



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 28 April 2010*

Saint Leonard Murialdo and Saint Joseph Cottolengo

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We are moving towards the end of the Year for Priests and, on this last Wednesday of April, I would like to talk to you about two holy priests who were exemplary in the gift of themselves to God, in their witness of charity, lived in and for the Church, and to their needier brethren: St Leonard Murialdo and St Joseph Benedict Cottolengo. We are commemorating the 110th anniversary of the death of the former and the 40th anniversary of his canonization, and the celebrations for the second centenary of the priestly ordination of the latter are beginning.

Murialdo was born in Turin on 26 October 1828: it was the Turin of St John Bosco and likewise of St Joseph Cottolengo, a land made fruitful by so many examples of holiness among lay people and priests. Leonard was the eighth child of a simple family. As a boy, together with his brother, he entered the College of the Piarist Fathers of Savona for the elementary classes, middle school and secondary school. There he encountered teachers trained in a pious atmosphere, based on serious catechesis with regular devotional practices. Nevertheless in adolescence he went through a profound existential and spiritual crisis that led him to go home sooner than expected and to conclude his studies in Turin, where he enrolled in the two-year philosophy course. His "return to the light" occurred as he recounts after several months with the grace of a general confession in which he rediscovered God's immense mercy. Then, at the age of 17, he took the decision to

become a priest, as a loving response to God who had grasped him with his love. Leonard Murialdo was ordained on 20 September 1851. Precisely in that period, as a catechist of the *Oratorio* of the Guardian Angel, he came to the attention of Don Bosco who appreciated his qualities and convinced him to accept the directorship of the new *Oratorio di San Luigi*, in Porta Nuova, which he held until in 1865. There Fr Leonard also came into contact with the grave problems of the poorest classes. He visited their homes, developing a deep social, educational and apostolic sensitivity which led him subsequently to undertake a wide range of projects for youth. Catecheses, school and recreational activities were the foundation of his educational method in the *Oratorio*. Don Bosco still wanted Leonard with him on the occasion of the Audience that Blessed Pius ix granted to him in 1858.

In 1873, Fr Leonard founded the Congregation of St Joseph whose aim from the start was the formation of youth, especially the poorest and most neglected. Turin at that time was marked by the vigorously flourishing works and charitable activities promoted by Murialdo until his death on 30 March 1900.

I would like to emphasize that the heart of Murialdo's spirituality was his conviction of the merciful love of God, a Father ever good, patient and generous, who reveals the grandeur and immensity of his mercy with forgiveness. St Leonard did not experience this reality at an intellectual level but rather in his life, through his vivid encounter with the Lord. He always considered himself a man whom God in his mercy had pardoned. He therefore experienced a joyful feeling of gratitude to the Lord, serene awareness of his own limitations, the ardent desire for penance, and the constant and generous commitment to conversion. He saw his whole life not only enlightened, guided and supported by this love but continuously immersed in God's infinite mercy. He wrote in his *Spiritual Testament*: "Your mercy surrounds me, O Lord... Just as God is always and everywhere, so there is always and everywhere love, mercy is always and everywhere". Remembering the crisis he had been through in his youth, he noted: "The good Lord wanted to make his kindness and generosity shine out in a completely special way. Not only did he readmit me to his friendship, but he called me to make a decision of predilection: he called me to the priesthood, even only a few months after I had returned to him". Thus St Leonard lived his priestly vocation as a gift of God's mercy, freely given, with a sense of gratitude, joy and love. He wrote further: "God has chosen me! He has called me, he has even forced upon me the honour, glory, and ineffable happiness of being his minister, of being "another Christ".... And where was I when you sought me, my God? At the bottom of the abyss! I was there, and there God came to find me; there he made me hear his voice".

Underlining the greatness of the mission of the priest who must "continue the work of redemption, the great work of Jesus Christ, the work of the Saviour of the world" namely, the work of "saving souls", St Leonard always reminded himself and his brethren of the responsibility of a life consistent with the sacrament received. Love of God and love for God: this was the force that impelled him on his journey to holiness, the law of his priesthood, the deepest meaning of his

apostolate among poor youths and the source of his prayer. St Leonard Murielado abandoned himself with trust to Providence, generously doing the divine will, in touch with God and dedicating himself to poor young people. In this way he combined contemplative silence with the tireless zeal of action, fidelity to every day tasks with ingenious initiatives, fortitude in difficulty with peace of mind. This was his path of holiness in order to live the commandment of love for God and for his neighbour.

