

Gaspar Bertoni: Priest of Verona, Founder of the Stigmatines



Painting of the Holy Espousals of Mary and Joseph
at the Stigmatine Sanctuary *Nostra Signora di
Lourdes*, in Verona, Italy.



Painting of Fr. Bertoni's devotion to the Sacred
Heart of Jesus, at the Parish of *San Paolo*, in
Verona [his home parish].

His Devotions and Service of the Church: the Sacred Stigmata of the Lord, the Espousals of Mary and Joseph and the Sacred Heart.

[Extract from Symposium held for the Canonization of the Stigmatine Founder.
October 28, 1989. Rome: Angelicum pp. 143-160]

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The Founder of the Stigmatines¹ made of his life a kind of synthesis of the various devotions to which he was dedicated in his apostolic ministry. His spirituality has been defined as ***A Model of Holy Abandonment***².

1. THE IMMOLATED LAMB, SPOUSE OF THE CHURCH

Even though Fr. Bertoni did not develop very much this symbol taken from the Apocalypse³, the reality is quite present in his writings. In his spiritual life, we can indeed see a realization of a phrase attributed to St. John: ***they will contemplate the One they have pierced***⁴. To understand this spirituality better, it is necessary to reflect on his idea regarding "Devotion", which he took from St. Thomas Aquinas, and the various "devotions" that he practiced and lived throughout his earthly sojourn.

¹ Gaspar Bertoni was born in Verona, Italy, October 9, 1777. He was the father of the youth in a particular way, during the Napoleonic invasions. He instituted parish oratories, established a tuition-free school, and dedicated himself to orienting the young in the Christian way. He founded the Congregation of the Sacred Stigmata of Our Lord Jesus Christ, as Apostolic Missionaries for the assistance [in obsequium] of Bishops, on November 4, 1816, in a small dwelling next to a Church, dedicated to the Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi in Verona. The Congregation is committed to the ***Verbi Dei quodcumque ministerium***, through preaching, the assistance of those in the consecrated life, and to the youth. From the age of 35 until his death at nearly 76, his life was a continuous succession of real painful maladies. He looked on suffering as "the School of God." The Spirituality of Fr. Bertoni can be summarized in a filial and confident abandonment into the hands of God. He died on June 12, 1853. Pope Paul VIth declared him blessed on November 1, 1975. Following the Consistory of March 13, 1989, the date for his Canonization was set for All saints' Day of the same year.

² Nello Dalle Vedove, CSS, *Un modello di santo abbandono. Fisionomia spirituale del ven. Gaspare Bertoni*. Verona: AMB 1951.

³cf. Daniel Ange, *Il sangue dell'agnello guarisce l'universo*. Milano: Ancora 1983, 288 pp.; Ignace de la Potterie, SJ, *Il mistero del cuore trafitto. Fondamenti biblici della spiritualità del Cuore di Gesù*. Bologna: EDB 1988, 183 pp.; Ignazio Bonetti, CSS, *Le fonti della Salvezza*. Salerno: "I Dottrinari" 1984, 215 pp.

⁴ cf. Jn 19:31, ff.; cf. also George Bettan, SJ, *Contempleranno Colui che han trafitto. Ascesi del Sacro Cuore*. Milano: Ancora/Brescia: Cenacolo 1962; Martin L. Smith, *Vatican II on the Wounded Side of Christ in Context and Background*. Roma: Gregorian [doctoral thesis] 1980.

In his sermons as young priest, Fr. Bertoni took up the matter of “Devotion” in an explicit manner⁵. In the course of one of his early parish sermons, he took inspiration from the Liturgical Season of Easter, and stated:

... The beloved Master, Jesus Christ, came among His disciples, to console them, with a real testimony of His glorious resurrection, offering them His peace... [cf. Lk 24:36, ff.]

The purpose for this sermon was one of encouragement, to exhort the listeners of his time to draw closer to their God, in order to serve Him in their state of life with greater perfection. In Fr. Bertoni’s view, one of the best ways to achieve this lay in the development of “a devout life.” Quoting from the Book of Proverbs [15:15], he said that the devout life is much like a perpetual banquet in which one can rejoice with security and peace. He urged the love of God, which is the real service.

Taking an idea from St. Thomas Aquinas, Fr. Bertoni taught⁶:

... true devotion essentially consists in a will of giving oneself to God, and of being dedicated to what pertains the more to His service. Now, while it is true that God calls all to serve Him, and in fact, all can indeed do this - and it is fitting that all should aspire to be sanctified in their particular state - it would be wrong to think that God wishes to be served by all in one and the same manner. There has been established by Divine Providence a difference in the states of life to which all have been called...

It simply would not be genuine devotion if anyone were impeded even only in part, from the duties of one’s state in life. Authentic devotion is a notable help in living the walk of life set for each person.

Such devotion commits the apostle, providing both “wings to fly heavenward, and feet to walk on earth”. For Fr. Bertoni, devotion moves the believer both to be committed continuously to one’s tasks, and yet know how to rest tranquilly with one’s heart set on God. Devotion offers a vision to be most vigilant to the handling and the managing of one’s temporal duties - and all the while retains that outlook that never loses sight of one’s last end. True devotion knows how to converse with other human beings, while never interrupting one’s praise and blessing of the good God. This ideal of “true devotion” is not far from the perspective that the Second Vatican Council offers:

⁵ cf. Gaspare Bertoni, Predica XI: La Divozione”, April 20, 1801, in: *Pagine di Vita Cristiana del ven. Servo di Dio. D. G. Bertoni. Fondatore dei Preti delle S. Stimate di N.S.G.C.* Vicenza: Stocchiero 1947, cf. pp. 200-206 [PVC].

⁶ St. Thomas, *Summa*, II-II, q/ 82, a. 1,c.

... For it is the liturgy through which especially in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, 'the work of our redemption is accomplished', and it is through the liturgy especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.

The Church is essentially both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities, zealous in action and dedicated to contemplation, present in the world, but as a pilgrim, so constituted that in her the human is directed toward and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, the object of our quest [[cf. Heb 13:14.. [SC 2].

