



SOCIETÀ DI SAN FRANCESCO DI SALES

SEDE CENTRALE SALESIANA

Via Marsala, 42 - 00185 Roma

*Il Rettor Maggiore*

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**Letter of the Rector Major, Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, regarding the Venerability of the Servant of God Ignatius Stuchlý, Professed member and Priest of the Society of St Francis de Sales.**

*The Venerable Ignatius Stuchlý, a man “moved by hope”*

My dear Salesian confreres

My dear brothers and sisters of the Salesian Family

On 21 December 2020 the Holy Father, Pope Francis, authorised the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to promulgate the decree regarding the heroic virtues of the Servant of God, Ignatius Stuchlý, a professed member and priest of the society of St Francis de Sales. He was born on 14 December 1869 in Bolesław (today Poland) and died in Lukov (Czech Republic) on 17 January 1953.

This is a further gift for the Church, and especially for the Salesian Congregation and all members of the Salesian Family, confirming the vitality of the charism given by God to Don Bosco and alive over time and history; the Venerability of Ignatius Stuchlý also manifests to us, at a moment of history marked by the Cornoavirus, the testimony of a man and a consecrated individual who knew how to live with hope and Gospel fortitude at in difficult times and situations. As I wrote in this year's *Strenna*: “Hope is a plant with deep roots that began long ago; roots that become stronger through difficult seasons and ways that require much sacrifice.”

Born in Bolesław, in former Prussian Silesia on 14 December 1869, to a farming family, Ignatius had an early and intense experience of faith at school where his teacher, Jan Kolibaj, a great devotee of Our Lady, asked him if he had a priestly vocation. His rather precarious health suddenly improved when a “popular healer” modified his diet: he also prophesised that he would become a priest. The dream would only come true many years later, and not without some difficulties owed to external circumstances and independent of him.

People spoke to Don Bosco about him and, after some ups and downs, in 1894 he was accepted in Turin and accompanied by Fr Michael Rua on his vocation journey. He began his aspirantate at Valsalice. There he got to know the Venerable Fr Andrew Beltrami who would have an impact on his journey of faith and his mission. He began his novitiate at Ivrea in 1895. Just before taking his vows he went through a moment of vocational crisis that he overcame thanks to the fatherly assistance of Fr Rua who encouraged him to immediately make his perpetual profession, which he did on 29 September 1896.



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In 1901 Ignatius Stuchlý was ordained priest by the archbishop of Gorizia, Cardinal Giacomo Missia, and at the end of 1910 he dedicated himself to poor youngsters, distinguishing himself as a sought-after confessor and expert spiritual guide: these were years of great sacrifice, but of great spiritual benefit for vocations. Then he went to Slovenia, between Ljubljana and Verzej, until 1924, dedicating his energies to sustaining Salesian works and to building the magnificent shrine to Mary Help of Christians in Rakovnik, Ljubljana. From 1925 to 1927 he was back in Italy, in Perosa Argentina (Turin), where he was placed in charge of the formation of young men from his own country of origin in order to establish the Salesian Congregation “in the North”, according to the prophetic words spoken to him years earlier by Fr Rua. In 1927 he went back to Fryšták in his own country where he took on roles of governance including Provincial 1935 (Czechoslovakia) giving rise to an extraordinary flourishing of Salesian presence. He had to deal with both the Second world War and the spread of communist totalitarianism: in both cases Salesian works were requisitioned, the confreres conscripted or dispersed, and all of a sudden he saw the work he had dedicated his life to destroyed.

Forty days before the fateful “Night of the Barbarians”, in March 1950, he was stricken with apoplexy. He spent the last three years of his life, first in the rest home in Zlín, then in Lukov, under constant surveillance by the regime and isolated from his confreres. His prophecy that he would die alone was thus fulfilled, but peace and joy, which he radiated in abundance, flourished around his bedside. The lively esteem he had always aroused in his superiors, and his great capacity to love and be loved, flourished more than ever in a reputation for holiness. He died peacefully in the evening of 17 January 1953.

The Venerable Fr Ignatius Stuchlý lived in an era – from 1869 to 1953 – marked by important historical, political and social revolutions. This led him to adapt to ever new contexts, but also to take up and deal with promising challenges in obedience to the Church and the service of the young. In particular:

– while still a young Salesian and not yet a priest, he was sent to Gorizia, where he worked closely with the archbishop, Cardinal Giacomo Missia, and together with other Salesians gave particular attention to events at the “St Aloysius” boarding school intended for priestly vocations in the diocese, and was part of a veritable flourishing of vocations in the Gorizia Archdiocese;

– when he moved to Ljubljana in Slovenia where he contributed with tireless dedication to the establishment of the local Salesian work, succeeding above all in bring the building works for the Shrine to Mary Help of Christians in Rakovnik to a conclusion;

– when he was suddenly recalled to Italy to accompany the vocational journeys of candidates for Salesian religious life for the Czech Republic. He carried out firm and prudent discernment;

– then when he transplanted this work to his own country as both founder and pioneer of the Salesian presence in Bohemia and Moravia in response to the practical needs of the local Church.

Fr Stuchlý, therefore, contributed not only to the expansion of the Salesian Congregation in new lands but indeed to the unity of the Catholic Church, through an intense and widespread work of support, beginning with young people and vocations.





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As founder of the nascent Salesian presence in those lands, then as Provincial of the Czechoslovakian Province (1935) and then of the single Czech Province (1939), Fr Stuchlý also accompanied, between 1925 and 1948 just for Bohemia and Moravia alone, at least 200 new Salesian vocations; he founded houses; he led the work through the drama of the Second world War when all material goods were requisitioned and the confreres dispersed. Fr Stuchlý succeeded in passing on first of all not only “structures” to the Czech confreres, but the living spirit of the Salesian tradition he had experienced in Piedmont, including the particular familiarity he had with Blessed Michael Rua and Salesians of the first generation. It was from them that he learned the true Salesian spirit that would make him, in life, a faithful and authentic interpreter of Don Bosco's charism, capable of transplanting it into very different contexts without betraying its spirit.

