



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of January 21, 2011,
Saint Agnes

Dear Friends,

ONE day in the summer of 1955, at the faculty of medicine in Milan, a female student showed up for a difficult exam at the end of her second year. Without warning, the professor called on her for the oral exam. At first, she didn't respond, then she blushed and shyly explained, "Professor, I am undergoing treatment for a disease of the nervous system—I can't hear anything... I hope to be healed... Please have patience with me... Could you ask me the questions in writing?" The students in the room began to laugh. Believing this to be a bad joke, the professor yelled, " 'Patience, patience!' What's this? Who ever heard of a deaf doctor?" As he threw the confused and humiliated young woman's grade book against the wall, she murmured, "I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to offend you." The professor remained unyielding. Having been failed, the student left the room and told a friend, who had seen everything and was crying, "It does not mean anything. Listen—don't say anything to my mother for now; I will tell her tomorrow." And it was she who sought to excuse the professor to her mother. This student never earned a medical degree, but today, from Heaven, she teaches countless "patients" the art of suffering well.



Benedetta Bianchi Porro

Benedetta (Benedicta) Bianchi Porro was born on August 8, 1936 in Dovadola, a village in the province of Forli, in the Emilia-Romagna region of northern Italy. Her mother had a deep faith that she strove to pass on to her six children. As an infant, Benedetta was struck by polio. The disease was stopped, but her right leg was to remain shorter than the other. One day, during a game in the schoolyard, a boy whom the little girl had bothered shouted to her: "Oh! The cripple!" Her brother Gabriel took it badly, leading to a fistfight between the boys. The mothers ran to separate them. But Benedetta did not take offense: "He called me 'the cripple'—what is wrong with that? It's the truth!" These words reconciled the two boys, who resumed their game.

The great desires of a teenage girl

In 1942, the Bianchi family moved to Sirmione, on the shore of Lake Garda. In 1946, Benedetta began to confide her thoughts in a diary, in which the child often recorded her faults: "Mama told me that I am unbearable... I am ill-mannered and naughty." In 1949, she had to start wearing a corset to avoid becoming hunchbacked. She wrote that day: "I cried! The corset squeezes so hard under the arms! Before, I was carefree and felt almost like the others. Now, what a gulf separates us! But in life, I want to be like the others, a little more, per-

haps. I want to be able to become someone." In school, the girl earned outstanding grades. In 1953, she noted, "Today is Easter. How I would like to rise from my sins and live only for God! ... Today, Gabriela and I philosophized a little about God and the immortality of the soul. What fools men are when they are ashamed to speak of these important things!"

In an April 15, 2010 homily to members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Pope Benedict XVI remarked, "Today all too often we are somewhat afraid of speaking about eternal life. We talk of things that are useful for the world, we show that Christianity also helps us to improve the world, but we do not dare to say that its destination is eternal life and that from this destination stem the criteria for life. ... We must once again recognize that only in the great perspective of eternal life does Christianity reveal its full meaning. ... [E]ternal life exists, it is the true life and from this true life comes the light that also illuminates this world."

On February 15, 1953, questioned by her teacher in a Latin class, Benedetta was unable to hear the questions. This hearing trouble happened again. She commented in her diary: "What do I look like when this happens? But what does it matter? Maybe one day I will no longer understand anything that other people say, but I will always hear the voice of my soul, and that is the true

guide that I must follow." In October, by dint of hard work, she received her high school diploma with honors. She then enrolled in the faculty of medicine in Milan. Her goal was to "Live, struggle and sacrifice myself for all men."

However, threatened with deafness, Benedetta experienced a period of discouragement. She felt the vertigo of nothingness. She wrote to her closest friend at the time: "You know, Anna, it seems to me that I am in an endless and monotonous swamp, in which I am sinking slowly, slowly, without pain or regrets, unaware of and indifferent to what will happen to me, even when the last ray of light from the sky disappears and the mud closes over me..." "I am very often filled with doubts and I sink into the deepest skepticism." The greatest danger that threatened the young woman was not disease, but the insidious temptation to sink into nihilism and despair. However, it was precisely at this moment that she began to be aware of the richness of the interior life, a world so much vaster than that of the senses. A cry escaped her that announced the future direction of her life: "How I would like to live only for God!" Nevertheless, her personal encounter with JESUS CHRIST would only come later.

