

Louis Guanella: *Modern Saints, Their Lives and Faces*

by Ann Ball

Louis was the ninth of the thirteen children of Lawrence and Maria Guanella. He was born December 19, 1842 in Fraciscio, Italy. The day after, his father carried him in his arms down to the Valley of Campodolcino to be baptized.

The family maintained a simple but comfortable home high in the Italian Alps. Lawrence served as first deputy under Austrian rule, and under Italian rule he was the respected mayor of the little town of Campodolcino. The land was used for pasture, and young Louis worked tending the family sheep and carrying wood and other items long before he had had any schooling. These mountain people were hard workers. They had no animals to help with the work, and horses and wagons were almost unknown.

From his family, Louis learned many lessons he would later put into practical use in his apostolate. He learned how to use his hands to build things, rather than depend on having money to purchase ready-made items. He learned the value and some of the skills of agriculture. Best of all, he learned that a loving spirit of sacrifice can work miracles.

Annually on the Feast of St. Rocco, Lawrence gave away food to all who came. Louis and his sister Catherine played at making "pretend" soup from mud to give to the poor. Perhaps their childish game was an indication of their later work. At one time, Catherine came to help Louis in one of his Houses of Divine Providence, where the soup was still free to the poor - but not made of mud!

Louis' childhood was similar to that of many other little Italian boys of his age and state of life. He learned some reading and arithmetic from a local curate and later attended an elementary school in a village where the priest was a relative of his family. He was entranced at his first sight of horses attached to a wagon. Accidents were no stranger to such an active child, and he had several narrow escapes from serious injury.

At the age of twelve, Louis wanted to enter the seminary. With thirteen children to provide for, his father was uncertain about whether he would be able to afford this. Luckily, through the offices of an uncle, Louis was able to obtain a scholarship. His record at school was excellent and he completed high school in 1859. After this, further studies at the seminary in Como were possible only by sacrifice on the part of his family.

At the seminary, a fellow student came down with a contagious disease and became critically ill. While others used every precaution and avoided the student when possible, Louis disregarded all warnings and cared for the patient until all danger was past.

Louis was ordained in 1866. His first priestly duty was that of an assistant to an elderly pastor. Here his zeal for souls and his sense of responsibility toward them became so strong that he began trying to do penance for those who would not do penance on their own. He prayed for them, fasted for them, and wore a heavy spiked chain. However, the wise old pastor noticed that Louis' health was beginning to be affected, and forbade him such severe penances before his health completely failed.

From 1875-1878, Don Guanella went to stay with Don Bosco at the Oratory in Turin. Here, too, he was able to observe the great works of charity carried out by Joseph Cottolengo. He wrote of his time there, "The Lord saw to it that I should meet Father Bosco and Father Cottolengo whom I admired and grew to love the more I learned of them."

The spirit of these two saints of Turin (both have been accorded the honors of the altar) became the greatest example for Louis' priestly life. He followed the example by combining John Bosco's work for the education of youth with Joseph Cottolengo's great works of charity with the poor and the sick. His first houses, indeed, were called Houses of Providence in imitation of Father Cottolengo's home in Turin.

Louis Guanella's vision extended beyond his time to the movements which even today are of concern to Catholics - social action, education, youth movements, and the lay apostolate. In particular, he encouraged the laity to pray the Mass silently along with the priest, and he anticipated St. Pius X's decree by encouraging frequent and even daily Communion. The Italian census of 1861 showed that 74% of the population was illiterate. Father Guanella went so far as to obtain a teaching certificate so that he might not only teach, but also train teachers.

The dignity of the human person was a priority in all of Father Guanella's works. In particular, he wanted to maintain this dignity for those who were classed as society's outcasts.

Often the old, the incurable, and the physically and mentally handicapped were left in pitiable condition by relatives who had no desire or no knowledge of how to give them this human dignity. In the early days, Father Guanella took these outcasts to be cared for by the followers of Father Cottolengo. Later, he established homes for their care and founded the Servants of Charity and the Daughters of St. Mary of Providence to staff his homes.

Father Louis refused to call his mentally handicapped men and boys "retarded." Instead, he wished them to be called his "good boys" or "good children." He believed that a human life has value because it is a gift from God, and that it cannot be measured by its achievements. When he died, he left these "good children" to his priests and sisters as most precious gifts; he called them his "treasures."

During most of Father Guanella's lifetime, Italy was in a state of political unrest. The infamous law of July 7, 1866 suppressed all religious communities. Several later laws, including the Suspect Law of 1866, were enacted by the anticlericals and the socialists. Because of his popularity with the people, Father Guanella was seen as a threat by these groups as well as by the Freemasons. He was placed under surveillance, and several times had to offer Mass under the watchful eyes of the police.

In 1881, a pious priest, Father Coppini, had just died in the town of Pianello Lario, leaving behind a small home for orphans and the aged, which he had entrusted to the care of a group of young women who had an inclination toward the religious life. In 1878, with five of these women as its members, the bishop had authorized Father Coppini to establish a religious community. No one seemed willing to assume the burden of carrying on Father Coppini's work until the bishop remembered Father Guanella, whom he thereupon sent to Pianello.

In five years with the cooperation of the Superior, Sister Marcellina Bosatta, he established the foundation of charitable work and he became the founder of the Congregation of the Daughters of St. Mary of Providence. He thought it best to transfer the headquarters of the work to Como where it could be at great service of the entire diocese.

