



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of July 31, 2019
Feast of Saint Ignatius of Loyola

Dear Friends,

ON October 14, 2018, Pope Francis canonized his predecessor Paul VI, along with Nunzio Sulprizio, a young man Paul VI had already beatified on December 1, 1963, in the presence of the bishops who had gathered for the Second Vatican Council. On the day of his beatification, Pope Paul VI noted two aspects of Nunzio Sulprizio's life: "The shortness of his life, and the fact that during his sad and hard adolescence, he was a poor and simple apprentice in a mediocre blacksmith forge. A youth and a worker: this characterizes this new Blessed, and this character is splendid and significant enough to fill his short and limited biography... We are determined to ensure that both of Nunzio Sulprizio's descriptors, being young and a worker, are compatible with sainthood. Can a young man be a saint? It would be even more interesting to discover that our dear chosen one is worthy of beatification not despite the fact that he was young and a worker, but precisely because he was young and a worker."



Saint Nunzio Sulprizio

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On Sunday, April 13, 1817, Nunzio was born in the village of Pescosansonesco, in the center of Italy; he was baptized the same day and named in honor of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin MARY. His father, Domenico Sulprizio, was a cobbler, and his mother, Rosa Luciani, spun yarn. He was only three when he received the sacrament of confirmation, when the bishop came to a neighboring town. In August 1820, his father Domenico died at the age of 26, leaving his wife without a source of income. Rosa remarried two years later, but Nunzio's stepfather treated him harshly, showing him no affection, and hitting and humiliating him for the slightest misstep. As a result, Nunzio became timid and very sensitive. He was very close to his mother and maternal grandmother, and attended a small school run by a priest, where he knew the happiest hours of his life. He learned to know JESUS, the Son of God made man who died on the Cross for our sins. He also began to pray, and learned to read and write. On March 5, 1823, Nunzio's mother passed away and he went to live with his maternal grandmother, Rosaria Luciani. She was illiterate, but rich in faith and charity. Nunzio was sent to a school for poor children. His pure heart loved serving Mass, and he often visited JESUS in the tabernacle. He had a great horror of sin and a true desire to be like Lord JESUS. But in 1826, scarcely nine years old, Nunzio suffered the loss of his beloved grandmother.

Beating the anvil

Nunzio's uncle Domenico Luciani, called "Mingo," took him in. An alcoholic and extremely angry, brutal, and crude, he pulled Nunzio out of school to work as an apprentice in his blacksmith shop for more than twelve hours a day, giving no thought to either his young age, or to the most basic necessities of the boy's life. When he thought his nephew was not sufficiently obedient, he deprived him of food. Half starved, Nunzio fainted at times, but his uncle paid no attention. Mingo sent him on errands, no matter the distance or the load he had to bear. Blows accompanied by curses and blasphemy were frequent. The other men who worked at the forge also treated him cruelly. Aware of the child's sensitivity, they amused themselves by blaspheming in front of him. Nunzio would run away and plug his ears. Some days, exhausted from fatigue and hunger, he would ask the help of neighbors. His great faith sustained him and kept him from giving up. In the forge, while beating the anvil, an inhumane job for a child, he thought about his great friend, the crucified JESUS, and prayed and offered his suffering in union with His in atonement for the sins of the world, to do God's will and to gain Heaven. Sundays, even though no one sent him, he went to Mass, his only consolation of the week.

Speaking to young people, Pope Paul VI said: "Your age was illuminated and sanctified by Nunzio Sulprizio. This glory belongs to you. He will tell you that the period of youth should not be considered the age of free passions, of inevitable falls, of invincible crises, of decadent pessimism, of harmful selfishness. Rather, he will tell you how being young is a grace. Saint Philip used to say, 'Blessed are you, young people, who have the time to do good.' It is a grace, it is a blessing to be innocent, to be pure, to be happy, to be strong, to be full of ardor and life—just as those who receive the gift of a fresh and new existence should be, regenerated and sanctified by Baptism. They receive a treasure that should not be foolishly wasted, but should be known, guarded, educated, developed, and used to produce fruit for their own benefit and that of others. He will tell you that no other age than yours, young people, is as suitable for great ideals, for generous heroism, for the coherent demands of thought and action. He will teach you how you young people can regenerate the world in which Providence has called you to live, and how it is up to you first to consecrate yourselves for the salvation of a society that needs strong and fearless souls. He will teach you the supreme word of Christ: that sacrifice, the cross, is our salvation and that of the world. Young people understand this supreme vocation."

