

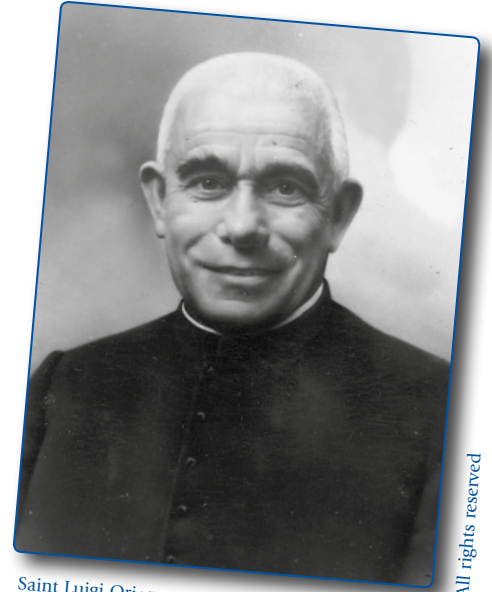


Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of August 15, 2018,
Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin MARY

Dear Friends,

AT dawn on January 13, 1905, a violent earthquake devastated the region of Marsica in central Italy, while snow covered the entire area. The victims numbered in the hundreds. One morning, after a long sleepless night, a fifteen-year-old boy, Secondo Tranquilli, with one brother the sole survivors of his family, saw a short priest in a pitiful state, with a ten-day beard in the midst of the ruins, surrounded by a group of newly orphaned children. Just then, several automobiles arrived—it was the king who had come to visit the devastated area. As soon as the sovereign had passed, the priest began to put the children into one of the cars. The police objected. The king noticed the conflict and allowed the children to be driven in this manner to Rome to be cared for there. Surprised and overcome with admiration, Secondo asked who this priest was. “A certain Don Orione, a rather strange priest,” an old woman replied.



Saint Luigi Orione

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Good legs

The priest in this wonderful story was born into a humble and poor Piedmont family in Pontecurone, in the diocese of Tortona, in northwest Italy. The father, Victor Orione, who was almost without religion, was a street paver, and the mother, Carolina, took care of the home somewhat primitively but with a profound faith. Born in 1872, Luigi, like his three older brothers, received a solid upbringing from his mother. Two principles in particular were instilled in them: “God is there” and “God sees you.” Luigi, nicknamed “the wildcat” by his friends, had a fiery temperament. He would later say of his mother: “She put me in my place!” She also taught him to love poverty and the poor. One day, he came home soaked, without an umbrella that had been entrusted to him. “I gave it to an old homeless man,” he explained, “for I have good legs to run with!” A priest, the hospital chaplain, who was to exert a profound influence on him, gladly took him along when he went to visit the sick. Very early on, the desire to become a priest germinated in tempestuous Luigi. But his father soon took him out of school to make him work with him in the streets of Tortona and Montferrat. From the age of ten to thirteen, the boy learned the demanding trade of a paver, experiencing life through the fatigue and discipline that manual labor imposes. Throughout his life, Don Orione would feel close to the young and to workers, whose hard work he knew from experience.

After meeting a Capuchin Father, Luigi asked permission to follow him, and on September 14, 1885, he entered the Capuchins in Voghera. But before the end

of the school year, he came down with a serious case of pneumonia; the doctor thought he would soon die. Nevertheless, the patient gradually regained his health, but his Capuchin superiors thought it was insufficient for him to be able to lead their life. In October 1886, thanks to a priest friend, he entered the Valdocco Oratory in Turin, run by the Salesians. There he developed a friendship of a deep supernatural affection with their holy founder, Don Bosco, who became his confessor. In Turin, Luigi also discovered the foundation created by Saint Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo (1786-1842): the “Little House of Divine Providence”. Modestly named, this immense shelter, that provided care for all sorts of miseries (and is today one of the largest hospitals in the world), was for Luigi a source of inspiration. But Don Bosco’s departure for heaven in 1888 left him in profound sorrow and great perplexity—should he remain among the Salesians, or become a diocesan priest? He naively asked the Lord for three signs to know if he should enter the seminary: first, to be accepted there without having asked; second, to have a cassock that fit him perfectly without his being measured for it; and third, to see his father, who was far from any practice of religion, return to God. The three requests were fulfilled providentially, and on October 16, 1889, Luigi entered the seminary in Tortona. He then became aware of the social and religious unrest of his time. He wrote: “There is a need and an ultimate remedy to cure the wounds of this poor country, so beautiful and so unhappy—to conquer the heart and the affection of the people and enlighten the young” by explaining to them the truth of

the Redemption, and bringing them to obedience to the Pope. He became involved in works of charity with the San Marziano Society for Mutual Help and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.

