

Giovanni Caputa

SIMON SRUGI  
(1877–1943)  
IN THE HISTORY  
OF BETGAMĀL

*SIMON SRUGI (1877-1943) IN THE HISTORY OF BETGAMĀL*  
Giovanni Caputa

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Cover photo: early years 1930 at Betgamāl in front of the *Martyrium* of St Stephen.  
From left: Fr Spiridiōn Rummān, Bro. Simon Srugi, Fr Yūhanna Nahhās, Bro. George Harūni



Principal places of interest in the life of Simon Sruji 1877–1943



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# Significant Dates

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- 15.04.1877: Sim'ān Sruḡi was born in Nazareth (Palestine) of a Maronite mother and a Greek-Melkite father.
- 10.05.1877: baptised and confirmed in the Greek-Melkite parish, the former synagogue in which Jesus began his public ministry (cf. Lk 4:6-30).
- 1888: taken into the orphanage run by Canon Antonio Belloni in Bethlehem. Apprentice baker, nurse, tailor. Lived with the first Salesians who arrived in Bethlehem in 1891.
- 1892–1896: aspirant and novice at Betgamāl (Ramlah).
- 12.03.1895: met Fr Michael Rua. Exchange of letters between them.
- 31.10.1896, Cremisan: first profession as a Salesian Brother.
- 20.09.1900, Bethlehem: perpetual profession.
- April 1908: second meeting with Fr Michael Rua.
- 1900–1943, spent the rest of his life in the agricultural school and orphanage at Betgamāl: worked in the infirmary, clinic, mill. Teacher of Religion and Arabic in the lower elementary school. Master of ceremonies at solemn liturgical functions.
- 1916, 1917: discovery of the tomb of St Stephen, Protomartyr.
- 1925: copied down Jesus' revelations to Sister Marie-Marta Chambon.
- 1925–27: animator of the “Blessed Sacrament Crusade”.
- 1926–1939: wrote down his Retreat resolutions.
- 1929 and 1934: chosen to represent the Salesian Brothers at the beatification and the canonisation of Don Bosco in Turin and Rome; renounced this in favour of other confreres.
- 1930: began his service in the new clinic, helped by Sister Tersilla Ferrero FMA.
- 1938: forgave and looked after one of the presumed murderers of his Rector, Fr Mario Rosin.
- October-November 1939: fell seriously ill, taken to the “Daughters of Charity” hospital in Bethlehem where he received the last sacraments.
- 24.12.1939: wrote to his sister Zāhra, telling her he was close to and ready for death.
- June 1940: the British imprisoned him together with the Italian and German confreres but once they checked on his Palestinian nationality, they set him free.

- 1943: frequent recurrences of malaria attacks and bronchial pneumonia. Forced to remain inactive in his room.
- 27.11.1943: died early on the Saturday morning. Buried in the crypt of St Stephen's Shrine.
- 1964–66: Informative Process takes place at the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem.
- 1968: Censors from the Congregation for the Causes of Saints approve of his writings.
- 1981–83: Apostolic Process takes place at the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem.
- 02.04.1993: with the decree on the heroic nature of his virtues, approved by Pope John-Paul II, he was recognised as "Venerable".

# Presentation

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The human being was born to remember, and memory is necessary to be able to live fully. Obviously not memory as the simple ability to mentally preserve everything that has happened, but an intelligent and attentive memory, one that can recall and coordinate, grasp the deeper meaning of events and relive them.

The Salesian community at Betgamāl in the Holy Land, with its 129 years of history, is heir to and custodian of so many riches and resources; of highly qualified "lived experiences of holiness", expressions of faith tested in the crucible of difficult political, economic, social, religious and ecclesial situations that the Salesians have had to tackle in the story of this community. But this story runs the risk of being forgotten, and thus also of losing the spiritual wealth that God has given rise to in this land which is the custodian not only of biblical memories but also of Salesian holiness.

Fr Gianni Caputa offers us a real treasure by presenting us with the life of Simon Srugi (1877–1943) in his context, the richest hagiographic presentation to date. Also very interesting are the “windows” that are a clear invitation to explore the richness of the history of the Salesians in the Middle East.

Simon Srugi is a model for the Christians of the Middle East, the “good Samaritan” of our times who teaches us that the presence of Christ’s disciples will be significant only if based on deep faith, if it grows through a serious commitment to communion and is expressed in a simple but constant witness of practical charity. It is significant to see how this saint speaks to us, today’s people: the son of a family of refugees, of a persecuted people, the history of whose family is an intertwining of rites, poverty, orphans, people who found themselves living amidst wars and guerilla skirmishes. He speaks, through his life, to so many Christians who experience similar situations: “*I am one of you*”.

Simon Srugi is a clear invitation to reawaken in the Church the precious vocation of the consecrated lay person. At times today this is a misunderstood vocation, one that could find its original evangelical perspective in figures such as Simon Srugi. The gift of the lay vocation and the gift of consecration come together in a unique movement of love for God and neighbour, and all this in the simplicity and humility that really does speak of the Gospel to today’s world.

Simon Srugi is a model for the Salesians of the Middle East and of the entire world: faith, apostolic zeal for the salvation of souls, especially of abandoned children, a strong devotion to Mary, love for St Francis de Sales and Don Bosco. Although a man of few words, Srugi continues to proclaim, including today: “*Return to the playgrounds, return to encountering the lives of the poor and suffering, return to being signs of God’s love.*”

Thank you, Fr Gianni, for offering us a documented and critical reconstruction that helps us to make a “believing interpretation” of Simon Srugi’s life and the story of the community of Betgamāl. May your book help us to reappropriate the past (convinced that God was at work in it) and thus better understand in the present the identity of Christians, consecrated lay people and members of the Salesian Family today.

**Alejandro León sdb**

Provincial of the Salesians of the Middle East

Cremisan, 24 May 2021

# Foreword

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With the publication of Giovanni Caputa's *Simon Srugi in the History of Betgamāl*, we now have the most extensive and complete biography to date of our beloved confrere Brother Simon Srugi.

Forty years ago, when I was beginning my Salesian life, Zatti and Sandor had not yet been beatified, and Simon Srugi was the best known Salesian Brother. Today, as I go around the Salesian world, I realise that Srugi is no longer known to our younger confreres. Fr Caputa's book, along with his other writings, will go a long way to remedy this unfortunate oblivion. I am convinced that Srugi has something very relevant to say to us at the present moment of history.

First, Srugi is a great *prophet of fraternity*. Within his community of Betgamāl, which lived through extremely difficult moments of tension between local and foreign confreres, Srugi comes across always as the brother and friend of all. He proclaims to us in a heroic way that only One Thing is necessary. He reminds us that nothing is more important than God: not language, not race, not caste, nothing. We are children of God and therefore sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. Srugi lived fraternity in an extraordinary and exceptional way.

Second, Srugi's fraternity extends beyond his community to embrace the people, mostly Muslims, who flocked to him. This is a well known fact, but its full significance must not escape us: in a land where there is usually no love lost between Arab Christians and Muslim, here is Srugi, an Arab Christian, who not only loves his Muslim neighbours but is in turn loved and appreciated by them. Here is a Salesian who knew how to make himself loved, and whose people knew he loved them. In his own simple but unmistakable way, Simon Srugi lived the *universal fraternity* that Pope Francis is pushing so hard. And like his fellow citizen Jesus, he revealed the merciful face of the Father to all, even to those unable to call God Father. Srugi, I am convinced, will take his place along with Christian de Chergé and his fellow monks as a model of dialogue with our Muslim brethren.

Thirdly, Srugi, uneducated as he was, lived his consecrated vocation as a Salesian Brother in a vital and profound manner, as is so clearly revealed in the writings that Fr

Caputa has published for us. He offered his body daily “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1) and became a *living memorial* of Jesus. In people like him, the kingdom of God takes shape on earth, quietly and almost unseen, like leaven in the yeast.

And there is “power in his hands,” as the simple villagers of Betgamāl used to say. I know by experience that Srugi is a wonderful intercessor – shy and retiring, as he must have been in life, but truly effective.

We in our turn need not feel shy to ask the Father to bring this son of his into the light, if that be his holy will. Ask, Jesus said. Seek. Knock. So we will ask, seek, knock.

Our profound gratitude to Gianni Caputa and our congratulations for this very significant step in making known the figure of this humble yet truly great Salesian Brother.

**Ivo Coelho sdb**

General Councillor for Formation

Rome, 14 May 2021



# Introduction

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## **Nature, scope and limits**

I am offering the results, in this book, of the study I have done to give more prominence to the historical coordinates of Simon Srugi's spiritual biography, thus completing the process initiated in two recent publications (cf. CAPUTA 2017; 2018). His life, activity and writings are in fact located within the hundred years of history between halfway through the 19th century to halfway through the 20th, taking as indicative of this the re-establishment of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem in 1847 ("terminus post quem") and the partitioning of Palestine in 1947 ("ante quem"). Betgamāl became part of a region or territory which completely changed its nature over that century from a socio-economic, political, cultural and religious point of view, due especially to events and general institutions (First World War; the fall of the Turkish Empire; the colonial era; Second World War), particular ones ("Italian schools abroad"; Armenian genocide; the British Mandate; Jewish immigration; Arab revolution; partitioning of Palestine), ones involving the Church (the arrival of "Latin" religious Congregations in the Holy Land; expansion of Anglican and Protestant Churches), and Salesian ones (the merging of Fr Belloni's institute with the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; the canonisation of Don Bosco and the beatification of Mary Mazzarello).

A complete reconstruction of this background clearly goes beyond the limits of my work, but it is necessary to keep its major aspects in mind in order to correctly understand the life and writings, activity and message of Simon Srugi. Nor have I had the intention of writing the history of every aspect of Betgamāl, just those that are pertinent to Srugi and his specific activity, highlighting (more than has been done previously) the members of the Salesian community who together with him played a leading and active role in religious and devotional, educational and scholastic, human welfare and development activity. This interest of an historical nature has also motivated me to some exploratory "windows" on special topics: the villages inhabited by Muslim farmers who came to Srugi for treatment; his mystical and priestly attitude; the taking in of Armenian refugees; Fr Bianchi's letters to Brother Na'im Cumbāz. Instead, I have touched only peripherally on the complex "Stephenine question" that began in 1916 and was still being debated in 2006.

## **Content and its development**

Part 1 of the book contains an historical and biographical section; to avoid often interrupting the thread of the story I refer the presentation of particular topics to the earlier-mentioned “windows” in the second section. Similarly for Part Two: the analysis of Srugi’s writings, indicating where they have come from, their context and to whom they were addressed, is followed by a section in which I sum up his “personal life project”. All of this is prefaced by a brief prologue that goes back almost 5 centuries to the remote roots of the Srugi family, and is followed by a similarly brief epilogue that arrives at the recent monastic foundations at Betgamāl. The specific indexes (biblical and names of people) follow the conclusion and final summing up and will assist the reader who wishes to make detailed consultation. The photo appendix offers a significant gallery of historical photos depicting the people in reference to the most significant places and events in our story.

## **Sources**

– *Unpublished*: Srugi’s manuscripts (notes of a religious nature; resolutions; registers of the clinic ... ) and manuscripts of confreres at Betgamāl (chronicles, correspondence, school and account registers ... ) kept in the archives of the Salesian house at Betgamāl, the Middle East Province, and houses at Bethlehem, Cremisan, Nazareth.

– *Published*: Srugi’s personal books and books from the library at Betgamāl: proceedings from the canonical process for beatification; biography by Fr Ernesto Forti; research material available in digital format. Refer to the list of abbreviations and acronyms and the bibliography.

## **A word of thanks**

While taking the opportunity to renew my thanks to all those who assisted me in writing the Italian original of this book (“pioneers”, archivists, historians, councillors, those who revised the drafts) here I would like to express my deep gratitude to a very dear friend and confrere from “downunder”, who prefers to remain unnamed, for his translation of this entire work into English. He has done a very accurate job not only from a linguistic, philological point of view, but also as a creative interpreter to the point where, in dialogue with him over a number of points, I myself have discovered new content and have learned new meanings regarding Simon Srugi and the history of Betgamāl.

Up till now, the only item in English was the brief work by Fr Prospero Roero in 2009. Now, with this version, English readers, particularly young Salesians in formation, brothers and clerics, have a complete text available to them on the life, activity and

writings of Srugi. I hope it will serve to increase knowledge, encourage imitation, spread devotion and intensify prayer to obtain from God the miracle required for his beatification.

**Fr Giovanni Caputa**

Betgamāl, 6 May 2021

The liturgical feast of St Dominic Savio.

### **PLEASE NOTE**

In the documents that I studied, Arabic, Armenian and Jewish names appear transliterated in various forms: according to the French, English, German, Italian alphabets (and depending on who the sender and receiver was), and sometimes they change from one page to another in the same notebook or registry or chronicle! Without any claim to uniformity, I have chosen an English transliteration.

In particular, in order to maintain a clear reference to the **person of Gamaliel**, his estate and country house *Cafargamala*, I use **Betgamāl**; nevertheless when recording original documents, I reproduce the other transliterations.

I always use the name “Simon” (“Simone” in Italian) and not the original Arabic “Simān” since the former is how Brother Srugi was referred to in his own context. He signed himself “Simone” (since he spoke Italian rather than English), except in the letter to his sister Zāhra. But for the purposes of this translation, “Simon” is used.

I render the Arabic letter “*ayn*” with the single inverted comma ‘ (e.g. Simān).



# Abbreviations and acronyms

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## Manuscripts of Simon Srugi

COR = Correspondence.

DIA = Dialogues with (Revelations of) the Crucified Jesus.

MAC = Maxims of the month for Confreres to copy down.

MAG = Maxims for the young (*Giovani*) to copy down.

PES = *Pensieri salutari* Salutary thoughts.

PRE = *Preghiere* Prayers

PRO = *Propositi* Resolutions.

## Sources and most mentioned works

ABet = Archives of the Orphanage and Salesian house in Bethlehem.

ABG = Archives of the Salesian house at Betgamāl.

- Acceptances - Pupils
- Pupils = “List of qualified pupils since 1920”
- Handwritten chronicles
- Documents pertaining to Polish pupils
- Mortuary letters
- Register of exam results = *Scuola Agricola San Giuseppe. Registro dei voti degli esami trimestrali, semestrali, finali e Licenza. Dall'anno 1919 al 1944-45*
- Register of the deceased = *Scuola Agricola di S. Giuseppe di Beitgemal. Registro dei defunti dal 1886 al 1938.*
- BIANCHI, correspondence
- POSS = “Pia Opera di Santo Stefano per il Perdono Cristiano” or Pious Work of St Stephen for Christian Forgiveness
- SACCHETTI, *Annotazioni varie. Beitgemal dal 1913 al 1926.* Various notes, Betgamāl from 1913 to 1926.

- SACCHETTI, correspondence CNEWA; Correspondence NER; ... varia.
- ROSIN, Chronicle notebooks

ACrem = Archives of the Salesian house at Cremona.

ACS = *Acts of the Superior Chapter of the Pious Salesian Society*.

ANaz = Archives of the Salesian house at Nazareth.

AIMOR = Archives of the Salesian Province of the Middle East [at Salesian headquarters].

- 4.4.1.1 = Chronicle (summary) photo chronicle of the house at Betgamāl
- 4.4.2 = History of the house at Betgamāl from its foundation until 1937
- 15.1.1, 15.1.2, 15.1.3 ... 15.1.12 = Documents regarding Simon Srugi
- Filing cabinet containing personal records of individual confreres
- History of the Middle East Province = *I Salesiani nel Medio Oriente dal 1891 al 1980*, ed. Ciro COZZOLINO, Igino GREGO, Emilio PRADUROUX (Cremona 1975)

ASC = Central Salesian Archives, Rome.

BS = Bollettino Salesiano.

DBS = Eugenio VALENTINI – Amadeo RODINÒ (a cura di) *Dizionario Biografico dei Salesiani*, Torino: Ufficio Stampa Salesiano, 1969.

EGS = *Elenco Generale della Società di San Francesco di Sales*, a cura della Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco. Torino (for years relating to Simon Srugi).

FIORA, *Biography* = Luigi FIORA, official *Biography* of Simon Srugi, as part of the *Hierosolymitana* 1988, pp. 19–156.

*Hierosolymitana* 1988 = CONGREGATIO PRO CAUSIS SANCTORUM, Hierosolymitana beatificationis et canonizationis Servi Dei Simonis Srugi, laici professi Societatis Salesianae. Positio super virtutibus. Romae: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1988.

*Hierosolymitana* 1993 = CONGREGATIO PRO CAUSIS SANCTORUM, Hierosolymitana Decretum canonizationis Servi Dei Simonis Srugi laici professi Societatis Sancti Francisci Salesii (1877–1943) in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 85 (9 September 1993). Città del Vaticano: LEV 1993, pp. 859–862.

RBA = Registro bilancio annuale dell'Opera di don Belloni, con osservazioni: dal 1863 al 1902 (Register of annual budget sheets of Fr Belloni's Work with observations: from 1863 to 1902).

SDL = Salesian Digital Library (<http://sdl.sdb.org>)

# Select bibliography

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Part 1  
THE LIFE AND ACTIVITY OF  
SIMON SRUGI (1877-1943)



## Section 1

# Historical & biographical reconstruction

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### 1. Prologue: a family of refugees from Syria, Lebanon, Palestine (1550–1772)

Following their victory at Dàbeq in 1515, the Ottoman Turks extended their rule over southern Syria where Hūrān is located. In their records from 1596 “Hābab” figures as a village with some fifty or so families who paid a 40% duty or tax on all products from the land. Currently, Khābab (حبيب) is a Syrian town 50 km south of Damascus with around 8,000 inhabitants, most of whom are Christians, and the headquarters of the Catholic Greek-Melkite Archeparchy, heir to the metropolitan See of Bosra (established in 1687), situated in what the Gospels called the Decapolis.

The story of Simon Srugi begins precisely in Khābab, with a long pre-history documented in the family memoirs entitled: “*Āl as-srūgy wa aṣl intimā’ihem li’āilat fara’ūn wa tāriḫ bad’i higrātihem min khābab min a’māl hūrān* – [The people of] the Srugi and the origins of their belonging to the Fara’ūn family, and the date of the beginning of their emigration from Khābab in the region of Hūrān.”

Since killing and commanding are only in the hands of the strong, men have, since ancient times, fought for command and squabbled for supremacy, and many times wars and occasional raids and revolutions broke out. In Hūrān too, the Arabs and the Druse battled for supremacy and this led to the departure of many of them from their towns since they considered them to be dangerous areas; or just to flee from persecution and fear. Among the inhabitants of Khābab (a town in the Hūrān region) around 1550 AD, there was a man called Fara’ūn whose origins and birthplace were unknown. This man called Fara’ūn had a son called ‘Abdāllah. As far as we know, this ‘Abdāllah was married in Khābab (Hūrān) in 1607 and in 1609 he had a son whom he called Fara’ūn after his grandfather, therefore he was known as Fara’ūn son of ‘Abdāllah son of Fara’ūn. And so it happened that the latter, Fara’ūn the second, also married in Khābab in 1646 and had four children: Iskandar (1648), Yūsif (1650), Fransīs (1652) and ‘Abdāllah (1654); and this took place in Khābab.

At the time things in Hūrān were going from bad to worse, and there were many instances of murder and persecution: disquiet reigned among the people and the

government was unstable. After the supremacy and command fell into the hands of the Druse, it then passed to the Arabs, and so on and so forth. Victory and vengeance swapped between one or the other. Every time one side won, it punished and pressured the other; and very often they extorted the populations they had subjugated with taxes twice or three times in excess. Due to the many abuses and injustices, the people scattered and fled to the east and west, and the people of Hūrān found themselves in terrible straits and abandoned their town. Among them were also Fara‘ūn’s four sons, Iskàndar, Yūsif, Fransīs and ‘Abdāllah, who migrated from their town (Khàbab) to Damascus in 1671; but it is not known if their father left with them.

They settled in Damascus and were of mutual assistance to one another in order to survive. They were distinguished for their trade as saddlers for horses. The Lord saw that they prospered and covered them with the mantle of his grace; thus it was that their circumstances improved and they became related with the people of Damascus. Iskàndar married a woman from Damascus in 1676, and then Yūsif in 1679. In 1680-81 a slanderer made accusations about them to the governor of the time, called ‘Azāza Hussèin Bācha, accusing them of living in abundance and possessing great wealth. Then Bāsha obliged them to pay a fine. He did more than this, he ordered that they be sent to prison, threatening them with even tougher punishments. And after he had threatened them and the women wept and hastened to plead help from the nobility, great and small and whoever was generous and knew about this cruel potentate, he would not agree to their freedom until he had received the sum demanded. This happened again and so it was that the family left Damascus for Fūrzul in 1682 (Fūrzul is a village in the Ba‘ālbak region).

At the time it was the Emirs of the Harfūsh family who were governing there. They were well received in Fūrzul because they were foreigners; the foreign guest has a right to hospitality. In the village of Fūrzul these four brothers, Iskàndar, Yūsif, Fransīs and ‘Abdāllah, toiled tirelessly and hard, helping each other, and persevered in their work in the fields and agriculture. The Lord saw that they prospered and they lived in peace because they treated the people of Fūrzul well, and they remained there from 1682 to 1699. Fransīs married a woman from Fūrzul in 1684, and ‘Abdāllah did the same in 1697.

However, peace does not last in this world, and this was well put by someone who said: “The winds blow, but not as the ships want.” Times changed and people arrived who embittered their lives and clouded the clarity of their existence. For the Harfūsh emirs, after regaining control and subjecting their enemies, sought to be like all other cruel and unjust men, and they committed such cruelties that they wrote a black page in the history of the ages. There were rumblings and grumblings among the people whose way of living had been disturbed and whose conditions had worsened and muttering began to spread among the ranks. This was around the year 1699.

During the harvest that year a prince of the Harfūsh family arrived in Fūrzul before the allotted time. He was surrounded by his courtiers, his entourage and soldiers, and had come to claim the annual tax from farmers and inhabitants. The important people and the elders received him very well, and after they came to understand why he had come, they asked him for a few days extension so they could prepare for their harvest

and then hand over the tax imposed on them. Three or four days after the prince's arrival, and while the inhabitants were showing him and his courtiers the utmost respect, nobility of soul and hospitality, even feeding and looking after their horses, he wanted to hear nothing more of it, became agitated, proud, and wanted the tax paid there and then, no delay. However, they got him to understand that they were in terrible straits and once again asked him to wait a few days so they could present him with what he wanted. But he was stubborn, without mercy or pity, and threatened to beat and whip them. Indeed, he commanded his soldiers to seize everything by force. They entered the homes on their horses, mistreated everyone, big or small, and made no distinction between the menfolk and the women. This way of acting and the show of force increased hatred of the governor, enkindled anger, and at midnight the inhabitants rose up and killed the prince and his courtiers.

Unfortunately, Fara'un's sons were among those who revolted and dealt that way with the haughty prince and his soldiers. The event did not go without punishment, for when the Harfūsh found out that one of their princes had been killed, they came with horses and men to Fūrzul, brutalised the inhabitants, and after taking everything, they took away their murdered prince and buried him. Some days later they seized 20 men, took them away to Ba'ālbak and sent them to prison. From their hiding place, Fara'un's sons heard about the imprisonment of the 20 people and were seized with fear, believing that the accusation of murder would be laid upon them because they were foreigners. Because of this thought and out of fear, they secretly brought horses from another town, loaded up their families with some of their belongings and food for the journey, and migrated from Fūrzul to Māshghara, west of the Beqā' valley, where they lived until 1699. After remaining in Māshghara in fear and anxiety for several months, since they had heard that the Harfūsh were continuing to ask for news of them and to follow them, three of the brothers, Iskandar, Fransīs and 'Abdāllah, migrated from Māshghara to a place that is not exactly known. This was in 1700. The fourth, Yūsif, remained in Māshghara, and there he practised his trade as a saddler (Srugī) changing his name to Yūsif Srugī. Māshghara is located in western Beqā', which is a region of Lebanon.

This is the story up to that point. In 1965 the sheets of this valuable Arabic manuscript were made available to the Salesians by Mr 'Azīz 'Issa Srugī, Simon's grandnephew, living in Beirut at the time; they carefully reconstruct the entire family tree up until his own time (cf. AIMOR 15.1.1, folder no. 2; 15.1.2, envelope no. 8.6). The document speaks for itself, has its own impressive narrative impact, and gives us a glimpse into the scene in which the grandfather hands down the events to his grandchildren, with the memory typical of the oriental who has carefully learned and jealously guarded a family treasure. We can note that in less than 40 years (1670-1710 ca.) the Fara'un-Srugī brothers became refugees four times over, going as refugees from Hūrān to Damascus, and from Lebanese Beqā' to Gallilee in Palestine; for the most part this was not for religious reasons but for political and socio-economic ones. Already in Damascus they had begun practising the trade of saddlery (in Arabic *sarġ/surūġ*, from which comes *surūġi* = Srugī) which would become their patronymic.

## **2. Sim'ān Srugi: from birth to religious profession. His meetings with M. Rua (1877–1908)**

In 1710 Yūsif's son, called Ġirġis Srugi moved to Palestine, and in 1720 set up home in Tarshiha. By his son Faddūl in 1748 another Ġirġis was born and in 1771 he married a woman from Tarshiha and they settled in Nazareth in 1772: therefore, we can consider this to be the final date and destination of their wanderings. Ġirġis had 7 sons who took their wives from various parts (Deir el Kamar, Beirut, Ma'aleya, Nazareth) and belonging to various rites (Latin, Maronite, Greek-Melkite Catholic). His second last son Tannūs (1791–1840) was the father of Hilāne, Daūd, Sim'ān and 'Āzar (1815–1880); the latter married in Nazareth and had ten children by his second wife Dālleh Ibrahim Khāwaly, the last of whom was Sim'ān.

### **2.1 Infancy and childhood in Nazareth (1877–1888)**

Simon was born in Nazareth on 15 April 1877: his mother belonged to the Maronite rite, and his father to the Greek-Melkite rite, and because of this the child received the sacraments of Christian initiation in the Greek-Catholic Melkite parish, then located in what was considered to be the synagogue in Jesus' time. On page 46 in the register of the parish archives we find written:

Today 10 May 1877 the blessed child Sim'ān, son of 'Āzar Srugi was baptised and confirmed. His mother is Dālleh of the Khāwaly family. The godfather is Ayūb Būtrus, son of Y'aqūb, of the Latin Rite. The minister is Fr Agustīn 'Aun. [Photos nos. 1, 2, 3, 14]

His father 'Azār, who had opened a small greengrocer's shop, made up for the family's poverty, also marked by many premature deaths. After his death (1880) and his mother's a few years later, Simon was taken into the home of his paternal grandmother Bāhġiat 'Aid, who with the help of an aunt, sought to fill the fearful void around the poor child. At the time, Palestine was one of the poorest provinces of the Ottoman empire, by then in decay, and the socio-economic circumstances were so disastrous that sometimes families were forced to sell their own children in order to survive. In the city of Nazareth, with its few thousand inhabitants, there were some orphanages and primary schools run by Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants; according to the very recent testimony of one of his childhood companions, it would seem that Simon attended elementary classes at the parish school run by the Franciscans (cf. FORTI, pp. 13–14; DESRAMAUT, pp. 17–22; FIORA, pp. 23–41). He was then entrusted to Fr Antonio Belloni.



## 2.2 Fr Belloni: missionary, founder, spiritual director (1831–1903)

Antonio Belloni was born on 20 August 1831 in the hamlet of Sant'Agata di Oneglia, in the diocese of Albenga in Liguria (Italy). After his years of formation at the “Brignole-Sale” Institute in Genoa, run by the “Priests of the Mission” of St Vincent de Paul (the Vincentians as they are known in English), he was ordained priest on 13 December 1857. He gladly accepted the invitation from “Propaganda Fide” to go as an apostolic missionary to Palestine in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem (re-established in 1847) where he arrived in April 1859. He was at the Patriarchal seminary in Beitjala as a lecturer and spiritual director, and from 1863 began looking after poor and orphaned boys, first of all taking them into a rental property, and then building classrooms, workshops, a church etc. for them in Bethlehem.<sup>1</sup> His hard-working charity for orphans became so well known that he was called *Abù-l-Yatāma*, father of the orphans (cf. *NAHHĀS*, vol. 1, *passim*). [Photo no. 4] Due to his knowledge, wisdom and gift of spiritual fatherhood, as well as confessor for his confreres and the young people at the orphanage, he was sought out as a spiritual director by religious and diocesan priests, lay people and nuns. From all of these emerged Marie-Alphonsine Ghattās, and Myriam Baouardy.

The aforementioned Marie-Alphonsine Ghattās (Jerusalem 1843 – ‘Ain Karim 1927) made her profession in 1863 in the Congregation of “St Joseph of the Apparition”, and while she resided at the small school in Bethlehem not far from Fr Belloni’s orphanage (where some of the Sisters who belonged to her congregation worked in the laundry and kitchen), she began to have visions of Our lady who revealed to her her wish that she should start a new local religious congregation. The young girl kept this secret for a while, then in 1875 she confided in the Patriarch, Vincenzo-Mansūr Bracco (1835–1889).

Patriarch Munsūr helped me by making me feel at ease and calmed my state of mind with his holy and wise indications. He ordered me to open my conscience and allow myself to be guided by *abuna* Antonio Belloni and to carry out what he would prescribe for me.

After appropriate discernment and the approval of Patriarch Bracco, Fr Belloni had just founded (1874) the diocesan Congregation called the “Brothers of the Holy Family”, made up of priests and lay people belonging to various rites, and who took simple vows each year. So he knew from experience what an undertaking of this kind meant. Marie-Alphonsine, after visions on the Epiphany 1876, experienced moments of

<sup>1</sup> In RBA p. 1, we read: “The first youngster was taken in and clothed with 20 francs from savings on 1 January 1863; then I began to spend on food in a small rented room in Beitjallah around 20 May”; p. 2: “No. 10 pupils, two serving girls and a prefect-teacher made up the personnel at the orphanage. On 1 July 1864 the orphanage moved to Bethlehem.”

great consolation, which alternated with “mortifications and vexations, reproaches and sufferings”:

I confided in my spiritual director regarding this and asked him to advise me about everything. He instructed me on how I should act and recommended that I keep it all a deep secret. He asked me to make a novena, asking the Virgin my Mother to help me to understand what she wanted from me and to offer myself totally to her service. He promised me that during the novena he would pray for me at Mass.

Other “dreams” followed regarding the foundation of the congregation; The visionary wanted to ask Fr Belloni for advice, “but my director had left for a journey to distant parts”. Some three years went by, and seeing that Fr Belloni was taken up with many commitments and often abroad, she asked Our Lady to indicate a new spiritual director for her, “an Arab of our lineage”:

On the day of the Feast of the Annunciation, I saw a wonderful light in which the Queen of the Rosary emerged in the act of placing her hands on the heads of two people. I saw that they were priests and were facing the Virgin. The first was Fr Antonio Belloni and the second Fr Yūsif Tannūs, my spiritual director, on whose head shone the first mystery of the Rosary.

By this Our Lady was showing that she was pleased with both and would ensure continuity of spiritual direction from one to the other (GHATTĀS, pp. 56–57, 61, 63, 72, 74–75).

Fr Belloni exercised the ministry of spiritual guide over the same period in relation to the other great Palestinian mystic and foundress, the Carmelite Myriam Baouardy (Abellin 1846–Bethlehem 1878), since Patriarch Bracco had appointed him the ordinary confessor of the Carmelites at Bethlehem in November 1876. On 25 August 1878 he gave Myriam the last sacraments, and the day after her death, witnessed the removal of her heart (which in accordance with her will was given to the Carmelites at Pau) seeing *de visu* the wound that Myriam had received during the mystical experience of the transverberation (stigmata).<sup>2</sup>

These two Palestinian religious, compatriots of Srugi, were canonised on 17 May 2015 by Pope Francis.

<sup>2</sup> Let me add three details: also the Baouardy family had Damascene-Lebanese ancestry like the Srugis, and for a certain period resided in Tarshiha. During building works for the Carmel, Fr Belloni offered to house the first Betharramite chaplain in a special room in his orphanage. Myriam wrote to Fr Estrate on 6 February 1876: “The first carpenter we had asked for more money than Fr Belloni’s, who in fact is much better. If you approve, he will do all the carpentry work for the monastery: it will cost less and this way we will give the orphans the possibility of working”: CARMELITE NUNS of Bethlehem, *Anthology of Myriam Baouardy’s letters*, p. 11.

### 2.3 Simon with the “Brothers of the Holy Family” in Bethlehem (1888–1892)

When he was eleven years of age, Simon was entrusted to a priest of Fr Belloni’s congregation who brought him to the agricultural orphanage at Betgamāl (Ramlah). In the register entitled “*Young people of the house at Beit-Jamal 1898. List of Orphans and Pupils maintained and educated by the ‘Work of the Holy Family of Bethlehem’*”, Simon featured as number 50. It is plausible that because of his frail constitution he was unsuitable for work in the fields, and so after only half a year, on 8 December 1888 he was transferred to the technical orphanage at Bethlehem, where he became an apprentice baker, nurse and tailor. [Photo no. 5] Statistics published in the *Bulletin Annuel de l’Oeuvre de la Terre Sainte*, say that that year in Bethlehem, there were 110 boys living in and 160 from outside. The religious, lay staff and orphans, belonging to different rites, communicated in Arabic, French and Italian. They lived in poor circumstances, but in a serene family atmosphere, alternating their school duties with religious practices and recreational activities. Next to the orphanage was a building that functioned as a parish for the small Greek-Melkite community in Bethlehem; one could believe that the boarders belonging to that rite, and Simon among them, had this as their place of reference. The spirit that animated the “Bellonians” in their mission was an eminently evangelical one:

Although all orphans present themselves to us in the guise of the Saviour, the ones in Bethlehem have an additional resemblance to him; for us they are clothed with a very special, and I would almost say sacred, character. They were born where Jesus was born, they live where he lived, they suffer where he suffered. They are the descendants of those who were the first to adore the Saviour in the manger at the moment of his birth. It seems that Joseph and Mary, and especially Jesus, present them to us as children of his lineage, young people of his homeland, and they tell us: *They are dearer to me than all the others; they are my brothers, my compatriots, and you must love and help them before all the others.* (BERGERETTI, p. 9).

Sacramental life, devotion to the Holy family of Nazareth and to the Sacred Heart of Jesus were among the main sources of inspiration. Simon was imbued with this spirit, and on 23 May 1892 he had the joy of taking part in the solemn celebrations for the blessing of the large Church of the Sacred Heart, the building of which confirmed the architectural skills Fr Bergeretti (1846–1909) had displayed in Australia and especially in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). (cf. VALENTINI, p. 206). [Photos nos. 4, 5, 6].

## 2.4 The arrival of the first Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the Holy Land (1891)

As at Bethlehem, so too at Cremisan and Betgamāl the number of boys being helped grew year by year, yet the number of “Brothers” was not growing in proportion to the need.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, Fr Belloni, wanting to ensure the continuity of his work, visited Turin on several occasions to ask the help of Don Bosco, who promised that he would, but on a future date yet to be determined. The intention was to aggregate the Bellonians to the Salesians: easily said but a complex thing to do. Following Don Bosco’s death, negotiations were once more taken up by his successor, Fr Michael Rua (1837–1910), who studied the plan to put in place together with his Councillors, among whom Frs Giulio Barberis and Eugenio Bianchi (Catechist General and Novice Master respectively), chose the confreres to send, and obtained the *placet* of the Congregation of “Propaganda Fide”, organised the “missionary expedition”. Between June, October and December 1891, backed by solemn celebrations in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin for the Jubilee Year of Don Bosco’s Work (1841), 25 Salesians arrived in the Holy Land (SDB: 3 priests, 10 clerics and 12 brothers) as well as 5 Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA).<sup>4</sup>

The Salesians were very young, some just newly professed like clerics Giacomo Mezzacasa (born 1871), Salvatore Puddu (1874), Carlo Gatti and Mario Rosin (1875), and Brother Angelo Bormida (born 1870, professed 18 September 1890), and this meant that they could more easily acclimatise and learn the local language: not all had the intelligence of Mezzacasa, who in the years that followed learned Arabic, Syriac and Hebrew, or became specialists like Gatti, but they were all committed to what today we would call inculturation, and set about the study of Arabic under the guidance of a Maronite Lebanese priest (cf. Pozzo, p. 8). They began exchanging their first words in Arabic during recreation with the local boys (among whom the fourteen-year-old Simon

<sup>3</sup> We read in the RBA: there were 7 priests, 8 professed brothers, 8 “secular teachers”, 3 Sisters and 6 “Daughters of Mary”. Fr BERGERETTI, pp. 29–30, gave the following numbers for 1888: “Among those employed in the Work of the Holy Family are the Brothers in Vows and the Postulants, 25 in number.. They act as teachers, prefects to the boys, and together with the priests of the Work they are the Founder’s right hand.” ΝΑΗΗΑΣ, on p. 26 of Volume 2, writes that in 1890 the members of the Holy Family numbered 14. In the above-mentioned RBA for 1890 we read: 8 priests and 12 professed brothers, 3 sisters, 6 Daughters of Mary; and for 1891: “Personnel is more or less the same as for the previous year.”

<sup>4</sup> On 15 June to priests arrived, Fr G.B.Useo and Fr R.Coradini accompanied by the Catechist General Fr G. Barberis; on 8 October 7 Salesians arrived (4 clerics and 3 brothers) and five Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; on 29 December another 16 Salesians (only one priest, Fr Antonio Varaia, 6 clerics and 9 brothers), among whom the only non-Italian was seventy-year-old Adrien Nèple. The most documented and official chronicle of this, from its beginnings in 1890 to Fr Rua’s first trip in 1895, is offered by Fr Eugenio CERIA, *Annali*, vol 2., pp. 174–187. As for the FMA, cf. also PAPA-FABRIZI, in LOPARCO-ZIMNIAK, pp. 863–876.

Srugi), while telling them about Don Bosco whom they had known personally. The first impressions that Fr Coradini passed on in private to Fr Eugenio Bianchi are very positive:

My impression is that everything here has the same aspect as our houses; the Canon is at the centre of everything, dominates the hearts of the young with love, like our dear Don Bosco. The priests here are very friendly; most are Italians, all with beards. There are some clerics already professed and others who are aspirants: 18 in all. There are around 100 orphans, a large number of them postulants, meaning they would like to become Salesians. We must consider that the Lord has given us a great gift in bringing us to the Holy Land. Here we have a work brought about through a thousand hardships by this great man, who is worthily called the “father of orphans”, which in a number of aspects is formed more in a Salesian way than at the mother house itself; and we have been given it so easily by this same Canon, who is so keen that this house conform in every small detail to other Salesian houses (ASC, A8062403; A8062404).

Instead, at the level of official relations, it did not take long for things to become complicated: while Fr Belloni had always acted in agreement with Patriarch Bracco, who had given him his full support, the replacement, Ludovico Piavi, a Franciscan and of a different character, found himself handling this new venture at the beginning of his term of office (1889–1905), and moved ahead warily. For his part, Fr Rua had to juggle between the Latin Patriarchate, the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land and the “Propaganda Fide” section dealing with Eastern Rites affairs, and all without offending the political and cultural sensitivities of the Consulates General of France and Italy in Jerusalem, who in those years were very lively and in competition. Unexpectedly, even before the third group of missionaries departed, Cardinal Simeoni, the Prefect of “Propaganda”, presented new harsh conditions on behalf of the patriarchate. On 4 December 1891, Fr Rua took a stance, writing him a long letter which was both dignified and firm: the Salesian Congregation, which had not come to take, but to give “a strong contingent of personnel and a considerable financial contribution” to Canon Belloni’s work, could not accept the conditions that would have reduced the Salesians to “stipendiaries” of the Patriarch, paralysing their activity. Therefore: “If it is not possible to reconcile the Rule of our Congregation with the rights of the Patriarchate, we submit ourselves entirely to the disposition of the Apostolic See: that is, to withdraw or open other establishments; and always, of course, on the basis of the laws of the Church and in full subordination to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda.” (ASC, G336X101. cf. CERIA, *Annali*, vol. 2, p. 179). This intervention by Fr Rua was effective, without, however, solving everything, such that on 14 July 1892 he insisted with Patriarch Piavi:

It may have seemed to some that we were guided by ambition; in truth, this was so far from our thinking that we never even thought of trying to enter the Holy Land until we were warmly begged by the aforementioned Canon Belloni to lend him help to support his work. We felt our hearts moved when we heard that every breed of heretic

and schismatic has large establishments in Palestine and is constantly acquiring land, while a Catholic establishment as important and popular as Canon Belloni's was in danger of disappearing for lack of personal and material resources": in this respect, he pointed out that in little more than a year, the Salesians had invested about 100,000 Italian lire to make up the "deficit of 57,540 francs" that Fr Belloni had recorded on the RBA at the end of 1890 (ASC, G336X105).

We should remember that before the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians arrived, there was no lack of religious congregations in Palestine.<sup>5</sup> For all these reasons, the inclusion of the "latest arrivals" and their integration with the Bellonians in the houses at Bethlehem, Cremisan and Betgamāl required time and patience to overcome a number of difficulties. In the end:

Each person had full and peaceful freedom of choice: to join the patriarchal clergy or to become a Salesian. What is certain is that the Congregation made excellent acquisitions from among Fr Belloni's confreres: Fathers Raffaele Piperni, Andrea Bergeretti, Antonio Josephides, Giovanni Nahas, Charles Vercauteren, Athanase Prun, Giovanni Belloni (Fr Antonio's cousin), Brothers George Harūni, Giovanni De Ferrari, clerics Vincenzo Ponzo and Peter Sarkīs (who later became priests). They all made a new novitiate and joined the Congregation as part, for then, of the new *All Saints Province* that also included houses founded by Fr Belloni. Fr Celestino Durando, with his headquarters in Turin, was appointed Provincial (ASC 3.129; cf. BORREGO, p. 64; DESRAMAUT, pp. 287–289).

The FMA, too, were relatively young (average age 27); the Superior, Sr Annetta Vergano was only 25. Having made her perpetual profession in Turin (17 September 1891), on the 24th she received her missionary cross from Fr Rua, who wanted to spend time with those who were leaving "to give them appropriate advice; he knew that they would have to overcome delicate moments, not a few sacrifices and initial limitations." (cf. GRASSIANO, p.163; SECCO, pp. 5, 9–10). The first few weeks were devoted to establishing relationships of trust and understanding with the "Missionary Daughters of Mary", Sisters founded by Fr Giacinto Bianchi (1835–1914, declared Venerable in 2008) who provided domestic services at the orphanage from 1876; thanks to Sister Annetta's prudence, humility and kindness, "before Christmas, all the female staff of the orphanage were together in peace": some chose to go back to Italy, four asked to be aggregated to the FMA. The new arrivals immediately fraternised

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<sup>5</sup> For centuries only two male religious congregations ministered in the Holy Land. First the Franciscans (1218), then the Carmelites (1631). After the re-establishment of the Latin Patriarchate (1847) the Our Lady of Sion male religious arrived (1855), the De La Salle Brothers (1876), the White Fathers (1878), the priests of the Sacred Heart of Betharram (1879), the Brothers of St John of God (1880), the Dominicans (1884), the Assumptionists (1887), the Vincentians and the Trappists (1890). The female Congregations were: the Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition (1848), the Our Lady of Nazareth Sisters (1855), the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion (1866), the Carmelites (1873 and 1875), the Rosary Sisters (1880), the Poor Clares (1884), the Franciscan Missionaries of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (1885), the Daughters of Charity (1886), the Sisters of St Charles Borromeo (1886).

with the Bethlehem girls in what would emerge as an oratory, to the amazement of the other sisters who ran confessional-type schools for girls in the village, but did not open their doors during extracurricular hours or mix in the courtyard with Orthodox and Latin girls; on the other hand, the girls loved it and “took the bait”. The following year, Sr Annetta accompanied the first of her Sisters to Betgamāl where there were no girls to deal with in an oratory style, but just poverty, isolation and much work at the service of the Salesians and the orphans. Adopting the same approach, the composite community began to amalgamate and after a short time two “Daughters of the Immaculate” who were already there took the FMA habit, while others returned to Italy (cf. PAPA-FABRIZI, in LOPARCO-ZIMNIAK, pp. 863–876).

## 2.5 Simon at Betgamāl (1892–1900): aspirant, novice and professed Salesian

Halfway through July 1891, Fr Belloni, who had returned from his lengthy “search for funds” in Europe, wanted to accompany the first two Salesians by horseback from Bethlehem to Betgamāl: skirting the “*Hortus conclusus*” and “*Solomon’s Pools*”, they began the descent towards Jab’a and after 6 hours entered Betgamāl, escorted by a cortège of farmers on horseback and youngsters on foot, celebrating the return of their beloved father. The first day was memorable for the festivities, the dinner and the academy at which the boys presented skits, recitals in prose and poetry in 15 ancient and modern languages, demonstrating such friendliness and affection that the two Salesians were greatly impressed. Over the three following days they were accompanied on a visit to all of the huge property and were able to gain direct acquaintance with the Bellonian staff who animated the community. Returning to Bethlehem, Fr Coradini explained it all enthusiastically to Fr Bianchi:

Everything here is favourable, and the work seems more beautiful and greater every day. The staff can be described as truly Salesian. They have a simple, easy-going, friendly manner that is very pleasing to the eye. We really have to thank the Lord. At Beitgemal they pointed out a confrere to me who was supervising work in the fields, as a real St Aloysius: I never took my eyes off him, and I can assure you that he is a real edification, and seems to me to be even better than Bertarione, because he combines a most pleasing outer aspect with the solid virtue that is well known to all.<sup>6</sup>

Fifteen-year-old Simon Srugi returned to this setting on 25 August 1892: we think he found himself very much at ease, and being of a mild temperament and deep piety, it was not long before he stood out among the 35 pupils for his exemplary behaviour. Inclined to embrace Salesian consecrated life, in October 1892 he was admitted as an aspirant (to be a brother) and on 25 July 1893 he was admitted to the novitiate. Fr Forti explains: “In

<sup>6</sup> Letter of 21 July 1891: ASC, A8062407; he also hinted at some shadows: shortcomings regarding “morality” among the young people; unwillingness of “locals” to work; some decidedly untrustworthy tenants.

his humility perhaps he never thought of the possibility of becoming a priest: probably to study would have cost him dearly; on the other hand, it was not appropriate for the superiors to force such a frail young man to undergo an ordeal that would weaken his health.” Concerning the novitiate, Fr Fiora writes: “We have absolutely no information and no documentation regarding this period. The Rector of the house from 1894 to 1896 was Fr Ruggero Coradini and just as Fr Varaia had done earlier, he also had to be the novice master for the house.” It was not unusual for brother candidates to do a two-year novitiate. In addition, Simon, who was of the Greek-Melkite Rite, had to wait until Rome had completed procedures for his transfer to the Latin Rite; a procedure that in those years took place according to the precise rules of the *Orientalium Dignitas Ecclesiarum* just published (30 November 1894), under the vigilant eye of those who were accusing Western Religious Congregations of “latinising” oriental Christians (cf. POLACEK, pp. 23–27, 41). There is a handwritten document of the first profession in the Province’s archives:

I the undersigned have read and understood the Rules of the Society of St Francis de Sales and promise to observe them for three years in accordance with the formula of the vows I have pronounced.

Cremsan, 31 October 1896.

Srugi M. Simon.

The signatures of the two witnesses follow: Fr Ruggero Coradini, novice master, and Fr Athanase Prun from the new community at Nazareth, showing the ties with Simon’s birthplace. As a Salesian Brother, Simon became a full member of the community at Betgamāl where he would remain without interruption for 47 years. In the list of confreres for 1896, the new Rector, Fr Ercole Cantoni (1863–1942), listed just one priest (himself), a deacon, two clerics and two brothers: Antonio Baccaro (1866–1938) and Simon Srugi. Three years later, in the report sent to the superiors in Turin dated 8 January 1899, there was a description of the classes, subjects and the respective teachers at the “St Joseph’s Agricultural School”: Srugi taught Arabic in the first elementary class and Accessories (agriculture, geography, arithmetic) in the same class, for the lower section. One could think that he was also available for work as infirmarian, the rudiments of which he had learned at the orphanage in Bethlehem, and had then completed under the guidance of Fr Cantoni who was a good doctor. After 4 years of temporary vows, the superiors judged that he was mature enough to make a final commitment, and so he presented the following request for admission:

*Live Jesus*

Bethlehem 18 September 1900.



With a view to conforming to the Holy Rule in everything, I am asking my beloved superiors in writing to be aggregated to the Pious Society of St Francis de Sales through perpetual holy vows.

In faith  
Srugi Simon.

He made his profession two days later at Bethlehem at the end of the Retreat. It is nice to think that Fr Antonio Belloni, his great benefactor and father, who had formalised his adhesion to the Salesian Congregation some years before by making his perpetual profession on 7 July 1893, was present and rejoiced at this.

## **2.6 The Betgamāl work: the beginnings and its transfer from the Bellonians to the Salesians (1878–1892)**

Betgamāl is located in the geographical region of the Shefela, some 32 km south-west of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, 57 km south-east of Jaffa, and with Tel-Betshèmesh 3 km north, Hebron and Beersheba to the south-east (44 and 71 km respectively) and Gaza to the south-west (77 km). The entire area is filled with biblical memories, ruins from the Jewish, Roman, early Christian and Byzantine periods. The Jewish and Roman ones are linked, among other things, with the battles between the Philistines and Israelites and Samson's famous gestures, the passing of the Ark of the Covenant returned by the five Philistine chiefs (cf. 1 Sam 6:1–18), the duel between David and Goliath, the prophet Micah... Early Christian records date back to the Jewish doctor of law Gamaliel, his disciple Saul-Paul and the protomartyr Saint Stephen. This has been confirmed not only by the toponymy but also by the numerous remains of Byzantine and Muslim buildings scattered throughout the area. These particulars were among the reasons that urged Fr Belloni to acquire an enormous area of around 900 hectares (from 1869 to 1878), with funding from Scotsman John Patrick III the Marquis of Bute and other wealthy benefactors. The area was almost entirely uninhabited, and his hope was not only to reclaim the marshy land, but to settle Christian families there from Beitjala and Bethlehem, and revive "the holy places".<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Surprising data, to say the least, can be read about the extent of the land in Betgamāl: on 15 September 1892, Fr Belloni presented the Patriarch with a complete list of the 7 "properties or real estate belonging to the Work of the Holy Family": 2 in Bethlehem; 1 of "around 120 hectares 3 Km from Beitjala above the road of St John on the Mountain"; "a plot of some 900 hectares in Beitgemal"; 1 plot in Jerusalem, above what is known as the Mamilla pool; at Temeth near Madaba, around 100 hectares; at Nazareth around 150 hectares". Fr Sacchetti, *Annotazioni varie ...* 1913, on p. 8 writes: "Beitgemal has a surface area of approximately 600 hectares, only half of which are cultivated or able to be cultivated; the other half has two thirds not able to be cultivated while one third is a forest of small oaks"; the same Fr Sacchetti in September 1932 writes that Betgamāl was 650 hectares: cf. documents in AIMOR 4.4.1.1, folder A, B; and in ABG, *Cronache* up until 24

Fr Belloni's men placed the first "station" in the valley to the east bordering Fattīr, where a spring of fresh water gushes out, which ensured the cultivation of crops, while the water in the wadi Būlos to the west was brackish and ended up in malarial mosquito-infested rivulets. Then in successive stages, they settled on the hill to the north-west, on which a few houses of an abandoned Muslim village and scattered remains of Byzantine buildings remained. On it, they levelled a quadrangular area with sides measuring approximately 150 metres. The northern side faced the plot of land called *Khallet Isma'īn* from the name of the *sheikh*, in whose memory a mosque had been built, then dismantled. The central plateau was called *Khallet esh-Shugi'a* "land of the valiant men", and fell away to the south towards a narrow valley by the same name. After building the perimeter walls and excavating large cisterns in the limestone rock to supply rainwater, the Brothers of the Holy Family built the first part of the building (1878-80), where in 1878–79 they inaugurated the orphanage and the fledgling agricultural school with some fifteen pupils; Fr Guglielmo Barberis was the first Rector, followed by Fr Antonio Scanzio (1882–1891). In 1878 three "Missionary Daughters of Mary" arrived, sent by their founder, Fr Giacinto Bianchi to look after the kitchen and wardrobe; they were housed in a spacious, self-contained building bordering part of the western side of the plateau. As a whole the work was isolated, without communication possibilities, and the property, with imprecise boundaries often disputed by would-be landlords and tenant farmers, was exposed on all sides to the mercy of Bedouins and their flocks. [Photos nos. 7, 8].

In 1892, replacing Fr Raffaele Piperni (1842–1930), Fr Antonio Varaia (1849–1913) was sent there and thus became the first Salesian Rector (1892–1894). He had been taken in as an orphan by Don Bosco at Valdocco, made his profession in 1872 and was ordained in 1876. He was an excellent priest who combined a deep interior life with a notable practical capacity to organise. He had proved his worth in the orphanage and flourishing agricultural colony of St-Cyr in France. In his letter of 20 November 1891, Fr Rua invited him in very friendly terms to accept the obedience of going to the Holy Land as a "reward and trial", ready to continue the Saviour's work with sacrifice, for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. He wrote a very graceful letter to him on 20 January 1892:

I am happy about the various welcomes you have received, and may they serve as a commitment to cultivate this vineyard more and more, which the Lord has wished to entrust to you. I believe that all the confreres there are worthy, but from time to time, it is necessary to try to remove the ashes that are stuck to the coals. You should not believe that no difficulties will arise, and that the devil will keep quiet. On the contrary, it is in this vicinity that he dared to tempt the Divine Saviour; and therefore consider whether he has lost his audacity, and whether he will convert now that he

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April 1942. On a map from 1925 preserved in the ABG, the various plots of land are numbered, the surface area of which is 349,841 hectares (!).

is older! What I recommend to you always is the charity that must unite you, and drive out the desire to be first, which ruins every work, even the most holy. Try to put into practice the rules I gave you before you left and always show the deference and flexibility to Canon Belloni that I recommended you to show. Whenever some difficulty arises, try to let me know of it immediately and with charity you will see that everything comes together (ASC, A4540323; A4540324).

In fact, shortly after his arrival, and once the first illusory impressions had vanished, Fr Varaia admitted that he seemed to have moved from a garden to a desert infested by brigands and where, to resist, one had to become like them.<sup>8</sup> Jokes aside, he showed that he was up to his new task, and by word and example began to graft the traditions and spirit he had learned in Valdocco onto that land. In particular, he was the first Salesian teacher of the aspirant Simon Srugi, and therefore had to pass on to him, over the two years they lived together, something of his spiritual richness: he set him on the path of sanctifying every action of the day, living “the present moment” in the most generous and intimate union with the Lord; such that for Simon, when he was pumping water from the well and carrying containers to the laundry or to the thyme distillery “every turn of the wheel was an act of love of God”.

Fr Varaia played an important role in the delicate period of adjustment between Bellonians and Salesians. It is clear that the arrival of 25 Salesians and 5 FMA in six months (all Italians except one) had disturbed the balance of things, in terms of both quantity and quality (culture, language, ways of doing things ...). Dissatisfaction spread both among the outnumbered “Brothers of the Holy Family”, and the local teachers and workplace supervisors, who had to cede their place to the foreign Salesian brothers; this resulted in strong tensions. “Propaganda Fide” asked for the “*redde rationem*”, and Fr Rua, who had noted the “very serious grievances” for which “all the blame is being placed on us”, ordered that “Fr Useo and the Canon come here, as delegates to the General Chapter, to prepare the defence which is compatible with our circumstances. So long as there are no truly serious and, should I say, insurmountable difficulties, this would be my wish.”<sup>9</sup> Tensions eased over the months that followed, but the problems did not disappear, as we see from the account of things he laid out on 19 January 1893 when replying to Fr Varaia:

I share your problems deeply. This past year has been the first year since the arrival of the Salesians in the Holy Land and if it was a year of trial and tribulation for you, so too was it for me. It seems that the devil has sought to hinder our work there at any

<sup>8</sup> AIMOR 4.4.2: *Cronistoria della Casa di Beitgemal*. The first 5 Salesian Rectors were: Fr Varaia (January 1892 – October 1894), Fr Coradini (1894–1896), Fr Cantoni (1896–1901), Fr Vercauteren (October 1902 – September 1908), *abuna* Ishāq Giaʿnine from Beitjala (1908–1914).

<sup>9</sup> Letter of 7 August 1892, addressed to Fr Belloni and a copy to Fr Durando: ASC, A4480354; cf. also the letter of 25 August 1892 (ASC, A4510224), as well as one to Fr Paul Albera on 15 August 1892.

cost. But the good God and Mary Help of Christians have already come to our aid and I hope they will do so even more manifestly in the future, so long as we can withstand the future trials that the Lord may allow, with patience, humility and confidence in God. Be patient just a little longer and I hope the help of additional personnel will come. I was assured that the Congregation of Propaganda has written in favour of this, and all we are awaiting is the official announcement from the Patriarch and then we will immediately send the people whom our very dear Canon had told us are needed, both in terms of Salesians and the Sisters. With regard to material means, then, I hope that our dear Fr Piperni, who is currently in Mexico, will soon send help for the Holy Land. Let all of you agree to respect, obey and love the Canon as your local Superior; try to work together in agreement to save as much expense as possible, limiting yourselves to what is strictly necessary, and endeavour to ensure that the land yields as much as possible through your diligent work and also with the agricultural efforts of those who have to manage the work, and hopefully things will go better in the New Year. But above all you need to remember that *omne donum desursum est*, hence the need to resort to prayer, fervently and in faith (ASC, A4540326).

Fr Giulio Barberis, too, accompanied this delicate period of transition with a number of letters addressed to Fr Varaia in which he recommended prudence, taking things gradually, respect and adjustment to local traditions (“...had Don Bosco found himself in Bethlehem, he would have acted like Fr Belloni”), study of Arabic, practice of the preventive system, and other important points in a lengthy letter (7 sides) on 10 June 1892, a letter that was read out in public to all the confreres. In his letter on 8 June 1894 he offered moral advice and practical pointers for Betgamāl. Fr Rua himself had intervened on these matters with a detailed memorandum sent to Fr Belloni, entitled: “Measures required to purify the air at Beitgemal, to avoid fevers”:

1- Preventing fever by avoiding humidity at night; drink filtered water, have a healthy diet and avoid indigestion. 2- Combat fever with quinine or other powerful medicine, with herbal teas and appropriate measures regarding diet and rest. 3- Keep the creeks running through the valleys clean so that the water can flow freely. For some years now these creeks have not been cleaned and that is bad for health. 4- Plant two long rows of poplars and willows along these creeks. This will purify the air and you will also have wood. 5- Also plant many trees in the valleys and mainly close to the house. 6- Look after the forest, clear away the bushes from the saplings so they can grow into trees. In this way, the air will be reclaimed and the forest, free of bushes and thorns, will become a grazing area for the flocks during the summer. Until such time as these improvements are made, the confreres suffering from fever could go to Cremisan in Beitgemal. Someone has told me: regarding the poor air at Beitgemal, I really don't know what to say. Beitgemal's malaria is not just local: it is the same throughout Judea: even in Bethlehem which seems so healthy, malaria reigns. 7- I believe that when the trees that Fr Varaia was thinking of planting, eucalypts and poplars more than anything else, are known about in Beitgemal, much will be gained. 8- It would be a good idea to advise the youngsters not to play too much, especially when the wind is

blowing in the courtyard on the northern side of the house, which is very damaging, both in winter and in summer: and especially in summer, because young people, who love the cool air, do not understand the danger of playing in that courtyard, except when they fall ill. 9- There would be a need to organise a few bathrooms for the boys, with appropriate assistance. For lack of means, this was never done. 10- The nights are very humid there in summer, almost without exception: dew is plentiful. So after eight o'clock in the evening, it is not healthy to be out in the open (ASC, A4480395; cf. also ASC, A4540331).

## 2.7 Fr Michael Rua's first visit to Palestine (1895)

But neither letters nor visits from Fr Celestino Durando (July 1892) and Fr Giovanni Marengo (June-August 1893, with whom another two FMA arrived) were sufficient. Therefore, in 1895 Fr Rua decided to come in person (28 February–20 March), accompanied by the Catechist General, Fr Paul Albera, to clarify what were the main problems pending with the authorities, and to overcome the persistent difficulties that had arisen in the first years of fusion (and confusion) between Bellonians and Salesians, as also between the FMA and the “Missionary Daughters of Mary”. From the boat he wrote to Fr Eugenio Bianchi promising that while in the Holy Land he would pray in particular for him and the other novice masters (cf. ASC, A4480466).

His visit (12–14 March) brought a breath of energy to Betgamāl: he placed the work under the protection of Our Lady of Lourdes (whose statue he blessed in the grotto of the entrance square) and called it “the house of charity”, not only because he saw that good that was being done for the orphans, but also in the hope that the farmlands, now better cultivated, would also be able to provide for the houses in Bethlehem (called “house of faith” because that’s where everything began) and Cremisan (“house of hope” because it was already a house of formation for new recruits). The gift of an oil crusher and press from the Count de Villeneuve was part of this prospect of development (cf. CERIA, *Annali*, Vol. 2, pp. 185–187; AMADEI, Vol. 1, pp. 667–669; GREGO, pp. 16–25).

On several occasions following his visit, during 1896–97, Fr Rua sent financial aid; he repeatedly recommended that the Rector, Fr Coradini make the farmlands profitable, without thinking of new buildings or anything else.<sup>10</sup> In 1898 he sent the School Councillor, Fr Francesco Cerruti, for a visit to organise the houses of formation, insisting on the study of Arabic with a view to the proper integration of the Salesians in the local context (cf. Pozzo, p. 8).

<sup>10</sup> “I am told that Fr Coradini is dreaming about setting up a brick factory. For pity’s sake, keep an eye on him: we’re falling apart trying to help him pay his debts, I’m sorry he’s looking for ways to make new ones”: ASC, A4480363 (16 December 1896); A4480364 (13 January ’97); A4480365 (9 February ’97); A4480366 (11 February ’97); A4480373 (3 June ’97).

## **2.8 Erection of the Middle East Province. Death of Fr Belloni. Becoming an Italian “protectorate” (1902–1904)**

There were very important events for our story in the years that followed. On 20 January 1902 the Salesian Province of the Middle East was canonically erected, made up of 71 confreres in houses in Palestine, Egypt and Turkey. Some months later Fr Luigi Nai (1855–1932) was appointed Provincial, “Rector at the time of San Benigno Canavese, which had flourished under his leadership, and now it was his task to graft the genuine Salesian spirit onto the houses received from Fr Belloni. This choice of Fr Nai was considered a fortunate one because Fr Nai embodied Don Bosco’s fatherliness. He was not completely unfamiliar with the Middle East; he had just been there, probably sent on purpose, as an extraordinary visitor and preacher of all the retreats.” On 29 November 1902, among other things Fr Rua wrote to him:

I hope that Fr Barberis will help you to form the novitiate properly. I think there are very few novices this year. Try to see that there are many for the coming year: by then there will be time to discuss things. God willing, Beitgemal will start well and become a source of spiritual and temporal wellbeing for the houses in Palestine, which it can and should be. You should pay special attention to this area (ASC, A4520540).

Fr Nai succeeded in establishing relations of trust with Patriarch Piavi and with the Franciscans of the Custody. “Superior”, as title of reverence, was still given to Fr Belloni, but in fact his health was so precarious that he had already “handed over the tiller” to twenty-seven-year-old Fr Carlo Gatti, appointing him as his vicar. Just in time we could say: he died on 9 August 1903, 11 days before what would have been his 72nd birthday: “Emotions ran high, there was general mourning, and the funeral was a triumph. A number of Consulates flew their flags at half-mast, as a sign that he was always above any national disputes and deserved everyone’s respect and cooperation. The Work of the Holy Family had lost its founder, Palestine its father of orphans, the Latin Patriarchate a worthy priest and apostolic missionary, the Salesians a confrere who in his ten years of religious life had been an example of humility and simplicity” (V. Pozzo).

A charismatic man and man of culture, founder and administrator, Canon Belloni was the most representative figure of the clergyman in his generation, worthy of being appointed Patriarch of Jerusalem: in 1873 he was the first on the list of candidates proposed as successor to Bishop Valerga, but out of humility he renounced this so he could dedicate himself totally to his orphans (cf. GIANAZZA GIANMARIA, p. 12.). He had been a man of heroic goodness and humility, enduring insults and calumnies from the usual envious people, both at the beginning of his work and after the merger with the Salesians, even when he had the title of Canon of the Holy Sepulchre withdrawn from him (cf. CERIA, *Annali*, vol. 2, pp. 178, 180–183; DESRAMAUT, p. 24). He was

considered a man of God, a saint, and in the opinion of many of his contemporaries, something also shared by historians, he deserved to have his cause of beatification begun. Unfortunately, however, after his profession in the Salesian Congregation and transferring all his properties to it (in a handwritten will on 9 January 1903), he was opposed and discredited among the local hierarchies, and on his death, disputes over the inheritance of the assets that had belonged to him began; meaning that other interest prevailed over the opening of his cause for beatification.

Another important new development was the decision to place Salesian Works in the Holy land (except for Nazareth) under the protection of Italy. Up until then they were under France. The agreement was signed on 9 September 1904 by Fr Rua and Prof. Ernesto Schiaparelli, president of the ANMI (*Associazione Nazionale per soccorrere i missionari cattolici italiani*), who looked after the relations of religious congregations abroad with the Italian government (in a state of “separation” from the Catholic Church after 1870). We could say that it was an act of “political realism” that Fr Rua accepted, changing the position he had expressed in the previously mentioned letter to Cardinal Simeoni on 4 December 1891.<sup>11</sup> It was suggested by the prospect of practical advantages for the Italian confreres. But the anti-clerical measures of the French government, which had suppressed the religious houses, including the Salesian ones in France, Algeria and then Tunisia, dispersing the confreres in various dioceses, and on July 30, 1904 had broken off diplomatic relations with the Holy See, were not unrelated (cf. CERIA, *Annali*, vol 3, pp. 291–292). This decision would have lasting and dramatic consequences for relations between the Italian confreres and the local ones, who interpreted it as opening the door to undue political interference, as I will be pointing out further on.

For now I am resuming the particular subject of my research, the work at Betgamāl, that had become Simon Srugi’s home. Fr Rua continued to give practical instructions for a development plan for the farm and its environmental improvement to the Provincial, Fr Nai and his successor, Fr Peter Cardano, to whom he recommended: “What is important to us is that malaria can be avoided there. If you can make good provision for this, everything will go well” (cf. letters of 20 January 1903; 27 January 1904 and 19 February 1907, in ASC A4520542; A4520547; A4490624). I think this last point was particularly close to Srugi’s heart, as he was entrusted with public health, in charge of the infirmary for the boarders and the outpatient clinic.

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<sup>11</sup> “As far as protection is concerned, above all we have Providence, which, we have no doubt, will always manifest itself through the Apostolic See, teacher of wisdom and prudence: we will therefore accept no other protection than that which will be indicated to us by the Holy Father and by the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda. We do not engage in politics in our works. On this point there is no difficulty for us.” (ASC, G336X101).

## 2.9 Fr Rua's second visit and contacts with Simon (1908)

Fr Rua wanted to come back and visit all the SDB and FMA houses in the Province (after 1896 it extended from Constantinople to Alexandria in Egypt) during a journey in 1908, the longest one in his life, and one he also undertook as a penitential pilgrimage. This time he was accompanied by the Economer General, Fr Clemente Bretto who kept a very complete diary of it. He stayed in Betgamāl from 1–5 February 1908, and left behind a double list of recommendations regarding every aspect of the work, down to the tiniest details regarding improvement of the environment and hygiene and sanitary conditions, rearing sheep, cultivating vegetables, wheat and olives, and insisting on a balanced distribution of responsibilities over sectors among the Brothers; but above all he reminded the Rector and Prefect of the primacy of religious life and their fidelity to the Salesian system of education. Between the first and the second list there were thirty-one recommendations; it is worth recording some of them:

First: let the basis of everything be observance of the Rule. - Let the Rector “remind himself that his role is more spiritual than temporal, therefore let him be careful not to become absorbed in material matters to the detriment of spiritual ones. - See that there are two sermons every Sunday/Holy Day, one in the morning, the other in the evening. - Give the confreres two conferences a month and receive their monthly *rendiconto*. - Also give the Sisters a monthly conference at the Exercise for a Happy Death. - Teach theology to N.N. at least three times a week. He needs an Arabic-French or Arabic-Italian dictionary. - With kind words and fatherly familiarity encourage the confreres and domestics, informing yourself about their tasks and allowing them to explain their activities”. - The Prefect “should not give himself over entirely to material concerns; let him be present for the community practices of piety, and reserve at least some time for some sacred studies. - Recommend the preventive system and exclude any violent and lengthy punishments; monitor things to see that the repressive system is not used, warning those who use it (AMADEI, Vol. 3, pp. 391–393; cf. COLOMBO, *passim*, 474–476, 483–484).

The superior at Betgamāl then was Belgian Fr Charles Vercauteren (1865–1939, Rector from 1902–1908) one of the Bellonians who had made his profession as a Salesian in 1894. He had known Simon at the orphanage in Bethlehem and from then on had had the impression that he was a saintly lad. The Prefect (Economer) was Lebanese Fr Peter Sarkīs (1871–1937) also a former Bellonian; I will be presenting him further on. Among the boys whom Fr Rua met there, was also a small group of Armenian orphans in whom he took a personal interest; I will find the right place to open a “window” on them. At Betgamāl they were particularly assisted by cleric John Almagian, also an Armenian and orphan, since he was continuing his practical training there. We believe that Srugi had put into practice the instructions of Don Bosco's successor, those of a religious nature as



well as those pertaining to health and hygiene. They exchanged letters, two brief notes of which are extant, and that we will examine in Part Two, dedicated to his writings.

As was his custom as a man of government, Fr Rua was not just content to leave instructions, but wanted to be informed that they had been carried out; therefore on 25 January 1909 he wrote to the new Rector, Fr Ishāq Gia'nīne (Isaac Giannini), asking him to bring him up to date with everything, including the parish and vocational apostolate:

On another occasion when you write to me, give me some news about the place: whether the number of pupils has increased; whether they are good; whether good harmony reigns among the staff; whether the idea of sheep grazing has been adopted; whether any work has been done to protect you from malaria etc. I am very interested in the spiritual and material progress of the place, since it needs to be a source of vocations and of material help to the other houses in Palestine when well maintained. I would also like to know if you have anyone studying. Give me news about the parish too, since your chapel is the parish church; tell me if it has parishioners who come; whether they attend the Sacraments etc. Fond regards to all the dear confreres and the young people whom I recall with great pleasure and heartily recommend to the Lord (ASC, A4510475).

In the letter of 7 July 1909 he insists:

My dear Fr Giannini, Jaffa-Beitgemal. Heartfelt thanks for the greetings you sent me in yours of 20 June for my Name Day [*In fact it was his birthday, 9 June*], and especially for the prayers in common said for me. I am happy to know about the number of boys, though it is not much higher than the past year, and nevertheless that most importantly, they are good and profiting [from things]. I am pleased that the St Joseph's Sodality has started up among them, and that some of them are suited to the religious state. I too hope, indeed I am certain, that they will persevere if looked after well, as I recommend you do. I am also happy to know that you have developed the sheep grazing in accordance with the advice I gave you. And with regard to this I encourage you to be very careful that by taking in other flocks, they will not pass on diseases they are infected with to yours. Therefore, see that your sheep do not come into contact with the ones you are giving shelter to. I also recommend that you save some of the winter feed for the summer by leading your flock in the winter to graze on the banks or where the grass would otherwise die off. As for malaria I am happy with your proposal to plant eucalyptus, but I remind you that with some drainage work you can reserve some of your property, as I was convinced last year. As for the parish, put all your zeal into action and you will obtain ever more consoling results. As regards agricultural equipment, I am of your opinion, but I hope that Fr Cardano, who took an interest in agricultural machinery when he was there, will also have provided for you (ASC, A4510476).

Finally, writing to the Provincial, Fr Cardano, on 15 December 1909, he came back to what today we would call the issue of health and ecology:

As for the people of Beitgemal, about whom you give me such consoling news on several counts, I regret that malaria has developed once more: this makes it clear that we must continue to study the problem of the rehabilitation of the fertile valley, as we began to do last year with the Consul. It seems to me that we should be able to solve this problem with a certain ease and without great expense (ASC, A4490656).