Struggling with stoic determination against her handicap, Benedetta successfully pursued her studies. She learned to read lips; in oral exams, she answered questions in a flash, without letting on that she was deaf. In November 1955, she received permission to retake the oral exam from the summer before. This time, she was given the questions in writing, and she passed with excellent grades. But that very evening, she got a migraine and suddenly, her field of vision narrowed. She immediately had a premonition: "No, my God! Not my eyes!" One evening in 1956, the student showed a friend a medical treatise, saying, "This is my disease." She showed her the photo of a patient stricken with neurofibromatosis (also known as von Recklinghausen disease). This extremely rare and incurable condition forms small tumors on the nerve centers, progressively destroying them. The auditory nerve is the first to be damaged, followed by the optic nerve and the other senses, and finally there is progressive paralysis. After examination, the dismayed doctors confirmed Benedetta's diagnosis. Then began a long series of hospital stays and operations intended to slow down the terrible process.

"A docile sheep in His hands"

On June 27, 1957, Benedetta underwent an operation on her head. Looking death in the face, she confided to her mother: "How happy I am, Mama, to be pure as I go to the Lord, without a mortal sin." The words of Saint Francis that she so loved came to her mind: "Praised be You, my Lord, for our sister bodily death, whom no living man can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin, blessed those whom she will find in Your

most holy will, for the second death will not harm them" (Saint Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of the Creatures*).

As they were shaving her head, she felt humiliated, but had recourse to prayer: "While they were shaving me, I felt like a lamb being sheared. I asked the Lord that I might become a docile sheep in His hands." As soon as she came out of anesthesia, she touched her face: "They cut my facial nerve." The left half of her face was now paralyzed. The surgeon did not know how to ask her forgiveness for this professional error; she simply told him: "You did what you could; take my hand and be at peace! It was something that could happen—you are not the Eternal Father!"

Yet the great moral strength she demonstrated was no longer enough for Benedetta to endure her situation. One day she wrote to her best friend, Maria Grazia, from her seventh-floor apartment in Milan: "There are times that I would like to throw myself out the window." However, she would not concede defeat to the disease. At the cost of tremendous effort, she successfully completed her fifth year of medical school in June 1959—she was only one year away from her degree! But soon, an operation intended to stop the progressive paralysis of her lower limbs ended in failure—she was no longer able to walk at all. In 1960, she was forced to completely give up her studies—a difficult trial for this young woman so gifted, and eager to be active. But while her loved ones helplessly watched her progressive physical destruction, they were also the stunned witnesses to her spiritual growth. Cloistered in her room, she showed neither sadness nor discouragement: "I live everyday life, but how full it seems to me! Life itself seems a miracle to me, and I would like to sing a hymn of praise to Him Who has given it to me." And to her mother, who gave her a bird in a cage with the remark, "It is like you", she replied, "No, Mama, I was never as free as I've been since I've been immobilized here." She was able to say to Maria Grazia, with her characteristic sincerity: "As to my spirit, I am completely calm, and even much more—I am happy. Don't think that I'm exaggerating." At the same time, she became humble, realizing that she was indeed imperfect, a "sinner" in the eyes of God, and she feared losing this interior joy of which she felt herself unworthy.

Yet things did not always go smoothly. Peace was followed by periods of interior agony. In 1960, Benedetta wrote to a new friend, Nicoletta, who was already experienced in the spiritual life: "At the moment I am going through a period of great aridity. I feel alone, tired, somewhat humiliated, and without much patience... The worst is that I am not at peace. Pray for me, pray for me... Why is this happening to me? Why is God allowing this?" Her friend answered, "Don't force yourself to feel what you believe, or to understand why it is fair that you suffer so much. Don't panic if you seem to be rebelling—this is not important in God's eyes. He knows the truth... Before this vast mystery, He wants only our

'yes'; it doesn't matter if we say it badly." Benedetta listened, and said her "yes". And little by little, she experienced the presence of JESUS CHRIST living in her. She was able to write to Nicoletta: "Bless you for the joy you have obtained for me, a joy too great for me, so unworthy. I was flooded with joy, as though all the oceans were poured into a walnut shell."