Energy and light

On a cold winter morning, Mingo sent his nephew with a heavy load to an isolated farm. On his way, Nunzio slipped into an icy pond. That evening he returned exhausted, with a swollen leg, burning with fever, his head on fire. He went to sleep without saying a word, but the next morning, he could no longer stand. His uncle prescribed a simple remedy: work. He told him: "If you don't work, you don't eat!" So Nunzio returned to the forge. As soon as he could, he took refuge in church to pray: joy, energy, and light came to him from JESUS in the Eucharist. When he could not go to the tabernacle, he sought and found God in his own heart. Thanks to his exceptional union with God, he kept smiling, and forgave: "It is what God wants! May God's will be done!" His inner joy and charity inspired kindness from local farmers who loved talking with him. Nunzio took the opportunity to speak to them about Our Lord and to catechize them a bit.

"And for you, workers," added Pope Paul VI, "Blessed Nunzio Sulprizio's primary message is that the Church thinks about you and holds you in high regard. It sees in your condition the dignity of humanity and of the Christian, that the weight of your fatigue offers a path to social advancement and moral grandeur. This message reflects how much workers suffer, and that they still need protection, support, and help to be human and

free, and for their lives to reach their full potential. It states that work cannot be separated from its great partner religion. It is religion that gives light, that is the ultimate purpose of life, and that defines life's true values. It is religion that gives breath, an inner life, purification, nobility, and comfort in the face of physical fatigue and work. It is religion that humanizes technology, the economy, and social life. It is religion that makes workers great and good, fair, free, and saints. Nunzio will tell you how unjust it is to deprive the worker of the higher nourishment and spiritual expression that is prayer. He will tell you that nothing is more damaging to your spirit, and to your family and social life than to ignore Christ. Nothing is more unfair, dangerous, and fatal than to express indifference or hostility towards Him, the great Friend. And in the end there is no one better than a worker with a strong and honest heart to be called to His side, to welcome His Gospel and benefit from His salvation."

"You will pull the bellows!"

One day, a hammer fell on Nunzio's foot. To clean the wound, he went to the central fountain in the village, but was soon chased away by the women who had come to wash their laundry and feared that he would dirty the water. He could not work as before, so his uncle told him: "If you can no longer swing the hammer, you can sit there and pull the bellows!" This was indescribable torture for the child. Mingo even chained him to the bellows to force him to work. Finally realizing the severity of the wound, Mingo sent him to a neighboring town for treatment, thinking his useless nephew would never return. Nunzio was hospitalized from April to June 1831. However, his wound, which had become gangrenous, did not respond to treatment. Nevertheless, these weeks of rest did him good. He was kind to the other patients, and prayed intensely. When he returned to his uncle's, he had to resort to begging to survive. "I do not suffer much," he said, "so long as I am able to save my soul, to love God!" In these circumstances, the crucifix was his only light.

Francesco Sulprizio, another uncle of Nunzio, was a colonel in the Bourbon army in Naples. Having heard about the cruel treatment of his nephew, he went to Mingo's forge in 1832 and asked that Nunzio be entrusted to him. The blacksmith readily agreed to rid himself of this useless worker. Profoundly moved by the adolescent's miserable state, Francesco brought Nunzio to Naples where he introduced him to Colonel Felice Worchinger. This pious and charitable man agreed to take responsibility for the boy and provide for all of his needs.