Fr Rua died on 6 April 1910. His multifaceted and far-sighted action regarding Betgamāl is part of the history of this work, so it is worth documenting, given that it remains largely unpublished up till now. What is especially impressive was his constant concern to provide it with select personnel who were able to animate genuine spiritual growth, and to support it with material means. And at the same time, his practical guidelines for improving the environment and developing the farm, so that it could be a source of supplies for other houses in Palestine, and his desire that it become a seedbed for candidates to consecrated, lay and priestly life. What stands out is the man's versatility: both the idealist and realist, endowed with a refined spirituality but also a tangible physicality, ranging from ecology to ascetics, from pastoral to pasturing work, someone who dealt with the heads of ecclesiastical hierarchies, and looked after the boys in the playground for recreation... These are such admirable things if one takes into account that he, as Don Bosco's first successor, the superior of two religious congregations expanding rapidly across four continents, during those same years (1890–1910) had to tackle an enormous amount of work, documented among other things by the thousands of letters he wrote (cf. CERIA, *Annali*, vol. 3° pp. 895–899). We really do need to recognise that his saying that he had "Beitgemal very much at heart" was anything but a mere pleasantry! As the story continues, I will have further opportunity to complete this provisional balance sheet with other useful items.

## 2.10 "Bethgemal", as seen by Fr G.B. Francesia in 1909

15 months on from Fr Rua's visit, in 1909 Fr Giovanni Battista Francesia undertook a journey to Egypt and Palestine in order to make Don Bosco's works known to friends of the *Letture Cattoliche*, documenting the situation there in a pleasing literary style, that was also believably realistic.<sup>12</sup> On 5 August, having departed by train from Jaffa, gone through stations at Lydda and Ramlah, he arrived at the "Der Rabàn" station. There, during a brief pause on the way to Jerusalem, he was met by the Provincial, Fr Cardano, with a group of confreres and boys "carrying a sample of special grapes from Bethgamal. In our

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<sup>12</sup> Fr Francesia (1838–1930) was among the first Salesians to make his profession in 1859, together with Fr Rua; he taught Latin to Dominic Savio; Don Bosco chose him to be among his first trustworthy councillors; from 1878 to 1902 he was Provincial in North Italy, from 1886 to 1913 the editor of the "*Letture Cattoliche*" (Catholic Readings): cf. PIETRO STELLA, 'Francesia Giovanni Battista', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Volume 50 (1998).

language, Bethgamel means house of Gamaliel. His body, together with Stephen's and others, was miraculously discovered and returned to be honoured there as God wanted. Now at Bethgamel there is a very flourishing Don Bosco agricultural school.”

In the afternoon of 4 September, coming from Jerusalem, he arrived at the same station a second time and from there, on horseback,

around five o'clock we reached the summit of the fertile land of Bethgamel. I should not expand on what my confreres have done, because someone could accuse me of praising my own work. But I cannot keep silent because the cause of religion comes in here, and this is also the cause of civilisation. You can understand that there are Catholics and there are Turks [i.e. *Muslims*, in Fr Francesca's lexicon]: the fields are neatly divided and there is no danger of confusing which is which. On the one hand, the luxuriance of splendid and abundant vegetation, and on the other, desolation and an oppressive dryness. How many olives there are! How many vineyards! And what an abundant harvest! We finally got to the house. This agricultural school has around 40 orphans coming especially from Lebanon. On a regular basis they are learning to read and write their native language, Italian and also English. In general, those who show a sharper intellect and kinder heart take a course in Latin, in the hope that in time they will come to help their superiors in the beneficial work of educating and instructing poor Arabs. That day I also saw some who are refugees from Adana in Armenia. The story of these pitiful cases was enough to move us to tears.

Despite the draining of some of the rivulets, the unhealthy water stagnates at the bottom of the valley, so the climate is unhealthy; during the day it is hot and at night you can hear the jackals screaming as they ravage the vineyards. Nevertheless,

We grow wheat here, and there is more than enough for the many in the school. There is a mill here for us and the inhabitants; and I saw that it was working well enough. All day long I saw the Turks arrive with their donkeys, grind their small amount of wheat, and then leave. I asked the Rector of the house: these Turks don't bother you? – See, they also come here for the olives, and from now on, for the grapes, preferring to go over there (and he pointed out to me a small village, all Jews, near the station). To compete with us the Jews ask for less, have better tools, and don't take any of ours. Whatever. Turks are always Turks, and although enemies of any kind of progress and better off, they love and respect us. Can you believe it? – the Rector told me: these people see the sacrifices of the Catholic clergy and admire them. More than once they have told us that if they were not Turks they would like to be Latins, but never Greeks! I saw the Italian flag waving and wanted to know if it was known. – Oh, how they know it! Were it not for this little rag waving in the wind, how many risks there might be for our lives! Instead you can be sure there will be no damage beneath these folds. Some of the kids come and play with the orphans, and the girls often run over to the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians who have been lovingly looking after the smallest orphans for years, and attending to the education of some Turks who want to learn something. The day after was the feast of *Our Lady's Birthday*; I could only

but link the dear name of Don Bosco to this feast of our good Mother, who was his first teacher and then the inspiration for all his works. And at one time this land was also touched by her, materially!

As he said goodbye, some of the “lively little orphans” accompanied him down the hill to the station where the train for Jaffa was already waiting; from there he embarked for Haifa. A few comments: the information Fr Francesia gives us on Salesian work (SDB and FMA; number, condition and origin of the boarders; their studies and formation in work and piety as “sons of Don Bosco”; the influx of Muslim boys and girls from outside...) correspond to the data provided by the house chronicles. The picture he sketches of the surrounding environment and the mentality of the time is convincing, both for its real and historical aspects and for some shared perceptions at the cultural and socio-religious level that we know of from other sources (prejudice and rivalry between Muslims, Christians and Jews, and among Latins and the Greek Orthodox ...).

His report contributed to helping the superiors in Turin grasp the potential of the work, and in autumn 1912 they sent Fr E. Bianchi, his very dear friend, and Fr A. Sacchetti. Finally: we can consider that Fr Francesia (who does not mention any confreres by name, except for Fr Cardano) also met Simon Srugi – during the practices of community life, in the clinic or the mill, or while he was treating the “fifteen or twenty orphans in the early evening, all set apart and suffering because they had not washed their hands” before picking figs or grapes (that had probably been sprayed), and were complaining about itchy eyes: “I was afraid that the epidemic would spread the next day, and I had the consolation of seeing all or almost all of them appear before me with those lively, laughing, truly Arab eyes.”

These were the people Simon was living with, this was the setting and circumstances in which he carried out his various tasks; supported by the encouragement of the revered Fr Rua and kindly Fr Francesia, he continued his exemplary life as a religious, providing his contribution to the good running of the house, especially as infirmarian, primary school teacher and formator of the youngest children.

### **3. Simon as educator and apostle in the mid-thirties (1909–1939)**

Convinced of his consecration, and therefore given over or, as he used say “completely sold” to the Lord, the thirty-two-year-old Brother aimed at acting only for the glory of God, and his example had not passed unnoticed. We have confirmation of this from a judgement that the new Provincial, Fr Luigi Sutera (1869–1948) wrote in a notebook for the canonical visitation on 13 January 1912: “Srugi: impeccable and very happy. And to the edification of everyone.” This was the circumstance in which he gave a gift to Simon of St Francis de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life*, that remained one of his

favourite books from then on, as I will show further on. Simon acted in the first instance as the Salesian educator: his natural gifts predisposed him for this (sensitivity balanced emotions, spirit of observation, poise and stepwise approach to things, good practical criteria...) further refined by practical experience and God's grace.

### **3.1 Natural gifts and assimilation of the Salesian spirit**

Though he had not pursued any specific studies, he had an uncommon religious culture compared with the other lay and a confident command of the preventive method which combined reason, religion and loving-kindness. Beyond the few subjects taught at school and catechism lessons (including one to candidates for First Communion and to non-Catholics preparing to recant) Simon educated the boys through his life, being there among them and assisting them not only in study but also on the playground, in the church and the infirmary, on weekdays and weekends. His biographer, Fr Forti, has rightly highlighted the primary educational and apostolic dimension of the activity Simon carried out for years (especially before having to reduce it because of his increasing responsibility in the mill and the infirmary which absorbed much of his time) and sums it up saying: the most beautiful figure that the former students of Betgamàl remembered years later was his. It is worth recording, among many others, the following three testimonies: "The boys had more confidence in him than in their superiors and spoke to him boldly, without any fear." - "I knew many of the Fathers and Brothers in the convent at Betgemàl, but none of them, as respected and good as they were, has the gifts Srugi had. He stood out from all the others for his kindness." - "When Bro. Srugi was the assistant, well then, his scolding was fatherly advice, and his anger was just a friendly smile, and I was doing very well because of this gentle and affectionate approach of his. His kindness was of the kind that meant you needed to listen to him and like him. His love for us boys won our respect, won over our souls." Brother Angelo Porro provided this testimony: "The boys understood that Brother Srugi loved them, so they did what he wanted and what he sought from them." It is natural to comment: in his activity as an educator, Simon perfectly embodied the spirit of the famous 1884 letter from Rome in which Don Bosco wrote that the secret of success lies in doing things in such a way that the boys know that they are loved.<sup>13</sup>

### **3.2 Fr Bianchi as a spiritual guide (1913–1931)**

The one who helped Simon more than any one else to progress in the perfection of his Salesian consecrated life was Fr Eugenio Bianchi. He was born on 26 March 1853 in

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<sup>13</sup> The testimonies of the three past pupils are recorded by FIORA, p. 79, note no. 25 and p. 80; the third is Joseph Al Haiek who wrote on 22.9.1964: cf. AIMOR 15.1.2, folder 8.

Coriano (Forlì), grew up at S. Patrignano and on 17 March 1877 was ordained a diocesan priest in Rimini. Don Bosco's reputation was widespread throughout the region, and the desire grew in the young priest not only to meet him personally, but to enter his Congregation. In summer 1880 Don Bosco answered him (undated):

Dearly beloved in O.L.J.C.

For my part, I am always happy when I can add a few brave warriors to the humble ranks of the Salesians. So come: but as you have rightly said, come just to spend some weeks with us. In view of this you could come for one of the Retreats to be held at Lanzo from 9 to 16 September next. If this time is not suitable, say so and I will establish another time and another retreat session. Before, during and after them, we can talk about things and see what is to the greater glory of God. I await this with great pleasure, and in commending myself to the charity of your prayers, I have the consolation of professing myself now and always,

Your affectionate friend

Fr John Bosco

P.S. When you leave Rimini, organise matters so you can be away for some time should that be necessary.

Fr Bianchi would not have made it in time, so decided to take part in the session that followed: he bought a return rail ticket and went to Turin on 4 October, and then on to Lanzo. He made his decision during this period of discernment: on 13 October he entered S. Benigno Canavese to begin the novitiate which concluded with his profession on 4 October 1881. Coming to know his uncommon gifts, Don Bosco immediately wanted him at the side of the first novice master, Fr Giulio Barberis (1847–1927); 5 years went by, and then, having expressed the desire to leave for the missions, Don Bosco replied to him from Turin on 12 February 1886:

I praise your courage and good will. As soon as you have finished cultivating the field that God has entrusted to you, I give you ample permission from now on. God bless you and your work; and pray for me. I remain always in J.C.

Your affectionate friend

Fr John Bosco (MB XIV, p. 563s; MOTTO 2016, number 3236)

In fact that same year Don Bosco had made him novice master at Foglizzo where on 4 November he went for the clothing of the 75 new enrolments. The house had been adapted as best it could but poverty soon set in. On one occasion Fr Bianchi had an urgent need of 1960 lire, and went to Valdocco to Don Bosco who initially told him he was sorry but he had given all the money to the Prefect General, then went to look in a drawer to see if some more offerings had arrived in the meantime: they counted it together and it was exactly 1960 lire! (cf. LEMOYNE, Vol. 2, p. 617). Fr Bianchi, "Already a Salesian in

mind and heart before belonging to the Congregation, placed himself unreservedly in the hands of Don Bosco and his worthy interpreter Fr Barberis. Beneath his athletic limbs lay the kindness of a friend and a saintly and affectionate father.” (CERIA, MB XIV, p. 564). Fr Carlo Gatti, his novice, and who then became MOR Provincial, attests in the Mortuary letter that Fr Bianchi carried out his delicate ministry over those years

lavishing his most diligent care over more than a thousand young novices, and they all kept alive in their hearts the memory of his fatherliness that very often was also a mother’s tenderness. He understood our youthfulness and demanded of each of us only the little we were able to give. Very forgiving, he was prone to optimism, so he always trusted in the success of his ‘little creatures’, as he jokingly called his sons; and even when it seemed that his hopes were in vain, he hoped even more for a new breakthrough. He jealously preserved as many cards in his breviary as there were years when he was in charge at Foglizzo, with the names of the novices of each year. Every evening, before going to bed, he gathered up his cards and from his *prie-dieu* gave all his novices the blessing of Mary Help of Christians. We have often heard him express his fear that the sense of paternity, as he felt it, might be diminishing among Salesians. For him the father is all about wanting the good of his children, and he lived solely for his young men, he sought to know their tendencies intimately, he empathised with their needs, thus winning them over to himself; and when he had to correct their defects or oppose their desires, he found such loving and persuasive reasons that no one could resist him.

Among his novices were future saints already canonised or on the way: Andrew Beltrami, Louis Versiglia, Louis Variara, Vincent Cimatti, Augustus Hlond, Ignac Stuchly... In particular, he formed a deep spiritual friendship with Louis Versiglia who returned to Foglizzo after graduating in philosophy at the Gregorian in Rome, as teacher and assistant to the novices (1893–1896), and then kept up correspondence with him. The confidential letters Vincenzo Cimatti (as cleric and then priest) wrote to Fr Bianchi are now available on SDL.<sup>14</sup>

When Fr Rua decided to send the first Salesians to Palestine, he left the task to Frs Barberis and Bianchi: they chose the youngest missionaries from among their best disciples, asked that they write back frequently, and then had their reports transcribed, to be read in public.<sup>15</sup> Hence Fr Bianchi’s influence in Palestine was noticed well before he was there in person as the realisation of his long-nurtured aspirations.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. extracts from 5 confidential letters from 1892 to 1899, in BOSIO, pp. 36, 37, 54–58, 61. SDL is the Salesian Digital Library. The Cimatti link is <http://sdl.sdb.org/greenstone3/library/collection/holiness/cimatti1/page/about>

<sup>15</sup> In 1891–1892 Luigi Variara was among Fr Bianchi’s 140 novices; at his invitation he transcribed 13 letters from the first missionaries in Palestine so they could be used for spiritual reading; they include the three letters from R. Coradini that I used earlier.

In fact, in November 1897, at the end of his mandate in Foglizzo, he was entrusted with running Ivrea, then a house of initial formation, where he continued to look after the hundreds of novices, clerics studying philosophy and the “Sons of Mary” from countries around Europe, many of them aspiring missionaries. Finally, “on 9 November 1912, on the orders of Fr Paul Albera, I left for Palestine with Fr Sacchetti”. He jotted down some notes on the fortnight’s travels with stopovers in Loreto, Corigliano d’Otranto (so they could send the superiors in Turin a report on how things were going at the agricultural school there), Naples, Alexandria (Egypt) and Cairo. He disembarked at Jaffa, where he was welcomed by the Provincial, Fr Luigi Sutura who then went with him to Jerusalem, Bethlehem and finally Betgamāl. His is a lively humorous style, with frequent expressions of joy at the marvels of creation, and sincere affection when meeting some of his “little creatures” wherever he went.

Six months after their arrival in Betgamāl, having reviewed the length and breadth of the work, interviewed people in the house and beyond, the two visitors drew up an overall report of 15 large handwritten pages which was impressive for the competence of its analysis, critical diagnosis of the problems affecting the enterprise and for its realistic future planning:

The Agricultural School at Beitgemal has seen a period of decreasing decay over some years. It’s on everyone’s lips, especially outsiders, especially since there are other setups and businesses nearby that are very well run, like the Jewish school at Artuf, the Greek one at Bredge and the Trappist Fathers establishment at Latroun. What is lacking at Beitgemal is an initial technical set of guidelines and a work plan to be carried out by all the administrations. Beitgemal has been a real field of experience in which the skills and personal initiative of many have been unleashed, resulting in heavy expenditure which is not always remunerative and in many cases unnecessary; and each change of personnel, which is unfortunately very frequent, has seen the introduction of radical reforms and the adoption of systems which are diametrically opposed to those used previously.

They also noted: the boys don’t have the necessary strength and preparation; the animals are not appropriate as beasts of burden; the stables and equipment do not answer to the criteria of a modern, mechanised agricultural school (SACCHETTI, *Annotazioni varie*, p. 5 and *passim*).

They discussed this with their superiors in Turin who decided that they should stay in Betgamāl to initiate the recovery. Fr Bianchi continued his correspondence with many of his former novices from Betgamāl as well; so it is plausible that he would share this with the community for their edification and encouragement. Srugi benefited from the long experience of this extraordinary director of souls, and on the other hand as infirmarian he was particularly close to him given that, due to his poor health, he often needed assistance and care.



### 3.3 Fr Sacchetti, manager and *abuna* Sarkis administrator of the enterprise (1913–1938)

Alfredo Sacchetti was born in Florence on 21 July 1871; as a secondary student at Alassio he met Don Bosco who made this prophecy about him: “You will become a Salesian, and have many wanderings in your Salesian life, but it will come to a holy end” (*Mortuary letter*, in ASC: Superior Chapter Archives, no. 9403). He entered the novitiate at Foglizzo in 1889, and his novice master was Fr Bianchi; he received the cassock from Fr Rua in September that year, and the following year made his first profession at Valsalice, where he remained for his final year of secondary school and for philosophy. Sent as a missionary to Ecuador, he did his theology there and was ordained priest in Quito in 1893. His first missionary experience was brutally cut off when on the night of 24 August 1896, the Masonic government expelled the 9 Salesians in Quito and deported them to the border with Peru. After 41 days of a gruelling march through the forest, they arrived exhausted at Callao, the port in Lima. Two years later some returned, while Fr Alfredo stayed in Peru and in 1897 was among the founders of the college of arts and trades in Arequipa. After starting out as Catechist, Councillor then Prefect, he was the Rector from 1902 to 1904. Other than competently guiding the development of the agricultural school and gaining a reputation as a scientist, especially in meteorology, and being the editor of the national Bulletin, he saw to the construction of the church dedicated to Mary Help of Christians, attached to the Institute. It was the request of the Catholic Council of the province and the local population to honour the Divine Redeemer and the Pope at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, as a ‘fitting tribute from the city for the auspicious occasion’ (CERIA, *Annali*, Vol 2, pp. 698–699). Over those years Fr Alfredo kept up friendly relations with Archbishop Pietro Gasparri, the Apostolic Delegate at the time in Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia; it was a friendship that continued, even when he became Cardinal, the Salesian Protector and Secretary of State, as we will see later in our story. In November 1912 he was sent by the Rector Major, Fr Paul Albera together with Fr Bianchi on an exploratory mission to Betgamāl, and in April 1913 they both became part of the permanent staff there. As a polyglot, well versed in both biblical and scientific subjects, a public relations man, open-minded and jovial, he had first-hand experience of the world of agricultural schools. Thus at Betgamāl Fr Eugenio would be the Rector of the religious and educative community, while Fr Alfredo would be the “manager” and legal representative (“procurator”) of the business side of the operation.

But for the practical implementation of the recovery plan there was need for someone from the place who knew the language and the Arab population well. Fr Bianchi wanted Fr Sarkis with him. He had been his disciple in Ivrea, and knew the surroundings there better than anyone else. Fr Peter was happy to return to Betgamāl under his old master. He was the same age as Fr Sacchetti, having been born on 19 January 1871 to a Maronite family in ‘Āqūra in the Lebanese mountains; he lost both parents when he was just 3,

killed in an avalanche. As a teenager he was accepted by Fr Belloni at Bethlehem and after the fusion with the Salesians, was sent to Ivrea to redo his novitiate and do his studies in philosophy and agriculture (1897–99). In 1900 he returned to the Holy land (Nazareth, Betgamāl ... ) and on 29 September 1904 was ordained priest by Patriarch Piavi in Jerusalem. At Betgamāl he was entrusted with the direction of the main agricultural works and the supervision of the numerous workers and settlers.

With Fr Bianchi, Fr Sacchetti, and Fr Sarkīs (*abuna* Butrus as he was known to the people) a new era began for Betgamāl. [Photo no.10] The superiors in Turin approved the plan for the re-organisation of the agricultural school, the Holy See gave permission for the sale of land on the side that flanked Derabān and with the proceeds a new stable was built to house pedigree cattle, buy new machinery and a new mill from the Jewish Wagner firm in Jaffa. An exceptional guest lived in the house at the time, the famous archaeologist, Duncan MacKenzie.<sup>16</sup>

### 3.4 The upheavals of the First World War (1914–1917)

Unfortunately, the outbreak of the First World War (1914) froze projects and spirits just a year after the arrival of the new confreres, whose task it was to tackle the difficult situation. Fr Isaac Giannini (1878–1967) had completed his mandate in 1914 as the first Arab Rector of Betgamāl: following instructions from Fr Rua, he had led the SDB and FMA community to their satisfaction, provided pastoral leadership for the parishioners, looked after the religious formation of the boys and, at a professional level, encouraged study, respect for work in the fields. He had been struck by Srugi's example of life and during the canonical process would give valuable testimony in his regard, as I will say. At the end of December 1914 all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Palestine were forced to leave by ship from Jaffa for Italy via Alexandria, although some remained there and began a modest work.

The War forced the adoption of extraordinary measures, therefore the Provincial, Fr Sutera, who had to leave the country, appointed an Arab confrere in each house on 5 August 1915 to “manage things” with the aid of a council. He recommended fidelity to the Rule and that “*nihil innovetur*”. The Rector *ad tempus* of Betgamāl was Fr Peter Sarkīs, the Prefect Fr George Shalhūb (an astute man and one of the leaders of the anti-Italian faction), Prefect of Studies Fr Rummān Spiridiōn (capable but indecisive). Unfortunately, especially in the houses in Bethlehem and Betgamāl in that context,

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<sup>16</sup> MacKenzie published: *Excavations at Ain Shems (Beth-Shemesh)* in the “Palestine Exploration Fund Annual 1912-1913, Double Volume”. London, 1913. On p. 7 there is a photo of the “Convent of Beit Gemāl”, with its facade and southern garden. In another kept in the ABG we can note the “cart” used to reach the railway station and which he probably also used to travel to the excavation site.

inflamed by nationalism, not everyone was up to the task, and a nasty climate of suspicion and accusation arose between Italian and Arab confreres that led to painful divisions. For his part, Simon remained very obedient to the legitimate superior, rejecting invitations to side with the rebels. One detail: to escape forced conscription by the Turks, who had no idea of religious people without a habit, he had to wear the cassock. He was by no means displeased by this, and indeed regarded it as an honour; he looked after it with much devotion, and was happy to wear it every time he was master of ceremonies at the liturgy.

When the military campaign spread from Sinai to Palestine, Betgamāl found itself sixty or so kms from the front where there were decisive clashes between the British Army on one side (with a contingent of Australian, Indian and New Zealand soldiers and an Italian unit) and the Turks on the other: the latter, after losing the battle at Beersheba and Gaza (October-November 1917), set up camp at Betgamāl which seemed to be a strategic position. Up to a hundred defeated and hungry infantrymen and five hundred horsemen were stationed in the buildings and on the vast estate, where they made mincemeat of everything: emptied the storerooms and cloakrooms, took away the livestock, equipment and furnishings, cut down a few thousand trees, including 300 olive trees, and even removed the roots to provide fuel for the train. For some time the confreres, treated like “bargaining chips”, were imprisoned in Ramlah, and the boarders in a Muslim orphanage in Jerusalem.

Having returned to their property occupied by the military, the confreres also had to make room for the Salesians from Cremisan and Bethlehem where an epidemic had broken out; many evacuees were accommodated for almost two years, thus increasing the work of Fr Cantoni the doctor and infirmarian Srugi, and mouths to feed for the bursar.<sup>17</sup> It is a fact that the countryside, worked by a larger number of confreres and boys, could have provided sufficient supplies for everyone, residents and refugees; but the Turkish soldiers acted as masters, and the tax office, despite the war, also demanded its share! As well as the annual tax on the property (*vercu/vergi*), the tithe on all the summer-autumn and winter-spring harvests had to be paid in kind.<sup>18</sup> Among the refugees was Brother

<sup>17</sup> SACCHETTI, *Annotazioni varie*, pp. 20–22; IDEM, *Appunti di cronaca*: “June 1916: people arrive from Bethlehem where cholera has broken out: 10 confreres, domestics and 20 pupils”. Problems settling in, lack of what was needed. “On 28.5.17 10 confreres and a pupil arrived from Cremisan, on the 25th their beds had arrived on the backs of camels.” Many confreres and boys, the Sisters and their helpers often came down with malaria (including Srugi); there were cases of cholera in the nearby village of Zacharia. Efforts by a British military doctor from Artūf, and doctors from Tantur and Ramlah alleviated the situation, but did not help save Brother Luigi Pogliotti who went mad and died on 1 September 1917.

<sup>18</sup> Fr Sacchetti recorded the following on 31.7.17: “estimate of harvest (and tithes thereof) negotiated with the *Kaimakan* in Jaffa: wheat 6,000 Kg (750), grapes 3,200 (400), figs 400 (50), olives 64 (8), almonds 300 (37), eggplants 200 (25), tomatoes 250 (31), pumpkins 400 (50)”.

Angelo Bormida (1870–1917), an excellent draughtsman and cabinetmaker, who carried out maintenance and painting work in various parts of the house during those years, and helped to brighten up liturgical feasts with music and choir singing.

During this confused period, with people of different nationalities and languages, bizarre episodes could occur, such as the following, summarised in the house chronicle: “On 7.5.17 an officer from Wadi Sarrar arrived telling us that the thresher was to be sent to Beersheba. Fr Peter went to Wadi Sarrar to speak with the commander of the *manzel* but was unable to hang on to the machine”, which couldn’t be moved despite the efforts of Brothers Flesia and Bormida; then some German soldiers intervened, assisted by some Armenian technicians who succeeded in loading it onto a large truck. But “on 13.5.17: three Jewish officers arrived with soldiers and mules, with a letter from Watsfi Bey, the Rector at Latroun and they too were charged with getting hold of the thresher. It was a real comedy”. The episode ended on 8 September 1917 when they brought the thresher back to Betgamāl, but not without them asking on 17.9.17 for “two beasts to be slaughtered as a contribution to the army.” To supplement this, it seems they also took “Giamila”, Fr Sarkis’ mule, with them. He went looking for it in vain for three days! (ABG: SACCHETTI, *Appunti di cronaca*).

The fact that when they left, the Turkish soldiers did not harass the people or carry out a scorched earth policy at Betgamāl, was due to the favourable impression created by the work being done for the orphans and the poor and the sick in the area, as recognised by the commander, who refused to carry out the deportation order, saying: “You people are working for humanity. Stay calm and say hello to the British.” Years later, the author of the *Cronistoria ispettoriale* (the history of the Province) was rightly able to write: “The Salesians at Beitgemal need to be grateful to Divine Providence for two very special reasons: for successfully remaining on their property, and for being saved from exile at the last moment due to the gratitude of the Turkish commander.”<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, the British army, continuing its advance towards Ramleh and Jaffa and Jerusalem, set up a “Junction” (connecting base), at Wadi Sarar, 7 km north-west of Betgamāl, which did not delay in benefiting from their presence: Fr Sacchetti notes on 29 and 30 November 1917: “After the confreres from Cremisan, also Fr Rosin and Brother Zanchetta from Bethlehem were arrested and taken away. On 1 December 1917, their fate was commended to the Australian military chaplain, Fr Joseph Bede McDonell, who was able, from Egypt, to inform our superiors in Turin and then, through the Spanish Consul, the Holy See. Italian *carabinieri* and Australian and Indian medical personnel provided basic necessities: foodstuffs, medical stocks and first-aid supplies, blankets,

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<sup>19</sup> ABG: chronicle 12–18 November 1917. From 20–24, shelling took place nearby, on the 27th the first British reconnaissance team appeared and finally, on 9 December, they entered Jerusalem.

“African fabric” and articles of clothing, like the military jackets that Srugi habitually wore. [Cover photos, nos. 13, 20, 26, 39, 42, 44, 47, 50, 53, 56, 59, 60]. On the other hand, the chronicler did not fail to note that the Salesians provided Catholic soldiers not only religious assistance (we remember that Betgamāl was a parish) but also the wine and pork they had managed to save (since these were *taboo* for Muslim Turks).

### **3.4.1 Discovery of St Stephen’s tomb: the contributions of Bro. Bormida and Fr Gisler (1916–1917)**

As I have already indicated, one of the reasons why Fr Belloni preferred to purchase the area around Betgamāl and discarded other offers “was to return it to Christian worship, since a widespread and respected tradition pointed it out as being the (village of) Kafargamala where the first Martyr was buried”. In fact, geographical explorations at the time credited the probability that the area corresponded to the “Gamaliel’s estate and country home”. In September 1916 there was a chance discovery that seemed to fulfil Fr Belloni’s hunches. While carrying out renovation works on the northern courtyard, the remains of a small apse-shaped Byzantine church came to light, with a much-damaged multicoloured mosaic floor. It was built over an empty burial cave. In Fr Sacchetti’s words there was excitement all around due to the unexpected discovery:

24 September 1916: Fr Maurizio Gisler arrived with Fr Eigmann. Fr Maurizio an architect and archaeologist, wanted to get to know the mosaic found in the boys’ courtyard. Excavations began with much enthusiasm and having found the mosaic in one of the places already known, they found a true work of art. They went ahead and found the foundations of a column, the width of a nave, and little by little, still under Fr Maurizio’s direction and digging in various places, they found other foundations of columns: the *Diaconicon* or Deacon’s altar, and this uncovered the sanctuary for us. But the amazement, not to say the emotion, reached its climax when under the same mosaic and in the sanctuary a beautiful tomb was discovered with steps perfectly cut into the rock. Father drew up a plan of everything and promised to study the excavations. There is no doubt that this study can throw new light and new proof on the Cafar Gamala, Gamaliel’s castle, 20 miles from Jerusalem and where St Stephen’s body was brought from Jerusalem by the early Christians and remained for 300 years or more. This is a matter we need to take very much to heart. There is no shortage of authors who argue in favour of Beitgemal, such as Meistermann and others. Fr Maurizio himself promised to study the matter in depth. *Fac sit Deus*. Will this be a new source of blessings and graces for Beitgemal? Excavations finished on the 27th, the day on which the indefatigable Fr Maurizio left on foot to return to Jerusalem.

Ecclesiastical hierarchies, archaeologists and scholars were apprised of the situation; but so as not to arouse the suspicions of the Turkish authorities, excavations were suspended and only resumed in July of the following year. The ruins of a small mosque

were still visible in the place, and it was near these ruins that the dedicatory inscription framed in a crown, three-quarters destroyed, and a vermilion Greek cross in the right-hand nave were discovered on the mosaic floor. Overall, there was evidence of what had been happening almost routinely in Palestine since the beginning of the seventh century: Muslim edifices were built over earlier Christian churches and in spite of themselves, they were preserving their memory. Since the war was still going on, the excavations were once again interrupted and the mosaics covered over, after Brother Angelo Bormida had faithfully reproduced them on cardboard, entrusting them to Fr Gisler.

A relationship of fruitful collaboration and deep friendship was established between the latter and the Salesians at Betgamāl. It was to last 25 years, in the name of St Stephen whose relics, after being found in 415, had been moved from Cafargamala to the mother church of Jerusalem on Mount Sion, where the Benedictine abbey now stands. Maurizio Gisler was born in 1855 in Czernek (in Croatia today), grew up in Switzerland where he specialised in architecture, taught art and built some churches. In 1891 he entered the Abbey of Beuron (Germany) where he became a Benedictine monk and after three years of theological studies in Maria Laach he was ordained a priest. In 1906 he was sent to the “Dormitio” abbey in Jerusalem, founded from Beuron, one of the first three monks, and was in charge of bringing to a conclusion the construction of this imposing basilica that was opened in 1910. He studied the layout of the Byzantine city of Jerusalem by analysing the mosaic of Madaba (discovered in 1898), took part in or directed many restoration works and constructions in Italy and various Middle Eastern countries, and was placed in charge of the archaeological museum of the “Dormitio”. Given the links with St Stephen and his relics, Fr Maurizio became immediately interested in the discovery at Betgamāl and began preparing a preliminary report, until he was interned in the prisoner-of-war camp in Sidi Bisher in Alexandria. But even there, during 1918 he managed to write a lengthy memoir entitled *The first tomb of St Stephen Protomartyr and Saints Gamaliel, Nicodemus and Abibo at Cafargamala*, which he gave to Fr Sacchetti in 1919, with a view to its publication. Due to the adverse circumstances, this had to be postponed.

### **3.5 The post-war period and the beginning of the British Mandate (1918–1923)**

The “useless slaughter” (Benedict XV) of the First World War had not only destroyed property and caused millions of deaths, but left behind hundreds of thousands of refugees of various nationalities in the Middle East, especially Armenian orphans who had survived the genocide in 1915–1916. In the years that followed a good number also came to Betgamāl and the Salesians equipped themselves to give them accommodation, food and clothing, education, medical care and spiritual comfort ... having recourse in the first instance to the “charity of the Pope”, Benedict XV, and international charity organisations. I am dedicating this chapter to a “window” on this situation.

### 3.5.1 Needs: reconciling people, rebuilding, reviving works

Work began on clearing and rebuilding; the regular activities of the “practical agricultural school” gradually resumed with a reduced number of pupils, even without waiting to receive compensation from the Italian authorities for damage to property and war pensions (for those who had suffered loss of loved ones). 1918 as a year of exuberant vitality: “We continued to help the Salesians in Bethlehem and Cremona, giving what we could. The British Government immediately showed us benevolence and on the initiative of Colonel Gabriel, Councillor for Finance, we were given a grant of 10 pounds a month to train some young people in agriculture and meteorology for the Government.” (SACCHETTI, *Annotazioni varie*, p. 41).

But it was above all the confreres who needed reconciling. Fr Peter Ricaldone (1870–1951) was sent from Turin in 1918, in the twin role of General Councillor for Technical and Agricultural Schools, and extraordinary Visitor with full canonical powers for mending the division between Arab and Italian confreres. It would have seemed almost a “mission impossible”, involving as it did the reinstatement of the previous superiors and convincing the seven confreres who had opposed them to return to the ranks. After months of meetings, dialogue and discernment, without any formal discipline process and “by using more mercy than severity”, he accepted that some would leave the Congregation and join the patriarchal clergy, others would be recalled to Italy, while the majority would adjust to returning to the “status quo ante”. I refer to the description of events given by his biographer, F. Rastello, basing himself on internal documents.<sup>20</sup>

I will dwell here on Fr Ricaldone’s numerous and lengthy visits to Betgamāl (19.01, 29.01–12.02, 4–9.03.1919), during which he laid down measures for fighting malaria and improving the health and hygiene situation; in order to avoid an influx of the sick into the community area, he wanted Srugi’s clinic to be located in one of the rooms off the entrance hallway; he personally drew up a set of regulations and curriculum for the agricultural school, establishing five specialisations, and explaining: “As far as education is concerned, we follow the method brilliantly dictated by the Venerable Don Bosco, which consists essentially of surrounding the pupils with continuous paternal assistance, so that it becomes almost impossible for them to neglect their duties.” This was a description that Srugi could perfectly identify with. “Fr Ricaldone reported a good impression of the religious community: good-spirited confreres, zealous priests and excellent brothers. He gave special praise to the economist, Fr Eigmann, for the most noble approach he took

<sup>20</sup> RASTELLO, Vol. 1, pp. 314–333. A more dramatic reconstruction instead is provided by DESRAMAUT, pp. 127–138; BORREGO, Chap. VI; and PIERACCINI, who had access to hitherto secret documents in archives in Jerusalem and Rome, but not to those of AIMOR.

toward his Italian confreres in the very difficult moments of the antagonism between Arabs and Italians.” (RASTELLO 326ff.). Writing on 9 March 1919 to the Rector Major, Fr Paul Albera he summed things up: “There are some excellent Brothers in this house: Srugi, an Arab who has the respect of everyone.”

Fr Ricaldone was accompanied by Fr Eusebio Vismara (1880–1945) who joined him in the investigation concerning “internal events that had occurred especially at Bethlehem during war time”. The hypothesis that Srugi took advantage of the presence of this well-known liturgist will be confirmed by what we will see ahead when we speak about his role as master of ceremonies (AIMOR 4.4.2; cf. VALENTINI, *passim*). *Commendatore* (Knight Commander) Ernesto Schiaparelli also made a visit, not only to admire the splendid mosaics of the *Martyrium*, but also to assess the real state of the war damage to the work, which remained under the protection of his ANMI. He was disliked by the Arab confreres, who accused him of having helped divert Salesian houses in the Middle East from their religious mission by placing them at the service of Italian colonial policy. Fully aware that there was a cultural war going on, Fr Ricaldone put the following urgent provision in writing: “*It is absolutely essential for the Salesians to get to know Arabic.*” In view of this he proposed that that same year a dozen of the best young men at Penango be chosen and sent to Cremisan where they could pursue their studies and start studying Arabic at once.” (RASTELLO p. 319).

Thanks to the interest of the British Governor and the Italian and Spanish Consuls and with the advice of Antonio Barluzzi (1884–1960), who came to Palestine as a lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers, then an ANMI representative and soon the chief architect of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, Fr Ricaldone initiated new buildings with a view to reviving the business side of the operation (cf. RASTELLO, pp. 320, 326–328, 331). It did not take long for the results of his mission to come to fruition: on 16 August 1920 an award-giving ceremony took place in rooms at the Salesian school in Jerusalem in the presence of the highest Church, civil and military officials. Fr Sacchetti read out a detailed “Memoir” highlighting the goals that had been achieved by the “practical agricultural school” just two years after the end of the war (especially: land reclamation, mechanisation and re-forestation), thanks to the help of the three main benefactors: Pope Benedict XV (who had “adopted” 18 orphans for four years), the Italian Government and the British authorities. In the name of the latter, General Arthur Wigram Money (1866–1951), head of the Aviation Headquarters, thanked the Salesians for services rendered in Palestine, saying among other things: “You have trained many of our agricultural and meteorological staff freely, in the language of the country, and without regard to race or creed, and you were the first to lay down forest trees for the future of the country”. Other than the symbolic value of the ceremony, we need to emphasise that the new graduates in meteorology were immediately taken on for 5 years by British civil aviation and they and others were given a savings bank passbook



at the headquarters of the *Banco di Roma* in Jerusalem, with their first credit in valuable Egyptian currency (cf. ABG, *Registro dei voti*).

### 3.5.2 Priorities: Fr Albera and Fr Rinaldi guide Salesian renewal (1920–1925)

The inauguration of the monument to Don Bosco that stands in front of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin (23.05.1920), offered the Rector Major, Fr Paul Albera, an opportunity to encourage Salesians: “Bringing Don Bosco back to life in us is the most beautiful monument with which we can honour his memory and make it precious and beneficial to future centuries.” In his last circular letters he set himself the task of imprinting on the souls of his sons the spiritual features of their father: the educator and apostle, charismatic founder and saint, going back to the sources, the dream at 9 years of age. In his circular of 18.10.1920 he explained that this initial seed grew gradually over the years at Valdocco, becoming the rule and method for the religious as well as apostolic and educative life that Don Bosco practised with his first followers, inaugurating a new way of simultaneously achieving personal holiness and carrying out the apostolate:

Don Bosco realised that self-sanctification and the apostolate could go hand in hand. It was his experience first of all, and he then determined that his sons should do the same, giving such a preference to the apostolate that superficial observers might believe that he had formed a society of zealous priests and willing laymen for the sole purpose of devoting themselves to the education of youth. And it could seem that the first article of our Constitutions implies the same, since the primary aim of our own sanctification is declared only through a secondary proposal: *Members, while striving for Christian perfection, will carry out all kinds of works of charity*, etc. Our Rule, like our founder’s life, has personal sanctification and the apostolate advance together, indeed in a certain sense the apostolate is the effective cause of religious perfection: inasmuch as those who consecrate themselves to the Salesian apostolate must necessarily support by their own example the teachings that they impart and the virtues that they inculcate.

All of our Venerable Father’s life was a relentless, hard-working apostolate; and at the same time he was so ardent in his pursuit of perfection that it is impossible to say whether he was thinking of this most of all, or of doing good to his dear young ones: for him religious perfection and apostolate were at one throughout his entire life! Dear confreres, the more we study this blessed and marvellous life, the better we will be convinced that to be truly his sons, we must work, like him, for our religious perfection in the most active and fruitful exercise of the apostolate imposed on us by our vocation. In him, apostolate and religious perfection were two simultaneous acts that almost merged into one (*Circolari*, pp. 311, 312, 332–334, 339).

Srugi, too, aimed at achieving this “grace of unity”, carrying out his tasks as an educator and infirmarian in union with God, in an uninterrupted exercise of virtue.

We will be able to show the truth of this as the story continues. But for now let me highlight some other guidelines for renewal that Fr Albera drew up in 1921, his final year as Rector Major: when launching the programme of celebrations for the third centenary of death of St Francis de Sales (1622–1922), he encouraged the reading of his life and writings, so we would imitate him as a model for personal sanctification and an educative apostolate, following in Don Bosco's footsteps; he explained that the holy Doctor drew pastoral charity and its characteristic virtues from the Sacred Heart (humility, kindness, amiability, gentleness), so much so that Jane Frances de Chantal called him "the son of the Sacred Heart"; he concluded, therefore, that one of the ways of honouring our holy Patron was to renew our devotion to the Sacred Heart.

In his final letter (21.09.1921) the superior added: "St Francis de Sales, through his example, apostolate and writings, was an outstanding educator of perfection and holiness among his contemporaries"; his pedagogy relies on supernatural principles, proceeds gradually, with gentleness and kindness, "*little by little, slowly, gently, like the angels do, with gracious movements and without violence*"; Don Bosco "modernised" these principles and this approach, drawing vocations even from among his "little rascals". In this regard, on another occasion Fr Albera invited us to "bear in mind something very important for us, and this is that for Don Bosco the more mischievous ones (he called them his *birichini*) or in other words the more restless and lively ones, offer good ground for vocations, since they are more ardent and so big-hearted that they feel compelled to go out of themselves, to love, and consequently to give, to give of themselves, then, and finally to sacrifice themselves totally for the good of others. His best conquests were from among boys of that kind" (*Circolari*, pp. 505–506; 465ff.).

His successor, Fr Philip Rinaldi (1856–1931) developed many of these themes. His masterful interpretation of the Constitutions was historic: they are the mature result of the divine-human affair that had already begun in the "dream-cum-vision" at 9 years of age, something that Don Bosco first inscribed in the hearts of his young collaborators, tried out over long years of practical life at Valdocco, and then formulated in terms conducive to what he wanted, not so much as an order or congregation, but a family. The soul of this long charismatic history is the preventive approach, and its concrete expression is friendly assistance understood as habitual presence among young people and sharing their life (cf. ACS 5 (1924) no. 23, pp. 177–199).

To fruitfully celebrate the "Golden Jubilee of the Rule" (1874–1924) he prescribed that after a triduum of preparation (of which "the most important part for us must consist in making meditation and spiritual reading in common on chosen points, e.g. on the preface Don Bosco himself provided"), on 3 April 1924 every confrere should approach the altar and receive a copy of the renewed text. "During this year, beginning from April, let evening reading in the refectory end with five articles of the Constitutions or Regulations.

And so we will get to know our life better and familiarise ourselves with the new wording.” He prescribed that in church and at table, other than the Rule, there be read “as soon as possible”, some volumes of the *Biographical Memoirs* and Lemoyne’s *Life* of Don Bosco, as well as circulars by Fr Rua and Fr Albera as interpreters of the true spirit of St Francis de Sales and Don Bosco. He gave Rectors, as one of the three commitments for 1923 that they “practise the preventive system with the young, and get all the confreres to be present during recreations”. In support of this, the Professional Councillor, Fr Ricaldone, asked them to encourage the emergence of vocations:

Let everyone work with commitment in the individual houses, returning to the beautiful customs of Don Bosco’s early days when all the confreres were together with the young, both in church and in recreation, beneath his fatherly gaze, almost as a large family that enamoured the young of Salesian life. In this respect especially our dear confreres in charge of workshops and the Brothers in general can do a great deal of good, and they are all recommended to spend as much time as they can with their pupils. This is so important that our Very Reverend Rector Major, has included among the rules for the extraordinary visitation to the houses, to ensure that *Salesian traditions and the preventive system are observed, and that confreres are involved with and live the life of their pupils*. ACS 3 (1923) no. 21, pp. 120–122; 5 (1924) no. 23, pp. 175–176, 197–198.

There is no doubt that the community at Betgamāl, led by Fr Bianchi, had fully complied with the instructions of the superiors: the books and circulars that Fr Rinaldi recommended can still be found in the community library. Srugi had personal copies of some of them: we can be sure that he was able to accept the grace of those events in order to pursue the path of personal sanctification and apostolate with renewed impetus. During the retreat in 1926 he wrote down these resolutions: “I will renew my vows every day to remind myself that I am a religious. I will always keep before me the exact observance of my Vows and the holy Rule”; during the retreat in 1928: “I will not let either a Sunday or feast day go by without reading the holy Rule and giving good thought to what I am reading so as to put it into practice. I will be generous with the Lord in putting into practice the smallest Rules considering them as a means of perfection”; and again in 1935: “I will often read the holy Rule so as to note the points where I am lacking and to correct my defects.” As our story continues we will be able to see how Simon lived the spirit and practice of Salesian assistance so much recommended by Frs Rinaldi and Ricaldone.

### 3.5.3 Appreciation for Betgamāl-Cafargamala. The encouragement of Pius XI (1923–29)

Systematic archaeological excavations at the Byzantine site resumed in June 1922, as well as studies on the “Stephenine question”. By comparing the *Letter* of Lucian, parish

priest of the Christian village of Cafargamala in 415 with literary testimonies of his contemporaries, a plausible identification became likely: this was the memorial to the protomartyr Saint Stephen built over the place where he was first buried in “Gamaliel’s villa (Cafargamala)”, to the north of the “field of heroes or men of God” (“*Delagabri*” and “*Debatalia*”), as Gamaliel had explained in a dream to Lucian, and that Arab tradition called “*Khället esh-Shugi’a*” (The land of the Valiant Ones)(cf. BEDE the Venerable, 1850, col. 996; 1983, pp. 129, 135; WALLIS, pp. 218–221.)

To make it known more widely through a publication which would gain recognition due to the competence of someone with first-hand knowledge of the work, in May 1923. Fr Sacchetti went to Germany to see to the publishing in five languages of the illustrated booklet by Fr Gisler that summarised the longer text, written at Sidi Bisher. Following the *nihil obstat* from Barlassina and the *imprimatur* from the Beuron’s archiabbas, it was printed by the Apostolic typographer B. Külen in Münchengladbach. Despite its modest dimensions, it was both a scientific and artistic work, and summed up 6 years of careful study on a variety of aspects: a chronological history of the excavations with photographs relating to the different stages of discovery; a reconstructed layout of the Byzantine church, whose burial space beneath the *diaconicon* was “the norm”, the standard; a reproduction in colour of the main mosaic; the interpretation of the fragment of dedicatory inscription. It also offered a photographic display of the biblical and hagiographical panorama of the surrounding area (Zorah, Wadi and Neby Būlos, Deir Asfūra, Gilgil, Yerimòth, ...); the reference to the sarcophagus of Saints Gamaliel, Abibo and Nicodemus in the cathedral in Pisa; and finally, it presented the Salesian work and the rebuilding project for the Shrine. The decisive argument was the following:

The small church has a standard sepulchre, solely for which and over which it was built. The tomb is also a standard one for the length of its side aisle; it is standard for its orientation, which follows its lines: it is standard for the arrangement of the altars, since the deacon’s altar touches the edge of the sepulchre; it is standard for its mosaic which, in the part that covers the tomb, is of very rich ornamentation; it is standard for the height of the external main wall, leaving free the entrance to the underground sepulchre. This proves that the sepulchre existed before the building; and was to be honoured and protected by the building: it was its treasure (GISLER, *Caphargamala*, p. 18). [Photos nos. 15, 16, 17].

Hence the reason why first the Byzantines, then the Muslims, chose to settle on this rocky hill, even though they had the ‘gardens of Fattir’, fed by the spring of the same name, in the eastern valley 2 km away. It was the desire (if not the imperative) to preserve the relics of the ‘valiant men of God’, perpetuate their memory and invoke their intercession for the living and the dead (who were buried in the cemetery adjacent to the church, later the mosque, until the arrival of the Bellonians).

On 2 June 1923, Fr Sacchetti was received in private audience by Pius XI to whom he presented this booklet, as well as the translation of *Lucian's Letter* by Fr Fergnani in the text of the "Patrologia Latina". The Pope showed his appreciation, encouraged him to pursue the studies, and was pleased with the plan to build a beautiful shrine worthy of the ones already in the Holy Land, and welcomed Fr Bianchi's petition for approval of the "Pious Work of Christian Forgiveness" (cf. SACCHETTI, *Annotazioni varie*; FERGNANI, *Il Sepolcro ...*, pp. 146–149). Fr Sacchetti seized the opportunity to add that Fr Rinaldi wanted "our activity to also extend to the Muslims, by setting up special sections, through social work for them, thanks also to the contribution of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians". Pius XI replied:

Good, it is necessary to try to penetrate the Muslims with all the means that Salesian efforts can inspire. There is so much talk about the impenetrability of the Muslim soul, but I believe that if we seek to approach them with true Christian charity, and study their intellectual and spiritual legacy more deeply, many prejudices would be eliminated and the circle of sympathy for the Church would broaden, of which there is undoubted evidence.<sup>21</sup>

To crown these events, on 3 August 1923 came the first solemn feast, at which Fr Ferdinando Diotallevi OFM presided. Understandably very satisfied, Fr Bianchi immediately sent news to Brother Na'im Cumbāz in Alexandria: "Today, 3 August, great festivities at Beitgemal in honour of St Stephen. We celebrated community Mass with another Mass over the tomb of the Holy Protomartyr, in the open air! The Custodian of the Holy Land came to sing the Mass! Fr Provincial will tell you everything. The Holy Father has given us a special grace. We need to pray so much for this Vicar of Jesus Christ."

### 3.5.4 The "Work of Christian Forgiveness": evangelisation and human development

On 9 June 1923 the Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, passed on the papal approval of the Pious Work of Christian Forgiveness, "recently established in Beitgemal (Palestine) at the tomb of St Stephen and Saints Gamaliel, Nicodemus and Abibo". Its aim was: "to implore from St Stephen and spread among Christian people the complete and perfect practice of charity, including towards our enemies, so as to extinguish the flame of hatred still alive within poor and unfaithful Christian humanity, by establishing a centre of prayer and good works at the very sepulchre of the Protomartyr himself. Prayers are offered daily by Catholic and schismatic orphans who are educated there to piety and work by the sons of the venerable Don Bosco; and the good works are for their benefit

<sup>21</sup> Cf. SACCHETTI, *Studi Stefaniani, Serie B: Documenti Pontifici*, p. 3. During the lengthy audience on 24 March 1923, Pius XI had indicated to Fr Philip Rinaldi "the need to work on behalf of Muslims": ACS 3 (1923) no. 19, p. 76.

and for other orphans, Muslims who have been brought together and educated in the same institute.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus Betgamāl became the world centre for this “Work” and Fr Bianchi was its director and promoter. Enrolments included many groups, especially priests and faithful from many of the hundreds of parishes and chapels dedicated to the protomartyr in all parts of the world, who were the first to be contacted. But we also note that “schismatics”, converts from Islam and Judaism, and even Muslim girls were among those registered. Many of Fr Bianchi’s former novices made it a point of honour to be among the first. On 3 December 1923, Fr Sacchetti proposed to Fr Rinaldi how these initiatives could be followed up:

It would be wonderful and glorious for us if, after the opening of the basilicas on Tabor and at Gethsemane which the Franciscans will do in 1924 in honour of Jesus Christ, we Salesians could open the basilica of the Protomartyr. Meanwhile, with a view to keeping the promise made to the Holy Father in your name, I am pleased to tell you that we have finished the semi-boarding school for Muslims that we hope to open towards the 15th of the month. The British Government has declared it an official school and will pay the teacher (ABG: Poss, *Corrispondenza*).

On 26 December 1923 there was a very solemn celebration at which Patriarch Luigi Barlassina presided in the presence of Fr Gisler and the Franciscan master of ceremonies, Fr Golubovitch. The Patriarch gave “first communion to 8 young Greek schismatics who had been duly prepared and who had been received the previous evening, Christmas Day, into the bosom of the Catholic Church.” He then stayed in the house “for the whole octave of St Stephen and to preach a triduum in honour of St Francis de Sales on the occasion of the closure of the centenary year of his death” (A detail from the report by Fr Sacchetti for the *Bollettino Salesiano*, in Poss, *Corrispondenza*).

Naturally, confreres, Sisters, lay personnel and young people from the house all enrolled in the “Pious Work”; there was a need to strengthen the mindset of reconciliation and the attitude of forgiveness between local and European confreres in the first instance, as well as between young Arabs and Armenians. There were encouraging results, as Fr Sacchetti wrote on 30 April 1924: “Our youngsters this year are very good. The thought that they find themselves at the Sepulchre of St Stephen, in their own courtyard, nurtures mutual charity and forgiveness in their hearts. There hasn’t been the slightest bickering throughout the whole year. *Deo gratias!*” Srugi was able to seize appropriate opportunities to be an apostle of forgiveness at home and a peacemaker among the surrounding folk.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. documents and correspondence between Fr Bianchi and Cardinal Gasparri (20 May, 9 June) and between Fr Bianchi and Patriarch Barlassina (11 July and 3 August), in FERGNANI, *Il Sepolcro ...*, pp. 150–156.

### 3.5.5 Successes and recognition. Srugi “the best known and most revered individual” (1924)

As we can see, over those years the community at Betgamāl was active in many areas, and Srugi gave his contribution to one of them which was no less important. In a brief summary of things that stood out in 1923-24, Fr Sacchetti wrote that the Feast of St Stephen in 1924 was presided over by the Patriarchal Vicar of the Maronites Bishop George Dumet, while to sing the Mass the Batharramite theologians came from Bethlehem led by Fr Denis Buzy, the famous biblicist and archaeologist (1883–1965). On different occasions there were visits from ten of the lecturers from the *Biblicum* in Rome accompanied by Fr Mallon SJ, and some professors from the American School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, led by William Foxwell Albright. In the final part of this report Fr Alfredo wrote:

In accordance with the Holy Father’s wish to extend charity work to everyone, the surgical and pharmaceutical clinic, which has been working for many years for Muslims in the locality and the surrounding area, has intensified its activities this year. The clinic is run by a Salesian confrere, a native of Nazareth called Simon Srugi. He came to Beitgemal at 8 years of age in 1888 and has never left there. He has become an expert pharmacist and nurse and for around thirty years he has been carrying out his merciful task among the Muslims. Some thousands of people have received remedies from him for the body, but always combined with some good words for the soul, especially regarding devotion and love for Mary Help of Christians. Certainly there is no one else throughout the district who is better known and revered than Srugi. Women, men, children, the elderly flock to the door of the clinic in the mornings, waiting for Srugi. He arrives calm and smiling and seems to bring a breath of hope and life among these poor people. Often they come also to pour out their concerns to him. And Srugi’s judgement is always accepted by them all without question. The power of Christian charity! (SACCHETTI, *Corrispondenza*).

Apart from some exaggeration and lack of precision concerning dates, what Fr Sacchetti wrote is true to history regarding Srugi’s work, including the reverence people had for him. This is the oldest accolade, and it acquires value from the fact that it appears in a summary of events.

Improvements and innovation continued for the agricultural operation: fine vines were imported from the Golan Heights in Syria and from Mount Lebanon, citrus plants and olive trees from Sicily; thousands of trees were planted in the wooded area; mechanisation was introduced on a broad scale in the work in the fields. For all these reasons, Betgamāl in the Twenties saw considerable development, and won any number of prizes at agricultural shows in the region, so much so that due to its modern equipment and methods it was recognised by the governing body of the British Mandate as the “best agricultural school in Palestine”; the Rector, Fr Bianchi was given “the Cross of the Order

of St George (O.B.E.) with a flattering citation from General Borton.” For his expertise and merits, Fr Sacchetti became a permanent member of the “Agricultural Advisory Board of the Palestine Government” (and later on also *abuna* Sarkīs). [Photo no. 70] This context explains the protest that the Salesians sent to the Italian publisher Paravia in 1927 because its maps of Palestine showed all the Jewish agricultural settlements and not the Christian settlement of Betgamāl. The editor corrected this in the following edition.

Perhaps it was during this period of ascendance that Fr Sacchetti had the experience (“due to the kind effort of the British Major, commander of the Wadi-Sarār aerodrome”) of the first flight over Betgamāl, the Judean mountains and the Jordan valley. A number of photographs remain of this (amongst which no. 62). He described it in his diary in terms that reveal something of his spirituality: “I have to thank the Lord for this excursion. First for the idea of the flight and then for the fact that I found myself in the air, seeing how everything disappears if seen from a height; they filled my heart with holy affection and love for God, and I begged the Lord to receive the infinite revolutions of the engine’s propeller as so many bursts of my affection for Him.”

The encouraging post-war revival and the flattering results of those years were achieved thanks to so many factors all coming together: first of all, the tireless and self-sacrificing work of the coadjutor brothers, the instructors and young people in the fields, the vineyard and wine cellar, which yielded sales of wine and oil; the proceeds from the oil press and mill; the collection of part of the war compensations, the annual subsidy from Schiaparelli’s ANMI, help from the Italian Consulate, etc. But a determining factor was the contribution of many benefactors contacted in Europe and the USA, both individuals and bodies; among them in particular the Protestant “Near East Relief” and the “Catholic Near East Welfare Association”. So as not to interrupt the thread of this historical and biographical narrative, I will dedicate one of my “special windows” to this topic.

### 3.5.6 The construction of the new *Martyrium* of St Stephen (1928–30)

Other donations from various benefactors were to be used to start the construction of St Stephen’s shrine. The miraculous liquefaction of his blood which happened on 12 July 1927 in the Franciscan monastery of St Clare in Naples when held in Fr Sacchetti’s hands, was interpreted as a sign that the Saint was pleased with what was happening in his honour, both on the devotional level and the way people were being educated to forgiveness.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, once permission had finally been obtained from the archaeological authorities, the Byzantine mosaics were removed from the floor, and

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<sup>23</sup> Fr Alfredo detailed the event in his diary: cf. *Lettera mortuaria*, p. 4; the ABG has preserved the original manuscripts of the two eyewitnesses, Fr Ferdinando Diotallevi from Jerusalem 7.2.1928, and Fr Girolamo Torresani from Naples, on 22.2.1928; they were both copied by FERGNANI, *Il sepolcro ...*, pp. 126–130.



excavations were carried out around the grotto in the venerated area, and between March and August 1928, under the planning and direction of Fr Gisler, the crypt was built, which was blessed on 3 August by Salesian Bishop Felice Guerra (1866–1957), former novice of Fr Bianchi's and later Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba. [Photo no. 19] On 16 March 1929 Patriarch Barlassina ordained Fr Rudolf Frey there.

At this point the bureaucratic and financial process began to build a church over it in the form of the primitive *Martyrium*. On 24 March 1929, Fr Sacchetti, introduced by Cardinal Gasparri, was once again received in private audience by Pius XI to present him with the plan that had once again been prepared by Fr Gisler, as the side aisle of a large shrine. This time Fr Sacchetti brought a small album of photographs as tribute to the Pope. One of the photos shows the large group of Salesians from the three houses of Betgamāl, Bethlehem and Cremisan posing on the empty square: Srugi appears in it in the first row on the left, closest to the grotto where St Stephen's sepulchre lies (AIMOR: *Schedario*, personal folder Sacchetti: letters to the Provincial of 5 and 24 March, and 4, 10, 12 April 1929). [Photo no. 20].

Fr Bianchi, who had already earmarked his entire family inheritance for the construction, and commissioned the six hard limestone columns from a quarry in Bethlehem, invited the Rector Major Fr Rinaldi himself to lay the first stone; he suggested to him that if he were to put aside the strenuous sea voyage, he could arrive by train on the *Orient Express*, imitating his predecessor, Fr Rua. But when he declined the invitation, the ceremony was presided over by Archbishop Evasio Colli of Monreale, on 2 June 1929, coinciding with the beatification of Don Bosco in Rome. In his sermon, the bishop made an apt comparison between the martyrdom of blood and the martyrdom of daily life spent for young people: "Now I understand how God in his goodness had to gift the sons of Don Bosco with the tomb and *Martyrium* of St Stephen: since Salesian life, so apparently joyful in the midst of carefree youth, is all about tough sacrifices and true martyrdom" (FERGNANI, *Il Sepolcro ...*, p. 164; cf. BS 53 (1929) pp. 239–240). It was with this priestly spirit that Brother Srugi spent his hardworking days in the service of the boarders, and the poor and the sick outside. Fr Bianchi closely followed up the work and in December was able to show the canonical Visitor, Fr Antonio Candela, the final stage. [Photos nos. 24, 25, 26].

### 3.5.7 Simon and the lay apostolate of the "Confraternities"

Three other "pious unions" or devotional associations were active at Betgamāl, their membership involving Salesians, lay helpers and some selected pupils. Chronologically speaking, the first had to be the "Confraternity of Jesus the Adolescent" which according to data provided by the Provincial, Fr Salvatore Puddu (1874–1964), had been founded back in 1900, approved by Pius X and then by his successors. It received a strong impulse

from the solemn consecration of the church dedicated to Jesus the Adolescent in Nazareth on 6 September 1923. The festivities, animated by the French Salesians at home and in the field, extended over an octave of liturgical celebrations and cultural events, and one of the culminating acts was the consecration of the youth of the world to the divine Adolescent (cf. DESRAMAUT, pp. 158–160). Fr Philip Rinaldi wanted this event to be highlighted throughout the Congregation, as it fitted very well with the programme of renewal he was carrying on during those years:

With this in mind, it seems appropriate to me this year to establish the reminders for the Retreats: a) The life of Our Lord in the house at Nazareth, the perfect model we should keep in view in order to reproduce it as best as possible in every young person that Providence entrusts to our care; b) Our life of intellectual or manual work that we should personally carry out in company with Our Blessed Lady and St Joseph, because Our Lord came down to redeem us through the sanctification of work even before the shedding of his precious blood; c) Our life of submission to our legitimate superiors which is a duty for all of us: not a purely passive submission that awaits order in order to carry them out, but a loving submission that foresees wishes and guesses what needs there are, just as the Adolescent Jesus did more perfectly for Our Blessed Lady and St Joseph (ACS 3 (1923) no. 21, pp. 118–119).

At Betgamāl too, the ceremony of consecration was held, following the instructions of the Provincial, Fr Puddu. It is plausible that a representative group of confreres also went to Nazareth: would Simon, a fellow citizen of Jesus, have missed out on that? It was probably on that occasion that he had himself portrayed posing with one of his cousins.. [Photos nos. 13, 14, 41]. For sure he was committed to carrying out the spiritual and pedagogical programme drawn up by Fr Rinaldi.

From 1924 to 1927 he was also the animator of the “Blessed Sacrament Crusade”, an apostolic initiative promoted at in the MOR Province by the zealous Salesian priest Fr Mario Gerbo (1885–1964). In those years there were brief exchanges of correspondence between the two of them and with some former students, which I will deal with in the second part. Some years after we also read in the Chronicle: “8 December 1930 the “St Joseph’s Sodality” was established with 11 chosen by the Rector. The president was Brother Srugi”. It was further recognition of the sway Simon had over the boys and even his confreres. Among the Sodalities, the St Joseph’s Sodality (already in place at the time when Fr Giannini was Rector, and encouraged by Fr Rua) also had as its specific aim, other than devotion to and imitation of the guardian and educator of the adolescent Jesus (trust in Providence, poverty, interior life, work and prayer ...) to assist the Prefect in the maintenance of the premises, the care of tools and household materials, in short, the smooth running of the household economy.

For their part the confreres in Nazareth had asked the ecclesiastical authorities to elevate the “association” of Jesus the Adolescent to the level of an “Archconfraternity”.

When this was obtained in 1930, its spread increased, receiving applications for membership from clergy and laity, seminarians, religious sisters and enclosed nuns ... from many parts of the Middle East, Europe and Latin America, as demonstrated by the impressive documentation preserved in the archives of the Salesian house in Nazareth. In an appropriate section of this work I will take up the prayer of consecration written by Patriarch Barlassina. Here I underline the concrete purpose of this archconfraternity which, in addition to sacramental and devotional practices, required the imitation of the Adolescent Jesus, according to a precise annual programme in which each month corresponded to the exercise of a particular Christian virtue. On 24 May 1932 all the confreres at Betgamāl were officially enrolled. Simon Srugi is the first in the list of the Brothers, confirming the respect he enjoyed thanks to his outstanding piety and exemplary behaviour.

### 3.5.8 A humble confrere and educator

All the above occasional or daily expressions of appreciation he received did not affect Simon's humility or his basic attitude, summed up in the words of the *Imitation of Christ's* "ama nesciri et pro nihilo reputari" (Love being unknown and disregarded, Book I, Chap. 2, no. 5). By always being in the presence and at the service of God, he carried out his various kinds of educational activity and all his hard manual work to perfection, but always in the spirit of the Gospel's "useless servant" (Lk 17:7–10). He was convinced that he was "a poor wretch" and often applied the words of Nathaniel to himself: "I am really good for nothing: it is enough to say that I come from Nazareth. And didn't Nathanael say that nothing good can come from Nazareth?" (cf. Jn 1:46). He considered his life to be of no value, so much so that even when he was in danger of being stoned or stabbed, he reacted nonchalantly: the first two episodes of aggression took place in 1933 near the Samaritan Woman's well and at the foot of Tabor, which Simon was climbing together with Brother Giovanni Battista Ugetti (1886–1965); the third happened in 1936 on the train from Jerusalem to Derabān (cf. FORTI, pp. 116, 125 and 117; FIORA, p. 130).

The thought that something was owed to him as a tribute of merit or token of gratitude was totally alien to him. In 1929 he was selected to represent the Brother confreres from Palestine at the celebrations for the beatification of Don Bosco in Italy. But to ensure assistance to the sick from the house and from outside, he had no difficulty staying home, leaving the honour to Bro. George Harūni, who left in company with the Rector, Fr Bianchi. A similar episode took place in 1934 for the holy Founder's canonisation. These are two examples of how Srugi habitually practised the "ask nothing, refuse nothing", in the spirit of Ignatian and Salesian "holy indifference". But where did this habitual attitude come from and how was it nurtured? He himself spoke of its Gospel roots to Sr Tersilla

one day, when commenting on the brief prayer “*Jesus meek and humble of heart, make our hearts like yours*”:

Oh, the humility of Jesus! He was God yet so humble, so hidden. Thirty years in Nazareth without letting himself be known; working every day as a simple *garzoncello* [young helping hand] (this was the term he used, I recall it well), while we are so proud. In the *Vademecum* there is a beautiful prayer in preparation for holy communion, dictated by Our Lord to Sister Benigna Ferrero that I like so much, and I say it every day; there lies our nothingness.

He also explained why, at the washing of the feet on Holy Thursday, he was assigned Peter’s part:

So as to teach these poor boys about the beauty of this function, and get them to understand the honour they have had in representing Jesus’ apostles. So when they grow up they will remember this act in their life and will be better. But for me too, poor man that I am, it is a good lesson in humility: representing the Apostle St Peter so ardent, generous and full of faith. But think about it: Jesus, who is God, humbles himself before us his creatures, and kisses the apostles’ feet: What a lesson in love and humility for us!

This habitual acceptance of humility made Simon capable of practising the Salesian educative and apostolic approach in an exemplary way. Fr Peter Cattān, who was in Betgamāl in 1929–31 and 1940 to 1943, portrays the Simon of maturity and old age in these terms:

He was an apostle in how he carried out his work, be it in charge of the mill and the clinic, as infirmarian, and especially as a friend and older brother to the boys. Every good Salesian is also a good assistant, but our confrere Srugi was the best, admirable. He stood out for his unalterable calm and exquisite charity, and was able to coax even the most reluctant to obey the rules. It was enough to know that Bro. Srugi was in charge of someone or being the assistant to be sure that everything would go well. Already elderly and not well, when he was invited to be the assistant he did so gladly and to the councillor who apologised for causing him such a disturbance, he exclaimed: “Oh, but just think, you are doing me a pleasure.” And he recommended that whenever it was needed he should not be spared. He enjoyed seeing the children play, he was happy with their cheerfulness and their fun.

Here we have a qualified confirmation of how Simon had assimilated those aspects of Salesian spirituality that Don Bosco’s first successors brought up to date in their writings, and he remained faithful to them until old age.

#### 4. The “small world” of Betgamāl and Srugi’s mission at its service

At this point in our story let us pause to take a closer look at the actual human setting in which Simon lived and worked, with people at home and outsiders.

##### 4.1 Within the walls and nearby to the religious house (*deir*, “convent”)

In Srugi’s time, after the First World War, an average of seventy to eighty people were living “in” at Betgamāl: a dozen Salesians (priests, brothers and clerics); 5-6 Daughters of Mary Help of Christians working in the kitchen, wardrobe and the infirmary for the women, and some of their helpers; two Armenian families of lay collaborators (both “Salesian Cooperators”), 5-6 “domestics and teachers”; some workers and trade teachers; some forty or so boys/young men from 10-12 to 17-19 years of age who attended the “practical school of agriculture” (Fr Ricaldone had laid down that new admissions should be of an average age of between 12 and 15). As a whole they were anything but a homogeneous group; they belonged to different nationalities and rites: there were Arabs (Palestinians, Syrians, Egyptians, Jordanians) who belonged to the Greek-Catholic and Latin rites, Lebanese from the Maronite rite, Apostolic and Catholic Armenians, Italians, some Germans and Swiss, and in the last decade also some Poles, one Spaniard and one from San Salvador. The languages used in community life and the school were Arabic and Italian, and English as well during the British Mandate.<sup>24</sup>

It could be said that within the same large “compound” (but in separate buildings and respecting the Sisters’ cloister) the members of almost all the “Salesian family” groups interacted in the ways that were understood at the time. Among the Salesians, as well as being variously involved in the practical school of agriculture, some were at the service of the surrounding populations, mostly Muslims who chose one of them to be the *mukhtār* or mayor.<sup>25</sup> There was also a small shop where the farmers could buy essentials; Srugi was in charge of this for years. Occasionally hospitality was provided in the house to

<sup>24</sup> During the twenty years from 1918-1937 the average number of borders was 43. In the 6 binders in ABG: *Accettazione Allievi*, we read of applications for admission from bishops and priests of various rites, and from religious, sisters, relatives or family members, along with baptismal certificates, medical certification etc.: most were orphans, but there were also boys entrusted to them because of over-sized families, or because they were not suited to literary studies. They came from everywhere: from nearby Beitjāla, Ramlah and Jerusalem, but also from Kerak, Gaza, distant Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt, Greece, Constantinople, Cilicia ...

<sup>25</sup> For years it was *abuna* Butrus Sarkīs, a balanced and just man, often assisted by Srugi who held the role of *mukhtār*. Also *abuna* Rummān Spiridiōn and Brother George Harūni (1873-1955) were *mukhtārs* for some time.

some “outsiders”.<sup>26</sup> One priest had the pastoral care of a minority of Christians in the parish operating from 1880 but then, in 1927, passed to the diocesan clergy from nearby Deir Rafāt.<sup>27</sup> There were friendly relations between the male and female communities at Betgamāl and Deir Rafāt (orphanage and clinic entrusted to the “Dorothy Sisters”, and an agricultural school run by priests from the Latin Patriarchate), with exchanges of visits when there were patronal feasts or other memorials, and also some forms of mutual pastoral ministry (cf. FANO, Chapters 1–3 *passim*, and here pp. 64, 95).

Beyond the walls of the “convent” were poor little homes where the families of a dozen or so settlers, tenants and share farmers lived, a few watchmen and a camel driver, various livestock handlers, or to cultivate vegetable gardens, orchards, olive groves and vineyards, with the proceeds of which the Salesian work supported itself. [Photos nos. 7, 62] Some distance away two Bedouin clans were camped with their flocks of sheep and goats that grazed on the property, and around a 150 Muslim families in surrounding villages. Then there was the constant coming and going of people: day workers, the dozens of sick people coming every day to be looked after from some fifty or so villages in the district; farmers bringing their products to the mill and the press. Finally, occasional visitors: merchants; buyers of wine and various foodstuffs, tax agents, health inspectors or the police, “vagabonds” or freeloaders who would inevitably turn up at lunchtime.

