



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of October 15, 2012,
Feast of Saint Teresa of Avila

Dear Friends,

"MY young friends, do not be afraid to be saints! ... Fly high!" This call issued by Blessed John Paul II in August 1989, at World Youth Day in Santiago de Compostela, echoed in the heart of Chiara, an 18-year-old Italian girl. In her sickroom, she followed the event on television, and offered her sufferings for the youth. Twenty-one years later, on October 3, 2010, from Sicily, Pope Benedict XVI put her forward as an example. "Last Saturday in Rome Chiara Badano was beatified... who died in 1990 from an incurable disease. Nineteen years full of life, love and faith. Two years, her last, were full of suffering, yet always in love and in the light, a light that radiated from her, that came from within: from her heart filled with God! How is this possible? How could a 17 or 18-year-old girl live her suffering in this way, humanly without hope, spreading love, serenity, peace and faith?"



Blessed Chiara Badano

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On October 29, 1971, after eleven years of marriage, Ruggero and Maria Teresa Badano finally saw their dearest wish come true, with the arrival of their first and only child, Chiara, born in Sassello, a small town in Liguria, above the Gulf of Genoa. "When she arrived," her father testified, "it seemed to us to be a gift right away. I had asked the Virgin Mary for her in a sanctuary in our diocese. This child completed our union." Her mother added, "She grew up well, healthy, and gave us great joy. But we felt that she belonged not only to us. She was above all a child of God, and we had to raise her as such, respecting her freedom." While Ruggero crisscrossed Italy driving his truck, Maria Teresa quit her job to dedicate herself to raising their daughter. She said, "I understood the importance of remaining constantly by your children, not only speaking with them, but being a mother, that is, loving them, and teaching them to love."

"No! They're mine!"

From her earliest childhood, Chiara was encouraged to listen to "a little voice" in her heart. It was explained to her that it was the voice of JESUS, and she was taught that it was important to listen to it in order to do the right thing. She was an ordinary child, joyful and sociable, but with a strong character. When she was asked to do something for someone or make an effort, often her first response was a categorical "no," like the day her mother suggested they give some toys to the

poor. "No! They're mine!" A bit later, as she was silently sorting her toys, a little voice was heard repeating, "This one yes, this one no..." She explained to her mother the reasons for her choices: "All the same, I cannot give broken toys to children who don't have any!" Another time, Chiara showed her joy at understanding the Gospel parable of the father who asks his two sons to work in his vineyards (Mt. 21:28-30)—and she admitted to recognizing herself in the first one who, after having refused, decides to do the will of his father. Her parents gave priority to conversation and affection, but they also knew how to demand renunciations, lest their daughter become temperamental. "We were aware of this danger," her mother would say, "so from the earliest years we wanted to make things clear. We would not waste any occasion to remind her that she had a Papa in Heaven greater than us." Ruggero retained a firm role in raising his daughter. "It seemed to me that, to raise her properly, I needed to be demanding of her. But I did it always out of love, not spite, fatigue, or any other reason."

Speaking to the families and youth of Sicily, Pope Benedict XVI emphasized that the Badano couple "had been the first to light in the soul of their little girl the little flame of faith, and helped Chiara to keep it constantly alight, even in the difficult moments growing up, and above all during her great and long trial of suffering..."

The relationship between parents and children is fundamental; not only because of a good tradition... It is something more, which JESUS Himself taught us: it is the torch of faith that is passed on from one generation to the next; that flame which is also present in the rite of Baptism, when the priest says: 'Receive the light of Christ... this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly.' The family is fundamental because it is in its heart that sprouts, in the human soul, the first perception of the meaning of life. It sprouts in the relationship with the mother and father, who are not the masters of their children's lives but God's first collaborators in the transmission of life and faith. This happened in an exemplary and extraordinary way in Blessed Chiara Badano's family" (October 3, 2010).

