



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

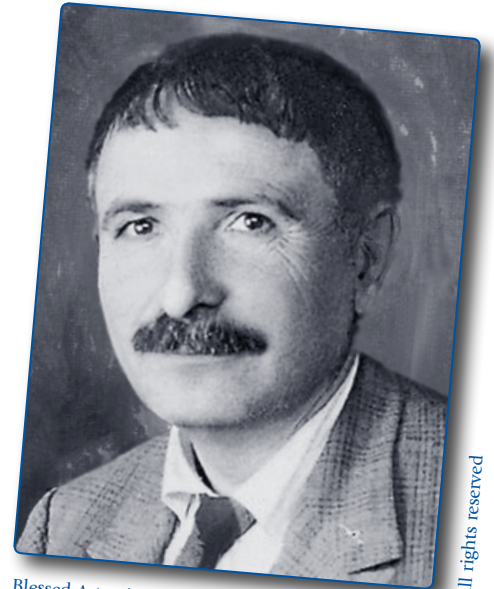
Letter of December 12, 2015,  
Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

**Dear Friends,**

**I**T is night. We are on the eve of the First World War, in Patagonia, in the south of Argentina, far from the political conflicts of the Old World. The port of Viedma sleeps in the nocturnal silence; a cyclist in a white shirt passes like an angel of God in the dark streets. If by chance someone were to see him, he would not be surprised—anyone here would know it is Don Zatti, an iconic figure in the little town, on his way to care for a sick person in his home. When the poor bedridden man sees the charitable Salesian Brother arrive at his bedside, he apologizes for making him come at such an hour. The response bursts forth with enthusiasm: “Your duty is to call me, my duty is to come!” If someone had predicted to the adolescent on the Po plain that one day he would be the providence of the poor on the other side of the world, he would probably have burst out laughing.

Born on October 17, 1880, in Boretto in northeast Italy, Artemide Zatti was the second of eight children of Luigi Zatti and Albina Vecchi. To feed their family, these humble farmers toiled on a piece of land that they did not own. When the mother was in the fields, the eldest daughter took care of the children. From the age of four, Artemide helped his parents on the farm. He went to elementary school until the age of nine, when he was hired as a farm worker by a local landowner. Rising at three o’clock in the morning, he quickly ate a little polenta with milk and left for the fields. His diligent work and sense of responsibility, acquired earlier helping his mother care for his younger brothers and sisters, set him apart from other adolescents his age. His salary? Twenty-five lira a year! Not only was he happy with it, but when he was given a cake to thank him for his zeal, he took it back to the house rather than keep it for himself; he then rejoiced to see his seven brothers and sisters devour the treat before his eyes in a flash. It is true that *it is more blessed to give than to receive* (cf. Acts 20:35).

The economic slump in which all of Europe was mired during the last quarter of the nineteenth century cruelly affected the agricultural world. Business went from bad to worse, machines were lacking, workers were unemployed. Malnutrition resulted in serious disease. Pellagra in particular, a disease that can lead to insanity and death, ravaged the Po plain. So the Zattis decided to join an uncle who had emigrated to South America. In 1897 they arrived in Bahia Blanca, in northern Patagonia. Nearly the entire population of this vast semi-desert region lived in towns on the Atlantic



Blessed Artemide Zatti

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seaboard. Originally simply a military base, Bahia Blanca had grown as a result of the railroad connection to Buenos Aires established in 1885. It had become a true commercial crossroads, and its population had quickly grown owing to the arrival of Spanish and Italian immigrants.

## “I will go to die”

**L**uigi Zatti opened a stand in the market. Artemide initially worked at an inn, then in a cloth factory. Salesian religious from Italy had maintained a mission nearby since 1875. In his free time, Artemide helped the parish priest, Father Carlo Cavalli, or went to read in his library. Fascinated by the life of Don Bosco (the founder of the Salesian congregation), he was not slow to perceive a call from God to religious life. The priest shared this with Mr. Zatti, who allowed his son to enter the Salesian pre-novitiate in Bernal, close to Buenos Aires. There Artemide encountered his first difficulties. At nineteen, he was the oldest of all those aspiring to the priesthood. Speaking mainly the dialect of his native land, mixed with a little Italian and Spanish, he encountered difficulties in studying Latin. Assigned to care for a priest with tuberculosis, he contracted the disease himself and was bedridden. On the day he was to put on the cassock, he was stricken with a fever and a bad cough, and so unable to participate in the ceremony or receive the habit. At the time, tuberculosis claimed a great many lives. So the doctor advised that the patient be sent

further south, to Viedma, where the air was healthier. Artemide willingly obeyed: "I will go to Viedma to die, if that is the will of God!"