#### 4.2 Ways and means of connecting with the outside

Before cars arrived, transport was on camel and horseback, or mule or ass. Journeys were occasional since the *deir* was almost self-sufficient: bread from the oven, wine from the cellar, meat from the stable and “lower court”, milk and cheese, vegetables, fruit, oil, honey; cobbler, carpentry, blacksmith, brick-making “workshops”, and from 1930 even a small printing press. [Photos 35–37, 63–67].

Connections with the outside were on foot or with a cart pulled by a mule as far as the nearby railway station at Derabān (which came into service between 1890–92, also

<sup>26</sup> As I have already indicated, Scottish archaeologist Duncan MacKenzie stayed there for a year and a half from 1912–13. Then from March 1928 “Dr Elihu Grant, a Protestant and former director of the American School at Ramallah was our guest for about three months, or in other words for as long as the excavations lasted in Betsames” (House Chronicle).

<sup>27</sup> Already in 1887 Fr Belloni noted: “The parish, canonically erected in 1880, had around 120 Catholics; it is at the expense of the Work; Dom Scanzio, superior of the agricultural school, is the parish priest”: *Bulletin annuel...*, Année 1887, p. 17. In 1894 Fr CONIL, on pp. 213, 215–217, describes the beginnings of Betgamāl, then on p. 218–219, other than indicating the parish, he writes: “Currently they provide the same spiritual services to European employees of the railway, an hour from the house. The School is still a hospice for European passengers passing through; it provides work for the poor and medicine for the sick; it has sixty-five boarding pupils mainly doing agriculture.”

known as Artūf, today Betshemesh). At Artūf, around 6 km away, there was a British police station and the post and telegraph office to which Betgamāl belonged. From the station one could head west to Ramlah (headquarters of the administrative district), Lydda (an important railway junction to go to the coast or inland, or in the direction of Egypt), and then on to Jaffa (and Tel Aviv), the most important city another twenty km away, where from 1907 the Salesians ran an elementary school belonging to Schiaparelli's ANMI (which they left in 1920 to take on the running of the one at Haifa).

To go to Jerusalem one could use the little train that climbed from Derabān-Artūf along the Wadi-Nahal Sorek and, after stopping at Bittir (from where a mule track led eastwards to 'Saint Philip's Fountain', Cremisan and Bethlehem.), ended at the "German Colony". Or first one went by cart or car to the *Bab-el-Wad* crossroads 12 km north of Betgamāl, and after 20 km of a truck route that climbed the mountains to the north-east one reached Jerusalem. Here, from 1904 the Salesians ran the Royal Italian Boys School situated on Prophets Street in front of the Italian Hospital where the Cottolengo Sisters were working. On the block below was the Italian Girls School which also belonged to ANMI, run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

In general, these were the destinations for Simon and the roads he covered as the one looking after the infirmary and clinic, whenever there was a need to go and consult doctors or buy medicines. In fact, given his frail constitution, he was not involved in working in the fields or vineyard and cellar, but continued looking after the sick, be they from inside (confreres and boys, often victims of malaria) or from outside, who came back even more battered than before from all the surrounding war-torn villages. To gain a realistic idea of the service provided, there is an instructive note on "Activities of the surgical and pharmacological dispensary for Muslims in July 1923-July 1924:

Purgatives; de-wormers; quinine doses; eye drops and similar remedies; teeth extraction; remedies for sores, tumours and bites; leeches extracted from the throat; coughs and diseases of the throat and mouth; treatment of light wounds; treatment of serious wounds; varia. This Dispensary has been operating free of charge among Muslims for about 30 years, and the picture here represents approximately an annual average. The annual average expenses amount to something around 6,000 Lit [Italian Lire]. – This is covered exclusively by the Salesians, but over the last three years ANMI has sent medicines to a total cost of Lit. 4,000. The British Government too has provided disinfectants to combat malaria" (AIMOR 4.4.1.1, *Documenti e corrispondenza 1901-1944*).

#### 4.3 A wise and faithful administrator

In the words of the Gospel, Simon can be said to have been the wise and faithful administrator put in charge of certain key areas of the work at Betgamāl, where on a daily

basis he carried out many and varied forms of corporal and spiritual mercy. Thus far, he received the sick in one of the rooms off the entrance hallway. To meet the ever growing number of requests, and also to meet the specific requirements of the British Mandate's governing body, there was a need for something larger and better equipped. The same view was held by Dr Elihu Grant, from Haverford College, then the director of the Archaeological School at Ramallah who, while carrying out research on the surrounding Palestinian socio-economic environment, lived at the house and was able to personally see how much was done; on 8 July 1930 he left this statement (kept among Fr Sacchetti's correspondence):

I have studied conditions in rural Palestine for many years and just recently have carried on three scientific experiments in close neighborhood to the monastic establishment of the Salesian Order at Beitgemal, Artuf station, Palestine. I want to bear my cordial, unsolicited testimony to the great value of the humane services of the brothers and sisters of Beitgemal. I am particularly impressed with the physical needs of those poor peasants living in over thirty villages who go up to the great house with their many sicknesses and ailments which the dwellers there try to minister to every day. I hope that their small equipment may turn into a well furnished dispensary.

#### **4.4 A providential benefactor: Fr Adolfo Tornquist**

Money is needed to shift from ideas to facts! While the aid promised by ANMI and the Italian Consulate were struggling to arrive, starting from 1926-27 the Providence came along through the two great associations N.E.R. and C.N.E.W.A., which I will deal at length with in the fourth "window", and thanks to Fr Tornquist, whom I now introduce. He was born in Buenos Aires on 4 December 1877, to a wealthy financier; he was won over to Salesian life by Bishop John Cagliero and made his profession on 14 November 1922 at Ivrea. In the years that followed the Rector Major sent him to visit the Salesian missions in Asia (cf. VALENTINI, *Profili di Missionari ...*, pp.546–550). During his stopover in the Holy Land, on 25 and 26 December 1929 he was in Betgamāl with the Provincial, Fr Carlo Gatti and Fr Antonio Candela (Councillor for Technical and Agricultural Schools) and took on the task of financing the construction of the planned building to the left of the entrance, to be used partly as a school for Muslim boys from outside, and partly as a clinic and dispensary. On 4 January 1930, in the presence of the chiefs and many inhabitants of the neighbouring villages, he presided over the blessing and laying of the foundation stone; in little more than a year the building was finished and its usefulness was soon evident. [Photos nos. 29-32]. On 21 June 1931 Fr Sacchetti wrote to him:

We are going through very difficult times but the Lord is clearly blessing us. The dispensary is in regular use with the Sister and Srugi and does immense good. I finished the Arab school in March; it is equipped with all it needs. I was expecting Fr



Shalhub to offer a 4 month course, the programme was printed, then Fr Shalhub did not come. I will send you photographs when the work is a bit more advanced. Srugi and Sr Tersilla (also a very capable Sister and all charity) send heartfelt greetings and promise to pray for your intentions.

Simon was particularly grateful to the generous benefactor; nor did he fail to pray for him daily. On 8 September 1931 Fr Sacchetti gave him an update:

We have found a Sister (FMA) for the small Arab school, and in October we will begin with the children of farmers at Beitgemal, about thirty of them. That is already a lot. The Sister working with Srugi is also a gift from God, because she does immense good. August ended with a total of 13,000 medications in one year.

The Provincial, Fr Lorenzo Nigra, wanted to point out in his annual report to the Superiors in Turin that: “1931–32: This year a small school, an infants school, was opened for the children of our Muslim workers. Average attendance (day time) 20 including boys and girls. The clinic has been extended over three rooms. There is a Sister for the women, and a Brother for the men”. In these new rooms Simon continued to carry out his daily welfare activity as a “Good Samaritan”; the sick came to him in their dozens and the reputation spread far and wide that he worked extraordinary and immediate recoveries. [Photos 33, 34]. This gave rise to jealousy on the part of a Protestant doctor but on the other hand the solidarity of a Maronite doctor in Ramlah who personally offered to be the guarantor of the “clinic”. Witnesses added that Simon, even in quite critical circumstances (such as when he was accused of having caused the death of a woman suffering from gangrene and had to suspend his activities as a cautionary measure) kept his calm, never complained about the offences he had received, entrusting his defence to the goodness of God.

#### **4.5 Sr Tersilla the nurse and Simon the pharmacist in the new clinic**

Just the same, regulations had to be obeyed, so on 25 May 1932, the “Chief Secretary’s Office, Government of Palestine – Jerusalem”, informed that “it has now been arranged for a Medical Officer of Health to conduct a clinic there once a month”. On the 29th of the same month, Fr Sacchetti assured the “Hadassah Medical Organization” that the clinic was being equipped in accordance with the rules and the handbook of the same organisation for use of the “Village Clinics”. On 29 July 1932 he provided Dr Haddad from the “District Health Office, Ramlah”, with the information requested (preparation, titles and practice) of the “nurse” and “Pharmacist Mr Serugi”); and finally, he assured him that a doctor from the Italian hospital in Jerusalem would come at least every two weeks to “hold clinic”. This would have ensured legal cover, and would have been an opportunity for practical training for the Brother and the Sister, who would sometimes

assist the surgeon in minor operations; this was nothing new for Sr Tersilla given her lengthy hospital practice, but it was for Simon.<sup>28</sup>

Who was Tersilla Ferrero? Born in San Salvatore Monferrato (Alessandria) in 1893, and while still very young, moved by a deep sense of Christian compassion, she had worked in civil then military hospitals during the First World War. An outspoken and strong character, “elegant young woman with a watch hanging from a silver chain and a gold brooch on her chest”, she kept her religious vocation a secret from her family until the age of 21 when she entered the FMA novitiate. She made her profession in 1916, opted for the missions and at the end of the war in 1918 was assigned to the school in Alexandria in Egypt that had been opened in 1915 by Sr Annetta Vergano, “a refugee from the Holy Land”. In 1922 she became part of the community at the Italian hospital in Damascus, where she qualified as a professional nurse and furthered her medical training, showing herself to be “capable and very generous in her gift of self”. She responded to the profile of the qualified “nurse” they were seeking for Betgamāl, where she arrived in September 1929 (cf. SECCO, *Facciamo memoria*, 1974, pp. 156–160). First as a simple Sister, then as superior of the FMA community, she would be at Srugi’s side for 14 years. Given their similarity of mind, the two religious saints soon developed a true spiritual friendship, beyond their complementarity on a professional level, as will be seen later in this story. [Photos nos. 32, 50]. From the legal point of view it was she as the qualified nurse who was responsible for the clinic and Simon was her assistant pharmacist; it would have been her who had to answer to the authorities, compile the registry of medications ... In fact it was Simon who filled in the columns in the pre-printed registers on a daily basis, noting in Arabic all the required data (patient’s general details and religion, village of origin, type of pathology and treatment administered). Nine of these “Dispensary Registers” have come down to us, documenting for us the dozens of medications administered daily, and from another point of view they provide us with interesting elements for reconstructing a map of the villages where the sick came from. I will deal with these aspects in the first “window”.

However, over and above all the bureaucratic formalities and formal study titles, the sick continued to prefer Srugi whom they called *el mu’ allem* (the master) or more emphatically *el hakīm* (the doctor), convinced that he was “a man in whose hands the power of God acted”. They had deep respect for him, while he humbly invited them to

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<sup>28</sup> Handbooks, surgical equipment, anaesthetics used by Srugi have been preserved in his room, e.g. Fred Haslam, *General Catalogue Standard Surgical Instruments*. USA 1929 edition, containing a complete description of all the surgical instruments then in use. Among others he consulted the small Hebrew-English manual entitled: *Pharmacopoeia of the Hadassah Medical Organization and Kupat Holim and other approved Village Clinics*. Jerusalem: R. H. Cohen’s Press, 1927; and the *Norme per i soccorsi d’urgenza da prestarsi in attesa del Sanitario*, by the Antica Regia Farmacia Schiapparelli in Turin.

pray to Our Lady (*Sitti Maryam*) and trust in “Jesus the Healer” whom he wanted them to turn to with the greeting *yahya Yasū'a!* (Live Jesus).

At night, with the Rector’s permission, Simon went to some slums to look after those who could not come as far as the clinic or because they suffered from some “shameful” illnesses, or for lack of strength, or on other occasions so they would not be stopped by the police who were scouring the area for wanted criminals.

As infirmarian, he did not limit himself to handing out medications or the appropriate treatment, but he educated the confreres and the boarders to sanctify suffering in a spirit of faith and love, so as to conform themselves to Jesus on the cross (cf. BANCHI, Chaps 1–3). Na’im Calussie, a boarder for 9 years and who was often ill, wrote from Aleppo in 1962:

I found him to be a guardian angel during my different illnesses; as a nurse he looked after me more patiently than a mother, and continuously suggested brief holy prayers to me. Sometimes he would call me to help him make the hosts, and he spent all his time in prayer. Really, whatever the time of day I met him, he was praying and making up these little prayers.

#### **4.6 Supervisor of mill works and friend to the least**

As a man of trust, Brother Srugi was also entrusted with the mill works: he established who went first, weighted the sacks of grain and at the end of the day brought back the takings to give them to the Economer. The heavy work was done by a worker, or technical mechanic and electrician, and by one of the older boys. Over the years, the focus had shifted from mechanical to electrical systems, and Srugi knew neither. [Photo 36].

Under the long shed with its sheet metal roof, facing south towards the *Khallet esh-Shugi'a* valley, the heat in summer was suffocating, the farmers’ voices deafening, and there were frequent brawls. Simon always wore a military-style jacket fastened up to the neck and did not drink anything throughout his service. Though small of stature and thin, he showed uncommon fortitude and restraint in maintaining order and calm., winning everyone’s respect because of his sense of justice and impartiality, and forgiving the not infrequent violators of the established order. Fr Cattān summed it up: “Ever calm and smiling, he did everything with so much delicacy and charity, he knew how to make himself loved and respected”; Fr Dal Maso adds that he often interceded with the superiors so that those who had stolen something, including recidivists, were not punished too severely let alone deprived of their job (cf. FORTI, pp. 65–70).

For people who were poor and hungry he was capable of many little “approaches” that his generous heart suggested to him: not only was he happy with the little they could pay (if they had no money he accepted a chicken, some eggs, or nothing), but he set aside his

own fruit in order to give it to undernourished children, handed out bread to those who had to tackle a long return journey to their villages. There are other episodes: he found a little cubbyhole for, and fed and looked after an orphan lad who was badly injured while working in the countryside (“he remained in this state for more than two months, without being able to move, while Srugi did everything for him, including the most humble things, and changed his clothes”). For two years he arranged for a Yemeni man, completely alone and lost, to sleep in the stable. Shehade was a poor man from Beitjala whom everyone laughed at because he was a bit dumb, almost crippled from walking in completely worn-out shoes; since the cobbler at the *deir* did not have the means or ability to resolve the problem, Srugi went with him to Hebron, a well-known leather processing centre, and saw that he got a pair of suitable shoes.

His work could not have been said to be over at the end of the day; in fact his room in the north-west corner of the first floor was very poor (the bed, a small table, a kneeler, basin and pitcher for washing, a wall-mounted wardrobe), and lacked what today we would call privacy: it was really a continuation of the infirmary, separated only by a wooden wall and opaque glazing. There were some beds for patients in there, first-aid equipment, some glass cabinets with medicines, a table for meals, a small altar ... it was a poor setting, even lacked running water, and was where a sick boy or confrere would be kept (sometimes for days or weeks). Even during the night Simon would give them appropriate care, interrupting his light sleep. In summer, at 4.30 a.m. (5 o'clock in winter) he was up once more and had gone down to the chapel to serve *abuna* Sarkis' Mass.

#### 4.7 A prudent and sought out counsellor

In the world that I have described, “*mu'allem* Srugi” had become an authoritative individual; they would turn to him also as a peacemaker or for “recommendations” and “mediations” of various kinds. Let me limit myself to three episodes. The Provincial, Fr Carlo Gatti, on 8 January 1930 wrote to Fr Giuseppe Raele, the Rector at Cremisan: “When Fr Coradini goes to Beitgemal he could take a young Muslim with him whom Srugi recommended to Fr Tornquist and me. Try him out in the garden and the fields, and send him back if it doesn't work.”

Sister Marcella Milano FMA (superior from 1934 to '37 at Betgamāl) testifies: “A girl stayed with us for two months, but because of her human frailty she was accused of being flighty and frivolous ... On her return to her family, her uncle (she had no parents) received displeasing news. The distressed child asked me to write to her uncle on her behalf. Since I did not know any Arabic, and in such a delicate case, I was inspired to turn to Bro. Srugi as a prudent individual. I explained matters with all prudence and seriousness and he wrote the letter in delicate words that assured the man that there was no problem with the girl.”

Past Pupil George Damergian had married a young woman from Jerusalem, and had gone to live in Nazareth with her where he worked; but she became homesick and wanted to go back home to the family and her parents. Knowing that his former teacher Brother Srugi was passing through Nazareth, George invited him to visit them. He went with Fr Dal Maso, listened carefully, and then, using simple but appropriate reasoning, managed to convince her to stay in Nazareth with her legitimate husband.

## 5. Simon's religious life

It is important to emphasise that if, in carrying out all his various tasks, Simon was not overwhelmed by fatigue and nervousness, not lost in routine, or even caught up in self-esteem, it was because he constantly pointed the “tip of his soul” upwards (Francis de Sales), as servants “look to the hand of their Master” (cf. Ps 123:2) and “calmed and quieted [his] soul like a weaned child with [his] mother”, Mary (cf. PS 131:2). Sister Tersilla often heard his words of encouragement: “Let us work, let us work a lot, and everything to please God and save our souls. Don Bosco, our good father, left his sons this inheritance: ‘*Work, bread and paradise*’” (note the order of precedence!).

### 5.1 Spirit of “piety”. Imitation of Christ and St Stephen

Simon's activity and apostolate flowed from deep theological springs: constant union with God, fed by daily Eucharistic communion and weekly confession; prayer, devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, the Sacred Heart, the wounds of the Crucified Jesus, and Our Lady Help of Christians. The church in which the community gathered daily for prayer, and to which Simon went for frequent 'visits', alone or often in the company of a few boys, was also an effective stimulus to the imitation of Christ and Saint Stephen.

The new *Martyrium* was solemnly blessed on 3 August 1930 by Patriarch Barlassina after the unveiling of the plaque dedicated to Pius XI on the entrance portal. He was assisted by Archbishop Haroutyoun Keklikian, the Armenian archbishop of Adana, some Episcopal Vicars from the various rites, representatives of the Custody of the Holy Land and religious communities in Jerusalem, in the presence of the Consul General of Italy, Comm. Giovanni Pascale, the Provincial Fr Gatti, and numerous Salesian confreres and civil authorities. [Photo no. 27]. In later years, the interior was decorated by the Maltese Carmelite friar Luigi Poggi with original paintings depicting the life and martyrdom, burial and glory of Saint Stephen. The German artist Emilio Ritz covered the lower band of the walls with imitation mosaics and in the vault of the apse he depicted Jesus on the cross in the act of praying.: “*Pater, dimitte illis*”. Everything was an invitation to imitate Jesus and Stephen in their love for God and in the forgiveness of their persecutors. It was in this shrine that Srugi would for years lead the practices of piety of the confreres and

the boys, and during solemnities would put on his black cassock and white “cotta”, and be master of ceremonies, edifying everyone for his competence and especially for his deep piety. I will approach this last point from the third “window”. [Photo no. 28].

But for him all places and times were an opportunity to live the gift of “piety”, understood as filial union with God and loving acceptance of his will. Anticipating something of what I will say in the second part, I observe that Simon marked his constant commitment to personal sanctification with an annual, monthly and weekly rhythm. During the Retreats he wrote down resolutions in a small notebook that he reviewed at the monthly recollection (then called the “exercise for a happy death”) and in his weekly confession. In the first instance they document his desire to experience Trinitarian communion and spousal intimacy with Jesus:

How happy and blessed I must be to have consecrated myself body and soul to my God. How much I must do to keep myself as pure and chaste as an angel in His presence. How careful I must be never to stain my soul or my body, the august temple of the Holy Trinity. Therefore, I will always have God present to me and put into practice the means that the Holy Rule suggests to me. God dwells in my soul no less blazing with light and glory than in the glory of Heaven. I am always in the presence of God; I am part of his court of honour; I will try to be pure of mind and heart.

For Simon the practices of piety, of course, were subordinate to the primary precept of love of neighbour; he was always punctual, except when, with due permission, he was dispensed for some act of charity or some work he could not be replaced for. And then he would say: “The act of charity makes up for the practices of piety.” Every morning, seeing him leave the house and head out serene and recollected for the clinic to look after the sick, one would have said that he was animated by what Francis de Sales presented as the “Marian spirit of the Visitation”: uninterrupted union with Jesus whom he bore in his heart, exulting in God his Saviour, and concerned about the humble service of his neighbour. The answers he gave to those who were surprised by his absence in church are revealing: “I heard Mass as well as the others: my spirit was with the Lord as if I were in church. Don’t you know that obedience is worth more than an hour of adoration? Besides, I have always been in spirit before the Blessed Sacrament exposed....”. Or words similar to this: “People of little faith! I have spent all day in adoration”; “Jesus himself who was in church with you, was also with me at the mill”. This was Simon’s way of living the cardinal principle of the “*Guard of honour*” for Jesus in the Eucharist, which Fr Rua, in 1900, asked all confreres to enrol in:

To sanctify the hour of watch you are not obliged to change any of your ordinary occupations to go to the church or say special prayers. It is all left up to each one’s piety so that, in the words of the Sacred Heart to St Margaret Mary Alacoque, “let everything be done out of love and nothing by force”. At the beginning of the hour

of watch, which each person chooses from the hours that are most convenient for him, the member brings his thoughts to his 'place of honour' in front of the Holy Tabernacle and offers Jesus the actions and words, thoughts and sorrows that may arise during the hour, but above all he offers his heart with all its affections, so that everything may speak of love and reparation for all those who forget him or offend him (ANONYMOUS, *Nuovo manuale della guardia d'onore al Sacro Cuore di Gesù*, p. 39).

The same fundamentals underpinned the "Eucharistic Crusade" and the "Blessed Sacrament Sodality". As we will see in the second part, Simon educated the best boys to this practice. In practical terms, this meant acting with the "right intention" of pleasing God out of pure love, without expecting a reward and even less, thinking about what others did or said. Simon repeated this to himself and others in a most impressive way. Whoever observed him up close became aware of it: the Catholic Armenian woman Serpuhi, who knew him very well for 18 years, when living at Betgamāl with her husband Dikrān Ciakmakgian, a teacher at the school, testified: "We knew, and it could be discerned from his whole demeanour and bearing, that his heart was fixed on the Lord, filled with God, paradise he was always thinking of, and paradise was the great and only hope of his soul, his food and nourishment for doing his work well, and to help him be so patient and charitable with everyone. I always had this impression and conviction that he was a man of God, and that all the good and work he did and the charity he showed everyone, Christian or Muslim, he did for God alone."

Even for Muslims it was clear that Srugi did everything "*li waghi-l-lāh*", i.e., as someone who stood before God and acted only for His glory. Simon explicitly renewed this purity of intention before commencing his ordinary occupations, varying it according to the particular devotion for each day of the week (Souls in Purgatory, Guardian Angel, St Joseph, the Eucharist, Jesus crucified, Our Lady. I will pick this up again when speaking about "Srugi the mystic" in the appropriate window). Sundays, free from work in the clinic and the mill, he dedicated to spiritual recharging: sometimes after the sung Mass he gave some spiritual reading to the boys, then one would see him in lengthy adoration before the tabernacle (Sister Regina Yūnis FMA, at Betgamāl from 1929 to 1938, revealed that sometimes she and another Sister would go to the church without being noticed, to "enjoy" watching Srugi in prayer); or sitting under a secluded tree, all absorbed in meditation on the Gospel that had been commented on in the sermon, or in reading devotional books or lives of the Saints. Fr Frey also provides some useful details in this regard: "He spent his free time reading magazines. With the permission of the superiors he subscribed to the *Messenger of the Sacred Heart* in Italian and Arabic, the *Lampada del Tabernacolo*, *La Crociata del SS.mo Sacramento*, etc. He passed them on to the confreres, then collected them diligently and he himself bound each year's worth. Other than magazines he gladly read the *Vademecum* by Fr Barberis: 'Oh what beautiful

things it contains: Let us do what it says!” From such readings he would draw paragraphs or sentences, composing a collection of thoughts and maxims, which he would then share with his confreres and young people, especially on the first Friday of the month. I write about this in the second part of my work.

## 5.2 Uninterrupted exercise of personal sanctification in the performance of daily actions

It is appropriate here to document how Simon aimed to achieve the vital synthesis of sanctification and apostolate that Frs Albera and Rinaldi had indicated as the distinctive characteristic of the Salesian spirit. All those who have testified (lay, consecrated, Christian and Muslim...) are unanimous in describing as heroic his perseverance in carrying out his varied daily duties as an educator and nurse, with enormous patience and even greater love; and he did this not just for a day or in tranquil times, but for decades and in difficult circumstances, for Christian and Muslim alike, all children of God. Arab confrere *abuna* Fathallah Tahhān says that Simon seemed to him to be more angel than man for his heroic patience. And *abuna* Butrus Cattān highlights “the admirable patience, charity and kindness with which he treated the sick, who were often uncouth, ignorant, filthy and not infrequently crawling with disgusting insects that were repugnant to see, clean and treat. But it was in these sick people that Srugi saw the limbs of the infirm Jesus.” For her part Sr Tersilla testified: “The poor children and not just children, perhaps without looking, drank unclean water from streams and puddles that had leeches in them. I can testify that we often got leeches out of their eyes as well as their noses and throats. The Servant of God called on the names of Jesus and Mary and taking tweezers, without any mirror, said ‘In the name of Jesus’ and pulled them out. As for me holding the baby on my knees and opening his mouth, I didn’t know how he could get them out! The people, including Muslims, said that it was Our Lady who was guiding his hand.” Fr Frey adds a realistic detail: after closing the clinic and before going back to the community, Simon shook off the fleas that had crawled under his clothes, quietly saying: “*Sit nomen Domini benedictum*”. Another virtue that Simon practised to an outstanding degree was purity and its associated virtues (chastity, delicacy, discretion ...):

I had been a nurse for many years in hospitals, as a sister and superior, but I have never seen so much delicacy in visiting the sick. This virtue in him was undoubtedly the result of constant vigilance, mortification and penance. Often when speaking about purity he would say: “*Blessed are the pure of heart for they will see God* (Mt 5:8). See God, possess God, be part of his court of honour, be among those who will follow the Lamb! (cf. Rev 14:4). If God’s mercy allows us to go to heaven ...” and he would become emotional and thrilled, and his eyes would shine brightly. Other times I heard him say: “Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Trinity (cf. 1 Cor 6:19), nothing should ever tarnish the innocence of our souls.” He showed the greatest reverence to the youngsters, especially the smallest ones. “We have angels in



our house. How beautiful innocence is and how dear it is to God. Pure souls are the temple of the Holy Spirit. By religious profession we too have become beautiful and dear to God because we are pure.” After adding that Simon never looked women in the face, not the Sisters, not even her, Sr Tersilla concluded: “The ascendancy he had over the people was certainly due to his great charity, but also to his chastity.”<sup>29</sup>

His personal poverty was absolute: he had two changes of clothes; in the clinic he would put on a white shirt over his usual clothes that he kept clean and, as a good tailor, mended himself. One day, when the wardrobe Sister asked him to choose one of the new shirts he liked, he replied, almost scandalised, saying: “Sister, I will take the one you give me. The religious does not have his own will and tastes. I am asking you never to make a suggestion like that to me again.”

The furnishings in his room were reduced to a minimum; he only had a few personal books on which he had written in pencil: “acquired with the superior’s permission”. As for the poverty and obedience associated with his role as infirmarian: he did not act on his own initiative, but humbly submitted to the instructions of the Rector and the Economer; he gave an exact account of the expenses he undertook for the clinic and was most faithful to his monthly *rendiconto* (“I want to make my *rendiconto* well at any cost”: resolution no. 101). In the supernatural light of faith he respected his superiors as God’s representatives, and so would doff his hat not only in their presence, but also when he went past their office. Sister Tersilla passed on to us this small but significant detail: “He used say that ‘the superior is “the Lord’s anointed” and represents God, so we owe him all reverence and filial obedience.” I recall when as a simple Sister, I was appointed superior at Betgemal, in the morning he came into the clinic where we worked together, welcomed me with a deferential greeting and signs of respect, and told me: ‘Mother superior, you now represent Our Lady, and indeed are God’s representative.’ From that day on, without fail, he no longer called me ‘Sister’, as he did before, but always addressed me with the title ‘superior.’”

Sr Tersilla summed it up: “Over the many years of working together with Srugi I have to say in all conscience that from him I have truly learned to know and understand more and more what a holy religious life lived in a holy manner is and means. He was a true model for me, always, every day. His intimate union with God shone from his whole demeanour. A demeanour and life inspired only by the supernatural. Affable in his manner, he was generous in his dedication to all the sick, and the precision with which he

<sup>29</sup> AIMOR 15.1.3, Folder 9C, p. 15. Here are a few lines from three Brother confreres: Giuseppe Fusi: “Sometimes he called me to assist him in certain treatments for the boys, either out of prudence, so that he would not be alone, or to keep them still when they became agitated or would not allow themselves to be medicated. How well he knew how to cover them up so that nothing indecent could be seen!” Na’im Cumbâz: for them he had “bowels of charity and treated them like angels, sent to him by God to serve them.” Angelo Porro remembers “his body almost spiritualised, and his eyes that reflected God because of their purity.”

worked was something superior even for those who continually observed him. Whoever lived with the Servant of God could only but feel attracted to live by that same intense spiritual life, otherwise they would have felt like a fish out of water.” This latter comment is a revealing of self: Sister Tersilla herself lived at similar heights. Whoever knew her testified that “she possessed and passed on an ardent spirit of prayer. Her intense work, instead of distracting her from communion with God, seemed to encourage it.” It is well known that familiarity and friendship either find or seek out their equal: so the two helped each other to embody the same characteristic of Salesian spirituality in a male and female way: tireless activity sanctified by union with God and prayer. During an audience on 6 June 1922 Pius XI granted a daily plenary indulgence for sanctified work; Fr Philip Rinaldi considered this to be “the most precious favour that the Holy Father has bestowed on us so far” (ACS 3(1923) no. 17, pp. 35–36).

### 5.3 The “little way” of simplicity in community life

The ascetic commitment that Simon constantly pursued did not make him rigid, isolated or unfriendly; instead he radiated Salesian amiability and the confreres and boys sought out his company. He made people love him, because his behaviour was always inspired by “*thinking well of everyone, speaking well of everyone, doing good to everyone*”. Most observant in common life, he took part in walks and community outings as well as recreation: Brother Giuseppe Fusi, who lived at Betgamāl from 1928 to 1940 as gardener and in charge of the sacristy, and had formed a deep friendship with him, testified:

With extraordinary humility, and at his age, he adapted to playing bocce with the confreres and skittles with the boys. It was extraordinary how he knew how to adapt and become small with the little ones as if he were the same age as them.” And he added this family scene showing the great humanity of Simon, always a man of faith: “I spent winter evenings with him reading the lives of the saints or some edifying book or practising my Arabic. But while I was with him I had the clear sensation that I was with a man of great faith. When it was raining on a Sunday afternoon and time did not allow outings, I used to play draughts with the Servant of God, or we would play some other game. He would suggest some nice thought about Jesus, Our Lady or some other saint.

He did the same with the boarders. In the last year of his life, until he was forced to stay in his room, he would spend hours and hours in the church before Jesus in the Tabernacle, but he also “had a chair set up in the courtyard where, during recreation, he loved to stay seated and observe the boys playing and, seizing the right moment, offer a good word to the boys and the confrere”, faithful to the end, practising Salesian assistance.

All this shows how consistent Simon was with the choice he made to take the “small way” of ordinary things indicated by St Francis de Sales as the fruit of the “simplicity of

heart which contains within itself the perfection of perfection”. By pursuing this journey of personal sanctification day after day, year after year, he became a model religious. The authoritative judgement that the Provincial, Fr Lorenzo Nigra (1879–1951) wrote in the notebook for the canonical visitation in 1931–32, is concise and sums it up:

Personnel. In general we can be happy with them. One group comes first: those who have “been in the house the longest” Fr Peter Sarkis, Bro. Srugi, Bro. George Harūni, who keep our spirit (not to mention Srugi whom everyone knows is a true saint); then there is a second group, the more recent confreres who are the backbone of the house.

The very literary form of the aside points to the fact that Srugi’s holiness was universally recognised as “obvious”.

The mention of Fr Sarkis offers me the possibility of completing what I said about him earlier, concerning the important role that he continued to play in the “business operation”, and concerning his wonderful testimony of religious life:

For many years he was in charge of the main agricultural works and the supervision of the many workers and settlers. He was always among his workers, and it seemed he had the gift of being ubiquitous. He led his people who obeyed him with absolute docility, knowing him to be vigilant and above all good and just. This was also the result of his spirit of charity towards everyone, especially the ones most in need. The workers and settlers did not see him as a master, but as a solicitous father; no poor person left him with their hands empty and without being refreshed. Endowed with an uncommon culture and, above all, wisdom, common sense and practical judgement, he was the counsellor, the peacemaker, the arbitrator and was able to settle disputes to such an extent as to merit the highest praise from the government authorities who appointed him *mukhtār* for the district. He was a most appreciated member of government Commissions for Agriculture and Education, among Muslim and Jewish colleagues who respected him. But all this material activity was animated by a spirit of piety and sacrifice and “perfectly framed by the programme of ‘work and Prayer’ of our Father Don Bosco. He was the favourite confessor for the confreres and boys because of his kindness and wise counsel. He was very fond of the Word of God, which he delivered with unction and practicality. Strong of character, he knew how to settle his nerves and humbly apologise when he realised that charity had been offended (From his Mortuary letter, written by Fr Sacchetti).

## 6. The decade from 1931–1940

There was a special understanding between *abuna* Butrus and Simon: they were very much alike in many aspects of their character, and in carrying out their daily tasks they were closest to the people. Simon also had him as his confessor for many years, following Fr Bianchi’s death.

## 6.1 The death of Fr Bianchi (1931)

Fr Bianchi died on 11 January 1931. His health had never been strong and Srugi had often assisted him as his personal nurse. In his later years his illnesses became more frequent and serious; a delicate operation and a long period in the Italian hospital in Jerusalem did not resolve things. But his suffering was balanced by periods of intense joy: his election as Delegate for the confreres of MOR to the 12th General Chapter in 1922 that elected Fr Philip Rinaldi Rector Major; his Golden Jubilee of priesthood (17.03.1927); his involvement in festivities for Don Bosco's beatification in Rome and Turin (1929) when he once again saw dozens of his affectionate former novices who were by then famous around many parts of the Salesian world; and then the blessing of the *Martyrium*. At the news of his death letters came from everywhere, not just of condolence but of admiration, memories, messages from confreres especially his former novices, clergy, authorities, expressing how much they revered this extraordinary man. I limit myself to some paragraphs from a letter Fr Vincent Cimatti wrote from Japan, recalling some of his novice master's distinctive traits, concluding with a statement that I think is Fr Bianchi's finest eulogy:

I admired the patience of that holy man for listening to me every evening before going to bed: as I left he always wanted to give me the blessing of Our Lady. I remember the fire that exuded from his conferences. He didn't have the great verve of the orator, but he became so engrossed in the subject matter that the words flowed and sometimes in the heat of the moment his voice failed. I have in mind his conferences on obedience. His union with God, expressed in many a brief prayer, was admirable. A familiar one for him was "*Blessed be the Lord and all the saints in paradise!*" He possessed a very fine intuition in assessing the character of individuals, discovering the predominant defect and determining the practical way to correct it. I did not know Don Bosco personally, but I like to think he was like Fr Bianchi in many ways.

Fr Carlo Gatti finished his mandate as Provincial in 1931 and returned to Rome. Driven by his love for the Middle East, thanks to the "habit of inculturation" that he had internalised since the first years of his stay in Bethlehem, he continued to devote himself to a twofold object of study: the liturgical-spiritual patrimony of the Eastern Churches and the Arabic language. In collaboration with experts, he published the Italian translation of Janin's work on the Oriental Rites, and put together a substantial collection of material that after his death was used to compile an extensive Arabic-Italian dictionary (cf. GATTI 1942; TRAINI 1966).

## 6.2 The fame of Betgamāl-Cafargamala. Fr Fergnani's contribution

The fame of Betgamāl-Cafargamala, which began around 1922-23, became stronger in the 1930s, not only thanks to the building of the shrine and the spread of the "Pious

Work of Christian Forgiveness”, but also because of new scientific contributions, first of all the articles by S.H. Stephan, from Beitjala. In the first of them he accurately shows the derivation of the place name Bet-Gamal, from the Semitic personal name Gamaliel, and values “an entire range of historical and philological data that converge in identifying Beit-Jamāl with Caphar-Gamala”. In the two articles that followed, he argued that the place names, and the personal names in Lucian’s *Letter*, provide further convergent data in support of that identification.

The site was therefore considered to be of both historical and devotional importance and therefore included among the stops along the so-called “biblical caravans” that came through the Shefela region. The house chronicle records for example the one on 6 September 1931 led by Fr Alexis Mallon SJ director of the P.I.B.; on 26 March 1932 there was the “pleasing visit” of Bishop L. Mathias, Prefect Apostolic of Assam (1887–1965) [Photo no. 40]; Fr John J. O’Rourke SJ and Fr Gabriele Allegra OFM (?) took part in the feast on 3 August 1932; the caravan on 8 August the same year was led by Fr Andrés Fernandez SJ. In 1933 it was the turn of Fr Donato Baldi OFM with students from the “Flagellation”. On 3 August 1934 Fr Augustine Bea SJ presided over the celebrations, and three years later Bishop Rabbani from Homs, while Fr Fernandez returned with various groups of professors and students, e.g. on 1 April and 4 August 1937.

Fr Giovanni Fergnani played an important part in what we can call the Stephenian chapter of Betgamāl, at different times and in different ways. He was born in Aguscello, a small hamlet of Ferrara, on 16 July 1874. He made his novitiate at Foglizzo in 1891-92, so also had Fr Bianchi as his novice master and cleric L. Variara as a fellow novice. After finishing his secondary studies at Valsalice and doing his practical training first at Borgo San Martino then at San Benigno Canavese, he was assigned to Sicily where he was for the ten years he judged to be the most beautiful of his Salesian life (1895–1905). He showed contagious enthusiasm for the apostolate; among his initiatives was the launching of the *L’Amico della gioventù* magazine, which was widespread and long-lasting. On 18 January 1906 he left for China with the Salesians in the first missionary expedition. It was through him that the boys at the “San Basilio” college in Randazzo wanted to give the expedition a silver and gold chalice, perhaps in memory of Don Bosco’s famous dream. Together with Fr Louis Versiglia he founded the *Gioventù Missionaria* magazine which had an influence on vocational and missionary pastoral care in Salesian institutions for decades. He worked so hard that his health suffered; in 1912 he was recalled to Italy and sent to Marina di Pisa (1914–15). Here he carried out his ministry as assistant parish priest and confessor to the FMA, and in the two year period from 1917–19 was Catechist at Colle Salvetti (PI). He was loved for his apostolic zeal (among other things, among the FMA he began the “Apostolate of innocence”, to get children involved in the spirit of the “missionary Infancy”) and for the many educational and recreational activities (conferences, music, singing ...). During this time in Pisa he made

friends with the learned and zealous Cardinal Pietro Maffi (1858–1931) a friendship that lasted. Meanwhile, the news had arrived from Betgamāl of the discovery of St Stephen's tomb, and Fr Fergnani immediately connected it with some monuments in Pisa: first of all, the 'Michelangelesque' sarcophagus in the first chapel on the right of the cathedral containing the relics of Saints Gamaliel, Abibo and Nicodemus that Archbishop Daiberto (Dagoberto) had brought from the Holy Land in 1099; and also the nearby small chapel dedicated to St Euphrasia where the Salesians officiated in the city. His fervent imagination began shifting to the Middle East, where in fact he arrived following the First World War: according to the EGS he worked first in Turkey in the houses at Adalia (1919–1921) and Constantinople (1921–22); the following year he was an enterprising Prefect of Studies at Betgamāl, and in June-August took part in the excavations at the Byzantine site. [Photos nos. 15, 17]. Once again sent to the missions, this time to Assam, in 1922-23 he was in the parish in Shillong, in 1923–24 at the novitiate in Shillong, and in 1924–25 was the Rector and parish priest at Raliang. During those years he worked enthusiastically in close collaboration with Louis Mathias, Apostolic Prefect of Assam, Manipur and Bhutan (1923) and Salesian Provincial of North India (1926). He then returned to the Middle East, to Alexandria in Egypt in 1925-27 working at the festive oratory; in 1927–28 he was once again in Constantinople as Catechist. Finally, in 1928–1929 he landed at Betgamāl where he was Prefect of Studies. [Photos nos. 25, 26] During this period, he dedicated himself to collecting everything that had been written on the Stephenine question and to propagating the "Pious Work of Christian Forgiveness". On 3 August 1930 at the blessing of the *Martyrium*, given his vast culture and gifts of oratory, he gave the occasional address. He died in Jerusalem on 29 December 1932 and was buried in the crypt of the *Martyrium*. Fr Sacchetti updated and brought together his publications as far as 1933, and the following year included them in a total of three volumes in the "*Studi Stefaniani*" collection. In conclusion: Fr Fergnani got the credit for making the cause of Betgamāl and St Stephen known. However, he succumbed to some naivety, and the impression he created of wanting to occupy the stage caused some reservations, so much so that he himself admitted that his "presence in Beitgemal could be a hindrance", and finally considered the possibility of a return to the Sicily-Maltese province (letters of 30 July 1928 and 4 September 1931).

But beyond all this, and returning to focus on the chief character of our story, it is important to note that Fr Fergnani left Srugi a very valuable treasure of another kind: almost certainly it was he who gave him the book of the revelations of the crucified Jesus to Marie-Marta Chambon, which left a lasting impression on his soul, so much so that he wrote out entire pages, as we will see in the section on his writings. He also left to the church at Betgamāl, where it is still kept, the chalice he had received as a gift in 1906, which he had taken with him to all the "stations" of his apostolate, starting with China (letting us think that the future martyr Fr Louis Versiglia also used it).

### 6.3 New difficulties: personnel, financial, socio-political problems (1932–1935)

After the deaths of Fr Bianchi and Fr Fergnani, the few effective Salesians left in the field at Betgamāl faced new and heavy sacrifices to provide continuity to the work in the business operation and in the school and boarding house. Fr Sacchetti, who had declined the offer to go to Cairo as Rector of the recently established Salesian school (1926), had to take on the roles of Rector and Prefect, and on 28 August and 3 September 1932, he vented his feelings in two bitter and despondent letters to the Provincial. Due to a prolonged drought, the situation in the countryside was disastrous with the lack of harvest and the death of the animals, which had been left outside and had passed on contagious diseases. Because of the great financial depression of the 1929 in the USA, aid from CNEWA had been suspended for two years. For all these reasons Betgamāl had a setback and struggled to keep up with the new circumstances in the country:

It is impossible, from a distance, to get an idea of the development in this country, given Jewish immigration, especially German, over these last three years (1932-35). The land we formerly had in Jerusalem has become the heart of the city, and the Jewish Agency is next door. Our land divided into lots and sold for 1½ lira a metre, today costs from 6–10 lire a square metre. The opportunity to finance the Province somewhat has been lost. What is more important is that the Germans are organising Palestine on an industrial and agricultural basis in a most formidable way. Between Haifa and St John of Acre there is an entire anthill of industries large and small. Oil from Iraq, the Rutenberg irrigation system are astonishing undertakings. There are five agricultural schools, all up-to-date. Poor Beitgemal! It is anything but in the vanguard of progress like Don Bosco wanted! At any rate, we are not cutting a bad figure yet, especially given our 100 hectares of woods that are a wonder.” Having been accompanied to visit the agricultural schools in Piedmont by Fr Ricaldone, he wrote to the Provincial Fr Canale: “I had occasion to say jokingly that the difference between Beitgemal and Cumiana was like the difference between Dives and Lazarus (Letters to the Rector Major on 22 June 1935 and the Provincial, on 8 October 1936).

Then gradually the internal situation improved, so that by 1936 a satisfactory balance sheet could be drawn up: “From the post-war reorganisation (1919–20) until today, 118 boys have graduated, almost all well employed. It is consoling that even those who did not finish the course for one or other reason, have solved the problem of life very easily because they have the habit of working.” Among the achievements were the large excavation works on the well at Wadi Būlos and the construction of channels to irrigate the fields (1933–1934); on 20 May 1936 Fr Tornquist returned to Betgamāl to bless the adjoining engine, which ensured the irrigation of the fertile valley. But outside, things were becoming dangerously complicated. Following the Balfour Declaration (2 November 1917) Jewish immigration mentioned by Fr Sacchetti intensified during the

second half of the 1920s, bringing about violent reaction from the Palestinians; Fr Bianchi had written on 29 August 1929:

For a week now, gruesome things have been reported between Muslims and Jews. Muslims are hunting down Jews everywhere, but they seem to be targeting Jewish settlements scattered in various places in Palestine. The Jews, at the first sign of danger, fled to some place they thought was safer, abandoning their homes and everything they had in them. The Muslims, arriving in an abandoned place, steal everything they can find: oxen, sheep, equipment, furniture, etc. After this they set fire to all the houses. In these massacres, the Jews were also fierce. Now calm seems to have returned. The British Government has put down the rebellion. Some twenty thousand soldiers have come from Egypt.

Unfortunately the calm didn't last long, because the British Mandate government was not perceived as having a balanced approach to Palestinians and Jews. From 1936 to 1939 the whole of Palestine was in revolt: the coastal strip of Jaffa and the Shefela area (rich in citrus cultivation, but also strategically important because of the port, the Lydda airfield and the routes to the interior and to Egypt) were disrupted by the struggles of the emerging Palestinian-Israeli conflict, with strikes, frequent acts of sabotage of communications and real terrorism perpetrated by both sides, without the Mandate authorities either wanting or being able to impose themselves (cf. DESRAMAUT, pp. 185–190). As I have already mentioned, Srugi ran the serious risk of death in 1936: while he was returning to Betgamāl from Jerusalem by train, someone came up to him to punch him, thinking he was a Jew, but was saved by the prompt intervention of a person who knew him well. In other circumstances, he passed unscathed, given his reputation as a just man, uninvolved in any political or nationalist affiliation.

#### **6.4 Jewish immigration and “Arab revolution”. The murder of Fr Rosin (1936–1938)**

The confreres at Betgamāl underwent theft, aggression, extortion followed by threats and reprisals. It was especially the Economist, Fr Sacchetti, and the Rector, Fr Rosin, being harassed, including recurring frictions with tenant farmers and Bedouins over breaches of contract, trespassing on property, and the arbitrary use of the recent British decree to favour Palestinian farmers. In the house chronicle, Fr Rosin recorded frequent acts of sabotage, explosions (bombs), firefights, overflights by British aircraft. In particular he wrote that on 30 April 1936 on the road to Deir Rafāt he was stopped by a Muslim goat herder who threatened to kill him, thinking he was a Jew, but let him go when he was sure that he was a Christian. On 13 September 1937 he reported to the Provincial, Fr Canale, on the hostile reaction of the twelve Jìarash tenants to his intention to regain control of a very lucrative piece of land; he also mentioned persistent difficulties in relations with the Italian authorities. On 28–30 March 1938 he wrote some very worrying reflections



on the situation, dominated by brigands of all kinds: 'Life and possessions are now much less secure than at the time of the Turks, even during the Italo-Turkish war. The writer can say this.'

That year, a chain of tragic events followed one another in the district: On 10 January near Beit Jibrin, Englishman J.L. Starkey was killed. From 1932 he had led the archaeological excavations at Lakish. On 7 May, 'Issa al-Bàttat, the local commander of the nationalist combatants, and his presumed assassin, was killed in a gun battle in the Hebron region. On the evening of 17 June, an armed band who had first cut the telephone lines, burst into the house and demanded the exorbitant amount of 100 Palestinian lire from the Rector, Fr Rosin. When they didn't get it, because there were only a handful of coins in the cash box, they beat him violently; the confreres and lay people who came to his defence also received a heavy dose of beatings. Except Srugi who was the first to take his new suit and the small amount he had collected that day in the mill and the clinic. As he passed by, the rebel group stood to attention before their leader: "Men, this is *mu'allem Srugi*, give him a military salute out of respect."

After taking food, clothing and footwear, they left, but repeating clear death threats against Fr Rosin, whom they accused of having installed the telephone link between the house and the Artūf police station to transmit information about their movements. Church, consular and military authorities were alerted and they took some protective measures.<sup>30</sup> Fr Rosin was advised to withdraw temporarily to Bethlehem, but he declined, saying that his duty as a father did not allow him to abandon his children in these difficult moments, nor could he place the burden of running the work on his first helper, Fr Sacchetti who had been in ill health for some time. On the afternoon of 23 June, the eve of the solemnity of the Sacred Heart, he wanted to go to nearby Deir Rafāt for the usual ministry of confession for the Sisters. [Photos nos. 48, 49].

On the way back unknown armed men ambushed him, told him to dismount, and after accusing him of having their leader arrested, they killed him. A young man, a postman at the Artūf' post office, who happened to be passing by at close range, saw and heard what was going on, but, threatened by the killers kept silent. Fr Rosin's body was found the day afterwards under a pile of stones, his arms spread out like a cross: his skull was smashed by a bullet, his hand was clutching what was left of his rosary.

<sup>30</sup> Fr Rosin wrote to the Italian Consul Q. Mazzolini with an account of what had happened, totally devoid of resentment. In the days that followed he jotted down in the chronicle: "Many policemen come and assure us... but "*Nisi Dominus...*" – On 22 June: "Arrangements have been made with the police at Artūf to turn on a red light on the tower of our institute in case of danger". In AIMOR 4.4.2, we read: "18 June, inspection by police from Artūf, Ramleh etc ... - 19 June: Fr Sacchetti goes to the Italian Consul in Jerusalem. - 23 June: a tank arrives with 4 British soldiers to guard the house"; this was just a few hours before Fr Rosin set out for Deir Rafāt!

One of the chief characters in the Salesian story, not only at Betgamāl but in the Holy Land, had departed the scene. Mario Rosin was born on 8 November 1875 in Tomazic near Trieste, and had entered Don Bosco's Oratory in Valdocco as a boy. After his novitiate under the guidance of Fr Bianchi, made his perpetual profession in Turin on 11 December 1891, and arrived in Bethlehem on the 29th in the third group of Salesian missionaries. He kept in touch with his formators, Fr Barberis and Fr Bianchi, to whom he periodically sent a report on his conscience in which he confided his progress in virtue and in the Arabic language ... (cf. ASC, C 350–351). After the years of study and practical training in Cremisan, on 4 June 1898 he was ordained priest in Jerusalem. Having learned Arabic well, he was assigned tasks of responsibility in Bethlehem (Prefect in 1904), novice master (Cremisan 1905), and again Prefect in Bethlehem (1906–1907); he was very soon appointed as a Provincial Councillor.

In 1907 he was Rector in Nazareth and also did well in that rather special French-speaking environment. From 14 to 20 March 1908, he accompanied Fr Rua on his visit-cum-pilgrimage, and at the end entrusted his impressions of the holiness of Don Bosco's successor to his diary. [Photo no. 9]. Recalled as Rector in Bethlehem, after the premature death of the superior, Fr Peter Cardano, in 1911, he fulfilled the role of Provincial *ad interim* for some months until the arrival of Fr Luigi Sutera. He contributed to the Italian translation of the life of Fr Belloni from the Arabic original by Fr Nahhās, judging that it could be put into circulation, given that things had by now “calmed down” between the Bellonians and Bosconians.

During the First World War the institute at Bethlehem underwent dramatic events: 700 Turkish and Austrian soldiers occupied it, then took away everything from the workshops, dormitories, classrooms. This was the period when divisions had broken out between Arab and Italian confreres, and these involved Fr Rosin as Rector: given his strong character, and that he was a lover of justice and intransigent where compromise was concerned (his friend Fr Puddu used say: “Under the flint lies a diamond”), he may have taken some ill-timed decisions, hurting people. But his honesty was so obvious that in the enquiry into events, the Turkish judge received him first and sent him back immediately saying that there was no need for any further questioning. In those terrible years, he made sure that the confreres and orphans had everything they needed; and one day, just while together with Brother Zanchetta he was going to Betgamāl to replenish supplies of flour, he was arrested by Turkish soldiers (because he was a “hostile individual trespassing in enemy area”), and on 5 December 1917 was condemned and exiled to Keskin in Anatolia. When he returned a year later, the canonical Visitor, Fr Ricaldone, re-established him in his role as Rector in Bethlehem. Over the three years from 1926–29 he was in Betgamāl to help and then replace Fr Bianchi as Rector. In 1929 the confreres of the Middle East elected him as their delegate to the General Chapter in Turin.

Always and everywhere, his conduct as a religious was exemplary: with a great spirit of faith and piety; poor and mortified to the utmost (vigils, fasts, never slept on a bed, wore a hair-shirt). This is why, in 1929 when the superiors decided to open the studentate of theology in Bethlehem, knowing of his virtues they asked him to be the Rector of the clerics and professors, as well as of the confreres working at the orphanage. He accepted this additional responsibility out of a sense of duty and performed it with great sacrifice; but at the end of the second year, seeing that he could not dedicate himself to the formation of the clerics as he would have wished, he asked to be relieved of this, while remaining Rector of the orphanage until 1935 (see CAPUTA 2004, pp. 375–393). At the beginning of the new community year 1935-36 he was appointed Prefect at Betgamāl and Rector the following year, at the very time and in the turbulent environment I mentioned above.

His brutal elimination was also interpreted in terms of religious geo-politics: “When the British mandate was firmly established, two powerful reagents altered the peace of God’s Land. The Jews and Anglo-American Protestants arrived”, destabilising the “area of mutual tolerance” between Catholics and Orthodox and their charity work on behalf of the Palestinians, which up until then was guaranteed by the Turks (cf. Pedrazzi). But for whoever knew him well there were no doubts: Fr Rosin had paid for his love of justice and duty with martyrdom; indeed, some believed that he had been murdered “*in odium fidei*”.

As far as our story is concerned, we can ask ourselves: what religious legacy did Fr Rosin leave behind? A provisional answer can be deduced from the sixteen surviving notebooks of reflections, sermons, commentaries on the Gospels and lectures that he gave to his confreres and sisters, the brothers, clerics doing theology and new priests over a period of 15 years. After reading books by excellent authors, he dealt competently with biblical, dogmatic and moral, ascetic and hagiographical topics: the Sacred Heart, the priesthood and the Eucharist were among his favourites: the long sermon about the richness of the Eucharistic mystery indicated by its many names seems to be taken from the 1983 Catechism of the Catholic Church. Following the liturgical year, he also preached on the mysteries of Jesus’ earthly life, on Our Lady, St Joseph, “Don Bosco the Saint” and his motto “Da mihi animas”; Mazzarello’s Venerability, etc. His last surviving sermon was on 3 June 1938 on the Sacred Heart of Jesus, twenty days before the Vigil of the liturgical solemnity that coincided with his death! In his diary too, up to May 1938, he regularly mentioned the topics he had discussed in his monthly conferences to the confreres (sanctification of work, progress in the spiritual life...). Simon Srugi heard many of these, but above all he was an eyewitness to the examples of holiness that Fr Rosin gave on a daily basis, and he looked to him as a model to be imitated.

### 6.5 Srugi 's reactions in this circumstance, and his habitual attitude

The Dorothy Sisters at Deir Rafāt who first discovered Fr Rosin's body beneath the pile of blood-soaked stones, were in shock; Sister Tersilla's nervous system (she prepared his body for burial) was shaken for a long time; the community at Betgamāl locked itself in the house for days with doors barred for fear of further attacks, despite visits from the police. And Simon? The loss of his beloved Rector caused him excruciating suffering, but he held on with prayer and a spirit of faith. Some time after the crime, one of the men presumed responsible, wounded in a fire and being hunted down, sought refuge after dark in the clinic at Betgamāl of all places. Simon brought him in, treated him and let him go, while Sister Tersilla protested: "Let's hand him over to the British soldiers. He murdered our Rector!" The confreres were of the same opinion and in the following days they made their displeasure felt. He replied to them all with these words, reported by various witnesses with slight variations:

If he has done wrong he will have to deal with God. On the other hand, the soldiers are on his trail and will not be long in catching him. But we must always do good to everyone. Let us pray for him and his friends. Didn't Jesus teach us to forgive our enemies? And hasn't Fr Rosin always forgiven? Perhaps these people, seeing that we forgive them, will feel moved to change their lives...

As Sr Tersilla recalled, there was a sequel: about two months later, leaders of the rebel gangs came to Betgamāl, "apologising for Fr Rosin's death and saying they were ready to punish the culprits; the superiors told them that they gladly forgave them: 'Our faith urges us and even obliges us to forgive.' And as a sign of this, they agreed to be photographed with everyone, Salesians and Sisters together." Srugi was not there, but when he learned of it he commented:

Sister, those poor people will remember this encounter all their lives. They too have a conscience and a soul to save. The Lord made them feel remorse so much that they came to humble themselves, and the superiors did well to forgive and forget. Justice will be done by the Lord, but it is up to us to forgive and always do good. Let us pray for them and who knows, perhaps they will convert.

Over the same years the community at Deir Rafāt, then made up of 3 diocesan priests, 9 Dorothy sisters and 3 lay people, suffered similar harassment (thefts, threats, damage to property, looting and burning ...), but continued to carry out their service. The similarity of the testimonies is striking: Sister Elburga Simionato wrote that "she treated many wounded, among whom the notorious Ocassi who had seven scars just on his right hand. It seems that it may have been he who killed our Father Mario Rosin. What I felt in treating this creature, knowing that I had before me a murderer of dozens of people, including two of his brothers, I cannot describe. 'Lord' I said often, 'Lord, touch their

hearts.” Just one act of repentance is enough for them to be saved. He will soon be taken by justice and they will kill him.” (FANO, pp. 108–111).

Srugi had arrived at that extraordinary fortitude and capacity for forgiveness through repeated practice: in less tragic circumstances he had shown himself ready not only to forgive and forget, but to immediately serve someone who had offended, assaulted or mistreated him. Episodes of the kind occurred both in the mill and the outpatients clinic. One day three of four rough young men, without waiting their turn, smashed through the door of the clinic, knocking Srugi over. To save him Sister Tersilla began elbowing, punching, scratching ... but as soon as he had got up he said to her: “Superior, calm down, not like that. Not like that. The Lord said ‘*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*’. None of the characters left, and Bro. Srugi treated them calmly and in all naturalness as if nothing had happened. He looked at them, wrote down their medicines as he would have done with anyone else. This could not be explained without considering his great love of neighbour, his great spirit of faith, such was the goodness and grace he lavished on everyone that day, including the ones who had almost crushed him.

## 6.6 Departure of Fr Sacchetti (1938)

Betgamāl’s woes were not yet over. Added to the restrictions due to the long general strike and to the horrors of the guerilla warfare, in September 1938 there was a bad epidemic of malaria that affected almost all of the boarders and many of the inhabitants of the area. Brother Srugi and Sister Tersilla had to work overtime to treat everyone who came to the clinic. Likewise Sister Elburga at Deir Rafāt: “Many times they come here with a fever of 40–41 because they want an injection after travelling 3–4 hours on a donkey, being from far away. Many mornings I gave 60 injections, all for malaria.” In 1939 there was an escalation in the violence the effects of which were documented by the increasing number of medications carried out by the Sister in her clinic: from 260 in 18 days in May the number went to 1265 in 27 days in September. The wounded who turned up were mainly “insurgents”, but there was no shortage of soldiers and a few British officers. (cf. FANO, pp. 112–15).

Due to the trauma of Fr Rosin’s murder and for various other reasons, Fr Sacchetti’s physical and moral resistance was very much put to the test; and since neither Srugi’s attentions or a period in hospital in Jerusalem were enough, the superiors in Turin advised him to return to Italy for appropriate treatment. He arrived in Rome, and took part in festivities for the beatification of Mary Mazzarello (20 November 1938) in St Peter’s and the Sacred Heart;<sup>31</sup> he was summoned to report confidentially on the murder

<sup>31</sup> During the solemn celebration in Sacred Heart Basilica, Sr Tersilla’s wallet containing 300 lire was stolen, including the money that Srugi had given her through the Rector.

of Fr Rosin to the Salesian superiors, and at the Foreign Ministry; he met the heads of ANMI, the chief inspector of the Italian Consuls (Mr Pedrazzi), various clergy in the Vatican, to represent the interests of Betgamāl. Professor Milani (the Pope's personal physician) who already knew him, visited him twice and prescribed treatment for him. Fr Ricaldone thought it prudent that he not return to Betgamāl, and assigned him to Corigliano d'Otranto in the "N.Comi" Agricultural School for war orphans. He had already known of this place since 1912; given his competence and long experience in this area, he could make himself useful there and in nearby Castellaneta; and while waiting for further developments he remained not too far away from his superiors.

When he left Betgamāl he was probably hoping to soon return, but the outbreak of the Second World War the following year prevented that. He had left the books and the abundant correspondence in his office in order: precious material, some of which has come down to us and thanks to which we can reconstruct the story of Betgamāl. He had given plenty of advice to Sister Tersilla to keep an eye on Srugi's notebooks, registers, and exercise books, before he destroyed them out of humility. Fr Alfredo, who had lived with him for 25 years and had been an eyewitness to his virtues and the effectiveness of his prayers, was sure that Simon had reached the heroic stature of a candidate for beatification.

Contacts between Fr Sacchetti and Betgamāl became more rare and were interrupted in June 1940 when the Italian confreres were sent to the internment camp in Bethlehem where correspondence was censored. Meanwhile he regained his health in the favourable climate of the Apulian environment and with appropriate treatment, so much so that in 1942 the superiors suggested he take on the running of the school at Corigliano; he generously accepted and, by making great sacrifices, was able to provide the confreres and orphans with all they needed, even during the hardships of war, "subjecting himself to no minor hardships and journeys to provide bread for the dear orphans, his joy and his crown."

But his time was approaching, he was aware of it and prepared for it. Don Bosco's prophetic words had accompanied him everywhere he went: as a young man in South America, and an adult in Betgamāl and as an old man in Corigliano, he was always sustained by a deep spirit of faith, his filial devotion to the Help of Christians and by an attitude of Salesian indifference in abandoning himself to God's will. Among his resolutions for his last Retreat in 1944, he renewed his daily commitment to the entire Rosary and to the *via crucis*, with the following motivations: "thinking that I am in the presence of God, with whom I speak and by whom I am listened to. I will try to study, meditate on and love the way of sorrow as a means of increasing and practising a life of unity with God. I will not forget that the quintessence and true fruit of the Retreat is the love of serving God according to His holy will with indifference to any way He wants to

be served.” (From his Obituary letter). We are struck by the spiritual harmony with Srugi. He died at Corigliano on 21 November 1944, mourned by all, especially by the confreres, sisters and young people of Betgamāl, where he was one of the leading figures from 1913 to 1938.

### **6.7 Premonitions for Srugi. The new Rector Fr Candiani (1938–1940)**

Amidst the upheaval caused by all the painful events of recent years, Simon proceeded steadfastly on his upward path, fixing his gaze on Jesus crucified and risen, even if his physical strength was deteriorating:

Being a religious consecrated to Jesus, I must be nailed to the Cross with him, so I can die with Jesus and rise to new life like Him. St Paul said: *always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies* (2 Cor 4:10), to the extent that I can say with the Apostle: *“I live no longer I but it is Christ who lives in me* (Gal 2:20). Jesus loved me so much that he suffered, died, gave himself entirely to me. I also want to suffer everything out of love, to love him and die for him.

He always wore a small crucifix prominently sewn on his jacket, on the heart side, and for him it was a constant encouragement to the “practice of loving Jesus Christ” that had become his favourite exercise. [Cover photo and no. 47].

Fr Antonio Candiani was sent to replace Fr Rosin as Rector, a completely different type. He was born in Busto Arsizio on 25 February 1887; he made his novitiate at Foglizzo and made his profession in 1907, then went on to Valsalice where he crowned the three years of studies and formation with his perpetual profession in 1910. During the First World War he was enlisted and assigned to far away Macedonia, from where he returned in 1918 battered, after a two-month journey on a stretcher. Once recovered, he was sent as a missionary to the Middle East Province. On 27 April 1919 he was ordained priest by Patriarch Barlassina in Jerusalem; he remained in the Italian school in the city first as Prefect of Studies, then as the Rector for six years. Then came two years as Rector of the Italian school in Haifa (1927–29); then back to Jerusalem again as Rector (1932–35) and from there he went to Suez (1935–38).

In these three works, Fr Antonio had been able to express his fine talents without worrying about financial problems, enjoying favourable situations where the Italian authorities were concerned, and gratifying ones from the pupils and their families (scouts, theatre, sport). He was jovial and outgoing, quick-witted and self-reliant, and at times drew criticism from the austere Patriarch Barlassina for his overly liberal management of the past pupils group and semi-public theatre, located in a part of the city notoriously given to “gossip”. It was certainly “quite a leap” for him, at the age of 51 and with

no knowledge of Arabic, to find himself unexpectedly in the rural, isolated and poor environment of Betgamāl, to which he came with the declared aim of bringing order and cleanliness to the scene. In a way, the house needed it, since after the death of *abuna* Sarkīs (20 February 1937) and Fr Rosin, and after the departure of Fr Sacchetti, it had lost its three great pillars, and the business side of things had suffered from this, including debts. As for the school, since he was used to “city” pupils, many of whom belonged to the middle class, Fr Antonio tended to look down on the boys in the agricultural school, most of whom were orphans or foundlings, rustic and poorly educated. And then, ultimately, he found a community of confreres who were not so united. In short, he did not have an easy task ahead of him. But Fr Candiani was also an intelligent and generous man and he took the situation to heart. He had the greatest respect for Brother Srugi and treated him with great reverence, admiring his charity and piety (he affectionately called him our “*magister coereemoniarum*”). For his part, the holy brother continued his attitude of humble obedience, almost veneration for the new superior, which stemmed from his deep-rooted convictions of faith. Such convictions had become even stronger over the years, while his physical strength began to diminish, and was not enough to sustain him in his heavy workload. Fr Candiani soon noticed this: “20 July 1939: the clinic these days is besieged from morning to evening! Srugi has no time even to come for lunch. Almost all the sick are suffering from malaria, organ failure, paratyphoid fever. – 26 July: clinic and mill crowded, the former due to malaria, the latter because the mill at ‘Agiūr has broken down” [a town about 11 km to the south-west]. – 2 August: clinic and mill crowded. An endless procession of malaria sufferers. Srugi and Artin have no time to breathe!”

The same month he was offered the opportunity to go to Bethlehem for the retreat; one of the two resolutions he wrote in his notebook is very much indicative of his state of mind: “I will do everything to get myself ready to appear before the Lord at any moment. And to keep matters regarding my role as infirmarian in order, both in the house and in the dispensary, and to keep the accounts prepared.” Back home, he sought to resume work again, but had to give up after a few weeks; once again we learn from Fr Candiani’s notes in the chronicle:

17 September: Fr Dalmaso, Srugi with Artin go by car to Tel-Aviv to get medical supplies and seeds for the garden. - 28 September: at home, Fr Frey, Fr Dalmaso and Bro. Srugi are all in bed; the only two Sisters are still standing despite fever reaching 39 degrees! And they want us to believe that there is no malaria in Beitgamal!” On 2 October “Srugi begs me to make ... his coffin or to take him to some hospital. It’s 8 o’clock, and I go by ass to Bab-el-wad then by bus to Tantūr; the Provincial made his “balilla” available and by 5 that evening Srugi was already in hospital in Bethlehem. – 11 October many still seriously ill and bedridden. Bloody malaria and Beitgemal, both of them! – 12 October: Srugi seems to be out of danger, but he can’t speak, and it’s the same with others who are sick. – 19 October: I get the doctor from the French hospital in Bethlehem to transport Srugi to Tantur. – 3 November: I visit Srugi in Tantur; he is



improving but I don't know if he will be able to go back to work. I get away for a day to Cremisan to find the Provincial who offers me some consoling words and sends me back feeling depressed. In Jerusalem, however, the FMA Visitor was moved and came to the rescue, sending a new Sister from Damascus to nurse the remaining Sisters in Beitgemal.

In the midst of so many serious emergencies, Fr Candiani's resistance reached its limits: "But I repeat for the umpteenth time that what scares me is "debt" fever more than malaria fever. Add to that the lack of '*cor unum et anima una*' in the community". So he continually begged to be relieved of the responsibility of Rector; knowing him very well, Fr Ricaldone replied that he needed to be patient and wittily invited him to pray with greater fervour every time he asked the Father to "forgive us our debts"!

Srugi's condition remained very serious for several weeks, and he suffered much; nevertheless, opposite to his Rector, he remained serene, in constant prayer, never a complaint, edifying the doctors, Sisters and confreres who often came to visit him from the Cremisan and Bethlehem communities. Then, thanks to the prayers of so many friends (as he wrote to his sister Zāhira) he overcame the crisis and on 19 November "our very dear Srugi is back among us, after a good 49 days of illness when he received extreme unction."

And meanwhile the situation outside was a worrying one; Fr Candiani paints an almost tragicomic picture with his usual vivacity: on the one hand, frequent patrols of British soldiers and Jewish policemen on the prowl, and on the other hand, equally frequent gangs of hungry Palestinian combatants; sometimes the two groups arrive almost at the same time from opposite directions and you have to juggle things to avoid being compromised. There are also a few firefights on the property; due to the exceptionally heavy rainfall, malaria is on the rise: "At home, out of 13 confreres, only 6 are still standing! Hurrah to Betgamāl, Gamaliel's salubrious mansion full of thieves, malaria and debts." The epidemic continued to spread; on 8 January 1940 "Bro. Srugi suggests returning repeat malaria sufferers to their relatives for an indefinite period of time, for safer recovery. In agreement with the Prefect of Studies the suggestion is accepted, with an accompanying letter being sent to them." Then came events of a different kind: "6 February Carnival, we go to Rafāt to celebrate Saint Dorothy; then games, carnival triumph, cinema. – 12 February: to Jaffa, stopping by the Nazarena [Farwagy, merchant]. – 16 March: funeral of Fr Maurizio Gisler 85 years old. – 29 March: Dear St Joseph and St Stephen, bless this school or it will become a mortuary."

## **7. Srugi's decline and death against the backdrop of World War II (1940–43)**

Since the Turks left Palestine in 1917, the Italian character of the "agricultural school" at Betgamāl had been accentuated by the authorities and supported by the Salesians.

The school's diplomas were endorsed by the Consulate General of Italy in Jerusalem and the awarding of diplomas and prizes was often presided over by the Royal Consul. The accounts document the aid provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ANMI and the *Banco di Roma* for the business and the school. On the other hand, the 1930s chronicler does not hide his delight at the victories in Abyssinia. So, summing it all up, even with the inevitable misunderstandings and reservations (especially on the part of the Arab confreres, but not only them...), it can be said that the Salesians at Betgamāl were comfortable under the protection of the Savoy flag and were considered good representatives of “*Italianità*”, as they used to say in those days, starting with Fr Candiani who had always been in the forefront among the members of the “Italian communities” in Jerusalem, Haifa and Suez, and even now in the Betgamāl setting he was happy to maintain some of these traits. [Photos nos. 51, 77].

### **7.1 Italy enters the war: imprisonment of Fr Candiani and the other Italians**

This all changed dramatically in June 1940, after Italy entered the war: for the British and the Allies, the school at Betgamāl became an enemy group and its property a coveted strategic post. All the Italians (SDB and FMA) were imprisoned, beginning with the Rector Fr Candiani considered to be the leading exponent; he cursed and swore as he was imprisoned in the citadel at Jerusalem, as opposed to Srugi who remained calm and pointed out to him: “Fr Rector, you have told us many times that we do not have time to pray and meditate. This might be a good occasion!” Given his health situation, Simon was transferred to the nearby Italian hospital. Fr Pietro Bolognani recorded in 1953: “When permission was obtained, through an English Catholic sergeant, to celebrate Mass early in the morning in the chapel at the same hospital, I told my dear confrere, who rejoiced immensely. Every day early in the morning he waited for me to serve Mass and have the consolation of eating the Eucharistic Jesus. His behaviour was angelic. The good Cottolengo Sisters hid a thermos of coffee in a corner in the sacristy. I used it but he did not want to taste it.”