Shortly after her First Communion, Chiara participated in a September 1980 children's meeting organized by Focolare. This movement, also called "the Work of Mary," was established in 1944 by Chiara Lubich (1920-2008), a young teacher from Trento. There, Chiara Badano discovered a way of living and thinking that responded to her thirst for God. The Focolare spirituality is based on love of God: "It is this faith in the love God has for us," the foundress wrote, "that has pushed us to seek all ways to respond to it with our own love. To do the will of God; that is the best way to love God." The other pillars of this spirituality are: the presence of JESUS where His disciples are (cf. Mt. 18:20); the search for unity, which is the specific goal of the Movement, which was born with a view to "the unity of men with God and among themselves"; the Passion of JESUS; God's Word; the Eucharist; and devotion to MARY, the Mother of the Movement.

JESUS forsaken

Chiara's life changed. She became very pious, attended Mass nearly every day, meditated, recited the Rosary, and put God first in her life. Her parents in turn subscribed to this ideal. The child also discovered what Chiara Lubich called the mystery of "JESUS forsaken" on the Cross. In 1983, she took part in a Focolare gathering outside Rome. A few months later, when she had just turned twelve, she wrote to the foundress: "I've discovered that JESUS Forsaken is the key to unity with God, I want to choose Him as my Spouse and prepare myself for His coming. I prefer Him! I understand that I can find Him in those who are far away, in atheists, and that I must love them in a very special way, without expecting anything in return." Chiara offered her little daily crosses in union with that of JESUS, and actively sympathized with those of people close to her. Thus she took the initiative to spend a great deal of time with an elderly and lonely neighbor, or spend an entire night watching over her sick grandparents. One of her cousins would testify: "She had such a beautiful relationship with our grandparents. She would have long and affectionate conversations with them. She assisted them in a way that was remarkable for her age." Chiara also con-

sidered the Gospel her dearest treasure—she meditated on it and wished to know it thoroughly. "I understood that I was not an authentic Christian," she wrote in 1984, "because I was not living the Gospel all the way. Now I want to make this magnificent book the sole goal of my life. I cannot remain ignorant of this extraordinary message. Just as it is easy for me to learn the alphabet, so it must be for me to learn to live the Gospel." Her regular correspondence with the foundress of Focolare was vital for the child. A deep spiritual friendship formed between them. She would say that she owed everything to God and Chiara Lubich.

The girl had a very beautiful voice, and loved music and dance. She also had a passion for walks in the mountains, sports, tennis, and swimming. Always surrounded by friends, boys as well as girls, she knew how to make herself liked—everyone was struck by the depth of her thoughts, her maturity, and the spiritual energy that emanated from her. Very much at ease with young people and adults alike, Chiara was able to converse about important and profound subjects without ever hiding her Christian convictions. The secret of such maturity was her union with God. She maintained a constant dialogue with Him, natural, simple, like a daughter speaking to her Father, and nourished by an intense trust. In JESUS she saw the Friend, the Brother, and the Spouse. She sought His face in everyone she met and in all the events of her life, but it was above all in the Eucharist that she was able to meet Him. This union with God was the source from which she drew the strength to control her fiery temperament. For example, when she heard comments that she did not approve of, she learned to control herself so that she didn't get mad, and to suspend her personal judgment for a moment so that the Holy Spirit could suggest the right response.

"Beautiful within"

Chiara didn't like to speak about herself, and tried even less to attract attention. Tall and slim, she nevertheless did not go unnoticed. She had a pure and limpid gaze, an open and sincere smile, and fine, delicate features. But she took no pride in her physical beauty. Rather, she was annoyed when flattered or complimented. What mattered to her was being composed and proper, "beautiful within." In her manner and dress, she followed the path set by her family and the Focolare movement. However, she acted decisively if her purity was threatened. The boy who one day on the bus dared make an improper gesture received a resounding slap on the face. Raised by her family to respect modesty and to have a delicate conscience when it came to chastity, she very quickly realized that to remain faithful to these values, "you had to go against the current."

