

Blessed Father Louis Guanella and St. Joseph

by Father Germano Pegoraro, S.C.

In just a few pages, it is impossible to present a complete portrayal of Blessed Louis Guanella's life, charisma, and holiness. However, there are certain key aspects that show us the real and true figure of our Blessed Fr. Guanella.

It was a wintry day on December 19, 1842 in a remote valley of the Alps, in a little town called Fraciscio, that the family of Pa' Lorenzo Guanella and Mary Bianchi received another son, Louis, as a special gift from God. The Guanella family had a deep religious tradition. In such a religious family atmosphere, little Louis grew up under the care and love of his Pa' Lorenzo, and he learned of piety, gentleness, and understanding from his dear mother Mary. Like Jesus at Nazareth, little Louis at Fraciscio grew "in wisdom, age and grace." In his heart, he carried the sweetness of his mother Mary and in his will power, the fortitude of his father. Little Louis was deeply influenced by his family's life. To him, it resembled the life of the Holy Family of Nazareth. As a Founder of two Congregations, the Daughters of Saint Mary of Divine Providence and the Servants of Charity, he wanted the loving and joyful atmosphere of Nazareth in all his homes for his favorite people.

The deep faith implanted in Louis' heart by his parents was the secret of his spiritual life. From Pa' Lorenzo's love, respect and care for his wife Mary and all his children, Louis perceived the paternity of God, a father who cares and loves all his creatures.

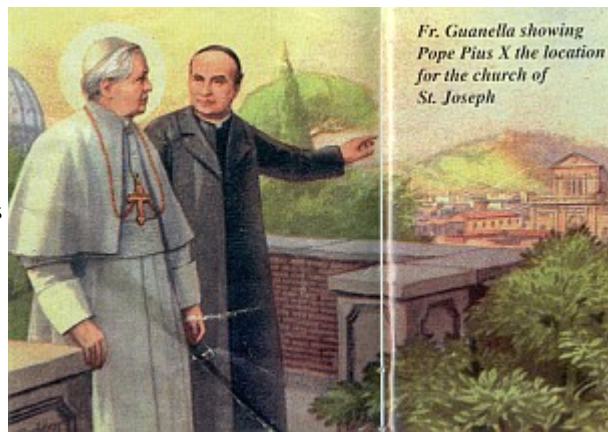
Through the figure of Pa' Lorenzo, Louis came to know paternal qualities such as hospitality, respect and care for the poor, assisting the sick and helping the needy. All of these became guidelines for Fr. Guanella's activity and spirituality. We, his spiritual sons and daughters, inherited his charismatic love for the most neglected people. The Paternity of God the Father became the central force and inspiration in all his charitable work.

In his daily life, Fr. Guanella had a great devotion to St. Joseph, custodial father of Jesus and safeguard of the virginity of Mary, his wife, the Mother of God. He reminded his priests and nuns that St. Joseph is the administrator of all their homes. All superiors must have the love and care of St. Joseph, as well as the kindness and gentleness of Mary, in dealing with the residents. Even today, there are priests and nuns who can testify the providence they received came through St. Joseph's help.

Fr. Guanella traveled to find good people willing to help him care for his dear people. People called him the priest of the mentally and physically impaired, the elderly, and the orphans. He opened many houses in Italy and, in 1913, he had sent nuns to Chicago. To those asking how he was able to open so many houses, his answer was, "It is God who does it." His faith in God's providence was the secret of his success. One day, as was his habit, he was seen with his head down at the train station. A priest sat near him posing a question to Fr. Guanella. "What do you think about Fr. Louis Guanella? Some are saying that he is a holy man; others think that he is crazy. Have you heard of him? What you think?" Fr. Guanella answered, "I think he is crazy." What sincere humility for a person so close to God!

His love and care had no limit. His dear impaired people were assisted to the very end. When he was home, it was his duty to give his blessing for the dying. His motto was, "Let us give them bread and paradise" and this was implanted in the hearts of all his nuns and priests.

In Rome, six years before his death and physically tired of his work, Fr. Guanella was



inspired to build a Church and start an Association in honor of St. Joseph, patron of the dying. Pope Pius X, a very close friend, expressed a desire to have a church in Trionfale, a very poor area near the Vatican. The Pope's desire strengthened Fr. Guanella's own ideas. Trusting to divine providence, he put a down payment on the land and the foundation was immediately begun. On the property, there was a barn which became the first Chapel of St. Joseph. The people called it the 'Basilichetta' (small Basilica.) What a striking comparison with our barn that we call Basilichetta! In 1912, Fr. Guanella announced to the Pope that the Church was completed in honor of St. Joseph and His Holiness, whose baptismal name was Joseph Sarto.

The Pope admired Fr. Guanella for his courage and devotion to St. Joseph, and when he heard about the Pious Union Association of prayers for the dying, he said to Fr. Louis, "Please make me the first member." In 1913, Pope Pius X gave his approval, making the Church of the Pious Union the main center for all the universal church.



St. Joseph's Church in 1912



The Minor Basilica as it is today.

His beloved Pope Pius X died in 1914, one year before Fr. Guanella's death. The two saints understood each other so well.

In October 1915, Fr. Guanella had a stroke on his left side. He suffered, being incapable of movement or speech. Around his bed, all the priests and nuns assisted him with prayers and showed their sorrow. The future Blessed Fr. Orione, founder of religious Congregations, came to visit his friend Fr. Guanella. The two holy priests had a private meeting and when Fr. Orione left he said, "A saint is dying."

On October 24, 1915, Fr. Guanella died while invoking God and paradise. Religious and civil authorities, including the Pope, sent their condolences. All the citizens of Como came to the Sacred Heart Church, another church built by Fr. Guanella, to visit his exposed body and to pray. His privileged people provided a constant presence around his body, praying tearfully. The news of the death of the father of the poor traveled throughout Italy. The funeral was, as Fr. Guanella desired, simple and modest. His spiritual sons and daughters in their sorrow were consoled, recalling that they had asked Fr. Louis Guanella earlier, "Who will take over after you?" The smiling Father Guanella answered, "It is God who works!"

On October 25, 1964 in St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Paul VI beatified Father Louis Guanella with admirers of the holy priest present, including the neediest. The Pope ended his discourse, repeating Blessed Louis Guanella's saying, "It is God who works." In closing, the Pope said, "Let us praise God in his servant Blessed Louis Guanella and pray to Him through the intercession of this champion of faith and charity, that God will give us the grace to imitate him and thus bless all of us."

The day of the beatification was very cloudy. Witnesses have confirmed that at the moment the Pope declared Louis Guanella blessed, the sun came out and shone through the windows onto the image of Bl. Guanella.

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