After they checked that his nationality was Palestinian, Simon was sent back to Betgamāl where he remained with the few boys, confreres and collaborators. Yet the work had not lessened since the sick and the poor continued to come up to the *deir*, in fact the inhabitants of Rafāt also flocked to the clinic, where the Dorothy Sisters had been interned and the clinic was closed. Without Sister Tersilla, also interned in the female section of the prison camp in Bethlehem with all the FMAs from the Holy Land, Simon had to take on almost all the work, though luckily with help from Mr Artin, an Armenian. Fr Candiani was first taken to Acre, where he suffered from the isolation and lack of communication which he complained about in three letters he wrote to the Provincial (signing himself: “your excommunicated son”), given that, for understandable

reasons, none of the letters Sister Tersilla and various confreres wrote him arrived. When transferred to the internment camp at Deir Rafāt along with priests and Sisters from the Latin Patriarchate, he wrote as a “consoled son” since he was being treated “like a prince in this oasis of peace and prayer”; he sighed with nostalgia as he looked towards the nearby house at Betgamāl, thinking of the sacrifices the confreres were making (29 September, 1 October). He was able to move around with a degree of freedom, as he wrote in letters on 13 and 21 October and 1 November. I am copying some details from these here that I think will be helpful to get a realistic picture of this period, other than “legend”:

Yesterday, Saturday, the Apostolic Delegate came to visit me. He put me on the spot when he asked me if I wanted to stay in Rafat or go to Bethlehem. However I immediately told him that I would much prefer to be with my confreres so I could lead a more religious, more regular life and also so we could share our joys and sorrows together. I needed to tell him, however, that I could not wish for anything better in Rafat in terms of food, accommodation, religious service and also the good harmony that reigns among all the priests and clerics of the Patriarchate. I asked the officer's permission to take all the Sisters (more than 50!) to the place where Fr Rosin was killed. The outing-cum-pilgrimage was marvellously successful. The officer himself escorted us on horseback and the Sisters couldn't stop thanking me as well. I will try to get permission to take them as far as Betgemal on foot when some “bigwig” from the C.I.D. comes to Rafat. I'm not lacking in nerve. I have suggested to Betgamal to look after the water tanks as much as or more than the cellar, because while we can be without wine we can't be without water. I have been twice to the place where Fr Rosin was martyred, with the Sisters the first time and with the priests and clerics the second time as a pilgrimage. Yesterday I went with all the Sisters above Rafat to contemplate Latrun from afar. The hope is we can get permission to go as far as the *Martyrium* of St Stephen; It will be a grace if we get it. Yesterday morning I greeted Artin and Dicran who came with our car to take our officer from Bab-el-wad. From Beitgemal I receive what I need on request: clothes, stationery, table wine and Mass wine.

Despite all this he kept insisting and in February 1941 he got permission to be transferred to Bethlehem, to the large Salesian institute transformed into internment “Camp X” for around 120 Italian priests and clerics.

## 7.2 Fr López the superior “*ad interim*”. Fr Calis the nominal Rector

Meanwhile the Rector Major, Fr Peter Ricaldone, when he found that the Provincial, Fr Giovanni B. Canale (1882–1962) was unable to carry out his task because he was interned as an Italian citizen, appointed the thirty-seven-year-old Fr López from Salvador (until then a lecturer at the theologate in Bethlehem and also part-time at the philosophate in Cremisan), as the legal representative of the “Pious Salesian Society” for Palestine with its headquarters in Betgamāl, to be effective immediately.

By following the EGS we can reconstruct his remarkable “*curriculum vitae*”. Rafael Arturo López was born in El Salvador in 1903, and entered the Congregation as a young man. After his initial formation and practical training in his own country (1922–1923), noting his outstanding talents the superiors sent him to the Crocetta in Turin where over a period of five years (1923–28) he completed his studies in theology and Canon Law, graduating in theology and *utroque jure* at this school of great Salesian lecturers. His Rector for a year was Fr Luigi Nai. In that Salesian and international atmosphere (where Blessed Fr Philip Rinaldi gave memorable conferences on the Salesian spirit) he absorbed a love for the Congregation and the Church that was his characteristic for the rest of his life. On his return home, enriched by a remarkable patrimony of biblical-theological sciences and classical and modern languages, he was assigned to the Santa Tecla – Nueva S. Salvador theologate, first as Prefect of Studies for two years (1928–30) and then as Rector (1930–34).

In 1934 he offered himself voluntarily for the missions; his request was accepted, and he received the crucifix in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin as one of the large expedition that year (200 Salesians and 125 FMA) who wanted to give worthy honour to Don Bosco the saint. He was sent (probably at the suggestion of Frs Nai and Nigra, former Provincials in the Middle East) to the theologate at Bethlehem, where initially he took on the teaching of Holy Scripture, liturgy and ceremonies, then later other disciplines. Here he demonstrated “a complete personality due to the balance of human gifts and talents, combined with a high level of religious spirit. He immediately had a special influence on and standing with the clerics and was at the centre of their attention and esteem. Jovial, sharp and conversational, a fine observer, he adapted himself to each person’s character in an appropriate and effectively formative way. In addition to his work as a counsellor and teacher, he soon combined this with being the director of the festive oratory, to which he gave new vitality.” (PRADUROUX, in CAUTERO 1977, p. 155).

With the boys and clerics in Bethlehem and Cremisan, Fr Raphael spent fruitful and rewarding years, both in his teaching and in the various educational and pastoral activities in which he was able to display his rich talents. Now obedience was asking him to leave all that to become the Rector at Betgamāl and delegate of the Rector Major for all the houses in Palestine. He accepted this heavy responsibility in a spirit of sacrifice given that he knew he was threatened by tuberculosis that until then had not received adequate treatment, and even less so from then on.

He began to carry out his task as canonical superior with great patience and balance. There were some intricate situations that needed to be urgently addressed, including: the somewhat arbitrary management of the school in Haifa by the one in charge *ad interim*; rebellion by the French Salesians in Nazareth against the Italian Provincial, Fr Canale, ending in a temporary closure of the school; debts to be paid; legal procedures to secure

assets and capital of the Congregation that were considered “enemy property”; endless demanding requests to get permission to bring aid to the interned confreres.

Given the circumstances, Fr Joseph Calis (1880–1954) was appointed the Rector at Betgamāl. He was born on 1 November 1880 in Beirut and baptised on the 14th in the Latin cathedral of Saint Louis the King. It is not clear when he came to the Holy Land. After an inconclusive seminary experience, he entered Cremisan in 1896 where he did his aspirantate and novitiate, which ended with temporary profession; as a practical trainee he was assistant to the youngest boarders at the orphanage in Bethlehem and after overcoming a few problems, made his perpetual profession in 1903 and became a priest in 1905. From then on he was always at the house in Bethlehem as councillor and later Catechist for the boarders and for a while the headmaster of the school for boys from outside. He dedicated a lot of time to his favourite study of Arabic “in order to master it perfectly and make it an effective instrument for proclaiming divine truths, not only with a truly rare theological competence, but also with a precision and literary elegance that could possibly stand comparison with the best classical prose of Islamic civilisation. His was not mere literary ambition, but an awareness of a higher mission, since many Catholic books and magazines were commonly neglected, indeed despised, by the Muslim world for their clumsy wording and overabundance of stylistic imperfections. He soon made a name for himself in the literary world as a perfect prose writer and distinguished poet, and he had many connections with eminent people in the Islamic world who honoured him with their friendship and coveted his collaboration. Indeed, it was not uncommon, during his sermons in our church of the Sacred Heart in Bethlehem, to see genuine Muslims lined up in the back, who had come especially to hear his fluent and perfect prose from his lips.” (V. Francia, in his *Mortuary letter*).

Although he sympathised with the “rebellious” Arab confreres (1915–18), he remained in Bethlehem after Fr Ricaldone’s enquiry. There was no lack of work for him there: he was often asked to preach in the house (boys, confreres, Sisters) and beyond (religious communities, parishes, schools). Endowed with a sharp intelligence and a photographic memory, he had acquired eloquence as an orator, but he knew how to adapt to the illiterate in simple ways. He gave triduums, novenas to Our Lady, sermons on popular saints; retreats; he was consulted with awe to proofread devotional books and catechisms, articles in magazines or dailies.

In October 1929 he was assigned to teach moral theology and Arabic to the clerics in the newly emerging theologate. He took care in preparing and writing up his lessons, but since he had no specific academic formation and teaching experience, it was not long before his limitations were known causing discontent among the clerics and a negative judgement by the superiors. For lack of a replacement he kept this role until 1936 when he asked and was given permission to give it up; he also ceased teaching Arabic (cf. CAPUTA

2004, pp. 376, 387, 411). But he continued to live in the same house in Bethlehem until halfway through June 1940 when it was requisitioned by the British to be used as an internment camp, and it became necessary to make room for the Italian confreres. At this juncture, Fr Calīs was assigned to Betgamāl as the Rector. The local confreres rejoiced at having a champion of “Arabness” among them; Srugi too enjoyed his preaching while on the other hand, as was his custom, showed the new Rector the same humble obedience he had shown any superior, making himself useful in services that circumstances demanded, as well as looking after him since he suffered from diabetes. Fr Calīs did not take long to let the Provincial know about the situation of the house, asking for help: “I don’t know why the FMA superior does not want to send three Sisters (two from the country and a Pole). If she had to send just one I could understand, but here it’s a question of sending more. The Sisters in Bethlehem are more than enough to serve the orphanage. Brothers Harūni and Srugi do not bring the mail from Artūf: they cannot leave Beitgemal, as the British sergeant told me; Mr Dikrān does not dare go beyond Beitgemal because he is afraid of being kidnapped or having problems.”

Other brief messages are of the same tenor, and show that he was not lacking a spirit of observation and practical good sense. Instead, the long letter of 5 April 1941 contains a resentful protest at the occupation of his room in Bethlehem, the alleged scattering of all his personal things, and the loss of his very valuable manuscripts. In fact they had been saved, and in time he got them back. After his death they were consigned to the Province archives where they remain today.

Meanwhile, Fr López (making up for mistakes made through Fr Calīs’ inexperience), was effectively the Rector at Betgamāl: other than organising the school life for the boys and work on the farm, he gave lessons in theology to the clerics in practical training (three Poles and one Spaniard), preferring to keep them at home rather than send them to Bethlehem where, including during the internment, regular courses in philosophy and theology were organised for the clerics, but in a crowded and suffocating setting. Although even at Betgamāl there was no lack of health problems. Quite the opposite!

### **7.3 Srugi’s illness and new heavy trials for the house (1941–42)**

Fr López noted in the chronicle: “5 May 1941: a heatwave has begun, up to 45 degrees. Our doctor Srugi is in bed with fever, it seems he is struck down with malaria. 7 May: Bro. Srugi is still in bed with fever and people are flocking to our clinic because also at Rafāt there is no pharmacist. 10 May: Bro. Srugi has been taken to the French hospital in Bethlehem. He is suffering from bronchial pneumonia and they say that his state is rather serious.” For his part, in a letter of 12 May 1941, the Swiss Economist, Fr Karl Goslar (1883–1944) updated the Provincial: “It seems that our dear confrere Srugi is not too well. Bronchitis and then exhaustion. It has us worried. Let us pray to the Lord that he

will let our guardian angel of Betgemal recover. We see that God wants to test our house with many misfortunes.”

Fr Ernesto Forti was witness to the positive development of this stage: “The great care of the good Sisters of Charity, who have by now learned to respect him, helped him to overcome the crisis, but they did not give him back his strength. Italian confreres interned in the house at Bethlehem have come to see him, since he wanted to visit them before returning to Beitgemal. In order not to tire him out they all came as a group to the reception, watched over by the British police, and surrounded him affectionately, showing how happy they were to see him. He was so moved that he could not hold back his tears.”

Fr López noted in the chronicle that during June–November 1941 groups of British and Australian soldiers came to Betgamāl with their Italian prisoners, having come by train to Wady Sarār and been taken to the camp at Bab el-Wad. On Sundays, after taking part in the Mass, they were given breakfast (bread, wine and olives), and the officers would leave behind medicines, disinfectants and military jackets: Srugi used some of these that are still kept in his room. Other times they came to swim in the pool at Wadi Būlos or for some hunting on the hills at the end of the property.

He also wrote about other problems in a scene we might be able to describe as a mini apocalypse: in the autumn of 1941 the house ran the risk of being occupied by a Polish contingent associated with the Allied forces. At the end of December torrential rains carried away much of the cultivation at wadi Būlos, caused water tanks to split, holes in the dispensary roof, while the roofs over the rabbit hutch and stable collapsed, with the consequent death of the animals. On 7 January 1942: snow on the surrounding mountains; in certain parts of the house it was raining more inside than outside; more than 110 sheep and lambs dead with a loss of 200 sterling. “Patience, the Lord wants to try us. I am convinced that up to a certain point Fr Candiani’s pessimism has some *fundamentum in re*.” Then he adds an extenuating circumstance that demonstrates his extraordinary kindness: “Probably the previous superiors were unable to do better due to poor health.”

Despite everything, on 30 and 31 January 1942, prepared for with a novena, solemn celebrations were organised for the closing of the first centenary of Don Bosco’s work (1841–1941), at which Bishop Karol Mieczysław Radoński (1883–1951), bishop of Włocławek (Poland) presided. He was a refugee at the time, and accompanied by his secretary. When saying goodbye, the bishop expressed his heartfelt appreciation at the success of the festivities and his great respect for the master of ceremonies Srugi. Before leaving he recommended to the confreres present: “Hold Bro. Srugi dear, follow what he does, collect his details, because Bro. Srugi is a true relic, he is a saint.” [Photos nos. 54, 55].

#### 7.4 Danger of military occupation. Requests to house Polish refugees (1942–1943)

From May-August 1942 there was a succession of visits from Polish, Australian and British officers interested in occupying the spacious areas in the central building and the many other connected areas. Managing to beat the censorship, Fr López sent a memo to the Provincial “Plan for what to do in case of the house being occupied”: what to rescue, who would remain (Srugi among these) and where the others would go. On 19 May Fr Canale informed him: “I have come to learn secretly from a well-informed individual that within a month Betgemal will be occupied by the army.” On 17 June Fr López passed on the news: some rumours say they will place police or Polish cadets here. The chronicler noted that between July and November 1942 there was talk of opening a gymnasium for Polish boys. On 2 July Fr Canale insisted: “We must fight vigorously with all our strength. We cannot admit other people, especially of the opposite sex. Already the other houses have been occupied.” On 7 July, Fr López informed him that two Polish military chaplains were asking to rent out Betgamāl to settle 250 cadets from 14 to 16 years of age, assuring him that they would not take over the property and would pay the rent. He added that he had rejected the request and had given instructions to Fr Anthony Farrugia (1908–1995), then the Rector at Cremisan, to oppose any similar attempts. In November, when the urgent need for rooms was less, the chaplains asked for two of the clerics in practical training as religion teachers for their cadets in Nazareth. The Rector granted this, even though it increased his own workload; but on 7 January 1943 he got the Provincial to send Polish cleric Edward Swider (1914–1967) from Cremisan to replace them. Again on 21 September 1943 a Polish colonel wanted to put 30 boys in Betgamāl and after seeing the rooms, went to ‘Ain Karim to try to get the approval of the Rector, Fr López, in his final stage of illness.

At this point it is helpful to make a brief *excursus* so we can place these events in historical context. During the annexation of eastern Poland to the Soviet Union (1939), thousands of Polish soldiers were arrested and sent to the *gulags*. With the Sikorski-Mayski agreement (1941), many were released and allowed to join a reconstituted Polish army being formed in Southern Russia and in Kazakistan (the “Second Corp”). But very soon Stalin withdrew his support for the agreement, therefore General Władysław Anders, Commander of the Polish Divisions, through a lengthy exodus marked by unspeakable suffering, managed to bring his troops together with thousands of civilians, via the British Mandate corridors, first to Iran then to Iraq and finally to Palestine.

The survival of the civilians was a priority for both military and Church leaders, who knocked on the doors of all the Catholic institutions in the Holy Land. On 14 July 1942 “the Major General of Polish Forces” presented a proposal for the leasing of the two Salesian buildings at Nazareth and Betgamāl “for use as boys boarding schools”. Negotiations went on for a long time, as we have seen. Only between July and September



1943 did the chief chaplain, Fr Jan Brandys finalise an agreement with the Salesian Rector at Nazareth, Fr Auguste Crozes, to house around 300 boys under 15 years of age in the building and in tents in the surrounding woods. Most were orphans. While the girls were housed in the nearby Betharram Fathers institute. A school was organised for them that functioned for more than two years. They were accompanied by officers, teachers and service personnel. Some Salesians were also chaplains and teachers. Among them was Fr Anton Guzik (+ 3.2.1966) and two clerics from Betgamāl. In general relations between the leaders and the Salesians and boys were good. (cf. DESRAMAUT, pp. 212–215).

### **7.5 Fr López and Srugi: serving until they had no strength left**

Despite all the difficulties, Fr López managed to get the new school year going. On 31 October 1942 he wrote to the Provincial: “We have 35 boys split between 4 classes. Everything is going ahead properly. Tomorrow, All Saints Day is the end of the triduum for the beginning of the school year”. From September to November 1942 Srugi had frequent relapses (malaria, bronchitis...) that left him exhausted, so much so that he didn't have the strength to write down all the details needed for the register in the dispensary but just summed them up, always in Arabic and in a clear hand: “Various medications to any number of people, up to 45, 67, 77 a day”. Finally he gave up, not for lack of desire but of energy, as we read in the handwritten note on the last page: “I finished treating people at the clinic at the end of September 1942. Through lack of strength.”

So he was taken to rest for a while in the healthier climate of the mountain at Cremisan, and came back refreshed; but Fr Gossler wrote that “since coming back he has not gone down to the pharmacy any more and only treats the villagers in rare cases, because he himself needs care for his ill health.” These precarious conditions continued in spring 1943; and on 29 April he did not take part in the memorable “whole community outing (confreres, lay staff and boys: 45 people in all) to Jericho, the Dead Sea, by bus and in our car.” [Photo no. 78].

Between May and June 1943 some of the confreres and Sisters received permission from the British authorities to leave the internment camp at Bethlehem and return to Betgamāl. Among them Sister Tersilla whom Srugi had missed so much in the clinic from June 1940. Now she became his personal nurse and would be with him till the end, saving valuable items, among which his notebook with his resolutions. On 8 July a reluctant Fr Luigi Lajolo (1880–1959) was convinced by the Provincial to assume the effective running of the house. Fr Calis was not up to it and Fr López was exhausted from tuberculosis and the thousand problems he had dealt with during the three years of heavy responsibility; transfer to ‘Ain Karim and then Cremisan were of no further use; lovingly attended by the “Daughters of Charity”, he died on 8 October in the French hospital in Bethlehem at just 40 years of age, mourned by everyone. Srugi was aware of the many difficulties his

office involved and therefore assured him of his constant prayer, as well as assisting him during his frequent relapses, competently and lovingly, such that he affectionately called him “our doctor”. So for him, his death was a painful separation.

### 7.7 The last months of Simon’s life; his death and funeral (1943)

And now he too was approaching his end, but without fear, and indeed with a foretaste of the joys of his reward. Unable to go down to the church for the community practices of piety, he took part in the Mass that the Catechist, Fr Khalil Sciueri celebrated for him on the small altar in the infirmary. He hastened to dictate to the same confrere the many prescriptions for treating the sick, so that the experience he had accumulated over the years would not be lost. He frequently read the *Imitation of Christ* that he had by his bedside table.

On 19 October “he asked for Viaticum, which was brought to him, after making a holy confession”, and on the 24th he was given extreme unction, “fully composed, always resigned to the will of the good God”; the confreres and the Sisters who were there were impressed by his serenity. On the 30th, unannounced, a nephew of his arrived from Haifa and on 1 November his sister Zàhra came from Nazareth accompanied by her daughter and a cousin. They stayed some days. Some of the confreres said that Simon had had a premonition of their arrival and asked the Rector to send someone to pick them up at the station at Deirabān. His niece testified that Simon healed her from a boil on her foot, which had been hurting her for a year: it disappeared overnight. On 23 November “Bro. Srugi’s sister with another two women came to visit the patient for a second time.” During these final encounters, Simon begged his sister to come back to the Catholic Church, thus removing a thorn from which he had suffered for a long time. We read in the chronicle: “17 November: Mr Artin went by car to Bab-el-wad to pick up Dr Simon, a converted Jew, who kindly, gratis, offered to come once a month to visit the sick. He found Bro. Srugi very low and gave him no more than a few days of life. – 27 November: tonight, without any death throes and without Willibald, who was sleeping in the infirmary, noticing it, Bro. Srugi died. After two months of suffering which he bore with exemplary resignation, he flew to Heaven.” [Photos nos. 60, 61].

The Sisters were the first to come and they saw that he had died peacefully, without any death throes; they reverently composed the still-flexible body as if they were touching a sacred relic, dressed him in the only poor black suit he owned and in the parlour on the ground floor they prepared the funeral chamber, where for the whole day there was a procession of people crying, praying and touching him to get his blessing.

The funeral was held the day after with a sung Mass in the shrine of St Stephen, some family members present and a limited number of confreres, since restrictions on

movement were still in force for the “internees” in Bethlehem. Everyone who was there, Christians and Muslims, unanimously celebrated his virtues, convinced that a man of God, a saint had died. Fr Calis gave the funeral eulogy in the classic Arabic that only he was capable of, praising Simon’s talents and heroic virtues, and concluding that “rather than praying for him, it is we who should be asking him to pray for us.” The Muslim leaders said: “Had he been one of us, we would have immediately built a *maqām*, as we do for our *waly*.”

He was buried in the crypt in a grave dug next to Fr Rosin’s, opposite the burial cave that had held the ossuaries of St Stephen, Nicodemus, Gamaliel and Abibo. The Rector, Fr Lajolo wrote to the Provincial on 1 December: “I am confident that Saint Srugi will be at work again and very much from Paradise for this poor house.”

The span of Simon’s earthly life had thus come to an end. I think everything can be traced back to its beginnings, when he received the sacraments of Christian initiation in the old synagogue, then Greek-Catholic church, in Nazareth: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me: because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour*” (Lk 4:18,19). Truly, the Holy Spirit consecrated Simon and made him a living gospel in favour of the little ones, the poor, the sick and the suffering, for whom he was a tireless servant and ‘Good Samaritan’ throughout his 50 years (1892–1943: a jubilee!) spent at Betgamāl as a Salesian Brother.

## **8. Epilogue: end of an era and the start of the process towards beatification (1943–1993)**

In order to be able to resume the various activities, new staff were needed, which Fr Lajolo asked for, but they were late in arriving: the war had drastically reduced the number of suitable confreres in the Province and in the Congregation, and they were assigned preferably to other works.

### **8.1. Downsizing of the farm-school and other activities**

For Betgamāl, by now the sunset of an era was beginning: in the five-year period 1944–1948, the world that was Srugi’s underwent a radical transformation: after the end of the Second World War and the persistent terrorism that would lead to the withdrawal of the British, the UN decided to divide Palestine (resolution of 29 November 1947) into two territories assigned to the future Israeli and Palestinian States, leaving the area of Jerusalem-Bethlehem under the direct authority of the UN and placing the Gaza Strip under Egyptian administration. The resolution was welcomed by the Jews (although with reservations) and rejected by the Palestinians: a war ensued between the two (1948; ceasefire in May 1949), with the involvement of neighbouring countries and major

Powers. “Beit Gemal was occupied first by Egyptian troops and bombed fiercely by the Jews, who in turn occupied it in October the same year, emptying it of everything of value. With the flight of the Arab population and the systematic destruction of their villages, it was isolated, not very far from the line of demarcation, and exposed to raids by night that for years required measures of armed self-defence. Only with the creation of Jewish settlements in the surrounding areas did the security situation improve, but meanwhile the situation within had become critical due to the rapid decline of the school and the extreme difficulty in changing the confreres, since it was cut off from the rest of the Province” (V. Pozzo). “It is due in no small part to the great experience and ability of Fr Lajolo that the storm did not have more disastrous consequences for the place. Ever vigilant, always at his post, despite his age and aches and pains, with an admirable spirit of sacrifice” (G. Ponzetti).

Only a few farmers came up to the mill and press from the abandoned countryside carrying their sacks of wheat and olives. Boys ceased coming to the little day school; few sick people turned up at the clinic, therefore first one then the other was gradually closed; in 1946 Sister Tersilla left to be superior of the FMA community at the Italian hospital in Damascus. The plan envisioned in 1929 to build a large “shrine of Christian forgiveness” at the *Martyrium* of St Stephen was frozen, both because the flow of offerings by devotees and benefactors had dried up and because the socio-religious context had completely changed. There was also less interest in the Stephenine question and no fewer than 26 years elapsed before publications on this picked up once more (cf. CHARBEL, 1969).

## **8.2 Canonical process: from the Informative Process to the declaration of Venerability (1964–1993)**

By contrast, the value of what had been done so far and, in particular, the person and activity of Srugi began to appear in a new light in the eyes of the confreres. They began to look after whatever had belonged to him as well as related documents, but also to interview witnesses, so that his memory could be passed on in a credible and reliable way. As well as confreres, Sisters and lay helpers, many past pupils were interviewed who had settled, from 1948, in the nearby refugee camps around Bethlehem (Dehesheh, ‘Aida, Beit Jibrīn, Gaza) and Hebron (‘Ain ‘Arrūb ...), or around distant Jericho and Transjordan.

Srugi’s reputation for holiness, which he already had during his life and was confirmed at the moment of his death, increased with the passing of the years; news of graces obtained through his intercession were arriving. Fr Francesco Laconi (1912–1983; in 1958–1966 Provincial of the Middle East) had already begun in 1947–48 to collect written testimonies, first privately, and from 1953 officially with the encouragement of the Rector Major, Fr Renato Ziggotti (1892–1983) who visited Palestine in 1954 and wanted to offer

the Salesian Congregation a model of the holy brother. So, 10 years after his death and 400 years after the beginnings of the Fara'un-Srugi family, his process of beatification began.

In the climate of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), Western and Eastern Patriarchs and Bishops (including those of Damascus, Zahlah, Adana, Cairo...), parish priests and religious superiors highlighted the ecumenical and lay dimensions of Srugi's witness in about seventy 'postulator letters', asking the Pope to present him to the whole Church as a credible model worth imitating.

On 11 May 1964, at the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem under the presidency of Patriarch Alberto Gori OFM (1889–1970), the Informative Process began, and ended on 28 November 1966. 58 witnesses gave their depositions, among whom some of his non-Catholic relatives and, something more unique than rare, some Muslims (cf. ORLANDO; *Hierosolymitana* 1988, pp. 257–381). Fr Sciueri attested: "I was lucky enough to be chosen by Bro. Srugi as his ordinary confessor. But it was I who had to marvel at so much virtue. He was a beautiful soul, candid and simple as a dove; I believe that he carried the immaculate robe of his baptism to his grave."

In May-June 1968, the Roman censors deputed by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to examine his few writings, attested that they were fully in conformity with the Catholic faith and morals. From 1981 to 1983 the Apostolic Process took place, presided over by the Latin Patriarch, Giacomo Beltritti, who as a new priest and director of Deir Rafāt had known Simon well (1933-35); 23 witnesses gave their depositions. On 10 December 1982, the exhumation of Simon's body took place in the crypt of the *Martyrium*: following the indications of those who had been present at the funeral 39 years earlier (Dikrān Ciakmakgian and Nasry Al-'Arag, and their respective wives), the pine coffin was dug up, in which his almost complete skeleton was found. After the examination of the medical experts ('Abdāllah Khoury and Cesār Ra'éd), his skeleton was reassembled and placed in a zinc casket inside a large sarcophagus of fine wood, which was walled up in the western niche of the crypt. The author of the present work, who had served as secretary during the latter Process, was among those who attended the event.

In the years that followed, the theologians and experts of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints carefully studied all the documentation and, on the basis of their positive opinion, on 2 April 1993 Pope John-Paul II (1920–2005) authorised Cardinal Prefect Angelo Felici to issue the decree on the heroicity of his virtues, thus conferring on Simon the title of Venerable. The introduction is very solemn and highlights Simon's evangelical qualities; in the body of the document, his total love for God and his distinctive virtues

are highlighted, especially his mercy towards the sick and his profound experience of the beatitudes.<sup>32</sup>

### 8.3 Closing of the works for the boys, and new monastic foundations (1982–2000)

I will only mention some of the main events, referring to the House Chronicle. The boarding school for Arab children, orphans and the needy, which had been restarted after the war years of 1948–49, was suspended for the first time in 1957. From 1958 to 1962/3, at the request of the “Diocesan Assistance Committee” of the Latin Patriarchate and of the “Work of St James the Apostle”, Betgamāl also welcomed groups of Polish (and Hungarian) boys, members of “mixed” families, both during the three months of summer camps and during the school year. The Polish Salesian Fr John Kot (who, as we know, had lived with Srugi for some years) was put in charge of it and returned at the beginning of 1959. A Polish FMA, Sr Teresa Tazarkowna, made a great contribution by acting not only as interpreter but also as mother to the younger children. In the midst of difficulties of various kinds, and with ever decreasing numbers of children, the boarding school continued until the school year 1962–63; the summer camp, on the other hand, was active until 1966 and ceased after the “6-day war” in June 1967. In 1968, the boarding school was reopened for Arab children, mainly from the Galilee, to cater for poor, disadvantaged families and “social cases” assigned by the Israeli Ministry. The first years were promising: in 1970 there were 50 children, 11 Salesians (including 2 practical trainees), 3 FMA and 5 lay people; the “Yom Kippūr” war (1973) marked a setback, with the suspension of the boarding school, which resumed until its final closure in 1982, surrendering to the evidence of facts unfavourable to a sustainable and meaningful management. Also as a result of this closure, the last three Sisters (Ermellina Mignani, Giuditta Dal Pos and the aforementioned Teresa) left Betgamāl on 23 March 1985, after 93 years of self-sacrificing service to generations of Salesians and boarders, and to a lesser extent also to local mothers and their children. The more fortunate ones had known Srugi closely and collaborated with him, so they were able to give valuable testimony for his cause of beatification. (cf. R. CAUTERO – L. FIOR, pp. 87–88).

In 1975 the Benedictine from the United States, Fr Isaac Jacob attempted to establish an ecumenical community or “Christian Kibbutz” on the south-eastern hill, called “Tel-Gamaliel”, which ended with his death in 1995. Instead, the lengthy negotiations with a new monastic family, the “Moniales de Bethléem, de l’Assomption de la Vierge, et de Saint Bruno” had more success and in 1987 they were allowed to build their monastery

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. AAS 85 (9 September 1993), pp. 859–862. The style is celebratory and, apart from a few exaggerations, the two errors in the date of birth (27 April 1877 instead of the 15th) and the date of his death (27 September instead of November 1943), remain inexplicable in such an official pontifical gazette.

on the south side of the hill, close to the inner courtyard of the Salesian house, in what had been the mill and oil press sheds that Simon Srugi had supervised. On 27 November 1988 (45th anniversary of Srugi's death), the first group of nuns (10 and one volunteer), began their contemplative life. Since 2000, the male branch of the same monastic family has settled on the aforementioned "Tel Gamaliel" hill, overlooking the driveway and the clinic where Srugi carried out his ministry as "Good Samaritan" for many years. Nuns and monks look to him as a model for the vital synthesis of contemplation and action that he was able to embody, and they unite their prayers for his beatification.

#### 8.4 Resumption of studies and excavations on Saint Stephen and Cafargamala (1969–2006)

With regard to the "Stephenine question", after the mention made in passing of Fr Antonio Charbel (1911–1988), it is worth concluding by recalling the Polish Salesian Fr Andrzej Strus (1938–2005) for the great interest he devoted to it from the literary and archaeological point of view. He published comparative philological studies of various versions of the *Passion of St Stephen*; in 1987 conducted new explorations of the crypt beneath the current *Martyrium*, tracing the stages of transition from the two original caves (one of which was venerated) at the first *Martyrium*, arriving at the conclusion that "the hypothesis of the authenticity of the tomb of St Stephen at Beit-Jimal is still valid and, with these new data, appears to be possible." From the mid-1990s until 2004, with the scientific support of the well-known archaeologists Fr Michele Piccirillo OFM (1944–2008) from the "Studium Biblicum Franciscanum" in Jerusalem and Fr Jean-Baptiste Humbert OP from the "École Biblique", he conducted excavation campaigns in Betgamāl and Fattīr that led to significant results about the history of this area, *in primis*, the continuity of human settlements from the Jewish to the Roman and Byzantine periods (cf. MARITANO, pp. 9–11, and the titles I have given in the bibliography). They were crowned in 2003 by the discovery of a "tabula ansata" at a round building on the hill about one kilometre north-west of the Salesian house, with a Greek inscription crediting "Khirbet el-Jiljil" as the site of the primitive monument erected in honour of the deacon and protomartyr Saint Stephen: "Τὸ διακονικὸν Στεφάνου προτομάρτυρος = Le diaconikon d'Étienne, premier martyr" (The diaconicon of St Stephen, protomartyr). The hill is still known today by the Arabic name Khirbet Jiljil, derived from Aramaic *[I]klīla*, "the form inscribed on the lid of the ossuary or sarcophagus in Lucian's Letter" and means "crown" or "diadem", that the corresponding Greek "stephanos" respects (cf. PUECH, pp. 109–126). According to Fr Strus, however, the precise location of the original tomb of St Stephen has still to be identified. In my humble opinion, with all due respect to my friend and colleague Fr Andrzej, the conclusions reached by numerous researchers and scholars in the years 1922–1930, based on converging evidence provided by the critical analysis of monuments and documents, summarised by Fr Maurizio Gisler and confirmed in

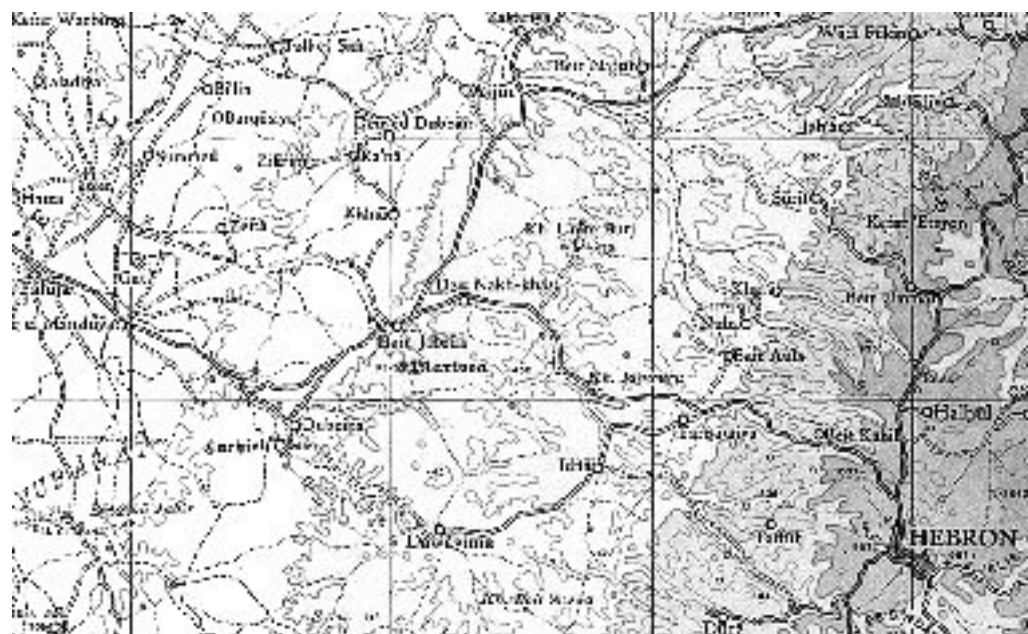
1969–1978: the primitive sepulchral space in which the ossuaries (reliquaries) of St Stephen, Nicodemus, Gamaliel and Abibo were placed is the small grotto below the altar of the right apse (the *diaconicon*) in the 5th century Byzantine church, which was rediscovered by the Salesians in 1916–1917 and rebuilt by them between 1928–1930.

So it is with good reason that in the crypt below, also “made standard” by that grotto, Fr Bianchi, Fr Fergnani, Fr Sarkīs, Fr Rosin, and the venerable Simon Srugi were buried and rest in the sleep of the just. In life they were imitators of St Stephen, and now await with him the resurrection of their bodies at the “parousia” to receive the “crown of glory”. Thus the history of the “valiant men” of Betgamāl flows into the eternity of God.





Towns and villages within the outreach of Simon Sruqi's activity.  
British Mandate maps in Wikipedia.





## Section 2

# Special “windows”

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### I ARAB-PALESTINIAN POPULATION IN CONTACT WITH SRUGI

#### 1. Nature, scope, sources

According to tradition, Srugi’s circle of influence as the one in charge of the clinic and mill at Betgamāl extended to “around fifty villages” in the Shefela region. Which ones were they and where were they located? How many people lived there? Given that today (2021) the face of this geographical area has completely changed and that many of those villages have disappeared, my desire is to help the reader to gain a faithful idea of the reality in which the Salesians at Betgamāl and Srugi in particular were operating. It is helpful for people living in the Holy land and even more necessary for others, including putting aside the niggling doubt that hagiography has romanticised Srugi’s life! But also to be able to critically rethink certain interpretations that opposing ideologies, be they Zionist or Palestinian, have today of that historical and geographical reality (cf. ABU SITTA, FALAH, GAVISH).

For my reconstruction I consulted internal and external sources. The former: we have both the information that Srugi noted down in 8 surviving registers of medications, and oral testimonies of some past pupils as well as the Acts of the Informative Process. It is from these sources that we draw the names and number of towns and villages, but not the size of individual populations or the population as a whole. For this, we need to refer to contemporary external sources, i.e. the results of the first and second census carried out by the British Mandate in 1922 and 1931, and the *Survey of Palestine*, jointly carried out in 1945–46 by the “Office of Statistics” and the “Department of Lands” for the “Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine” in view of its partition by the UN. Research had already begun in 1938 and was taken up again in 1943 (cf. BARRON, HADAWI, MILLS, SHAW).

## 2. The eight registers of medications

The printed title on the cover is “Salesian Agricultural School. Beitgemal, Palestine. Dispensary Register”, while the heading on the individual pages within is “Beitgemal Dispensary. Treatment Register”. 8 registers have come down to us that cover the years 1932–1942; They are kept in what was his room, uncategorised. Srugi writes in Arabic in 6 columns: date, sequential number of medications (sometimes more than 60 a day!), patient’s name, the village they came from, diagnosis and treatment, observations. The total number of villages is over 50.

## 3. Names provided by past pupils and people originally from the area

On 7 November 1961 in Bethlehem, Palestinian Salesian *abuna* Ibrahīm Khoury (1920–1982) interviewed past pupil Dīb Mahmūd Hāsan Al-‘Aisy “from Zakariya, in the district of Hebron”. The interview is replete with original details, many thus far unpublished.<sup>33</sup> Dīb deserves credit for what he says concerning our subject, including the fact that nobody had asked him to list the villages; (I transcribe this respecting the form in which the interviewer wrote them down):

Srugi provided services to more than 50 villages: Zakaria, Beitnatif, El Brej, Deraban, Jarāsh, ‘Illār, Seríf, Wadi Fukin, Kharās, Nūba, Bitūla, Tarqūmia, Ithna, Der Nakhas, Dawamia, Beitjibrin, Kbeibe (not Emaus Qubeiba), Kudna, Der Essabān, Ra’na, Zita El Janubīa, Thikrin, Summél, Tallessāfi, Itnibbe, Altīna, El Kheme, Jīlia, Mughalles, Casāse, Sajad, Shamha, Kholda, Der Emheisen, Beitjis, Beit Sosin, Ishua, ‘Eslīin, Sārra’a, and others that I do not know. All their inhabitants came to be treated by *mu’allem* Srugi. And they were all humanitarian services for eyes, malaria and other illnesses. Even at night time ... from Ajur ....<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9B, file C = Testimonianze III, pp.12–14: “I got to know Srugi since I was about 10 years old and now I am 45. I entered the school at Betgemal as an 11-year-old pupil and was a pupil of Srugi’s, a boarder. I stayed there four years: I ate in the convent and slept at home. It was at the convent that I learned the masonry trade. Srugi was my teacher of Arabic. He knew Arabic very well, even better than Fr Spiridion and no one at Beitgemal knew Arabic like he did, who came after Fr Calis, but before Fr Shialhub and Fr Butros Sarkis and Brother George Harūni. Fr Frey taught me geometry and Fr Fergnani, the Prefect of Studies, taught me Italian. As for the masonry trade, building engineer Salvetti Pietro taught me the practical side, that is, building, plastering, finishing, flooring, carpentry, whitewashing.” Let me add: because of his masonry skills Dīb was invited, even in the 70s, to carry out works at Bethlehem and Nazareth, where he lived in the Salesian community for three years.

<sup>34</sup> “When he went to peoples’ homes to treat them, he took or accepted nothing, except that after a lot of pressure he would accept a cup of coffee. Currently, an American, between Kharas and Nuba, called Abu Daud, is the director of an American institution, and he also goes around treating people and has doctors with him. But the people say he is not like Srugi, because he requires all the necessary time for recovery, while Srugi had people recover, at least more than once, immediately; they went to him because they knew that they would be healed.”

So, of the “around fifty” towns and villages spoken of by the tradition, Dīb lists 40 of them and adds that he does not know the others (he does not say he cannot remember them!). It is interesting to note that many correspond to the ones Srugi recorded.

Nada ‘Abd-el-Fatāh al-‘Arag, ‘Abd-el-Hamid ‘Aly, Mahmūd ‘Atāllah ‘Abed, are other people interviewed from the refugee camp at Deheshe, and at Bethlehem or Cremisan the same year, 1961, and they provide confirmation (Ajjur, Qasasa, Khoulda, Sajad, Zita, Der Nakhas, Tikhrin al Bardān) also letting us know of two other places: Almasmiya al-Kabīra, Almasmiya as-Ṣaghīra (cf. AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9B, file III, Testimonianze (Testimonies), pp. 8, 10, 19. In *Annotazioni ...*, dated 31.01.18 and 7.2.18, Fr Sacchetti also names Eshdaoud [Eshtaōl ?] and Murabbag). Other places are named here and there in the various house chronicles at Betgamāl, but I don’t think it is necessary for now to go beyond the current research. Instead, it is more important to verify whether or not these names correspond to official data.

#### 4. Population according to the census and official data

I am not proposing to be exhaustive, but only to give a reliable overview. I will provide the Arabic name Srugi wrote in the clinic’s register and the Italian transliteration that the Provincial Secretary, Fr Ciro Cozzolino used for the interviews carried out by Fr Ibrahīm Khoury. I am aware that the English transliteration in the two censuses uses *Bayt* instead of Beit or Bet, and *Dayr* instead of Deir or Der. **I prefer the 1931 data as being more indicative of the central period of Srugi’s activity.** I add a separate column to show the number of Christians. I do not calculate the distance of the villages from Betgamāl, which varies from 2-3 km to about 45 km (Al-Masmyyat). The indication of the administrative sub-district clarifies first of all that Betgamāl belonged to the jurisdiction of Ramlah, while neighbouring localities were under Jerusalem or Hebron and the more distant ones under Gaza. It also helps to understand the bureaucratic, legal and judicial complications in which the Rector and Economist at Betgamāl were involved. Finally, we can recall that because of his great prestige, Srugi was sometimes also consulted by the *mukhtār* of some towns or by judges of some of the sub-districts, in his role as peacemaker and intermediary.

On the table that follows I have listed the names according to the Arabic alphabet, followed by their English transliteration as it features in the 1931 Census (Beit, Deir ...; contrary to what the 1922 Census had: Bait, Dair), adding dots for emphatic letters and slashes for long ones. I abbreviate the name of the sub-districts Bethlehem, Hebron, Jerusalem, Ramlah with Bet, Heb, Jer, Ram.

	Names: Arabic alphabetical order	Names: transliteration	Sub- district	Cens. 1922	Cens. 1931	Chr. 1931	1945
1.	إدنبه	Idnibbah	Gaza	275	345		490
2.	إدنا	Idhna	Heb	1300	1719		2190
3.	إشوع	Ishū'a (Ishwa)	Ram	379	468		620
4.	أم برج	Um Burj	Heb		119		
5.	برقوسية (بركوسيا)	Barkūsya (Barqūsyat)	Heb	198	258		330
6.	البرج	Burj (Al)	Heb		621		
7.	البرج	Burj (Al)	Ram		370		470
8.	بريج	Bureij	Ram	398	621	7	720
9.	بيت أولي	Beit Ūla (Bitūla)	Heb	825	1045		1310
10.	بيت جمال	Beit Gamāl	Ram	59	168	78	240
11.	بيت جالا	Beit Jāla	Bet	3101	2731	2529	3710
12.	بيت جبرين	Beit Jibrīn	Heb	1420	1804		2430
13.	بيت جيز	Beit Jīz	Ram	203	371		550
14.	بيت سوسين	Beit Sūsīn	Ram	47	70		210
15.	بيت عطاب	Beit 'Iṭāb	Jer	504	606		540
16.	بيت نئيف	Beit Natīf	Heb	1112	1649		2150
17.	بيت نوبا	Beit Nūba	Ram	839	944		1240
18.	ترقومية	Tarqūmiyyah	Heb	976	1173		1550
19.	تل الصافي	Tell aṣ-Ṣāfy	Heb	644	925		–
20.	التينة	Tīnah (At)	Ram	306	530		–
21.	الجبعة	Jiāba'ah (Al)	Bet	122	176		210
22.	جباليا	Jabālya	Gaza	1775	2425		3520
23.	جرش	Jīarash	Ram	115	164		190
24.	جليا	Jilya	Ram	–	271		–

	Names: Arabic alphabetical order	Names: transliteration	Sub-district	Cens. 1922	Cens. 1931	Chr. 1931	1945
25.	حلحول	Ḥalḥūl	Heb	1927	2523	1	3380
26.	خاراس	Khārās	Heb	577	739		970
27.	خُلْدَة	Khuldah	Lyd	53	178		280
28.	الخيمة	Khaymah (Al)	Ram	132	141		
29.	الدوامة	Dawāymah (Ad)	Heb	2441	2688		3710
30.	دُورًا	Dūra	Heb	5834	7255		9700
31.	دير أبان	Deir Abān	Ram	1214	1534		2100
32.	دير الدبان	Deir ad-Dubbān	Heb	454	543		-
33.	دير الشيخ	Deir ash-Sheikh	Jer	99	156	7	220
34.	دير مُحيسن	Deir Muḥeisīn	Ram	-	113		460
35.	دير النخاس	Deir an-Nakhās	Heb	336	451		600
36.	دير الهواء	Deir al-Hawā'	Jer	38	47		60
37.	ذكرين	Dhikrīn	Heb	693	726		960
38.	رأس أبو عمار	Ra's Abu 'Ammār	Jer	399	488		620
39.	رَعْنَا	Rā'na	Heb	126	150		-
40.	رَفَات	Rafāt	Ram	190	320	68	-
41.	الرَمَلَة	Ramlah (Ar)	Ram		10,347	2184	-
42.	رنتيس	Rantīs	Ram	824	954	-	-
43.	زَكَرِيَّا	Zakariyya	Heb	683	742		
44.	زَيْتَا	Zeita	Heb	139	234		
45.	سَجَاد	Sājad	Ram	221	300		-
46.	سَعِير	Sī'ir	Heb	1477	1967		-
47.	شَحْمَة	Shāḥmah	Ram	107	150		280
48.	صَرَفَند الخراب	Ṣarafand al-Kharāb	Ram	385	974	33	
49.	صَرَفَند العمار	Ṣarafand al-'Amār	Ram	862	1183	19	

	Names: Arabic alphabetical order	Names: transliteration	Sub-district	Cens. 1922	Cens. 1931	Chr. 1931	1945
50.	صَرَعة	Šar‘ah	Jer		271		
51.	صَمِيل	Šummeīl	Gaza	561	692		590
52.	صُورِيف	Šūrīf	Heb	1265	1640		2190
53.	الطَّيرَة	Tīrah (Aṭ)	Ram		892		
54.	الظَّاهِرِيَّة	Thāhiriyyah (Aṭh)	Heb		2930		
55.	عُجُور	‘Ajjūr	Heb	2073	2917	4	3730
56.	عَرْتُوف	‘Artūf	Ram	181	253		
57.	عَسَلِين	‘Islīn	Jer	132	186		
58.	عَلَار	‘Allār	Bet	224	325		
59.	القُبَاب	Qubāb (Al)	Ram	1275	1502		
60.	القُبَيْبَة	Qubaybah (Al)	Heb	646	800		1060
61.	القُبَيْبَة	Qubaybah (Al)	Ram		799	3	1720
62.	قَزَاة	Qazāzah	Ram	472	649		940
63.	كَسَل	Kasla	Jer	233	299		280
64.	كُدْنَا	Kudna	Heb	281	353		
65.	اللِد	Lidd (Al)	Ram		11,250	1210	–
66.	اللُبْن	Lūbban (Al)	Ram.	221	298		
67.	لَطْرُون	Laṭrūn	Ram	96	120	44	190
68.	المسمة الصغيرة	Masmiyat aṣ-Ṣaghīrat (Al)	Gaza	261	354		530
69.	المسمة الكبيرة	Masmiyat al-Kabīrat	Gaza	1390	1756	4	2520
70.	مُعَلِّس	Mughāllis	Ram	311	447		
71.	نَحَالِين	Naḥḥālīn	Bet	346	440		
72.	نُوبَا	Nūba	Heb	557	611		



	Names: Arabic alphabetical order	Names: transliteration	Sub-district	Cens. 1922	Cens. 1931	Chr. 1931	1945
73.	وَادِي فُوكِين	Wādy Fūkīn	Bet	149	205		280
74.	يالو	Yālū	Ram	811	963		1220
75.	يَطَّة	Yaṭṭah	Heb	3179	4034		–
76.	البدو	Badū (Al)	Ram		255		
<b>Partial total</b>					<b>68,120</b>		
<b>General total</b>					<b>89,717</b>		

## Results

1. The names provided by Srugi and Salesian tradition are not fictitious. The traditional number of “around fifty villages” corresponds to the reality, indeed it is an underestimate. The great majority (almost all) of the inhabitants were Muslim; the majority came from the two subdistricts of Ramlah (33) and Hebron (27). The few Christians were concentrated in the two cities of Ramlah, Lydd, the village of Beit Jāla and in three or four religious houses (or in their vicinity).

2. The prevalent agro-pastoral occupation of these inhabitants (with manual work and animals, and very little mechanisation), explains their coming to the mill and olive press at Betgamāl, both because the equipment was modern, and because of the service of the “supervisor” that Srugi carried out as a most trustworthy individual. On the other hand, the persistent conditions of poverty and endemic diseases, due primarily to the lack of water and hygiene, explains their coming to the clinic to receive their essential health care services from Srugi and Sister Tersilla.

Halfway through the 1930s there were a good number of towns and villages that had an active mosque: ‘Agiūr, Betgibrīn, Ḥalḥūl, Ṣarafand, Ṣūrīf, Tarqūmiyyah, Zakariya, Yaṭṭah ..., while the mosque at Betgamāl had been abandoned at the end of the 19th century. A *maqām* in memory of a *nāby* could be found in some towns and villages. Less numerous were towns or villages with a school or market; very few had a mill, press, clinic, power station (electricity).

3. According to the 1931 census, the population of those towns and villages was 68,120; and if we include the two cities of Ramlah and Lydd in the count (around 21,597 combined), we have a total of 89,717. So, given all the proportions of

time and place, it appears that the people who used to turn to Srugi, and even more so those who knew him, were not just 'a small world', but constituted a not inconsiderable social reality. As one can see by checking the data, from 1931 to 1943 there was only a slight increase in population in the countryside: due to increasing political tension and armed confrontation, the people preferred to move to urban centres that provided better work opportunities and security. Instead, those who were forced to stay relied even more on the *deir* and on *mu'alle*m Srugi, the nurse and "holy" miller at Betgamāl.

4. My research has only been exploratory, limited and focused. Anyone interested in studying the hygiene and health circumstances of the area to write an exhaustive study from a sociological and medical point of view (households, births, infant mortality, most frequent disease... ) could find a variety of useful material in Srugi's written records: the 8 registers of medications, the handbooks and prescriptions he used, notebooks in which he wrote down the components of medicines he made himself..., as well as in the account books of the Economist-Prefect of Betgamāl, in the correspondence with doctors and benefactors of the clinic (reports, requests for help...).

5. Today, 2021, there is no Palestinian Arab population around Betgamāl; the nearest lives in the Jerusalem-Bethlehem area, 32 km east, or in Ramlah and Lydd, 37--40 km N-W, or in Ḥalḥūl and environs, 48 km S-E. The Betgamāl estate is surrounded by the city of Betshemesh founded 69 years ago, and for 20 years in very rapid building expansion (Ramat Betshemesh Alef-Hey). Its population (125,000 or so in 2019) consists mostly of observant "ultra-Orthodox" Jews, not native to the area, who would certainly find it difficult to subscribe to the noble statement of November 12, 1926 in the New York *Jewish Tribune*: "The coming to our shores of Father Alfred Sacchetti, manager of the Christian Agricultural School of Beth Gemal in Palestine, is a vivid reminder of the fact, over which all the Jews should rejoice, that Palestine is not only *Eretz Israel*, the Land of Israel, but also the Holy Land to the adherents of Christianity and Islam."

An impossible utopia, or a prophecy still awaiting fulfilment?

## II SRUGI AND MUSLIMS IN THE BETGAMĀL AREA

The first of Srugi’s biographers, Fr Ernesto Forti (1921--2000) sums things up in a letter from Cairo on 5 May 1981, addressed to the Ecclesiastical Tribunal for the Apostolic Process in Jerusalem: “I think that in addition to being a clear example of an authentically lived Salesian life, the Servant of God had a special mission towards his Muslim brothers and sisters, among whom he was an authentic embodiment of Jesus the Good Samaritan for souls and bodies.” (*Hierosolymitana 1988 ...*, p. 374). I propose, in the following pages, to broaden the importance of this statement on the basis of what I have so far documented in my research.

### Introduction

In general, there was a peaceful coexistence between the Salesian community at Betgamāl (SDB and FMA) and the Muslims of the region, based on mutual respect, as was customary in Palestine at the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. The relations between the “masters” or employers, on the one hand, and the tenant farmers and sharecroppers, the employees, the caretakers, the peasant farmers and the workers on the other hand (despite recurrent episodes of disputes, thefts, trespassing, ...), remained good until the appearance of the first nationalistic movements between Palestinians and Jews. The Salesians in the school and on the farm, and to varying degrees the Sisters in what was a sort of weekend recreation centre for girls, acted at the level of human empowerment which, together with the testimony of life and friendly relations, was a kind of “first proclamation” or pre-evangelisation. Explicit evangelisation aimed at conversion remained a pipe dream; as was pointed out to Fr Coradini, who in 1920 imagined settling in the nearby village of Zakariya in order to convert the inhabitants en masse (cf. BORREGO, pp. 209--210). We know for certainty of only one youth who was converted, and his story unfolded according to this scheme as laid out by Fr Bianchi to Fr Rinaldi in 1927:

For the past three years we have had a young Muslim boy, 14 years old, fatherless and motherless. He is a very good child and knows the catechism very well. For some time now he has shown a great desire to become Catholic and often begs us to baptise him. We always delay this to make sure of his perseverance. A lady from Piedmont has written to Fr Coradini that she would very much like to be godmother to a newborn Catholic child from Nazareth. It occurred to me to speak to Fr Coradini about writing to this lady so that she might change her intention, and instead of having her future godchild from Nazareth, it might be a Muslim from Beitgemal. We could send him to Turin, where he would be baptised by you in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians; so this lady could witness the baptism in person. Moreover, you have promised the

Supreme Pontiff to take an interest in Muslims. It is very little, but at least it would show the Holy Father the good will we have. Once the young man has been baptised, he could be sent to an agricultural school. If Lombriasco is too cold, he could be sent to Portici or Corigliano. (cf. BORREGO, p. 232).

Fr Alfredo Sacchetti reported the words of Pope Pius XI who believed that it was possible to influence the minds of Muslims (contrary to a widespread cliché). For his part, he thought that it might be possible to sow, prudently, at Betgamāl as well. When he opened the elementary school for boys and girls next to the clinic in 1931, he entrusted it to an FMA (after Fr Shalhūb had declined) and used as an example what the Sisters of St Anne were doing with Muslim girls in Sefforis in Galilee (cf. ABG, *Annotazioni* and the House Chronicle).

In particular, given his work assignments, Simon Srugi usually met Muslim adults at the mill, the oil press and especially at the clinic, or for some time in the shop where he sold basic necessities. Occasionally he went to offer his services to some of the surrounding villages. The Muslim boys who were full-time boarders or the few who were part-time, also came into contact with him at school or in the courtyard or in the infirmary; with the day students there was daily contact and a lot of it.

## 1. How these Muslims perceived Srugi

They thought of him first of all as a man of God, a consecrated religious (*rāheb*), a perfect man (*rājol tamām*) in whom from their perspective, they saw the typical virtues of the “pious Muslim” shine to a high degree:

- Submission and obedience to God in all of life’s circumstances, accepting his will with great faith, humility, patience, calm, self-mastery. His constant attitude was one of imperturbable inner and outward peace.

- A man of prayer: he expressed it not only in the popular forms of praise and thanksgiving, (*al hamdu li-l-lāh, nāshkor allāh ...*), but also by beginning everything in God’s name and referring all his actions to him, even the smallest things he did as a nurse (*b-ismi esh-Shafy* = in the name of the Healer; *kul shi li-l-lāh* = all for God...), before weighing and milling the grain, etc. Therefore he became credible and convincing when he invited his patients and farmers to pray, often using his special greeting: “Live Jesus, *Yahya Yasū’a*”.

Because of his closeness to God, Muslims resorted to him even in humanly desperate cases, convinced that his intercession was effective: he made droughts cease and abundant rains come, or obtained unexpected healings. “*Allāh wa*

*mu’allem Srugi*” (“Allāh and master Srugi”). And although they could go to doctors at Ramlah or Hebron... many said they preferred to make a long and difficult trip to come to him, not only because he did not make them pay dearly, but especially because “his hands are blessed. There is the power of Allāh in his hands. It is enough for him to touch the sick or give them some small remedy for them to recover quickly and well.”

- A just man: wise in his judgements, prudent and considered in his decisions. “He does everything for the face of God” (*li waghi-l-lāh*, that is, for the glory of God, to please Him), not “for men” (as Sha’bān Mahmūd ‘Atallah, ‘Abd al-Fattāh ‘Abd al-‘Arag, among others, said in their deposition: in AIMOR 15.1.2, folder 8). He did not let himself be influenced nor did he favour people, he was above parties, one could trust him blindly, because he was detached, humble and very poor. Discussions and arguments often ended with this opinion: “This is what *mu’allem Srugi* said, Srugi does it this way ... enough!” In this context, the testimony of Nasry Al-‘Arag (*factotum* at Betgamāl from 1939) is significant: he recalled that Ibrahīm Hamdān, the Muslim guardian of Wady Būlos confided in him that he had married only one wife “because this is what *mu’allem Srugi* taught me” (AIMOR 15.1.2, folder 8).

- Good, merciful and compassionate towards everyone: young and old, men and women, showing traits of benevolent affection for the little ones, orphans, anyone who suffered. Always ready to excuse, forgive, forget, Simon invited anyone who felt offended or injured to do the same. He educated people to avoid offensive language, correcting the popular expletive *yākhreb bētak* (“may your home be ruined”), by inviting them to replace it with “*y’ammer bētak*” (“may your home prosper”).

- Reserved, modest and chaste: particularly the Muslim women who came for treatment or brought their sick, were amazed at his angelic delicacy and purity. He never received them alone, and never looked them in the eye.

Regarding all these human and religious virtues of Simon, the attestations of Muslims were innumerable, repeated and convergent. On the day of the funeral, “hundreds paraded emotionally before his body, weeping, praying, touching the body, and then passing their hands over their foreheads, hands and feet, as if to receive some blessing”. Many expressed the belief that Simon “was a saint, a man of God, there was no one like him”. As I have already mentioned, the chiefs said: “If he had been one of ours, we would by now have built a sacred building with a dome over his tomb (*maqām wa kūbbe*) as we do for a revered individual (*wāli, naby*)” ( AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9C, pp. 20 and 21).

Finally, from among all the Muslims he had known, about twenty gave confirmations or new testimonies in private or before the ecclesiastical tribunal in Jerusalem, before and during the years of the two canonical processes, in a period from 1950 to 1983 (cf. Testimonies collected by Fr Ibrahīm Khoury in AIMOR 15.1.3, folder B, files A.B.C.). The Trinitarian and sacramental sources of Simon's holiness (what we call supernatural realities) undoubtedly escaped them, but they were nevertheless able to grasp numerous fruits and important effects that were also expressed in heroic form.

## 2. How Srugi saw these Muslims and his “mission” in their regard

- The love of God was the motive that animated all of Simon's actions, and from it derived his love for his neighbour. For him, everyone was a child of God, including Muslims, in the sense that God created them, looks after them in his fatherly Providence; Jesus died and was risen for them too and awaits them all in Paradise, young and old. Hence, in his love of neighbour, he made no distinction between Muslim and Christian.

- He felt completely fulfilled in this context: he never asked to change house, never thought about choosing who would be the beneficiaries of his service and apostolate. Certainly, his most immediate beneficiaries were Christians (confreres and Sisters, lay helpers and the boys) who lived within the walls of the religious house: with them he shared the Salesian spirit and community life during prayer times, meals and recreation; he rendered his many services to them as infirmarian, catechist, master of ceremonies, teacher, sometimes tailor and baker ..., in an atmosphere of fellowship and friendship. But also with the “people outside” and “others” Simon was the same whole being: he was not a divided being, and was totally at ease with Muslims as well, showing them the same warmth. His resolutions reveal the conviction that he must set a good example in everything and at all times, precisely to show them how beautiful the Christian life is, so that they feel drawn to know Jesus and his Mother Mary. This is the way he interpreted Jesus' exhortation: “*Let your light so shine... that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*” (Mt 5:16). Since his neighbour was made up of the young and illiterate, the poor and the sick, Simon adopted the attitude of the compassionate, humble, self-sacrificing Good Samaritan towards them. Indeed, he saw Jesus crucified in every suffering person.

- He was always simple, humble and without any “sense of superiority”. He did not use his position to gain advantage for himself or the Church, nor did he exert pressure in the religious sphere. In this regard, it is worth quoting another

part of the testimony of Dīb Mahmūd Hasan al-‘Aisy, whom we have already met:

He taught me Arabic on my own, because while another four pupils had been enrolled, they believed it might be propaganda to make them Christians, so they avoided it. I went to his room for my lessons; there was a kneeler next to the bed and he knelt down there to pray, and I felt like he was talking to someone invisible. I tried several times to find out from him who he was talking to and what he was saying, and he replied: “I’m sorry I can’t answer you, because you are still small and don’t understand anything, because this is a divine secret.” Sometimes *mu‘allem* Srugi asked me to become a Christian, but without putting any pressure on me. I was only afraid of my relatives, but I was not baptised, although I believe in the Christian religion, which is heavenly and true, and I do not doubt it at all, although I remain a Muslim, because all my family are Muslims (AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9B, file “*Testimonianze* III”).

- Simon expressed understanding and magnanimity by correcting any confreres or lay people who points out limitations or faults of Muslims: “Poor people, they do not have the Sacraments and all the graces we have, we have to pity them, forgive them and pray for them.” Hearing some derogatory remarks about customary expressions of popular piety, he corrected those who made them, pointing out that good intentions pleasing to God can be hidden under appearances, and even in these circumstances he invited them to “pray for them so the Lord will make them better and convert them”.

- In his relationship with Muslims, he was not condescending, did not reduce or disguise his identity as a Christian and religious: the small crucifix was always sewn on his jacket, the statues of Our Lady and St Joseph were well and truly visible in the clinic; he would customarily say: “*Maria Auxilium Christianorum, ora pro nobis*”. Before any treatment he would ask: “Have you prayed to *Sitti Maryam*?” His habitual greeting with Muslims too was “*yahya Yasū‘a*”, and when they said that back to him, “he seemed transfigured; facing heavenwards, happy, he would say to me: “Did you hear that? Muslims greeting Jesus!” (Sister Tersilla, in AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9C, p. 1).

- He was convinced that Muslims somehow perceived the higher value of Christian piety. Sister Tersilla reports that one year, after the three-day processions known as “rogation days”, he commented in these terms:

If everyone were to understand the efficacy of prayer, how many more graces the Lord would give people. Our Muslim farmers understand it and admire us and are edified when every year we all go to pray for the countryside, and say: “Your harvest is better than ours because you pray to the Lord and he comes to your aid.” See, Sister, what a beautiful impression we make on these Muslims by praying? May the Lord enlighten them! And let us pray for them. (AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9C, p. 6).

After the murder of Fr Rosin, when the superiors forgave the probable instigators, and he himself treated and let go of one of the alleged murderers, Simon said:

Let us set a good example to them with our religious behaviour, and they will understand that we Christians are something more than they are by practising Christian forgiveness, which Jesus wanted when he forgave his crucifiers. (AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9C, p. 11).

On the other hand, the influence he personally exerted through his testimony of life, day after day, “without posing”, bore long-term results in various areas: Srugi was aware that the Muslims were learning from him not only how to pray with faith, but also to forgive, to behave honestly and justly, to put up with suffering in view of Paradise ..., in short, to become better. It should be added that he immediately attributed the merit to the goodness of God and Our Lady, humbly considering himself to be a “lowly individual”, that “nothing good” came from Nazareth. Here again is Sister Tersilla, an eyewitness:

Sick Muslims were brought by their friends, relatives, parents, and they turned to Srugi begging him to help them, to heal their sick; I often saw them embrace him, kiss him on the forehead, the shoulders, his feet, throwing themselves on the ground, as if in a tone of supplication and entreaty. Brother Srugi merely tried to divert all attention from himself, from his person, talking about Our Lady and saying: “It is their faith that heals them!” And he told them: “Pray to Our Lady, *Sitti Maryam*, and do everything in Jesus’ name and you will be healed by Him” (AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9C, pp. 6,18).

On reflection, this expression of his (“It is their faith that heals them!”) is a faithful echo of the one that Jesus used when addressing non-Hebrew people (such as the Roman centurion or the Syro-Phoenician woman). We could therefore say that Srugi used it because he realised that faith is a gift from God, and he also gave rise to it in the hearts of devout and simple Muslims, making them capable of “seeing”! The above-mentioned Dīb Mahmūd Hasan al-’Aisy, in his deposition on 28 September 1982 before the members of the ecclesiastical tribunal, said that once when he was in the infirmary because of malaria, he was assisted by Fr Frey, because Srugi had gone to make his retreat at Bethlehem:

At night I woke up, I saw the door of the infirmary open and I saw a Lady enter, dressed in green and with a green veil on her head. She asked me where Bro. Srugi was, and I replied that he was in Bethlehem for the retreat. She told me: “Yes, I know, and he will return the day after tomorrow. I am the Virgin. Tell him that I have come to ask about him.” Two days later, Bro. Srugi returned, and I told him that I had something



secret to tell him, to which he immediately replied: “Yes, I know, but don’t tell anyone.” I wanted to tell him, but he said, “Yes, I know.” I deduce from this episode that Bro. Srugi was in contact with the God who created him. I believe that the Blessed Virgin came to me because I was Bro. Srugi’s confidante and I had a deep relationship with him because of the catechism class [“religion”]. I have always kept these things secret, I am telling you now because I have sworn to tell the truth. (*Hierosolymitana 1988...*, pp. 358–359).

### 3. How God used them both for their mutual benefit

Sister Tersilla testifies:

Brother Srugi told me this himself. Many years ago when Fr Varaia [1892–1894], a holy priest, was the Rector here at Beitgemal, they held the *Corpus Domini* procession here as always. When we arrived at the gate, all the farmers from our village and others from Betnatif, Zakaria and Derabàn were there, watching the procession pass by. At a certain point, the grown-ups uttered exclamations of amazement, and their children started running after us happily and joyfully, and we couldn’t understand why they were doing this. When we left the church we asked them why they had done this and were so happy. And they answered: “*Abuna Ràies* (the Father Rector, the leader) was carrying a beautiful child who looked at us and smiled, and was so handsome. Where did you put him?” And the Servant of God commented on this as follows: “Think, Sister: the Rector had the Infant Jesus in place of the monstrance! The Muslims saw the Infant Jesus while we didn’t. The Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth, made himself seen, I believe, by this poor people, humble and simple souls, so they would understand that they are all his souls.” The Servant of God, as I have said above, told me that he saw nothing. This episode was also told to me by Sister Cristina Castellotto, FMA who was at Beitgemal then, and who died on 4 January 1937 (AIMOR 15.1.3, Folder 9C, p. 3).

The question arises spontaneously: who were the evangelisers (= bearers of God’s joy) and who were the evangelised (= recipients of God’s joy)? Undoubtedly both were beneficiaries of the same action that had God as its main character.

### III SRUGI'S MYSTICAL AND PRIESTLY ATTITUDE

Simon's days were packed with community, educational, apostolic and material tasks, from dawn to dusk, every week, in summer and winter alike. He did not take holidays, nor days off, except for Sunday and the Retreat week. He had his feet firmly on the ground and his hands forever busy with work. So it is logical to ask: what is it that motivated him and gave him the energy to do what he did? What was the spirit he did it in? In the earlier historical and biographical section I have already included some answers to that. Here I intend to explore this point more extensively, giving more space to the testimonies of contemporaries.

#### 1. The foretaste of heaven on earth in faith, hope and charity

Witnesses testify that Simon walked on earth but his heart was in heaven ("*sursum corda!*"). He worked and laboured, but always sustained by the hope of the reward and eternal rest, with such certainty that he seemed to be already tasting its joys.

1.1 Fr Eligio Dal Maso (1906–1980), lived beside him in Betgamāl for years and then became a much sought-after spiritual director by clergy, religious and lay people in Bethlehem. He said in his deposition:

I testify that the virtue of hope is the virtue that I most admired in the Servant of God. I have never known anyone who had such familiarity with Heaven than he did. It was the thought of Paradise that accompanied and guided him in all of life's circumstances, be they prosperous or adverse. And this though, which was almost something natural for him, he nurtured tactfully in all those who approached him, be they confreres, young people, the sick, workers, and also Muslims. How often did I hear him say: "Paradise, paradise" ... and enthusiastically intone the well-known words of praise "*Paradise, paradise, great city of the elect*". At times he seemed beside himself with joy. "Up there we will see God, Our Blessed Lady, the angels, the saints, and we will rediscover our superiors, Don Bosco, will see Fr Bianchi and our confreres. Oh what joy, what a celebration that will be!" As we were used to seeing him recollected and humble, it was strange when he took up these topics, so easily and informally, happily, jumping for joy, and my thoughts turn to St Alphonsus Liguori who had the same attitude in similar circumstances. Srugi saw paradise and tasted its delights beforehand (AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9C).

Fr Rudolf Frey recalls: "He gladly listened to some of the stories of the saints, and he could not be given greater pleasure than to talk about spiritual things. Sometimes he spontaneously interrupted: - 'Oh what a beautiful paradise, what music, songs, lights, what joy and happiness, what processions and festivities up there!'" Brother Luigi Ghezzi (1888–1974) explained: "Other times he used

say; ‘Paradise is God, He is paradise, and where there is no God it is hell.’” Bro. Cesare Aselli said: “When we spent time with him, we felt nothing but paradise and its pleasures. He looked like a man convinced he had been up there.” Fr Edward Swider (1914–1967) wrote from Czestochowa on 25.8.61: “Many times I heard expressions coming from his heart: ‘Lord, Lord, how great you are, how beautiful you are! The Saints, Oh! The Saints: what do they do in Paradise?’ And he would immediately answer: ‘They adore God, they enjoy God, they rest in God.’” Trappist Fr Daniel Avedissian said: “In the courtyard, in recreation, he would always speak about heaven and his face would light up with a heavenly smile every time he said the word ‘paradise’; then he would turn his eyes upwards and seem to anticipate its sweetness” (AIMOR 15.1.1, folder 2, envelope 7, first group, no. 9; AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9C; AIMOR 15.1.1, folder 2, envelope 7, second group nos. 6–9; AIMOR 15.1.2, folder 8). Fr Eraldo Derossi (1905–1972), skilled in theology, novice master, apostle of the young oratorians, summed it up:

He always lived by faith, a faith that was alive, strong and extraordinary, both inwardly and in all the manifestations of his outer life. Faith based on great love of God, on total and complete abandonment in his Providence, for the simple but heroic fulfilment of his religious duties. His outward appearance, always calm, smiling and serene, exuded an air of paradise that enchanted. The common opinion was that he lived more for heaven than for earth. Amid so much activity and different kinds of work, Bro. Srugi, in the intimacy of his heart, habitually dwelt in a higher world, in the sweetest vision of another world to which he must naturally aspire with all the urging of his soul. I am convinced that this holy man, in his intimate conversations with God and the saints, already had a foretaste of something of the heavenly homeland, for which he must have yearned with all the urging of his beautiful, heavenly soul (AIMOR 15.1.2, folder 8, pp. 2, 4).