From this time on, Benedetta received suffering less as a burden to be heroically carried, than as the mark of divine favor. JESUS called her to share His cross so that she might identify herself with Him. She let herself go, and found her strength in the Gospel, which she read every day, in Saint Paul, and in the psalms.

In his encyclical on hope, Benedict XVI confirms the correctness of this attitude: "For prayer to develop this power of purification, it must on the one hand be something very personal, an encounter between my intimate self and God, the living God. On the other hand it must be constantly guided and enlightened by the great prayers of the Church and of the saints, by liturgical prayer, in which the Lord teaches us again and again how to pray properly" (Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, no. 34).

"Speak to the Madonna!"

In May 1962, Benedetta left for Lourdes in a train specially outfitted for the transport of the disabled. At the hospital, in the bed next to hers was a 22-year-old woman, Maria, paralyzed like her. In a situation that was, humanly speaking, materially and morally hopeless, Maria had come to Lourdes to ask the Immaculate Conception for a miracle. She prayed constantly, but nothing happened. The day before they were to leave, the two invalids found themselves side by side at the Grotto. Maria was sobbing. Benedetta took her hand and pressed it in her own hands, as though to pray in her place. "Maria, the Madonna is here, looking at you! Speak to her, to the Madonna!" And all of a sudden, Maria rose from her stretcher. She gently took a few steps, still incredulous. And then, delirious with joy, she made her way among the wheelchairs, weeping with emotion and gratitude. Benedetta, happy for this miracle, nevertheless felt a pang of sadness in thinking that it was another who had been its beneficiary. Then she regained her peace and abandoned herself into the hands of MARY. One year later, she would return to Lourdes, from where she would write, "I feel the sweetness of resignation. For me, that was the miracle of Lourdes this year... The Madonna gave me everything I had lost. She repaid all that had been taken from me, because I possess the richness of the Holy Spirit." On August 20, 1963, a nurse found the patient in ecstasy. Benedetta would confide to her that she had seen the Blessed Virgin, adding, "How beautiful the Madonna is!"

Meanwhile, Benedetta underwent several operations on her head. Before the last of these, on February 27,

1963, Benedetta admitted her fear to Maria Grazia, who reminded her of this passage from *Diary of a Country Priest*, a novel by Georges Bernanos: "If I am afraid, I will say without shame, 'I'm afraid,' and the Lord will give me the strength." For a long time, Benedetta softly repeated this phrase, and bit by bit, peace took hold of her. She thanked her friend effusively. The day after the operation, she announced that she was now blind, but she asked that no one tell the surgeon, so as not to sadden him. She accepted this cross of blindness that in 1955 had terrified her, and her soul was at peace: "There is nothing to do but trust in God, with eyes closed. I am in the process of living simplicity, that is, the stripping of the soul... How beautiful it is! One becomes so light and free!"

Speaking of these great trials that seem humanly impossible to bear, Benedict XVI sheds light on this secret that Benedetta discovered: "It is important to know that I can always continue to hope, even if in my own life ...there seems to be nothing left to hope for. Only the great certitude of hope that my own life and history in general, despite all failures, are held firm by the indestructible power of Love, and that this gives them their meaning and importance, only this kind of hope can then give the courage to act and to persevere" (*Spe Salvi*, no. 35).

