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December 26, 2016
St. Stephen – 1st Martyr

Dear Stigmatine Lay Member,

Here, the day after Christmas, the Church reminds us of the first Martyr, St Stephen. As our second centenary as Stigmatines fades into happy memory, we look forward to this beginning a third centenary – and early in January, we have the celebration of the Epiphany of the Lord. Like the Magi of old, we are called to follow the star: to follow God's word. St. Thomas Aquinas and the Mystics refer to faith compared to a candle in a dark place – and in faith we pray that perpetual light may shine for all eternity, when we are brought home to God, by following the star of God's word, and the teaching of the Church.

As St. Stephen was giving his missionary life up to the Lord, the Scriptures tell us that as the Saint was being martyred, being filled with the Holy Spirit, and saw the heavens opened [cf. Ac 7: 54-60]. This is the goal of our pleasing the Lord by one day entering heaven, persevering in faith all through life, by following the bright star of His word in a darkened world.

To teach us along our way, the Church offers us a wide variety of 'Models' of Redemption – this meeting of God's Infinite Divine Mercy with our abysmal human misery. Some of these are:

- Agriculture [vine and branches; seed of God's word];
- Economics [Debt; Purchase price];
- Medical [healing, Eucharist as *Pharmacum*: Antidote]; Liturgy [Sacrifice, Communion, Holocaust];
- Juridical [Tribunal; Judgment; Advocate];
- Military [Spiritual Combat; sword of God's Word; helmet of salvation]; Family [God as Father; Spouse; Infancy].

Over the marvelous discoveries of the past 225 years, some might at Astronomy – with the discovery of a bit more of the immense treasures of the created universes.

Astronomy can teach the open mind about the size of the planets, and stars – the distances – their speed – and the power of their gravity and the magnetic fields in this millennia old "tug of war" going on in the skies above. A modern theologian, the

late Has Urs von Balthasar, developed the idea of a Christological Constellation – all the saints of the New Testament and of all time gyrate around the Central Power of God’s Mercy, drawing us ever onward and upward and upwards. **Spiritually, the infinite Mercy of God has reversed the natural Law of gravity – he used the metaphor of a “Christological constellation” - reversing the natural process of falling down, but his mercy Lifts us up – and we pray in each Mass, Lift up your hearts!**

St. Gaspar Bertoni spoke of being drawn onward by the power of the Lord: in his very first letter, of Nov. 12, 1812, he writes about his dream of a community. He reminds us that when Peter heard that correction when he seemed to be sinking into the deep waters, the Lord said to him: “Ye of little faith! Why do you doubt?” [Mt 14, 31]. The Lord Jesus was very near to the struggling Peter at this time, and was approaching him over the storm waters, drawing him by His own right hand. His prayer was at that time as the Spouse in the Song of Songs: Draw me after you! [Ct 1:23] [cf. *Epistolario*, pp. 23, f.]. Again St. Gaspar reminds us in his 149th letter [cf. o.c., p. 236] – the Lord takes hold of our weakness, and draws it to Himself and shares His own good odor with us. He further noted that good prayers of dear people for us further enable us to draw the carriage of our burdens in the service of the Lord [cf. o.c. p. 286].

This same ideal is presented to us in the resurrection of the Spouse of the Church. We read in John 12:32 that when He is raised up, He will draw all to Himself. Fr. Bertoni’s own spirituality seems to manifest a kind of Eucharistic Constellation, as his own Spiritual Diary indicates this way:

AN INTRODUCTION FOR THE YEAR 1812

Fr. Bertoni continued with great determination his apostolate and his penances until October, the month during which a very severe illness struck him. He was hardly recovering from that illness, when Bishop Innocence Liruti gave him more ministries to accomplish in the Seminary. He had to suspend the assistance to the Canossa "Retreat", except for the Direction of its Superior, Mother Leopoldina Naudet.

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Before presenting an outstanding "gift of Prayer" which Fr. Bertoni received on 30 May 1812 (during the Octave of Corpus Christi), we should like to give an extract from Leopoldina's **Diary**. It deals with an experience of ecstasy which she tried to resist, during the Mass of Holy Thursday which on that year fell on 26 March:

“... While thinking of the Institution of the Blessed Sacrament I was taken in spirit to the place of the Last Supper. In the contemplation of what was going on there I felt

being very pleasantly but strongly drawn out of myself. I abandoned myself and surrendered to the power and pleasantness of that pulling force. When I realized that my body was also going to be involved and it started to lose its sensitivity, my natural reaction forced me to become distracted. I did that, however, with some hesitation. I knew that I was told not to do like that and to trust in God. Notwithstanding that I gave myself an excuse thinking that what I was experiencing could be a physical weakness. I continued to distract myself in order to have control over my feelings and to remain self conscious... “