With the intuition and instinct of the gift of theological wisdom, Simon experienced the joy of faith as “*the substance of things hoped for; the proof of things not seen*” (Heb 11:1); it “gives us even now something of the reality we are waiting for... it draws the future into the present, and thus the things of the future will spill over into those of the present and those of the present into those of the future” (Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, nos. 7, 9). Simon also experienced this interpenetration of historical and eternal, human and angelic reality in his Eucharistic piety; to his confidante Sister Tersilla he revealed why he always wanted to carry one of the poles of the canopy in the *Corpus Christi* procession:

To continue seeing the holy Host, to adore Jesus with the angels of paradise who are in their myriads, princes of the heavenly court, come down from heaven to do honour to Jesus in the Eucharist. We miserable creatures are incapable of giving such honour

to Jesus and so we join the angels and offer Jesus their love and adoration. What a joy and honour it is for us to contemplate the Blessed Sacrament! Jesus going around our house to bless us, bless our country and the whole world (*Hierosolymitana 1988 ...*, p. 223) [Photo no. 43].

1.2 For Simon, this experience did not happen a few rare times and by chance; rather, it was an habitual attitude, which he renewed every day as he went about his various occupations in the service of his real neighbour. The “communion of Angels and Saints” was not just an article in the “Creed”, but a company cultivated as a “theme and variations”. It is worth quoting almost in full the long testimony of Sister Tersilla (AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9C, pp. 4–5).

For him the week was an uninterrupted hymn of praise to God. Monday was dedicated to the holy souls in purgatory, and he used to say: “There are many souls who praise God even though they do not see Him. We offer our work in suffrage for them.” During the day, he would talk to me about it in inspired tones, and his clear eyes were turned to heaven in a prayerful attitude.

Mr Dikrān adds another detail: on 2 August, Simon tried to gain the indulgence of the Portiuncula as often as possible on behalf of the souls in purgatory; every free moment from his usual duties he made a visit to the church, inviting groups of young people to accompany him, “and they followed him like chicks follow the hen” (AIMOR 15.1.1).

Tuesday was for the Guardian Angel. He used tell me: “Sister, there are two Guardian Angels here, yours and mine. Just think: two princes from the heavenly court! How good the Lord is for having thought to give each person a guardian angel. There are millions of them, as many as there are people.” And while he was saying this, his face shone with joy. Another time I said to him: “Bro. Srugi, I wonder how many times you have seen your guardian angel?” I said this because, since he always spoke with such enthusiasm, I was convinced that he was seeing him. But he immediately replied: “I am a lowly individual. I have never seen my guardian angel, but I always hear him. Everything we do today, let us offer it to the guardian angel: he will bring it to Our Lady and Our Lady to Jesus.”

Past pupil Dīb Mahmūd Hasan al-‘Aisy, on 28 September 1982, testified before members of the ecclesiastical tribunal that he had heard him speaking with his guardian angel: one day Srugi did not turn up for class, so I went to look for him in his room and found him “kneeling on his kneeler with his arms wide open and slightly raised, looking upwards calling on the Lord and speaking with a white angel. I was very much afraid; Bro. Srugi’s face was very pale. I closed the door and went back to my place” (*Hierosolymitana 1988...*, pp. 358–359; AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9B, file *Testimonianze III*, p. 12).

Wednesday was all for St Joseph, “the economer of the house”, as he usually used to call him. He told me so many times: “From St Joseph, the great saint, we must learn humility, silence, hiddenness, and love for the Child Jesus, whom he held close to his heart. Imagine what Saint Joseph was to Jesus and Our Lady!”

Thursday was dedicated to the Blessed Sacrament, something of special attention for him. The sick, the mill, no work could distract him from Jesus in the Eucharist. In his continuous and tiring work, he always found a way to speak of the goodness of Jesus in instituting the Holy Eucharist, the food of souls. He talked about how to be true worshippers of Jesus in the Eucharist. That is why I think he had to be nourished by reading about the Eucharist, because when he spoke about it he always had new emphases. And those feelings certainly didn't come to him suddenly, because I know that the time he had left free was spent in church before the Blessed Sacrament, even two or three hours in a row. Spiritually, he was always in front of the Eucharistic Jesus in adoration.

On Friday he appeared rather reserved, and his face was veiled by a sense of sadness. On that day he spoke less, he was very silent. He was filled with a deep compassion for Jesus and saw him in the Sanhedrin, at Herod's, at Pilate's, on the Via Dolorosa and on Calvary. He uttered only very short sentences, and spoke more with the expression on his face than with his lips. I had no difficulty in realising that he was meditating on the passion and death of the Lord, and that his soul was completely united to the suffering soul of Jesus. He felt the passion of Good Friday, and at that thought and meditation he became inflamed with a new ardour for his mission, because each day he was able to see Jesus more and more in those who were sick or suffering. On Fridays he spoke with such an accent of love and sadness, reflecting on the death of Jesus, that he was moved, and repeated to me the words of Jesus on the cross: “*Mother, behold your son! – Son, behold your Mother!*” (Jn 19:26–27) We are children of Mary, our kind and good Mother, and since we are children of such a Mother, we are Jesus' brothers and sisters. What should we not do to please her more and more?” I can say that this was one of his most frequent sayings.

Saturday was like a sunrise, a bright sunny day and blue skies, completely dedicated to the memory of Our Lady. He used say: “Our dear mother, our empress! That Our Lady is my mother is a wonderful thing. In paradise I want to be always in her arms!” and in this way he became tender. I said to him: “If you continue on like this Our Lady will come and take you.” And he would immediately shoot back: “I am a lowly individual!” As well as the entire holy Rosary he used say the “*Seven Joys of Mary*”, and he never missed a day without saying them; he told me he could not sleep unless he had first said them. In May, his Marian ardour seemed to take on a new lease of life. He would say to me: “Now we are beginning Our Lady's month. What should we do? Mortify the eyes (he who was always so modest and recollected), practise the virtue of patience (I can testify that over 14 years I never saw him lose patience, despite there being a thousand opportunities!), do our work in company with Our Lady. Every evening we should offer a posy of spiritual flowers to our Lady, of good deeds done in her honour and for her sake. Then we will go and enjoy her in paradise and sing to her Son Jesus: “*Holy, holy holy*”, for all eternity.” And when he said these words, he smiled contentedly, as if anticipating the happiness of paradise. In this way

he sanctified the week, in a continuous crescendo of praise to God. I had the good fortune to experience this for 14 years. For me it was a real school of edification and spiritual life. And it always seemed to me that he would start the week over again without ever stopping and without ever repeating himself, sustained by a faith that accompanied him in every act of his day, all of which was aimed at the service of God and of his neighbour.

Obviously, on Sundays he lived even more fully and savoured union with God more intimately. And after having been "recharged" in this way, on Monday he was ready to resume his life as a contemplative in action! Fr Derossi sums up very well this unity of love of God and service of neighbour, which was an habitual state of grace in him:

Srugi's soul must have been filled with God's love, if he lived as he lived and did what he did and in the way he did it. For him there was only one thing he cared about more than anything and above everything else: becoming a saint in perfect observance of Salesian religious life. He breathed God as one breathes air: his whole life was impregnated with God. For his soul, thirsting for God, it was like a necessity to be able to gather in devout silence so he could more easily cultivate that interior life which for him was like a second nature (AIMOR 15.1.2, folder 8 unnumbered, pp. 2, 4).

Thanks to what we could call these "weekly retreats", it became natural for Simon "to dwell in heaven with Christ", keeping himself firmly rooted on the ground of his daily duties for his very real beneficiaries. He was a mystic not only in moments of prayer, but while carrying out his most usual activities (focused, with precision and imperturbably calm): assisting the boys in class or in the courtyard or the infirmary, preparing ointments and pills, disinfecting sores and bandaging wounds, weighing sacks of grain and delivering flour to the mill ... Everything, always with such simplicity and kindness that those who approached him were edified and drawn to him.

To sum up: The statements of witnesses that service of his neighbour increased Simon's love for Jesus/God and, vice versa, his habitual communion with God, Our Lady and the Saints translated into increased dedication to neighbour, and that mission and consecration were mutually fruitful in him, seem to me to correspond to what Fr Albera had indicated as one of the constitutive principles of Don Bosco's spiritual experience: the apostolate becomes the efficient cause of personal sanctification and glorification of God. In this, Simon imitated Don Bosco who, in the years around his beatification (1929), was presented as "union with God". (cf. CERIA 1929, *passim*). He habitually lived the spirit of 'sanctified and sanctifying work', experiencing Fr Rinaldi's

statement: “The Lord came down here to redeem us by the sanctification of work even before the shedding of his precious blood.” (cf p. 49). In today’s language we could say that Srugi embodied article 95 of the renewed Salesian Constitutions (2015): *“his need of God, keenly felt in his apostolic commitment, leads him to celebrate the liturgy of life, attaining that ‘tireless industry made holy by prayer and union with God’ that should be the characteristics of the sons of Don Bosco”*. He habitually lived the “grace of unity” that Fr Egidio Viganò (1920–1995) placed once more at the centre of Salesian spirituality (cf. VIGANÒ; SALA).

## **2. Ceremonies. Liturgical spirit and life as liturgy**

For years Simon was in charge of the sacristy, made the hosts for Mass, taught the boys to serve Mass in Latin and Arabic with a gradual and patient way of doing things and with such joy that they demonstrated both his love for Jesus and his art as an educator. Among the roles he held was that of master of ceremonies for feast days, solemnities and during Holy Week. We need to keep the context in mind: the liturgy at the time was that of the Council of Trent, in Latin; Simon was a layman, excessively busy with his work in the infirmary, clinic and mill; the altar boys he trained were not aspirants, but helping hands in manual labour in what was an agricultural orphanage, not a seminary. In the role of master of ceremonies, we would more naturally see a cleric or a priest, versed in Latin. Why did he do it? Why were the confreres and Sisters, the people of the house and guests (including priests and bishops) edified by it? What was the secret that made the humble brother so happy when he could serve at the altar as master of ceremonies?

### **2.1 An exceptional master of ceremonies**

*Abuna* Butrus Cattān was among the first to provide us with a revealing response in 1950:

In the person of the master of ceremonies he saw something sacred. For him, serving at the altar is a holy thing, it is sharing with the priest in the sacrifice of the Holy Mass. So he did it with great devotion and a spirit of piety and love for our Lord Jesus Christ. How keen he was to wear his cassock and how carefully he prepared the ceremonies! Always punctual, he called the boys who were to serve and taught them the various offices of the solemn, sung Mass with much charity and patience. Everyone who attended saw in him the precision of the ceremonies and the spirit of piety and devotion that informed all his movements. (AIMOR 15.1.2, folder 8).

Brother Luigi Ghezzi said:

He very much liked being master of ceremonies. And he deserved to be put in charge of that role because he knew how to inspire piety in everyone with his demeanour. He was a saint in serving Holy Mass and as a master of ceremonies. (AIMOR 15,1,3, folder 9C).

Clearly, this awareness of “sharing in the priestly sacrifice” and his competence in the ceremonies did not come from any kind of infused knowledge! Simon got to this stage too through a long apprenticeship, exploiting the opportunities that the Salesian tradition offered him. Among the best practices prescribed for Rectors to foster what we now call “ongoing formation” of the confreres (monthly conferences, the friendly talk, theology classes for practical trainees, solving monthly moral and liturgy “cases”), Fr Michael Rua recommended:

Nor should the recitation and explanation of ten verses of the New Testament and the ceremonies classes be omitted. This weekly class serves immensely to preserve and increase in clerics the spirit of piety and love of study. I commend to you the same concern for our dear Brother confreres (RUA, *Lettere Circolari*, p. 115).

## 2.2 Theological sources. Teachers and models

Srugi's accuracy in transcribing the Latin rubrics into Italian, his confidence and precision combined with simplicity and naturalness in 'directing' the ceremonies, show that even in carrying out his liturgical ministry, Srugi allowed himself, humbly, to be instructed by some priests or clerics and drew on substantial works by contemporary authors. I have not set out to do exhaustive research here; I am merely presenting some results of an initial exploration.

**2.2.1** The *Vademecum dei giovani salesiani* by Fr Giulio Barberis (1847–1927), that Fr Bianchi had given to Simon and that he so often used, was one of his more direct sources. In the chapter on the Mass, the author, who had a doctorate in theology from Turin university, explains that Jesus “is both victim and the principal one making the sacrifice, the primary and true offerer of this holy sacrifice. Priests are only his servants.” (p. 111); “elevated to represent him, they stand in the place of Jesus and act in the name of Jesus: they are the ministers, the instruments who lend him their hands and their voices” (p. 113):

But it is also necessary to know that in the third place those who participate in Holy Mass are also the ones who offer the sacrifice, since all the faithful, in union with Jesus and the priest, have the power to offer the holy sacrifice. I am certain that one of the most excellent graces that God has granted to all the faithful, without distinction of sex, age or status, is that he has granted not only to priests, but also to all people, the



power to offer this august sacrifice to his divine Majesty. This is why the apostle St Paul [sic!] proclaimed to the faithful: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”: *Vos autem genus electum, regale sacerdotium, gens sancta ...* (1 Pt 2:9). What a privilege you have, although not a priest, to be able so easily to offer the body and blood of the Saviour! Oh, take advantage of this power, exercise every day that priesthood with which God’s mercy has clothed you, and think about uniting yourself spiritually with the priest and offering the divine sacrifice with him; without this you would not hear the Mass well, because to hear the Mass is not only to be present materially, it is to offer the sacrifice in union with the priest (p.113–14).

Now consider carefully what great grace Jesus Christ grants you by making you a priest spiritually during Holy Mass: he gives you the right to offer this sacrifice not only for yourself, but, in the manner of the priests, also for others, that is, for those, whoever they may be, for whom you offer it. This is certain, since in the Canon of the Mass the priest says expressly that it is not the priest alone who offers the sacrifice, but all those around: *Pro quibus tibi offerimus, vel qui tibi offerunt hoc sacrificium laudis, pro se suisque omnibus*. And in the *Orate fratres*, the priest, turning to the faithful, adds: *Ut meum et vestrum sacrificium acceptabile fiat apud Deum Patrem omnipotentem*. And after the elevation of the chalice, the priest repeats that he is not alone, but united with the people (*nos servi tui sed et plebs tua sancta*) who offer to the Sovereign Majesty a pure, holy and spotless sacrifice (p.114–115; cf. also the *Nuovo Manuale di Filotea*, pp. 372–400).

I think that Srugi appropriated these principles and allowed himself to be inspired by them when he served the 'private' Mass of his priest confrere early in the morning, as well as when he participated with the boys in the community Mass, and also when he acted as master of ceremonies.

**2.2.2 Handbook of ceremonies and books on theology of the liturgy.** Fr Dal Maso indicates one of the books he used to carry out this role:

He went through the Vismara book on ceremonies beforehand and was impeccable during the service. He gave his orders in a soft voice, accompanied by a delicate gesture with his hands. He felt happy when he could play the part of master of ceremonies. He did it with taste, decorum and dignity. (AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9 C).

Fr Eusebio Vismara (1880–1945), lecturer at the Salesian theologate at S. Benigno Canavese, published the two volume *Manuale di sacre cerimonie, ad uso dei chierici* between 1908 and 1912, which became the text which every Salesian candidate for the priesthood, in the first decades of the last century, used in preparation for the examination on liturgy and ceremonial practice. A copy of this handbook can be found in the library at Betgamāl; no wonder: we have already seen that Fr Vismara had been there in 1919 accompanying Fr Ricaldone

and he may well have presented it to the confreres as a gift. The first volume contains four pages on the role of the master of ceremonies, which according to the canonical norms

should be a priest of cleric *in sacris*” (152–153) “a special cleric” (149). He is not a servant, nor a commander of the people at the altar. His office is to supervise, regulate and guide the individual ceremonies: he is a *magister* or *moderator*. In order to perform his office well, he should have a thorough knowledge of the ceremonies in all their parts, with all the attributes of the individual ministers, both major and minor. He should therefore be an educated person, and one who has been ordained in holy orders. He should give his instructions “modestly and discreetly, in a hushed voice and, if possible, with just a movement” of the head or hand (150–151).

It is obvious that at Betgamāl (where sometimes a priest or cleric was the master of ceremonies, and sometimes a brother) these principles and norms were given a flexible interpretation, and that Simon was far from being attributed any clerical status! In Vismara’s second volume we find the long and detailed instructions concerning the master of ceremonies’ role, in particular for the “extraordinary ceremonies” of Holy Week (pp. 86–277).

Simon also kept a small missal in Arabic on which he had written his name in pencil; this contained: *Rutbat al Quddās* [Rite of the Mass], *Ahad ash-Sha’anin* [Palm Sunday], *Alam Saydna Yasū’a-l-Masyh* [The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ], *Yaum al Ithnain min al Gum’at al ‘athim* [Second day of the Holy Week]. One of the books he customised in an original way for use as a master of ceremonies is the *Uffizio della Settimana Santa coll’aggiunta delle dichiarazioni in lingua volgare*. Between the small pages of the Latin text, he glued together sheets of the same size, handwritten in Italian, containing the parts of the ceremony. They are taken from the Vismara handbook, including the drawings, reproduced to scale, concerning the position of the celebrants and servers in relation to the altar. Knowing Srugi, we can say that for him this precision was not just something technical, something in order to have a beautiful, dignified and impeccable function performed. He was certainly motivated by the desire to relive the central mysteries of our salvation (the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the Last Supper, the passion, death and resurrection of our Lord), becoming almost a contemporary of them. It is this desire to identify with the protagonist and the actors in the historical and saving drama that motivated his precision in detail regarding ceremonies and rubrics. Without the former, the latter cannot be explained.

2.2.3 This same motivation sustained him during the various hours of the day in “perpetual thanksgiving”. He had a personal copy of the *Breviario dei Fedeli*

*Latino-Italiano con note storico-liturgiche* by Fr Battisti OSB. At the top of the first page he wrote in the date he had been given it in pencil: 1-4-1923. The author of this book (a twin to his “*Messale dei Fedeli*”) was proposing to contribute to the “liturgical movement which, we are certain, will become more and more widely established in the near future, making that robust piety, and those masculine and Christian virtues which a truly intelligent, active and effective participation is destined to produce in souls, flourish again among our people” (p. xi). It also contained the “Little Office of the B.V. Mary” that was recited by confreres and boys in Salesian houses. And to complement the Office of the Dead he had the “Order of burial of children”, among the pages of which Simon had inserted a bookmark. But in this book (full of “notes of a mainly mystical and spiritual nature”: p. xiv) Simon was able to find much more to nurture his attitude of “continuous prayer”; in the introduction the author spends time explaining that

the Eucharist [is the] centre of the Divine Office”, according to “the intimate connection between the sacrifice of praise and the sacrifice of the Mass” (p.1). It “gives unity to our life by reuniting it affectively and effectively with the Eucharistic Jesus through prayer and the practical sanctification of our day. Because the Eucharist is the centre of the whole Christian life, so it is also the centre of the liturgical office. (p.6). “To be united with Jesus, to live by his grace and to be transformed in him, this is the main task of our existence, and this is also the goal that the liturgy strives to make more accessible to us. Now the Holy Eucharist is par excellence the sacrament of union, and its particular grace is the grace of real and habitual transformation into Jesus Christ. Hence the Holy Eucharist becomes the centre of dogma, moral theology, worship, all of the Christian life; it is the starting point and the centre towards which all liturgical practices converge, so we must conclude that the Divine Office, like the whole of our Christian life, must be a continuous preparation and thanksgiving for the Most Holy Eucharist.” (pp. 6–7). It “is directed precisely to this twofold end, namely to convert our entire day into an ardent and continuous prayer, according to the Lord’s precept: “*Always pray and do not lose heart*” (Lk 18:1) and to make of ourselves a continuous immolation, a living and holy host by uniting ourselves to Jesus and living his life not only in the act of Holy Communion, but throughout the day, generously accepting all the sacrifices that the sanctification of the acts of our daily life imposes on us.” (p. 8) “We can aspire to nothing greater and nobler than intimate communication with God and participation in the ineffable praise that the three divine Persons have been giving each other from all eternity.” (pp. 13,14).

We could say that in some of these points Fr Battisti was anticipating the themes of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and the opening of the Apostolic Constitution *Laudis Canticum* by Paul VI.

**2.2.4** Luigi Barlassina (1872–1947), Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem (1920–1947), was someone who loved the liturgy, was strict in its regard where he himself was concerned, and very demanding of his priests in ceremonial matters. During the

years of his patriarchal ministry he came to Betgamāl in a number of occasions and presided at solemn ceremonies as we have noted. Simon was able to see him celebrate both in the house and at the nearby shrine at Deir Rafāt for the annual feast of “Mary Queen of Palestine”; on the other hand Patriarch Barlassina saw Simon in his role as master of ceremonies, regarded Simon as a saint and entrusted himself to his prayers. He recommended taking this into account, in view of a canonical process (cf. Testimonies of Fr Gorla, Fr Cattān and Fr Spiridiōn in AIMOR 15.1.2, folder 8).

In his book *Sacerdoti Litanti* the patriarch brought together his teachings concerning the celebration of Holy Mass. On the front and back cover is a quotation from St Francis de Sales: “‘When I am at the altar, I am there in one piece; nothing distracts me, and I lose sight of all the things of this world.’ What interests me here is the dominant theme of the second part (“Supernatural elevations during the Holy Mass”: pp. 41–51): in the various moments of the Mass, the celebrant must conform to Jesus who becomes incarnate, enters the world to fulfil the Father's will, enlightens the nations with the light of his preaching [the priest “in the Epistle and Holy Gospel finds instruction for his life: if he puts them into practice he will become the living Gospel among the faithful” (p. 46)]. At the offertory:

Better than on a gilded paten, God likes the offering laid on a heart adorned with twofold charity. Together with the matter of the sacrifice, the priest should also present himself, body and soul, and pray to God to transform him into Jesus Christ: *ejus divinitatis esse consortes*. Thus you become what you must be, by the duty of his priesthood: *hostiam viventem, sanctam, Deo placentem*. Nor can the true priest be defined in any other way than as a permanent victim in order to be *omnibus omnia factus*; always immolated to the glory of God and the service of others, with generous sacrifice of time, substance, taste, rest, and life itself (p. 46–47).

This identification culminates in Eucharistic communion:

Ineffable intimate union of Jesus with his priest; it is the mystery of the drop of water which, mixed up with the wine, is transformed with it into divine blood. The priest who has communicated must say: Jesus is mine, therefore I must and I want to be all his...” (p. 50).

Finally, he recommends its prolongation throughout the day:

Pious priests are accustomed (as are many devout souls) to divide the twenty-four hours in two: half in thanksgiving for the Holy Mass celebrated, and half in preparation for that of the following day. This is the best way to make participation in the Adorable Sacrifice very effective. (p. 51).

Don Bosco taught Dominic Savio to spend his day this way (cf. *Life of the young Dominic Savio*, Chapter 14); and Fr Barberis proposed this to his novices in his *Vademecum*, Part III, Chapter 9. The contents of Barlassina’s book, although printed in 1944 and addressed directly to the ordained priest, were not out of Simon’s reach: both materially, because some of the topics assembled there had been touched on by the Patriarch in his sermons, addresses and Pastoral Letters that were regularly read in the community, and because in ceremonial matters he adhered scrupulously to the Patriarch’s directives; both conceptually, because this liturgical spirituality in a priestly and sacrificial key was a common possession even of the most committed laymen like Simon, who on the other hand saw it very well presented in the life and writings of his “seraphic” confrere, Fr Andrea Beltrami (cf. Fr Dal Maso, in AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9C ).

### **2.3. From the mystery celebrated, to life as liturgy, and back the other way**

It is clear that for Srugi not everything began with immediate preparation (going back over the handbook and testing out the ceremonies with the “altar boys”), nor did it conclude with the *Ite missa est!* He lived habitually in a liturgical spirit; the grace of the celebrations flowed over into his ordinary daily occupations that were transfigured and experienced in the spirit of “royal priesthood”. I will limit myself to quickly recalling some of the fundamental liturgical attitudes that Simon had during his day as an educator, apostle, nurse and worker. In this way we will have an integration of what has been presented in the first part of this “window”, in the sense that the liturgical dimension is but one component of Simon’s contemplative and mystical life, and vice versa.

His entire day, from the first spontaneous exclamations of prayer out loud in Arabic immediately after waking up, to the recitation of the “*Seven Joys of Mary*” at night before going to sleep, was dotted with expressions of praise and blessing, admiration and jubilation at the wonders that God the Creator had done in nature, and even more so in our redemption, adoption as sons and sanctification.

Simon was convinced that “God dwells in my soul no less resplendent with light and glory than in the glory of heaven.” (PRO 77), therefore, adoration in spirit and in truth had become habitual for him and inspired the practices of the “Blessed Sacrament Crusade”, and the “Guard of Honour” and his frequent and prolonged visits to the chapel before the tabernacle. He said explicitly that he always felt he was in the presence of God, in an attitude of joyful and humble thanksgiving for the many divine benefits bestowed upon him, happy to have been chosen, he who was so lowly, to be part of God’s “court of honour” in the company of the angels and saints in heaven.

Religious consecration through the practice of the three vows, as a form of living holocaust, the offering of actions, mortification, humiliation and suffering in union with Jesus and Our Lady, the desire to conform to Jesus as victim and priest for the salvation of souls, made up his other habitual attitudes (as Sister Tersilla attests; and as we will see in the *Writings*, speaking of his devotion to the “Wounds of Jesus Crucified”). Sanctifying suffering was an invitation Simon made to many: to Christians as the imitation of Christ, to Muslims as a meritorious work for entering paradise (cf. His other personal book *La Liturgia degli Infermi* – The Liturgy of the Sick). Linked to the above was the prayer of intercession for the conversion of sinners. This too was nourished by the practice of the “Offices of the Sacred Heart”, and the “Via crucis” or Stations of the Cross.

The Mass is also “breaking bread”: Simon translated this Eucharistic dimension into practice not only by distributing to the poor the bread and fruit that he took away from his meals, but also by “breaking” himself, spending his physical energies in daily service to the needy.

Finally, by feeding daily on the Eucharistic bread, which is the “pledge of future glory”, he had a foretaste in today's world of the joy of the heavenly banquet and nourished the leaning to Paradise which was his habitual attitude.

## Results

Up to now, no attention had been paid to Srugi's service as liturgical master of ceremonies, considering it to be secondary (or even bizarre) and therefore a negligible aspect; however, at the end of the study I conducted, it turns out that it is an integral part of his profile. Thus, on a broader documentary basis, the assertions of the first biographer Fr Forti remain justified: Simon's life can be understood as a liturgy of praise in the sense that he carried out all his various tasks as “Jesus' cantor” and “living his royal priesthood by offering to God the daily sacrifice of his life for the benefit of his brethren, so that Christ the Lord may reign in everything and everyone.” (cf. FORTI 1967/1, pp. 153–161; and 1967/2, p. 17ff.). This confirms that the pleasure he took in being a master of ceremonies was not born of a desire to show off, but was the cultic manifestation of his zeal for the house of God, that is, of the fire of love that burned unceasingly on the altar of his heart (as we will be able to see in the part dedicated to his *Writings*).

Although Simon had not read the texts of Vatican II, he was able to experience in advance something of the spirit of the Council, thanks to his contemporary authors who in their writings addressed to all the lay faithful opened up perspectives of liturgical and priestly spirituality that remain

relevant even today. Without forgetting that the sanctification of the present moment and of daily occupations is one of the most frequent themes in the Salesian Magisterium of Fr Philip Rinaldi, which Simon assimilated perfectly.

#### IV FR SACCHETTI AND THE CNEWA FOR ARMENIAN ORPHANS TAKEN IN AT BETGAMĀL

In the historical and biographical part we saw that among the boys at Betgamāl in Srugi's time there were substantial groups of Armenian orphans. Where did they come from? How did they get there? Who looked after them? In the following pages I would like to spend some time providing a documented reply to these questions.

##### 1. Persecution of Eastern Rite Christians In the Turkish Ottoman Empire (1894–1914)

Persecutions, expulsions and massacres of Eastern Rite Christians by the Turks began in 1894 and, under different forms on behalf of successive administrations, lasted 30 years, during which not only Armenians were affected, but also Greek Orthodox, Syrian Catholics, Syriac Monophysites, Chaldeans and Nestorians (cf. AKÇAM; MORRIS-ZE'EVİ; RICCARDI). The world was shaken by the plight of the Armenians, and demonstrations in their favour were held in many major cities. The Salesians too, encouraged by the Rector Major himself, Fr Michael Rua, became active (cf. Letters of October 1896 and 11 February 1897: in ASC A4480361 and A4480366); in Palestine, groups of Armenian orphans were taken in by the houses in Nazareth, Bethlehem and Betgamāl. (cf. Articles in the BS 20(1896) 315; 21(1897) 78, 131, 178). The first was Peter Arusian, then after him in 1896 John Almagian who was born in Mar'ash on 28 September 1886 and while still a child saw his parents murdered (regarding the massacres, expulsions, deportations in/from that city, cf. MORRIS-ZE'EVİ, pp. 167–170, 341–345, and *passim*). He did his secondary schooling in Bethlehem, on 29 August 1904 entered the novitiate at Cremisan, and on 15 November the following year made his profession for a triennium. After two years of practical training in Nazareth (1905–1907), he did another two in Betgamāl (1907–1908) where he lived together with Simon Srugi and where, in April 1908 he met Fr Rua during his second journey to the Holy Land (cf. Mortuary letter; ASC 275 *Almagian*, and ASC 3.99 *Istanbul - Chronicles* 1945).<sup>35</sup> During his stay at Betgamāl in 1909, Fr G.B. Francesia met some of the Armenian orphans who had escaped the massacres in Adana (cf. FRANCESIA 1912, p. 160). Others arrived in the years and decades that followed, according to

<sup>35</sup> All the documents used in this “window”, unless specified otherwise, are found in ABG = Archives of the Salesian House at Betgamāl, in the binder SACCHETTI, *Corrispondenza*, with corresponding dates. Other acronyms are: AIMOR = Archives of the Salesian Province of the Middle East, Cremisan; ASC = Salesian Central Archives, Rome.



the testimony of one of them, Dikrān Ciakmakgian, when in 1912 a small group of boys, including his brother Armenag and Setrak Eskigian, were brought to Betgamāl (cf AIMOR 15.1.2, folder 8).

## 2. After the Armenian genocide and the First World War (1916–1925)

Regarding the years of the genocide (1915-16) no relevant data can be found in the Betgamāl chronicles. A mention of a different tenor is found in 1917: “8.4.17, Easter Sunday. A beautiful feast was held, which was enlivened by the presence of 30 Armenian Catholic soldiers who performed their services with special devotion and decorum. Fr Paul [Villa?], said the Mass and also spoke to them.” (SACCHETTI, *Appunti di Cronaca*).

At Diyarbakir, already in 1895 some 25,000 Armenian and Syrian Christians were massacred by the Turks (and Kurds); then during the ethnic cleansing in 1915 around 150,000 Christians were deported from the city, including Greek Orthodox (cf MORRIS-ZE‘EVI, pp. 35–39, 185–186, 198–204, 473–474, 603, *passim*).

In the following years the influx of refugees increased. From the testimonies of those concerned, we learn that – at the initiative of Fr John Kuiumgian, then secretary to the bishop of Adana – other Armenian orphans came to Betgamāl in 1919: among them Dikrān Ciakmakgian, his brother Anthony, and Artīn Keklikian, nephew of the above-mentioned bishop. After finishing secondary school and completing their specialisation courses, Dikrān and Artīn stayed in Betgamāl, became instructors, got married and lived there until the mid-1960s with their respective wives Serpuhi and Meline, a sister-in-law and their children. Another two followed: Namuk (Daniel) Avedissian (pupil from 1923 to 1930, who then made his profession with the Trappists at Latrūn), and George Damergian (who was married at Nazareth). In 1928 Armando Boghossian arrived. From 1932 he was Srugi’s helper in the mill, then went on to work at Deir Rafāt. Finally, Musa Hagopian was a pupil from 1931 to 1934.<sup>36</sup> In the binder containing the applications for admission and the acceptance form for pupils for the years 1919–21 we find various letters from Bishop Paschal (Haroutyoun) Keklikian and Fr James Ghiragossian; for example, on 29 August 1921 the latter

<sup>36</sup> This information, spread across various memoirs, testimonies, letters ..., is kept in AIMOR 15.1.2, folder 8; AIMOR 15.1.3, folder 9C. It is reflected in ABG, *Registro dei voti* (Record of marks). I would add that I have personally heard Kerop Talatinian (was born in 1913 and lived to the age of 102) recall with gratitude that he was taken in for a period of time at the Salesian orphanage in Bethlehem before joining the Franciscans and professing with the name Basil.

wrote the following request from the Apostolic Visitor John Naslian, Vicar General of the Armenian Catholic Patriarch in Constantinople:

Fr Matthew Agopian, a married Catholic priest from Adana, after all the sufferings of the deportations in 1915, while he thought he could rest in Adana, had to come here to Constantinople with his whole family after the events in Cilicia. Lacking means, he found it impossible to support his family and think about the education and upbringing of his children. So he appealed to me to get his eldest son into the Practical School of Agriculture in Betgemal, which is wisely run by Your Lordship [name omitted in the text]. The young man's name is Agop Agopian, he is 17 years old and speaks a fair amount of Italian and a little French. Because of the war and the Armenian deportations, he has not been able to attend school regularly. I am sure that Your Excellency will do everything possible to accept this young man into your school" (ABG: *Accettazione Allievi*).

To give an idea of the ordeals these poor people had to endure, I will give just one example: on 19 September 1922 Fr Paul Asegian, proto-chancellor of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem, asked for a nephew of his to be accepted "Joseph Sceüris, who had lost his Caldean Catholic father from Diarbakir, was about 15 years old, and was saved from the Turks' knives by the prayers of my mother and sister"; after successfully attending the Salesian school in Jerusalem, Joseph went to his mother in Cairo. Then his uncle turned to Fr Bianchi "so that the poor boy may find in your fatherly bosom both comfort and his soul's salvation; all the more so since he has not been able to go to confession or receive Communion for a year. Like all Armenian orphans of kin and country, he doubly deserves our esteem and compassion." Joseph was accepted free of charge, then Fr Asegian, on 20 January 1925 asked to withdraw him to enrol him in the college of the Opera Cardinal Ferrari in Jerusalem (ABG: *Accettazione Allievi*).<sup>37</sup>

From 1920 to 1925 Fr Manugian was the Patriarchal Vicar at "Our Lady of Sorrows" on the third and fourth station of the *via dolorosa* in Jerusalem; he was succeeded by Fr James Ghiragossian (1930–1948), then Fr John Kuumgian up until 1961. They came to Betgamāl on various occasions to visit their charges, as documented, among other things, by the house photo collection (cf. ABG on 10.4.1934). During the same period other Armenians were also accepted at the Salesian orphanages in Bethlehem and Nazareth and a number of them entered

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<sup>37</sup> At Diyarbakir, already in 1895 some 25,000 Armenian and Syrian Christians were massacred by the Turks (and Kurds); then during the ethnic cleansing in 1915 around 150,000 Christians were deported from the city, including Greek Orthodox: cf. MORRIS-ZE'EVİ, pp. 35–39, 185–186, 198–204, 473–474, 603, *passim*.

the Congregation.<sup>38</sup> We know that two of them (Caiscian Sciucri and Dilanian Lavon), as Salesian novices at Cremisan, received the *sanatio* from Rome to move to the Latin Rite in 1905, together with John Almagian (cf. BORREGO, p. 199).

### 3. An ambitious project and the support of the Pope, NER and CNEWA

These emergency interventions did not remain isolated episodes, but were part of a far-sighted plan of action that the Salesians gradually implemented, managing donations from public and private charities, in particular from the Pope and the NER and CNEWA associations.

#### 3.1 “The charity of Pope” Benedict XV

Benedict XV (1854, 1914–1922) as early as 1915 came to the aid of the many Eastern Rite refugees, especially Armenians, including those taken in by various institutions in Palestine:

In 1919 His Holiness Benedict XV gave one million lire a year to Palestine and, in agreement with Cardinal Camassei, decided that part of this sum should be invested in the upkeep of about 200 orphans distributed among the various orphanages closed during the war. Those of the Salesians, Ratisbonne and the Sisters of Charity were especially recommended. The planned opening of other new ones was prevented. The pension would be 2 Egyptian lire per orphan per month. This subsidy was given for three years and effectively contributed to the reopening and reorganisation of the old establishments, almost all of which had been devastated by the war.

A “patronage” named after him was set up in Jerusalem, and in December 1919 the Salesians at Betgamāl, through the Apostolic Administrator Luigi Barlassina, made an agreement with this for the education of 18 orphan farmers; the list has come down to us with name, surname, age (average 14 years), nationality (13 Arabs, 4 Armenians, 1 Italian) and rite (8 Latin, 5 Armenian Catholic, 3 Greek Catholic, 2 Maronite). In a letter of 1922 and a second of 23 August 1923, Fr Alfredo Sacchetti, the procurator of the Salesian work at Betgamāl, asked the Patriarch to intervene so that the patronage could continue to contribute money on behalf of the orphans, explaining that “over the past four years, sixteen of them completed their agricultural course with distinction, thus responding effectively to the charity of the Holy Father.”

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<sup>38</sup> Fr Gianmaria GIANAZZA, in an unpublished item of research, lists the following: Brother Balaian Antonio (1907–1910); Brother Caiscian Sciucri (1904–1905, who did not make his profession); cleric Paul Demirdgian from Istanbul (1929–1932); Brother Dilanian Lavon (1908–1914); Brother Megdessian Megdess (1933–1936); cleric Stephen Tournaian from Aleppo (who did not finish the novitiate in 1936).

### 3.2 Help from the Protestant “Near East Relief” (NER)

In 1915, in order to help Christian populations in the Middle East, especially Armenians who were undergoing a veritable genocide, American citizens founded an association, initially called the “American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief” (ACASR), that was immediately supported by the US ambassador to Constantinople and by other diplomats in various Middle Eastern countries. Taking advantage of the widespread presence of Protestant missionaries in the region, and having obtained the recognition of the federal government in Washington, the association (renamed “Near East Relief”, NER) launched an extensive awareness campaign using all propaganda possibilities, managed to raise enough funds to help almost one and a half million people over the years, including hundreds of thousands of Armenian, Greek and Syrian orphans ..., in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, founding orphanages, schools and workshops, hospitals and clinics, and distributing basic necessities (cf. The official online site of the Association, today called the “Near East Foundation”; detailed contributions in MORRIS-ZE‘EVI, pp. 306–7, 313, 355, 367, 368, 417–18, 424, 445, 459, and *passim*; KALBIAN).

Edward W. Blatchford, the director of the NER in Palestine from 1922 to 1948, knew of the Salesian works in Nazareth, Bethlehem and Betgamāl where dozens of Armenian orphans had been taken in and added to those who had already arrived after the 1894-96 massacres. Fr Sacchetti, following talks in Betgamāl with him and members of the central office, drew up a large, almost visionary project which he submitted to the attention of various recipients, both ecclesiastical and lay. In a “confidential” letter of 1 July 1924 he asked Fr J. Mecerian of Beirut to indicate to him some young Armenians

who for their goodness and intelligence might be suitable for admission to one of our formation houses in Italy to become brothers and even priests in our Institute. We are convinced that in the not too distant future things will have to change radically in Turkey. And that a great future is being prepared for Salesian activity there. It is for this reason that we would like to begin right now to prepare the elements for future penetration into Asia Minor. Mr Blatchford of the NER told us that he had in Beyrouth a good number of Catholic Armenians whom he would like to entrust to our institutes in Palestine. I would be very grateful if you could give exact information about these young people, especially if there has been active propaganda of Protestantism among them.

On 20 and 22 June 1925 he presented his wide-ranging plan of action, in equivalent terms, to the Italian consuls in Port Said, Alexandria and Cairo, as

well as to the wealthy Armenian businessman Ohannis Bey Matossian of Cairo-Ghiza, urging them to help the 23 Armenian orphans present in Betgamāl, but also to point out and send others who could receive a suitable education, with a view to having them return to Turkey to run the schools “which we hope to open as soon as the present situation has passed. We already have 5 and we plan to send half a dozen of them to Italy, *si nous pouvons leur trouver un protecteur* (if we can find a protector for them).” On 20 June 1925 he sent Blatchford a first request for aid for 60 orphans among whom “23 Armenians we have been supporting for a long time” in the houses in Palestine. On the 24th of the same month, Blatchford replied, his letter headed “NER. Syria and Palestine Area. Director for Palestine”, that the distribution of funds did not depend on him but that he supported the request and would make the result known as soon as he had an answer from the office in Beirut. On 26 August 1926 Fr Alfredo proposed to the treasurer, Mr. Laird W. Archer, that the NER in 1926–27 support 200 young men in Salesian technical and agricultural schools: 100 in the Middle East (Constantinople, Egypt and Palestine, including the institute at Cremisan where missionaries for the region were being prepared), and a further 100 in Italy; in an attached sheet he presented a list of Arab and Armenian candidates. To start small, he asked that the NER take charge of another 10 boys in Betgamāl by sending a corresponding sum immediately. The reply on 15 September 1926 by Mr. William S. Dodd “In Charge of Personnel Division Foreign Department” was negative: currently the NER did not have that amount; its policy was to give priority to children in its Protestant institutions in Syria; and finally, he could not commit for three years. Then came a twist: on 20 September Dodd and Archer communicated by telegram that the NER agreed to support another 10 orphans in Betgamāl for a year; but the most important thing was that in the same month, wanting to establish long-term relations, they invited Fr Sacchetti to New York to give a series of lectures aimed at raising funds.

#### **4. Fr Sacchetti’s trip to the USA to collect funds**

And so, Fr Alfredo embarked on a long journey he had been preparing for some time: after some stopovers in Italy with benefactors in Rome, Florence and Turin, then in England, he reached the USA, bearing important letters of recommendation: the first was from the Rector Major Fr Philip Rinaldi (undated!); the second dated 12 December 1925 from Fr Aurelio Marolla OFM, Custos of the Holy Land, addressed to the Rev. Commissioners of North and South America, and another of the same date from the “Chief Secretary, Government Offices, Jerusalem”; on 19 January 1926 it was the turn of the

Salesian Provincial of MOR, Fr Carlo Gatti; on 1 March 1926 the Salesians at Battersea (London) launched an appeal for “The Salesian Missions in Palestine”, as the Salesians in New Rochelle (New York) also did on 1 September; Dr Rogeri “Royal Italian Ambassador in Washington” concluded matters on 20 September 1926 (cf. AIMOR 4.4.1.1). Those running the New York appeal wrote that they were far from doing something similar to what the Jews were doing who, according to Sir Herbert Samuel “last year had expended at least \$30,000,000”. There is no record of a letter of recommendation from Patriarch Barlassina, who had also gone to the USA in that period to gather funds to build Deir Rafāt, begun in 1925.

Fr Sacchetti was also assured of support from influential Jewish circles: on 12 November 1926 the *Jewish Tribune* in New York published the following noble appeal, entitled: “*A Kiddūsh Ha-Shem*”, that is, *A [kind of] sanctification of the Name [of God]*:

The coming to our shores of Father Alfred Sacchetti, manager of the Christian Agricultural School of Beth Gemal in Palestine, is a vivid reminder of the fact, over which all the Jews should rejoice, that Palestine is not only *Eretz Israel*, the Land of Israel, but also the Holy Land to the adherents of Christianity and Islam. The Salesian Community, which Father Sacchetti represents, is doing a holy work which will evoke the commendation of all Jews, and is bound to enlist the aid of many of our people. Poor and abandoned Christian children in all parts of the world, orphaned and friendless, are rescued by the Salesian Fathers and taught arts and trades; six of their institutions are maintained in Palestine, and the training of agriculturists for life in Palestine, is their major activity. The Jewish heart has ever sympathized with all true philanthropy, regardless of racial or creedal associations and we feel sure that, among those who will contribute to the fund for the school of Beth Gemal which Father Sacchetti has come to gather, there will be many Jews, for to do so would be performing a *Kiddūsh Ha-Shem* on a sublime plane. (AIMOR 4.4.1.1, folder B).

The text of the letter signed on 21 December 1926 by David de Sola Pool (1885-1970), the main Sephardic rabbi of the 20th century in the United States, scholar, author and world leader of Judaism, and Herman Bernstein (1876-1935), a well-known journalist and writer, is more detailed. The first part praises the humanitarian spirit of the Salesian work in Palestine, while the second acknowledges Fr Sacchetti's contribution in unmasking the falsehood of a well-known libellous pamphlet:

To whom it may concern. Father A. Sacchetti has come to America with warm letters of recommendation from leading Zionist in England. As the Procurator of the Salesian Missions in Palestine, he is working in the spirit of our Jewish endeavor to make modern Palestine a fruitful and flourishing land of human work. The

agricultural school of which he is the head is devoted to training Christian orphan children to be agriculturists in Palestine.

Father Sacchetti scholarship and love of truth have lead him to investigate the origin of the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. He has traced these forgeries to their origin, and has called their spurious character to the attention of the highest authorities in the Catholic Church. At the time when Henry Ford with all his vast opportunities for propaganda is still continuing to circulate the outrageous charges of the *Protocols*, and at a time when these charges are, through translation, finding their way into Palestine and other lands where the influence of the Catholic Church is strong, Father Sacchetti’s services in documenting for the Catholic Church the proof of the forged nature of the *Protocols* is a service of religious brotherhood of which Jews should be deeply appreciative. In this quest for truth Father Sacchetti has deserved well of both Jew and Gentile.<sup>39</sup>

In Palestine the agreement with Blatchford was confirmed: on 23 March 1927 he wrote to the Provincial, Fr Gatti, thanking him for the warm welcome given him on his visit to Betgamāl. On 15 March 1928 he asked the NER office in Athens to cover the expenses for the journey of 4 Armenian orphans whom Fr Sacchetti would take in at Betgamāl, saying by way of motivation: “Father Sacchetti is one of my very dear friends in Palestine, and I feel that it is a great opportunity for the boys to be under the eyes of this good, kind, efficient Father”. But in the meantime, a new player had burst onto the international charity scene in New York, requiring the Salesians to change their strategy.

## 5. Lasting relationships with the Catholic CNEWA

In order to reorganise various Catholic charity agencies more effectively, on the initiative of Pope Pius XI (1857, 1922--1939) and the ratification of the US Bishops' Conference, the “Catholic Near East Welfare Association, a Society in aid of Catholic interests in Russia and the Near East” was formed in New York between 11 and 15 March 1926. Made aware of these developments, Fr Sacchetti established contact with Jesuit Fr Edmund Aloysius Walsh, the first President of the CNEWA, who in a letter of reference on 8 October 1926 allowed him to preach in Italian parishes and give conferences in Catholic institutions in New York to collect funds. On 29 October 1926 secretary Mr Joseph F. Moore,

<sup>39</sup> In ABG: SACCHETTI, *Corrispondenza*, there is a notebook of 34 handwritten pages on which Fr Sacchetti had noted down reviews of books and articles on the “*Protocolli degli Anziani di Sion*” (Protocols of the Elders of Zion) and “*Il cimitero ebraico di Praga ed il Concilio dei rappresentanti delle dodici tribù di Israele*” (The Jewish Cemetery in Prague and the Council of the Representatives of the Twelve Tribes of Israel). The central Zionist in London got in touch with him, asking him to initiate mediation with church leaders in the Vatican and Jerusalem regarding the “Protocols”: cf. PIERACCINI 2017, pp. 53–82.

addressing him as “Procurator of the Salesian Missions in Palestine. 148 Main Street, New Rochelle, N.Y.” and again on 4 November 1926, asked him to go to the offices of the Association to provide information, documentary and photographic material on the Salesian works in Palestine to be published in the CNEWA bulletin, so as to make them better known in the USA. In his letter to Fr Walsh on 12 February 1927, Fr Sacchetti highlighted the continuity with Benedict XV’s initiative:

With reference to our various interviews, I am presenting you a plan of work to be carried out for the training of one hundred Armenian and Arab orphans in arts, trades and agriculture. These pupils will be distributed among our several Institutes in Palestine, and Turkey or Egypt. This plan is of the type successfully adopted by His Holiness Benedict XV during the years 1920, 1921 and 1922.

He now had all the credentials for carrying out his propaganda mission, and hastened to inform the Provincial, Fr Gatti (memo in AIMOR 4.4.1.1, *Documenti*, folder B).

This I did with much activity during the winter of 1927. I thus became part of the CNEWA family. On 12 February I presented the updated project for the education of 100 orphans in our Institutes. It included Constantinople. I requested \$15,000 annually of which \$12,000 would be for boarding fees at the annual rate of \$10 per orphan per month and \$3,000 for the re-establishment of Beitgemal for which I was especially, as is well known, in America, and in which the Association showed special interest because, as an agricultural orphanage, it was at the forefront of the papal directives and the Association’s aims. (See poster and propaganda prints in which the Pope is depicted pointing out the countryside and plough to Armenian refugees). The project was given general approval: but given the requests for help coming in from everywhere, Fr Walsh told me in April that the Holy Father was taking up the discussion and approval of each project himself, and that we would meet in Rome in June.

To be sure of success, Fr Sacchetti wrote to the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri (1852–1934):

I therefore beg Your Eminence to take under your patronage this project which is of the greatest importance for the future of our institutes, and especially for those in Palestine who must support themselves worthily in the face of the Protestant and Jewish advance. Fr Walsh, already favourably disposed, will be happy to do the Holy Father and Your Eminence a kindness in this matter. By way of information, I would like to remind Your Eminence that the only Catholic vocational schools in the Near East are those of the Salesians. Completely destroyed by the war, they are resurrecting at great sacrifice and with all kinds of difficulties. The support requested



from CNEWA will help to make them fully effective and save large numbers of poor orphans from poverty and vice. (AIMOR 4.4.1.1, *Documenti*, folder B).

Thanks to the mediation of the Cardinal (already “an old acquaintance” from the time of his diplomatic service in Lima Peru, and now the Salesian Protector), the Pope arranged as follows:

1) The grant requested was reduced to \$12,000 payable in quarters beginning in September. This was without future commitments and without any ties whatsoever to the Salesian institution. 2) Freedom of disposition regarding the number of orphans, and Fr Sacchetti’s responsibility towards CNEWA and the Holy Father directly. 3) The grant was intended only for Palestine for the exclusive teaching of agriculture or other trades to orphans, especially Armenians. The Holy Father, said Fr Walsh, took a special interest in the agricultural orphanage at Beitgemal whose history he was familiar with. The grant for the first quarter did not come in September but by mid-October: A final report from Mgr Robinson was still awaited in New York. He came to Betgemal on 11 October. [Photos nos. 18a-18b]; he visited the school, examined all the correspondence with CNEWA and, although he said that Fr Walsh had spoken to him only about Betgemal, he was happy with the disposal of funds as follows: Bethlehem: 30 orphans, 300 dollars a month; Betgemal: 35 orphans, 350 dollars a month; Cremisan: 100 dollar grant. Wagner contract for Betgemal 200 dollars. Reserve available to CNEWA: 50 dollars; total dollars 1,000 (AIMOR 4.4.1.1, *Documenti*, folder C).

## **6. Mr. Moore, first secretary of CNEWA, visits works in Palestine and Lebanon**

The respect and trust that Fr Sacchetti had gained explain the fact that he was asked to act as a guide, from 3 to 10 May 1928, for the Secretary General, Mr Moore, accompanied by his wife, to visit the institutions then being funded by CNEWA in “Palestine and Syria” (I use their terms). The programme was agreed upon with the Apostolic Visitor, Mons. Paschal Robinson OFM, who was staying in the Holy City at the time and met the illustrious guests/pilgrims a number of times. They began from Jerusalem, going first of all to the Benedictines (“on the Mount of Olives; they depend on the Syrian-Chaldaic Patriarch of Beirut. Minor and Major Seminary. Photographs”.); then to the White Fathers at Sant’Anna (“Seminary for Greek-Catholics. Report: 105 pupils, potentially up to 150. Photographs”.); then to the Jesuit Fathers at the P.I.B.; the Sisters of Charity (“a visit especially recommended by Mons Robinson. Carefully examined the various departments. Special interest of Mrs Moore in the crèche”.); the St Pierre de Ratisbonne technical school of the Our Lady of Sion Fathers (“Visit to workshops. The matter of the 40 orphans from Beirut and the Near East. Good presentation of the school, especially the electricians and mechanics section”.);

The Rosary Sisters; the Cardinal Ferrari Work; the Focolare. Then they went to Bethlehem and, after venerating the Holy Grotto, they were received to the sound of the fanfare in the Salesian orphanage, visited the workshops of the technical school, (carpentry, shoemaking, tailoring and mechanics ...), and the attached house and oratory of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. On the following days they went down to Betgamāl and met the boys and Salesians working in the fields of this huge property, in class or in workshops. I note that in his memo Fr Sacchetti jotted down: "Attach great importance to Srugi's clinic". Then the journey to Galilee with "a stop at Jacob's well. Photographs of earthquake damage in Nablūs. Arrived in Nazareth at our house. Improvised workshops. Statement to Mr Moore that it does not belong to the Middle East Province but to the French Province"). They then went on to "Syria-Lebanon" to review the works that CNEWA supported in Beirut and surrounds and on the eastern slopes of the mountains: "Jesuits, Armenian schools; Armenian refugee camp; visit to the new Armenian city built by the Government; to the Armenian schools run by the Jesuit Fathers; new orphanage being built by the same Fathers; CNEWA clinic; NER Armenian orphanage".

Naturally during these 8 days there were moments of prayer along the *Via dolorosa* and the main shrines in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth, conferences, receptions and courtesy visits including in Jerusalem to Mr Blatchford, and in Lebanon to the Apostolic Delegate Archbishop Frediano Giannini and "Patriarch Rahmani, the Syrian-Chaldaic Patriarch, 80, who knew Don Bosco. He has many refugee orphans". Fr Sacchetti took photographs everywhere that he had sent to New York and Rome; a good number of copies he pasted in his personal album (unfortunately without dates or names); some are now reproduced in the photo gallery attached to this book [Photos nos. 21, 22, 23].

Initially the programme envisaged other visits and meetings, but had to be scaled down after Fr Walsh telegraphed from New York "in the name of the Holy See, ordering Mr Moore to leave immediately for Constantinople and Bulgaria to bring relief to those affected by the earthquake". Back in New York, on 28 August he wrote thanking Fr Sacchetti "for the courtesies extended to both Mrs Moore and myself", but also for the overcoat ("dustcoat") that was made for him and which he appears to be wearing in all the photos.: "I am enclosing herewith my personal check for \$15.00 to cover the Palm Beach Suit which was made for me in Beitgemal. Please accept my sincere thanks as the suit is very well made and very well fitting, and I shall certainly take pleasure in recommending your tailor shop at Beitgemal". Fr Sacchetti in his reply on 22 September explained: "I have sent the check of 15 dollars to the tailor at Bethlehem. I enclose herewith

the receipt”. I think these are two significant details of the admirable precision and delicacy of both the American secretary and the Salesian priest!

### **7. Potential developments, setback, recovery and consolidation (1929–1938)**

Other than the notes in his diary, Fr Sacchetti left details of a summary report in the archives at Betgamāl that he sent to Fr Walsh on 27 May 1928, with many photos and negatives attached, and of an extensive report on 6 October 1928 that he had sent to Pope Pius XI through Cardinal Gasparri, including an account of how the offerings were invested in Betgamāl. In this regard he envisaged possible developments:

The Muslims in the surrounding area are provided with an evening school, instruction in masonry and above all a pharmaceutical dispensary which has already taken on the importance of a hospital. The development of the dispensary requires a suitable building which we hope CNEWA will help us to build. This is a work of exquisite charity that is much appreciated by the Muslim population.

On 10 October 1928 Mr Moore acknowledged receipt of the material sent to him and a copy of the letter to the Holy Father with an update on developments in Betgamāl, both in the countryside (including the new “Ford” tractor) [Photo no. 64] and in Srugi’s medical dispensary, writing in its regard:

It may be that your dispensary can be developed into a hospital. In this connection I would be glad to have you let me know what medical supplies you are in need of most, as it may be possible for me to get some of the necessary articles even where I could not get money.

On 15 December 1928 Fr Sacchetti thanked the Holy Father “for authorising, on behalf of the Salesian Missions in Palestine, the allocation of ten thousand dollars for the year October 1928 - October 1929”. He informed him that “other than the ordinary number of orphans at the Agricultural school in Betgamāl, at the request of Rev. Fr Cirillo O.M.C., the Ordinary of the Armenians in Greece, we have recently received 11 orphans coming from Athens. The other institutes in Bethlehem and Cremisan are also full”.

In short: With all the long and complex paperwork involved (getting a Greek passport on the one hand, a visa to enter the Palestine Mandate on the other, then finding the money to cover travel expenses, via Cyprus ...) things were taking a satisfactory course. However, due to the catastrophic financial depression in the USA in 1929, the volume of donations from benefactors shrank significantly, while CNEWA had to meet urgent requests for help from Russia. The grant

for Salesian works in Palestine was reduced, but it was enough to carry on the various activities. In his annual report to CNEWA on 21 September 1929 (and in his letter of 15 October 1929 to the Pope) Fr Sacchetti asked that it be confirmed for the following year, so as to start building the new clinic “which would cost \$1500; we could provide a Sister for the women, and have a doctor come from Jerusalem once a week. We would be happy to name the clinic and the Dispensary CNEWA or Pius XI”. But things did not improve; on 1 February 1930, from the Secretariat of State came the formal reply: “The Sacred Congregation for the Oriental Church on which CNEWA depends, and which had been interested in this matter, replied that they are in the dire necessity of not being able to do anything else, having already made the maximum effort for the 1929–30 financial year, and that moreover the Dispensary at Beitgemal, being destined for poor Muslims, is under the competence of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide.”

As a consequence the grant was completely suspended, with considerable inconvenience and at the same time as the countryside of Betgamāl was afflicted by a great drought and in the house it was difficult to get the construction work started: the *Martyrium* in honour of St Stephen, the school for Muslim children and the new clinic for Srugi. A concerned appeal of 12 August 1931 did not produce any immediate change; but it did come about after Fr Sacchetti, in a letter to Cardinal Gasparri on 10 May 1932 (“ever mindful and grateful for your paternal kindness towards me since the times I spent there in faraway Peru”) begged him to intercede with the Pope. He did so and so, a few months later, CNEWA resumed sending the valuable aid. It continued to do so after Fr Sacchetti’s transfer to Italy in autumn 1938, during the years of the Second World War and then for decades, even after the wave of Armenian refugees died out.

## 8. Some concluding remarks

1. In the Catholic field, the involvement of Popes Benedict XV and Pius XI was the backbone of all the charitable initiatives on behalf of orphans in Palestine, especially those who had been taken into the Salesian orphanages and schools in Betgamāl and Bethlehem: a specific, concrete and continuous interest. CNEWA was its *longa manus*, and the Salesians, as good sons of Don Bosco, by placing themselves at its service, intended to put into practice the explicit directives of the Pope.

2. Both the Popes and CNEWA found in Fr Alfredo Sacchetti, one might say, a most suitable “interface” for 20 years, 1919–1938. He was advantaged by his friendly acquaintance with Secretary of State Cardinal Gasparri, who, among

other things, introduced him in a private audience with Pius XI a first time on 2 June 1923 and again on 24 March 1929. He contributed to the direct knowledge of the institutions that CNEWA financed in the early years of its welfare and educational mission in Palestine and “Syria-Lebanon”. He also rendered services to the Church and the CNEWA by unmasking a certain Nuntius Picarella who posed as a monsignor in order to collect money (cf. Letters of March 1928), and by pointing out the improper actions of some representatives of the NER who proselytised Catholic refugees and exploited the photographic documentation, as mentioned in this passage of the report of 27 May 1928 to the “Rev.mo P. Edmondo J. Walsh, c/o Istituto Pontificio Orientale, Roma”:

I took photographs of what might be of interest to the Association. I have sent Mr Moore 40 enlargements in Rome, and will send the negative films to New York. These must be considered as property so that they are not used by others for propaganda purposes. Near East Relief unfairly uses most beautiful photographs of Catholic Institutions.

As “Procurator of the Salesian Missions in Palestine” (as stated on the letterheads of the London-Battersea and New York-New Rochelle offices), Fr Alfredo was inspired by a utopian vision which made him dream of rapid changes and a glorious future for Don Bosco's work in Turkey. But at the same time he did not stand there with his hands in his pockets waiting for manna from heaven: He was a tireless traveller, a convincing “propagandist” and negotiator in soliciting private and public charity from civil and ecclesiastical bodies, politicians and diplomats, and Christian and non-Christian philanthropists. He was a concrete implementer of small projects carried perseveringly, conscientious in administration and meticulous in accounting. In the archives at Betgamāl receipts are kept of amounts (the NER and) CNEWA sent regularly, either as Mass intentions or in the form of bank cheques (the first year they used the Ottoman Bank, then Barclays); they are duly signed by the Rectors of the houses that benefited: Fr Giovanni Villa in Bethlehem, Fr Giuseppe Raele in Cremisán, Fr Mario Rosin in Betgamāl. Accounts of how charity dollars were used are also attached, including costs for Bro. Srugi’s clinic that for example in 1927–28 gave out 9876 medications. All this just to demonstrate Fr Sacchetti’s professionalism and absolute transparency (which did not go without unjust accusations from those who were inevitably envious!).

3. For his part, Srugi, who had a special “devotion” to the Pope, found reason to intensify his prayers for him, and for the benefactors of CNEWA who, in addition to financial aid, sent pharmaceutical and sanitation items for both the

internal infirmary and the outpatient clinic that he ran for the benefit of the poor in the area. In his activity as a Salesian educator, Simon felt particularly close to the Armenian refugees and Syrian and Lebanese orphans, given that he had been an orphan as a child; he was their assistant, catechist and teacher, he prepared the little ones for first communion and formed the better older boys in Eucharistic spirituality: in 1927, of the twelve whom he admitted as new members of the “Blessed Sacrament Crusade”, five were Armenians. Artīn Keklikian and Dikrān Ciakmakgian joined the “St Josephs Sodality” which he looked after, and for decades they helped him in the mill and the clinic. In short: at all these levels, between him and the young Armenians in Betgamāl a lasting network of friendly relations was woven. This confirms the value of the testimonies that many of them gave during the various stages of the canonical processes for the beatification of their former teacher and benefactor.

4. Finally, a clarification: in this current “window” I have limited myself to the orphans who took refuge in the house in Betgamāl and the initial years of the Sacchetti-CNEWA relationship. Therefore I have left aside the rebuilding of relations with CNEWA beyond this period, both with the house at Betgamāl and with the other Salesian houses in Bethlehem and Cremisan belonging to the Middle Eastern province, as well as with the house in Nazareth, which was then part of the French province. Regarding the latter let me add that after being visited by Mr Moore in 1928, it also began to receive a \$1,000 grant from CNEWA, “to be sent direct to the Rev. George Schalhoob”. On the contrary, the request submitted by Fr Hanna Nahhās for the activities of the Italian School Club of Jerusalem-Musrara was rejected, as it did not fall within the specific aims of the Association (cf letters from Mr Moore on 28 August 1928 and from Fr Sacchetti on 22 September 1928).

## V FR BIANCHI: SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT GUIDELINES FOR BRO. NA'ĪM CUMBĀZ

Fr Eugenio Bianchi came to Betgamāl after 25 years as novice master and Rector for over 2,000 young Salesians in the two formation houses in Foglizzo and Ivrea (1886–1911). Even in the small area of the new house he was able to exercise his valuable service as a spiritual guide, which he continued through correspondence with former students and confreres; Na'īm Cumbāz (1896–1992) is one of the latter.

Born in Aleppo on 26 October 1896 to a Greek-Melchkite Catholic family, after his father died he was accepted at the house in Bethlehem on 3 April 1907. Unaware that he had already been “christened” with all three sacraments of initiation, he prepared to make his “first communion” which he received in 1908 together with his “Latin” companions from the hands of Fr Michael Rua a pilgrim in the Holy land. He learned his trade as a tailor at the technical school in Bethlehem; he made his novitiate in Cremisan in 1915–16, concluding with his triennial profession as a Salesian Brother, and renewed his vows in 1919. In the years that followed he did his practical training at Betgamāl, where Fr Bianchi was the superior. While giving everyone (confreres, Sisters and young people) communal spiritual direction (in sermons, lectures, “good nights”, monthly *rendiconto*), he especially accompanied Na'īm in his preparation for perpetual profession, which he made in Bethlehem on 6 August 1922, at the conclusion of the Retreat (cf. AIMOR, *Registro Coadiutori* no. 37; *Mortuary letter*, written by Fr Vittorio Pozzo). Assigned by obedience to the technical school in Alexandria, Egypt, he kept up correspondence with his spiritual father who sent him many letters. In the archives at Betgamāl we find 9 manuscripts in faint handwriting; they are from between 1922 and 1928, that is to say during that period of initial formation, so important for every young Salesian, between perpetual profession and specialisation. Bro. Na'īm probably made them available to Fr Sacchetti when he began gathering useful material for writing a life of Fr Bianchi, who died on 11 January 1931. I think it is useful to deal with them because they offer a small sample of the art of spiritual accompaniment of which Fr Bianchi was an extraordinary master. So far I have reported others' impressions of him, while in these letters he himself expresses himself.

## 1. The 9 letters in their context

1. The recent perpetual profession is the starting point for the exchange of letters: this event ensures an increase in divine grace which, on the one hand, fills the soul with joy and, on the other, communicates the strength to commit oneself in fidelity to the promises made.

Beitgemal, 15.10.22.

Naim my dear son in the Sacred Heart of Jesus. How are you after your perpetual profession? I hope things are going well, for the Lord, with the increase of grace, will give you greater strength to sanctify your soul more and more. I had half a hope that this year the Provincial would have left you in Beitgemal, but the Lord has disposed otherwise: *Sit nomen Domini benedictum!* Periagian [?] has gone home with the promise that he would certainly return, but he now tells me that his mother absolutely does not want him to return here, and indeed that he will go to America with her where his brothers are. For this too, *Sit nomen Domini benedictum!* But this year we will be without a tailor. Clemente has finished his course this year and has found a good job with a Muslim gentleman in Nāblus. They all say he is very good and has a property perhaps 4 times as big as Beitgemal.<sup>40</sup> Will you also be teaching class this year? Well, try to do good for the boys whom obedience has entrusted to you. Greet Fr Castellani for me and tell him to pray for me. Be faithful to the promises you have made and devoted to Mary Help of Christians. Best wishes to Fr Rector and Fr Banchemo. I bless you in the name of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Pray too for your affectionate friend in J. and M. Fr E.M. Bianchi.

2. After a few months, Na'īm, while saying he is happy, does not hide the effort he makes and the difficulties he encounters in his educational work and religious obedience; his teacher replies to him on 12 April 1923 with a most affectionate letter (“helpless little creature”, “little rascals”, “little schoolboys”...) reminding him that this is what he must expect, following Don Bosco’s promise.

Beitgemal, 12.4.23.

My dear helpless little creature in the Sacred Heart of Jesus. When we read, and I have heard it with my own ears, that our Venerable Father D. Bosco told those who wanted to join his ranks that he would give them bread, work and Paradise, I feel pleasure and consolation at times when one is overwhelmed by hard work, because one thinks that it is D. Bosco who will procure for us the glory of heaven.... To me it seems that this is happening to you amidst all your occupations. *Deo Gratias!* Courage, push ahead: always remember that when you do well in obedience to your superiors, even if the

<sup>40</sup> Cf. ABG: *Registro voti ...*, Clemente Tuhtarian was one of the best pupils: in the final exams for the 1920-21 school year he gained 105/120 marks and received three prizes for agriculture, application to work and study. At the end of 1922-23 he received his diploma with 29/30, and was given a “Banco di Roma” savings bank booklet. In 1935 he was employed in the “Fordson Company, Tunis”: cf. ABG-*Pupils*.



things commanded are a little burdensome, D. Bosco will be pleased with you and you will never lack divine blessings. For me, it will always be a reason for consolation to know that you are happy and content in the midst of your occupations, which you will always carry out in the best possible way. Another reason for consolation for me is the knowledge that you get your little rascals to go to communion and pray for me. Follow this and I will be most grateful to you. I, too, remember you and your little school boys in my poor prayers. Greet my friends for me and always pray for

your affectionate friend in J. and M. Fr. E.M. Bianchi.

3. Seeing that the end of the school year was approaching, Na’im expressed his satisfaction at having worked well with his boys, also from a devotional point of view (the month of Mary...) and professed that he always wanted to be a true son of Don Bosco. In his quick reply on 3 August 1923, Fr Bianchi confirmed him in his good resolutions, and informed him of what, on that very day, was the most important “Stephenian” event, made memorable by the benevolence of Pope Pius XI who approved the “Work of Christian Forgiveness”.

Beitgemal, 3.8.23.

Naim my dear friend in the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I can't tell you how pleased I was with the good news you gave me. I was immensely consoled to hear that you had a very good year, always remaining a true son of D. Bosco and doing good for your pupils. *Deo gratias!* May Mary Help of Christians richly reward you for all that you have done for her, especially in her month, and may the boys keep a grateful memory of you and love this most tender Mother. Thanks for the prayers that you and the boys have said for me. Today, 3 August there are great festivities in Beitgemal in honour of St Stephen. We celebrated the community Mass over the tomb of the Holy Protomartyr in the open air! The Custos of the Holy Land came to sing the Mass! The Provincial will tell you everything. The Holy Father has given us a very special grace. We need to pray a lot for this Vicar of Jesus Christ. Fondly greet Cherubino and Fr Gerbo for me and recommend me to their prayers. I bless you in the name of the Sacred Heart.

Your affectionate friend in J. and M. Fr E.M. Bianchi.

4. In the following letter Fr Bianchi also confirms Na’im's desire to progress in virtue; he encourages him to face the numerous commitments in the spirit of Don Bosco's threefold promise; he expresses his affectionate feelings: he misses him not only as a tailor, but as a friend and hopes that he will return soon. He updates him on two significant community events, informs him about some former students and his long illness.

Beitgemal, 27.11.23

Naim my dear friend in the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Your letters always give me very great pleasure because I always see in them your good will to make progress in virtue

and that you are especially always ready to obey in everything that the Superiors want from you. *Deo gratias!* I also see that there is no lack of work for you: live happily thinking of what D. Bosco promised his spiritual sons = Bread, Work and Paradise. I remember you always and pray for you. When you come back to Beitgemal you will find something new. We have placed a bust of the Ven. D. Bosco, in bronze, at the entrance and on the terrazza in place of the small statue of Our Lady a beautiful statue of Mary Help of Christians. Both look great and present very well. Pray for me and get your children to pray for me. When you get the chance, you can write to me about what Hajale does and where he is.<sup>41</sup> Oh, if you came back to Beitgemal, how I would love to see you again! Now we need to cut the clothes of the young people and we have no one to do it. John was supposed to come from Bethlehem to cut the clothes, but he doesn't show up. I think they have a lot of work, so they can't let him leave for three or four days. Patience! My health at the moment is fair. But I was ill with an incomprehensible illness. I could not sleep at all, great lack of appetite etc. etc. I went 35 days without celebrating Mass!! This is something that has never happened to me since I have been a priest. *Sit nomen Domini benedictum!*<sup>42</sup> Greet Fr Gerbo, Fr Raele, Castellani, the Prefect [?] etc. etc. May the Sacred Heart bless you and make you happy both here and in eternity. Always continue to pray for

your affectionate friend in J. and M. Fr E.M. Bianchi.

5. Fr Eugenio wrote the fifth letter probably between the end of 1923 and the beginning of 1924, in reply to the letter in which Na'im wished him well (for Christmas and New Year 1923–24), explaining that his pupils offered him "a spiritual treasure", as was the custom. The letter comes between two visits: the one Na'im made to his family in Aleppo during the summer break, and the one Fr Sacchetti would make to Alexandria come February. One can sense the satisfaction that Na'im experiences in his Salesian life; Fr Bianchi interprets it as a special grace from the Lord that rewards him for his generous consecration to his service, giving him a foretaste of the joys of heaven. He then tells him about the vocational discernment he is carrying out with regard to an aspirant from Aleppo, wanting to know the actual circumstances of the family.