From that point on, for nearly a year, Benedetta was like an inaccessible castle, with neither doors nor windows. Nevertheless, two little "peepholes" remained open to the outside world—a weak voice to make herself heard, and her left hand, which "miraculously" remained functional. With the fingers of this functioning hand, her loved ones traced on her face the letters of the Italian alphabet for the deaf, which she did not see but could feel (for example, the "b" was formed with the tips of the index finger and middle finger pressing together, resting on the cheek)... She could thus communicate! Her room was besieged by visitors who came to encourage her, but also to ask for her help. Benedetta had the gift of spreading joy around her. She gave advice and showed everyone the "narrow way" that leads to God. She told her best friend, who could not bear to see her physically suffering so much: "We must accept the mystery, Maria Grazia. What fills us with anguish is asking ourselves 'why'... The Lord gives us as much suffering as we can bear—not more, not less." Her friend would later testify, "I then unexpectedly noticed something that had changed in her since becoming blind. A great peace enveloped her, as though she felt completely freed from fear and anxiety." Don Gabriele, a priest who often brought her Holy Communion, would receive this confidence: "If for a brief instant, temptations arise, I call on Him, and even if I am pale with fear I immediately feel the presence of the Lord, who consoles me."

Benedetta took interest in everyone, especially in people who were far from God. In May 1963, her mother read her by sign language a letter from a young man, published in a weekly newspaper. Natalino was suffering

from a serious illness. Bewildered and without hope, he was crying out for help. She wrote to him: "Because I'm deaf and blind, things have become complicated for me... Nevertheless, in my Calvary, I do not lack hope. I know that at the end of the road, JESUS is waiting for me. First in my armchair, and now in my bed, where I now stay, I have found a wisdom greater than that of men—I have discovered that God exists, that He is love, faithfulness, joy, certitude, to the end of the ages... My days are not easy. They are hard, but sweet because JESUS is with me, with my sufferings, and He gives me His sweetness in my loneliness and light in the darkness... He smiles at me and accepts my collaboration. Adieu, Natalino: life is short, and passes quickly. It is a very short bridge, dangerous for one who greedily wishes to enjoy oneself, but sure for one who cooperates with Him in order to enter into the Homeland."

On January 21, 1964, feeling that the definitive meeting with JESUS her Spouse was very near, Benedetta made her confession and received communion. During the night of the 22nd, she asked her nurse to remain close by, because Satan was tempting her: "Emilia, tomorrow I will die. I feel very ill." In the morning, her mother noticed that a white rose had opened in the garden. A rose in bloom, in January! She announced her discovery to Benedetta, who replied, "This is the sign I was waiting for!" She then reminded her of a dream she had had on the previous All Saints' Day: she went into the family burial vault and saw it decorated with a white rose dazzling with light. A little later, stricken by a hemorrhage, she died at the age of twenty-seven, murmuring, "Thank you."

On May 24, 1963, Benedetta confided, "I want to say to those who are suffering, to the sick, that if we are humble and docile, the Lord will do great things in us." Following her example, let us ask JESUS to make each one of us "a docile sheep in His hands."

"I will no longer be alone with fear"

After her death, Benedetta Bianchi Porro's influence has only grown. Countless people faced with suffering find strength and courage in reading the story of her life and her letters. Like Maria Grazia, they can say to her: "I will no longer be alone with fear, for you have taught me the value of prayer." On December 23, 1993, Pope John Paul II approved the decree of the heroicity of her virtues. The recognition of a miracle obtained by her intercession is now required for Venerable Benedetta to be proclaimed "Blessed".

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Salvifici Doloris* (February 11, 1984), Venerable John Paul II wrote these words, which can be applied precisely to Benedetta's spiritual journey: "[A]lmost always the individual enters suffering with a typically human protest and with the question 'why'. He asks the meaning of his suffering and seeks an answer to this question on the human level. ... Christ does not answer directly and He does not answer in the abstract this human questioning about the meaning of suffering. Man hears Christ's saving answer as he himself gradually becomes a sharer in the sufferings of Christ. The answer ... is above all a call. It is a vocation. Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering, but before all else He says: 'Follow me! Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through My suffering! Through My Cross.' Gradually, as the individual takes up his cross, spiritually uniting himself to the Cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed before him. ... It is then that man finds in his suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy" (no. 26).

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