In prosperity, true devotion does not stand above the miseries of others; in adversity, it does not give in to sadness, and rejoices in others' happiness as though it were one's own. In devotion, all are invited to offer their hearts as spiritual sacrifices, the **obsequium** of their lives to the mercy of God⁷. An essential part of this resolution is that of serving from now on, for all the days of one's life, that God who so merits our "oblation" [**ossequi**]. Fr. Bertoni thought of the ultimate reason for creation to be that of knowing, loving, praising, serving God, and promoting His glory on earth. All have been "purchased", "redeemed", by the most Precious Blood of His Son, in order to serve God alone and His Church.

A few years later, Fr. Bertoni continued this same theme under another form, preaching on "External Worship"⁸. Pondering the doctrine on Creation - that we are made up of body and soul - and also on the principle of the Incarnation and of the sacramental life, he strongly defended the role of external cult, as an expression of one's interior attitude. According to St. Paul [cf. Rm 12:1, ff.] and also St. Ignatius of Loyola, the believer is called to make an **obsequium**, and oblation of one's life:

... My heart is overwhelmed with consolation, in offering to God a most pleasing sacrifice ... Any external devotion that has been abandoned by the heart, is only a cadaver of devotion: the very soul of devotion is the heart. This only means that God principally, and for Himself, seeks from us the oblation [**obsequium**] of our hearts... God loves us first to bring in harmony with Him, and to order toward Him, our hearts... Our oblations [**ossequii**], our adoration, tend to this

⁷ cf. Rm 12:1, ff.; 1 P 2:5. The Stigmatine Founder described the scope of his Congregation as: **Missionarii Apostolici in obsequium Episcoporum**, indicating thereby the disposition to go anywhere in the diocese and in the world, under the dependence of the local bishops, an openness toward the apostolic ministries of the Word of God, unavailability to the local Church

⁸ cf. Gaspare Bertoni, Predica 36: "Il culto esterno", October 3, 1806, in: PVC pp. 207-215.

goal, that of submitting our spirit to God. In this subjection consists our every good, all our perfection...

Hence, the principal part of the worship of religion is those internal and spiritual acts. The external manifestation of these have their whole reason for existence in beings means ordered toward the internal attitude⁹.

In the Incarnation, God in Christ chose to make Himself visible in the flesh: this was also to make an appeal, through the senses, all the more readily to human nature. He instituted the sacraments under material and sensible signs in order to diffuse His grace and charity into the human heart:

... After the ancient sacrifices had been abrogated, He constituted a new and perpetual sacrifice, one that was also sensible, through the sacramental Species ... He set up a whole law of the spirit and of love, which consists essentially in the grace of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, He commands that the internal affections and motions of the heart should accompany the external offering [*ossequi*] of the tongue, and the even more solemn works of the hand...

By making public one's adoration, the believer manifests externally that God alone merits the oblations [*ossequi*] of human beings¹⁰. Furthermore, there is a great value in the "witness" of a faith that is lived¹¹.

To conclude this sermon on "External Worship", Fr. Bertoni stated:

... Yes... we manifest our religion, we confess our faith, we externalize our devotion. This is the right moment. The glory of our Lord asks this of us; to be of assistance to our neighbor commands this of us; and our own well-being commits us to this...

Throughout his entire life, from his very earliest writings as a young student of rhetoric, right up through the very last letters of his life to his beloved spiritual son, Fr. Louis Bragato - a Stigmatine serving as Confessor to the Empress at the royal court of Vienna - Fr. Bertoni presented Jesus Christ, Spouse of the soul and of the Church, with His Sacred Stigmata.

⁹ cf. St. Thomas, II-II, q. 81, a. 7, c.

¹⁰ cf. Mt 5:16.

¹¹ For Religious: cf. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, Apostolic Exhortation, June 29, 1971; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation, December 8, 1975, n. 68. For the biblical idea of "witness", cf. Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*. Cambridge University Press 1965.

2. THE SACRED STIGMATA AND THE ESPOUSALS

As Vatican II has taught, the Church - a "Second Eve" - is born from the side of the Crucified Christ, "Second Adam":

... The Church - that is, the kingdom of Christ - already present in mystery, grows visibly through the power of God in the world. The origin and growth of the Church are symbolized by the blood and water which flowed **from the open side of the crucified Jesus** [cf. Jn 19:34], and are foretold in the words of the Lord referring to his death on the cross: 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself' [Jn 12:32, Gk] [LG 3].

... For his humanity united with the Person of the Word was the instrument of our reconciliation came forth and the fullness of divine worship was given to us. The wonderful works of God among the people of the Old Testament were but a prelude to the work of Christ Our Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God. He achieved his task principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and glorious ascension, whereby 'dying, he destroyed our death, and rising, restored our life.' For it was **from the side of Christ** as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth 'the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church.' [SC 5].

This theme of Christ, Spouse of the Church, was treated in masterly fashion by Fr. Sebastian Tromp, SJ, as ***De Imaginibus parallelis Imagini Corporis Christi Mystici***¹². More recently, the matter was studied as the "Pierced One", according to the writings of the Fathers, by Fr. Alfredo Carminati, SCJ.¹³

As a young boy, Gaspar had as his teacher, Fr. Joachim Avesani well known professor of rhetoric in Verona at that time, who encouraged his students to express themselves not only in prose, but also in the form of poetry. We learn from one of our Stigmatine historians:

... From the years that he was Fr. Avesani's student, there have come down to us a few scraps of his poetic efforts, that are of great interest to us because of their autobiographical content. In the imagery that was much in vogue at the time, we find young Bertoni writing about: ... 'the gentle voice of a chaste Spouse...'.

¹² cf. Sebastian Tromp, SJ, *Corpus Christi quod est Ecclesia*. Roma Gregoriana 1946. Vol. I. Introductio Generalis. Sectio Altera, Caput Primum - pp. 26-52. cf. also Odo Casel, *Il Mistero della Chiesa*. Roma: Città Nuova 1965.