Situated on the left bank of the Río Negro 30 kilometers from its mouth on the Atlantic Ocean, Viedma was a 250 kilometer train ride from Bahia Blanca. In this missionary outpost populated by soldiers, adventurers, and self-employed workers, the Salesians ran a pharmacy and a hospital that they had converted from a former stable. The indigenous people had no immune defenses to protect them against illnesses common in Europe. With no medical help, they died by the hundreds. Father Evasio Garrone, who welcomed Artemide, was the only "doctor" (without officially being one) in the area. He had gained vast experience as a nurse in the Italian army, and everyone turned to him, calling him "doctor". This priest invited the young tuberculosis patient to pray to the Virgin MARY to obtain his cure, and suggested the following formula: "If you cure me, I will dedicate the rest of my life to the sick of this facility." To the surprise of all, Artemide quickly recovered: "I believed," he said, "I promised, I was cured." He then enthusiastically embarked on the path already laid out. On January 11, 1908, he made his first profession as a lay Brother, then made his perpetual vows on February 8, 1912. Faithful to his promise, first he took charge of the pharmacy, then became increasingly involved as a nurse in the care of the sick. After Father Garrone's death, the weight of both Saint Joseph Hospital and of Saint Francis pharmacy rested on his shoulders.

### *Without a degree*

**T**he young religious acquired such competence that he was soon regarded as indispensable. But he had no degree and had to conform to the law. The State—though completely incapable of meeting the health needs of Viedma—required anyone who provided care for the sick to have a degree. To ensure the legality of the institution and its future, the Salesian superiors called in a qualified doctor. Nevertheless, it was Artemide who had to cope with the unforeseen events, take responsibility, and in a word, run the establishment. He sometimes even had to do the housekeeping! In 1913, by dint of a great deal of effort and activity, he managed to have the hospital entirely rebuilt and to outfit it with all the equipment necessary to provide better care to the sick. The sick poured in, but very few were able to pay the costs of hospitalization. So Artemide crisscrossed the city on his bicycle, collecting funds. When the people saw him wearing his large hat, they understood that he was on his way to a banker or a generous benefactor.

Having personally known illness, the humble Brother perceived the needs of others better than anyone else. And the certain knowledge of his vocation led him to

wholeheartedly embrace the pain and misery of his neighbor, in whom he saw the crucified Christ.

*"We know love by this, that He laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another (1 Jn. 3:16). I turn in a special way to the sick and all those who provide them with assistance and care,"* said Pope Francis on February 11, 2014. "The Church recognizes in you, the sick, a special presence of the suffering Christ. It is true. At the side of—and indeed within—our suffering, is the suffering of Christ; He bears its burden with us and He reveals its meaning."

### *A triumphant return*

**I**n 1914, Artemide obtained Argentinian citizenship. It was a joy; from that point on he would love the Río Negro as much as the Po, the river of his birth. The infirmary at Viedma prison having become too small, the prisoners were sent to Saint Joseph Hospital. One night, one of the prisoners managed to escape. Zatti was given a prison sentence for "negligence in the supervision of prisoners." This scandalous decision stunned the people of the area. To show their indignation, nurses, schoolboys, convalescents, and all those who had benefited from his charity organized a procession, led by a band. After five days in prison, the Brother was freed—his return was triumphant. "I so badly needed some rest!" he joked unaffectedly before the crowd, for he knew how to see in all circumstances the hand of God acting for his good.

In 1915, a pharmacist with an official degree took up residence in the neighborhood. In the eyes of the authorities, the State no longer had any reason to tolerate the Saint Francis pharmacy run by the Salesians. Artemide, with no degree, would be forced to close his pharmacy... He could not resign himself to it—how would the poor obtain medicines at prices they could afford? So he went to La Plata, passed the necessary exams, and returned with a degree!