In his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, Pope Saint John Paul II exhorted Christians to evangelize in their surroundings and to correct the evils of society by putting the social doctrine of the Church into action: "The new evangelization, which the modern world urgently needs and which I have emphasized many times, must include among its essential elements a proclamation of the Church's social doctrine. ... This doctrine is still suitable for indicating the right way to respond to the great challenges of today, when ideologies are being increasingly discredited. ... We need to repeat that there can be no genuine solution of the social question apart from the Gospel, and that the new things can find in the Gospel the context for their correct understanding and the proper moral perspective for judgment on them" (May 1, 1991, no. 5).

Kicked out

In 1892, Luigi's father died a pious death. Left without resources, Luigi could no longer pay for his boarding at the seminary. His superiors then secured for him the position of caretaker at the cathedral, which would provide him with 22 lire a month, a sufficient sum to continue his studies. One morning, the young seminarian came across a boy who was crying because after disrupting catechism class, he had gotten a smack and was thrown out. Luigi mercifully took him to his room, and resumed the interrupted lesson. Bright and early the next morning, the child returned with his companions. Luigi taught them the catechism and put at their disposal the room he was living in, along with the necessary books. Little by little, the number of these students grew; soon it reached around fifty. But the canons of the cathedral, bothered by this noisy herd, decided to reduce the caretaker's salary from twenty-two to twelve lire a month. Luigi promised to stop assembling the children in his room, in doing so obtaining the reinstatement of his salary. From then on, he would bring them together on a little piazza where they could play, pray, and study. No longer seeing the boys come by, the bishop inquired about the reason for this change. He then called Luigi and offered him his own garden for the children. Thus began, on July 3, 1892, the Oratory of Saint Louis.

Some of these youth wanted to become priests, but were unable to pay for their board at the seminary. Don Luigi obtained from his bishop permission to found a school for them. "The vocations of poor children to the priesthood are, after love for the Pope and the Church, my dearest dream, the sacred love of my life," he would say one day. He set out in search of a site for the school; on his way, he came across a student of the Salesians, who asked him, "Don Luigi, where are you going in such a hurry?" "I'm running to open a school!" "Well,

I'll enroll in it," replied the student with enthusiasm. "But where do I need to enroll?" "I'm just now searching for a location." Just then, the boy's father was trying to rent out a house he had for 400 lire. Luigi felt a moment of fear—he did not have this sum, but, trusting in Providence, he closed the deal. In the street, an elderly lady he knew called out to him—"Don Orione, what a lovely surprise! What business brings you here?" "I wish to open a school..." "So, I beg you to take my nephew. How much will you ask me for his tuition?" "Oh, very little, whatever you want..." "If I give you 400 lire, how much time will you keep him?" "For his entire education!" he replied to her with humor but not without emotion. The lady immediately handed over the sum. Shortly thereafter, Luigi was summoned by the bishop: "I am withdrawing my blessing," the prelate told him, "I no longer want to hear talk of your school." Aghast, Luigi responded respectfully: "Your excellency, I am sorry! For all has been so well arranged..." And he very simply explained what had just happened. Astounded in turn, the bishop reversed his decision: "Kneel down, and I'll give you my blessing!" And so, on October 16, 1893, Don Luigi, still a seminarian, opened a school that would serve as a minor seminary for the vocations of poor children in the San Bernardino area. Many aspersions were cast against him, but his bishop supported him, and gave him permission to preach on behalf of his initiative in all the churches in the diocese.

Bread, peace, paradise

On April 13, 1895, Luigi was ordained a priest. He celebrated his first Mass surrounded by his boys and, by a special privilege granted by the bishop, gave the clerical habit to six students at his school, the early beginnings of the congregation whose foundations he was laying, the Little House of Divine Providence. During his first Mass, he had asked the Lord for three graces for those who would come to him and his initiative: "Bread, peace, and paradise." Luigi felt in himself JESUS' redemptive thirst for souls. He knew the risk of eternal damnation that his contemporaries ran. He would repeat to his religious: "Save always, save everyone, save at any sacrifice, with redemptive passion and redemptive holocaust." He addressed this prayer to the Lord: "Come, O Lord JESUS! Be resurrected in every heart, in every family. Hear the anguished cry of the throngs that rise up towards You, O Lord. They belong to You, they are Your conquest, O JESUS, My God and my Love!"