St Joseph Benedict Cottolengo, who lived 40 years before Murielado the Founder of the work which he himself called the "Little House of Divine Providence" and which today is also called "Cottolengo" embodied this same spirit of charity. Next Sunday, during my Pastoral Visit to Turin, I shall have the opportunity to venerate the remains of this Saint and to meet the residents of the "Little House".

Joseph Benedict Cottolengo was born in Bra, a small town in the Province of Cuneo, on 3 May 1786. The eldest of 12, six of whom died in infancy, he showed great sensitivity to the poor from childhood. He embraced the way of the priesthood, setting an example to two of his brothers. The years of his youth coincided with the Napoleonic period and the consequent hardships in both the religious and social contexts. Cottolengo became a good priest much sought after by penitents and, in the Turin of that time, a preacher of spiritual exercises and conferences for university students who always met with noteworthy success. At the age of 32, he was appointed canon of the *Santissima Trinità*, a congregation of priests whose task was to officiate in the *Corpus Domini* Church and to ensure the decorum of the city's religious ceremonies, but he felt uneasy in this situation. God was preparing him for a special mission and, precisely with an unexpected and decisive encounter, made him realize what was to be his future destiny in the exercise of the ministry.

The Lord always sets signs on our path to guide us according to his will to our own true good. This also happened to Cottolengo, dramatically, on Sunday morning, 2 September 1827. The diligence from Milan arrived in Turin, more crowded than ever. Crammed into it was a whole French family. The mother, with five children, was at an advanced stage of pregnancy and had a high temperature. After traipsing to various hospitals, this family found lodgings in a public dormitory but the woman's situation was serious and some people went in search of a priest. By a mysterious design they came across Cottolengo and it was precisely he who, heavy hearted, accompanied this young mother to her death, amid the distress of the entire family. Having carried out this painful task, with deep anguish he went to the Blessed Sacrament and knelt in prayer: "My God, why? Why did you want me to be a witness? What do you want of me? Something must be done!". He got to his feet and had all the bells rung and the candles lit and, gathering in the church those who were curious, told them: "The grace has been granted! The grace has been granted!". From that time Cottolengo was transformed: all his skills, especially his financial and organizational ability, were used to give life to projects in support of the neediest.

In his undertaking he was able to involve dozens and dozens of collaborators and volunteers. Moving towards the outskirts of Turin to expand his work, he created a sort of village, in which he assigned a meaningful name to every building he managed to build: "House of Faith", "House of Hope", "House of Charity". He adopted a "familystyle", establishing true and proper communities of people with volunteers, men and women religious and lay people, who joined forces in order to face and overcome the difficulties that arose. Everyone in that Little House of Divine Providence had a precise task: work, prayer, service, teaching or administration. The healthy and the sick shared the same daily burden. With time religious life could be specifically planned in accordance with particular needs and requirements. Cottolengo even thought of setting up his own seminary to provide specific formation for the priests of his Work. He was always ready to follow and serve Divine Providence and never questioned it. He would say: "I am a good for nothing and I don't even know what to make of myself. But Divine Providence certainly knows what it wants. It is only up to me to support it. Let us go ahead *in Domino*". To his poor and the neediest, he would always call himself "the labourer of Divine Providence".

He also chose to found beside the small citadels five monasteries of contemplative sisters and one of hermits, and considered them among his most important achievements. They were a sort of "heart" which was to beat for the entire Work. He died on 30 April 1842, with these words on his lips: "*Misericordia, Domine; Misericordia, Domine*. Good and Holy Providence... Blessed Virgin, it is now up to you". The whole of his life, as a newspaper of the time said, was "an intense day of love".

Dear friends, these two holy priests, a few of whose characteristics I have described, carried out their ministry with the total gift of their lives to the poorest, the neediest and the lowliest, always finding the deep roots, the inexhaustible source for their action in their relationship with God. They drew from his love in the profound conviction that it is impossible to exercise charity without living in Christ and in the Church. May their intercession and example continue to illumine the ministry of the many priests who spend themselves generously for God and for the flock entrusted to them, and help each one give himself joyfully and generously to God and neighbour.

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I offer a most cordial welcome to the ecumenical delegations from the Lutheran Church of Norway and from the Church of England. My warm greeting also goes to the group of Jewish leaders visiting the Vatican with the Pave the Way Foundation. Upon all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Scotland, Norway, Indonesia and the United States of America I invoke Almighty God's blessings of joy and peace!

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