Naim my dear friend in the Sacred Heart of Jesus. You were quite right to say in your letter that the part that would have pleased me most would have been the part where you announced that your pupils had made 40 communions for me. Yes, this consoled me very much and I will be very grateful if you will give me such a gift some other time during the year. May the Sacred Heart of Jesus, through the intercession of Mary Help of Christians and our Venerable Father D. Bosco reward you abundantly in this

<sup>41</sup> ABG: *Registro Voti ...*, 9 April 1921 Naim Haiale [*alias* Khajale] got 9.5 in the catechetics competition. At the end of 1921–22 he got 8.5 in agriculture, finishing with his diploma and was given the Savings Bank booklet. The following year he found work on a poultry and dairy farm in Alexandria: cf. ABG-*Pupils*.

<sup>42</sup> I found no mention of this in the house or Province chronicles; Fr Sacchetti, in the above-mentioned letter to Fr Rinaldi of 3 December 1923, vaguely mentions Fr Bianchi's wish to go to Italy for treatment.

world and in the future life. I am also very pleased to know that you are completely happy and content in a particular way after having made your religious profession. *Deo gratias!* See how good the Lord is with us. Also in this land he makes us feel a special contentment in his service! Yes, my dear friend, let us be grateful to him and love him with all the strength of our hearts. Don't be afraid, my good friend: for what little my poor prayers are worth I will always remember you, I will remember you also in the future. Be brave, be very devoted to Mary Help of Christians and to Don Bosco and they will help you in all the moments of your life. Tell me one thing: when you were at home, did you see and talk to Naim Calussie's mother?<sup>43</sup> Well, I would need you to tell me what situation she is in, how old she will be shortly, whether she lives with his brothers or serves in some particular home, whether she has any sons or daughters yet, etc. etc. Do you know why I am asking you this? Because Scandar is planning to become a Salesian, and I fear that he cannot because of his mother's poverty, since I think that when you returned you told me that his mother was in a miserable state. Now answer me this question when you can. - Farid left early this month saying he had found a place in Syria. May the good God go with him!<sup>44</sup> Fr Sacchetti will pass through Alexandria in the first half of February and you can find out many things about St Stephen from him. We will have the feast of St Francis on 4 February. I bless you in the name of the Sacred Heart.

Yours affectionately in J. and M., Fr E.M. Bianchi.

6. At the end of 1924 Na'īm communicates to his spiritual father the discouragement and melancholy he feels because of the lack of decision about his period of further education. In his reply, Fr Bianchi deals immediately with the matter, suggesting the most effective medicine for these spiritual ills: contemplation of the much greater sufferings of “our dear and beloved Jesus on the Cross”. He also reminds him of the ascetic principle (dear to St Francis de Sales and outlined by Fr Barberis in his *Vademecum*, Part 3) of praying even if one does not feel any pleasure in it, for the merit becomes greater. He encourages him to remain within the ark of salvation of the Congregation. Finally, he reports the sudden death of a Palestinian boarding student.

Beitgemal, 10.01.25

Naim my dear friend in the Sacred Heart of Jesus. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for your good wishes and I pray to our Divine Redeemer that you will

<sup>43</sup> ABG: *Registro voti...*: Calussie Na'īm (of the late Alexander, born in Aleppo) at the end of 1920–21 took his final exams with a score of 87/120; the overall result of the exams for the 2nd course was 113/120; the following year in the final session in July, he got 8 for agriculture, and was among the winners of the catechetics competition in Arabic, at which the Provincial, Fr Salvatore Puddu, presided. He was soon employed among the municipal gardeners in Aleppo: cf ABG-*Pupils*.

<sup>44</sup> In ABG: *Accettazione Allievi*, Farid Huri [*alias* Hourī, Khoury] was presented by Fr G. Villa the Rector at Bethlehem: born in 1908 in Ramlah, he lost his father, “made his abjuration”. In the *Registro voti...*, he figures among the pupils for the 1st course in 1922–23, and his marks are given for the final exams in August 1923. I gather that he left Betgamāl at the beginning of the following month.

receive them in return with abundant heavenly graces during this Holy Year, a year of graces and blessings. I am not surprised that sometimes you are caught up in melancholy; as long as we are in this vale of tears we will always have something that gives us grief. It is also certain that when melancholy assails us, everything becomes heavy. In those moments we raise our minds to our dear crucified Jesus and we think of the bitter pains he felt from that hard wood, of the holy body all torn and covered with wounds, of the pierced feet and hands, of the crowning with thorns ... and then we say to ourselves: “What is that which I suffer compared to the immense pains that my beloved Jesus suffers? And then let us ask him for strength to bear what we suffer for his sake with patience. At that time, let us strive to keep our hearts in peace and have unlimited recourse to Mary Help of Christians, from whom we will surely receive the help we need. We must then do all the practices of piety that we are accustomed to do with the usual diligence and punctuality, even though in doing them we do not feel any pleasure or rather we feel boredom and annoyance, because it is certain that these are more meritorious than when we do them with pleasure, and they obtain greater graces for us. So, courage my dear friend, and go ahead *In nomine Domini!* Consider also that, finding yourself in the Salesian Congregation, you are in an Ark where you will certainly save your soul. My thoughts fly to you very often and I commend you to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to Mary Most Holy the Help of Christians and to the Venerable Don Bosco, so that they may help you in all your spiritual and temporal needs. I think you will still remember Azar. Well, a very strong attack of cellulitis carried him off in 4 days! Yesterday he was taken to the cemetery. A *requiem* for this poor boy!<sup>45</sup> You did well to write to Fr Ricaldone. Greet my friends there for me. I bless you in the name of the Sacred Heart.

Yours affectionately in J. and M. Fr E.M. Bianchi.

7. The mention of the letter sent to Fr Ricaldone, who was then the Councillor for Technical Schools, confirms that for many months a dialogue of discernment about his future specialisation had been taking place between the provincial, the superiors in Turin and Na’im. On 1 September 1924 the Provincial, Fr Salvatore Puddu invited him to be patient (“Your Rector has good will but it is not always in his power to please you in everything”), pointing out that he himself had spoken to his superiors about him and promising that he would be able to be accommodated in due course (AIMOR, *Schedario*, personal folder Combas). Na’im waited, then, but his patience was sorely tried, including by the ingratitude of the boys and undeserved reprimands from some superiors. As well as this inner struggle, there were the temptations coming from the city environment outside. The result was a restless state of mind and doubts about the vocation. Fr Bianchi’s letter, the longest and most articulate, is full

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<sup>45</sup> ABG: *Registro voti ...*, Habasc Azar [*sic*], son of the late Carlo, originally from Jaffa, was one of the students in the first course in 1923–24 and in the second course in the quarterly examinations in 1924–25, then no longer; in fact he died on 8 January 1925, as written in ABG: *Registro dei defunti*, no. 46.

of pedagogical and spiritual wisdom: in order to overcome the snares of self-love and preserve peace of soul it is necessary to always keep in mind the ultimate goal of Salesian consecrated life, to remain available to any “obedience” and to be rooted in humility, the foundation of everything and guarantee of perseverance.

Beitgemal, 4.7.25.

Naim my dear friend in the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Your letter, for which I have been waiting for a long time, has given me immense pleasure. However, although I wanted it very much, I was not worried by your long silence, because I know how much you have to do. First your duty, then the rest! For us religious of Ven. D. Bosco the dominant thought in our actions must always be for the Glory of God and the salvation of souls. Therefore, when we see no correspondence with our labours, or rather not infrequently ingratitude and misunderstanding, although our wretched humanity cannot help but resent this, we must strive not to be disturbed and keep our souls calm, believing that the reward and guidance of our labours and efforts will be in heaven. It is only in this way that we will stand strong in the breach, that we will continue to work with courage without ever stopping, that we will fulfil our duties with ever greater diligence and remain steadfast in our vocation that the Lord has given us. Even the city, and a city such as Alexandria can be a cause of disturbance and temptation; but you will only go to the city out of necessity and obedience, and then your modest, reserved, mortified demeanour will ensure that it does not harm you in the least. But there is another thing that we must keep an eye on and that is the humility that is the basis of our holiness [underlined in the manuscript]. We always need this virtue, but we especially need it when it seems to us that our actions are not taken into account as we believe they are, when some remark is made to us that we do not think we deserve; then self-love rebels and if we are not well grounded in humility, we show sulkiness, discontent, restlessness, murmuring and even doubts about our vocation. So you see how necessary this virtue is for us, ask the good Mother Help of Christians for it insistently. With this virtue we will be safe from many dangers and we will obtain many graces from the Lord. When will we see each other again? When the Lord wishes, although I would be very happy to see you again soon. With regard to your destination in the coming year, you do well to put your heart at rest and go and stay wherever obedience will take you. Not a day goes by that I don't remember you to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary Help of Christians so that they may bless you with all the blessings you need to sanctify yourself. I thank you for the prayers you are saying for me and I recommend that you continue. Fr Sacchetti sends you his best wishes and would be very happy if you were here to relieve him a little from the burdens he is under. Greet Fr Rector for me, Fr Loda, Fr Rael, Fr Ponzio, Fr Tasciotti, Fr Castellani, Cl. Blanchet, Costamagna, Fr Vizolo. I bless you in the name of the Sacred Heart.

Yours affectionately in J. and M. Fr E.M. Bianchi.

8. The note on 15.10.25 makes us think that Fr Bianchi kept at a respectful distance in contact with the provincial and followed the development of the

“negotiations” between him and Na’īm, without interfering. He assures him of his prayers so that he may remain strong in his vocation and not make the mistake of the former student he knows who has just left.

Beitgemal, 15.10.25.

My dear friend in the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Some time ago I received your kind letter with great pleasure and I did not reply to it because of the laziness that always dominates me. However, I always remember you to the Good Lord so that He may bless you in all your actions and keep you strong in your vocation. The other Naim Scandar who had done so much to be received into the Seminary, left last week and thus abandoned his vocation.<sup>46</sup> Oh! If you only knew how much I regretted his decision. After leaving the seminary he came here and stayed with us for about ten days. Last Friday he left for Aleppo and now he will have arrived. *Sit nomen Domini benedictum!* You will have news of Beitgemal from Fr Cantoni. Greet the confreres, recommending me to their prayers. Pray for me so that I may prepare myself well for death. I bless you in the name of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Yours affectionately in J. and M. Fr E.M. Bianchi.

9. After having been patient for a long time, Bro. Na’īm wrote to the new Provincial Fr Carlo Gatti on 18.12.25, reminding him of the promises he had made to him about the advanced course in Turin, and adding that, once completed, he would gladly remain in Italy, but “if the superiors wish me to return to my province, I will be obedient to their wishes”. (AIMOR: *Schedario*, personal folder Combas). Finally, “the negotiations” took the direction he hoped for: In fact, he arrived in Turin in the Martinetto community in mid-January 1926 and spent two years perfecting his tailoring skills and completing his Salesian formation (cf. Letter of the Rector of Martinetto in AIMOR: *Schedario*, personal folder Combas).

In the 1927–28 school year he returned to Alexandria where he was then given the responsibility of head of workshop; Srugi sent him greetings in the letter he wrote to Fr Gerbo on 16 October 1927. I will present this when examining the Writings. In this context he received the letter of 11.5.28 in which Fr Bianchi (who feels the fatigue of his years and asks for prayers to prepare himself to die well) expresses his unchanged affection for him and his real interest in some former students entering the working world; finally he gives the news of the long-awaited start of preparatory work for the construction of the shrine of St Stephen, the completion of which will be his “swan song”.

<sup>46</sup> ABG: *Registro voti* ..., in the 1919–20 school year Naim Scandar was among those who “were considered for final exams”, but got second prize for conduct and first for application to study. He was no longer among those who sat for exams in the final session in 1920–21.

Beitgemal, 11.5.28.

Naim my dear friend in the Sacred Heart of Jesus. You have written to me several times and I have never replied not because your letters are not dear to me, but because I am getting old and difficulty in writing increases. However, this does not prevent me from remembering you and always recommending you to the Lord in my poor prayers. And now, how are things for you in Alexandria? Always good? Do you have many pupils in the workshop? Are they good? Do they look forward to their work? Recommend them a lot to Mary Help of Christians, especially now that we are in her month. Does Cacciaturian come to the college often?<sup>47</sup> Did he find a good position outside? Does he take care of his own food and everything else? Send him the note I'll write him. Does Farid come to the college too? Was he able to find employment? I recommended to D. Fatalla that he suggest studying French as some of his friends did and so they were able to find a place. Are you always a true son of D. Bosco? Greet the Rector very much for me, Fr Banchero, Fr Ponzio, Fr Helu, Fr Cantoni, Fr Castellani, Fr Teissèdre [underlined], Blanchet, Fr Rossi, and recommend me to their prayers. You pray for me too, so that I may always prepare myself well for death. I bless you in the name of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Yours affectionately in J. and M. Fr E.M. Bianchi.

[PS]

We have begun excavations for St Stephen's crypt. *Deo gratias!* Greetings from Fr Sacchetti and Fr Rosin". [PPS: "Fond greetings from me too. Greet Blanchet for me. Fr Mario Rosin."].

## 2. Significance and value of this correspondence

1. As is clear, these are letters of vocational discernment and spiritual accompaniment, “tailor-made” for Na’im (to use the language of tailors, which he was). Fr Bianchi continues the ministry of teacher, guide, father and “friend of his soul”. But he is aware that he carries it out in support of the Don Bosco fatherhood of whom he wants to be a faithful echo and Na’im one of “his spiritual sons”, “a true son of Don Bosco”. This fatherhood is anchored in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who is omnipresent: at the beginning and end of each letter and often in the body. We know that this is one of the most real foundations of Salesian life and mission, to which the first generations of confreres and sisters were very attached. The aim of this correspondence is to accompany the young brother in his growth towards holiness, faithful to the spirit of Don Bosco; to

<sup>47</sup> ABG: *Registro voti ...*, at the end of the 1923–24 school year Abed Kacciaturian had received second prize for application to work. In September 1924 (together with his older companions: A. Agopian, A. Arabian, M. Avedissian) he took part in the exploration being directed by Fr Gisler on the archaeological site at “Giammala” which some scholars presented in opposition to Betgamāl as the place of St Stephen's tomb: cf. HEIDET, p. 13.

revive the grace of profession; to confirm him in the joyful service of the Lord, helping him to overcome the danger of failing in his vocation.

2. The main themes that Fr Bianchi touches on rapidly (they are one-liners or a few sentences, not a complete speech, at most an outline for a conference or instruction...) are some of the fundamental and dominant themes of Christian life (loving God “with all the strength of our heart”, loving our Mother Mary, imitating Christ crucified, our beloved Jesus), religious life (obedience, humility; salvation of our soul by fulfilling one's duties . ..), and Salesian: direct everything to the greater glory of God and to the salvation of souls; unlimited trust in Mary Help of Christians, as a beloved and tender Mother; in one's labours remember the promise: “bread, work and paradise” that Don Bosco committed himself to “provide” for his sons to make them happy now and in eternity. Other typical guidelines or directions are: comfort in difficulties; warning against dangers and temptations, first of all the restlessness and melancholy that Francis de Sales in the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and Fr Barberis in the *Vademecum*, warn is the mother of all others ...; remaining faithful to the practices of piety even when one has no taste for them (another typical instruction of our patron saint). Na'īm is suffering, not only because of the delayed period of further studies in Turin, but also because of the lack of gratitude on the part of fickle and superficial boys, and the burden of undeserved reproaches from demanding superiors. Two realities not infrequent in the experience of young Salesians. Fr Bianchi's indications, therefore, also from this point of view, transcend their immediate contingency and retain current value.

3. The atmosphere in which this exchange of letters takes place is that of cordial friendship between master and disciple, or rather between father and eldest son. In these letters Fr Bianchi shows Na'īm something of his rich humanity: not just psychological finesse, but great affection, esteem, consolation and pleasure in knowing that he is at peace and content, the expectation of receiving his letters, the desire to see him again... Nothing too intimate and no disembodied spiritualism: Even in his correspondence, as attested by many of his illustrious former novices, Fr Eugenio shows himself to be a practical man: he continues to be interested in very concrete terms in aspirants to Salesian life, and suggests a winning strategy to former students for finding work...

4. In addition to containing guidelines on Salesian pedagogy and spirituality, the letters provide news and make it possible for us to know the identity of some pupils and former pupils. From this latter point of view they help (like Srugi's letters) to reconstruct something of the story (minor, if you like) of Betgamāl,



giving a face and a qualification to a certain number of young people who, after their school years and their diploma, were still seeking their vocation, or were already entering the world of work or professions. Thus they do not remain just a record in the registers, but living people in action, in contact with their teachers and companions.



Part 2

THE PROJECT OF LIFE OUTLINED IN  
HIS WRITINGS

1. RELIGIOUS WRITINGS
2. HIS PROJECT OF LIFE  
(HIS PLAN FOR PERFECT HOLINESS)

u. Gou Betlemme 18 Settembre 1900

Affine di uniformarmi in tutto  
alle sacre regole domando anche per  
scritto a' miei amici Superiori di esse  
e aggregato alla più società di S.  
Francesco di Sales coi sacri voti per  
finito

Im fine

Srugi Simone

Handwritten request for admission to perpetual profession

Torino aprile 1907

Carissimo Srugi (Resigimale)

Ho ricevuto la tua lettera - Mi rallegro  
con te della tua buona disposizione di avere  
il digiuno nella tua santa Casa. Spero che ti  
trovi costante - Coraggio, continua sempre  
così, e ricambiantoti <sup>te</sup> gli impegni per lo S.  
forte. Impugnabile, e con fiducia. Ed avremo

Tuo Affetto non p. e aff.  
Suo. Michele Rua.

First note from Fr Michael Rua

# Section 1

## Srugi's religious writings

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### Introduction

Simon Srugi was not a writer with a literary background who had set out to write a book, not even to keep a collection of letters. He was a practical and very simple man, a Salesian Brother (Coadjutor) who loved reading the lives of the saints, devotional books ... and writing down brief sentences or paragraphs from them for his own use and for use by the people with whom he lived. The kinds of things we are talking about are a handful of letters; extracts from Jesus' Revelations to Sr Marie-Marta Chambon; two lists of "maxims" that he used to hand out to confreres and young people each month at Betgamāl to encourage them to live a devout life; an "assortment" of thoughts that he used for his own personal meditation; some special prayers; and finally, the resolutions he took during annual retreats and the monthly recollections. Also preserved are some notebooks with medical and nursing prescriptions: we might say that just as the latter were useful for looking after the health of the body, he made use of the former for the salvation of souls and for Christian perfection, his own first of all then that of others. The original manuscripts have been preserved in the archives of the Salesian Middle East Province in binders marked AIMOR 15.1.1; 15.1.11; 15.1.12.

Fr Ernesto Forti, in his book *Un buon Samaritano concittadino di Gesù* (Leumann-Torino: LDC, 1967), has mentioned a few passages here and there; while here they are presented as a whole with introductions, notes and indication of sources.

### 1. LETTERS

Very few letters (or notes) written or received by Srugi have come down to us; fragments of what are presumed to be more frequent exchanges of

correspondence. It helps to remember that back in his day, each confrere would give or receive their correspondence to/from the superior still or already open, and the superior would then make just one trip to the post. This could be a reason to suppose that some of his letters have been lost, along with other letters. Besides, at times we only have a reflection of what he wrote that can be inferred from the content of the replies he received.

Anyway, the few that have come down to us deserve to be presented because, as well as providing us with additional information about his life, they help us to get to know some traits of his spirituality and apostolate.

### **First Note from Fr Michael Rua**

Fr Michael Rua (1837--1910), the first successor of Don Bosco, came to Palestine for the first time from 28 February to 20 March 1895, to smooth out the persistent difficulties of integration between the Salesians and followers of Fr Antonio Belloni, which had taken place in 1891. He carried out a detailed visit to the three communities of Bethlehem, Betgamāl (12-14 March) and Cremisan, as well as the plot of land in Nazareth where there would soon be an orphanage and the “Jesus the Adolescent” school. It is plausible to think that Simon, although still a novice, would have approached the holy priest to tell him of his desire to become a good Salesian, and that he would have received encouragement in this. The two of them kept in contact as we can see from what Fr Rua wrote to Fr Belloni in his letter of 12 September 1896: “Give my fondest greetings to Simon Srugi and Francis Nardi. I have read the letters they sent me with pleasure” (ASC, A4480360). I believe this exchange of letters continued over the years that followed, in the shape of brief notes like the following:

Turin, April 1907

*My dear Srugi (Beitgémal),*

*I have received your news. I rejoice with you in your good intentions to serve the Lord in his holy House. I can see that you are happy. Courage, keep it up, and let me exchange greetings with you for the Holy Days of Easter. I remain your beloved friend in Jesus and Mary.*

*Fr Michael Rua.*

## Second Note from Fr Michael Rua

On an unspecified date (after 29 September, the feast of the Holy Archangels, and presumably in 1908) Fr Rua, through one of his secretaries, sent Simon this leaflet which had a *standard* formula pre-printed on one side:

*Thank you for your kind letter and I thought I would give you a reply to your liking by sending you a beautiful thought of our beloved Don Bosco's, which he himself wrote: "May Jesus always be your guide, amidst dangers, to heaven." Fr Gio. Bosco. – Please accept my regards and pray to the Lord for your beloved friend in Jesus and Mary: Fr Michael Rua.*

On the other side are these more personal lines, of which only the signature is in his own handwriting:

*Thank you for your greeting and prayers, as well as the Communion you have made for me for my Name day. Keep on recommending me to the Lord and you will do me a real favour. I am very happy to know that the circulars and letters from the Superiors are regularly read out there. Please see to it that – as far as you are concerned – they are scrupulously put into practice. My heartfelt blessing and in turn I recommend you to the Lord.*

*Fr Michael Rua.*

## Notes

The second time Fr Rua came to the Holy Land was during his longer journey to the Middle East which lasted from 3 February to 30 April 1908. There had been a drought in the country for some months; the faithful in Galilee and Samaria had heard it said that Fr Rua was a saint, so they had recourse to his prayers. And in fact on 23 March, the day following his visit, such heavy rain fell that it remained in living memory, and still today in the parish church at Zabābdah there is a plaque recalling it. Fr Rua was in Betgamāl from 3 to 5 April: he visited most of the property, inspected the various sectors of the work, leaving a lengthy set of recommendations (including sanitation and hygiene measures to make the environment healthier), gave a conference for "the exercise for a happy death", and gave First Communion to 6 boys at the school who were most probably prepared by Simon. He was 31 years of age at the time and played a significant role in the community, not just as infirmarian but also as an educator and apostle. He could certainly have had a personal chat with Fr Rua and have dealt with what would have been most at heart for both of them: his personal

holiness. One could reasonably suppose that Simon also took part in some of the events where the Salesians of the Holy Land gathered around Don Bosco's successor for festive academies or for the Easter celebration that fell on 19 April that year, such that their mutual understanding would have grown and that their exchange of letters would have continued.

Even in the case of this second note, it is easy enough to reconstruct the contents of Simon's letter: he sent name-day greetings, along with an offering of prayers and Eucharistic Communion, and renewed his commitment to continue to entrust Fr Rua to the Lord. He also told him that documents from the Superiors were being regularly read out in the community.

The fact that Simon had jealously kept these two notes from the successor of Don Bosco (today Blessed) until he died, lets us know that he considered them to be the relics of a saint.

### **Srugi's First Letter to Fr Mario Gerbo**

*Long live Jesus in the Eucharist!*

Beitgemāl, 13 September 1926

*Dear Fr Gerbo,*

*By now our Crusade is at its end, meaning: it no longer exists. Our good Superiors have transformed it into the Blessed Sacrament Sodality which is substantially the same thing. The young Crusaders who remained have already left the school and I am not receiving any others. I am no longer sending news of our group to the Administration, but I subscribe to the magazine and the news-sheet "La Lampada del Tabernacolo" (The Tabernacle Lamp).*

*I was very unhappy about this but I am resigned to the will of the Lord who has allowed this for our good. This is how our Group has come to an end.*

*I am sending you some pages of the "Tabernacle Lamp" that are left over; See if you like them. My kind regards and please remember me in your prayers. I offer you my condolences at the death of your beloved brother. I have begun a novena of Communion and prayers for the repose of his soul.*

*Your confrere in Jesus and Mary,*

*Srugi Simon.*



## Notes

The one in charge of animating the life of piety in Salesian houses was a priest, known as the "catechist": Fr Mario Gerbo (1885--1964) had this responsibility at Betgamāl in 1924--25. He was "a soul wholly of God, an exemplary priest, a tireless apostle of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and a director of souls of rare competence. Fr Gerbo and Simon were immediately on the same wavelength, because of that intuition which binds exceptional souls together in love: he was thus able to deepen his knowledge of the treasures of the divine Heart and make his already ardent devotion to the Blessed Sacrament more alive" (E. Forti). Simon supported Fr Gerbo so well that after the latter's departure he continued to be the person of reference for the Eucharistic Crusade: he received newly enrolled members, sent reports to the central administration, updated subscriptions to the magazines. Although a brother and not a priest, he fulfilled the role of guide for the small group of "Crusaders".

Regarding the contents of the letter and its context: Fr Forti "highlights Simon's prompt obedience and calm resignation in the face of inevitable disagreements, including in the field of the apostolate. Although the Crusade was dear to his heart, he did not shy away like weak spirits would, but he was willing to use his enthusiasm and love to boost other apostolic activities more in keeping with the traditions of the Salesian Family."

Let me stress an important detail: Simon expresses total acceptance of God's will, convinced that He sees that everything turns out to our good, as St Paul teaches in Rom 8:28. In fact, this was the line of conduct followed by Fr Gerbo who wrote: "*The apostle is such if he works humbly, in intimate contact with God, in perfect detachment from his own judgement and will. Should a method of apostolate yield even the best results, but not be approved by those in authority, the apostle must be prepared to renounce it immediately, without criticism, without complaint, and without deception.*" The maturity of Simon's judgement is also striking as he concentrates on the substance of the Eucharistic cult, beyond the external forms that distinguished the various associations and devotional practices of the time.

## First Letter of past pupil 'Atallah Selim

Cairo, 19 January 1927

*Dear Brother Srugi,*

*It is already many days since I left Beitgemal. I arrived safe and sound in Cairo. Thanks be to God I am well in soul and body.*

*I am in a centre where in fact you never hear Italian spoken and I am happy to subscribe to two Italian magazines I am interested in but that I have not yet received.*

*But my address has changed. It is not the Salesians' address, I would therefore ask you to send me as soon as possible the addresses of the various administrations of the magazines to which I subscribe, so that I can write to them and send them my new address so that I can receive these magazines.*

*I remember you daily in my poor prayers, especially at Holy Communion. Please pray for me too so the Lord will grant me the grace of perseverance.*

*Awaiting your reply, I am happy to sign myself*

*Your affectionate and devoted friend in C.J.*

*Atallah Selīm*

*Blessed Sacrament Crusader.*

## Notes

'Atallah Selīm, whose Maronite father had died, came to Betgamāl in August 1922, as shown in the acceptance register. After completing the four-year course and gaining his certificate in summer 1926, he left Palestine to find work or a trade in Cairo, and after a temporary stay with the Salesians, went to live on his own. The content and style of his letters show him to be a well-formed young man of considerable Christian maturity.

His letters confirm the role that Brother Srugi played as a person of reference and guide for the *Blessed Sacrament Crusaders*. As one of them, Selīm hastens to briefly reassure him of his good physical and spiritual health in his new environment in a different culture. Regarding the "centre" he was employed with, the following letter offers us some further indication.

We can suppose that Brother Srugi did not delay in replying but we have no direct evidence. But given that in the following letter Selīm assures him that he is receiving the magazines, we can conclude that Bro. Srugi wrote back to him, also sending him the addresses he asked for to renew his subscriptions.

## Simon's Second Letter to Fr Mario Gerbo

*Long live Jesus, Mary and Joseph!*

Beitgemal, 16 October 1927

*Dear Fr Gerbo,*

*When you wrote to me about the Crusade and sent me the crosses, I immediately enrolled and gave my name through the word of honour. I also began to speak about it; indeed, Fr Coradini gave a fervent address. Then all those who were enthusiastic asked to be accepted. However, since enthusiasm and good conduct did not measure up, I enrolled only the best. Here is the list of their names. And here too are 10 piastre for subscription to the Crusade's monthly magazine; please send it to us every month.*

*My kind regards and regards from all my dear confreres. Greetings to Fr Cantoni, Fr Cancemi, Fr Spiridion, Bro. Fathalla, Bro. Naim, Bro. Cherubino.*

*Your brother in the Lord.*

*Simon Srugi.*

## Notes

From the beginning of the *Crusade* at Betgamāl, Bro. Srugi was the one responsible for this kind of lay apostolate. As a shrewd educator he carried out the appropriate discernment and maturity of judgement in admitting new members, basing himself not on fleeting enthusiasm but on the concrete evidence of habitual good behaviour.

The list of 12 enrolments is most likely the one that Srugi wrote down on a small sheet of paper still kept in the pages of his copy of *The Devout Life*: Selīm 'Attallah, Michael Salim, Manne Avedissian, Hagop Khumarian, Ibrahim Attalla, Hagop Seyachian, Anton Tfei, Eghiazan Parseghian, Armando Milani, Michael Tutundjie, Sarkis Hagopian, Giuseppe Salem. This way Simon often remembered them in his prayers. It is interesting to note that the first one on the list is Selīm 'Atalla. Five of the twelve were Armenians; one Italian, one Syrian, the others were probably Palestinians or Lebanese.

We can point to the freedom of spirit that Srugi shows in this situation as well: while having accepted the Superiors' decision to close down the "Crusade" and replace it with the "Sodality", more than a year later he explicitly asks Fr Gerbo not to forget to send him the "Crusade"'s monthly magazine, a sign that he did not want to deprive himself of the undoubted spiritual advantage he was gaining from it.

## Second Letter of past pupil ‘Atāllah Selīm

+ Long live Jesus!

Cairo, 26 October 1927

*My dear Bro. Srugi.*

*You have finally woken up, you will tell me. Yes, I have been asleep for a long time, and I am ashamed of my laziness. Forgive me for my long silence. Like an ingrate, amidst all my concerns, I have little by little begun to forget my dear Superiors at Beitgemal. However, my Guardian Angel did not allow your feast day to pass by without reminding me of it, therefore as your brother Crusader here I am to wish you a happy feast day of St Simon. May your holy Patron send down the choicest blessings from heaven on you. The day after tomorrow, your feast day, I will make my Holy Communion especially for you, that the Lord may grant you all the graces your heart desires.*

*Although I am in a huge city like Cairo, I still do not forget that I am a Crusader and I always wear the badge both on the streets and at work, among the many Jews around me. Sometimes human respect tries to get at me, but with God's grace I always succeed in overcoming it. Jesus in the Sacrament is my strength.*

*I regularly receive all the magazines I have subscribed to and which I hope to subscribe to in the coming year as well.*

*Remember me sometimes in your prayers, just as I never forget to do so every day for you. Greet my dear friends for me at Beitgemal: Fr Frey, Dotta, Vincenzo, Musa, Manne, and tell them I pray for all of them and for them to also remember me. In union of prayers, I am always your affectionate friend in Jesus the Eucharistic King.*

*A. Selim.*

*Knight Crusader of the Blessed Sacrament.*

*[in the margin] “Tannus sends you his regards.”*

### Notes

This letter of Selīm's is not just something incidental, occasioned by Bro. Srugi's Patron Saint's feast day; nor is it just simple information about the circumstances and setting in which he lives, or just about subscriptions to devotional magazines. There is something more: in his brevity, the affectionate past pupil intends to open his soul candidly to Bro. Srugi, the person who, although not a priest, enjoys all his esteem, can understand him and help him grow in his Christian life. Selīm expresses the determination to persevere in

the practices connected with the association, drawing energy from Eucharistic communion, overcoming the difficulties he encounters in a setting made up mostly of non-Christians.

The fact that Srugi had kept these two letters among all his other letters until he died, means that he considered them to be significant. Today for us they are proof of a fraternal relationship of Christian friendship, and we could also say of spiritual fatherliness.

### **Simon's letter to his sister Zàhra**

*Dear sister, may God prolong your stay [on this earth] and that of your dear daughters. After this fraternal greeting, I offer you and your daughters my warmest wishes for the feast of the Birth of our beloved Saviour Jesus and for the New Year, asking the Most High to shower his heavenly blessings and graces on you, and that these may remain for many years together with health and life's prosperity.*

*Now let me tell you that two months ago I was struck by severe malaria which brought me to the threshold of the grave and forced me to go to hospital in Bethlehem where I spent more than two weeks hovering between life and death.*

*However now, thanks be to God, my health has returned (not completely) due to the prayers of our orphaned children and many superiors and confreres, but just the same I feel that the end of my period of exile in this world is not far away. For some time I have been having difficulty in breathing, heartache and not much strength; all this is telling me: "Prepare yourself to meet your Lord when it is his wish."*

*And you, my dear sister, how is your health? May God keep you well and in perfect health. Every day I ask the Lord to prolong your life for many years and keep all ill away from you. But in any case, may you too be ready to meet the Lord Jesus so that together we can deserve to see one another in Heaven. I beg you not to be upset by these words of mine, and indeed to accept this advice of a brother who wishes your soul well, since you are already advanced in age and know that death is near to us. Happy are we who are prepared for it!*

*Finally, accept my abundant greetings and great respect, and offer them to your dear daughters: Ràdia, Baitàlla, Nada and the fourth whose name I cannot remember.*

*Do not deprive me of your prayers and supplications.*

*Your brother who is praying for you,*

*Sim'ān Āzar as-Srūgi*

*Date: 24 December 1939.*

## Notes

Fr Forti highlights “the delicate continuation of family affections and his holy concern to help his sister, who had been away from the Catholic Church for so many years, with the thought of death.” We can add Simon’s sincere gratitude for all those who had obtained the grace of his recovery through their prayers. He minimises the seriousness of his illness and does not mention the “extreme unction” he had received; however he is realistic in recognising that he is not completely returned to normal. In fact his health would deteriorate over the four years that followed, also because of the Second World War.

Zāhrah was the sixth daughter of their father ‘Āzar Srugi, 9 and a half years older than Simon, born on 3 December 1867; as a girl she was entrusted to the local Anglican orphanage; on 28 February 1887 she married Sa’id Baltīn (who died on 6 January 1917) and remarried, this time to Sāleh Abū-l-‘Asal (who died 1 April 1933); she died as an eighty-year-old on 5 March 1947. The invitation that Simon very delicately gave her was not heard: in fact from December 1939 to November 1943, when Zāhrah went twice to Betgamāl to visit him when he was already on his deathbed, 4 years went by without anything changing regarding her belonging to the Anglican Communion. Despite Simon’s prayers and insistence, and in spite of the general assurances that she would have given her brother, according to her daughter and sister-in-law who were present at the farewell (more to give him a sweetener than out of sincere conviction) she did not change her mind, so much so that she died, as far as we know, ‘as a Protestant’

In Simon’s biblical way of thinking, death would be the end of exile in this world and, if one were well prepared, would introduce us to our homeland in Heaven where we would be able to “meet the Lord Jesus” and also the people dear to us as well. At the retreat in 1930 he had written “I will detach myself from any earthly thing that prevents me from being completely of my God and to be ready for the call of Jesus my Spouse when he calls me from exile to my heavenly home”, and he wrote during the retreat the following year: “I will hold myself ready for when the good Jesus will call me from exile to my heavenly home.” Furthermore, every day when he said the Rosary he turned to Our Lady as one of the “poor banished children of Eve”.



## 2. JESUS' REVELATIONS TO SISTER MARIE-MARTA CHAMBON

### Introduction

Srugi had a copy of the book of revelations that Jesus made in 1867 to Sister Marie-Marta Chambon, a lay Sister of the Visitation at Chambèry. They were collected by her superior, Mother Teresa Revel, then published later in Italian with the title: *Suor M. M. Chambon e le Sante Piaghe di N. S. G. C.*; Pisa, 1924.<sup>48</sup>

Given the accuracy of the transcription, we can say that Srugi identified with the confidante of these revelations, and it is as if Jesus made them to him. Love for the Crucified Jesus, for his suffering and wounded humanity, especially his pierced Heart, had a central place in his piety and continued throughout his life, where he wanted to conform himself to the divine model. The Crucified one had become his favourite book; he always had a small crucifix sewed on his jacket over the heart.

Devotion to Christ's saving wounds, with its biblical and patristic roots, had been spread by many of the medieval mystics. The Prophet Isaiah had already predicted that the Messiah would redeem humanity through his wounds, and St Peter saw this prophecy realised in Christ "*He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed*" (Is 53:5; 1 Pt 2:24-25). St Peter Chrysologus had Jesus speak thus: "Do not be afraid. This cross inflicts a mortal injury, not on me, but on death. These nails no longer pain me, but only deepen your love for me. I do not cry out because of these wounds, but through them I draw you into my heart. My body was stretched on the cross as a symbol, not of how much I suffered, but of my all-embracing love." (*Sermo* 108). And St Bernard said: through Jesus' wounds "*the bowels of mercy of our God*" are revealed; *I take refuge there like the dove in the cleft of the rock, and I dwell there to be saved* (cf. *Commentary on the Song of Songs*). St Thomas Aquinas wrote: "Indeed the passion of Christ is sufficient in itself to instruct us completely in our whole life. For if anyone wants to live a perfect life, he has only to despise the things that Christ despised on the cross, and to desire what Christ desired. The cross provides an example of every virtue" (*Conf. 6 on the Creed*). We discover very similar expressions in these Revelations to Marie-Marta Chambon, for example in line nos. 16, 39, 54, 65. This devotion was revived in the modern era by the religious family of St Francis de Sales: some of his spiritual daughters received the mission from Jesus of propagating devotion to his Sacred Heart

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<sup>48</sup> This was published in its entirety in digital format on the internet in 2013: <http://Yeshua.ilbello.com/yeshua/SantePiaghe/Chambon/le-sante-piaghe-Libropiccolo.pdf>



(especially St Margaret Mary Alacoque), and his wounds (as is precisely the case for the Servant of God Marie-Marta Chambon). Another of these privileged souls is Servant of God Benigna Consolata Ferrero (1885-1916), also a Visitation nun whom Jesus wanted to be an apostle of his merciful love. Srugi knew the writings of all three to some extent.

The doctrine of "pure love" that Francis de Sales expounded on in the *Treatise on the Love of God* and according to which he guided his "great spiritual daughter" Jane Frances de Chantal, echoes clearly through the conversations with Sr Marie-Marta: detachment from creatures, total stripping of one's will in order to achieve the highest form of union with God and embody the "*Live Jesus!*" in her own person. In copying out the revelations to Sister Marie-Martha with such precision, the humble Salesian brother shows that he had grasped their exact meaning.

The emotional tone and serenity are striking: the wounds are a consoling refuge in moments of pain and temptation, a cleansing in which to purify one's sins, a furnace from which to draw the fire of divine mercy for the salvation of souls. Some themes then emphasised in the theology of redemption and in "victim" forms of devotion also recur: paying the debts of sins with the merits of Christ's passion, expiating, making satisfaction and offering in order to avert God's vengeance.

Above all, it needs to be emphasised that Simon did not limit himself to contemplating Jesus' wounds during his moments of "mental prayer"; the very wounds of the Suffering Servant which the psalmist presents as "stinking and festering" (Ps 38:6) Simon saw present in the body of the sick people and he would cure them with faith and love as if they were Jesus' himself. As we saw, *abuna* Butrus Cattān remembered "the admirable patience, charity and kindness with which he treated the sick, who were often uncouth, ignorant, filthy and not infrequently crawling with disgusting insects that were repugnant to see, clean and treat. But it was in these sick people that Srugi saw the limbs of the infirm Jesus." (p. 63) And Sr Tersilla added that at the thought and meditation of the suffering Jesus, Simon became inflamed with a new ardour for his mission, because each day he was able to see Jesus more and more in those who were sick or suffering" (p. 116).

## TEXTS

1. Jesus says: every humiliation binds you more intimately to my Heart. I am not asking great things of you; I simply want the love of your heart. Hold on to my heart, you will discover all the goodness it is filled with.
2. Place all your actions in my heart, even recreations, and they will be well looked after.
3. Hearts must unite with my heart through humility and self-effacement.
4. Oh how my heart suffers due to the ingratitude of so many hearts. You must unite your sorrows with those of my heart.
5. Jesus appeared to one of his servants, on the cross, stripped of everything, just skin on his bones, and said to her: Behold, my daughter, where those whom I have chosen and who wish to arrive at glory must pass – not those who lift up their heads. My Mother passed this way. Gentle and consoling is the way of the souls who carry their cross generously.
6. It is necessary for religious souls, brides of Jesus Crucified, [to carry the cross] generously. I have only my brides to compensate me for the offences I receive.
7. My daughter, you must love the Crucified one very much and crucify yourself to love Jesus, to the point of being able to die like Jesus and rise to new life like Him.
8. In the religious house, God's house, you must live united to my wounds. Your vows come from my wounds. Because the religious is consecrated to Jesus, he must be nailed to the cross with him.
9. Whenever we follow our own will we declare ourselves to be enemies of the cross.
10. Jesus said: look at my crown of thorns and you will understand mortification; at my outstretched hands, and you will learn obedience; seeing me stripped bare on the cross, you will learn poverty.
11. Religious souls are souls consecrated to suffering. I would like to see in my brides those who are likewise crucified. Should not the bride be like the bridegroom?
12. Jesus says: if you wish to suffer for me as I suffered for you, let all your actions be done to please me and do not refuse me any sacrifice.
13. Your faults will all appear at the day of judgement, but for your glory and mine.
14. Jesus says: I accept all your actions and your sufferings for sinners and for the souls in purgatory, but you must be intimately united to my Heart, to my wounds, so that you are one with me.

15. You must not leave my Heart, because I could no longer communicate with you.
16. Jesus says: the Crucified one must be your favourite book. All true knowledge lies in the study of my wounds; knowledge of love is not learned from books, it is only given to the soul who looks upon the divine Crucified one and speaks with him heart to heart. If all creatures were to study them, they would all find enough there without needing any other book. Never turn your eyes away from this book of my wounds, and you will learn more than the great sages.
17. During the day, often offer the wounds of Jesus Christ to his eternal Father. Unite all your actions according to the intentions of the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the triumph of the Church, for sinners and for the souls in purgatory.
18. Jesus says: I want the religious soul to be detached from everything, since in order to come to me the soul must be free of every attachment, such that no more ties bind it to the earth. You need to go and conquer the Lord in solitude, you have to search in your heart.
19. You need to be united to me in all your actions. The soul that does not rest on the bosom of its bridegroom Jesus (cf. Jn 13:25) in its sorrows, in its work, is wasting time. When it has committed offences it must rest on my Heart with great confidence. All your infidelities vanish in this burning hearth: they are seared by love and all consumed.
20. Jesus says: I beg for the love of my creatures but the majority of them, including among religious souls, refuse me this love. My daughter, love me purely for myself alone, without regard to punishment or recompense.
21. Ah, my daughter, if you only knew how my Heart suffers due to the ingratitude of so many hearts. You need to unite your sorrows to those of my Sacred Heart.
22. Jesus says: the fruits of holiness issue from my wounds. You need to place your soul and the soul of your sisters in my wounds. Here they will be honed like gold in the furnace. You can always purify yourselves in my wounds.
23. My wounds will mend your wounds, will cover over all your faults.
24. Those who honour my wounds will have true knowledge of me. By meditating on them you will always find new nourishment for love.
25. My holy wounds will give value to your works. My daughter, immerse your actions in my wounds and they will become something. Dip all your actions, even the least of them, in my blood, and they will acquire infinite merit and will satisfy my Heart.
26. My holy wounds are balm and comfort in suffering. When you have some sorrow, something that brings suffering, you need to promptly place it in my wounds and your pain will be alleviated.

27. These holy wounds have marvellous efficacy for the conversion of sinners; they save the world and assure one of a holy death; they will save you infallibly. They will save the world; there will be no death for the soul who expires in my wounds; they give true life.
28. My holy wounds give all power over God. My power is in my wounds: you become powerful with them. Yes, you can obtain everything: you have every power. You can disarm my justice. Although everything comes from me, I want to be implored, I want to be asked. The holy wounds in particular will safeguard communities.
29. The Eternal Father told her: My daughter, I will give you my divine Son to help you in your life that you may pay what you owe to my justice for yourself and for everyone. You will take from my Son's wounds to pay the debts of sinners.
30. She nurtured a tenderness, a childlike confidence for the Eternal Father, and is filled by Him with divine caresses.
31. She told the Eternal Father: "I offer you everything that your Son has done and suffered for us." The Eternal Father replied: "This is great and pleases me very much."
32. Your life here – he told her – is to make me known and loved by means of my holy wounds.
33. He asked her to ceaselessly offer his divine wounds to the Eternal Father for the salvation of the world.
34. You have chosen to satisfy my justice. Closed within your cloister you must live down here as we live in heaven: loving me, begging me continually to withhold my vengeance, and renewing devotion to my holy wounds.
35. With this devotion I want not only the souls living with you to be saved, but many others still. One day I will ask you if you have made good use of this treasure for all my creatures.
36. Jesus told her: I truly dwell in this place and in all its hearts. I will establish my kingdom and my peace; I will destroy all obstacles with my power because I am the master of hearts.
37. I have chosen you to bring the merits of my holy passion to bear on everyone. My daughter, every time you offer the merits of my divine wounds to my Father, you will earn an immense fortune. You are similar to one who finds a great treasure in the ground; but since you cannot preserve this wealth, God takes it back, and my divine Mother too, to return it at the moment of death and to apply its merits to the souls in need of it.
38. There is no need to remain poor since your Heavenly Father is very rich. Your wealth is my passion. Whoever finds themselves in need can come with faith

- and confidence and constantly draw from the treasure of my passion and the holes of my wounds. This treasure belongs to you, everything is here.
39. One of my creatures betrayed me and sold my blood, but you can so easily buy it back drop by drop. One single drop is enough to purify the earth, and you do not think about that? You do not know its value. My murderers did well to pierce my side, my hands and feet, because the waters of divine mercy will flow eternally from them. One only needs to detest the sin that caused them.
  40. My Father is pleased with the offering of my holy wounds and of the sorrows of my divine Mother. To make this offering to him and to offer him its glory is to offer heaven to heaven. Here is what to pay for all those in debt – by offering my Father the merit of my wounds you make satisfaction for the sins of human beings.
  41. You need to entrust everything to my divine wounds and work with their merits for the salvation of souls.
  42. Venerate and look upon my wounds with great humility. You do not consider my wounds enough, and you do not understand the full extent of the graces you receive for their merits. Even my priests do not look sufficiently upon the Crucified one: I want to be honoured in full.
  43. The harvest is great, abundant; you need to humble yourselves, sink into your nothingness to reap souls, without looking at what you have already done.
  44. You should not fear to show my wounds to souls. The way of my wounds is so simple and easy a way to go to heaven. He asks us to do it with the zeal of seraphs.
  45. You need to contemplate the sufferings of Jesus to conform yourselves to him.
  46. You need to come to my wounds with a warm and zealous heart, and with great fervour make aspirations to obtain the graces of conversion you seek.
  47. In the contemplation of my wounds you will find everything for yourself and for others.
  48. My daughter, do not be concerned with earthly things. You will see in eternity what you have earned through my wounds.
  49. The wounds on my holy feet are an ocean: place all creatures here since they are big enough to hold them all.
  50. It is necessary to pray a lot so that my holy wounds spread throughout the world. My holy wounds sustain the world. Constancy in loving my wounds must be asked of me, since they are the source of all graces.
  51. It is necessary to often call on my wounds, draw your neighbour to them, and you need to speak about them and return to them frequently in order to

- impress devotion on souls. All words spoken about my holy wounds please me, inexpressibly so, and I count them all. If anyone does not want to come into my wounds, you, my daughter, must let them in.
52. One day Jesus told her: My daughter, come to me and I will give you water that will quench your thirst. In the Crucified one there is everything, there is something to quench your thirst, there is something there for all souls. You will find everything in my wounds, they produce solid works, not through glory but through suffering. You are the workers who work in the Lord's field; you will earn much through my wounds and without pain.
  53. Offer me your actions and those of your sisters united to my holy wounds; nothing could make them more meritorious nor more pleasing to my eyes. There are incomprehensible riches there even in the smallest actions.
  54. Jesus told her: You must apply yourself to healing your wounds by contemplating my wounds. Uncovering his right foot he told her: How you must venerate this wound and hide in it like the dove.
  55. Jesus let her see his left hand: my daughter, take my merits for souls in my left hand, that they may be at my right hand in eternity.
  56. Religious souls will be at my right hand to judge the world, but first I will ask them to account for the souls that they should have saved.
  57. Jesus asks for a very special cult of veneration, reparation and love for his august Head crowned with thorns. The crown of thorns made me suffer more than all my other wounds, this was my cruellest suffering except for the Garden of Olives. To alleviate it you need to observe your Rule well. For the faithful soul who goes to the point of imitation, the crown of thorns is a source of merit. Here is this head that has been pierced for your love, and for the merits of which you must one day be crowned. Happy is the soul that will have contemplated well but even better, put it into practice.
  58. The souls who have contemplated and honoured my crown of thorns on earth will be my crown of glory in heaven. For one moment that you contemplate my crown of thorns here on earth, I will give you one for eternity, and it will be the crown of thorns that will earn you the crown of glory. It is the chosen gift that Jesus gives his privileged ones. My crown of thorns I give to my privileged ones. My wounds and the crown of thorns are the property of my brides and privileged souls. They are the joy of the blessed, but for my chosen ones on earth it is a suffering.
  59. My true servants endeavour to suffer with me, but none can reach the degree of suffering that I have endured.
  60. Behold him whom you seek, see what state He is in. Look, remove the thorns from my head, offering the merit of my wounds to my Father for sinners. Go

in search of souls. A souls that acts in union with the merits of my holy crown earns more than the whole community.

61. My crown of thorns will illuminate the heavens and all the blessed. On earth there are some privileged souls to whom I will show it, but the earth is too dark to see it. See how beautiful it is after having been so painful. Take my crown of thorns and my blessed ones will contemplate you in this state. Then turning to the saints and showing his dear victim: "Behold" said he, "the fruit of my crown of thorns. The holy crown which makes the righteous happy, is an object of terror for the wicked."
62. Souls who have been faithful during their life will throw themselves with confidence into the arms of their Saviour. Others, at the sight of the crown of thorns and the reminder of the immense love of Jesus Christ they have despised, will plunge themselves into the eternal abyss in terror.
63. Just come here to the wound in my side, it is the wound of love from which the brightest flames emanate. Come to my heart, you will fear nothing. Put your lips here to draw charity from it and spread it throughout the world. Put forth your hand to take my treasures.
64. Take, because the measure of graces is replete. I can no longer contain them, so much do I want to give them. Hold fast to my heart to take and spill my blood.
65. If you wish to enter into the Lord's light, you need to hide yourself in my divine Heart. If you wish to know the intimacy of the *bowels of mercy* (Lk 1:78) of he who loves you so much, you must bring your lips respectfully and humbly to the opening in my heart.
66. He has in mind all souls, and in a special way the souls consecrated to him..
67. I need your heart to comfort me and keep me company. You need to be united to me in every one of your actions.

### 3. MAXIMS OF THE MONTH FOR THE CONFRERES

#### Introduction

1. Three notebooks have come down to us entitled *Massime del mese per i Confratelli. Da copiare* (Maxims of the month for the confreres. To copy down). Srugi writes four maxims per page, intending to copy them onto cardboard strips so he can distribute them on the first Friday of the month, following the order of the “Office of the Sacred Heart” (promotion, reparation, adoration, lover, disciple, victim, faithful servant, supplicant, zeal).

2. In his day, the Betgamāl community consisted of priests, brothers and clerics doing practical training; all were involved, to varying degrees, in the Christian education, instruction and vocational training of young people. Srugi was responsible for the internal infirmary, outpatient clinic and external dispensary, supervisor at the mill and for a period was also in charge of the small shop store. He also led morning prayer for the confreres and the boys; he prepared the candidates for their First Communion and looked after the altar boys group; he was the Master of Ceremonies for solemn liturgical celebrations; he was the leader of the “Blessed Sacrament Crusade” and presided over the “St Joseph’s Sodality”. Any number of priests and brothers were of outstanding virtue, exemplary for their work, prayer and temperance. Among the priests some had fair or even a very good knowledge of classical and ecclesiastical culture; Simon instead was certainly not “a man of letters”.

Bearing these facts in mind, his initiative in collecting these “maxims” and distributing them demonstrates his zeal for the sanctification of the confreres, be they priests or brothers, without having any kind of “complex” about it. The simplicity with which he acted came from the fact that he was the first to put these exhortations and recommendations into practice, and to be an example of them. Otherwise the confreres might well have told him: “*Physician, heal thyself*”. Instead, the testimonies of his contemporaries (confreres, young people, sisters and lay collaborators) show that this discreet and humble way of doing things was very well received by everyone.

The maxims he copied down the most, point to his preferences: first of all purity of intention; the true joy that springs from the virtuous soul; fighting vices and faults, both in thoughts and deeds (anger, gluttony, vanity where the body is concerned, and in clothing ...) and cultivating virtues: especially religious obedience, humility and charity.



3. The cues for these “maxims” for the confreres, and the ones for the boys, as well as the “salutary thoughts” I am offering in the pages to follow, came to him from many sources (which he never mentions): biblical, liturgical, devotional, hagiographical, meditation books, the catechism and explanations of the Sunday Gospel, the Rector’s monthly conferences.<sup>49</sup> In my book *Simone Srugi nella storia di Betgamāl* I indicated where each manuscript could be found in the archives and the position of each maxim. Here I consider it sufficient to report the texts, allowing me also to combine phrases or sentences that Srugi separated for practical reasons.

### TEXTS

1. Take a firm look at your conscience to observe the advances or setbacks made in the devout life. Think often of what could possibly give you anxiety or sorrow at the point of death and put matters right in good time.
2. If we were to enjoy all pleasures, all comforts, all possible honours in this life, yet were condemned to hell in the next world, what benefit to us would that be?
3. All worldly affairs should matter little to us; we should only have our eternal salvation at heart. If we were the most miserable, the most wretched people in this world, yet were possessors of eternal happiness in the next, what harm would it be to us?
4. My soul, you know your foolishness in being so attached to earthly affairs and in being so neglectful of your eternal salvation. The only thing you are in this world for is the salvation of your soul. Oh, open your eyes so that you are not deceived in something so important.
5. How unhappy I would be if I were not to begin from today onwards to work hard at the matter of my salvation; what regret would await me at the point of death. Today I will convert myself to the Lord and will let go of every worldly affair, and I will direct everything to the most important business of my eternal salvation. Help me, oh my God.
6. Christian soul, descend often with your thoughts into hell, that horrible and desperate place filled with fire and merciless demons, and always be prepared not to fall into it.

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<sup>49</sup> The sources most used, which I have already listed in full in the initial Bibliography, are: the writings of St Francis de Sales, St Alphonsus Liguori, St John Bosco and his first four successors; Alphonsus Rodriguez, Lorenzo Scupoli, (most of the above exist in English translation), Giulio Barberis; [Anonymous], *Mese del Sacro Cuore*.

7. Mortal sin changes our soul so much that in making it lose the image of God it makes it become more ugly and abominable than the devil himself. Man could not be in a more unhappy state on earth than being in the state of mortal sin. The Christian may have all the goods of the world, greatness, honours, wealth, health, esteem: but if he is in mortal sin he is like a corpse amid flowers. The soul in mortal sin is stinking and rotten and heading for perdition: hence it is abominable and an object of horror to God. A soul in mortal sin is in disgrace with God, has lost any of the merits of any good work it has done. The soul in mortal sin is stripped of any gift, any privilege, and if it dies in such a state then hell will be its eternal abode.
8. Whoever has right intention in everything walks towards heaven without bending either to the right or to the left. The intention is upright and simple when there is nothing impure about it, nothing of self-love or vain fear, but turns to God alone and is content with Him alone.
9. The one aiming at God alone, seeking only the glory and honour of God has right intention. True children of God are those who always aim at God and seek his will alone.
10. Our works in themselves are nothing; they need to be veiled and clothed with the right intention to please God. Before doing anything, fix your gaze on God to whom you direct your intention. We must close our left eye to so much human consideration and vain knowledge, and open the right eye, looking at God by means of a sincere intention. Let us offer our service with good will, considering God in our superiors, imagining that we serve not men but the Lord.
11. Christians, whoever they may be, must always keep their mind's eye fixed on the Heavenly Father in every operation, and work for his glory.
12. Those who seek only their own material interest in their actions live very badly. Those who raise themselves up to God with their thoughts live well and never lose sight of him in what they do.
13. Those who have the most righteous intention look to God, not to themselves. The driving force behind our actions should not be reward and merit but only the goodness of God. Offer your every action for the greater glory of God and your neighbour's salvation, and await your reward from God.
14. God must be served only for who he is and for what he deserves. God does not want us to serve him like the dog serves his master, awaiting a reward. God loves us spontaneously and we must love him the same way. To truly serve God is to serve him solely for who he is, that is, in view of what he deserves.

15. Whoever has the right intention looks to God alone, and seeks only his pleasure. Let us try to have the treasure of that intention which is excellent and very pure when we do something because it pleases God so. A good religious looks only to his God, whose glory and approval he seeks with the utmost commitment.
16. Where there is perfect uniformity to God's will, neither sadness nor melancholy can ever reign.
17. God, in his immense goodness, deserves that everything should be done in his honour, even if there were neither heaven nor hell.
18. Whoever has the right intention looks to God alone, and seeks only his pleasure.
19. Human actions share in the nature of the intention that one has in carrying them out. If the intention is holy, works will also be holy. Many works are very good on the outside, but they are marred by intention. The same thing can be good and bad according to the right or wrong intention of those who carry it out.
20. In our every word or action we always aim at the highest good which is God.
21. Those who do good for their own sake must be called bad. Instead, everything must be done in deference to God. Let us always aim for the highest good, and let us be like sailors who steer our course towards some star.
22. Ways that appear to be crooked and rough to the eyes of the flesh are very straightforward ways for going to God, so long as we have the intention of giving pleasure to God.
23. The sun that illuminates objects is the symbol of the right intention that ennobles our actions. If the right intention does not accompany our works, they will be nothing before God for eternity. In the sight of God, those works are righteous which have been preceded by a righteous intention.
24. Our life is based on virtues, and these on right intention which takes its strength from Jesus Christ. We deserve praise or condemnation, depending on whether our intention is good or bad.
25. Where virtue is not the goal, the goal is vain, or natural, or vicious, which spoils everything. When our works lack good intention they are like bodies without a soul. Right intention is for works what the soul is for our body. Man without right intention toils without fruit and has no right to any reward with God.
26. Jesus Christ says: be careful to do good in the sight of men to be seen by them. Good in the sight of men must be done; but because when they see it they will glorify God, not us (cf. Mt 5:16). Those who do good with a

sinister intention, that is, to please men, to be seen by them, to merit their praise, have already received their reward (cf Mt 6:1-6, 16-18). God does not regret that the work we do is seen, but he is sorry that we are doing it to be seen. Let the good work you do be public, but the intention be secret and let them glorify your Father who is in heaven (cf. Mt 6:1-6, 16-18).

27. The Lord will not reward our good works if we have done them to be seen and praised by men (cf. Mt 6:1-6, 16-18). The more our works are deserving, the less we should take delight and pleasure in them. We must get used to acting without seeking what pleases us but only what pleases God.
28. God does not want you to be the aim of your works, and even more so does he not want you to be the aim of others in your works. Whoever does good works in order to be seen by men must not expect the reward of his heavenly Father.
29. Many fear the voice of men but do not fear the voice of conscience. Most do not look to work well but to see to it that others think well of them and applaud and praise them.
30. When the good Christian hears praise being heaped on him to which God, not he, has the right, he says: these things do not belong to me, the glory is God's.
31. Let us be careful that the bad thief with wrong intention does not steal all the merit of the works we do. The price of our actions comes from our intention, and actions are good or bad according to the intention that accompanies them. The widow's mite pleased God because of her good intention, rather than the heap of money that the pharisees, urged on by self-love, threw into the treasury box (cf. Mk 12:41-44).
32. The devil knows well that in every work the price comes from the right intention; that is why he is constantly striving to take it away from us.
33. All of our inner being depends on properly adjusting our outer being. Mortification in eating is the beginning of the spiritual life. Whoever does not practise mortification in eating will never be able to overcome their passions. The first battle you have is to break with the vice of gluttony, which provides pasture for all the others. Gluttony is the origin of the death of body and soul, since our first parents, by eating the forbidden fruit (cf. Gen 3:6), killed all human beings before generating them.
34. Trying to suffer without others knowing it is the surest indication of perfection. The true patient not only does not regret his pain, but he does not even want to be pitied by others.
35. Truly humble people never believe they have been wronged.
36. We shall have every good thing if we fear God and guard against displeasing him.

37. Be quick to feel compassion for your brothers' mistakes, and willingly forgive the offences you receive from them.
38. Have a tender devotion to the passion of Jesus Christ if you wish to grow in his love.
39. Oh what an unhappy lover is the one who does not love God!
40. Whoever loves God is in God: by ceasing to live in himself he lives in him (cf. 1 Jn 4:12-16 *passim*) in whom everything has its life.
41. Human love is violent and bitter, while divine love is always meek and tranquil.
42. Love God if you want to love yourself; for loving God is good for you, not for him.
43. Man may change and perish; but you never lose God if you do not turn away from Him.
44. Happy is the one who is subject to God, who desires nothing anxiously, who adapts himself to events, and says: God wants me healthy, he wants me sick, he wants me needy; I am ready for anything.
45. You will be troubled by perpetual concern if you desire what is not in your power.
46. True joy only comes from a good conscience, and only someone who is just, strong and temperate enjoys this. So that your soul may never lack happiness, let it come from within. Seriousness is the origin of pure joy, of an innocent mind, honest advice, upright actions, contempt for sorrows, and a placid tenor of an untroubled life.
47. This is the true law of virtue: that sincere joy is to be acquired with tears every day.
48. God is the soul's only food, the only one capable of satisfying its hunger and thirst.
49. In order to be blessed, Christians need to want to sanctify themselves, and they need to work hard to become so.
50. The more you are devoured by hunger and thirst for justice, the more you will be satiated one day (cf. Mt 5:6).
51. The supreme praise that can be said of a man is that he is just.
52. Let us be modest, disinterested, pure, sincere before everyone.
53. Whoever loves themselves does not love God. Love of self is contrary to love of God.
54. Despise worldly things and you will neither desire them nor hope for them. No one hopes for what they do not care for.
55. All that you have was lent to you, and yours is only the use of it, for as long as it pleases the supreme arbiter of all things.

56. Do you wish to be free from envy? Despise the fleeting goods of this world and love those that are eternal: because the love of eternity is the death of envy.
57. Faults must certainly be corrected and punished, but without anger.
58. Lucifer brings envy to men, but to none of his companions, and you, O man, bring it to your brothers, and in this you surpass the devil. Envy is a sign of a weak mind, for only those whom you consider superior in goodness and greatness are envied by you.
59. Lift yourself up to eternal things and make yourself worthy of the heaven you were born for. If Caesar had made you an adopted child of his, who could put up with your haughty behaviour? But you are the child of God, redeemed with the blood of Jesus Christ and of such a sublime origin you don't even remember?
60. Cast out the proud thoughts of your superiority and judge yourself with the norm of the true goods of heaven.
61. We will have every good if we fear God and are on our guard against displeasing him.
62. To those for whom God is everything, the world must be nothing.
63. No one can boast except of his own good.
64. If you are eager to receive praises you corrupt them of your own accord. In fact, what is it about you that is truly commendable? Beware lest the world give you a value that you really don't have.
65. Give back to the Supreme God what you received from him: existence, life, understanding, and nothing will remain for you, except sin.
66. Take care that you are not praised for the things in you that you are ashamed of.
67. The body must be treated severely rather than not, so that it does not become repugnant to the desires of the soul. You were born to greater things than being the abject slave of the body, in which you must see nothing but a bond of soul and freedom. It is much better to torment the body and keep it than to caress it to its detriment and lose it together with the soul in eternity.
68. Since the senses are almost the doors through which the death of the soul enters, so you will ensure that they are closed to the things of this world and turned to the things of heaven. The senses must serve, not command. A sign of much foolishness is to be occupied with the care of the body.
69. No matter how much you pride yourself on gold and pearls, without Christian ornaments you will always be deformed. Let your dressing be without artifice, not for pomp, but for necessity, according to your condition. It is a good ambition to cover the earth with gold. The ornaments

- that last forever, that is, those that adorn you internally, and not your mortal flesh.
70. Flee from duplicity and simulation, and candidly state the feelings of your soul.
  71. If you have learned to venerate God in creatures, from them you will gently lift your soul to the contemplation of his great majesty.
  72. Shut your ears to murmurings, gossip, vain tales and all that cannot be beneficial to your soul.
  73. The more seldom you listen to men, the more often you will hear God speaking to your heart.
  74. God gave you the power to speak so that you can express things as they are with simplicity and frankness. When you are about to speak, examine yourself, and if any violent passion boils in you, do not open your mouth until the emotion has passed.
  75. What you are inside, this will be your speech: if the mind is healthy, temperate and composed, your speech will be sober and sparing. Diligently weigh your words and put a stop to your mouth, and say nothing that it would have been better to have kept quiet. It is more laudable to be more sparing in words than in money. Those who are lavish with money harm themselves, but at least they benefit others, but those who are lavish with words harm themselves and others.
  76. Beware of all idle talk, for talk shows the mettle of the man. Wise men repeatedly regretted having spoken, never having been silent.
  77. Love cannot lie, nor can it stay hidden, and in the long run it responds to what abounds in the heart (cf. Mt 12:34). If God were the object of your love, if you were concerned about your salvation, no one would hear you speak except about God, virtue and perfection.
  78. In social gatherings, all reasoning mostly revolves around the life, customs and inclinations of others. Rare is the man who keeps his eyes on his own house. We throw open the door to the slander of our neighbour, but we keep the door ajar to his praise.
  79. It matters little that others have an opinion of you. You have a more certain and incorrupt witness within your soul: question your conscience and believe it.
  80. Though evil ones tear at you and slander you, you must not lose the tranquillity of your soul. To be troubled at every noise is a sign that someone has little self-esteem. You will always be unhappy if the fear of contempt stirs you.
  81. What do you fear poverty for if you carry a whole kingdom in your heart? *The kingdom of God is within you* (Lk 17:21).
  82. Whatever you blame in others you will find in your own heart.

83. Eternity is the present that lasts forever, a wheel that turns without ever stopping, an endless inexhaustible beginning that always seems to begin again.
84. Order your soul every day in the way you would if your final hour had come.
85. That which has passed from good or evil deeds into eternity remains firm and immovable forever. Eternity makes every toil seem easy, every sorrow joyful, every pain sweet and small.
86. It is no wrong to suffer what you made others suffer before.
87. Why don't you correct your impatience? Why don't you overcome evil with good? (Rom 12:21). Why do you place the vices of others before your eyes and your own behind your back?
88. Why do you grieve that you have been wronged by an evil man? He acted in accordance with who he is. Now you, if you are good, act appropriately, and endeavour to make the other good also.
89. The more virtuous a man is, the more strongly he restrains his anger. Let your anger be the first aim of your vengeance. Do not seek your enemies in the public square, while the most bitter one is lurking at your door. The enemy is hidden within you (cf. Gen 4:2-8), indeed you are that very one. Therefore look at your soul from within yourself.
90. The happiness of pleasing God by doing all things well is a sample of paradise.
91. How beautiful it is to see God, to love him, bless him and contemplate him for all eternity.
92. Jesus is in the tabernacle to console us, and therefore we must go often to visit him. How much He likes that short quarter of an hour that we steal from our spare time to come and visit him, to console him for the many outrages he receives! Jesus is hidden in the tabernacle waiting for us to go and see him, to present our petitions to him. Look how good Jesus is! He adapts to our weakness. Jesus hides from us like someone who is in prison and tells us: You don't see me, but it doesn't matter. Ask me what you want, and I will grant it to you.
93. Beware of pondering in your thoughts before God the things you would be ashamed to speak about before an upright person. May your thoughts be placid, simple, pure, and without malice. Be ashamed to think about what you would be ashamed to say. Let your thoughts be such that, when suddenly asked what you think, you would not blush to reveal what is hidden in your heart. Occupying the mind with good thoughts: this is the way the door is closed to bad ones.



94. Without the passions, virtue would be done away with. Where there is no battle, there are no victories.
95. It is easier to resist principles than to hold back passions, so it takes a lot of tough restraint to resist bad inclinations.
96. You will destroy self-love and eradicate it by despising yourself; considering yourself not endowed with any singular prerogative.
97. By reasonably hating yourself, you shall preserve yourself; and you shall lose yourself by loving yourself ill (cf. Jn 12:25).
98. The humble religious will look better in the Valley of Jehosaphat than the wise and proud religious (cf. Joel 3:2, 12).
99. Love sincerity, especially in confession, and you will find yourself happy in life and especially at the point of death.
100. This life passes quickly and at the point of death there is nothing left but our good works done for God. In everything you do, see if you are aiming for God's greater glory.
101. When we experience some pain and affliction, let us console ourselves by thinking that the saints have happily suffered greater things.
102. Receiving corrections and reprimands with humility shows that one loves virtue and one's own profit in perfection.
103. Let us learn from the Child Jesus to have the respect that is due for the things of this world.
104. If you want to arrive at the height of perfection, then truly seek to love being misunderstood, insults, slander, in imitation of Jesus our teacher. Whoever is not very humble can never acquire any virtue.
105. The greatest gift we can receive from God is that of being able to overcome ourselves by renouncing our own will. Really give yourself to the practice of humiliation, and you will know that this is the quickest and shortest way.
106. Lord, you pay anyone who does some service for you with some affliction. Oh what an inestimable price this is for those who truly love you.
107. A "thanks be to God", a "blessed be God" in adversity is worth more than a thousand thanks in prosperity.
108. Many religious have become saints without prayer, but none without obedience.
109. There is no road that leads more quickly to the summit of perfection than that of obedience, therefore the devil introduces many difficult and distasteful things under the guise of being good.
110. True obedience is known in carrying out things that go against our grain and are to our disadvantage, joyfully and without repugnance. The truly obedient person does not pick and choose, nor does he desire one job over

another, because he does not care for anything other than to faithfully carry out what has been commanded of him.

111. The perfection of the religious lies in exact obedience to his Rules. The religious who will be most faithful in observing his Rules will certainly be more perfect.

#### 4. MAXIMS FOR THE YOUNG

##### Introduction

1. Many of these maxims are the ones that Don Bosco suggested to his boys in the first part of the *Giovane Provveduto* (in English *The Companion of Youth*). A good number of them are identical to the ones for the confreres (therefore not repeated here), a sign that Simon was proposing the same "high standard" of spiritual life to the young men. Others are in references to the life of the boys/older youth themselves, as boarders, and concerned their relationship with the superiors and their fellow boarders, devotion to Our Lady, the virtues of their state in life.

2. The boys living in at Betgamāl (of varying ages from 10-12 and 17-19) were mostly orphans and also bore the psychological consequences of the persecutions they had undergone, for example the Armenians. The level of schooling consisted of knowing how to read, write and do arithmetic, the rudiments of Arabic and Italian, then English as well, and in learning practical subjects and techniques to be used in field work, in the stable or in the cellar. By the end of four years they had gained a certificate and some specialisation. As in every Salesian boarding school, the educational environment as a whole was aimed at the integral formation of the youngsters, and encouraged their active role in various ways: religious and devotional groups (the "sodalities"), singing (including Gregorian), instrumental music, theatre (Don Bosco's *teatrino*), gymnastics and sport (they had a basketball court on the northern courtyard, a football field on the south-eastern hillside, a swimming pool down below the wadi Bulos); outings, walks and pilgrimages were organised, and they took part in regional catechism competitions.

From a religious point of view, not all of them had a proper knowledge of the liturgical Rite they belonged to; they received basic catechetical instruction and had their daily practices of piety of the good Christian, Mass and communion on Sundays and feast days. Also, some zealous confreres, and Simon was among these, introduced them to devotions typical of Salesian houses: the Blessed Sacrament, the Sacred Heart, Our Lady, St Joseph. As we have seen earlier, the best ones were enrolled in the "Blessed Sacrament Crusade" for which Simon was responsible. Among these boys there were very few aspirants to the priesthood or consecrated life as Salesian coadjutors (brothers).