¹³ cf. Alfredo Carminati, SCJ, *E' venuto nell'acqua e nel sangue. Riflessione biblico-patristica*. Bologna: EDB 1979, especially pp. 89, ff; cf. also Edward Malatesta, SJ, "Blood and Water from the Pierced Side of Christ", in: *Segni e sacramenti nel Vangelo di Giovanni. Sacramentum* 3. Studia Anselmiana 66. Roma: Anselmiana 1977, pp. 165-182 with bibliography.

Young Gaspar seems to be alluding to a kind of extraordinary experience of his First Communion, that he calls 'a loving wound'... He languishes from an untreatable wound ... and no one could heal him of this other than the One Who had wounded him' [cf. Ps 41:4; 38:3; Rm 12:5]... See that today, there follows the triumph of love, that sufficed to medicate my wound...¹⁴

a. His Devotion to the Holy Spouses, Mary and Joseph:

Another of the great historians of the Stigmatine family, Fr. Joseph Stofella, during the first Marian Year of 1954, wrote:

... Why would Fr. Bertoni decide that his community should have for its heavenly Patrons, Mary most holy, and St. Joseph, and that he proposed them precisely under the Mystery of their Espousals? There will be those who might indeed smile when they hear that under this mystery of the Espousals the Founder wanted precisely to seek out and find their heavenly Patronage for a religious Congregation of priests, apostolic missionaries...¹⁵

Fr. Stofella responded, citing St. Thomas¹⁶ :

... among the various arguments of convenience why Christ should be born of a married Virgin, there is also the following: 'So that by this there would also be implied the universal Church: while the Church is a virgin, she is espoused to one man, Christ ' [cf. St. Augustine, *De Virginitate* , c. 12. In this, there is contained in a nutshell also the nuptial theme of the soul with God...¹⁷

Fr. Stofella went on to say:

... The Mystery of this virginal Espousals was embraced by Fr. Bertoni, not partially, nor as a simple addition to some other mystery. Rather, he chose it precisely for itself, and as it is, in all its doctrinal, devotional and practical integrity. There is also the further reason that in this he could contemplate the example - that is beyond all comparison - the example that is the most perfect of what constitutes the very core of his own spirituality: **the spirit of holy abandonment**... The Holy Espousals is the most fitting devotion to draw

¹⁴ cf. Nello Dalle Vedove, CSS, *La giovinezza del ven. Gaspare Bertoni e l'ambiente veronese dell'ultimo '700*. Roma: Postulazione Stigmatini 1971, pp. 249-255.

¹⁵cf. P. Giuseppe Stofella, CSS, "Il culto e la Devozione dello Sposalizio di Maria Vergine nei primi Padri delle Stimate", in *Collectanea Stigmatina. Colezione di documenti e di studi riservati agli Stigmatini*. Roma: Curia Generalizia Stigmatini, Vol. I, fasc. III, pp. 357, ff. [CS I].

¹⁶ cf. III, q. 29.

¹⁷cf. Stofella, "Lo Sposalizio...", o.c., p. 358.

believers to a total union with Him. This mystery is the most attractive and eloquent example of a total service of God¹⁸.

In one of his most extraordinary letters, the Founder of the Stigmatines offers a sublime description of the Church, and of her “First Rock”, as a **Model of Holy Abandonment**. In this ideal of his, Fr. Bertoni surely was much inspired and strongly drawn by the heroic example of His Holiness, Pope Pius VIIth, in the sufferings inflicted on him with his arrest and deportation by Napoleon. This is Fr. Bertoni’s description:

... This is how the matter proceeds, as St. Gregory states, that when one does see clearly, he should take the first step - waiting, then, to take the second step only when there is more clarity [cf. In Primum Librum Regum].

The hope that the Lord gives, the attestation of His Charity, in brief, his consolation:

- if it is concerning those areas of our activity that we are still in the dark, these keep us firm while waiting for greater clarity, before getting on with the task;

whereas, if it is clear, these animate the carrying out of the responsibility.

This seems to be the practice of His Spouse, which is the Church. As she has been assured by the divine promise of the assistance of the Holy Spirit, she never gives up seeking light for her activity, either in the defense of the Truth entrusted to her, or in matters of Discipline. And when she does see her way clearly, she never holds back on her activity, or on her study and consultation, so that she might proceed further in the light and in her task.

And in both of these manners, her abandonment in God is always uniform. Thus, unless I am mistaken, is the perfect model of our abandonment in the Lord.

To abandon oneself to the omnipotent power of Divine Providence is a beautiful virtue, when we are not able to act on our own - but, it is even a more perfect and consummate virtue when indeed we can act, and - according to the order established by Providence - we should act with our own strength, and yet never cease from being equally and totally abandoned to His power...

¹⁸cf. G. Stofella, ib., pp. 361, ff.

This is what the author of these words seems to have done: 'I live' [and consequently, 'I work'] no longer I, but Christ lives [and consequently, 'works'] in me' [cf. Ga 2:20]¹⁹.

A few days later, Fr. Bertoni added this paragraph:

... Once one has listened to the counsels of right and healthy reason, there is no further impediment that in writing [your Rule], you submit the slender flame of human reason to the most clear Sun of Divine Wisdom. Then, the finished product results as though we had done nothing, but recognize every inspiration as coming from that source, where, truthfully, it is derived, either immediately, or indirectly.

This is the manner of conduct in taking care of very serious matters, practiced by that great Servant of the Lord, St. Ignatius Loyola - and before our very eyes, the Servant of God, Pius the Seventh, His Vicar, and our Father and Teacher...²⁰

b. His Devotion to the Five Wounds, the Sacred Stigmata:

Fr. Bertoni had written to His Holiness, Pope Gregory the XVIth, during the year 1844. This is part of his letter:

Most Blessed Father:

The superior of the congregation of secular priests, living at the Church of the Stigmata of St. Francis in Verona, prostrate at the feet of Your Holiness, manifests what follows with sentiments of the most profound humility;

In the above-mentioned Church, every Friday of the year, following the suggestion and encouragement of the local Ordinary, towards evening there has been held since 1822, a Pious Exercise which follows this pattern:

First, there are sung the so-called 'Steps of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Then, for about one half hour, there is given an instruction that has for its purpose that of promoting Christian virtue, but especially the veneration and devotion towards our Crucified Lord; there immediately follows the adoration of the Five Wounds, which consists in some appropriate prayers.