The Virgin MARY had placed two compassionate men on Nunzio's path. On the World Day of the Sick on February 11, 2018, Pope Francis called on us to show this sensitivity to the suffering of others, which is so needed by the world: "To MARY, Mother of tender love, we wish to entrust all those who are ill in body and soul, that she may sustain them in hope. We ask her also to help us to be welcoming to our sick brothers and sisters. The Church knows that she requires a special grace to live up to her evangelical task of serving the sick. May our prayers to the Mother of God see us united in an incessant plea that every member of the Church may live with love the vocation to serve life and health."

How can I complain?

Nunzio was immediately taken to the Santa Maria del Popolo Hospital, for incurables. His bone had already begun to decay, causing him extreme pain. Seeing his unfailing patience and his virtue, the doctors and other patients began comparing him to Saint Aloysius de Gonzaga. One priest asked him: "Do you suffer much?—Yes; I do the will of God.—What would you like?—I wish to confess and receive JESUS in the Eucharist for the first time!—Have you not made first Communion?—No, in our area we must wait until we are fifteen.—And your parents?—Dead.—Who is taking care of you?—God's Providence!" He was immediately prepared to receive JESUS in the Eucharist. It was truly the most beautiful day of his entire life. His confessor said: "From that day the grace of God began to work in him in extraordinary ways, so that he raced from virtue to virtue. His whole being breathed the love of God and JESUS Christ." During his Calvary, Nunzio was graced with visions of the Blessed Virgin, the angels, and the saints. The bandages from his wounds began to show miraculous properties: a lady at the court of Naples experienced this when she applied them to her damaged knee. Overwhelmed, the Colonel asked: "How can I complain of the trials the Lord sends me when I see the heroic courage with which Nunzio bears his suffering? How can I postpone sharing my abundance with the poor, when he, who is undoubtedly the poorest of all, refuses what is offered him, to give it to others?"

The medical treatments did improve his condition: Nunzio was able to abandon his crutches and walk with a cane. His serenity deepened through prayer in the chapel in front of the tabernacle and the crucifix, or before Our Lady of Sorrows, or even in his bed. He became the angel and apostle of other patients, taught catechism to hospitalized children, prepared them for their first Confession and first Communion, and explained to them how to live more intensely as Christians, through suffering. Those who approached

him were charmed by his saintly life. He would tell others in the hospital: "Be always with the Lord, because all good comes from Him. Suffer for the love of God, with joy." He loved to invoke Our Lady, saying to her: "Mother MARY, make me do God's will!"

In his message on the World Day of the Sick on February 11, 2017, Pope Francis wrote: "After her visit to the Grotto, thanks to her prayer, Bernadette turned her frailty into support for others. Thanks to her love, she was able to enrich her neighbors and, above all, to offer her life for the salvation of humanity. The fact that the Lovely Lady asked her to pray for sinners reminds us that the infirm and the suffering desire not only to be healed, but also to live a truly Christian life, even to the point of offering it as authentic missionary disciples of Christ. MARY gave Bernadette the vocation of serving the sick and called her to become a Sister of Charity, a mission that she carried out in so exemplary a way as to become a model for every health care worker. Let us ask the Immaculate Conception for the grace always to relate to the sick as persons who certainly need assistance, at times even for the simplest of things, but who have a gift of their own to share with others."

The first person

On April 11, 1834, Nunzio went to live with Colonel Worthinger, his second father. He wished to be consecrated to God. While waiting, he had his confessor approve rules for his daily life that he observed carefully: prayer, morning meditation and Mass, hours of study during the day, recitation of the Rosary in the evening. He spread joy and peace all around him. The venerable Gaetano Errico, who would found of the Missionaries of the Sacred Hearts, promised to welcome the young man in his religious family when the time came. "He is a young saint," he affirmed, "and I want the first person to enter my congregation to be a saint, infirm or not." However, Nunzio's health soon worsened: he suffered from bone cancer that could no longer be treated. In the fall of 1835, doctors wanted to amputate the diseased leg, but Nunzio was too weak.

