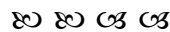


Holy people

Servant of God Giovanna Meneghini

Giovanna glint of beauty

It is the duty of the consecrated life to show that the Incarnate Son of God is the eschatological goal towards which all things tend, the splendour before which every other light pales, and the infinite beauty which alone can fully satisfy the human heart.



o the degree that consecrated persons let themselves be guided by the Spirit to the heights of perfection they can exclaim: "I see the beauty of your grace, I contemplate its radiance, I reflect its light; I am caught up in its ineffable splendour" (Vita consecrata).

Docile toward the Spirit that aroused in her heart the attitude of filial obedience to the Father witnessed by Jesus Christ, Mother Giovanna lived in the consecrated life, in poverty and in contemplation, a singular religious experience, from which she received the capacity to arouse the desire to follow Jesus in



other young women, according to her project of apostolic religious life. (Costituzioni)

Introduction

It's not easy to introduce in a few lines the work and the figure of Mother Giovanna Meneghini, the foundress of the Ursuline Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary. Through her personality and her singular vocation, we perceive that we are in front of a person called by God to incarnate and relive the inexhaustible mystery of Christ, meek and humble Servant of the Father's redeeming plan. Like Him, imitating the Lord's Servant Mary, Giovanna gives herself with bride's love to God's project of love, who wants to make of her "a true daughter of him... holocaust to His love".

How this can happen Giovanna doesn't know exactly, only through the correspondence to God's love, the sapient reading of events and the docility to the everlasting action of the Spirit, she will discover that this gift, this new charisma, will take shape through the foundation of a new religious family.

This simple profile doesn't have any pretension to exhaust the richness of the life and of the work started by Mother Giovanna, but it has the hope to give birth to a dialogue among us and her, a friendship, a comparison that may lead to a profitable exchange of experiences where Giovanna, with her life stretched out toward the "glory of God", encourages us to "beat the dark path with strength in order to find the light".

It pleased God that I came into the world

“My parents were poor shepherds that used to go in some village during the winter with their sheep. In November 1867 they were in Toara, by counts Barbaran and went back toward their village Enego in the morning of 23 May '68. In the evening they arrived in Bolzano Vicentino and they took shelter with their herd in a stable, where it pleased God that I came into the world”.

This is what Mother Giovanna tells about her origins. Fourth-born of Stefano Meneghini and Teresa Luigia Francescato, Giovanna was baptized in Bolzano Vicentino's church the following day. Her godfather was her uncle Antonio Baggio of Breganze that “during his whole life always remembered that blessed day”. When she was three years old, her parents left her with her uncles Baggio of Breganze in order to ensure her those cares and that stability necessary for a harmonic and serene growth.

From that moment Breganze became not only the place of Giovanna's life and of her human and Christian maturation, but also the place of her singular vocation of Foundress. She writes on her diary: “A voice told me in my heart that [the Lord] wanted me in Breganze instead, together with other little daughters. There... it seemed to me to see that white little house about which I will speak again”.

Breganze was the chosen place, for a mysterious project of God, to welcome the germ of a new religious family.

She had a sweet and discreet character, a reflective disposition with a marked practical sense and a lively intelligence both in spiritual and in material things.



First crisis first “callings”

When she was 12, Giovanna lived the delicate passage from childhood to adolescence, time of first decisions and of first fundamental orientations.

Friendships in this age have their weight and Giovanna, that had a friend “not bad but vain”, starts feeling “distraction and indifference for religious things”, as she writes on her diary.

But it’s in this crossing of ways, of possible choices of life, that the Lord waits for her in a completely unsuspected way, that is, through two dreams that will mark the beginning of her vocation to the consecrated life.

In the first dream Giovanna is put in front of the mystery of death and of the discovery of what it’s really worth in life. A young friend, who died a short time before, appears to her and she makes fall down a big tower with a small gesture of her hand, declaring: “Things of world are like this!”. It’s a strong gesture, that deeply shakes her and push her to “start a new life”, to find in prayer and in the Eucharist a meeting place with that Light that enlightens the darkness of her young researching heart.

In the second dream, when she was 15, an invitation will start to take shape and it will put Giovanna on the still hidden traces of the Bridegroom: the Son of God. She writes: “it seemed to me to be in a house in which the Master had prepared a banquet for men only: I waited at the table, I came in and I saw, among all, a man who sit higher, handsome, bright, resembling an image of the Sacred Heart... Looking at me with a kind eye, he put his hand on my head and told me: “If you want to be a true daughter of mine, you have to consecrate the lily of your virginity to me”.

Toward her vocation

Dreams begin to come true when Giovanna, maturing a deeper adhesion to Christ in prayer and in the assiduity at the sacraments, she asks to be accepted in the Collegio Farina of the Suore Dorotee Figlie dei Sacri Cuori of Vicenza to become religious. It’s February 1885.

But the Lord let her soon understand that he had other plans for her! A few days after her entrance she had such a nagging fever and malaise that she was dismissed from the Institute, with big regret of the sisters. A clear voice told her heart, that wasn’t the place where the Lord wanted her. “He



wanted me in Breganze – she wrote on her diary – together with other little daughters” in that white little house that she seemed to see with the eyes of her heart!

After her return by the family, her calling to the consecrated virginity doesn't fade away; on the contrary, it increases day after day: in June 1890 mons. Andrea Scotton gives birth to the Company of Saint Angela Merici (a form of consecration to God staying in the Family) and Giovanna is not only one of the first seven enrolled young women, but she is also chosen as “superior” of that first nucleus of secular Ursulines of Breganze. She was a little more than 20.



Nevertheless something or Someone in her heart push her still further, indicating her another way.