On an evening in April 1886, a little boat slipped into the quiet lake at Pianello and traveled through the night to Como. Two Sisters and four orphans were its passengers and it transported an assortment of furniture which Father Guanella described as "a square table missing one leg, a chair that had seen better days, and a bed that was a miracle of balance." This was the nucleus of the future "Little House of Providence."

The poor and the afflicted of all ages came. In 1890 there were 200 in the House of Providence. Never before in Como had there been gathered so much human misery into one place. Some young men came to follow him, he guided them and established a second congregation of priests and brothers, the "Servants of Charity."

In 1896, a mob of anticlericals set fire to the House of Providence. As Father Guanella comforted the people, he advised them to tell God, "Lord, in Your designs You have permitted that our house be burned down! We will stay here in Yours." They slept that night in the church, and immediately, plans for rebuilding were begun.

"The Lord ordinarily wants everything here on earth to follow a natural course," said Father Guanella. He believed that the help of Providence was merited by faith, prayer, and work. Sometimes, however, the ordinary course of events gave way to the extraordinary. At one time, Father Guanella decided to rebuild the chapel. Patients, workers, and Father Guanella himself were working happily one day when he suddenly gave the order to halt and directed all the workers to leave the area. Within minutes, the scaffolding crashed to the ground without a single injury. On another occasion, the superior at one of the schools discovered that there was no food for dinner. When she told Father Guanella, he replied, "It is only 11:30; Providence still has half an hour to provide." The sister asked the students to pray, and at noon a cart delivered a sack of rice. No one knew where the cart had come from.

This was the foundation which Father Guanella built within himself and made ready for the help of Divine Providence which never failed him. Countless are the incidents that tell of this dual activity: Father Louis' confidence on the one hand, and the wondrous intervention of Divine Providence on the other. "Those who receive with two hands from Providence," he would say, "must give with four hands to the poor of Providence."

"But if too many come seeking a home, where will you put them?" a priest asked him one day. "Just let them get in the door," Father Louis answered, "and Providence will take care of them." Father Louis' confidence, as always, was vindicated. "Let us confide and hope in God," was his maxim. "Let us avoid sin, then shortly God will work." He, himself, lacked neither foresight nor human prudence, nevertheless, he could say with complete conviction "One grain of confidence is worth more than one hundred grains of foresight and human prudence."

Father Guanella did not believe that his priests and sisters should simply sit back to watch God work, although he often said, when asked how he accomplished so much, "It is God who does the work." He advised his priests that "the Servant of Charity must go to bed each night so tired from work that he will think he has been beaten."

As he saw it, practicality went hand in hand with trust in God's Providence. Although Father Louis relied on Providence to care for his dependents; he also worked to improve their lot. When a fellow priest asked how Father Louis could hope to care for all who came to him for help, he simply advised the priest that God would provide for His own.

Noticing a large parcel of swampy, mosquito-infested land at the end of Lake Como, Father Guanella decided to attempt to reclaim the land. His detractors thought that he was crazy, and laughed that he had at last found a swampy grave for himself and his work. Using the labor of his "good children" who were physically strong, and the directive and administrative ability of some of the old men from his homes, he began slowly to reclaim the swamp. Within a few years, the work of leveling, filling, plowing, and planting had changed it into fruitful land. People began to move into the area to make new homes. Father Louis designed a statue of Mary for his faithful workers and called it "Our Lady of the Worker." Soon a church was dedicated in this "swampy grave." For his work in reclaiming unusable land, Father Louis was awarded a medal of honor by the minister of agriculture.

A friend and contemporary of Pope Pius X, Father Guanella often appealed to him for help in his work. After the construction of one home for the retarded, he asked Pope Pius if he might name the new home in honor of His Holiness. Laughingly the pope replied, "Yes, yes, put me at the head of your retarded patients. immortalize me through them; call it the Pius X Home." These two great men of their age often joked in this manner while carrying out numerous works of charity. When the Pope asked Don Guanella if all his responsibilities did not worry him a great deal, the priest replied, "I worry until midnight and from then on I let God worry. I even sleep too much. Sometimes when I am in the streetcar and should get off at [one stop], I sleep and it takes me to another place. And then quietly, and well rested, I return without telling anyone so they will not make fun of me."

Humorous incidents often arose from what some considered Father Guanella's foolish charity. Once when some of the sisters tried to prevent his giving away some money, he literally threw money out the window to a poor man standing outside. Another time, not having any money to give, he tossed out a pair of new shoes.

Father Guanella did much to rescue the victims of the Italian earthquakes of 1905 and 1915. He assisted on the disaster sites and sheltered refugees in his homes all over Italy. During World War I, he was active in relief and aid and was presented with a gold medal by the board of deputies for his outstanding work.

In other facets of his apostolate, Father Guanella began the return of Catholicism to Switzerland, promoted the Lourdes devotions, led a pilgrimage to the Eucharistic Congress in London, and himself traveled to the United States in 1911 to investigate the plight of Italian immigrants. Later he sent his sisters and priests to assist these immigrants, and care for the physically and mentally handicapped people.

Louis Guanella died on October 24, 1915. He was beatified by Pope Paul VI on October 25, 1964, only forty-nine years later.

Credit: Ball, Ann. "Louis Guanella" *Modern Saints, Their Lives and Faces*. Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers.