¹⁹ cf. Gaspare Bertoni, Lettera 39, October 16, 1813, in: *Epistolario del ven. Servo di Dio, D. Gaspare Bertoni, Fondatore dei Preti delle SS. Stimate di N.S.G.C.* Verona: Scuola Tipografica Missioni Padri Stigmatini 194, pp. 99, ff. [Ep].

²⁰ o.c., p. 100.

Although the Holy See has already granted some Indulgences to the Faithful who take part in these prayers, nevertheless, the following petition is forwarded. Our purpose is so that the piety of the faithful towards the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ [which in our experience seems unfortunately to be waning more with each passing day] might be intensified, and also that the number of the faithful might be increased.

The under-signed, therefore, beseeches Your Holiness to grant the faithful of both sexes, provided they are sorry for their sins, go to confession and receive Holy Communion, and who take part in this pious exercise, and that they pray devoutly for a certain length of time, that the following might be granted:

- that on the First Friday of every month, and on the Friday after the Third Sunday of Lent - i.e., on the Feast of the Five Wounds that these be venerated with such worship -
- that all might gain the Plenary Indulgence and remission of all their sins; and that on all other Fridays of the year - provided that they at least have taken part in adoration of the Five Sacred Wounds, following the discourse - that they might gain an Indulgence of seven years, and as many quarantines.

The under-signed petitions that all these indulgences be applicable to the Souls of the Faithful who have left this world in charity and in the grace of God²¹.

As with the devotion to the Espousals, there is also a tradition that would associate Devotion to the Five Wounds with abandonment. The Dominican mystic, Johann Tauler [1300-1361] offers a number of thought-provoking themes:

... Abandonment in Jesus' own poverty and wounds - The reaching of genuine love through the wounds of Jesus - An exercise to reach the divinity through the five wounds of Christ...²²

As a kind of recurring theme, or 'leitmotif', there may be discerned in the writings of Fr. Bertoni [from his early boy-hood efforts at poetry, until the final letters prior to his death], a genuine fascination for the Sacred Stigmata of the Lord. To present this theme, we will follow a kind of chronological order of his writings that have come down to us:

²¹ o.c., pp. 345, ff.

²²cf. Giovanni Tauler, *Opere*. Alba: Paoline 1977, Lettere, pp. 805, ff.

1.] His Parish Sermons [June 1800--December 1807]:

a.] Good Friday [April 3, 1801]: this sermon was repeated on Good Friday, five years later, April 4, 1806²³. On this occasion, the young preacher was living his first Lent as a priest. Quoting from Aristotle, he stated that in order to excite the compassion of others, it is required that the object worthy of pity be near at hand. In this way, he indicated his intention to bring Christ's Passion close to his listeners:

... [O Jesus]... show all who look to you those cruel wounds that the nails earlier made in Your hands and feet... Show that place where Your head reclined, as You expired, being for them a loving Father, even a faithful friend, a very tender brother, a most gentle, most amiable Spouse ... What a blow to the Heart of Jesus must have been [the pact that Judas made]! Does not this move you to compassion toward One Who s so good, so kind, so lovable - and so ungratefully betrayed?

... Just look at Jesus now - the Strong One, rather the Invincible. By His own free choice, in order to make satisfaction for our faults, He subjects Himself as a man to sustain the weight of these afflictions that we, too, experience: and how much more did He not experience them, because of the greater knowledge of His mind, and the greater sensitivity of His heart - He was far more disposed to feel these...

... The shame He felt pierced Him more vividly than did all the wounds and all that pierced His body...He is one great bruise, all one wound! ... The nails press deeply into His hands and feet ... What an even more bitter wound for His loving heart not only to see His death so ardently brought about, but to hear right up to the moment of death the terrible insults from the very persons He had come to save! What a deep wound in that Heart already saddened and wounded by the sins of all and those that will be committed until the end! In His heart that suffered for all sins in general and those of each in particular ... A literal flood of suffering flowing forth and raining down on every part of His body and soul, that overwhelms His heart ...

... Yet, His enemies even lash out against His dead body. They open with a lance on His right side a large wound that goes through His heart and out the other side ... Would that His bloody body be given to us so that we might make reparation with the fitting **oblation** [*ossequio*] of our tears for the most atrocious injury inflicted upon Him by all that cruelty... You are alone now to

²³cf. PVC, pp. 270, ff.; cf. also *Manoscritti Bertoni* [5 Volumes, cited as *Mss B*,] Vol . I ## 425-498.I

offer compassion for this Innocent One Who has been betrayed, this Just Man who has been condemned, this Crucified Love ... Look at this body, so lacerated with so many wounds ... Look at ... these hands, these feet, how wounded: this side that is so open, console Your Heart that has been so pierced ... They will now come to kiss Your Wounds...!

b.] The First Sunday after Easter [In Albis] April 5, 1807²⁴: in this Sermon on “The Spiritual Life”, Fr. Bertoni emphasizes the life of glory, in the hope of which we glory. Citing St. Paul [cf. Col 3:1-3], he invites his listeners to rise up with Christ to taste the heavenly realities.

He directs his Sermon to those who would rise up from earlier fear and contrition, to confidence in divine mercy - to those who have experienced a holy and devout exaltation, and come to the vibrant spiritual joy in the Holy Spirit. In this discourse, the preacher developed St. Paul’s baptismal theology: having been buried with Christ, let us walk now in the newness of life. In proposing the future resurrection, St. Paul asks of us another resurrection: that is, a new orientation of this present life by a change of habits. All are called to this life of glory:

... In the harsh winter, even the ever-greens might seem dry to the sight. As the summer approaches, the living roots push forth leafy branches and the trees become heavy with fruit. Such is our life that is so like the winter when our sun, which is Christ, us further from us and remains hidden from sight behind clouds. We are like dry plants left outside without leaves, without honor, without appearance, or any resplendent beauty. Deep within, however, there is the living root, which is charity in God, deep within the vital earth, strong and alive. We will come to life again, the leaves will sprout and the fruit will appear - these are the glorious traits of beatitude, both for the spirit no less than for the body... We have all been invited to heaven ... There Christ awaits you, and is preparing a place for you - rather, a throne...

