

Mundelein Seminary
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OCTOBER 9, 2017
240th Birthday of St. Gaspar Bertoni

Dear Stigmatine Laity,

As last year at this time, our thoughts and prayers were directed toward the 2nd Centenary of the birth of the Congregation, today we remember the 240th birthday of St. Gaspar Bertoni. Although we do not have any primary records of that birthday at our disposal, we might do well to look at his spiritual diary [*Memoriale Privato*] on his 31st birthday – which was a time of extraordinary insights and graces for St. Gaspar:

Some form of “Teaching” was a central ideal in the early years of St. Gaspar. This took place not only in the class room but throughout his entire life by example. Written record of this may be found in his parish sermons - his Spiritual Diary – his Letters. In the year 2000, the Holy See issued a document on the life and ministry of Priests. In the place of the usual emphasis on Priest as King, Prophet and Priest – the document presents these in a new guise: the Priest as Leader in Prayer; the Priest as Minister of the Mysteries; and the Priest as Teacher of God’s Word. St. Gaspar cultivated these mediations – after having been sublimely “drawn”, “taught by God”. Let us look at the entries in his Dairy on and around the date of his 31st birthday.

9th OCTOBER 1808

[59.] Feast of St Denis and the Maternity of the Virgin Mary.

During the Eucharistic prayer of the Mass near the time of the memento, it seemed that my mind opened up to know with Whom was I speaking. I felt great affection and an enthusiasm of love in prayer. Then some outbursts of my heart for God and some impulses of my spirit towards God. I seemed to be like a person overwhelmed by the appearance of a great friend who had not been seen for a long time and on seeing him suddenly, he wants to throw himself at him and embrace him.

Then I felt a desire that the vision could increase and an impulse to be able to reach the Supreme Good. Since I was in public I feared [the feeling of] some vanity and I [made an effort to] think of my most serious sins. As a consequence [I felt] an increase of knowledge of goodness and love which dissolved in most soothing tears which lasted until after Holy Communion.

In the meantime faith and confidence increased very much together with humility and loving reverence.

Lastly, at Communion, a very intense devotion and sentiment similar to that of my First Holy Communion: an experience that I am not aware of having felt since. The recollection lasted for another hour and it remained for the rest of the evening.

[This is Fr. Stofella's commentary]: It was the second Sunday of October, the 18th after Pentecost, and Fr. Bertoni's birthday. He was 31 years old. It was also his 'name-day' because "Denis" was the third name given him on his Baptism day. ["Gaspar", his first name, was that of his Grand-father – "Louis" was his Father's name]. That day the commemoration of St. Denis had to give liturgical precedence to the celebration of the feast of the Maternity of the Virgin Mary. That feast was commemorated in the regions under the Venetian Dominions on the second Sunday of October. Could not all this have had some bearing in preparing the soul of Fr. Bertoni for the visits of the Lord?

It seems that one should read this day's entry on one's knees! What can we say? Fr. Gaspar found himself taken over by a very special state of grace. Let us note first that opening of his mind and heart. This prompted these outbursts of his spirit toward God. Such a desire and impulse reached Him. Then, on the apparent threshold of ecstasy, in order not to fall into vanity in front of the public, he made an effort to think of his very serious sins. This reminds us of what St. Teresa of Avila used to say to her nuns:

... Let us be on guard when we are taken by these great impulses of such desires, not to add anything nor to increase them. We have to cut the thread gently with some other consideration...¹

However, it seems as though Grace took firm hold of Fr. Gaspar, even after the ecstasy. He was given a certain consciousness of the Divine Goodness. He experienced gentle tears, and an increase in virtues. He was being granted literally what he prayed for in that familiar Ignatian prayer written for his own private use: *Give me humility and loving reverence!* (cf. 12 July 1808). What can be said about his remembrance of his First Holy Communion day? ... The sway of grace in his soul seems to go back a long time in his life.

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10th OCTOBER 1808

[60.] *Tears during Mass, followed by recollection. And silence.*

¹ St. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, c. 19.

A very short note. It is however sufficient to make us aware that Fr. Gaspar was still enveloped in the same atmosphere of the day before. He experience those same sweet tears during Mass. The same recollection after Mass. And then: silence! Is this not his keeping an ear open to the most gentle whispering of our Creator²? Or is this not a certain whispering that is already in progress? On this day, this, too, is *the secret of the King*.

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11th OCTOBER 1808

[61.] *Clarity of mind during study. Affection in praying the Rosary.*

Here he mentions what seems to be the usual study required of a priest and the daily recitation of the third part of the Holy Rosary. These activities, however, must have been made so delectable by God with some spiritual gifts that Fr. Gaspar wanted to record them with a special remembrance in his Journal, as a sign of gratefulness. These too could be presumed to be gifts of extraordinary nature.

Our hope is that God would grant us such dispositions of spirit to be worthy of receiving similar enlightenment in our studies and similar increase in affection towards the Mother of God during our daily Rosary! And surely Fr. Gaspar would share with us some of his deeply humble spirit of gratitude!

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[62.] *When in a Religious Community each member does not apply himself deliberately to his specific perfection, that Community cannot make progress. And even if it does go on, it will be without spirit and only as languishing.*

A Community is nothing more than the sum total of all its members. If the members lack zeal, and are languishing, and if *operari sequitur esse* (action follows from being), what other result could a Community expect? And how can this Community progress if not languishing?