Once, confiding the anxieties and the desires that agitated her spirit to her confessor, she said “I have a cloud before my eyes that consoled me” and that this “cloud” “seemed a religious foundation”.

Giovanna is encouraged to feel confident and ready to the divine calling, preparing herself, in the stability and in the joy of the Consecration to God in the Company of Saint Angela Merici, to the future mission of Foundress.

A special love for the Eucharist

The path of Giovanna toward the fulfillment of the mysterious project, that God reveals her little by little, is filled with “Eucharistic meetings” that mark her spirituality and her foundation in a singular peculiar way.

The special love she feels toward “Jesus in sacrament” is not simply referable to the Eucharistic devotion of that time: there is something more, there is a discovery and a personal meeting between Giovanna and the mystery of Jesus-Eucharist, touchable sign of the amorous “lowering” of the Son of God, that made himself obedient to death, the death of the cross.

Giovanna’s “conversion” after her first dream at 12 is marked by a new attention and a “special love”, as she writes, toward the Eucharist. It isn't a passing emotion or a superficial devotion, and this can be witnessed by the fact that the presence of Jesus-Eucharist not only accompanies Giovanna’s spiritual itinerary, but it has a relevant part in relation to her calling to found a new religious family.

In the “solemn moment of the Saint Eucharist” Giovanna spreads in acts of love and of perfect abandon. She writes: “in those precious moments I felt free, released from everything and everyone, as if I were with Jesus alone”.

The words that Giovanna hears in these solemn callings remain impressed with fire characters in her heart and accompany her through her whole life: “You must consume with love for me – he used to tell me – you must dedicate yourself to my glory”.

On the 14th June 1906, the feast of Corpus Domini, Giovanna is absorbed in adoration in front of the altar and she has the vision of a group of young sisters that devoutly adore Jesus. She writes on her diary about this: “I can’t say how much my heart was delighted with this sight, but at the same time it seemed a distraction, so I tried to shake myself off, to read in the book, but everything was useless. It lasted until the end of the Holy Sacrament’s exposition”.

Through these intense Eucharistic meetings, the Lord prepares, lights up and broadens Giovanna’s heart enabling her to receive the gift of the new religious foundation, that He wants to make bloom through her.

A big heart to embrace the world

The people of Breganze realized very soon that Giovanna had a big and generous heart: a lot of she-friends used to visit her to ask for an advice or help, sure to find an adequate answer for their expectations.

Her job by Monsignors Scotton’s typography in Breganze, where Giovanna was employed when she was very young, put in evidence her amiability, her strong practical sense and her professional ability. It wasn’t rare that Giovanna had to solve delicate and difficult situations.

Like Angela Merici, Giovanna also seems to have the precious gift of the counsel and of the spiritual discernment, fruit of a constant interior work guided by the Spirit, that shapes her toward the figure of the only Meek and Humble of heart.



Giovanna is vibrant of the same anxiety as Christ: “the salvation of the souls”. She is often incited to take in charge the problems of the people she meets, that tell her their joys and grieves.

Once she listened to the pains and the desires of some young women that wanted to be nuns, but they couldn't because of their economical condition and she felt a “clear voice” saying that she had to think about it,

Day after day the Lord dilates Giovanna's eyes so that she can see the world's deepest needs and particularly those of young women and girls toward which she feels “a very special affection”.

In some moments she felt “such a big heart and such a burning longing for the souls' salvation, that it seemed enough to embrace all the world”.



The foundation of a new Religious Family

On the evening of the 5th January 1907, in the imminent feast day of the Epiphany, in a humble little house in Breganze Giovanna give birth to the new Religious Family that will afterward take the name of Ursuline Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary. She writes in her diary: “The little family of the Ursulines gathered in Breganze to make common life is a little branch of the big tree planted by Saint Angela Merici in the mystic garden of the Church”.

The beginning was poor and difficult although it was full of joy and big expectations, because Giovanna couldn't openly join together with Orsola Balasso and Angela Franzan (her first spiritual daughters with such significant names). The Mother must sorrowfully wait for three years the blessed day when she can enter the desired “little house of the Lord” without any other hindrance.

Soon some Sisters joined the first ones, and on the 8th September 1914, Feast of the Nativity of Mary, Giovanna made her profession together with eleven companions, while another numerous group wore the religious dress and began formation.

According to Mother Giovanna, the spirit of the new servants of the Lord had to be: “perfect abnegation of themselves and tireless zeal for the souls' salvation” and their mission “is one own salvation and the sanctification of the feminine popular class”.

Only a charisma received by the Spirit of Christ, that gives his gifts to the Church, could make Giovanna and her spiritual daughter prone to contemplate and able to live in history the mystery of Jesus obedient servant of the amorous plan of God through a daily gift of themselves at the service of woman's human and Christian promotion.

2 March 1918, Saturday afternoon. In Breganze the bells announce the day of the Lord's first vespers. Giovanna Meneghini, Foundress and Mother of the new Religious Congregation, born from almost nothing but already known and appreciated by the local people, gives her last breath to God.

The body, shown for two days, sees such an incessant flow of numerous persons, that the high priest of Breganze, Mons. Giovanni Prosdocimi has to forbid the access into the room where Giovanna's body lies, constantly full of people coming from everywhere.

Her passing away was serene, accompanied by the promise she made to her beloved daughters and sisters that, once in Heaven, she "will pray a lot for them", so that they will be "strong and constant in the started path. And indeed, now more than ever her foundation was in need of her help, her guide and her prayer.

Further steps of the Institute show that, notwithstanding very hard proofs, the plan that God wanted to achieve through Mother Giovanna was fulfilling.