One very interesting phrase in this Sermon of the Stigmatine Founder is taken from Cornelius a’ Lapidè:

... If you wish to find me, look for me in the Wound in the side of Christ. There I will stay, and there it will be easy to find me. Elsewhere, you will search in vain...

There can be noted in these early Parish Sermons of the young Veronese priest a particular interest for the Wounds of Jesus Christ, Spouse of the Church - and a certain fascination for the open side of Christ. It is there that he must be sought!

²⁴cf. PVC, pp. 289, ff.; cf. also **Mss B** Vol. I ## 1323-1364.

2.] A Retreat preached to young Priests, Confessors [September 1810]: in these days, perhaps from the 13th - 22nd of the month, young Fr. Bertoni was the Spiritual Father of the Diocesan Seminary of Verona. In this Retreat, he was preaching the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. For the second Meditation for the Eighth Day, Fr. Bertoni spoke about the Passion of Jesus Christ - and on the following morning, he presented the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus.

a.] The Passion: Fr. Bertoni pondered on the Garden scene, where Christ enters with His disciples. In the course of this Meditation, he took inspiration from a number of citations from the Song of Songs:

... The New Adam enters the garden of agony, to make up for the former Adam and what he ruined in the garden of delights. He comes to pick not a sweet fruit, but one that is most bitter... 'Come into the Garden, my Spouse...' [cf. Ct 5:1]... 'where your mother had been corrupted and the one who gave you life, violated...' [Ct 8:5]. Here the Church has begun to be restored and washed in the sweat of the blood of the Son of God...' If Christ has sweat blood for my sins, 'it is only right that I should at least shed tears ... Draw me after You!' [cf. Ct 1:3]....²⁵

b.] The Resurrection and Ascension to Heaven: for the second Prelude, Fr. Bertoni offers this:

... Imagine that you see Him, as He appeared to some of His disciples, so full of life, and with the scars of His Wounds, inviting you, too, to heaven, to which He is now going: 'I go to prepare a place for you...' [cf. Jn 14:2]²⁶.

In the course of this Meditation, the preacher considers Christ's Resurrection as the model of our sanctification [cf. Rm 4:25]:

... For Christ, it was a victory ... The glorious life, is a new life: to be transformed into that... is achieved by a profound change. 'When Christ was raised from the dead, we might live a new life...' [cf. Rm 6:4]... Christ has entered with the signs of His wounds: 'this is the price,' He says, 'with which I bought this Kingdom. It cannot be had for anything less...' ²⁷.

²⁵ cf. *Mss B*, vol. II, # 1613.

²⁶ cf. ib., # 2632.

²⁷ cf. ib., ## 2635; 2637; 2647.

3.] Three “Franciscan” Panegyrics: on two separate occasions - once in 1808, for the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, on October 4th; and then again, some 31 years later, for the Canonization of St. Veronica Giuliani, Fr. Bertoni was invited to deliver the Panegyrics:

a.] St. Francis of Assisi [October 4, 1808]:

... On October 4, 1808, for the second time, the Feast of St. Francis was solemnized in the Church of St. Firmus Major [Verona] without the presence of any of his sons. The Conventual Friars, who had officiated in the Church since the year 1260, had been sent away by government decree... As we review now these writings of Fr. Bertoni, the distinct impression is had that he actually prepared two sermons for this day: one most likely that he would have delivered in the morning at Mass, and the other for the evening services. What has come down to us as the ‘rough draft’ would really be two complete and distinct panegyrics...²⁸

[1] First [Morning - ?] Reflection: perhaps delivered on the morning of the Feast²⁹, he offers a commentary on a text from St. Matthew [cf. 16:24]: ‘... let him deny himself... take up his cross ... and follow Me.’ We are all called to imitate Christ in His suffering and ignominy: ‘with Christ I am nailed to the Cross’ [cf. Ga 2:19]. St. Francis manifested a great love for the crucified Christ, and an intense desire to imitate Him. The formula is simply this: to imitate Christ on earth in order to possess Him for all eternity: ‘For I bear the Stigmata of the Lord Jesus in my body...’ [cf. Ga 6:17, Vulgate]. St. Francis was inserted, planted in the Tree of Life to draw from it its sap, life from the tree. The four effects of this con-crucifixion are: union, mutual inherence, assiduous and loving contemplation, ecstasy. Having become almost a single person with Christ” ‘I live, no longer my own life...’ [cf. Ga 2:20], St. Francis is assimilated to his crucified love. In com-passion, in the Stigmata, there he found his every joy.

Perfection consists in conformity with Christ - it is born in charity, and is perfected in charity: it consists in the imitation of Christ. Charity which is nourished, grows up, and becomes adult, transforms one into Christ. In the three degrees of patience: to endure patiently, freely, joyfully - may be discerned three levels of charity: that of necessity, of supererogation and that of plenitude. The sacred

²⁸cf. Nello Dalle Vedove, *CSS, Vita e pensiero del Beato Gaspare Bertoni agli albori dell’800 veronese [1800-1816]* . Roma: Postulazione Stigmatini 1975, pp. 645,ff.

²⁹ cf. Gaspare Bertoni, *Panegirico di S. Francesco d’Assisi.*, in *S. Fermo Maggiore, 4 ottobre 1808. Verona.* in: *Mss B* Vol. II, ## 1783-1844.

Stigmata in Francis are the testimony of a consummate imitation and evangelical perfection.