This courageous interior disposition recalls that of Saint Antonio de Sant'Anna Galvao (1739-1822), who dedicated himself to Our Lady in these words: "Take my life rather than let me offend Your blessed Son, My

Lord!" During the May 11, 2007 canonization of this Brazilian monk, Benedict XVI commented on these words: "They sound remarkably contemporary to us, who live in an age so full of hedonism... They are strong words, the words of an impassioned soul, words that should be part of the normal life of every Christian, whether consecrated or not, and they enkindle a desire for fidelity to God in married couples as well as in the unmarried. The world needs transparent lives, clear souls, pure minds that refuse to be perceived as mere objects of pleasure. It is necessary to oppose those elements of the media that ridicule the sanctity of marriage and virginity before marriage. In our day, Our Lady has been given to us as the best defense against the evils that afflict modern life; Marian devotion is the sure guarantee of her maternal protection and safeguard in the hour of temptation."

On different wavelengths

In the fall of 1985, Chiara was continuing in high school, in order to fulfill her dream—to go to medical school and then travel to Africa to treat children. So the family moved to Savona, where they had an apartment. At the end of each week, they returned to the village, to everyone's great delight. The school year was trying for the girl, and in spite of her hard work, the results were disappointing. She was on a different wavelength than one of her teachers, who gave her an undeservedly low grade and made her repeat a class. In this particularly difficult situation, Chiara's charity manifested itself. This teacher's lack of understanding made Chiara suffer greatly, but never did any judgment or ungracious comment about her ever leave her lips. One episode in particular revealed her charity. One day, students noticed that this teacher was about to go down the stairs. They quickly rushed up behind her to try to make her fall, because many had grievances against her! Chiara hurried to stop them and deter them from this act of vengeance. Realizing what had just happened, the teacher turned to Chiara with a look of gratitude.

During this period, some difficulties rose up in the Focolare youth group, because of a new, more severe assistant, with whom Chiara had trouble getting along. She even wondered whether she should continue on in the movement. She prayed and offered this new suffering to JESUS, without revealing anything to the other members of the group. Only one friend noticed to what lengths Chiara went to avoid letting her difficulties, including her failures at school, weigh on her companions. "She was constantly busy living for others, for the group to go smoothly. She appeared calm and smiling, in spite of what she was enduring," this friend testified. At the end of the school year, Chiara wrote another friend: "You may have already learned that I failed a class. It was really painful for me. I did not immediately succeed in giving this pain to JESUS. I needed a lot of time to pull myself together, and even now, when I think about it, I want to cry a little. But it's JESUS forsaken!"

The next two school years were easier, but the cross, already present in Chiara's life, soon revealed itself with all its realism. JESUS forsaken, Whom she had chosen as her Spouse, took her at her word. In June 1988, a pallor often spread across her face, and her smile faded. She sometimes felt a pain in her left shoulder, but neither she nor her family thought anything of it. Nevertheless, towards the end of the summer, while she was playing tennis, the pain was so violent that she dropped her racket. Doctors tried treatments that proved useless. Finally, Ruggero and Maria Teresa were the first to learn the results of the in-depth exams—their daughter was stricken with osteogenic sarcoma, a particularly painful form of bone cancer. Then began an endless way of the cross: tests, hospitalizations, treatments, and surgeries. Chiara hoped to be cured, and maintained her wonderful smile. The attention she paid to others did not lessen, in particular to a young drug-dependent girl who had the neighboring room in the hospital. She accompanied her for long walks in the hallways. Her parents urged her to preserve her strength, but she replied: "I'll have plenty of time to rest later." The following March, when she had her first chemotherapy session, she fully realized the seriousness of her illness. When she returned home, pallid, she isolated herself, refusing to speak, and remained prostrate on her bed. Twenty-five minutes later, she turned to her mother, smiling: "Now you can speak." Chiara had just participated in JESUS' Agony in the Garden; her unreserved "yes" to God's will was given and she would never again look back. The smile that had always been characteristic of her returned to her lips.

