

Servants of God

At our *Consecration Now!* Conference in Rome, May 2011, Father Gruner realized that we had in our midst, Archbishop Bernardini, whose parents' cause for sainthood was in process in Rome. This is an edited transcript of his talk he gave there.



by His Excellency Archbishop Giuseppe Bernardini

My parents are not beatified yet, they are Servants of God. Their cause is now at the Congregation for the Saints, in Rome, after having passed very quickly through the canonical process in their diocese of origin, which is in Modena in northern Italy.

My talk today is unscheduled. It is a surprise. It came about because I had with me a few pictures of my parents, some pamphlets about them. When I showed them to someone, Father Gruner became interested and asked me to speak a few minutes about my parents, who have been presented to the Church for their beatification as a married couple.

They were married in a Christian marriage. They are a model for this time when the Christian family, the family willed and intended by God, is under attack everywhere, an attack aimed to destroy it. My

parents were probably offered as an urgent example to the world, but first of all to Catholics, of course.

There is already the example of the well-known Catholic couple, Mr. and Mrs. Quattrocchi, who have already been declared blessed by the Catholic Church. They belonged to the intellectual upper class. But my parents came from very humble origins. My family was poor, though not miserable. We always had our bread every day, but it was a poor family, and mom and dad had to work hard to feed and clothe us, as well as to give us an education.

My two parents, these two Christians, were born in the mountains in the province of Modena, in two different parishes, one close to the other. They were, in a mysterious way, meant to be together by God Himself and by means of the Cross, as are all the holy works done by God.

My Father's Cross

This was true especially of my dad, who carried a very heavy Cross during his life. Why? Because my dad was young, strong, handsome, jovial and always available to hear the trials of other people.

At 25, he married a local girl, and had three children with her in a short time. What happened? In the short span of four years, the Lord required serious sacrifices from my dad: he lost his father, his mother, his only brother, as well as his wife and all his three children! In four years he was alone, left full of debts by the funerals, and so on. Therefore, he had to emigrate to earn some money so he could pay off his debts.

He emigrated to the United States, in Illinois, to work in the mines. There, he was injured very seriously due to an explosion. After just one year, with the money that the insurance had paid him for the incident, he estimated he had enough to repay his debts, so he returned to Italy.

But he mainly returned because – this is beautiful – he said:

“America is not for me; I feared for my Christian faith, for my Catholic faith.”

My Mother's Cross

And here Providence made him meet my mom.

Even she had her own Cross to bear, although not as heavy as my father's. She was engaged, but her fiancé, a young man from her parish, died quickly from a disease, and so she was alone. My father's uncle then arranged for him and my mom to meet. Before my mom accepted my father, she prayed to Our Lord a good deal, and finally accepted him. She said, “Good Lord, if this is Your will, I'll accept it,” because my dad was a widower, among other things, and widowers usually did not have much chance of finding a new bride, in those days. But she recognized that “he seemed so good to me”, so they began to talk about marriage. Of course, they were talking about a Christian marriage, with the Gospel in their hands, in order to form a Christian family.

You should note one thing: they were two laypersons, without any particular education. I would say that they didn't have any education at all, because in those days, especially in the mountains, schools were very rare. They seldom had a confessor or spiritual director who could

guide them, but they were guided by the Holy Ghost. They found themselves in agreement to form a Christian family, asking the Lord to bless them with many children. My mother, especially, used to say: "Please, Good Lord, many children, and if You like, even religious vocations."

Well her prayer was answered, since they had 10 children, 8 of whom became religious! Six Sisters and the only two sons, my brother and I, both became Capuchin priests. Their prayer was therefore accepted and granted.

In order to raise their family, they obviously had to work hard, but they were driven each day by God's will, and this was always very clear to them. Maybe that was the difference between my parents and many of the other large families at the time (in those days it was not unusual to have many children). Perhaps to my mother and my father God's will was more evident and manifest. They always sought to know the will of God in all things.

It is amazing to see how they let themselves be guided by the Holy Ghost. Even my father, at the time of his personal tragedy, when he re-



**Sister Agatha Bernardini
with her brother,
Archbishop Giuseppe Bernardini.**

mained alone, his reaction to God was, "Thy will be done." This, I think, was the *leitmotif* of his whole life. I have this conviction that my father never made a decision in his life without praying first, without trying first to understand what was the will of God, in order to respect it; and for my mother it was the same.

Time goes by quickly, so instead of telling you the many episodes that happened in their lives, I'd rather read some of their thoughts, because they really express the reality of their spiritual strength.

Keep in mind that these two people were illiterate.

Some of My Father's Spiritual Insights

Dad said, "I never failed

to trust in Providence, even when the children and difficulties grew more and more." As their children grew in number, neighbors used to say to them: "What are you doing? You'll be poor soon!" But here's how my dad used to answer them: "I never failed to trust in Divine Providence." "Lord, I thank You for the gifts we receive every day, and even the trials, and Your help to overcome them all, patiently."