Brother Artemide's days in Viedma were completely filled with service to God and the poor. Every morning he rose at 4:30, lit the fire, and went to the church, where he prayed, often prostrate with his forehead to the ground. Then he attended Mass before visiting his sick in the hospital, who all greeted him as "Don Zatti", a title as honorific as it was affectionate. As he passed by the refectory, he would grab a quick café au lait before mounting his bicycle to go care for the sick in their homes. At noon, he rang the bell and said the Angelus with the community. After lunch, he sometimes played bocce with the sick, filled with an enthusiasm worthy of Don Bosco. At two o'clock, he started on his bicycle rounds again. Before supper, he worked on his correspondence, then spoke with the hospital staff, giving precise recommendations and instructions. Under his influence, his co-workers

grew in gentleness and Christian charity. In the evening, Artemide would dine with the community before going to make one last visit to the bedridden sick. If he had no outside obligations, he read pious works and medical treatises until around ten or eleven in the evening. During the night, he was often called to a sick person's bedside. Faithful to Don Bosco's saying "work and temperance", he demonstrated a spirit of truly heroic sacrifice—one night at the hospital, he himself removed the body of a patient who had died, to prevent other patients from seeing it.

Day and night, Zatti heard Christ's call in every patient's groan. He responded promptly and diligently to this love, which invited him to give himself in imitation of the Lord, who gave Himself up to save us. Pope Francis affirmed this, saying on February 11, 2014, "JESUS is the way, and with His Spirit we can follow Him. Just as the Father gave us the Son out of love, and the Son gave Himself to us out of the same love, so we too can love others as God has loved us, giving our lives for one another. Faith in God becomes goodness, faith in the crucified Christ becomes the strength to love to the end, even our enemies. The proof of authentic faith in Christ is self-giving and the spreading of love for our neighbors, especially for those who do not merit it, for the suffering and for the marginalized."

### **No-cost service round the clock**

Artemide's services extended to the neighboring towns and villages along the Río Negro. When necessary, he freely went, no matter what time it was, to the most wretched homes outside town. His reputation was such that he was sometimes brought patients from the south of Patagonia. It also was not rare for the sick to prefer his visit to one from a doctor. Just his presence, radiant with interior joy, consoled aching hearts. He lavished competent care, all the while singing and entertaining patients with a thousand pleasantries and jokes. He sought to care himself for the most desperate cases, the most repulsive diseases and wounds. He took on himself their pain, and left them his joy. He only wept when he could do no more for them, but those who died in his arms had a smile on their lips. When he visited the sick who were poor, he left them some alms. One day the generous Brother, given the urgency of the situation and in the absence of a better solution, went so far as to welcome a gravely ill man into his own room. He gave him his bed and made do with a chair for his night's rest. Instead of being upset that his guest's snoring kept him from sleeping, he blessed the Lord: "Thank God, he's still alive!" Interiorly filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit, he did not yield to anger, did not speak ill of anyone, and did not allow anyone to speak ill of anyone in his presence.

The welcome that Artemide Zatti reserved for those persons most weakened by suffering and infirmities is a light and an example for societal life. As Pope Francis explained during the World Day of the Sick, "A society truly welcomes life when it recognizes that it is also precious in old age, in disability, in serious illness and even when it is fading; when it teaches that the call to human fulfillment does not exclude suffering; indeed, when it teaches its members to see in the sick and suffering a gift for the entire community, a presence that summons them to solidarity and responsibility. This is the Gospel of life" (February 19, 2014).

Artemide Zatti had at the hospital a woman who had become mute as a child after being abused. Very diminished in her faculties, she behaved eccentrically. Artemide remained gentle and refused to harass her, in spite of the advice of those who had difficulty tolerating her: "She has already suffered enough," he told them, "I won't add to it." This woman would live in the hospital for forty-eight years... The most disgraced received the warmest reception by the charitable Brother. One day, he received an Indian child covered in wounds and almost naked. "My Sister," he asked his assistant, "try and see if we have anything with which to clothe a ten-year-old Child JESUS." He believed that the poorest drew God's blessing. The doctors considered Zatti as one of their own, even though he had never benefitted from their university courses. Struck by his intelligence and competence, they admired his moral bearing even more. One day an atheist doctor admitted, "In the presence of Zatti my unbelief wavers. If there was ever a saint on earth, he's one!"