[2] **Second [Evening - ?] Reflection:**³⁰ here the Stigmatine Founder develops even more his characteristic sense of “progress” in the imitation of Christ. To speak of St. Francis of Assisi is to speak of the most ardent spirit, on fire with love for the crucified Christ. In this long “journey”, there is definite progress:

Let him deny himself	Penance	Principles
Take up his Cross	the Cross	Progress
1st Cross: persecution		
2nd Cross: temptation		
3rd Cross: mortification		
And follow Me	Love	Consummation

This “progress” in the ***sequela Christi*** is based on the living of this text: “With Christ, I am nailed to the Cross”: engrafted, implanted in the Tree of the Cross, this produces a variety of effects:

- union: one with the Crucified Christ;
- mutual inherence [cf. Ct 1:12];
- assiduous thought: loving contemplation
- ecstasy

For Fr. Bertoni, St. Francis was a living image of the Crucified, with the Five Wounds of the Savior, almost totally transformed into Christ. The ***sequela Christi*** manifests various aspects of this progress that is so characteristic to Fr. Bertoni: not only to be near, but along-side; not only close, but in union - not only united, but transformed: do not look for Christ’s gifts, but for Christ Himself: this is the plan. In this sense, Fr. Bertoni offers an extraordinary **nuptial, Espousals Principle** for the following of Christ:

³⁰cf. Gaspare Bertoni, *Testo completo del Panegirico di S. Francesco*, in: **Mss B** Vol. II, ## 1844-1874.

... There are very many who follow Christ for the temporal reward: but the mercenary, when he reaches the door, is paid, and remains excluded from the house: 'You have received your reward:' [cf. Mt 6:2].

Many follow Christ as slaves, out of fear: they do follow, but at a distance, and remaining distant, they do not share in their master's secrets. 'The servant does not know his master's business.' [cf. Jn 15:15].

Some follow Christ as children, from a somewhat selfish love for their inheritance: but such children are more loved than loving: they even come to the point of disdaining their father, should he command something that goes against their grain, even though he makes reasonable requests, and imposes demands on them for their own good, but they may be difficult. 'I reared sons, I brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.' [cf. Is 1:2].

Few follow Christ as friends, in that they base their love on the sharing of His goods; but should these cease for reasons hidden to them, but always under the direction of a just Providence, and their sweet influence is lost, and there is substituted a rather harsh sharing in the difficulties of the friend: 'Then all the disciples deserted Him and ran away' [cf. Mt 26:56]: these were the very ones who had been declared 'friends' by Christ. 'All the rest seem more interested in themselves than in Jesus Christ.' [cf. Ph 2:21].

But, only very few follow Christ as lovers, who in the youthful ardor of their love follow Christ wherever He may go, whether to Tabor, or even to Calvary. Drawn by the sweet odor of His perfume, by the internal consolations and inspirations, they even run after Him. However, they are not able to keep up to His pace, nor can they maintain His speed. He proceeds not by steps, but by giant-steps, in running along His way. 'walking deliberately in your footsteps...' [cf. Ps 18:6, Vulg.]

However, only the spouse, the adult in the school of love, is not attracted by the sweet-smelling perfume, but the strong right hand of the Spouse: '**Draw me!**' [cf. Ct 1:3]: firmly holding on and finding support in His strength, she proceeds apace, and with Him she not only runs, but floes. 'His left arm is under my head and his right embraces me.' [cf. Ct 8:5, Vulg.].

The whole purpose of this *sequela* as lived by St. Francis, is to become one with Christ, almost a single spirit with Him - so that one might indeed come to the point of being able to say: 'I live, now not with my own life, but with the life of Christ who lives in me' [cf. Ga 2:20] - not 'with' Christ, but rather "'in' Christ: disdained, poor, wounded as Christ: **DRAW ME!** [cf. Ct 1:3].

b.] The Canonization of St. Veronica Giuliani [1839]: a certain honor came to Fr. Bertoni on the occasion of the joyful re-discovery of the body of St. Zeno, Patron Saint of Verona, in the crypt of the grand basilica dedicated to him, that took place on March 22, 1838. Grandiose celebrations were organized, beginning with the First Vespers of August 17, 1839, that would go on for a week: seven solemn days, with seven different invited orators. The day assigned to Fr. Bertoni was August 18th³¹. This honor was to be for him a kind of ***Nunc Dimittis***, or final such invitation that he was able to accept. It was in fact, for him, his last such contribution. Later in that same year, he was invited to give the panegyric in honor of the Canonization of St. Veronica Giuliani, and had the discourse all ready³². From his papers that have come down to us, the actual delivery of this solemn preaching effort fell to his first disciple, Fr. John Mary Marani³³.

St. Veronica Giuliani, a Capuchin contemplative, was born December 17, 1660, and died on July 9, 1727; she was declared “Blessed” in 1804, and “Saint” in 1839. Even in our own time, this saint extends a strong appeal³⁴.

Following the Capuchin sources, Fr. Bertoni presented the saint’s biography, and then her spirituality. Her dying mother recommended her five surviving daughters to the Five Wounds of the Crucified: to Veronica was assigned the Wound in the side. The Saint is reported to have heard the words: “My Spouse, the Cross awaits you!” Among her singular gifts, her biographers note the following:

- the impression of the Cross on her heart;
- the wound in her heart;
- the stigmata, together with the formal nuptials with Jesus Christ;
- the saint is presented as the Spouse of the Crucified God.

³¹ cf. Gaspare Bertoni, *Orazione in lode del s. Martire Zenone, Ottavo Vescovo e principale Patrono della r. Citta’ di Verona, recitata nella sua Basilica, il giorno XVIII di agosto MDCCCXXXIX, dal sacerdote Gaspare Bertoni*, in: **Mss B** Vol. II [rough draft, ## 1875-2050; Completed Text, ## 2061-2125].

³²cf. Gaspare Bertoni, *Panegirico di S. Veronica Giuliani nella sua solenne canonizzazione recitato nella Chiesa dei RR. PP. Cappucini, in Verona, dal sac. Giovanni Maria Marani, il 29 dicembre 1839*, in: **Mss B**, Vol. II, ## 2126-2172.

³³ cf. P. Giuseppe Stofella, CSS, *Il ven. Gaspare Bertoni. Fondatore dei Preti delle Sacre Stimate di N.S.G.C.* Verona: Scuola Tipografica Stigmatini 1951, pp. 204, ff.