I'm moved as I read these words. Someone who lives an ascetic life may find these thoughts normal, but for an illiterate person it means that he listened to the Holy Ghost and was guided by Him.

My father went on to say:

"In peace with our neighbors, and with a clear conscience, I feel as the lord of the mountain. I have no wealth, but I have Faith."

"The Cross" (it is a wonderful theological thought) "is necessary to temper our pride. It would be worrisome if we didn't have it [our Cross]."

I studied Franciscan spirituality and theology, but I feel inferior to my dad when I read his thoughts.

Charity

"Do a lot of charity and good

for the poor, for the people who are spiritually in need, for the young and the little ones." This is the testament of my dad. This is in a letter he wrote to us priests, his sons, a phrase which I consider to be just as theologically sublime: "For me, the most beautiful prayer is charity."

I do not remember him ever mentioning in vain the name of God and Our Lady, and this is due to his holy inspirations.

With regard to their children's vocations, my dad said: "I never pushed them, but if they want to go on with it, I will not hinder them, for it is a good way. It will be Our Lord who will look after us."

We were missionaries, we traveled abroad. Five of us children devoted our lives as missionaries and went to different nations. There was a time when we were on almost every single continent, one here and one there, except for Africa. So, to make up for that, my mom gave up her pension to help a Nigerian student in Rome, who later became a bishop in Nigeria, and is currently the President of the Episcopal Conference of Nigeria. Africa was therefore "covered" by the children of mom and dad.

"If Our Lord wills, we will meet again here on earth. And if He calls me back home, we will meet again up there [in Heaven]."

Some of My Mother's Spiritual Reflections

These are my mom's thoughts: "All things speak of Our Lord and lead me closer to Him." Let me recall here a small incident that occurred to her. It is very significant to understand her mystical and even poetic mood. One day, I think it was in May, one of my sisters surprised my mother, who was holding a rose in her hand. My mother was caressing and kissing it, thinking she was alone. My sister asked, "What are you doing, mom?" And she, surprised, replied: "I feel like kissing and caressing the beauty of God." It was a nice thought as well.

"My children are my crown and my treasures. Oh, if I could only explain to all the mothers of the world how beautiful such a gift is, what a grace it is to have children and vocations in their own families." Then, while she was suffering, she told us: "Courage, let us go forward. Our Lord has all eternity for us to enjoy." And to us missionaries she used to say: "Have no doubt, I'm

more than happy. Blessed are you, my children, who travel abroad to do good. We are with you and we will help you every day with our prayers."

It truly was a daily prayer because, for a special privilege during the summer when we went on vacation to our father's house (3 km. away from the church), we obtained permission from the bishop to have the Blessed Sacrament in a special room when we were at home. This privilege was later on confirmed, and this chapel still exists in our house. So there was the Blessed Sacrament, and my parents, especially during their retirement when they had more time, spent hours and hours in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, praying for us who were in the missions in different parts of the world.

"I'm so glad that my children are all healthy and beautiful, because I don't want to give anything bad to Our Lord. When Our Lord calls me into His Kingdom, announce my happiness to everyone with the sound of the bells festively ringing." This happened for real! Not that we went to ring the bells of the churches, but that she died on a Saturday afternoon when the parishes

began ringing their bells to call the faithful to evening Mass. Her prayer was answered by God. My mother once said:

“I must thank Our Lord for the many graces He has given to us. I happily live for my dear children, who often ask for Jesus’ help, all the time. Dear Jesus, You gave our children to us. I’ve raised them, but they are Yours, bless them. Dear son, Our Lord Jesus and His Divine Mother and your mother on earth bless you. See you in Heaven.”

These are just some of my parents’ thoughts, which reveal more about them than any episode I could tell you. They were modest, but they were very rich in faith, and this faith they passed on to us.

One last observation. They had eight sons and daughters, all religious, but unfortunately there was someone who thought that dad and mom had sent all their children to college to save on costs, and some wicked people thought that as well, but it is not so. My mother and father tried to have us study at a school where we could earn at least a diploma in teaching. They wanted to give us the culture they were unable to get for themselves during their own lives.

Our parish priest showed them the Pauline Institute of Don Alberione, which accepted poor girls, because then their daughters could work at the printers. It happened that after a year or two, my first two sisters who were there (I had not been born yet) had asked to become nuns. My mother hesitated, saying that they were too young and inexperienced. But my dad said, “Well, the path is good, so if they want to do it, then so be it.” And one by one, all of my sisters became nuns, I became a priest, and my brother as well. You see, for us it was a normal thing, it was the religious environment of our family that made us live within this religious spirit, so it was quite normal for us.

Eight Vocations With No Defection

One last thing: eight vocations, no defection! Note that this was the time after the Second Vatican Council, when it was easy to leave the Order, and unfortunately thousands and thousands of men have given up. But none of us ever wanted to do that, and that was surely thanks to God’s grace, the fruit of the prayers of my mom and dad.