Under the impending threat of the Nazi regime and then with the arrival of communist totalitarianism, and then in the final years of his life spent in solitude in a rest home for the elderly, Fr Ignatius Stuchlý continued to testify to this complete fidelity to the Church and the Salesian Congregation, encouraging the younger members and testifying to how no situation of suffering or historical injustice can distance one from complete giving of self to Christ and the service of the Church.

He was born and grew up in a rather poor setting where the faith was above all an expression of a simple popular piety. He then went from Moravia to Italy then back to Salv territories (Slovenia, Bohemia and Moravia, Slovakia). His circumstances of life and the nature of the practical problems he had to tackle seem far removed from today's sensitivities and priorities. It is not, instead his message and especially the spiritual interpretation he learned to give to history. In this respect his relevance lies in certain essential points.

Above all, he bears witness to the totality of a religious and priestly gift of self that grew the more tasks of government were entrusted to him: prefect and vice-rector, bursar, rector, provincial, founder of the Salesian presence... He saw authority as service, obedience as the leaven of unity, and he succeeded in commanding through the authority of his life and radiant evidence of virtue, allowing himself to be guided by the principle that if the superior is the first of all (by his example), then he can ask others to follow him by the driving force of his example.

His arrival in Turin after an arduous vocational search, and his perseverance in his vocation in spite of some difficulties due to his age, his initial lack of cultural preparation and the context of relative poverty from which he came, show how aware he was of the gradual harmonisation between the gifts of nature and grace, and always in obedience to his superiors: the effort and commitment witnessed by Fr Stuchlý in his own journey of vocational discernment, and then his work of discernment of new vocations, including in difficult times, and in a sometimes discouraging context and often with individuals who were in need of prior human and moral growth, make him a very valuable point of reference today in the task of vocational accompaniment and formation.





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The total nature of his dedication to the Salesian cause, through a special appreciation of the virtues of poverty, humility and unswerving obedience, remind us how the “*da mihi animas*” is inextricably linked to the “*caetera tolle*”: today this becomes, for the sons of Don Bosco, an encouragement to rediscover the most authentic roots of this vocation, going back to meditating on the attitudes and basic virtuous habits which sustain it, and anchoring them to the primary goal of sanctifying ourselves in order to sanctify (“*saints for the young*”, but above all “*saints with the young*”).

A young layman, passionate about beautiful things and influential among his peers, then a man on a pilgrimage in search of his vocation, then destined for the missions and finally a “missionary to the North”, responsible “*in rebus materialibus*”; a Salesian who worked in close contact with the laity, knowing how to involve them, and with those who worked closely with him, committing himself together with them to the most humble manual tasks; finally, a man of government who remained simple at heart; then an elderly man who died in exile as a result of being forcibly distanced from his confreres, spied on and persecuted by the communist regime, Fr Stuchlý embodied in his own person the many aspects of the life of a son of Don Bosco, with such completeness of role and integrity of dedication that today he is a valid point of reference for all those - lay or consecrated, within the Salesian Family and in the Church - who wish to look to him.

The ‘joy of the Gospel’ clearly imprinted in the smile he brought to the least and the poor, even to the point of dying, the least among the least, and his life spent in a difficult period entirely for the faith, make him a sure reference point for society and the Church today. And not least but importantly, his accompaniment of the elderly when – himself elderly and sick, shut away in a rest home under the closer surveillance of the regime – he accompanied many of them on the final part of their journey, showing them that life is always worthy of being lived, and can be understood as joyful witness even when strengths have declined.

A man who lived in many geographical, linguistic and cultural circumstances (such as today’s Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Slovenia, Italy, etc.), even in border lands (between the present Czech Republic and Poland, in 19th-century Moravia strongly influenced by German-speaking culture, or in Austro-Hungarian Gorizia at the beginning of the 20th century and then in Ljubljana), the Venerable Ignatius Stuchlý ultimately offered himself as a man of peace, unity and reconciliation between peoples. The sufferings he endured under Nazism and Communism, while engaging him in a wise exercise of prudence, also highlighted in him qualities such as truthfulness against hypocrisy or expediency; the ability to take on responsibilities and roles of government as a form of service and not self-promotion; full and liberating adherence to the truth of the Gospel as an antidote to totalitarian ideologies and a response to the deepest needs of the human heart; the art of empowering young people by guiding them to give their best through trust, against the rampant mentality of control and manipulation.

Even today, the figure of Fr Stuchlý therefore proves invaluable in helping to heal historical and psychological wounds, and in promoting a culture of reconciliation and peace.



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In difficult contexts, and by tackling many challenges with great faith and hope, the new Venerable leaves us a message of great relevance: "Let us work while it is day. When the night comes, the Lord will provide." With this confidence and with this spirit that animated Fr Ignatius Stuchlý, I repeat the invitation I expressed in the *Strenna*: "as educators and people who accompany families, ordinary folk and the people of God in general, I invite you: *let us never lose hope; let us cultivate an outlook on life that is rich in hope*, and never let it die out in our hearts. Let us be lights that invite to hope through the testimony of how we live. Let us pass on happiness in the simple but genuine way we live our faith."

*Rome, 17 January 2021*

*Birthday of the Venerable Ignatius Stuchlý*



*Angel Toledo*  
**Fr. Angel Fernández A., SDB**  
Rector Major