3. Bearing all this in mind, it is striking that Srugi not only taught them to serve Mass in Arabic and Italian, but looked after their spiritual growth through these monthly "maxims" as well. He offered them some models for

their behaviour: Jesus the adolescent in submission to St Joseph and Our Lady, the chaste Joseph, obedient Tobias, St Aloysius Gonzaga. The motivations he uses to encourage them to live virtuously are: God loves youngsters for their innocence and generosity; Our Lady reciprocates those who venerate her with her constant “visits”; the direction taken as teenagers will be the same as the direction one is likely to continue as an adult.

### TEXTS

1. There is more value in picking up a straw out of obedience than fasting an entire Lent through one’s own choice.
2. In this world there is no purgatory, but either heaven or hell: whoever endures tribulations with patience has heaven, and who doesn't has hell.
3. We will have everything good if we fear God and beware displeasing him.
4. When someone invites you to do wrong, flee from it like the chaste Joseph tempted in Potiphar's house (cf. Gen 39:6-20).
5. Be quick to feel sorry for your companion’s faults, and willingly forgive the offences you receive from them.
6. Always be horrified by duplicity and pretence, because it displeases God and superiors.
7. To those who love God, all things will turn out well (cf. Rom 8:28).
8. Have a great horror of sin, as did St Stanislaus Kostka, who fainted at hearing a bad word.
9. Go to confession often and value the confessor’s advice very much.
10. Always speak well and with great respect in matters of religion if you want to please Jesus Christ.
11. Have great respect for your parents and for your superiors in the boarding school, just as young Tobias respected them and never did anything without their permission.
12. Highly value the advice given to you by God's ministers, both in public and in private.
13. To always have a clean soul, imitate St Magdalene dei Pazzi who, from her earliest years, delighted in attending the Sacraments.
14. Beware of any immodesty, remembering Saint Agnes who, in the midst of the flames, gathered her clothes so as not to uncover the slightest part of her body.
15. Fear offending God more than death. With this principle Susanna was always innocent, even in the worst moments (cf. Dan 13).
16. Never forget that sin is the only evil you must always flee from.

17. Remember every day that God's grace is the only comfort and the only good that must always be valued above any other good.
18. Often aspire to God with short and ardent thrusts of your heart; give him your soul a thousand times a day.
19. A great support for you, O young people, is devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary - listen as she invites you: "Let him who is a child come to me". If you are devoted to Mary, besides the abundance of her blessings in this world she will assure you of the beauty of paradise in the next life. Be certain that if you are a true devotee of Mary, you will obtain from her all the graces you need, provided you do not ask for things that would be to your detriment.
20. If you are steadfast in your devotion to the Mother of God, you will be enriched every hour with new graces, and at the hour of death you will certainly be visited by Her. If you visit Mary, she will visit you, visiting you every moment from heaven with the loving signs of her special care. One of the dearest respects you can pay to the Queen of Heaven is to visit her image in church every day. The best way to acquire the love of God is true devotion to Our Blessed Lady, and to visit her frequently. Pope St Gregory says: Whoever visits Our Blessed Lady in her images will be abundantly rewarded by that most benign mother who is very pleased with this reverence. Oh Mary, how blessed are those souls on whom you turn your loving eyes.
21. We are surrounded by many temptations, the devil and passions; it takes a great deal of diligent practice if we are to journey to paradise.
22. Sing your praises to God with cheerful spirit and recollection whenever you sing in church.
23. Be sincere in your words and beware of lies so as not to offend God and not to be disgraced in front of your companions.
24. Have filial confidence in the Rector, going to him whenever you have some doubt of conscience. Show great respect to all the superiors, especially if they are priests.
25. Do you know what it means to fall into mortal sin? It means renouncing being children of God to become slaves of Satan. Falling into mortal sin means losing the beauty that makes us dear to God and like angels, to become like demons before him. Falling into mortal sin means losing all the merits already acquired for eternal life, and deserving hell for eternity; it means greatly insulting the infinite goodness of God, and this is the greatest evil imaginable.
26. Never stop to look at things that are contrary to modesty, however slightly. St Aloysius Gonzaga did not even want his feet to be seen. Guard your eyes, which are the windows through which sin makes its way into your heart, and through which the devil comes into your soul. Whoever keeps the

- virtue of purity, his guardian angel will regard him as a brother and enjoy his company very much.
27. Every day ask Our Blessed Lady for the grace of being able to keep the virtue of purity. The young man who keeps it has the greatest resemblance to angels. Be certain that the purer your looks and your speech, the more Mary will be pleased with you.
  28. Always stay away from the company of those young people who talk in filthy ways, otherwise you will become bad too. Happy you, young man, if you flee the company of the wicked, you will be sure to be on the way to heaven. Stay away from bad companions even when they are your relatives, and be sure that sometimes being in their company does more damage than the company of a devil. If you really love your soul, flee bad companions like the plague. Bad companions are all those young people who are not ashamed of using filthy language in your company, uttering immodest words, grumbling and lies.
  29. Flee bad books and bad press like the plague, rather than exposing your soul to the danger of becoming bad.
  30. Remember to practise the great advice of the holy Gospel to obey God before men.
  31. The main snare that the devil lays for youth is idleness, the fatal source of all vices. Be convinced, boys, that man is born for work, and when he ceases to work he is off-centre and runs great risk of offending God. Idleness, says the Holy Spirit, is the father of all vices, and being busy fights them and beats them all.
  32. There is nothing that torments the damned more in hell than the thought of having spent idle the time God had given them to save themselves. There is nothing that consoles the blessed in paradise more than that they used the time given to them by the Lord for the glory of God and to save themselves.
  33. God loves you, young man, because he expects from you many good works; he loves you because you are at a simple, humble, innocent age, therefore, correspond to his love. God has a special affection for the young, and finds his delight in dwelling with them. It is therefore right to love him above all else.
  34. Remember that a bad life begun in youth will easily continue so until death, and will lead you to hell. The Lord declares happy the man who, from his youth, has borne the light and gentle yoke of the commandments (cf. Jer, Lam 3:27).
  35. Honour your father and mother, and your superiors in their stead, and you will have a long life on earth, says the Lord (cf. Ex 20:12). Those who are not obedient do great insult to their parents and, in their stead, to their superiors

and to God himself. Jesus Christ, though all-powerful, in order to teach us to obey was subject in all things to the Blessed Virgin and to St Joseph (Lk 2:51). It is the duty of everyone to pray morning and evening for his parents, so that God may grant them every temporal and spiritual good.

36. Whatever we ask of God in church we will obtain it.
37. How much pleasure you give to Jesus Christ and what good example you give to your neighbour by being recollected and devout in church. When you enter the church, beware of running or making noise, but after making a good genuflection, go to your place. Beware laughing in church or speaking unnecessarily; a word or a smile is enough to give scandal or disturb someone.
38. Have the greatest respect for priests and religious, and receive their advice with reverence. Whoever does not respect the sacred ministers must fear great chastisement from the Lord. Speak well of the sacred ministers or do not speak at all.

## 5. SALUTARY THOUGHTS

### Introduction

The handwritten manuscript consists of 50 small pages on which Srugi wrote, in various circumstances, a lengthy series of brief thoughts, items of advice, exhortations, considerations... concerning religious life, and especially the daily journey of sanctification, to be practised in ordinary occupations, following common practices and using traditional means, but with great love of God, purity of intention and heart. Unlike the “maxims” he copied and then distributed to the boys and the confreres on cardboard strips, these thoughts were written down for himself and intended for personal use. The literary genre is similar to the wisdom “aphorisms” found in the books of the Bible or of the Desert Fathers, and in fact often make reference to aphorisms from Wisdom or NT authors but without direct mention of them.

He shows how fully aware he is of his identity as a “consecrated soul”, joyous and grateful to God for the very special grace of a religious vocation. The unifying factor of his being was the love of God, or rather, the God of Jesus Christ, his one and only and exclusive love, the one to whom he was espoused, to whom he wanted to belong and give glory and pleasure in everything and always. The primacy of God is very much in evidence. The call to vigilance is motivated both by the desire not to displease the Lord in the least and by the fear of appearing with some stain before the tribunal of his friend Jesus.

### TEXTS

1. St Paul said: *...always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies* (2 Cor 4:10).
2. St Bernard says: It is not fitting that the Head should be girded with thorns and the limbs be delicate.
3. St Paul said: *I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us* (Rom 8:18).
4. And St Peter says: *Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul* (1 Pt 2:11).
5. We are all pilgrims in this world, and we are journeying towards our heavenly homeland (cf. Phil 3:20). Let us get rid of what is not very necessary so that we can journey more quickly and more easily (cf. Heb 12:1). St Bernard says: Blessed and happy is the one who acts and behaves as a pilgrim on earth, and understands and laments his exile, saying with



- the Prophet: *Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears. For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears* (Ps 38(39):13).
6. I must hasten to weave my crown for paradise with many good works, because the time of my death is approaching.
  7. I will seek to *confirm my call and election* to the religious state by means of many good works (cf. 2 Pt 1:10).
  8. Following Mary's example I must attend to my sanctification with all solicitude.
  9. Entering religion I plan to bury my will and follow the will of my superior in everything. St Bernard says: it is very important for the religious to be accustomed to blindly obeying and without any further enquiry. Because it is impossible for someone to last in religion if they want to be prudent and know the reason for everything; it is better to be awkward and ignorant in order to be wise. The good religious subject must embrace what the superior orders him to do with much humility, simplicity and confidence.
  10. The Lord says to St Teresa: Do you think, my daughter that merit consists of enjoyment? No, it consists of suffering and loving. Look at my life full of pain. Believe, my daughter, that whoever is more greatly loved by my Father receives greater suffering from him (cf Prov. 3:12). Look at these wounds; your sorrows will never reach this extent. It is an error of judgement to think that my Father admits someone to his friendship without suffering.
  11. Our predestination to glory is not connected with extraordinary favours but with the virtues of our state. Endeavour, O religious soul to *confirm your call and election* by means of good works (cf. 2 Pt 1:10).
  12. How many victories you have had over your enemies, how many crowns you have received from God: how many humiliations and sorrows, as well as delights and splendours. Multiply your virtuous acts now and He will enrich you not only with the gifts of his grace, but also with glory, and he will bestow this on you in abundance.
  13. The Virgin Mary's blessedness is the fruit of her holiness and her good works. Oh, religious soul, when will you understand this? It is not only what God has done for you that will give you the right to eternal reward, but also what you have done for him. If you want a death similar to the Virgin Mary's, be accustomed to living united to God with the bond of charity, detaching your heart from every earthly affection and acting only for God's glory.
  14. Oh, how much peace and contentment a good and mortified religious has, one who treads diligently and solicitously in matters that benefit him, doing what he should as a good religious. There is no contentment that is its equal.

15. Do not desire what is forbidden. God is the master of the soul, mind and heart, as also of the body, and he wants everything in a man to be upright, orderly and holy, inwardly and outwardly. Avoid bad thoughts and desires, then; chase them away promptly.
16. At the point of death how we will regret not having done more good works and acquired virtue and advanced in perfection. We would want to do more but there will be no time. The Lord says: Walk the way of salvation while you have time and light, before the darkness of death overtakes you (cf. Jn 12:35).
17. At the moment of death our conscience will remind us of the time we had to become saints, and we wasted it. At every moment you can acquire eternal treasures for life eternal, and you want to waste time? The enemy never wastes time in tempting us, yet we waste the time that God gives us to save ourselves? At judgement time Jesus Christ will ask us to account not only for the time we have wasted, but also for every idle word (cf. Mt 12:36).
18. To keep our heart pure and unstained we very much need to have custody of the senses. St Dorothy says: Get into the habit of keeping your eyes cast down and modest, and of not looking at flippant and vain things, because this usually causes all the efforts of religious to be lost. Everything you have earned over a long time and with great effort will disappear very easily through those doors of the senses if you do not keep custody over them, and you will end up empty and without anything. Through negligence one can very quickly lose what has just been finally acquired by grace with much effort.
19. Beware lest you speak too much because this hinders holy thoughts and inspirations and the desires that come from heaven. Continuous silence and self-forgetfulness, and withdrawing from the clamour of worldly things, lifts up the heart and has us ponder heavenly things, and turn our heart to them. Eyes cast down always helps keep our heart in heaven.
20. Those who speak too much will damage their soul (cf. Prov 13:3). *When words are many, transgression is not lacking* (Prov 10:19).
21. If you are not careful to observe silence, you will never acquire perfection and will never be a man of prayer. If you want to make great profit in virtue and arrive at perfection, observe silence and with it, says St James, you will get there. If you want to be spiritual and a man of prayer, observe silence (cf. Jas 3:2).
22. Abstain from facetious and silly words; these are the games children play, and if perfection is your aim then it is appropriate to leave the child behind and become a man (says St Basil). These jokes and games cause a man to

- become remiss and negligent in the things of God's service, and deprive one of devotion and compunction of heart.
23. A Saint says: If you are reserved everywhere, you will enjoy quiet and rest. There is nothing so useful as being recollected, and speaking very little with others and a lot with yourself.
  24. The difference between spiritual men who attend to perfection, and carnal and sensual men. (cf. 1 Cor 2:12-15) who do not do so, does not lie in feeling or not feeling the difficulties and repugnance of the flesh, but in letting oneself be carried away by them, or not. The spiritual man does not heed the cries and demands of gluttony and the sensual appetite, nor does he let himself be carried away by them. And this is the point: not heeding temptations and the appetites that arise, nor giving in to them.
  25. St Teresa practised and taught: Go ahead always with the desire to suffer out of love for Jesus in everything and on every occasion. The Lord said to St Teresa: Merit does not consist of enjoyment, but of working, suffering and loving.
  26. Eternity is approaching apace, therefore this requires greater vigilance of us and renewed fervour in the service of the Lord.
  27. The Gospel we have embraced is a light. While it shed its light on us, we need to arm ourselves with holy works.
  28. The joy of the Christian is far superior to that of the worldly person.
  29. The presence of God and the closeness of his judgement must be a motivation for moderation and modesty for us in all our actions.
  30. The peace that comes to us from God, which is one of the fruits of the merits of Jesus Christ, is an inestimable good.
  31. The truly just person never forgets his state, whatever the esteem men have for him. It matters little what others think of us, so long as God approves of our action. We must never prevail over our conscience, since this can deceive us, but always have God's judgement before our eyes (cf. 1 Cor 4:3-4).
  32. The only true repentance is that which brings about a change in us. Do not believe that we are honouring the birth of Jesus Christ unless we change our habits and become like children through the humble disposition of our heart (cf. Mt 18:3).
  33. Let us learn to do good while we have the time (cf. Gal 6:10) and the convenience to do so: and let us not content ourselves just with sterile desires and vain words, but let us do those fruitful good works that the Lord requires of each religious (cf. Mt 3:8-10; Jn 15:1-8, 16).
  34. It often happens that our prayers are not heard by God's majesty, through lack of peaceful union and charity with our brothers (cf. Jas 4:2-3).

35. We must take care to deserve the reward of the elect by living a good life.
36. Let us endeavour with all our strength to make our way of life angelic and pure during our brief sojourn in this present life, so that we may deserve the glory and happiness of the angels in heaven.
37. Whoever loves his neighbour as himself (cf. Mt 22:39), kindly and meekly tolerates and puts up with his defects and failures. Whoever is charitable and tries to grow and perfect himself in this, possesses an inestimable treasure, and according to St Augustine, accomplishes everything contained in the Holy Scripture.
38. Let us honour and venerate the ministers of God and the Church whoever they may be, because they are by nature venerable, and in their person we are honouring God himself.
39. Always regard God as the ultimate goal of all our actions, and the only object of our love.
40. All our desires must tend towards that blessed life that we hope for, and the perfect establishment of the kingdom of Jesus Christ in us.
41. The most terrible penalty that God can show sinners is to withdraw from them so that they no longer give him a thought.
42. Let us fear the formidable judgement of God every day of our life, and let us fear it with filial fear, which does not disturb us unnecessarily but makes us diligently work for our salvation.
43. Let us not deceive ourselves, because *each one will reap* on the day of judgement what he has sown in this present life (Gal 6:7). *Whoever sows in the flesh*, meaning carnal and sinful works, will only reap corruption, that is, pain and damnation; and *whoever sows in the spirit*, meaning good works pleasing to God, *will reap eternal life* (Gal 6:8).
44. Keep awake, says Jesus Christ, *for you do not know either the day nor the hour* of your death when the Son of God will come to judge you (Mt 24:42).
45. Do not put off for even a single moment trying to regain God's grace if you have lost it; and if you have it, guard it with great care, and increase it every day through good works.
46. Let us remember that all the time of our present life is given to us to avoid hell and to deserve heaven with good works, especially works of mercy (cf. Mt 25:31-46).
47. Let us try to prepare ourselves diligently for the particular judgement and be continually prepared for it as our Divine Master Jesus Christ who will be our judge urges us. Blessed are we if *we are found ready* when the Lord comes (cf. Mt 24:46; 25:13; Lk 12:35-40).
48. Not only do we have to refrain from talking about indecent things, but also from listening to them: because those who enjoy hearing them provoke the

- other to speak: but it is still shameful and ugly to hear bad and ugly things. Saint Basil says: Whoever grumbles and whoever listens to grumbling must be separated from the community; because if one didn't listen to it willingly, the other wouldn't enjoy grumbling. The Sage says: Plug your ears with thorns when you hear your neighbour grumbling, especially about superiors.
49. The Sage says: Before anything else you always have to value telling the truth and not lying. The religious must never tell a lie, either to excuse himself or to cover up his error. Because it is a vile and ugly thing and unworthy of a religious. The theologians and saints say that it is not lawful to tell a lie not even for the spiritual salvation of the entire world; so I can hardly tell one to avoid being ashamed or mortified over some tiny thing!
  50. We must go in search of mortification and humiliation: and do you flee from those which present themselves to you and from those which you cannot escape without committing sin? He who does this goes against the profession he professes.
  51. It is neither gravitas nor religious modesty to exaggerate and amplify things too much.
  52. Words proceed from the heart (cf. Mt 12:34). So the one who uses vain and flippant words, demonstrates the vanity and flippancy of his heart. The one who says witty or other ridiculous things, echoes like a vacuous and empty vessel. The one who gives himself to flippancy and ridiculous things, does not have the name of Jesus written on his heart but the world and all its vanity, and this is what comes out of his mouth when he speaks.
  53. St Paul says: *Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear, and ignite and enkindle in them the love of God and the desire of virtue and perfection* (cf. Eph 4:29).
  54. The Lord says: Above all, it is useful and very necessary for spiritual profit, that every religious gives himself to perfect obedience. Obedience of the religious must be obedience of will and heart, conforming his will with that of the superior, having the same will.
  55. We must be very diligent and punctual in doing what is commanded of us. The truly obedient person does not know what it means to delay, nor about tomorrow or the day after, nor does he say "I will go right now", like the lazy ones do. Instead he keeps his ears pinned to hear what is commanded, his feet ready to go and do it, his hands out to do it, and so promptly does he do it that it seems he has anticipated what would be asked of him.
  56. We have to be ready for the ringing of the bell and for the voice of the superior, as if it were Christ our Lord, leaving whatever, even the letter we

have begun and not yet finished. The devil cannot make us totally abandon obedience, but he ensures that we are not punctual in obedience, so he can play some part in it, and claim as his own at least that little bit that you omit or delay in doing from the sound of the bell until you get up to obey.

57. Happy the souls who can say to God: Lord, we have always been yours.
58. Every religious is obliged to keep his cell in the utmost simplicity, and to strive with all his might to adorn his heart with virtue.
59. Bridle your mouth with silence when your persecutors assail you with weapons of slander, lies and scorn. Hold back from speaking and humble yourself.
60. Only one ambition is just: the ambition to love God. He who fears men will do nothing for God.
61. How few are those who understand what God would do for them if they gave themselves entirely to him.
62. Beware the devil's snares. The best weapons against him are self-denial, humility and patience.
63. Religious life is a school in which two things must be learned: to curb one's passions and to imitate the virtues of others.
64. Virtue is the true wealth of the soul.
65. Carry your daily cross each day with the grace that each day brings.
66. Forget the past and keep your gaze continually fixed on the long way you still have to travel along the path of virtue (cf. Phil 3:13).
67. There are souls whose name is written in golden letters on the Heart of Jesus, and they are those who work and suffer for his glory.
68. *"You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength"* (Dt 6:5; Mt 22:37). The love of God is the holy fire that must always burn on the altar of our heart. (cf. Lev 6:5-6).
69. Our rest will be in paradise. Oh paradise! Oh paradise, whoever thinks of you in this world no longer suffers tiredness.
70. Put your things in order because you are about to die.
71. The Lord wants much more love from a religious than from other faithful, and he has the right to do so.
72. *Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is. You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight. Surely everyone goes about like a shadow* (Ps 39:4-7).
73. Let us remember that time is short, and that God's judgement is upon us. The day is passing says the poet; you do not know if you will see the dawn of the following day, or whether this will be a day of peace or pain. *Thus passes the glory of the world* (Imitation of Christ, I, Chap. 3, no.6).

74. Life is like a stream that rushes towards the sea of eternity. How many thousands of people land on those shores every day.
75. A moment of pain, eternal rest. A tear, an ocean of delights.
76. Proceed in such a way that you earn more and more merit for heaven.
77. The wise person is able to sell the earth to buy heaven.
78. St Bernard says: May none of you despise a single moment of time, wasting it with useless words. The word escapes and cannot be recalled, time flies and cannot be regained. Nothing is more precious than time, but alas, nothing is even more neglected. Nobody thinks of the fact that the wasted day will never return. But just as *not a hair of your head will perish* (Lk 21:18), not a single wasted moment will escape God's justice.
79. A single day gone by without fault is worth an entire lifetime.
80. Virtue does not consist in the quantity but in the quality of our works. All time spent in the state of mortal sin is time lost.
81. Be spiritual farmers: sow now in time what you will have to reap in eternity (cf. Gal 6:7-8).
82. St Dorothy said to St Dositeo: May God never leave your heart, always think that you have him present and that you are standing in front of him.
83. Wait patiently for the Lord and He will deliver you. God does things slowly, but he does them well.
84. St Basil said: Strive to acquire patience because it is the greatest virtue of the soul; strive to acquire it so that you may soon reach the summit of perfection. Patience is the sovereign remedy of the soul; impatience is the poison of the heart. The patient soul rises as tribulations increase. Let them persecute you; God will one day see to the persecution of your enemies, and for you will remain the crown of patience, no less beautiful than that of martyrdom.
85. Those who suffer are as dear to God as the apple of his eye. The divine gaze rests preferentially upon them. When you suffer, rest assured that you are acceptable to God. This is a truth written in the holy books (cf. Prov 3:11-12; Heb 12:5-7; Sir 4:17-18; Tob 12:13 (*Vulgate*)). St Augustine says: Every act of patience is a grateful hymn to God. Nothing is so painful that you cannot tolerate it patiently if you remember the passion of Jesus Christ. Courage, you who suffer: your sufferings are like those passing clouds which bring great fertility to the arid earth. Patience is a good plant, but it doesn't grow in all gardens.
86. Let us ensure that there is not something worthy of reproof from others in our words and actions, but that it is of edification and benefit to others. (cf. Eph 4:29).
87. Vain and useless words easily sully the heart.

88. Our life is a passing dream, and when we wake up it's already over. To pray, to suffer, to live by love divine: this destiny, O religious, is ultimately thine.
89. One day the Lord said to a sister of charity: Souls are mine, the soul of a sinner is mine. For the love you bear me, save me sinners. The best consolation we can offer to the Heart of Jesus is to bring souls to him.
90. Christian soul, look to Heaven, that is where God is waiting for you. Run, fly, break all attachments that bind you to the earth.
91. One act of resignation to God's will in all that he gives us that is not to our liking is worth more than a hundred thousand good successes according to our will and liking.
92. The enemy we must fear most is ourselves.
93. Whoever walks constantly in the presence of God (cf. Gen 17:1), will always be accountable to him for his deeds, and will never lose his love for him by allowing sin to occur.
94. The Lord does not want any of our affections to be given to anyone other than him.
95. Make every action your last.
96. Those who dedicate themselves to Mary, those who consecrate themselves to her, those who honour and love her, are as certain that they are going to heaven as if they were already there.
97. Whenever the Christian devoutly turns to God with prayer, he earns goods that are worth more than the whole world.
98. Do what you can in your state in life with diligence and purity of intention.
99. Willingly suffer the tribulations that God sends us in any way.
100. Remain silent about your neighbour's faults, offences against you and words praising you.
101. Long prayers without mortification are useless as well as long.
102. The cross, if it is loved, is only half a cross, because the love of Jesus softens everything, and one does not suffer much except when one loves little.
103. If the Lord wants us to be humbled let us remain so without complaint.
104. Envy, from which few souls are exempt, is often the bone of contention in religious houses.
105. One of the virtues that the religious must acquire at all costs is silence. Silence when one is rebuked. One must receive admonitions with one's head bowed and one's lips between one's teeth. Silence when your mind is troubled, because speech would reflect the gloomy state of your soul. Silence when the word of lament is about to spring up on our tongue. Lament is the woodworm that corrodes the fabric of your merit.
106. Among the virtues that the religious must ask of the Lord is humility, since we all have a great deal of pride in our hearts.



107. Be exact in everything: exactness is the virtue of the man of order. The untidy man does all things wrong.
108. Recollection is as necessary to the soul as rest is to the body.
109. Try to do good then let people say what they want. Become saints and pay no attention to anything else. What does anything else matter compared to this necessary task? Don't waste time over useless things: life is so short! Go straight to your duty, without deviating to right or left. This is your goal: sanctify yourself. But it is a very high goal. Save yourself! Sanctify yourself! This must be your only yearning; what can the rest serve for if it does not lead to this?
110. We need mortification if we want to do great things. We cannot win the battles of the spirit without first having won the battles of the flesh.
111. Say your prayers, especially the Divine office *digne attente ac devote*: worthily, attentively and devoutly. This is the only way you must pray.
112. Drive *the old man*, the wrathful one, out of you O religious soul and you will remain only with *the new man*, the peaceful one (cf. Col 3:9-10; Eph 4:22-24; Gal 5:22).
113. Sin is the greatest act of ingratitude we can make towards God.
114. Expect nothing from men but everything from God.
115. Knowing how to forgive the faults of others and how to tolerate them is an act of charity that is to be offered constantly.
116. The prudent man speaks little, listens a lot, and goes ahead slowly in his undertakings. Before offering opinions, he meditates and prays.
117. One thing can be spoken about without remorse: the good of our brethren. Evil must always be kept hidden.
118. The prudent man should consider what he does as being ten times less in merit than what his imagination tells him it is. Because self-love often multiplies the merit of our actions.
119. Prayer is the all-powerful act that puts the forces of heaven at the disposition of the soul.
120. Her Guardian Angel once said to St Margaret of Cortona: God's perfect friends are those who keep their heart detached from created things, who are united with God alone and who long for him day and night with every urging of the heart. "So what are their virtues?" the Saint asked. "The first," the Angel replied, is a profound humility in imitation of and for the sake of the One *who humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross* (Phil 2:7-8). The second is perfect charity.
121. Three main reasons must see us make time precious: first, it is the price of eternity, then, it is short, and finally, it is irreparable.

122. Always have eternity in your spirit, Jesus Christ in your heart, and his divine love above all things.
123. Let us do our duty at all times, and leave it to God to look after our future.
124. Absolute abandonment to the divine will is the secret of the joy of the saints.
125. Happy are those actions done between two "*Hail Marys*".
126. When the cross seems heavy, when the road seems too long, when darkness is thickening around us, let us think of the happiness we will have at the hour of our death if we have suffered for love of Jesus Christ.
127. St Thomas Aquinas said: He who is desirous of honour, who avoids being despised, and if he is despised is sorry, even though he does marvellous and miraculous things, is far from perfection, for all this is virtue without foundation.
128. You will be able to build this tower of evangelical perfection that you have begun to the extent and proportion, O religious soul, of the depth of its foundation in humility (cf. Lk 14:28). If you want to build true virtues in your soul, try first to have a good foundation in humility. If you want to be great and build a building of very high virtue, think first to a very good foundation in humility. Virtues that are not founded on humility are not true ones but merely false ones that appear to be true.
129. Everyone says that humility is the foundation of holiness and of all virtues. The more humble you are, O religious, the more you will advance and grow in virtue and perfection.
130. St Augustine said: Pride goes after good works in order to destroy them. He who wants to cultivate virtue without humility is like those who throw a little dust into the wind and everything scatters. The need we have for humility is so great that without it we should not believe we can take a step in the spiritual life.
131. The Son of God equal to the Father takes the form of a servant (Phil 2:7) and wants to be humiliated and dishonoured (cf. Phil 2:7-8), and *I, dust and ashes* (cf. Gen 18:27; Sir 10:9; Sir 17:27), wish to be respected and acknowledged by men?
132. Let every good religious be careful not to allow himself to be bound by routine of any kind, no matter how insignificant. Let each religious's habit, bed and cell be kept clean and decent but in particular let him make every effort to avoid affectation and ambition. Nothing adorns a religious better than holiness of life, so that in everything he may be an example to others.
133. Each religious must be ready to endure heat, cold, hunger, thirst, toil and contempt when necessary, any time these are for the greater glory of God, to the spiritual benefit of others, and the salvation of one's own soul (cf. G. BOSCO, *Costituzioni della Società di S.Francesco di Sales*, xiii, art. 11).

134. The humble person can be commanded in all things. The humble man has no judgement to the contrary; in all things he conforms to his superior, as much by his carrying out as by his will and intellect; there is no contradiction or resistance in him.
135. Those who love God do not seek to be esteemed and loved by men: their only desire is to be well-liked by God, who is the only object of their love. Every honour received from the world is the devil's trade.
136. A saint once said that she valued her religious vocation for two main reasons: one, because she enjoyed the presence and company of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament; the other, because there, through obedience, she was entirely God's, sacrificing her own will to Him.
137. Our only claim must be to be united with God, as Jesus Christ was united with God his Father, which he did on the cross.
138. Being religious is nothing other than being "bound to God" by means of a continuous mortification of ourselves, and living only for God; therefore our heart, our eyes, our tongue and our hands and all the rest are to be used only for the glory of God.
139. Whoever desires to live according to nature, let them remain in the world; and those who have decided to live according to grace, let them come to religion, which is none other than a school of self-denial and self-mortification; it therefore offers many tools for mortification both inwardly and outwardly.
140. Religion is a mystical hive, all full of celestial bees which gather to produce the honey of the celestial virtues.
141. The religious is required to do the works of his calling, that is, to die to himself in all things, both in those that seem good and in those that are bad and useless.
142. The monastery is an academy of exact correction, where each soul must learn to allow itself to be handled, planed and cleaned so that, being well smoothed and flattened, it may be joined, united and glued more properly to the will of God. The monastery is a hospital for the spiritually ill who want to be healed, and in order to be healed they expose themselves to suffering bloodletting, the lancet, the razor, the needle, the iron, the fire and all the bitterness of medicine. Be such and do not take account of everything that self-love tells you to the contrary; but delicately, pleasantly and lovingly make this resolution: either to die or to heal, and since I do not want to die spiritually, I want to heal, and to heal I want to suffer. We must die through mortification (cf. 2 Cor 4:10). These words "one must die" are harsh, but they are followed by a great sweetness: that is, to unite oneself to God through this death.

143. The Rules, religious observance, are the Jacob's ladder on which religious must, in an angelic life, ascend to God through charity and descend to themselves through humility (cf. Gen 28:10-12).
144. Let us willingly submit to the diligent and punctual observance of our rules, and with simplicity of heart, without wanting to double up on what we do, since God does not have regard to the multiplicity of things we do for his sake, but only to the fervour of the charity with which we do them.
145. Let us do all we can in religion: God will be pleased with us, and so will our superiors.
146. The task of the religious must be to cultivate their spirit well, to root out the bad shoots that our depraved nature constantly allows to grow, such that there is always something that has to be redone.
147. If you do what you have been taught, you will live very happily and experience the rewards of heaven in this life, at least in small doses.
148. The saints would like the whole world to know their faults, so that they might consider them to be the wretched people they consider themselves to be; and on the other hand, if they do an act of virtue, they would like only God to know of it. God, whom alone they wish to please, and for whom they love the hidden life so much.
149. Whoever wins out over himself will easily win out over all other repugnance. This is where everything we have to do to become saints lies: denying ourselves and not following our own will. St Bernard says that if everyone were opposed to their own will then no one would ever be damned. Our own will is a great evil, since it means that your good deeds do not benefit you at all.
150. Our first battle comes from the appetite of sensual delights: let us seize the opportunity, mortify our eyes, recommend ourselves to God and this battle will be over. The second battle comes from greed for wealth: let us try to love poverty and this battle will end. The third battle comes to us from ambition for honours: let us love humility and the hidden life, and the battle will end. The fourth battle, the most dangerous one, comes to us from our own will: let us resign ourselves to everything that happens as God's will, and this battle will be over (cf. 1 Jn 2:16).
151. Give yourselves to God without any half-measures and put off everything else, for time is short and we can hardly be here for long. And blessed are those who love Jesus Christ without half-measures.
152. Whoever loves something, unless it is for love of God, is prevented by it from loving God, and the intellect is clouded. Anything we love outside of God takes away our union with God and the light of the truth of Jesus Christ.

153. The religious soul mourns time misspent and offence against God and wishes to punish himself in any way possible. Therefore he wants to be humble and patient, and with much charity to embrace creatures for love of the creator, so that he desires to be hated and despised, and desires to suffer many insults and torments, and to be persecuted by every one, because he knows the goodness of God and his own cowardice and misery.
154. Holy poverty empties the soul of earthly cares and affections and of all created things. Beware of the ownership of any thing as of poison, for the devil will strive to make you say, even of small things: this is mine. Keep poverty holy, clean and pure, and do not spoil or corrupt it; for it is the foundation on which the edifice of all virtues is built, and it is the nourisher of humility.
155. You have little time left to do penance in this world, because we are hastening quickly towards death. Know, good religious, how to earn merit while you have time, lest death come to you unprepared.
156. In all your anguish and adversity have faith and hope in God.
157. Commit yourself, religious soul, to keeping your soul white, keeping your heart always clean from every fault, so therefore go to confession often and to communion fervently.
158. The passion of Jesus Christ enlightens and strengthens the soul of those who devoutly consider it, because it is the best medicine for all our spiritual infirmities.
159. Fight hard and with patience, desiring and seeking as much as possible the honour of God and the salvation of souls; so that at the end of this short life, blessed Jesus Christ may grant you eternal glory.
160. St Paul says: *So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God* (1 Cor 10:31).
161. The foundation of all virtue and holiness is found in doing the will of God, which forms the merit and worth of all our actions.
162. Your special holiness must be the holiness of every day and moment: nor can it come about except through brief prayers and affectionate outpourings of the heart towards God.
163. What a consolation it is for you, religious soul, to know that in order to become holy you do not have to seek your perfection outside of yourself, but rather in carrying out your daily exercises as you must. Those who consume their time thinking of great projects of holiness, elevated contemplation, austere penances, heroic acts of charity and even martyrdom, and meanwhile neglect the particular duties of each day, are living in deceit and most fatal illusion.

164. What goodness of God and our good fortune it is to accept our most obvious actions for his glory and for our good. Remember that God rewards only what is done for him. The Lord is so good that, so long as nothing is opposed to Christian virtues, he willingly accepts our common works if we do them with the pure intention of giving him glory and pleasure.
165. Do you wish to make your works meritorious, whatever they may be? Do them in union with God, from whom comes the mighty power that gives life to what we do, for he is the one who is *the way, the truth and the life* (Jn 14:6).
166. It is necessary to work for God by giving life to our works through the holiness and purity of our motives, that is, to please him in everything and for everything. It is advisable to do everything with the aim of pleasing God alone, of serving and glorifying him; without this right intention our actions, no matter how sensational and great, are lost.
167. Conform yourselves to the Rule, which is an expression of the divine will: and moreover, do everything as God wants it, that is, with all diligence, exactness and perfection, according to the grace given you.
168. Woe to him who sets himself up for the honour and praise of men: he puts himself at risk of throwing away the merit he may acquire, and to him might apply the Saviour's saying: "*Truly I tell you, they have already received their reward*" (Mt 6:1-6, 16-18), through some frivolous worldly praise and applause.
169. May you be far from all pride, deceit and hypocrisy.
170. From the beginning of the day you must strive to live in grace. And why? Does it not seem to you of little importance to reap the fruits of the many labours and hardships that you have to endure every day in the divine service?
171. If people of the world show so much care for temporal interests, should not we religious and people consecrated to God do at least the same to the benefit of the interests of our soul?
172. Zeal in fulfilling your duties, charity, gentleness and especially obedience are the virtues that you will continue to practice in the office entrusted to you.
173. What advantage is it to religious to make a profession of the highest perfection and to put on the habit of perfection, if in the study of virtue and the exercise of good works we are not distinguished from the lowly who are also in a state of health? This is a source of confusion for us and a kind of deception. To promise great things and to be content with nothing but small things deserves punishment rather than reward.

174. Be humble, because the gate to heaven is low, which is Christ (cf. Jn 10:7, 9), and no one can enter it without lowering himself.
175. If poverty frightens you, may the kingdom of heaven and eternal bliss encourage you.
176. Do not let any malice dwell in you lest it pervert your heart.
177. The pure heart is one that does not think of or desire ill to anyone, is without sinister intentions, but whatever it does is ordered to God whom it wishes to please.
178. Do not become proud or puffed up because of your good works; think of your frailty and you will humble yourself. Think that you are but a *vessel of clay* (2 Cor 4:7) and glass, and always be humble before your God, lest you lose his grace.
179. Happy are those religious who desire the arrival of the Bridegroom and leave this world to receive him with due preparation (cf. Mt 25:6). Woe to those instead who distance themselves from God.
180. How great is the love of the Lord and the goodness he shows us by calling himself the bridegroom of our souls (cf. Mt 25:1-10; Mk 2:19-20 with parallels in Mt and Lk).
181. *Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*, says the Apostle (Phil 2:12).
182. Be meek, patient, tolerant and easily pardon insults, and you will be blessed (cf. Mt 5:5).
183. Woe to those who, falling into the same faults each day, never learning to rise again. They associate death with sleep.
184. Be vigilant against the temptations of this life with prayer, mortification, and trust in your God.
185. Perfection consists: 1st in total mortification of our appetites; 2nd in true self-contempt; 3rd in perfect conformity to God's will. Whoever lacks one of these virtues is out of the way of perfection.
186. Oh religious soul, let not the wide and seemingly flowery path of the world flatter you; oh if only you knew how many thorns those roses are armed with and how many cruel monsters tear the wretched people of the world apart. Happy are you who have decided to follow the *narrow way* of your Divine Redeemer (cf. Mt 7:13-14). Courage, always resist the enticements of the senses and the corrupt maxims of the world, and thus the beautiful day will come when you will deserve to enjoy him forever in paradise.
187. God must reign in the senses of your body formed by him to be an instrument of the soul. You must glorify God with them, making them a *living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God* (Rom 12:1).
188. Remove from your eyes, ears, taste, smell and touch every kind of illicit and dangerous satisfaction, and by penance mortify your feelings as much as

possible even in lawful things. Remember that the more you apply yourself to spiritual things, the greater will be your mortification of the senses.

189. God alone and not the world must be served with all your mind, with all your heart and with all the senses of the body (cf. Deut 6:5; Jas 4:4).
190. Your thoughts, words, works and pains must be addressed to God alone.
191. All evil comes from the mind and from the heart that is not mortified, as Saint James says (cf. Jas 4:1).
192. The time here below is given to us only so we can reproduce the divine Model Jesus in us.
193. Oh, how much God reckons with a righteous man, and how much he says and does out of respect for him. See to it, O religious, that you are very just and very friendly with God, and that you really attend to your own perfection, taking it for certain that God will favour all your concerns, and will remember your parents, your relatives and your friends, and everything that belongs to you, and the more he does this, the more you will put aside your thoughts and forget these things and give yourself to God alone.
194. O religious soul, enter into yourself and consider the most intimate closets of your soul, your passions, vices, the inclinations that cause the greatest damage and impediment to you, and endeavour to get rid of them and mortify yourself until you can say with the Apostle: *“it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me”* (Gal 2:20).
195. The day of death for the holy religious soul who has done good throughout life is the day of a copious harvest. Because he reaps the fruit of his good works. There have been so many acts of penance, so many acts of humility, so many acts of charity, so many acts of obedience, so many fervent prayers and communions, so many acts of mortification, humiliations for the love of Jesus, so many merits accumulated in every way, in every good thought, in every good word, in every prayer, in every sigh of love for God.
196. In death we will be separated from and must leave the room we preferred, our clothes, the comforts we have procured, the amenities we have made for ourselves, our satisfactions in food. This will be the total separation we are condemned to by death.
197. The Church strongly recommends that people consecrated to God lead an irreproachable and holy life, telling them to flee even the slightest shortcomings. We must love purity of conscience to the point of having the most vivid horror of small faults and every commitment to keep ourselves free and cleansed of them.
198. St Francis de Sales says: I believe that it is an act of the greatest perfection to conform oneself in everything to the community without ever departing



from it of one's own accord; in fact, besides being an excellent means of union with one's neighbour, it also serves to conceal our perfection from our own eyes. There is a certain simplicity of heart which contains within itself the perfection of perfection, and it is that simplicity which causes our soul to recollect itself and focus entirely on the faithful observance of the Rules, without pouring itself out into other desires or wishing to undertake greater things. It does not seek to do lofty or extraordinary things that might attract esteem from creatures; but keeps low within itself and has no great aspirations, like one who does nothing of his own accord nor more than others; thus all its holiness is hidden from its eyes.

199. You must not believe yourself to be sinning or lacking as it may be when you feel emotion or repugnance. Not at all. These things are independent of us; these emotions are not culpable. They are natural passions which in themselves are not sins. It is a deception on the part of many to imagine that perfection lies in resenting nothing, and to believe that with every rebellion of passion all is lost. It is guilty of that which lies behind the emotions, that is, those resentful words, those thoughts about grumbling which you cherish, ruminate on, and hold in your heart for days, weeks, and months; the repugnance which you warily indulge in about obediences contrary to your taste and fancy.
200. Attend to your business diligently, but know that you have no business that is more important than your eternal salvation.
201. In handling your affairs, do not trust that you will be able to succeed with your own efforts, but only with the help of God.
202. The Lord wants you to think about always grasping and using the opportunities to serve him and practise virtues minute by minute. Practise small things, without which big things are often false and fallacious.
203. Let us learn to willingly suffer humiliating words and words aimed at stifling our opinions and suggestions.
204. Direct your thoughts to perfect yourself in all your ordinary actions, and to carry the crosses, large or small that will appear before you. Believe me, here lies the secret of becoming saints.
205. Let us try to be what God wants, since we are his, and let us not try to be what we want, contrary to his intention.
206. "Good Jesus! Jesus was good, kind, good by nature first of all because he was God; and God can be nothing other than infinite goodness. Secondly, because he was a man; and if, as Bossuet, says 'When God created the human heart, he first of all placed goodness in it as a characteristic of the divine nature', how could the Man-God have shown himself with a heart that was not good? Finally, Jesus, eminently humble, could only but be

eminently good. Goodness is the flower of humility: these two virtues are inseparable. When one is good, one is inclined to give oneself, to accept, to make oneself small; and is this not humility? A proud man will never know how to be good. And yet it is so good to be good, to forget oneself, never to think of oneself and always to be in the joy of God! A secret instinct warns us that goodness emanates from Heaven; it spreads a perfume that can only be a divine fragrance. Gushing forth from the heart of God as from his spring, would it not have surrounded with a halo of sweetness the One who in its litanies is called by the holy Church 'Jesus Infinite Goodness'?" (J. Bacteman).

## 6. PRAYERS

### Introduction

Simon Srugi was “a man of prayer”. Other than the community practices of piety he prayed continuously before, during and after his daily work, by day and by night, quietly or singing, in Arabic or Italian; he always remained in the presence of God; he had memorised the prayers from *The Companion of Youth* and loved to sing hymns. On the inside half of the sheet of paper preserved in his copy of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* he had jotted down a list of litanies with a pen: Blessed Trinity, Blessed Sacrament, in honour of the Holy Face of Jesus, Sorrowing Mother, Divine Providence (for a happy death; recommending his soul to God), The Deceased, Sacred Heart, Holy Name of Jesus, St Joseph. He was enrolled in the “Apostolate of Prayer” and received their monthly leaflet. In what follows I limit myself to indicating some of his special prayers.

The prayer to the Sacred Heart, printed on a holy picture, contains some of the characteristic features of Salesian spirituality with its source precisely in the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, something Simon was able to reproduce in himself.

The handwritten prayer addressed to the Crucified Jesus is both a reverent and affectionate contemplation and a resolution to be concretely conformed to Him; it sums up well the essence of his devotion to the “Holy Wounds” as documented in the “Conversations” mentioned earlier.

Simon confided in Sister Tersilla Ferrero that he prayed the entire three parts of the rosary every day, and that at night he never went to bed without first reciting *The Seven Joys of Mary*, a practice that nourished his habitual orientation towards paradise and his characteristic joy. The others are spontaneous expressions when, at the end of a day's work, he would get down on his knees in front of the statue of Mary Help of Christians and give vent to his grateful love.

The lengthy formula of the *Act of Consecration to Jesus the Adolescent*, was prepared by the superiors in Turin for the consecration of the church dedicated to him at the school in Nazareth on 6 September 1923. Simon would personally meditate on it, and commented on it to the young people at Betgamāl who also made their consecration.

The brief daily prayer to Jesus the Adolescent in the text approved on 25 September 1932 by the Patriarch, Luigi Barlassina, was certainly one that Simon said, being one of the practices to which members of the archconfraternity were bound. It too is rich in biblical allusions and includes the apostolic dimension.

The three invocations to St Stephen (composed by Salesian Fr Angelo Rocca) are formulated not so much as praises of him, but as imploring the three theological virtues: love for God and neighbour, including our enemies; the courage to confess the faith, even to the extent of shedding one's blood; the hope of gaining the crown of glory in heaven after a life filled with good works.

## TEXTS

### 1 – Prayer to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

*“O Jesus, place a good and serene smile, a sweet, indulgent, compliant word on my lips. Place the kindness that opens hearts on my outward appearance; the ability to help without being precious; the goodness that obtains everything without effort; the self-denial that attracts and encourages someone to ask for a kindness, a service without fear or hesitation.”*

### 2 – In contemplation of the crucified and wounded Jesus

*“O sweet Jesus, as if you were present, I draw close to you and embrace you with affection, mindful of your wounds. Oh how I see you stripped, bruised, torn, soaked in blood. Hail, holy Head, crowned with cruel thorns. Hail, adorable Face, on which the flowers of life have withered. Hail, open side of my Saviour, redder than a rose, and my salvation. Hail, O holy hands pierced by hard nails. Greetings, O my divine Saviour, I throw myself at your feet and here I would like to die.”*

### 3 – Prayers to Our Lady

#### 3.1 The Seven Joys of Mary

1. *“Rejoice, O Immaculate Bride of the Holy Spirit, in that contentment which you now enjoy in Paradise, for by your humility, purity and virginity, you are exalted above all angels and sublimated above all saints.*
2. *Rejoice O Mother of God, at the pleasure you experience in Paradise, For as the sun here on earth illuminates the whole world, so do you with your splendour adorn and make all Paradise shine.*
3. *Rejoice, O Daughter of God, in the sublime dignity to which you were elevated in Paradise, for all the choirs of Angels, Archangels, Thrones, Dominions and all the blessed spirits honour, revere and recognise you as the Mother of their Creator, and at the slightest nod they are most obedient to you.*

4. *Rejoice, Handmaid of the Most Holy Trinity, for the great power you have in Paradise, because all the graces you ask of your Son Jesus are immediately granted to you; indeed, as St Bernard says, no grace is granted here on earth that does not first pass through your most holy hands.*
5. *Rejoice, O most august Queen, because you alone deserved to sit at the right hand of your Most Holy Son, who sits at the right of the Eternal Father.*
6. *Rejoice, O Hope of sinners, Refuge of the troubled, in seeing that those who praise and reverence you in this world, are rewarded by the Eternal Father with his holy grace on earth and with his immense glory in Heaven.*
7. *Rejoice, O Mother, Daughter and Bride of God, for all the graces, all the rejoicing, all the joys and all the favours which you now enjoy in Paradise will never diminish; on the contrary, they will increase until the Day of Judgement and will last for ever.*

*Prayer: O glorious Virgin Mary, Mother of my Lord, fount of every consolation, Because of these joys of yours, which I have remembered with the greatest devotion I could muster, I beg you to implore from God the remission of my sins, and the continued help of his holy grace, so that I may never be unworthy of your protection, but rather have the good fortune to receive all those heavenly favours which you are accustomed to obtain and share with those who devoutly remember these joys with which your beautiful heart abounds, O immortal Queen of Heaven. Amen."*

### **3.2 Outpourings of gratitude to Our Lady**

*"O my mother from Heaven, how beautiful you are, how much I love you! I am your son, you know it, my Mother! Tell me what I have to do to love you more. You are my heavenly mother ... I give myself to you, body and spirit. I love you I love you!"*

*"I thank you, my Mother, that you have made me succeed, guided me and blessed our labours in helping many suffering people. Thank you, my good Mother, infinite thanks!"*

## **4 – Act of consecration to Jesus the Adolescent**

*"O divine adolescent Jesus, full of confidence we come to your feet to consecrate ourselves and our youth to you. We want to belong to you, because you are our God, God of perpetual and happy youth; because without you there is no innocence, virtue or happiness. We want to belong to You, because You love us with youthful enthusiasm. We represent the hopes of Religion and Humanity, and You love them too much not to look upon us tenderly; our age is surrounded by too many snares for you not to be moved on our behalf; you have sanctified your adolescence with too much virtue not to think of the fruits that ours can give.*

*We consecrate ourselves to You, O Jesus, O divine companion of ours, O true friend of ours, because we want to imitate Your life of divine adolescence, because we want ours to be*

*full of holy ideals, guarded against evil, untainted; we want it to be a life of silence, modesty, work, duty, prayer. Help us, O Jesus, to keep our consciences sinless, to correct our faults, to acquire the virtues of a young saint, so that later, after Your example, we may become men of God, apostles among unbelieving humanity, and, if need be, even victims of our Faith. Teach us to love sincerity and steadfastness in doing good, never yielding to vice, to human interests and respect.*

*We consecrate ourselves to You. We are few in number here, but we want to represent all the adolescents of the world. We know, O Jesus, that many have always been faithful to You, that they are ready to die instead of denying their faith; that many are even prepared to follow Your way as redeemer and apostle among their brothers. But not all the adolescents of the world are like this. Many who are misguided have died to grace and live far from You. Thinking of them, Your heart grieves. We ask forgiveness and conversion for them. We ask this of You who raised up adolescents – the son of Naim’s widow and the daughter of Jairus – who know the weaknesses of our careless age. Let the misled return to former thoughts of innocent childhood, to Religion, to duty. Stretch out your arms, O Jesus, and call us all to your divine embrace, and be happy with us and in us.*

*And you, Mary, as you were always at the side of the Adolescent Jesus, be always at our side so that we may never be separated from Him.*

*O Jesus, may You be blessed by all the young people of the world! And may we and all the young people of the world, be saved and blessed by you, O Jesus!”*

## **5 – Daily prayer to Jesus the Adolescent**

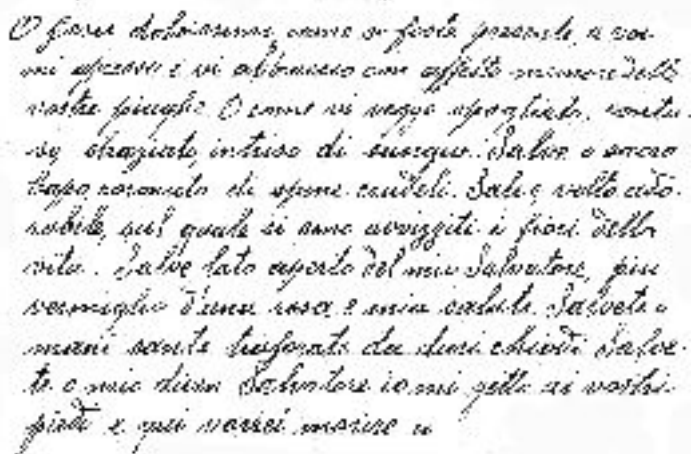
*O Jesus, eternal Son of God, if you left heaven, if you came among the children of men, if for so many years you lived obscure and hidden in Nazareth, you did it for my sake. By becoming like one of us you wanted to be able to say: “From now on I will no longer call you servants, but friends.” Me, your friend! ... You are so great and I am so miserable! Could I still refuse such affection? Certainly not; to make myself less unworthy, I, my heavenly friend, want to be pure like you, humble like you, industrious like you, obedient like you, gentle and good like you. In this way, with the help of Mary and Joseph, I too will prepare myself to deal one day with the things that concern the glory of my Father who is in heaven. And after my difficult journey, accomplished in faith and duty, it will be so wonderful for me to come and see you and love you in blessed eternity. Amen.*

## **6 – Triduum of prayer to glorious St Stephen, Protomartyr**

- 1. Most glorious Protomartyr St Stephen, your heart was so inflamed with charity that you have always been considered by the Church as the perfect model and teacher of such a*

beautiful and necessary virtue; obtain for all of us true love for God and for our fellow human beings, so that, following your example, we may love the Lord with all our hearts and above everything else, and be willing to put up with any suffering, even death itself rather than offend him. May we never separate this love from the love of our brothers and sisters, including our enemies.

2. Most intrepid Levite and Confessor of Jesus Christ, with admirable zeal and heroic courage you defended the faith and religion, under attack from the fiercest enemies from your time onwards. With patience and gentleness you fearlessly preached the truth of the gospel. We earnestly beseech you to obtain for us too this spirit of faith, zeal, and courage, so that we may never allow ourselves to be beaten down by the derision and wars of the enemies of the religion into which we were born and wish to die; and thus may we be made worthy, after having confessed Jesus before the world, to be confessed by him before his eternal Father.
3. St Stephen, most glorious of all the martyrs, you had the enviable destiny of being the first to shed your virginal blood for Jesus Christ, whom, in your final battle, you saw triumphant in heaven where you now enjoy eternal happiness as a just reward for your virtues and holy works ... May you continually intercede for us, who still find ourselves in the midst of so many miseries and dangers, amidst so many battles and persecutions; and may we also always keep our eyes, our thoughts and our hearts turned towards heaven; and remembering that crown which awaits us there, may we never tire of doing good, of fighting against evil and so, after a holy death, may we see the same Jesus triumphant in the eternal glory of paradise.



O fiore del deserto, come se fosse prezioso, e con  
mi affezionato e mi abbraccio con affetto immenso della  
vostra pietate. O come se fosse spogliato, con  
vi chegiate inteso di sangue. Salvo e sano  
tutto coronato di spine candide. Salvo e tutto  
nobilita, nel quale si sono avvigniti i fiori della  
vita. Salvo lato caputo del mio Salvatore, più  
veramente d'una rosa e non caduto. Salvo e  
mani aperte traforato da dieci chiodi. Salvo  
to e mio diu Salvatore io mi getto ai vostri  
piedi e quei vostri miseri

## 7. RESOLUTIONS

### Introduction

Just one small notebook has come down to us, in which Srugi noted down the resolutions he had taken from 1926-1939, but there are some indications that lead us to believe that he might have had others. The first lot of resolutions go back as far as 1910-1911; the longest set (nos. 6-122) consists of resolutions taken during the yearly Spiritual Retreats, and this is the word he in fact uses in Italian (*Ritiro*). The fact that he had carefully preserved this notebook suggests that during the monthly and weekly examinations of conscience he had checked whether he had put them into practice, updating his personal life plan. Writing down other resolutions on tiny slips of paper and keeping them between the pages of his personal devotional books shows that resolutions were a very serious matter for him, and were a practical accompaniment to his habitual exercise of sanctification.

The formulation of these “resolutions” reveals his decisive and constant character; he was not content with generic and vague aspirations, but targeted specific circumstances and adapted the general regulations to his particular situation in life. The body with all its senses, the soul with all its faculties, thoughts, words and actions ... they were all involved in this endeavour to grow in the love of God, in accordance with the first commandment.

What comes through repeatedly is his willingness to commit himself, both in combating specific inclinations and defects (sensuality, resentment, whims, impatience...) and to become more perfect in some virtues (humility, charity, patience, purity ...). This reveals, if not the struggle, at least the effort of spiritual combat that this man of flesh and blood, like all of us carried out with determination and constancy in the very real circumstances of daily life at Betgamāl. Since today he is on the way to the honours of the Altars, we must not fall into the naive way of thinking that he was born with an angelic nature, or that he acted with supreme perfection at all times in everything. For him too virtue was a conquest, the combined result of divine grace and his cooperation in it, as his first biographer, Fr Ernesto Forti, rightly notes on a number of occasions.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> FORTI, *Un buon samaritano, concittadino di Gesù*: “All this was not just the result of a happy temperament. His strong emotions and innate tendency to withdraw into himself would have easily led him into moments of distress which, because he was so shy and with little inclination to vent his feelings outwardly, would have made it difficult for him to find inner peace and give of himself fully. But he was able to conquer this...” (p.42); “His habitual calm, recollection, modesty of manner, his natural self-control, discretion with regard to others,



## TEXTS

### Year 1910-1911

1. Keep the eyes in check.
2. Attend to your own perfection and don't worry about others, never querying others.
3. Prompt, blind and cheerful obedience to my superiors.
4. Never meddle with others' affairs, but think only of correcting my many faults.
5. My mind will often turn to God.

### Retreat, 1st September 1926

Oh my God, I thank you for granting me the grace of also making a retreat this year. I promise you I will benefit from it to improve my life.

6. No more sins in my life especially this year, but to love you O my God with all my heart and above everything else.
7. Take advantage of events, things, creatures to lift myself up to my Creator and enrich myself with merits for heaven.
8. I want to observe the vows I have made to my God, with great fidelity, especially the vow of poverty, in order to be a true and holy religious.
9. With the Lord's help I would like to correct my defects and not contract any habits.
10. The greatest vigilance over myself, especially over my eyes and in dealing with our boys and people outside.
11. I will renew my vows every day to remind myself that I am a religious.
12. The prudent and good religious will take advantage of every opportunity to humble himself, deny himself, mortify himself, to manifest his love for God and enrich himself with many merits.
13. O religious soul, every attack on your comforts, your whims, freedom for your senses, will also end for you. Blessed are you if you are mortified in everything and attached only to God. Death will be sweet to you.
14. Would I dare appear before Jesus Christ as judge in the state of a bad religious? Oh woe to me, how would I be able to withstand his terrible looks?

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his ever ready, cheerful, precise, complete obedience that brooked no discussion nor ever asked why, as his Rector assures us, were not the fruit of nature alone" (p.51); "The extreme amiability and naturalness of his manner with young people was internally controlled by a supreme vigilance of all the urgings of the heart" (p.79).

15. I have consecrated myself to the service of God with love, and I want to keep my holy vows for his sake and to please him.
16. To advance in perfection, vigilance over myself and custody of my senses. Do everything and every action out of love for and to please God alone. Deep humility and make use of every occasion to mortify myself.
17. I will always have before me the exact observance of my Vows and the holy Rule, and even more so my religious perfection, strongly and constantly adhering to the most profound humility, self-denial, mortification of my senses and doing all my tasks very well, so that they may be acceptable and pleasing to my God and meritorious for my soul.

**Retreat, 25 August 1927**

18. I will put all my effort into perfecting my soul, removing from it all pride, vanity, all sensuality so as to make it worthy of possessing God in Paradise.
19. I want to deny myself, my acts of vanity, my pride, my whims and my comforts and carry my cross every day to be a true disciple of Jesus (cf. Lk 9:23).
20. I will carefully avoid committing even the slightest faults against the infinite majesty of my God.
21. I am now renewing my consecration to my God and I want to be all his, renouncing my passions, my comforts, my whims, and detaching my heart from anything that could prevent me from being all the Lord's.
22. Jesus loved me so much that he suffered, died, and gave himself to me (cf. Gal 2:20b). I too would like to suffer everything for love of him, and to love him and die for him.
23. Oh, how much the Lord has loved me by calling me to religious life, in contrast to many hundreds and thousands of others, to make me all his! How great must my gratitude and love for him be.
24. How I should accept from the Lord's hands the crosses he sends me to pay my dues and to purify my soul from its stains, before presenting myself before his fearful tribunal.
25. I will seek to purify my soul by detaching myself from any earthly and material thing so that I may imitate my Lord Jesus Christ who was so poor.
26. The greatest vigilance over myself, my passions, my thoughts and affections. Never the least attachment to the young.
27. Great vigilance in dealing with people from outside, especially with the other sex, and great vigilance over my eyes.
28. How happy and blessed I must be to have consecrated myself body and soul to my God! How much I must do to keep myself as pure and chaste as an

angel in His presence. How careful I must be never to stain my soul or my body, the august temple of the Most Holy Trinity (cf. 1 Cor 6:19). Therefore, always have God present to me and put into practice the means suggested to me by the Holy Rule.

29. Oh how happy is the religious soul who always strives to detach itself from everything earthly and material, and tries to keep its body and soul spotless, to please its heavenly bridegroom Jesus.
30. Never any complaint about what happens to me, but suffer in silence out of love for Jesus my spouse.
31. Whoever loves God detaches himself from all earthly and material things, denies his own will and disordered appetites, his pride and his vanity.
32. Truly nothing in this life is more precious than suffering, being despised, being humiliated for the love of Jesus who suffered so much and died for us out of love.
33. Be convinced and always keep in mind that hardships, sufferings, pains, humiliations, temptations, forgetfulness and crosses of every kind are the true badge of the love of God for us, and that out of love for him we must receive them for his sake.

#### **Retreat, 16 August 1928**

34. I will never let a Sunday or feast day pass without reading the Holy Rule and carefully pondering what I read in order to put it into practice.
35. I will be generous with the Lord in putting the small Rules into practice, thinking of them as a means of perfection.
36. I will make every effort not to commit the slightest faults, especially of impatience and resentment.
37. I want to observe poverty in scrupulous detail, not looking for my comforts, my whims, and never complaining about what can happen to me – deprivation or anything else that is not to my taste.
38. I will always have death and judgement before me to hold myself ready to appear before the good Jesus.
39. I will be vigilant over my passions and senses to keep myself pure and chaste in soul and body.
40. I want to be very careful to do everything out of obedience, because without obedience we don't deserve anything before the Lord, and I won't be a good religious if I don't do my every deed out of obedience.
41. I will put all my efforts into keeping myself prepared for the death that can happen to me at any moment.

42. I will receive from the hands of the Lord every day whatever may happen to me – sorrows, pains, afflictions – with resignation, whether they come from the hands of God or of my neighbour.
43. I want to be constant in fighting my passions, my comforts, my whims, resentments, acts of impatience and all other defects; suffer in silence and endure everything.

**Retreat, 4 August 1930**

44. I will be very vigilant in not committing even the slightest faults against the holy Rule, but will observe them all.
45. I will be very vigilant in observing the holy Vows: Poverty, Chastity and Obedience.
46. To love my God means not to give him the slightest displeasure either in thought, word or deed, but to very much love my God who loved me so much.
47. Remove from my heart every thought, every desire, every world item of news, to be God's alone in time and eternity.
48. Show the utmost respect to the superior because he is clothed with the authority of God, and never give him the slightest displeasure, because whoever offends the superior offends God himself.
49. I will endeavour to be a holy religious, living so that I will be ready to die any day.
50. I will obey promptly, blindly and cheerfully so as not deprive myself of the merits of obedience.
51. Instead of enriching myself with temporal things, I want to enrich myself with spiritual treasures for eternity, like acts of humility, mortification, charity, self-denial, resignation.
52. I would like to detach myself from every earthly thing in order to love my God better.
53. I will see myself as a guest, a passenger on earth, always looking to heaven which is my homeland and I will seek to do many good works of every kind for heaven.
54. I will detach myself from every earthly thing that prevents me from being all my God's, so as to be ready for the call of my spouse Jesus when he calls me from exile to my heavenly home.
55. I will look out for my defects and will correct myself to be ever more acceptable to my God.

**Retreat, 17 August 1931**

*Live Jesus!*

56. The good religious greatly esteems his vocation as a very singular freely-given grace of the good God.
57. The good religious does everything to be all and only of God, scrupulously observing the promises made to God and to superiors.
58. The good religious tries to do everything to be humble and pure before God and not give him any displeasure.
59. I want to be the good religious trying to make my outward self correspond to my inner self, and look for my defects and correct myself in order to be more and more pleasing to Jesus.
60. I will be judged according to my observance of the holy Rule and the holy Vows, therefore, scrupulous observance of them.
61. The Lord is continually watching me as I go through the battle of temptations and dangers, however ferocious they may be, to crown me one day if I take the courage and strength to overcome them (cf. Mt 11:12; Jas 1:12; 1 Cor 9:24-27).
62. In every place and in all my actions I will always look at my God as He looks at me and I will do everything to please him.
63. My God I am yours and yours I want to be. I intend to do every action of mine, whatever it is, with you and for you. I want to live as a good religious, as a holy religious.
64. I will keep myself ready for when the good Jesus calls me from exile to my heavenly homeland.
65. The good religious keeps all the senses of the body in check and like a good soldier fights all the temptations of the devil, the flesh and the world, and resists them until death.
66. I want to keep detached from everything earthly and for anything I need I will ask permission.
67. Jesus wants to see his religious without blemish, pure in hands, eyes, mind, heart. Go to war against impure sin.

**Retreat, 7 August 1932, in Bethlehem**

68. Every day when I receive Jesus I will renew my religious profession, my vows, to be more fervent in their observance.
69. The works of the religious, however small and simple they may be, are precious and acceptable to God when they are done to please and give glory to the Lord.
70. Oh how much I should appreciate my religious vocation which makes me all the good God's.

71. How many merits I would gain for eternity if I lived as a faithful and good religious, and how much glory I would give to the Lord for so many bad people who live oblivious to the good God and offend him.
72. I will renew my total consecration, that is: my soul with its powers, my body with its feelings, my heart with its affections, not to forget the obligation to be all his.
73. I will be very vigilant over myself and all the occasions that come to me, so as not to offend my God in the least, especially by giving pleasure to the senses.
74. I will try to be delicate in conscience by observing the smallest rules, always being in the presence of God, my father, and I will correct myself of my defects to be more acceptable to the Lord.
75. I will fight against disorderly pleasure and my sensuality to please the Lord and to keep myself pure and holy before my God.
76. How have I behaved in relation to my superior, the holy rules and my duty? How have I behaved in obedience?

#### **Retreat in 1933, in Nazareth – 15 August**

77. God dwells in my soul no less blazing with light and glory than in the glory of heaven.
78. What joy, what peace, what confidence in thinking that God is my Father and loves me very much. That Jesus is my Saviour and Redeemer. What must be my correspondence to their love!
79. When I have the opportunity to talk to young people, I will tell them a few good words about the soul and Jesus.
80. I will give myself to Jesus every moment of the day, trying not to offend him in any way.
81. Oh how much our soul cost the good Jesus! He came down to earth and gave his blood to redeem it. And I respect him so little?
82. I am always in God's presence. I am part of his guard of honour. I will seek to be pure in mind and heart.
83. I will fight sensual pleasure as much as I know how and as much as I can, so that it does not dominate my mind and my affections for a single moment.
84. I have given myself, I have consecrated myself, I have sold myself entirely to my God. So I must be neither of myself, nor of the world, nor of young people.

85. Much attention to my chastity, promptly chase away sensual pleasure, and mortification of the eyes.
86. Consecrating myself body and soul to my God means that I must work only for God, doing my superior's will in everything promptly, exactly and cheerfully.

#### **Retreat made in Nazareth - 7 August 1934**

87. I will keep vigil over myself in order not to offend the Lord in the least way.
88. Oh my God, I renew my total consecration to you and I intend to renew it every moment of my life. I do not want to give you the least displeasure.
89. I will be very careful not to commit small faults, not to fall into the biggest ones.
90. I will keep my senses in check to be all God's and keep peace of heart.
91. I will remove from my heart every affection and every desire for people and things, to be all God's.
92. How happy is the religious soul who strives to always detach itself from everything earthly and material, and tries to keep its body and soul spotless in order to please its heavenly spouse Jesus.
93. Never any complaint about anything that can happen to me, but suffer everything in silence, for the love of Jesus my spouse.

#### **Retreat in Bethlehem, 1935**

94. I want to correct myself of my shortcomings regarding Poverty. When I have God and his grace I am rich enough.
95. I want to be holy and pure as an angel to please the Lord. I will watch carefully over myself so as not to cause the slightest offence to the Lord.
96. I want to mortify myself especially in the eyes, ears and touch, to be all God's.
97. I always want to set a good example by leading an irreproachable life, and that my inner being corresponds to my outer being, so as not to be hypocritical.
98. Often read the Holy Rule to observe the points where I fall short and to correct my shortcomings.
99. Oh how much I have sinned against God my creator, therefore what a great debt I owe to his righteousness! For penance I will observe the Holy Rule and I will be mortified in all my senses.
100. To strive for holiness and my perfection I will try to correct myself of those defects that I often fall into, to please Jesus and be a good religious.
101. I want to make my *rendiconto* well at any cost.

102. How much attention, how much vigilance so as to fight sensual pleasure in me when dealing with people, with our young people, and to treat the body as consecrated to God!
103. I have sold myself, I have consecrated myself to God alone, so my thoughts, my affections, my desires must be for him.
104. The good Jesus did penance for me by suffering so much for me, and for love of him and for my sins I want to suffer everything that happens to me that is painful, painful both in spirit and in body.

#### **Retreat in Bethlehem, 2 August 1936**

105. I will try to sanctify myself and perfect myself by enduring the pains, sufferings, discomforts, ailments that God sends me day by day.
106. The Holy Spirit says: whoever despises small transgressions, small faults, small failings, will little by little fall into the greater ones (cf. Sir 19:1), so pay close attention to myself.
107. I will fight sensual pleasure in me, both in thoughts and in affections, and I will try never to consent to sensual pleasure.
108. Remember that God your Father and Creator accompanies you everywhere. He is in you and with you, and he sees everything that passes through your thoughts and your heart; try to please him in everything you do and give him glory, and try to never stray from him.
109. I will try in everything I do to be at peace and not to get impatient, especially when I deal with my neighbour and with our young people, and to resign myself to everything that can happen to me during the day.

#### **Retreat 1937, 8–14 August, Bethlehem**

110. How happy and blessed I must be to have consecrated myself body and soul to the Lord! How pure and holy I must keep myself as an angel in His presence. How careful I must be never to stain my soul and body, which are the temple of the Most Holy Trinity! (cf. 1 Cor 3:16-17).
111. I have given myself, I have sold myself, I have consecrated myself entirely to God, my master. Therefore, my thoughts, my desires, my actions and my affections will often be directed to Him.
112. I will take the thought of death as counsel and I will try to always keep myself ready to appear before the good Jesus, whom I will try to make my friend.



113. I will make it a habit, as I have always done, to think about judgement and hell in order to live as a good religious person and to detach myself from people and things.
114. Being a true devotee and son of Mary means watching over myself so as not to commit faults against purity, humility and charity.

#### **Retreat made in Nazareth, 21 August 1938**

115. What joy, what happiness is mine in knowing for certain that I am a child of God, heir of paradise (cf. 1 Jn 3:1; Rom 8:16-17), that God is always with me and never abandons me, as long as I am in his grace!
116. Mortal sin strips the soul of its wedding garment and its merits, kills it and sends it to hell if it dies in that state.
117. I will take the thought of death as a counsellor, to live holy and perfectly and to keep myself prepared.
118. *But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these* (1 Tim 6:8), and any excess in food and clothing is contrary to poverty.
119. By becoming a religious I gave myself entirely to my God, body and soul, and He gladly accepted me as His. I will do everything for his greater glory, and to please him I will see that my heart and mind are filled with the love of Jesus.
120. Accept with love everything that may happen to me during the day that is painful, whether it be from God, from my superiors or from my neighbour.

#### **Retreat in Bethlehem, 6 August 1939**

121. I will do everything to keep myself prepared to appear before the Lord at any time. And to keep the things in my infirmarian's office in order, both at home and in the dispensary, and to keep the accounts prepared.
122. I will try not to meddle in the affairs of others and always speak well of others. I will make acts of humility and self-denial.

#### **Various circumstances**

123. I will always try not to fix my eyes on any woman, and to be as brief as I can when I happen to speak to one.
124. I will try not to waste time in idle chatter without profit to my soul. But to occupy it with profit.
125. I will always try to mortify myself at all meals in the refectory.
126. I will do what I can to practise the virtue of humility on every occasion that presents itself.

