

REFLECTION FOR THE STIGMATINE LAITY ON FOUNDER'S DAY

June 12, 2015

Fr. Bertoni's Apostolic Mission and the 'New Evangelization'

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Fr. Gaspar Louis Dennis Bertoni, died on this day, June 12, 1853 – so, 162 years ago today, this canonized Saint was born unto eternal life at the age of 76. Juridically for 53 years of his life, he served as a Diocesan Priest, in Verona, Italy. Physically for well over half of his life and for about 80% of his Priesthood, he had been an 'invalid'. For over 30 years in his life, he needed to be bodily lifted into the pulpit where he gave a weekly reflection on the Stigmata, preaching a Friday night service called the 'Steps of the Passion of the Lord' – a text that seems to echo St. Alphonsus Liguori. In one of his letters, he wrote: that he bore the 'stigmata' [metaphorically – as Paul wrote: *We suffer all kinds of afflictions and yet are not overcome* (2 Corinthians 4:8). What Fr. Bertoni experienced was something like Paul's 'brand marks the stigmata in Ga 6:17] in his body, that he was just 'wounded – but, not yet dead!'

Since he remained a Diocesan Priest for all of the 53 years of his ministry, he and the community he founded strove to build deep bonds with the diocesan clergy wherever his service is offered. Pope Pius VI was formerly a Benedictine Abbot, and as Pope, had been imprisoned by Napoleon – on his release he appointed a number of Benedictine Abbots to serve over the European dioceses with the specific intent of Church renewal. In Napoleon's time a good number of the members of the College of Cardinals had sided with Napoleon - and only about one half of them stayed loyal to the Pope. As a result of this terrible division in the Cupola of the Church of Jesus Christ, very bad effects trickled down on the long-suffering faithful.

To stem this 'Low Tide' for the Bark of Peter, the Bishops of Verona gave much emphasis to building up the Diocesan Seminary from within. Fr. Bertoni was appointed Spiritual Director - his first successor, Fr. John Marani, served on the Admissions Board and was an adjunct Teacher there. Fr. Peter Vignola, a later Father General, came to the Stigmatines already an ordained priest of some years. He felt called to the Stigmatines also because he felt they were cooperating so earnestly in renewing his home diocese, which he had already served as the Seminary Rector. Our Fr. Charles Fedelini taught moral theology there for 32 years. In later years, Fr. Richard Tabarelli taught in the Roman Seminary, and was specially blessed by two of his greatest students, Pope Pius XII and Pope John 23rd.

These deep ties with the diocesan clergy led the Stigmatines as time went on to offer a wide variety of service in their Apostolic Mission: parish missions – priests and religious retreats – a committed youth work – in the ideal of striving for a deferential competent service in the assistance of Bishops.

CONCLUSION

While in his own time, Fr. Gaspar was a noted “Preacher” [with a very broad understanding of that term]. In his rule and customs there are many principles that would be familiar to anyone who would ponder today Pope Francis’ challenge in his recent *EVANGELII GAUDIUM* [November 24, 2013 – Christ the King] in our own time with his own ideal of a very varied missionary service of the “Joy of the Gospel”:

- formal preaching; evangelizing; sharing the Gospel message; catechism;
- visits with the sick; the accompaniment of the dying; the bereaved; the imprisoned;
- domestic exhortations of encouragement; counseling spiritual groups;
- familiar and friendly conversation;- the ‘Apostolate of the Pen’ [or e-mail, Twitter, Blogs];
- ‘Evangelical Conversation’;
- small talk;
- informal conversation, leading to deeper reflections;
- sharing the ‘Way of the Cross’;
- a Mission of Encouragement [like the Saint of yesterday - a ministry of *Paraclesis, Paranesis*] - inspired by the Paraclete:

We are on a journey to the Emmaus of our own time – and the Lord asks us all: what do we talk about along our way of life? [Lk 24:17]. Could we express more the “Joy of the Gospel”?

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