This thought seems to have been derived from St. Teresa of Avila:

... Believe me: the point is not to wear the religious habit or not, but rather in seeing to it that we exercise ourselves in virtues and in subjecting all our will to the will of God. The harmony and order of our lives should be that which His Divine

² *Epistolario*, l.c., p. 68.

Majesty will order and decide upon. We do not want that our will be done, but his...³

Whether he was aware of it or not, this principle in Fr. Bertoni was a decisive step towards his role as *Founder*. This entry can be connected with the visit to the altar of St. Ignatius, together with earlier reflections and some which will follow.

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12th OCTOBER 1808

[63.] *Whoever is drawn by the Spirit to a way of greater perfection - as it is that of being totally abandoned to God, - should not resent others who are of lower virtue and use lesser means [for their perfection], which are also good.*

For Fr. Bertoni, *abandonment in God* could have been a loving exercise of virtue, even before it appeared to him as a peculiar method of life initiated by a particular vocation. It seems that such *calling* dawned on him gradually during the first years of his Priesthood. Together with Fr Matthew Farinati, he read the life of St Cajetan Thiene⁴, the Saint of Divine Providence. It became confirmed more and more decisively as St. Gaspar studied personally St. Ignatius of Loyola in the often quoted book of Fr. Antonio Francis Mariani:

“Fr. Bertoni was deeply impressed when he read that Ignatius, after getting rid of everything, ‘found that he still had 5 or 6 coins’. He then left them on the shore, before boarding the ship to Jerusalem. Ignatius’ only provision for the journey was his confidence in God⁵.”

As the biography goes on, Ignatius found himself in prison. But because the saints find their God everywhere, they accept any place where He puts them... It was God's cause, and he left it to God to defend it...⁶

Later Fr. Bertoni accepted, on the authority of Ignatius, the following teaching:

... While we are walking before the Lord with a loyal heart, we can happen to experience something opposite to what we have desired with all our good intention. It is in situations like these that we must understand to rely on the

³ St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, Third Mansion.

⁴ Fr. Stofella notes here that there remains a manuscript with comments on Saint Cajetan, almost all in the hand-writing of Fr. Farinati.

⁵ Fr. A.F. Mariani, SJ, *Life of St. Ignatius*, Book I, c. 9, p. 51

⁶ *ib.*, c. 13, p. 83.

Fatherly Providence of God. We are sure that, as St Paul said, for those who love God all things work for good...⁷

He found also in this same source that:

... Ignatius could admirably harmonize the finest prudence and accurate diligence with a total abandonment of himself to God. After having organized everything accurately, he considered himself as a useless servant. In his total abandonment to God he expected the happy outcome of the endeavor from Him alone... In all that he did, he never lost sight of God...⁸

In our commentary above, regarding St. Gaspar's first entry in his diary, dated 1 July, we saw a confession of Ignatius. He deeply hoped that *the men of the Company (of Jesus) entrust themselves to their Superiors,... as he himself relied on the hands of God with full resignation of heart and indifference.*⁹ In the text, *resignation* means *entire abandonment*. We see a similar expression in *Imitation of Christ: ... about pure and entire resignation of self... Son, let yourself go, and you will find Myself...*¹⁰

We have not yet quoted the Ignatian text from which flows easily all the logic of *Holy Abandonment*. Fr Bertoni transcribed it *verbatim* from the 4th book of Mariani, not in this body of extracts which we have been presenting here, but in many other circumstances. It flowed from his pen naturally, as it were! In this *Journal* he first noted it on 18 May 1811. He must have had it on his lips, since the beginning of his work as a counselor of souls. This is the cornerstone of his own Spirituality (if we may use this term). Here it is:

***Very few are those persons who understand what God would like to do of them, if He were not hindered by them in His designs.*¹¹**

The only modification introduced by Fr. Bertoni was a plural instead of a singular, i.e. *His designs* instead of *His design*. We shall examine this later on, in comparison with the entire text from the Jesuit, Fr. Bartoli.

As regards that *should not resent... if others use lesser means, which are also good*, this thought comes from the spirit which filtered through the meditation on the *Kingdom of Christ*. The point is that there is a wide variety of Vocations of the many called to militate under His Banner. Hence the conclusion: *Each one is striving*

⁷ ib., c. 15, p. 99.

⁸ ib., Book 3, c. 3, p. 204.

⁹ ib, Book 6, c. 12, p. 435

¹⁰ *Imitation of Christ*, Book 3, c. 37.

¹¹ Mariani, o.c., c.11, p. 417.

*to imitate Our Lord Jesus Christ most perfectly, according to the state chosen by each one.*¹²

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Now that the new school year has begun in some of the Stigmatine Provinces, let us ponder St. Gaspar's role as Teacher. Let us ponder on the life and lessons of St. Gaspar.

Very sincerely yours,

Fr. Joseph Henchey CSS

[Acting Spiritual Director]

Appendix:

Taught by God – by Fr. Joseph Henchey, CSS.

¹² DaPonte, Part 2, Fundamental Meditation. Following Point 11.