³⁴cf. P. Casimiro Luchetti, OFM, Cap., *Itinerario mistico di S. Veronica Giuliani*. Siena: ed. Cantagalli 1983, 205 pp.; cf. Fr. Giovanni Maria Leonardi, cappuccino, *Santa Veronica Giuliani. Clarissa. Cappuccina*. Mercatello sul Metauro [PS]. Monastero di S Veronica 1983, 62 pp. cf. *Testimianza e messaggio di S. Veronica Giuliani. Atti del Congresso Internazionale di studi su S. Veronica Giuliani*. Roma: Pontificio Ateneo Antonianum, 27-31 ottobre 1982, 2 volumi. Collana Dimensioni Spirituali. Roma: Laurentianum 1983; cf. Lazaro Iriarte, OFM, Cap., “Lo spirito francescano di Santa Veronica Giuliani”, in *Temi di vita francescana*. Roma: Collegio S. Lorenzo da Brindisi 1987, pp. 393-433.

The preacher made every effort to explain these nuptials in some way, and presented them as a most intimate union between the Saint and God, through the living of the most perfect charity:

... With certain extraordinary individuals, it has pleased the Lord to manifest the spiritual nuptials with sensible signs, and with certain formalities that are observed in human marriages, as in the life of St. Catherine of Siena, and a few other saints of the highest sphere. In order to dispose her the more for such an honor, God granted her many graces and visions: of Jesus Christ, who comforted her and stipulated the nuptial pact; of the Virgin Mary, who appeared to her seated on a magnificent throne with St. Catherine and St. Rose, assuring her of her impending nuptials, and showing her the wedding ring, and instructing her on the most sublime virtues. On Holy Saturday, Jesus Christ also appeared to her, informing her of her nuptials on the next day, and showing her also the precious ring ... When the time came for Communion, in which the marriage would be contracted, she was enabled to hear the Angels singing the sweet melody: Come, o Spouse of Christ...!

This ardent sermon then explained that Jesus Christ took the ring out from His own side. The whole experience is but the charity toward which the visions, the ecstasies are ordered, much like the sacraments of the Church, which signify, produce and increase charity. For this saintly Capuchin, the divine espousals were the end result of pure suffering. The wound in the heart gave her such pain that she thought that any moment she would die. Before receiving the stigmata promised by Christ, she was asked what it was she wished most from Him. Her answer was: the fulfillment of Your will!

In all her admiration and her descriptions of these extraordinary phenomena in the lives of St. Francis of Assisi and of St. Veronica Giuliani, Fr. Bertoni always emphasized the perfection of charity, obedience, service, the acceptance of the divine will - all of which can be realized only progressively, in accord with the normal manner of the activity of divine grace. There can be noted in these saints, as Fr. Bertoni presents them, an evident harmony between the Espousals and the Stigmata - with a particular emphasis given perhaps, here and there, to the wound in the side.

3. THE SACRED HEART

Before taking formal possession of the house in Verona next to the Church dedicated to the Stigmata of St. Francis, on November 4, 1816, Fr. Bertoni twice noted in his Spiritual Diary³⁵, mystical experiences associated with the Eucharist:

July [June?] 2, 1808: Feast of the Sacred Heart. At Mass, during the Consecration, the Communion, and all through the time of thanksgiving, there were tears of compunction and affection: especially at Communion, I experienced for an instant the detachment of my spirit from every creature, for the oblation [*ossequio*] to the Creator...

May 30, 1812: Praying before Mass, overtaken by a kind of drowsiness, I heard these words from the Crucifix: 'Look at this, My Heart!'. This expression then effused such light into my intellect, a great and sudden ardor in my heart... The effect was a most tender devotion to the Sacred Heart, and great affections during Holy Mass...

The Paschal Mystery and the Eucharist offer the background for Fr. Bertoni's devotion toward Christ's humanity and toward the Most Holy Trinity. His devotions both developed and expressed his abandonment to the Trinity, and his availability toward the Church.

A few days after the second citation above, Fr. Bertoni preached for the Feast of the Sacred Heart. Among his thoughts, we find the following:

... The humanity of Jesus Christ is not adored separately and for itself; but always as united to the divine Person, and because of this; the Incarnate Word receives with his flesh, a single and identical adoration...

The object of the Feast of the Sacred Heart consists in that wonderful and truly divine union of realities, formed both of that human and wounded heart of Jesus, as well as of His most holy soul, through which His heart lives, and also by the Person of the Divine word... His heart is the symbol and the seat of those sufferings and the anguish endured by that heart...

The prudent and most wise Spouse of Christ, the Church, made ingenious by her love, most ardently yearns to see her Spouse adored and loved and still seeks more universal and appalling means, as well as simpler and more efficacious incentives to bring this about... such as the Infant in the Crib, the dying Christ on His Cross; but also His Blood, His name, His Wounds ... the Cross...

³⁵cf. below, Note # 316; CS IV, pp. 1-205. "Appendice" in: *Lo Spirito del B. Gaspare Bertoni*. Verona: Stimograf 1977, pp. 207-242.

... It has never been the custom of the Church to solemnize with a proper Mass and Office the divine attributes, the interior virtues and abstract perfections of Christ - but, only under some sensible object that would clearly represent these, or some fact evident to the senses, or some mystery that would impress itself the more vividly. For example, the Church does not venerate the patience of Christ without a symbol, or mystery: as Wounds, the Passion, the Cross...

Jesus' love is much better symbolized by His Divine Heart ... The open side, after His death, customarily shows us that Heart, the same Heart wounded by the lance, that wound preserved in His glorious body make of it such an appealing, evident, divine symbol, that it is impossible to venerate the wounded heart without remembering and venerating His immense love... The Abyss of misery calls out to the Abyss of Mercy...³⁶

CONCLUSION

Fr. Bertoni's spiritual journey can be followed rather well, beginning with his early Parish Sermons [1800-1807]; his panegyric in honor of St. Francis of Assisi [in 1808]; the Spiritual Exercises he preached to the priests [in 1810]; his personal Spiritual Diary, called his **Memoriale Privato** [from 1808 - 1813]; his Sermon for the Feast of the sacred Heart [in 1812]. Then follow his Panegyric honoring St. Veronica Giuliani [in 1839], and his **Epistolario** that covers that year from 1812 almost up to his death, June 12, 1853³⁷.