Soon, Don Orione was called to open new houses in Italy and Sicily. With time, the field of apostolic activity of his little initiative expanded more and more. At first, it expanded to receive abandoned children, and to found schools for impoverished youth, but very soon he was opening institutes for orphans, the abandoned, artisans, care homes and hospices, "villages of charity," after-school programs, leper hospitals, asked to provide staffing for parishes and sanctuaries, a missionary

apostolate... In his congregation, the need became urgent to open houses of formation. On March 21, 1903, the bishop of Tortona granted canonical recognition to the religious of the Little Work, called Sons of Divine Providence. These religious had as their mission to "carry the little, the poor, and the people to the Church and the Pope, through works of charity." They made a fourth vow of "fidelity to the Pope." Moreover, the first constitutions of 1904 stated that one of the goals of the congregation was to work to obtain the union of separated Churches. As on a "single plant that contains numerous branches," Brothers Collaborators were added to the priests, then, over the years, the Hermits, some of whom were blind, the Little Missionary Sisters of Charity, and the Sacramentines, blind women religious dedicated to perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and prayer, to whom the Contemplatives of JESUS Crucified would later be added. For lay people, Don Luigi organized the associations of the Ladies of Divine Providence, the Former Students, and the Friends. In this manner the Don Orione Secular Institute and the Don Orione Lay People's Movement took shape.

Sympathy for the workers

Luigi Orione placed himself as much as possible at the disposal of all those who wished to meet him. His exceptional memory allowed him not to forget anyone. Cheerful and full of humor, he also loved music and the poetry of Dante and Manzoni, the two greatest Catholic writers of Italy. He read the lives of the saints assiduously, and wanted the Bible, the *Summa* by Saint Thomas Aquinas, and the *Imitation of Christ* to take pride of place in all his houses. Motivated by a great passion for the Church and for the salvation of souls, he took an active interest in the great problems of his time, such as the freedom of the Church, the temporal sovereignty of the Popes, socialism, and the evangelization of the worker masses. With kindness, he did his utmost to bring priests influenced by the errors of his day back to the way of truth. As a result of Luigi's childhood of hard work, he felt an affinity with the workers who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, were distancing themselves from the Church to adhere to Socialist ideologies. The work of a paver had imprinted in his soul a keen sense of justice, which rose up against the exploitation of workers.

Don Orione had skill in combining, with a wise clear-sightedness, service to one's neighbor with the promotion of the human person. After the First World War, he founded an ever greater number of schools, agricultural colonies, and charity and support organizations. Of particular note, Luigi organized the Little Cottolengos especially in Genoa and Milan. These institutions, intended for those in greatest suffering and for abandoned persons, were built on the outskirts of large cities. Like so many "new pulpits" from which Christ and the Church were preached, these were "beacons of faith and of civilization." "Anyone who enters our

homes," he said, "is not asked his name, but only if he is suffering." He took as a motto "*Caritas Christi urget nos!*" (*The love of Christ impels us!* 2 Cor. 5:14). He provided this commentary on his motto: "I wish to be consumed by love for God and neighbor, but above all for the poor and the abandoned. I wish to be hidden in the Heart of JESUS crucified, but to go along the roads and byways with the fire of charity."

The answer

In his message for the first Day of the Poor, Pope Francis wrote, "*Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and in truth* (1 Jn. 3:18). These words of the Apostle John voice an imperative that no Christian may disregard. ... Love has no alibi. Whenever we set out to love as JESUS loved, we have to take the Lord as our example; especially when it comes to loving the poor. The Son of God's way of loving is well-known, and John spells it out clearly. It stands on two pillars: God loved us first (cf. 1 Jn. 4:10,19), and He loved us by giving completely of Himself, even to laying down His life (cf. 1 Jn. 3:16). Such love cannot go unanswered. ... We are called, then, to draw near to the poor, to encounter them, to meet their gaze, to embrace them and to let them feel the warmth of love that breaks through their solitude. Their outstretched hand is also an invitation to step out of our certainties and comforts, and to acknowledge the value of poverty in itself. ... Poverty is an interior attitude that avoids looking upon money, career and luxury as our goal in life and the condition for our happiness. Poverty instead creates the conditions for freely shouldering our personal and social responsibilities, despite our limitations, with trust in God's closeness and the support of His grace. Poverty, understood in this way, is the yardstick that allows us to judge how best to use material goods and to build relationships that are neither selfish nor possessive" (November 19, 2017).