In March 1836, his fever became very high, and his heart showed signs of failing. His suffering was acute; Nunzio prayed and offered himself up for the Church, for priests, and for the conversion of sinners. He would tell visitors: "JESUS suffered so much for us, and thanks to his merits, eternal life awaits us. If we suffer a moment, we will rejoice in Paradise... JESUS suffered much for me. Why shouldn't I suffer for Him? I would want to die, to convert even a single sinner." On May 5, he asked for a crucifix and called for the confessor. He received the sacraments, and consoled the Colonel, his benefactor: "Rejoice, from Heaven I will always help

you." Towards evening he cried out, radiant with joy: "Our Lady, Our Lady, how beautiful she is!" and fell asleep in the Lord. He was 19. The scent of roses spread all around him; his body, ravaged by disease, appeared singularly fresh and beautiful. His tomb immediately became a place of pilgrimage.

Inexplicable fruit

Only one of Nunzio's letters remains. Several months before his death, he wrote to his uncle Mingo. Nunzio didn't express any bitterness or resentment, for his heart contained neither: the Holy Spirit had produced in him its best fruit (Ga 5:22). Pope Paul VI considered these fruits, inexplicable without grace: "It is not hard to find in the Blessed that the Church proposes today for our consideration, fruitful and profound subjects for study and investigation. His childhood, for example, orphaned and poor, marked by so much suffering, invites us to an intense meditation, troubling for those who do not belong to the school of Christ, on the mystery of the suffering of the innocent. How his childhood, marked by heavy solitude, suffering, brutality even, did not bring forth, as it generally does, a sick and rebellious psyche, an insolent and corrupt adolescence. Rather this young life, so unhappy and deprived, from the first years blossomed forth an innocent goodness, patient and smiling. And then, there is the fundamental problem of his deeply religious life. From where did such a lively piety, so sure, so persevering, so personal come? Possibly, and this would be the best possible discovery, we are witnessing the action of the divine invisible Master who, as in the case of the lives of many other saints, made this soul pure and taught deep prayer through suffering, made of him a privileged student who learned—not from books or from the voice of an external teacher, but from an emerging interior knowledge—the truths of the faith

and the mysteries of the kingdom of God. Thus was this young man, sick and wretched, able to go beyond his own needs and his own pain to understand the needs and pain of others. One can speak of, can describe the patience, the sweetness, the charity of this suffering and crippled adolescent, who anticipated and met the needs of others. A colonel with a big heart also had a beautiful role in his short history. But humanly speaking, Nunzio's goodness remains inexplicable; it tells us that here we are face to face with a secret: the secret of the good Nunzio, the secret which we seek to know, the secret of holiness."

In his canonization homily, Pope Francis said: "JESUS is a radical. He gives all and he asks all: he gives a love that is total and asks for an undivided heart. Even today, he gives himself to us as the living Bread; can we give him crumbs in exchange? We cannot respond to him, who made himself our servant, even going to the cross for us, only by observing some of the commandments. We cannot give him, who offers us eternal life, some odd moment of time. JESUS is not content with a 'percentage of love': we cannot love him twenty or fifty or sixty percent. It is either all or nothing. Dear brothers and sisters, our heart is like a magnet: it lets itself be attracted by love, but it can cling to one master only and it must choose: either it will love God or it will love the world's treasure (Mt 6:24); either it will live for love or it will live for itself (Mk 8:35). Let us ask ourselves what side we are on. Let us ask ourselves where we are in our story of love with God. Do we content ourselves with a few commandments or do we follow JESUS as lovers, really prepared to leave behind something for him? JESUS asks each of us and all of us as the Church journeying forward: are we a Church that only preaches good commandments or a Church that is a spouse, which launches herself forward in love for her Lord?"

Let us ask Saint Nunzio to offer us the grace of giving ourselves completely, each according to our vocation, and to fully submit to the sanctifying action of the Spirit of Truth and Love.

Dom Barthélemy Marie O.S.B.

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