In these letters, there also appears the interest for the Espousals of the Church with Christ, and passing references to the Stigmata. The Founder of the Stigmatines refers to his sufferings as "the School of God"³⁸, and makes use of a terminology that would lead to thinking of the Stigmata suffered by Christ on the Cross, and retained in His glorious body. Throughout his life, Fr. Bertoni suffered various painful and lengthy manifestations of a precarious health, that necessitated many surgical corrections. Here are a few of his passages written to his spiritual daughter, Mother Leopoldina Naudet:

³⁶ cf. Gaspare Bertoni, *Sacro Cuore*.. June 5, 1812, in: **Mss B** Vol. II, ## 1755-1778. For the Italian, cf. Nello Dalle Vedove, CSS, *Vita e pensiero del Beato Gaspare Bertoni agli albori dlel'800 veronese [1800-1816]*. Roma: Postulazione Generale degli Stigmatini 1977, pp. 387, ff.

³⁷This is cited as Ep.

³⁸cf. Nello Dalle Vedove, CSS, *Modello* , o.c., pp. 240, ff.

... I am getting better slowly. In your charity please pray that I might draw some fruit from this school³⁹ that the Lord wants me to attend, that I might be disposed to serve Him...

... It does not seem that my wound⁴⁰ is too bad, if we can trust appearances, that have so many times deceived us...

... It has not begun very well; but, He wants me wounded, not dead. All that matters is that I can serve Him and not abuse His graces, and to carry out that penance that is necessary for me.⁴¹

... My legs are not doing very well; the right one is wounded, a bit swollen, with a certain dull pain, that I would like not to heed. But - His Will be done!⁴²

From such indications of the Stigmatine Founder, the Holy Father, Pope Paul VI, on the day of Fr. Bertoni's solemn Beatification, November 1, 1975, stated:

... his life was a continuous immolation, even to the extreme purification of his illness....

In Fr. Bertoni's mind, physical suffering, offered to God, was a privileged means of realizing his over-all ideal:

... We are to draw in ourselves the portrait of Jesus Christ.⁴³

Of great interest in the "Stigmatine tradition" are the letters to his beloved spiritual son, Fr. Louis Bragato, Confessor to the Empress, Maria Anna Carolina Pia of Savoy, at Vienna. In one of these letters, Fr. Bertoni wrote:

... Your debt is to God alone, Who with His gifts - and for these I thank Him - has made you grow 'in wisdom and in strength and holiness and justice in His presence' [cf. Lk 1:75] - and with these gifts of external honor, He wishes to bestow on you prominence in the sight of men. Only remember always, when you wear any external sign of distinction that God does this for you and your Sovereign, and that 'the greater you are, the more you should behave humbly' [cf. Eccles 3:20]. And if you cannot come back to our little home bodily, be here in spirit, 'in the clefts in the rock' [cf. Ct 2:14], in the Wounds of our most

³⁹ cf. Gaspare Bertoni, Letter 45, June 1, 1814, in: Ep p. 109.

⁴⁰ id., Letter 92, Summer of 1828, in: Ep p. 183.

⁴¹ id., Letter 104, May 15, 1826, in: Ep p. 197.

⁴² id., Letter 130, March 9, 1829, in: Ep p. 225.

⁴³ cf. Gaspare Bertoni, *Memoriale Privato*, Spiritual Diary], February 26, 1809 [cited as MP].

lovable and humble Savior, where I leave you now, embracing you with all my heart...⁴⁴

In these words, there may be found a gentle reminder of the life lived in the House called the “Stimate” in Verona, comparing this to the Savior’s Wounds. An even more explicit reference to the community life with his confreres was offered by the Founder to Fr. Bragato a few years later:

... So, remain joyful; and when you need a bit of rejoicing, fly in your thoughts to Fr. Michael’s small room. If you do not always have the wings ready to fly over the clouds, remain in the bosom of our God, and within the glorious Wounds of your Savior: ‘Seek the things that are above, where Christ is’ [cf. Col 3:1]. Remain there as one of His people, in the beauty of that peace [cf. Is 22:18]: because everything is temporary, and ends soon, but that eternal peace never ends.⁴⁵

The mysticism of Fr. Gaspar Bertoni was a “Mysticism of Ecclesial Service”, expressed through the Pauline [cf. Rm 12:1, ff.] and Ignatian ideal of **obsequium**. The Stigmatine Founder lived a consecration of abandonment toward the Most Holy Trinity, and a total availability toward the Church. His “total service of God” in the fulfillment of the divine will, was expressed in the purpose he proposed for the community he founded: **Apostolic Missionaries for the assistance [**obsequium**] of Bishops.**⁴⁶

His charism is markedly “Trinitarian”, manifested through the Crucified and Risen Person of Jesus Christ, celebrated in the Eucharist, son of Mary. He made of his entire life an offering to the Father in loving obedience, and in service of the Church, the Spouse of Christ. As the Father did not spare His only Son, but offered Him up for all [cf. Rm 8:32] - God so loved the world, that he gave His only begotten Son [cf. Jn 3:16]. This is paralleled in the life of Jesus:

... follow Christ by loving as He loved you, giving Himself up in our place as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God... Husbands should love their wives just as Christ loved the Church and sacrificed Himself for her...this is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the Church... [cf. Ep 5:2, 25, ff.].

⁴⁴ cf. Gaspare Bertoni, Letter 2 to Fr. Bragato, November 18, 1839, in: Ep, pp. 311, ff.

⁴⁵ id, Letter 5 to Fr. Bragato, January 29, 1840, in : Ep pp. 318, ff.

⁴⁶ *Costituzioni del vev. Servo di Dio, D. Gaspare Bertoni, Fondatore dei Preti delle S. Stimate di N.S.G.C.* m June 1950, # 1.

In this sense, Fr. Bertoni understood the Apostolic Mission as an ***obsequium***:

- ... God indeed does merit our oblation [***ossequio***],
- ... We give Him the oblation [***ossequi***] of the tongue, and the more solemn works of our hands...
- ... Give yourself over to God; dedicate yourself to those things that the more pertain to His service: the oblation [***ossequio***] of our hearts.

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