Focused on the love of JESUS crucified and resurrected, Don Orione dedicated himself in a heroic manner during natural catastrophes such as earthquakes, which occur frequently in central and southern Italy. He came to the assistance of victims of natural disasters in Reggio, Messina, and Marsica. He became the determined and effective protagonist of first aid as well as of the reconstruction that followed these earthquakes, which ranked among the most disastrous that Italy experienced in the 1900s. But his priestly zeal, which had already manifested itself in sending his religious to Brazil, later extended to Argentina and Uruguay, Palestine, Poland, Rhodes, the United States, England and Albania. From 1921 to 1922 and from 1934 to 1937, he himself made two missionary trips to Latin America, going as far as Chile.

Don Orione's work was founded on an intense interior life. "Without prayer, we do no good," he would say. "God's works are done with clasped hands and on our knees. Even when we 'run,' we must rest spiritually

on our knees before Him." The Popes of his time greatly respected him, and entrusted numerous missions to him. He was called upon to resolve difficult issues, both with regards to civil society as well as within the Church. By appointment of Saint Pius X, he was named vicar general of the diocese of Messina for three years. A well-known preacher, and always available confessor, he brought his indefatigable zeal to bear in organizing missions, pilgrimages, processions, and other expressions of popular piety such as nativity plays.

Nothing without Her

A disciple of Saint John Bosco, Luigi lived in intimate communion with the Virgin MARY, like a child with his mother, undertaking nothing without having shared it with Her in prayer. He drew from Her his zeal for the good of his neighbor: "O Blessed Virgin, I call You! I belong to You, I love You! Carry me, O Blessed Virgin, among the crowds, on the piazzas and in the streets. Help me to welcome the orphans and the poor. Hail, O most Pure, immaculate Mother of God. Hail, Mother of Mercy!" He encouraged devotion to the Blessed Virgin in all its forms. Through the manual labor of his seminarians, he erected the sanctuaries of Our Lady of Safe Keeping in Tortona, and Our Lady of Caravaggio in Fumo, in northern Italy. But in his opinion, MARY must above all inspire, in himself and his collaborators, a spirit of complete devotion to one's neighbor: "MARY, give us," he prayed, "a great soul, and a magnanimous heart, that unites all sufferings and all tears. Make us truly what You want—the fathers of the poor. May our entire lives be consecrated to giving Christ to the people, and the people to the Church of Christ!

On March 8, 1940, spent by fatigue from having selflessly devoted himself, he was ordered by his doctors to leave his dear town of Tortona to take some rest in San Remo, on the Mediterranean coast. "It is not among

the palm trees that I would like to live and die," he protested, "but among the poor who are JESUS CHRIST!" They did not listen to him, because they hoped for his health to improve. But the hour of eternal reward had come, and on the evening of March 12, 1940, he peacefully passed, murmuring these words: "I'm leaving! JESUS! JESUS! I'm coming to You!"

The adolescent who had seen Don Luigi gather up the children in the midst of the earthquake ruins in Marsica and who had subsequently come to know him well, would state: "The thing about him that made the greatest impression on me was the calm tenderness of his expression. The clearness of his eyes had the goodness and the clairvoyance that can be found in some elderly farmers who have patiently endured all sorts of trials and who, as a result, understand or guess the most hidden sorrows. At times, I had the impression that he was seeing more clearly into me than I was into myself. But it was not an unpleasant feeling."

At its first exhumation in 1965, Don Orione's body was found to be intact. The beatification of this priest by Saint John Paul II on October 26, 1980, prompted an influx of pilgrims, who came to Tortona to kneel and pray at the foot of the shrine where his body had been placed in honor, in the sanctuary of Our Lady of Safe Keeping. During his canonization on May 15, 2004, the same Pope declared: "His witness is alive still today. The world, all too often dominated by indifference and violence, needs persons like him who fill with love the furrows of the earth ... so full of selfishness and hatred." Today, the Little Work of Divine Providence comprises more than 1,000 male religious, 950 women religious, and approximately 200 consecrated individuals in the Orione Secular Institute. The Orione Family is spread across four continents and in thirty-four nations.

Pope John Paul II said, "Luigi Orione let himself be led only and always by the rigorous logic of love! ... He had the character and the heart of the Apostle Paul." Let us ask this saint to draw us along in the wake of his supernatural love of neighbor and his zeal for the salvation of souls.

Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.

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