As white as snow

Knowing from then on where she was going, Chiara began a spiritual ascent, the fruit of her entire prior life. In spite of her continuous suffering, she did not complain. During these seventeen months of Calvary, she constantly repeated her "yes" to JESUS forsaken, a picture of Whom she kept close to her bed. "If you want it, JESUS, I also want it! ... JESUS is cleaning me with bleach, down to the smallest black spots; and bleach burns. So when I arrive in Heaven, I will be as white as snow." One day she acknowledged, "It is difficult to live Christianity all the way... but it's the only way." It was very difficult for this athletic young woman to accept the progressive paralysis of her legs, but she came to say, "If I were asked if I would like to walk again, I would say no, because this way I am closer to JESUS." She often repeated to her parents: "Every moment is precious; not one must be wasted. When one lives this way, everything has meaning. Everything finds its true importance, even the most terrible hours, if it is offered to JESUS. We must not waste pain—it has meaning if we make it an offering to JESUS."

"We can try to limit suffering, to fight against it, but we cannot eliminate it," declares Pope Benedict XVI. "It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, but rather by our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through

union with Christ, Who suffered with infinite love" (Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, no. 37).

Chiara's missionary concern did not leave her. Hundreds of people came to visit her and were struck by her radiant charity. Her room became the scene of joyful encounters, even singing! The local bishop, Bishop Maritano, met with her several times. Together, they recommended the youth of the diocese to God. He would later say, "She gave proof of a human and Christian maturity beyond the norm. ... The decrease in her physical capabilities only brought out her indomitable strength of soul even more, undoubtedly supported by grace. This grace gave her the certainty of true life, of meeting with the Lord, all throughout the development of the disease. Chiara truly lived Christian hope." Those close to the family also testified to the parents' spiritual ascent. Led by their child, united with her in the same ideal, they recognized, beyond the pain, the love of God. They astonished the doctors: "We could not understand," one of them said, "why they were not despairing. They were three, but I saw only a single person."

A new name

At this time, Chiara Lubich gave her, as is the custom in the Focolare movement, a new name—Chiara

Luce ("light"). Her light, in fact, radiated far off. She who had dreamed of treating African children now had a passion for the project of a friend, who had left to drill wells in Benin. She gave him all the money she had received for her 18th birthday—this was the beginning of a wonderful adventure that would see the construction of a dispensary for orphans and a "Chiara Luce Shelter." Finally, she used the last of her energy to prepare her "wedding celebration" with her mother and friends. After having chosen the readings, the songs, and the white dress with a pink waist that she wished to wear for her "nuptials" with JESUS, she died peacefully on October 7, 1990, surrounded by her parents. She was not yet nineteen years old. Her last words were for her mother: "Ciao (goodbye), be happy, because I am!", then she clasped her father's hand. The parents then kneeled, recited the Credo, adding, "God gave her to us, God has taken her back, blessed be His holy name!" Two thousand people attended her funeral, celebrated by Bishop Maritano. Very quickly, Chiara's influence extended beyond Italy's borders; more and more graces were attributed to her intercession, so much so that in 1999 the process of beatification was opened. She was beatified in Rome on September 25, 2010.

Chiara Luce was certain of being greatly loved by God. Her unshakable trust in the divine goodness gave her confidence that God can choose only good for us. According to her bishop's testimony: "she knew that the most important thing is to abandon oneself to the will of God, and she did." Following her example, may we recognize in all circumstances the Love of God and trust in Him, convinced that in everything God works for good with those who love Him (Rm 8:28)!



Favors, graces or miracles, attributed to the intercession of Blessed Chiara Badano should be notified to Mariagrazia Magrini, Piazza C.L.N. 231 bis, 10123 Torino, Italy (mariagrazia.magrini@tin.it).

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