the first years in Pompeii, where he arrived in 1872, he realized that, besides the Sanctuary of stone that Our Lady had requested, he also had to build a sanctuary of charity: that of the crown of social works which, even today, makes Pompeii a unique place in the panorama of sanctuaries around the world. He argued, indeed, that “charity without faith would be an absolute lie; faith without charity would be an absolute inconsistency”. He, who had personally experienced the mercy of God, wanted everyone to feel loved, and to this end he sheltered the poorest, the marginalized, and the excluded. His works, the structures and operating methods of which have changed, 130 years later still continue to be an oasis of hope for children at risk, unwed mothers, adolescents in crisis, the poor, elderly people, former addicts, people with disabilities, migrants, etc.

Bartolo Longo is the only lay member of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre to be beatified. In your opinion what message could he give to the 28,000 members of the Order throughout the world? Could he become their Patron, and in what way?

Bartolo Longo, who received the title of KnightGrand Cross of the Order on May 30, 1925, was a shining example of a lay person engaged in the evangelical witness of faith and charity, just as members of the Order are today called to witness to their faith, the practice of an exemplary Christian life, with an ongoing charitable commitment to support Christian communities in the Holy Land.

We have no absolute information on a specific commitment on his part in favor of the Holy Land, but we can say with certainty that he prayed and invited others to pray for the Holy Land as he considered that the Sanctuary of Pompeii was inextricably linked to Jerusalem. Knights and Dames of the Order will certainly find, in the person of Blessed Bartolo Longo, a prime example of Christian life which will inspire them, and endeavouring to imitate him in his virtues and his commitment to faith and charity, they can progress on their own spiritual path.

As for patronage, we would obviously be delighted. The rule provides that it is the Holy See that grants it after examining a well-reasoned request by the competent authority.

For you personally, what is the profound grace of Pompeii? What did Pope Francis say to you, on this subject, during his recent pilgrimage?

The grace that I felt when I started my ministry in Pompeii, and I continue to experience every day, is that of living every day under the gaze of Mary. I feel that I love her more and more each day, and I see growing in me the desire to take Mary like the apostle John, who “took her to his own home” (Jn 19:27), so that I can bring her into everything that makes up my inner life, that is to say, into my human and Christian “I”, as Saint John Paul II taught us in the Encyclical Redemptoris Mater (RM, 45). Every Christian should introduce Mary into his house, to live with Mary, come to Christ with Mary and for Mary, because she, in the words of Saint Augustine (Sermon 291), is the spiritual mother, the mother who nourishes Christians with salvation that comes from her breast.

And every day I have proof that the Sanctuary of Pompeii is the House of Mary; the place where she, Mother of Mercy, gives her children her love and forgiveness in abundance. The faithful who come here often tell us they actually feel the presence of Mary. A visit to our Sanctuary is like a stopover that refreshes the soul, recharges the mind and gives new strength to face the day.

On March 21, Pope Francis wanted to start his visit to Naples in Pompeii, precisely to entrust himself and all of us to Mary. The intensity of his gaze of love on all the faithful present, especially the sick, children, elderly and disabled, as well as the depth of his devotion during the silent prayer before the icon of the Virgin of the Rosary, gave us the measure of his spirituality. After placing on the altar, as a gift to the Virgin Mary, a precious crown of the Rosary, the Pope also wanted to pay homage to the remains of our founder the Blessed lawyer Bartolo Longo, by praying in the chapel dedicated to him. He then went into the confessional area, “the heart of the sanctuary,” and he told me, twice, to recommend to the confessors to be merciful when administering the sacrament of reconciliation and have a big heart like God who forgives all of us.

I wish the Knights and Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre to personally experience the great love of God, and I invite everyone to be a pilgrim, even individually, in the sanctuary founded by the only lay member of the Order to become Blessed to date. May the Virgin of the Rosary of Pompeii, he so loved, bless and protect you always.

Interview by François Vayne

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