### **An indelible image**

"Saints," Pope Benedict XVI said on August 20, 2011, "are witnesses who show us how to experience the tragedy of suffering for our own good and for the salvation of the world. These witnesses speak to us, first and foremost, of the dignity of all human life, created in the image of God. No suffering can efface this divine image imprinted in the depths of our humanity. But there is more: because the Son of God wanted freely to embrace suffering and death, we are also capable of seeing God's image in the face of those who suffer. This preferential love of the Lord for the suffering helps us to see others more clearly and to give them, above and beyond their material demands, the look of love which they need. But this can only happen as the fruit of a personal encounter with Christ."

In 1934, the seat of a bishopric was created in Viedma, and Saint Joseph Hospital had to make way for the episcopal residence. The new construction destroyed the facility for which Artemide Zatti had made so many sacrifices. The Salesians then put at his disposal a farm, a bit outside the city. The holy Brother organized the

move without losing his wonderful smile. Everything had to be redone, but his "poor relatives" were worth the trouble! He rolled up his sleeves and returned to begging for donations. His reputation only grew, and mothers brought him their babies to him to be blessed. Seeing the affection showered on Artemide, a local politician exclaimed, "May heaven grant us politicians such influence!"

However, one day the Salesian Brother was seen leaning at a bank counter, mingling tears and prayers. A witness to the scene rushed to the bishop to warn him that Artemide was in financial difficulties. "This time, it's bankruptcy and prison!" In fact, he owed a large sum of money, and no one had come to his aid. "It's always the same with that Zatti!" mumbled the prelate, who immediately sent the poor Brother all that remained in his account. Zatti's superiors had long worried about the manner in which he managed his finances. Several times they had given him specific advice, and they finally assigned him a German accountant. This meticulous accountant could not tolerate the way Artemide managed his finances, and left within a year. For the Salesian Brother, accounting was actually very simple: on one side, the money he received; on the other, the money he owed. His debts, proverbial throughout the region, did not discourage him at all—the more they grew, the more he struggled, placing his trust in Divine Providence. "I do not ask God to send me the money," he said, "I only ask Him to tell me where there is some!" He often repeated, "If money is not used to do good, it's good for nothing." Large sums of money passed through his hands, but he intended to remain poor. Since 1907, he had worn the same wide-brimmed hat to protect himself from the sun

and the rain. His bicycle was his only means of transportation; when he was offered a moped or small car, he refused, saying, "I would feel uncomfortable!"

### **"To the better!"**

**I**n July 1950, he fell off a ladder that he was climbing to fix a leaky water tank on the roof. It would take more than this to stop him, and a month after the accident, he was back on his bicycle. However, at the time his greenish complexion and unwell look were remarked upon. He laughed it off: "I am like unripe lemons that have yet to become yellow." Behind this joke he concealed his own diagnosis—a malignant cancer of the liver. Far from being upset over this, he stated, "I came here fifty years ago to die, and now that the time has come, what could I want more? I have been ready for it all my life." When the doctor asked him, "How is it going?" he replied, raising his eyes to heaven, "To the better, doctor, to the better!" And always in good spirits, he kindly reprimanded those who felt sorry for him. On March 8<sup>th</sup>, he wrote down the treatment he had to be given for the following week. It was his final prescription, and as always, he submitted it to the doctor for his approval. The treatment came to an end on March 14<sup>th</sup>. When the doctor visited him on the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup>, he found the death certificate already written out by the patient himself, with a space left blank for the hour of death. After he died, the funeral chapel was filled with wildflowers gathered by the poor. The day of his funeral, March 16, 1951, the whole town was in mourning—the factories, the workshops, and even the public services suspended operations.

Artemide Zatti was proclaimed blessed by Saint John Paul II on April 14, 2002. He was the first Salesian lay brother to receive this honor. May his example and his intercession help us to always seek the presence of the Lord, and to welcome it in all our brothers and sisters, especially the most deprived!

*Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.*

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