Fr. Bertoni had previously advised her with a statement so characteristic of him: **Do not resist God. Trust in God!** *What would have happened on that Maundy Thursday if Leopoldina would not have resisted the attractions of God, seems that her Spiritual Director experienced himself a couple of months later on 30 May 1812.*

†††

30th MAY 1812

[171.] While in prayer before Mass I was taken over by some drowsiness and I heard from the Crucifix these words addressed to my heart: *Look at this Heart of mine!* Those words immediately brightened my mind with light and my heart felt suddenly a great fervor. Then it was as if my spirit rose up to see the lovable object which was indicated. I felt a shivering throughout my whole body. I found I had my eyes and mouth closed but my soul was wide awake and full of delight.

It seemed that my soul wished to separate itself from my body. It seemed to be dying and yet to enjoy this. When it turned again back with desire towards the one who was talking to it, I had another shivering and the feeling of a sweet painful death. My soul was then confused about what to do. If the experience had continued it was going to die or at least to be separated from the body. In such inability to act, it rested with delight in the hands of the Lord and finding great peacefulness it was ready to die in that very moment. Then, in an instant, it regained contact with the senses.

The effect of this was a very tender devotion to the Sacred Heart. During Mass I was full of sentiment. My soul was moved to tears at Holy Communion. After Mass I kept much recollection and gladness for the whole day with an increase of Faith, Hope and Charity.¹

¹ Web-Site Note: it is interesting to note that in these days [less than a week later] Fr. Bertoni was thinking integrally also of the Glorious Wounds retained in Christ's Risen Body. In St. Gaspar's sermon on the Sacred Heart [June 5, 1812], he stated: *His side, opened after His death, is used to show us that Heart, that same Heart wounded by the lance, that WOUND RETAINED IN HIS GLORIOUS BODY*, render the Heart so sweet, evident, divine, so much so that it is impossible to venerate the Wounded Heart without remembering and venerating

The text is worth reading and meditating with devotion. This would be sufficient to understand it and to savor it without pretending to penetrate the deep phenomena which it narrates. However some remarks are helpful. We take from what Fr. Dalle Vedove wrote with regard to that mystical experience of Fr. Bertoni:

... It is probable that he was preparing in those days the homily for the Feast of the Sacred Heart, the following Friday. Spending nights in work, study and prayer makes one somehow drowsy early in the morning. But Fr Bertoni's drowsiness was not just natural: it was that *turgidity* and tying up of the human faculties which is characteristic of mystical experiences. The words ***Look at this Heart of mine!*** were heard distinctly. What followed was like a flash of lightning: an irresistible desire to **see the lovable object which was indicated.**

... The sudden and almost violent way in which Fr. Gaspar was taken by this mystic gift showed that it was not a simple ecstasy, which should have developed slowly and pleasantly, but rather a real *rapture* or *flight* of the spirit. The effects of this extraordinary experience invaded not only the spiritual faculties of mind and will but also the physical ones with characteristic phenomena like shivering of the body and shutting off of sight and voice. He even reached, twice, the state of *alienation* close to death. Yet the whole experience was described as delightful and in great quiet. The *rapture* in front of the Crucifix marks the height of Fr. Gaspar's extraordinary spiritual gifts. After this mystical experience he was no longer sure what he should write down on paper. He will record only seven more short notes and will leave blank the remaining 90 pages of his JOURNAL. The reason could be that a new phase of his life was opening up.

... Within few months he will be struck by a sickness which will accompany him for the remaining forty years of his life, marked by intense suffering. From the ecstasy in front of the Crucifix which showed him the Sacred Heart, a new journey began. It will lead him to the total sacrifice of self. Just like Jesus who, after his Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, took decisively the road to Jerusalem for his sacrifice on Mount Calvary...²

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His immense love [cf. MssB # 1771]. This integral theme is much in evidence in Fr. Bertoni's spirit - cf. J. Henchey, CSS, 'S. Gaspare Bertoni: una speranza missionaria...', in": *Symposium...*, pp. 143-160.

² Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove, *Un modello...*, o.c., pp. 191, ff.

Let us pray for each other, for a blessed and happy new year – with the prayers of the our Patrons, the Holy Spouses, Mary and Joseph, let us undertake our journey of following the Lord – the Star of His word, until He leads us all home to the perpetual life of His Eternal glory.

Sincerely yours in the Merciful Lord,

Fr. Joseph Henchey, CSS
Acting Spiritual Director

P.S. To help us reflect in this new year, I am offering two reflections from St. Gaspar: one from his Epiphany Letter of 1806 – and the other, a meditation on his spirituality and theology.