127. I will promptly and blindly obey the commands of my dear superiors, including in little things.
128. Today, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I want to reform my life completely, trampling on the old man and putting on Jesus Christ the Bridegroom, that is, imitating him in all his virtues, especially humility (cf. Col 3:9-10; Eph 4:22-24; Gal 5:22).
129. I will strive only for my own perfection, not caring what others do or say.
130. I will try every day to become more and more good and virtuous, to improve my life.
131. Mastery over thoughts, words, deeds.
132. Inner and outward patience.
133. Union with Jesus in the Host. Imitation. Purity of soul.
134. Hunger: read some edifying words from Holy Scripture.
135. Thirst: read the Holy Scripture with the intention of obtaining the grace of contrition or devotion.
136. Hospitality = spend an hour of attention to the Lord.
137. Clothing = endeavouring to practise some virtues.
138. Visiting the sick = resisting defects or temptations.
139. Freeing prisoners = praying for sinners or souls in purgatory.
140. Profound respect, prompt obedience to my dear superiors and see God in them.
141. Speak only when necessary and let others talk.
142. I will often raise up my thoughts to my Creator by means of very frequent and fervent brief prayers.
143. At death I will reap what I have sown in life.
144. I will battle with myself every day in order to correspond to my religious state with holiness of life.

\* \* \*

- non  
 e lamontarmi mai di quanto pu  
 accadere di privazione ad altro 8  
 che non sia di mio gusto
- 5 Avro sempre tenersi a me la  
 morte e il giudizio per tenermi  
 apparecchiato a comparire. Uno 9  
 anzi al buon Gesù
- 6 Vigilerò sopra le mie passioni  
 e i miei sensi per mantenermi  
 puro e casto di anima e cor  
 po
- 7 Voglio stare molto attento per 10  
 ogni cosa per obbedienza perché  
 senza obbedienza non si merita  
 nulla avanti il Signore e non  
 sarò buon religioso se non  
 faccio ogni mia operazione per
- obbedienza  
 Mettero tutto l'impegno per tenermi  
 preparato alla morte che  
 può capitarmi in un momen  
 to all'altro  
 Riceverò dalle mani del Sig.  
 non ogni giorno ciò che può  
 capitarmi di dolori, di pene, di  
 afflizioni con rassegnazione  
 sia che vengano dalle mani  
 di Dio o dal prossimo  
 Voglio essere costante nel con  
 battere le mie passioni le mie  
 comodità i miei capricci i  
 risentimenti, le impazienze  
 e tutti gli altri difetti soffri  
 in silenzio e sopportare tutto



## Section 2

# His plan for perfect holiness

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### Introduction

What did Simon Srugi want to make of his life? What was the goal he aspired to? What were the paths he sought and the means he chose to reach that goal? The answers to these questions are contained in his biography and in what he wrote. In the historical and biographical section of this volume, I have documented the facts, actions and sayings, recording the testimonies of his contemporaries. In the second section I have focused on what he makes known about himself through his religious writings. By studying them carefully, we can grasp the terms of what we can call his lexicon, in which there are five key words: religion, soul, perfection, holiness, love.

“Soul” and “religion”, in either their nominal or adjectival forms (the religious, the call to religion, the religious vocation, religious life, religious vows, etc.), are the most frequent of them and often coupled or combined: we could say that with the expression “religious soul” Simon is pointing to his very own identity. “Perfection” and “holiness” occur dozens of times, and are specified both by qualifying adjectives (evangelical, religious, Christian) and by the possessive (“my holiness”, “my perfection”), giving them the character of concrete personalisation.

Some verbs related to the key-words indicate a whole series of dynamic actions: turn your thoughts to ..., tend to ..., advance, acquire, soon reach the summit of perfection, lead to the heights of perfection, make a profession of the highest perfection, make great profit... and arrive at perfection, to maintain that “simplicity of heart which contains within itself the perfection of perfection”.

These favourite words and phrases of Srugi’s reveal his constant tendency: to become holy by practising love of God and neighbour, to the point of perfect charity! When linked together and taken in context, they form the fabric of the

discourse, with the dominant themes of the “personal life project” that he took care to outline and realise. In the following pages, by letting him speak for himself, I try to present it in a more unified and developed synthesis.

### **1. The vocation to religious life: freely-given grace and commitment**

The soul receives everything from God; creatures are to serve as a ladder to climb up to Him. Everyone is called to salvation and predestined to glory; Christian life as a lay person is already a state of “salvation”, and consecrated life even more so. “The good religious greatly esteems his vocation as a very singular freely-given grace of the good God, a sign of his special love and a privileged choice, unlike thousands of others.” So it requires a more generous correspondence from religious and those consecrated to God: “The Lord wants much more love from a religious than from other faithful, and he has the right to do so ... I will seek to confirm my call and election to the religious state by means of many good works (cf 2 Pt 1:10)”.

As a response to the divine call, *religious consecration* is the definitive giving of one's whole self to God. Srugi expresses this in radical terms: “I have given myself, I have consecrated myself, I have sold myself entirely to my God. So I must be neither of myself, nor of the world, nor of young people ... I have sold myself, I have consecrated myself to God alone, so my thoughts, my affections, my desires must be for him ... By becoming a religious I gave myself entirely to my God, body and soul, and He gladly accepted me as His.” The practical shape of this radical approach consists of observing the religious vows (or evangelical counsels). The resolution to be “all God's”, to belong only to Him, features as a refrain in his writings.

*The motive* that sustains Simon in this total and exclusive consecration of himself to God is love: “I have consecrated myself to the service of God with love, and I want to keep my holy vows for his sake and to please him ... Being religious is nothing other than being “bound to God” by means of a continuous mortification of ourselves, and living only for God; therefore our heart, our eyes, our tongue and our hands and all the rest are to be used only for the glory of God.” One rhyming verse sums it up clearly: “To pray, to suffer, to live by love divine: this destiny, O religious, is ultimately thine.”

*The religious house* is, in the first instance, “God's house”, “the house of divine service”. But it is also “a hospital for the spiritually ill who want to be healed”, therefore they have recourse to Jesus on the cross, and to his holy wounds. It is a school of divine discipline: “Whoever desires to live according to nature,

let them remain in the world; and those who have decided to live according to grace, let them come to religion, which is none other than a school of self-denial and self-mortification; it therefore offers many tools for mortification both inwardly and outwardly ..." Indeed it is "an academy of exact correction" in view of perfect union with God. It is "an angelic life", similar to what is depicted in Jacob's Ladder (Cf. Gen 28:12): where religious "ascend ... through charity and descend ... through humility". It is "a mystical hive" where people "gather to produce the honey of the celestial virtues". It is a field of apostolate where they work for the salvation of souls.

## 2. Intention and goal

The most important business of all is *saving one's soul*: "Attend to your business diligently, but know that you have no business that is more important than your eternal salvation." Our supreme concern is to achieve perfection: "Become saints and pay no attention to anything else. What does anything else matter compared to this necessary task? ... This is your goal: sanctify yourself. But it is a very high goal. Save yourself! Sanctify yourself! This must be your only yearning; what can the rest serve for if it does not lead to this?" "Give yourselves to God without any half-measures and put off everything else, for time is short and we can hardly be here for long. And blessed are those who love Jesus Christ without half-measures." Simon wanted to be not only a good religious but a holy religious: "God is the soul's only food, the only one capable of satisfying its hunger and thirst ... The more you are devoured by *hunger and thirst for justice*, the more you will be satiated one day (cf. Mt 5:6)." He insists that everything must be underpinned by the "**right intention**", meaning the intention to serve and **please God** alone, to do everything for his glory, **out of love** for him: The good religious "looks to God alone ... whose glory and pleasure" he seeks with the greatest commitment. "God, in his immense goodness, deserves that everything should be done in his honour, even if there were neither heaven nor hell", punishment or reward. The good religious does not go looking for human support, and avoids both vain fear and vain glory. "In every place and in all my actions I will always look at my God as He looks at me and I will do everything to please him. It is advisable to do everything with the aim of pleasing God alone, of serving and glorifying him; without this right intention our actions, no matter how sensational and great, are lost ... giving life to our works through the holiness and purity of our motives, that is, to please him in everything and for everything."

The resolutions “in everything and always” to do “what is pleasing to God”, “because it pleases God so”, to make himself pleasing to him ... appear very frequently; Simon wanted to imitate Jesus in this (“*I always do what is pleasing to him*”: Jn 8:29), taking his cues from the classics of Christian spirituality.<sup>51</sup> He pursued his path with simplicity of heart and purity of intention also doing good “before men”, not so they would glorify him, but the Father: “Woe to him who sets himself up for the honour and praise of men: he puts himself at risk of throwing away the merit he may acquire, and to him might apply the Saviour's saying: “*Truly I tell you, they have already received their reward*” (Mt 6:1-6, 16-18).

Others’ opinions, be they favourable or contrary or even slanderous, did not count: “It matters little that others have an opinion of you. You have a more certain and incorrupt witness within your soul: question your conscience and believe it ... To be troubled at every noise is a sign that someone has little self-esteem. You will always be unhappy if the fear of contempt stirs you ... Try to do good then let people say what they want ... Expect nothing from men but everything from God. ... Those who love God do not seek to be esteemed and loved by men: their only desire is to be well-liked by God, who is the only object of their love.”

*God is the ultimate end* and the supreme good: “To those for whom God is everything, the world must be nothing.” He is the criterion for what is important, on the basis of whom everything is ordered: from earth to heaven/paradise, from time to eternity, body to soul, suffering/sorrow to joy/bliss, death/mortification to resurrection and eternal life, from earthly exile to our heavenly homeland, from our journey/pilgrimage to our goal. Given this overall perspective, Srugi concludes: “Eternity makes every toil seem easy, every sorrow joyful, every pain sweet and small.”

### 3. Foundation and building

**3.1.** It is necessary to dig the foundations of “*deep humility*” without which nothing solid and lasting can be built: “You will be able to build this tower of evangelical perfection that you have begun to the extent and proportion, O religious soul, of the depth of its foundation in humility (cf. Lk 14:28). If you want to build true virtues in your soul, try first to have a good foundation in humility ... The more humble you are, O religious, the more you will advance and grow in virtue and perfection ...Whoever is not very humble can never

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<sup>51</sup> For example: Lorenzo Scupoli, *The Spiritual Combat*, Chapters 10-11; St Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book 8, Chapters 1-6, and especially Book 9, Chapters 1-9.



acquire any virtue." As a consequence, humiliations must be accepted, valued and loved, for conforming oneself to Jesus *meek and humble of heart* and to root out pride: "Among the virtues that the religious must ask of the Lord is humility, since we all have a great deal of pride in our hearts."

**3.2. Always doing God's will**, because "The foundation of all virtue and holiness is found in doing the will of God, which forms the merit and worth of all our actions." Accept everything from his hands: "Happy is the one who is subject to God, who desires nothing anxiously, who adapts himself to events, and says: God wants me healthy, he wants me sick, he wants me needy; I am ready for anything." Conformity to his will implies the renunciation of one's own will: "The greatest gift we can receive from God is that of being able to overcome ourselves by renouncing our own will ... Perfection consists: 1st in total mortification of our appetites; 2nd in true self-contempt; 3rd in perfect conformity to God's will. Whoever lacks one of these virtues is out of the way of perfection." The affirmation that obedient listening to the Word of God is worth more than any sacrifice is first and foremost biblical doctrine (cf. Ps 40:6-8, which the Epistle to the Hebrews 10:5-7 attributes to Jesus) and is placed at the heart of Christian asceticism by all spiritual masters, such as Alphonsus Liguori, from whom Simon took this last maxim.

In practice, this means observing the religious vows: "Conform yourselves to the Rule, which is an expression of the divine will: and moreover, do everything as God wants it, that is, with all diligence, exactness and perfection, according to the grace given you. ... I will always have before me the exact observance of my Vows and the holy Rule, and even more so my religious perfection, strongly and constantly adhering to the most profound humility, self-denial, mortification of my senses and doing all my tasks very well, so that they may be acceptable and pleasing to my God and meritorious for my soul."

This habitual attitude gave rise to the unalterable peace and tranquillity that Sruigi radiated: "Oh, how much peace and contentment a good and mortified religious has, one who treads diligently and solicitously in matters that benefit him, doing what he should as a good religious. There is no contentment that is its equal ... Absolute abandonment to the divine will is the secret of the joy of the saints ... Where there is perfect uniformity to God's will, neither sadness nor melancholy can ever reign ... The happiness of pleasing God by doing all things well is a sample of paradise ... If you do what you have been taught, you will live very happily and experience the rewards of heaven in this life, at least in small doses."

**3.3. Obeying the superiors promptly, cheerfully, in a spirit of faith.** Obedience is the badge of the true religious: “The Lord says: Above all, it is useful and very necessary for spiritual profit, that every religious gives himself to perfect obedience ... Consecrating myself body and soul to my God means that I must work only for God, doing my superior's will in everything promptly, exactly and cheerfully ... Profound respect, prompt obedience to my dear superiors and see God in them.”

Among the salutary thoughts we read: “The truly obedient person does not know what it means to delay, nor about tomorrow or the day after, nor does he say ‘I will go right now’, like the lazy ones do. Instead he keeps his ears pinned to hear what is commanded, his feet ready to go and do it, his hands out to do it, and so promptly does he do it that it seems he has anticipated what would be asked of him.” No work is meritorious if done outside of obedience; while “there is more value in picking up a straw out of obedience than fasting an entire Lent through one’s own choice”. According to Srugi, obedience is a more reliable path than prayer alone: “Many religious have become saints without prayer, but none without obedience ... The perfection of the religious lies in exact obedience to his Rules. The religious who will be most faithful in observing his Rules will certainly be more perfect ... There is no road that leads more quickly to the summit of perfection than that of obedience.”

**3.4. Fighting to eradicate faults and to grow in obedience.** “I want to be constant in fighting my passions, my comforts, my whims, resentments, acts of impatience and all other defects ... The good religious keeps all the senses of the body in check and like a good soldier fights all the temptations of the devil, the flesh and the world, and resists them until death ... The Lord is continually watching me as I go through the battle of temptations and dangers, however ferocious they may be, to crown me one day if I take the courage and strength to overcome them (cf. Jas 1:12; 1 Cor 9:24-27) ... I will battle with myself every day in order to correspond to my religious state with holiness of life.”<sup>52</sup>

The gradual purification of his imperfections was obtained by receiving the sacraments (“Commit yourself, religious soul, to keeping your soul white, keeping your heart always clean from every fault, so therefore go to confession often and to communion fervently”), and by taking refuge in the Heart of Jesus, furnace of love, which eliminates the soul’s imperfections like a crucible (“When it has committed offences it must rest on my Heart with great confidence. All

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<sup>52</sup> For these issues too (“battle”, “soldier”, “battle with myself”, “The Lord is watching...”, hoping for “the crown prepared for the winners” ...), Srugi could have taken his cue from Chapters 15-16 of the *Spiritual Combat*, by Lorenzo Scupoli.

your infidelities vanish in this burning hearth: they are seared by love and all consumed"). In this context, Simon takes on the task of doing reparation, expiation, but without making a martyr of himself: "The religious soul mourns time misspent and offence against God and wishes to punish himself in any way possible. Therefore he wants to be humble and patient, and with much charity to embrace creatures for love of the creator, so that he desires to be hated and despised, and desires to suffer many insults and torments, and to be persecuted by every one, because he knows the goodness of God and his own cowardice and misery."

#### **4. Theological love at the heart of consecrated life**

On the basis of the first commandment "*You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might*" (Dt 6:5; Mt 22:37), Simon's religious life was unified by the primacy of the theological love he received and reciprocated.

**4.1. Love of and for the Heavenly Father.** "If Caesar had made you an adopted child of his, who could put up with your haughty behaviour? But you are the child of God, redeemed with the blood of Jesus Christ and of such a sublime origin you don't even remember? ...What joy, what peace, what confidence in thinking that God is my Father and loves me very much. That Jesus is my Saviour and Redeemer. What must be my correspondence to their love! ... What joy, what happiness is mine in knowing for certain that I am a child of God, heir of paradise (cf. 1 Jn 3:1; Rom 8:16-17), that God is always with me and never abandons me, as long as I am in his grace! ... I will try to be delicate in conscience by observing the smallest rules, always being in the presence of God, my father, and I will correct myself of my defects to be more acceptable to the Lord." Srugi enjoyed the closeness of a Father who is both tender and strong; I believe that he attributed to himself what he copied down from Sister Marie-Marta Chambon's book: "She nurtured a tenderness, a childlike confidence for the Eternal Father, and is filled by Him with divine caresses." He wrote in his small notebook of resolutions: "Remember that God your Father and Creator accompanies you everywhere. He is in you and with you, and he sees everything that passes through your thoughts and your heart; try to please him in everything you do and give him glory, and try to never stray from him." Jesus reminds him that the Father tests his beloved children and friends with suffering: "whoever is more greatly loved by my Father receives greater suffering from him (cf Prov. 3:12). Look at these wounds; your sorrows will never reach this extent. It is an error of judgement to think that my Father admits someone to his friendship

without suffering ... Lord, you pay anyone who does some service for you with some affliction. Oh what an inestimable price this is for those who truly love you! ... Those who suffer are as dear to God as the apple of his eye (Ps 17:8). The divine gaze rests preferentially upon them. When you suffer, rest assured that you are acceptable to God. This is a truth written in the holy books (cf. Prov 3:11-12; Heb 12:5-7) ... Be convinced and always keep in mind that hardships, sufferings, pains, humiliations, temptations, forgetfulness and crosses of every kind are the true badge of the love of God for us, and that out of love for him we must receive them for his sake."

And this is how Simon intends to reciprocate the Father's love in practice: "Only one ambition is just: the ambition to love God ... The love of God is the holy fire that must always burn on the altar of our heart. (cf. Lev 6:5-6)." The individual, with all their spiritual and bodily faculties, is offered as a *living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God* (Rom 12:1). Simon did not use "liturgical" or "priestly" terms, but in fact this habitual attitude of giving himself totally to God in sacrifice/as victim inflamed by love, was how he exercised his liturgical priesthood in its most proper sense, not ritual but existential (as I have documented in the third "window"). "Whoever loves God is in God: by ceasing to live in himself he lives in him (cf. 1 Jn 4:12-16 *passim*) in whom everything has its life." This love was the reason for his absolute abandonment to the divine will, his dying to everything to live in God's love. It must be exclusive and uncompromising love, i.e. without sharing it with other loves, because these obscure the divine light in the intellect and deprive the will of emotional union with God. "Those who love God do not seek to be esteemed and loved by men: their only desire is to be well-liked by God, who is the only object of their love." According to his own practical logic, Simon added a consideration dictated by his saintly concern: "Love God if you want to love yourself; for loving God is good for you, not for him."

**4.2. Love that conforms to Jesus Christ.** "Jesus loved me so much that he suffered, died, and gave himself to me (cf. Gal 2:20b). I too would like to suffer everything for love of him, and to love him and die for him." It is good to contemplate Jesus but it is better to conform oneself to him: "happy is the soul that will have contemplated well but even better, put it into practice." The book by St Alphonsus Liguori *The Practice of Loving Jesus Christ* was one that Simon read most. Imitating Jesus in his attitude was the main purpose of devotion to Jesus the Adolescent, recalled by the prayer that every member of the confraternity said each day, committing himself to be "*pure like you, humble like you, industrious like you, obedient like you, gentle and good like you*". "Do not believe that we are honouring the birth of Jesus Christ unless we change our habits and become like

children through the humble disposition of our heart (cf. Mt 18:3) ... Jesus Christ, though all-powerful, in order to teach us to obey, *was subject* in all things to the Blessed Virgin and to St Joseph (Lk 2:51)." The readiness to lower oneself ("Be humble, because the gate to heaven is low, which is Christ (cf. Jn 10:7, 9), and no one can enter it without lowering himself"), becomes self-sacrificing service as far as the cross, on which He showed his perfect union with the Father. To sum up: "By becoming a religious I gave myself entirely to my God, body and soul, and He gladly accepted me as His. I will do everything for his greater glory, and to please him I will see that my heart and mind are filled with the love of Jesus."

**4.2.1. - Sruigi's life was strongly focused on the paschal mystery of Christ crucified and risen.** The "*Offices of Holy Week*" in Arabic and Italian are among the personal books he used frequently, not just to prepare himself to act as master of ceremonies, but to absorb the grace of the mysteries celebrated. "Because the religious is consecrated to Jesus, he must be nailed to the cross with him in order to be able to die like Jesus and rise to new life like Him. St Paul said: *...always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies* (2 Cor 4:10)." The crucified Jesus is the most perfect model whom the religious is called to copy, in order to become one with him, "until you can say with the Apostle: *"it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me"* (Gal 2:20)." This is the deepest meaning of his habitual greeting "*Live Jesus!*", and for Simon it embraced everything: "*May Jesus live in our hearts, our minds, our works, in our life and in our death.*"

Simon expressed himself in very practical terms: "The time here below is given to us only so we can reproduce the divine Model Jesus in us ... Truly nothing in this life is more precious than suffering, being despised, being humiliated for the love of Jesus who suffered so much and died for us out of love ... The Son of God equal to the Father takes the form of a servant and wants to be humiliated and dishonoured, and I, dust and ashes, wish to be respected and acknowledged by men?" Two are the main virtues of God's perfect friends: the first is a profound humility in imitation of and for the sake of the One who humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:7-8). The second is perfect charity."<sup>53</sup>

Simon summarised this in some quite effective words: "Carry your daily cross each day with the grace that each day brings", but with love: "The cross, if it is loved, is only half a cross, because the love of Jesus softens everything, and

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<sup>53</sup> St Francis de Sales, interpreting the mystical meaning of the composition of chrism (olive oil mixed with balm) says that humility perfects us with regard to God, and meekness, which is the flower of charity, with regard to our neighbour: *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part 3, Chapter 8.

one does not suffer much except when one loves little." He recommended to the confreres: "Have a tender devotion to the passion of Jesus Christ if you wish to grow in his love"; and for himself he decided: "I want to deny myself, my acts of vanity, my pride, my whims and my comforts and carry my cross every day to be a true disciple of Jesus (cf. Lk 9:23)."

One particular aspect of this conforming love is **devotion to the Holy Wounds and to the Sacred Heart**, which the two manuscripts of the "Revelations" to Marie-Marta Chambon speak of at length. Wounds in the side, heart, head, feet and hands are present in the glorious body of the Risen Lord, and are now the seat of divine mercy, source of all graces. Our actions, united with Jesus' glorious wounds, are the most pleasing offering we can make to the Father. As we know, every day Simon used to associate the wounds and ailments of the sick people he treated, with this liturgical action. They are most meritorious for us and most efficacious for the conversion of sinners and the salvation of souls; the apostolic dimension of these devotions is explicit and recurrent: "The best consolation we can offer to the Heart of Jesus is to bring souls to him." In summary, **Jesus on the cross is both Simon's book and his teacher**: "Jesus says: the Crucified one must be your favourite book. All true knowledge lies in the study of my wounds; knowledge of love is not learned from books, it is only given to the soul who looks upon the divine Crucified one and speaks with him heart to heart. Look at my crown of thorns and you will understand mortification; at my outstretched hands, and you will learn obedience; seeing me stripped bare on the cross, you will learn poverty."

**4.2.2. Jesus as friend and bridegroom.** It can be said that Srugi was in love with the Eucharistic Jesus and lived in **spousal** communion with him: "How great is the love of the Lord and the goodness he shows us by calling himself the bridegroom of our souls (cf. Mt 25:1-10; Mk 2:19-20)." Be all his, therefore, in body and soul. Jesus is the Bridegroom crucified and crowned with thorns and he wants us to imitate him: "Religious souls are souls consecrated to suffering. I would like to see in my brides those who are likewise crucified. Should not the bride be like the bridegroom?" The crown of thorns is "the chosen gift that Jesus gives his privileged ones, his brides". But Jesus is also crowned with glory: "Today, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I want to reform my life completely, trampling on the old man and putting on Jesus Christ the Bridegroom, that is, imitating him in all his virtues, especially humility." This spousal bond is comfort in life's difficulties and inspires confidence in the hour of death: "The soul that does not rest on the bosom of its bridegroom Jesus (cf. Jn 13:25) in its sorrows, in its work, is wasting time ... Happy are those religious who desire

the arrival of the Bridegroom and leave this world to receive him with due preparation (cf. Mt 25:6)."<sup>54</sup>

**4.3. Love for our Blessed Mother**, loving mother and helper, to whom Simon poured out his affectionate prayer at the end of work. He endeavours to imitate her in life ("Following Mary's example I must attend to my sanctification with all solicitude") to be able to have a peaceful death like hers: "If you want a death similar to the Virgin Mary's, be accustomed to living united to God with the bond of charity, detaching your heart from every earthly affection and acting only for God's glory ... Those who dedicate themselves to Mary, those who consecrate themselves to her, those who honour and love her, are as certain that they are going to heaven as if they were already there." Simon recommends: "The best way to acquire the love of God is true devotion to Our Blessed Lady, and to visit her frequently" in church. These visits are a source of special assistance from this most gracious Mother, both in life and at the point of death, and ensure the beauty of paradise in the next life. We know that reciting "the seven joys of Mary in paradise" was Simon's personal way of ending his days on earth and anticipating the joy of heaven.

## 5. The way forward

In his search for evangelical perfection, Simon did not become a perfectionist, but proceeded with great balance, harmonising intellect and reason, will and affections, the ideal and the real, as a true spiritual son of St John Bosco.

**5.1. Realism, vigilance and perseverance.** "The task of the religious must be to cultivate their spirit well, to root out the bad shoots that our depraved nature constantly allows to grow, such that there is always something that has to be redone." Following St Francis de Sales' distinction between feeling and consenting, in the light of Paul's distinction between the spiritual man and the carnal man, Simon writes: "The difference between spiritual men who attend to perfection, and carnal and sensual men (cf. 1 Cor 2:12-15) who do not do so, does not lie in feeling or not feeling the difficulties and repugnance of the flesh, but in letting oneself be carried away by them, or not. The spiritual man does not heed the cries and demands of gluttony and the sensual appetite, nor does he let himself be carried away by them. And this is the point: not heeding

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<sup>54</sup> Even without having read Origen's works on prayer, or the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* of St Bonaventure, Simon was one of the "little ones" to whom the Spirit revealed that the most intimate mysteries are grasped not with intelligence but with loving wisdom, and that where the disciple and the friend stop, the bridegroom is introduced.

temptations and the appetites that arise, nor giving in to them.” Then he adds realistically: “Without the passions, virtue would be done away with. Where there is no battle, there are no victories ... How many victories you have had over your enemies, how many crowns you have received from God: how many humiliations and sorrows, as well as delights and splendours. Multiply your virtuous acts now and He will enrich you not only with the gifts of his grace, but also with glory.

Another **very realistic** admonition: in this battle, “Do not seek your enemies in the public square, while the most bitter one is lurking at your door. The enemy is hidden within you (cf. Gen 4:2-8), indeed you are that very one. Therefore look at your soul from within yourself.” In one of his more developed reflections which echoes the admonition of 1 Jn 2:16, Simon takes from St Alphonsus Liguori the way in which to overcome the four disordered tendencies that are at war within us (see PES no. 150, p. 202).

He insists, therefore, on **vigilance**, for example in the resolutions taken during the retreat in 1926 and 1927: “The greatest vigilance over myself, especially over my eyes and in dealing with our boys and people outside ... To advance in perfection, vigilance over myself and custody of my senses. Do everything and every action out of love for and to please God alone. Deep humility and make use of every occasion to mortify myself ... The greatest vigilance over myself, my passions, my thoughts and affections. Never the least attachment to the young ... Great vigilance in dealing with people from outside, especially with the other sex, and great vigilance over my eyes.” Custody of the senses is essential: “Everything you have earned over a long time and with great effort will disappear very easily through those doors of the senses if you do not keep custody over them, and you will end up empty and without anything.” Have recourse to suitable means: “Be vigilant against the temptations of this life with prayer, mortification, and trust in your God.” If the wind of pride rises, it is extinguished by recourse to the stern Pauline admonitions: “Do not become proud or puffed up because of your good works; think of your frailty and you will humble yourself. Think that you are but *a vessel of clay* (2 Cor 4:7) and glass, and always be humble before your God, lest you lose his grace ... It matters little what others think of us, so long as God approves of our action. We must never prevail over our conscience, since this can deceive us, but always have God’s judgement before our eyes” (cf. 1 Cor 4:3-4). In conclusion: “*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*” (Phil 2:12). Srugi also dismantles the misleading comparison with a more comfortable state of life: “Oh religious soul, let not the *wide and seemingly flower-strewn path* of the world flatter you; oh if only you knew how many thorns those roses are armed with and how many cruel monsters



tear the wretched people of the world apart! Happy are you who have decided to follow the *narrow* way of your Divine Redeemer (cf. Mt 7:13-14).

**5.2. Take things gradually with practicality and simplicity:** “We cannot win the battles of the spirit without first having won the battles of the flesh ... Remember that the more you apply yourself to spiritual things, the greater will be your mortification of the senses.” First there is a need to conquer gluttony, then the other vices. “Proceed in accordance with the measure of grace communicated, carrying out simple and ordinary tasks, paying attention not to the quantity but to the quality that is given by the degree of love. Let us willingly submit to the diligent and punctual observance of our rules, and with simplicity of heart, without wanting to double up on what we do, since God does not have regard to the multiplicity of things we do for his sake, but only to the fervour of the charity with which we do them.” This invitation echoes the instruction Don Bosco gave his boys and confreres, and the teaching of St Francis de Sales that Srugi wrote down: “Our predestination to glory is not connected with extraordinary favours but with the **virtues of our state** ... Your special holiness must be the holiness of every day and moment. What a consolation it is for you, religious soul, to know that in order to become holy you do not have to seek your perfection outside of yourself, but rather in carrying out your daily exercises as you must.” In this respect Simon encourages himself: “The Lord wants you to think about always grasping and using the opportunities to serve him and practise virtues minute by minute. Practise small things, without which big things are often false and fallacious.”

**5.3. Diligence, reasonableness and friendliness.** Avoiding idleness means making prompt use of the present time, of uncertain duration, so as to accumulate merits for eternity: “I must hasten to weave my crown for paradise with many good works, because the time of my death is approaching ... Forget the past and keep your gaze continually fixed on the long way you still have to travel along the path of virtue (cf. Phil 3:13)”. Another habitual attitude of Simon’s was diligence in everything: combined with solicitude, exactitude and perfection, scrupulous observance and delicacy of conscience, it is necessary to journey to heaven by overcoming temptations, and to prepare oneself for the particular judgement; however, it must be free of anxiety. The spiritual battle to gain the Kingdom of God requires fortitude and even “violence”; but Simon, with the mature balance inspired by Don Bosco’s educative and spiritual method, points out that they must be combined with a sense of proportion, sound reason and loving-kindness. The resolve to heal spiritual illnesses must be radical, “but delicately, pleasantly and lovingly make this resolution”. The Gospel invitation to “hate” oneself (Lk 14:26; Jn 12:25), needs to be tempered

by reason: “By reasonably hating yourself, you shall preserve yourself; and you shall lose yourself by loving yourself ill (cf. Jn 12:25).” The same applies when dealing with our neighbour: sometimes it is necessary to correct, but it needs to be done without anger: “Whoever loves his neighbour as himself, kindly and meekly tolerates and puts up with his defects and failures.”<sup>55</sup>

## 6. Practices and means of sanctification

Holiness is not something we get “ready-made” nor is it achieved in a day; it is the result of the work of years, brought about jointly by divine grace and our cooperation; this was also the case with Our Lady: “The Virgin Mary’s blessedness is the fruit of her holiness and her good works. Oh, religious soul, when will you understand this? It is not only what God has done for you that will give you the right to eternal reward, but also what you have done for him.” Srugi leaves nothing to chance; in his plan for holiness he precisely identifies the exercises to be carried out and the concrete means to use. There are many of them and they take up a good number of pages in his writings; I am choosing the most significant of them.

**6.1. Remain in the presence of God:** “I am always in God’s presence. I am part of his guard of honour. I will seek to be pure in mind and heart ... How careful I must be never to stain my soul or my body, the august temple of the Most Holy Trinity! Therefore, always have God present to me and put into practice the means suggested to me by the Holy Rule ... The presence of God and the closeness of his judgement must be a motivation for moderation and modesty for us in all our actions ... Whoever walks constantly in the presence of God (cf. Gen 17:1), will always be accountable to him for his deeds, and will never lose his love for him by allowing sin to occur.”

Convinced that “God dwells in my soul no less blazing with light and glory than in the glory of heaven”, Simon cultivates *recollection*, the “hidden life” and *silence*. This allows him to listen to the voice of God, engage with him in the *prayer of meditation* (“If you are not careful to observe silence, you will never acquire perfection and will never be a man of prayer”) raise his mind from earth to heaven: “Continuous silence and self-forgetfulness, and withdrawing from the

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<sup>55</sup> “The care and diligence due to our ordinary business free from any solicitude, anxiety and restlessness” is the virtue that St Francis de Sales teaches us to practise in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part 3, Chap. 10. Simon personified this through his imperturbably serene approach. Meekness, friendliness and reason are other characteristic features of the spirituality of Francis de Sales, that Don Bosco took up in his brief treatise on *The Preventive System in the education of Youth*, included as an appendix to the *Salesian Constitutions*.

clamour of worldly things, lifts up the heart and has us ponder heavenly things, and turn our heart to them ... One of the virtues that the religious must acquire at all costs is silence ... Recollection is as necessary to the soul as rest is to the body", and as a consequence, even our words will be a reflection of this interior life: "If God were the object of your love, if you were concerned about your salvation, no one would hear you speak except about God, virtue and perfection."

Union with God is also expressed through very frequent and fervent **momentary prayers** that Srugi understands as "sighs of love for God", affectionate outbursts of the heart towards him: "Often aspire to God with short and ardent thrusts of your heart; give him your soul a thousand times a day ... Your special holiness must be the holiness of every day and moment: nor can it come about except through brief prayers and affectionate outpourings of the heart towards God."

**6.2. Renew consecration and multiply meritorious acts of virtue.** Every day, Simon renewed his religious consecration and confirmed it through his annual resolutions: "Every day when I receive Jesus I will renew my religious profession, my vows, to be more fervent in their observance ... I will renew my total consecration, that is: my soul with its powers, my body with its feelings, my heart with its affections, not to forget the obligation to be all his ... Oh my God, I renew my total consecration to you and I intend to renew it every moment of my life. I do not want to give you the least displeasure." This committed Simon to the practice of good works and all the virtues: "Do you wish to make your works meritorious, whatever they may be? Do them in **union with God**, from whom comes the mighty power that gives life to what we do, for he is the one who is *the way, the truth and the life* (Jn 14:6) ... The Lord is so good that, so long as nothing is opposed to Christian virtues, he willingly accepts our common works if we do them with the pure intention of giving him glory and pleasure ... The works of the religious, however small and simple they may be, are precious and acceptable to God when they are done to please and give glory to the Lord." He gave himself to these commitments consistently: "Instead of enriching myself with temporal things, I want to enrich myself with spiritual treasures for eternity, like acts of humility, mortification, charity, self-denial, resignation." In the light of the Gospel "we need to arm ourselves with holy works" in order to gain merit: "Proceed in such a way that you earn more and more merit for heaven ... Take advantage of events, things, creatures to lift myself up to my Creator and enrich myself with merits for heaven ... The prudent and good religious will take advantage of every opportunity to humble himself, deny himself, mortify himself, to manifest his love for God and enrich himself

with many merits. Hence the warning: “The only true repentance is that which brings about a change in us ... Long prayers without mortification are useless.”

Among the virtues he practised, in first place were **humility** (“If you want to arrive at the height of perfection, then truly seek to love being misunderstood, insults, slander, in imitation of Jesus our teacher ... Really give yourself to the practice of humiliation, and you will know that this is the quickest and shortest way”) and **charity** in its different forms. Charity means accommodating the mistakes made by our fellow human beings, putting up with their shortcomings, **forgiving** their offences, taking it for granted that “Truly humble people never believe they have been wronged.” In the shrine at Betgamāl, every day Simon saw depictions of the crucified Jesus praying “*Pater dimitte illis*”, and of St Stephen who forgave those who stoned him. Encouraged by their example he reached an heroic state of virtue, forgiving the one who accused him of causing the death of a woman suffering from gangrene, or the one who tried to stab him while travelling on the train. He also treated the group of young thugs who attacked him in the clinic, almost overwhelming him, and even treated one of the assumed murderers of his Rector, Fr Mario Rosin.

**6.3. Patience and controlling one’s temper.** “Wait patiently for the Lord and He will deliver you. God does things slowly, but he does them well.” Take refuge in the wounds of the crucified Jesus: “My holy wounds are balm and comfort in suffering. When you have some sorrow, something that brings suffering, you need to promptly place it in my wounds and your pain will be alleviated ... Nothing is so painful that you cannot tolerate it patiently if you remember the passion of Jesus Christ ... St Basil said: Strive to acquire patience because it is the greatest virtue of the soul; strive to acquire it so that you may soon reach the summit of perfection. Patience is the sovereign remedy of the soul; impatience is the poison of the heart. The patient soul rises as tribulations increase. Let them persecute you; God will one day see to the persecution of your enemies, and for you will remain the crown of patience, no less beautiful than that of martyrdom.”

He went from beliefs to resolutions: “I will try to sanctify myself and perfect myself by enduring the pains, sufferings, discomforts, ailments that God sends me day by day ... Accept with love everything that may happen to me during the day that is painful, whether it be from God, from my superiors or from my neighbour ... Direct your thoughts to perfect yourself in all your ordinary actions, and to carry the crosses, large or small that will appear before you. Believe me, here lies the secret of becoming saints.”

In practice this implied keeping his **tendencies** in check: “I will try in everything I do to be at peace and not to get impatient, especially when I

deal with my neighbour and with our young people." Srugi recommended for himself, for his fellow Salesian educators and the boys: "Be meek, patient, tolerant and easily pardon insults, and you will be blessed (cf. Mt 5:5) ... Drive the *old man* the wrathful one, out of you O religious soul and you will remain only with the *new man*, the peaceful one. The more virtuous a man is, the more strongly he restrains his anger."

**6.4. Detachment and poverty.** In the Revelations, Jesus said "I want the religious soul to be **detached** from everything, since in order to come to me the soul must be free of every attachment, such that no more ties bind it to the earth." Simon proposed living both detachment and poverty: "I will seek to purify my soul by detaching myself from any earthly and material thing so that I may imitate my Lord Jesus Christ who was so poor ... Holy poverty empties the soul of earthly cares and affections and of all created things ... it is the foundation on which the edifice of all virtues is built, and it is the nourisher of humility." This way he could fly even higher: "Christian soul, look to Heaven, that is where God is waiting for you. Run, fly, break all attachments that bind you to the earth ... The wise person is able to sell the earth to buy heaven ... Whoever has God and his Kingdom has everything: what do you fear poverty for if you carry a whole kingdom in your heart? *The kingdom of God is within you* (Lk 17:21) ... I want to correct my shortcomings regarding Poverty. When I have God and his grace I am rich enough." So there is no sense in being concerned about clothing, ornaments and valuable items. It can be said that because of this spirit of detachment and poverty, Simon always led a "penitent life".

**6.5. Mortification, purity and chastity.** First practice the **mortification** inherent to one's state of life and then add others of one's choice. In the maxims he wrote down for the confreres, Simon insisted on the following points: "The body must be treated severely rather than not, so that it does not become repugnant to the desires of the soul. Since the senses are almost the doors through which the death of the soul enters, so you will ensure that they are closed to the things of this world and turned to the things of heaven. The senses must serve, not command ... A sign of much foolishness is to be occupied with the care of the body ... It is much better to torment the body and keep it than to caress it to its detriment and lose it together with the soul in eternity." Mortification of all the senses, inner and outer, in a penitential attitude: "Remove from your eyes, ears, taste, smell and touch every kind of illicit and dangerous satisfaction, and by penance mortify your feelings as much as possible even in lawful things ... The religious is required to do the works of his calling, that is, to die to himself in all things, both in those that seem good and in those that are bad and useless ... We must die through mortification (cf. 2 Cor 4:10). These words 'one must die' are harsh, but

they are followed by a great sweetness: that is, to unite oneself to God through this death.”

**Purity in thought and word:** “Beware of pondering in your thoughts before God the things you would be ashamed to speak about before an upright person. May your thoughts be placid, simple, pure, and without malice. Be ashamed to think about what you would be ashamed to say. Let your thoughts be such that, when suddenly asked what you think, you would not blush to reveal what is hidden in your heart. Occupying the mind with good thoughts: this is the way the door is closed to bad ones ... I will fight sensual pleasure in me, both in thoughts and in affections, and I will try never to consent to sensual pleasure.” Speech must be chaste and modest too: Simon personally shunned and condemned in others any kind of immoderate gaiety, “immodest words”, dubious or ridiculous “jokes”, because they are unworthy of someone striving for perfection.

**Chastity in deeds.** Simon made frequent resolutions in this regard (for example in 1927, repeated in 1937 and 1938), indicating a prolonged commitment: “How happy and blessed I must be to have consecrated myself body and soul to my God! How much I must do to keep myself as pure and chaste as an angel in His presence. How careful I must be never to stain my soul or my body, the august temple of the Most Holy Trinity ... Jesus wants to see his religious without blemish, pure in hands, eyes, mind, heart. Go to war against impure sin ... I will fight against disorderly pleasure and my sensuality to please the Lord and to keep myself pure and holy before my God ... How much attention, how much vigilance so as to fight sensual pleasure in me when dealing with people, with our young people, and to treat the body as consecrated to God!” In harmony with all of the Christian tradition, Simon thinks of chastity as the angelic virtue, a prelude to heaven: “Whoever keeps the virtue of purity, his guardian angel will regard him as a brother and enjoy his company very much ... Let us endeavour with all our strength to make our way of life angelic and pure during our brief sojourn in this present life, so that we may deserve the glory and happiness of the angels in heaven.”

## **7. In the vigilant expectation of meeting Jesus, good judge and friend**

On this demanding ascetic path towards the highest perfection, Simon neither exalted himself nor became depressed, but maintained a healthy balance. On the one hand he knows that “the prudent man should consider what he does as being ten times less in merit than what his imagination tells him it is. Because self-love often multiplies the merit of our actions.” On the other hand, seeing

how much he still has to do, he does not become apprehensive, anxious or discouraged, but continues to be simple and trusting, counting on the mercy of God, who appreciates the smallest actions done for him and rewards them in proportion, not to our merits, but to his infinite goodness: "What goodness of God and our good fortune it is to accept our most obvious actions for his glory and for our good."

For Simon's religious psychology, **thinking about the "ultimate realities"** is an habitual encouragement to valuing this time of exile: "I will detach myself from every earthly thing that prevents me from being all my God's, so as to be ready for the call of my spouse Jesus when he calls me from exile to my heavenly home ... At the point of death how we will regret not having done more good works and acquired virtue and advanced in perfection! We would want to do more but there will be no time ... Order your soul every day in the way you would if your final hour had come ... I will endeavour to be a holy religious, living so that I will be ready to die any day."

During the retreat in Bethlehem in 1937 he took this resolution: "I will make it a habit, as I have always done, to think about judgement and hell in order to live as a good religious person and to detach myself from people and things." He renewed this the following year in Nazareth: "I will take the thought of death as a counsellor, to live holy and perfectly and to keep myself prepared." Finally, he made it more specific and detailed in 1939 when he was in serious danger of death and received extreme unction: "I will do everything to keep myself prepared to appear before the Lord at any time. And to keep the things in my infirmarian's office in order, both at home and in the dispensary, and to keep the accounts prepared." The same year he wrote to his sister Zàhra: "I feel that the end of my period of exile in this world is not far away. For some time I have been having difficulty in breathing, heartache and not much strength; all this is telling me: 'Prepare yourself to meet your Lord when it is his wish.'"

**Consideration of divine mercy takes precedence** over thinking about his faults: "Let us fear the formidable judgement of God every day of our life, and let us fear it with **filial fear**, which does not disturb us unnecessarily but makes us diligently work for our salvation ... Let us try to prepare ourselves diligently for the particular judgement and be continually prepared for it as our Divine Master Jesus Christ who will be our judge urges us. Blessed are we if *we are found ready* when the Lord comes (cf Mt 24:46; 25:13; Lk 12:35-40) ... Keep awake, says Jesus Christ, for you do not know either the day nor the hour of your death when the Son of God will come to judge you (Mt 24:42)." Simon is aware of the serious nature of the judgement, but trusts in the goodness of the Judge: "How

I should accept from the Lord's hands the crosses he sends me to pay my dues and to purify my soul from its stains, before presenting myself before his fearful tribunal ... I will take the thought of death as counsel and I will try to always keep myself ready to appear before the good Jesus, whom I will try to make my friend."

## 8. The fruits of action on earth, and contemplation of God in Paradise

Simon realistically noted that "How few are those who understand what God would do for them if they gave themselves entirely to him"; but he remained steadfastly committed to his order of priorities: "Always have eternity in your spirit, Jesus Christ in your heart, **and his divine love above all things**", convinced that God abundantly repays the primacy given to his friendship: "Oh, how much God reckons with a righteous man, and how much he says and does out of respect for him. See to it, O religious, that you are very just and very friendly with God, and that you really attend to your own perfection, taking it for certain that God will favour all your concerns, and will remember your parents, your relatives and your friends, and everything that belongs to you, and the more he does this, the more you will put aside your thoughts and forget these things and give yourself to God alone."

He was familiar with the biblical admonition which Don Bosco often repeated: "At the end of life we will reap the fruit of our good works"; he expressed this in similar words: "Let us not deceive ourselves, because *each one will reap* on the day of judgement *what he has sown* in this present life (Gal 6:7). *Whoever sows in the flesh*, meaning carnal and sinful works, will only reap corruption, that is, pain and damnation; and *whoever sows in the spirit*, meaning good works pleasing to God, *will reap eternal life*" (Gal 6:8). Here and now, as good "spiritual farmers", let us continue to toil so we can then reap in eternity: "Our rest will be in paradise. Oh paradise! Oh paradise, whoever thinks of you in this world no longer suffers tiredness ... Let us remember that all the time of our present life is given to us to avoid hell and to deserve heaven with good works, especially works of mercy (cf. Mt 25:31-46) ... When the cross seems heavy, when the road seems too long, when darkness is thickening around us, let us think of the happiness we will have at the hour of our death if we have suffered for love of Jesus Christ ... The day of death for the holy religious soul who has done good throughout life is the day of a copious harvest. Because he reaps the fruit of his good works. There have been so many acts of penance, so many acts of humility, so many acts of charity, so many acts of obedience, so many fervent prayers and communions, so many acts of mortification, humiliations for the love of Jesus, so



many merits accumulated in every way, in every good thought, in every good word, in every prayer, in every sigh of love for God ... How beautiful it is to see God, to love him, bless him and contemplate him for all eternity."

## Conclusion

We acknowledge that Simon's theology of Christian and religious perfection is what is contained in Don Bosco's writings, brought up to date by his successors in their letters, circulars and "strennas" regularly read and commented on in the community at Betgamāl. Therefore it belongs to the "common manner of feeling and acting" in vogue among the Salesians of the era, expressed in terms of a "family lexicon". Fr Eugenio Ceria, a direct witness and authoritative historian, wrote these lines in 1941 that also fit Srugi: "Today there is a lot of talk about the interior life, an expression that no one ever heard from the lips of Don Bosco and Don Rua, who were accustomed to discussing spiritual things with the utmost simplicity of language."; they used "union with God" which they "practised as it is impressed on us in the *Pater noster*, where we ask the Lord for the grace to do his holy will in everything and always, that is in every one of our life's actions. Therefore, habitual union of will with God in the manner amply described by St Francis de Sales in the eighth and ninth books of the Treatise on the Love of God" (CERIA, *Annali* vol. 2, pp. 745--746). In concrete terms, for Fr Rua the high road to holiness was the observance of the Rule as an expression of God's will. Rereading his letters we find that the subject of personal perfection with its related virtues and practices to achieve it, is central, and repeats as a refrain.<sup>56</sup> Fr Albera, too, uses the terms "soul, "religious vocation", "perfection", "holiness"

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<sup>56</sup> I will just mention a handful of passages from M. RUA, *Circolari*: by our religious profession we have contracted "the strict obligation to continually advance in perfection each day" (p. 111), forever beginning anew, because there is always a measure of self-love in the human heart, "desirous of making daily progress in perfection, in order to correspond to the very special grace that God grants us by calling us to religious life" (p. 122); "in professing the holy vows we contract the obligation of making constant progress in the perfection that befits the state we have embraced. Hence this leaning towards perfection becomes, for the Salesian, a debt he pays each day but that is never fully paid off on this earth – this is the business in which the talents we have received must be brought to fruition" (p. 195). In the Circular on Poverty: "We are urged to practise poverty by the intimate relationship that exists between the practice of this virtue and our individual progress in perfection" (p. 367). Jesus spells it out as the first of the Beatitudes because "it is the foundation underlying the other seven steps by which one arrives at the peak of perfection" (p. 368); we should not become attached to people or things, because they become small stones that hinder us from "walking along the path of perfection" (p. 372); in order to acquire the spirit of poverty it is very important to always adhere to the common life (p. 373); "indifference to any role is a pointer to a high degree of perfection" (p. 400).

as part of the fabric of his discourse.<sup>57</sup> Fr Rinaldi takes up and develops the same subjects, insisting on the sanctification of intellectual or manual work.<sup>58</sup> And finally, Fr Ricaldone presents it all once again extensively in the context of Don Bosco's canonisation.<sup>59</sup> I don't think it is necessary to multiply these citations; I think what I have already documented is sufficient, as well as reminding ourselves that Srugi had personally known the first two and the last of those men. From an overall perspective one could say that on the one hand Fr Rua's invitation/slogan ("The holiness of the children is proof of the holiness of the Father", 1888) and, on the other, Fr Ricaldone's ("Fidelity to Don Bosco the Saint", 1936) are the historical and spiritual coordinates within which we can place Srugi, his plan for personal holiness, and his apostolate as educator and social worker.

It needs to be added, however, that he did not restrict himself to copying a model or generically following in the footsteps of others: instead, he personalised their guidelines and directives, especially in his resolutions, and drew up an original programme for his progress, not just on certain occasions, intermittently, but constantly, not just in some areas but in all, not thinking just of himself but also of the confreres and boys with whom he lived, not within the closet of an exclusively Christian setting but in a context marked by a Muslim presence. For these reasons he embodied a kind of Salesian holiness that was unprecedented at the time, and which can still be imitated today.

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<sup>57</sup> Religious life is "is a most remarkable grace of the Lord, who in his goodness wanted to take us out of the life of simple Christians and call us to embrace the state of perfection, which has as its basis the practice of the evangelical counsels" (P. ALBERA, *Circolari*, p. 332). "Our vocation obliges us not only to strive for holiness, but also to acquire it in the most perfect degree possible."; therefore maintain "the keen desire for ever-higher perfection and the constant effort to achieve it" (p. 403); "Don Bosco had the art of lifting up hearts to the desire and achievement of perfection." (p.465).

<sup>58</sup> Cf. ACS 3(1923) no 21, p. 120; 5(1924) no. 23, pp. 177–199.

<sup>59</sup> Cf *Pensar bene di tutti, parlar bene di tutti, far del bene a tutti*. Torino: SEI, 1933; *Santità e purezza*. Torino: SEI, 1935; *Povertà*. Torino: SEI, 1938.

Per tendere alla santità e  
alla mia perfezione cer-  
cherò di correggermi di  
quei difetti che in essi  
cado sovente per piacer  
a Gesù ed essere buon  
religioso

Voglio far bene il mio  
rendimento a qualun-  
que costo.

Prendo molta attenzione quanto  
vigilanza per combattere  
in me il piacere sensuale  
nel trattare colla gente  
dei nostri giovani e  
trattare il corpo come

consacrato a Dio  
Io mi sono venduto,  
mi sono consacrato a  
Dio solo perciò i miei  
pensieri i miei affetti i  
miei desideri devono  
essere per lui

Il buon Gesù ha fatto la paci-  
fanga per me soffrendo  
tanto tanto per me ed io  
voglio soffrire per amor  
suo e per i miei peccati  
tutto ciò che mi capita  
di doloroso, di penoso  
sia nello spirito che nel  
corpo



# Final summing up

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At the end of the research I feel that I have achieved the goal I set myself, that is to better document the history of Betgamāl and the place of Srugi within it, connecting them with the main events and characters of the broader contemporary regional history.

## 1. Key players and actors in the Salesian history of Betgamāl

The study we have done allows us to have **a richer knowledge of the Salesian work in the multiplicity of sectors in which it was articulated**: religious community (SDB and FMA); orphanage and home for Armenian refugees; educational-scholastic institution for a majority of boarders and a group of external schoolchildren; clinic and dispensary for medical and nursing assistance to poor and sick peasants; farm with annexed winery, mill and oil press; centre for promoting devotion to Saint Stephen the Martyr and the spirituality of reconciliation.

These various forms of service responded to the real needs of young people and of the poor population of the place (over sixty villages, Palestinian Arabs); and, as far as the "Pious Work of Christian Forgiveness" was concerned, they also responded to the expectations of the numerous groups from different parts of the Middle East, Europe and America. The usefulness of the services provided was recognised by the beneficiaries themselves, appreciated by civil, educational, medical and religious authorities (including non-Catholics, Muslims and Jews), and supported by international charitable organisations.

The various sectors were managed by **the community as a whole** (confreres, sisters and lay collaborators) in which some distinguished themselves as *key players and leading actors*: Fr Eugenio Bianchi for spiritual animation according to the spirit of Don Bosco, as well as for the "Pious Work", an idea he conceived, established and, after the approval of Pope Pius XI, helped spread worldwide. Fr Alfredo Sacchetti, an industrious organiser of the farm and tireless "seeker" of charity, especially on behalf of the Armenians. Sister Tersilla Ferrero, for 14 years at Simon's side not only as a nurse but as his "spiritual sister". Father

Maurizio Gisler, who gave scientific credibility to the archaeological discoveries and designed the *Martyrium*. Fr Giovanni Fergnani, enthusiastic populariser. Brother Angelo Bormida, whose premature death prevented him from giving the full contribution of his skills; *abuna* Butrus Sarkīs, Fr Mario Rosin, Fr Rafaele López. There were also those who (to maintain the language of the theatre) I would call “**those in the wings**”: priests (like Frs Frey and Goslar, Candiani and Calīs, Spiridiōn and Sciueri ...), or brothers assigned to the various sectors of the farm (Harūni, Aloi, Porro, Hawīla ....) who by their manual work and increasing mechanisation, assisted by lay teachers, instructors and workshop heads (Artīn, Dikrān, ...) and workers, brought the farm to a level of excellence recognised by the numerous awards obtained at agricultural exhibitions. Finally, I feel that I have shed some light on the young boys of Betgamāl, with brief mentions of their lives as boarders and as past pupils.

The key players showed a remarkable **open-mindedness**; inspired by an almost utopian vision, they set their hand to far-reaching enterprises, three in particular: the professional, religious and priestly preparation of hundreds of young Armenians in Salesian schools in the Middle East and Italy, in view of the resumption of the Christian mission in south-eastern Turkey. The project to build a large shrine in honour of St Stephen, to promote the culture of reconciliation on an international scale. The plan to expand the outpatients clinic to the level of a hospital for the area.

The superiors in Turin, in particular Frs Michael Rua and Peter Ricaldone, sensed the potential of the work and nurtured hopes that it could give the houses in the Holy Land not only foodstuffs, but also priestly and religious vocations. For the former, having "the category of Latin students, never less than ten" in each house was desirable, while the latter realised it was problematic. As a matter of fact, in 1900 among the young men boarding at Betgamāl there were 6 aspirants and among the teachers two novices; in the following years until 1914, only one, besides Srugi, became a brother and 5 priests (cf. BORREGO, p. 244, 249; CERIA, *Annali* 2, p. 184; LEÓN, p. 32, 101--103). In the years 1920--30 there were only three "vocations" to consecrated life: one professed as a Trappist monk at Latrūn, two began the novitiate at Cremisan in 1932 but did not complete it (cf. *Cronistoria*, in AIMOR 4.4.2., folder no. 1; AIMOR 4.4.1.1).

All this serves to contextualize the person and activity of Simon Srugi as an exponent of the first young Arabs who embraced Salesian life; not an isolated individual but the leading figure of a community of religious who (in that historical-geographical, socio-economic, educational and welfare context) bore practical witness to the values of Salesian consecration and mission. They

recognised him as their best representative from the religious point of view, as demonstrated, among other things, by the fact that they elected him as the delegate of the brothers to go to Italy to take part in the beatification and canonisation of Don Bosco. A judgement unanimously shared by the "people outside".

## 2. Simon Srugi: representative figure of the "contemplative in action"

A quick look back: Simon spent the first 11 years in Nazareth, of which there are no documents remaining: certainly the Christological and Marian mysteries of the Incarnation and of the "hidden life" exerted a profound influence on his childlike soul, and the image of Saint Joseph compensated in a certain way for his father's absence: "We can say that his spirituality was "Nazarethian", all the more so since we know how sensitive and attached Orientals are to family and popular traditions" (cf. FIORA, pp. 39, 48--49). He then grew up for about 4 years in Bethlehem in the welcoming atmosphere of Fr Belloni's orphanage and the "Brothers of the Holy Family", fraternising with the first Salesians, many of whom were only a few years older than him. In that technical school which prepared him for manual work, the teenaged Simon served his apprenticeship as a tailor, baker and nurse. At the same time he was struck by the humility and poverty of the Child Jesus in the grotto of the nativity (where the orphans went down daily to pray for benefactors) and became imbued with devotions to the Blessed Sacrament and the Sacred Heart. These continued to be the pillars of his religiousness throughout his life. Then, during the years of aspirantate, novitiate and practical training at Betgamāl, he laid the solid foundations of his life of consecration to God, imitation of Christ and gift of self to his neighbour in the Salesian mission of education and assistance. In the decades that followed, he built the edifice of his sanctification on these foundations in which the above-mentioned dimensions reached maturity, merging with other equally characteristic ones: conformation to the crucified and risen Christ; work sanctified by continuous adoration "in spirit and in truth", as a "liturgy of life"; educational loving-kindness, readiness to forgive, the simplicity of the "little way" in community life, compassion for the sick and the poor. For these reasons, without taking anything away from the fact that he came **from Nazareth**, I think it would not be improper to call him Simon Srugi **of Betgamāl**.

This Bellonian and later Salesian work, unlike the others that were favored by their location in the city or its surroundings (Nazareth and Haifa, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Cremisan), was at a disadvantage: an agricultural orphanage in the open countryside, exposed to all the socio-political and military winds,

in an environment where malaria and poverty ruled. It is not surprising that some thought that second-rate confreres were sent there. (cf FIORA, p. 57; *Hierosolymitana* 1993, p. 860). Fr Bianchi and Fr Sacchetti, *abuna* Sarkīs and Fr Rosin, but especially Simon, with his humble, joyful and hard-working testimony, contributed to giving Betgamāl a different image and fame: it became Srugi's Betgamāl. People came, of course, to visit the sanctuary of Saint Stephen, or to enjoy the natural beauties, or for various practical reasons; but others came on purpose to get to know him, and among the most pleasant impressions they took with them when they left was that of having met a saint. He was the Salesian whom the former students, immediately and decades later, associated most closely with Betgamāl; a sign of deep and lasting brotherly relationship and also one of spiritual paternity that he had been able to weave with them. The observation that Fr Sacchetti noted down in 1924 ("**There is certainly no person in the entire district better known and revered than Srugi**") is confirmed by the long lists of names of people (thousands) and villages (dozens) in the 9 medication registers, and finally was deservedly highlighted on the day of his death. Fr Cattān summed it up, "**The house at Beitgemal can rejoice in having housed a saint for a good 50 years within its walls**" (AIMOR 15.1.2, folder 8).

In a succession of dramatic and sometimes tragic events (two world wars, rebellions by his confreres, guerrilla warfare, deportations, looting, killings...), against a backdrop of strong personalities who left behind violence and destruction, Simon knew how to be a man of peace, distinguishing himself by his gentleness and serenity. He always kept his gaze upward, in a constant attitude of loving union with God, pursuing without deviation a path of personal holiness and an apostolate of service and witness that, in the end, proved to be successful. He practised fortitude in his own regard, fighting against his disordered inclinations, **conforming to the attitudes of the Heart of Christ**: humility and meekness, gentleness and mercy, sacrificing all his strength in the service of the poor and the sick. For this reason he was well liked by all: confreres and sisters, young people and lay collaborators, poor and sick, Christians and Muslims; and even the bandits, if they did not love him, at least admired and respected him, so that several times, almost like a "lightning rod" or "guardian angel" of the house, he managed to ward off their reprisals.

Even in the periods of relative tranquillity (the twenties and the mid-thirties), he did not lie down in mediocrity but, as his astute biographer Fr Forti observes, thanks to the superiority of his soul and to his supernatural motivations, he succeeded in overcoming the pitfalls of that "terrible daily life", made up of ordinary things and monotonous practices. (cf. FORTI, pp. 63–64; FIORA, pp. 109–110). Amidst the din of conflicting voices that resounded in and



around Betgamāl, Simon allowed himself to be guided by the gentle breath of the Holy Spirit. He was able to understand what the educational, welfare and religious mission that the Lord entrusted to him was, on behalf of young people both within and beyond, be they Christians or Muslims, and he carried it out with constancy and simplicity.

Throughout his journey he was accompanied by **authentic models** and **masters of the spirit**: initially by Fr Belloni, then especially by Fr Bianchi, but also by Frs Gerbo, Rosin, and López, who were at his side for several years. His interior life and his activity rested on a solid theological foundation, according to the Catholic piety of the time, which privileged the sacraments and devotions over the Word of God, then approached mainly through the episodes of "bible history," the Sunday sermons, the catechism and the weekly practice of the so-called "testamentino," that is, the 10 verses that not only the clerics but also the assistants memorised and recited to the Rector who gave an explanation of them. (cf RUA, *Lettere Circolari*, p. 115). It can be said that Srugi knew the New Testament very well, as appears not so much from the index of the few biblical quotations I have found, but from a whole fabric of evangelical themes familiar to him.

His usual points of reference were the examples and teachings of **Don Bosco**, the teaching of **St Francis de Sales**, the revelations of Jesus to his spiritual daughters, the Visitation Nuns Margaret-Mary Alacoque and Marie-Marta Chambon, the ascetic works of St Alphonsus M. de' Liguori and some other contemporary authors who presented Christian life in terms of liturgical theology, anticipating Vatican II. In particular, **the four Rectors Major**, Frs Rua, Albera, Rinaldi and Ricaldone, provided him with up-to-date guidelines with which he pursued his gradual and steady path to perfection.

### 3. In conclusion

Beyond all the contingent aspects that are by now outdated, the history of the Salesian work at Betgamāl appears significant, indeed open to further investigation, following some of the avenues of research that I have indicated from time to time with cursory explorations: for example, the co-leading actors would deserve to be presented more fully: Fr Bianchi, Sacchetti, Rosin, López.

One important fact is clear: the humanitarian service that the people at Betgamāl requested most was not scholastic or job training but pharmaceutical and medical and health assistance. This fell mostly on Srugi's shoulders! In fact: in the 65 years from the opening of the agricultural school in 1878 until Srugi's

death in 1943, the annual number of boarders was limited to around fifty, which means that if we also include day students who attended the small day school, we arrive at a maximum of around 3,250 students. On the other hand, dozens of sick people came to the clinic on a single day to be treated by Simon and also by Sister Tersilla. On average there would have been many thousands a year, as shown by the official statistics sent to the superiors in Turin and the 9 registers of medications compiled by Srugi from 1932 to 1942.

For all these reasons Simon Srugi can be proposed as a convincing model of the "holy" Christian and religious, not only to the Salesian Family and to those who profess the evangelical counsels, but to every person who takes the good of their brothers and sisters to heart, beginning with those in the Holy Land and the Middle East, in its ecumenical, multi-religious, multicultural and socio-political context, with its millions of refugees and displaced persons, still today in search of a just peace among the peoples who live there.

Certainly, as I said in the introduction to his writings, Srugi was a child of his times and shared its limitations: his writings are influenced by the Italian used by the 'Levantines' of the 19th and 20th centuries indebted to authors of previous centuries; they therefore require the reader to make an effort to understand them and the translator to provide additional interpretation. On the other hand they do not present as lengthy speeches but as brief and telling "maxims" not unlike today's "text messages", "tweets", "sms". Instead, the testimony of his life speaks directly, because the hard-working charity in which he expressed himself remains the universally understandable language. In this sense, the message of this Salesian Arab Brother can be fruitful everywhere because it is a clear reflection of the simplicity of the Gospel.

If one were to shift from paper to audiovisual and digital language, the history of Betgamāl and Simon's life offer abundant material that could be transposed dramatically (theatre or film) to make it more attractive, especially for young people.

Betgamāl, 6 May 2021

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# PHOTO GALLERY

## Credits

Most of the photos here can be found in ABG in the ~~albums~~ *albums* belonging to Frs Sacchetti, Rummān and López (tampered with sometimes and almost all without dates or names). Though the attributions I give are generally trustworthy, in some cases they need to be considered with some reservation. Others are from pages of the brochure by Fr Gisler in 1923 (nos. 15-17, 20). Some are original ~~slides~~ *slides* made by Bro. Sante Tombolato (nos. 28, 41), who also worked on many of the earlier ones. The last three were made by Fr Gianmaria Gianazza (nos. 79-81). Finally, I use photos from the “National Geographic” (no. 1), the Greek-Melkite parish archives in Nazareth (nos. 2, 3), the Abù-l-‘Asal family in Nazareth (no. 13), and of the Dorothy Sisters in the Holy Land (no. 49).

1



Simon Srugi was born in Nazareth on 15.04.1877 and received the sacraments of initiation on 10.05 in the Greek-Melkite church built over the place thought to be the ancient synagogue from Jesus' time.

2



3

قد عمده وثبتت له ولد ابدانك سمعا بز عازر وولد ١٨٠٣ ابي شيخ امه دل بسنه الخوري  
 عرابه اليوب ابطري بن يقربه اليوب من اللاشيد وانعم كوري اغوسين عورت مع

Photo Gallery



4

From December 1888 to July 1892 Simon was in Bethlehem at the orphanage run by Canon Fr Antonio Belloni (youthful portrait and photo as an older man).



5

1893: FMA house, entrance to the orphanage and school, Sacred Heart church.

6



The instrumental band at the orphanage (ca. 1896).  
To the right of Fr Belloni bandmaster Angelo Bormida with baton, on left Mr Francesco Arrobio.

7



St Joseph's orphanage and agricultural school at Betgamāl at the end of 1800:  
here Simon Srugi lived as an aspirant, novice, professed member and practical trainee (1892-1900).



8

Betgamāl at the end of 1800: priests, brothers, workers, youngsters at work and posing in the garden before the south facade of the central building.



9

Nazareth, March 1908. On top from left.: G.Harūni, G.Suedān, Fr Y.Harūni, ?, ch. S.Rummān, ch. A.Crétal, ?. Seated: Fr A.Prun, Fr C.Bretto, Fr M.Rua, Fr P.Cardano, Fr M.Rosin, Rector.

10



The seven priests at Betgamāl in 1914-1915: Fr Eugenio Bianchi (seated at the centre), Fr Alfredo Sacchetti (behind him), Fr Pietro Marsegaglia, Fr Angelo Bertola, Fr 'Awad 'Atallah, Fr Luigi Vizolo, Fr Peter Sarkīs.

11



Bro. Angelo Bormida (ca. 1915).

12



Fr P.Ricaldone visitor and Fr L.Sutera provincial (1919).





13

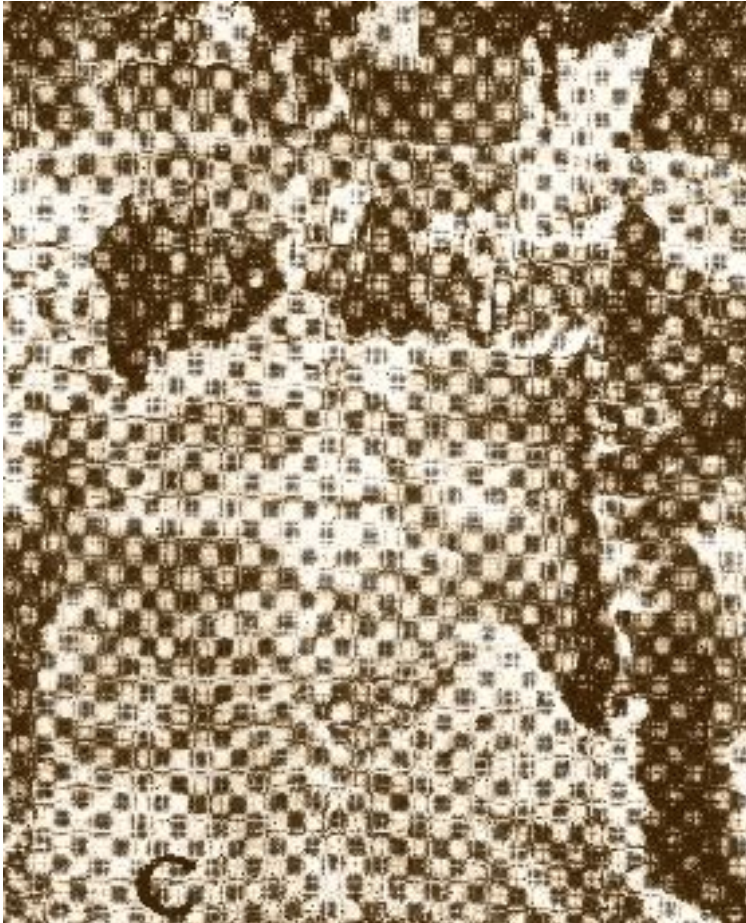
Nazareth, second half of 1920s: Simon posing with his cousin.



14

On the hill: Salesian institute and basilica of Jesus the Adolescent.  
House where Simon was born was located in the neighbourhood below left.

15



Discovery of Byzantine church over St Stephen's "tomb" (1916-17, 1922).  
Excavations: Fr Gisler osb, Bro. Bormida, Fr Bianchi, Fr Fergnani.

16



Base of the *diaconicón altā* (A), placed next to the entrance in the burial grotto (B),  
on whose steps stands the young man in the upper right corner (C).



17

E.Ritz, Fr Fergnani and Fr Bianchi admire mosaics in the side nave (1922).



18a

Archbishop P. Robinson, apostolic visitor for CNEWA with pupils and confreres (11.10.1927).

*Abun* Sarkīs,  
Fr Sacchetti,  
Fr Rosin,  
Arch. Robinson,  
Fr Bianchi.



18b

19



Spring 1928: young people help in the casting of the slab above the crypt.

20



Spring 1928: confreres and boys from Bethlehem, Cremisan and Betgamāl on area where the Martyrium is being built. Srugi is on the left beside the entrance to the burial grotto.  
Above centre: Fr Sarkīs, Fr Bianchi, Fr Frey; below right Fr Rosin.



21

May 1928: Mr. Moore, secretary CNEWA and friends bent over the mosaics on the *diaconicon*



22

May 1928: Mr. Moore visits orphanages in Bethlehem and Nazareth.



23

24



Autumn 1929: Fr Bianchi inspects building works at the *Martyrium*

25



December 1929: from right: Fr Rummän, Fr Frey, Fr Candela, Fr Gisler, Fr Fergnani. Boys on roof of the *Martyrium* not yet tiled.



December 1929: Fr Candela in front of the “Grotto of Lourdes”  
(which Fr Rua blessed in 1895). Srugi 3<sup>rd</sup> from right.



Armenian Bishop H. Keklikian at the blessing of the *Martyrium*  
On right his nephew Artīn, on left Fr Sacchetti, and Bros. Harūni, Aloi, Fusi (3 August 1930).



Inside the *Martyrium* decorated with paintings by Fr L.Poggi OCD and “mosaic-like” items and frescoes by E.Ritz (1932-1936). Here Srugi was m.c. for solemnities and feasts. Sanctuary rebuilt in 1972.





Fr A.Tornquist blesses the foundation stone of the day school and new outpatient clinic. Srugi seems to be last lower right. (04.01.1930).



*Abūn*Butrus Sarkīs cements the corner-stone, assisted by neighbouring village leaders.

31



Bro. Srugi, covered by the man mixing cement, closely follows building works.

32



Sr Tersilla Ferrero FMA, and Brother Srugi: the two “holy” nurses at Betgamāl.



Putting on his nursing gear, Simon welcomes the sick in the entrance hall.



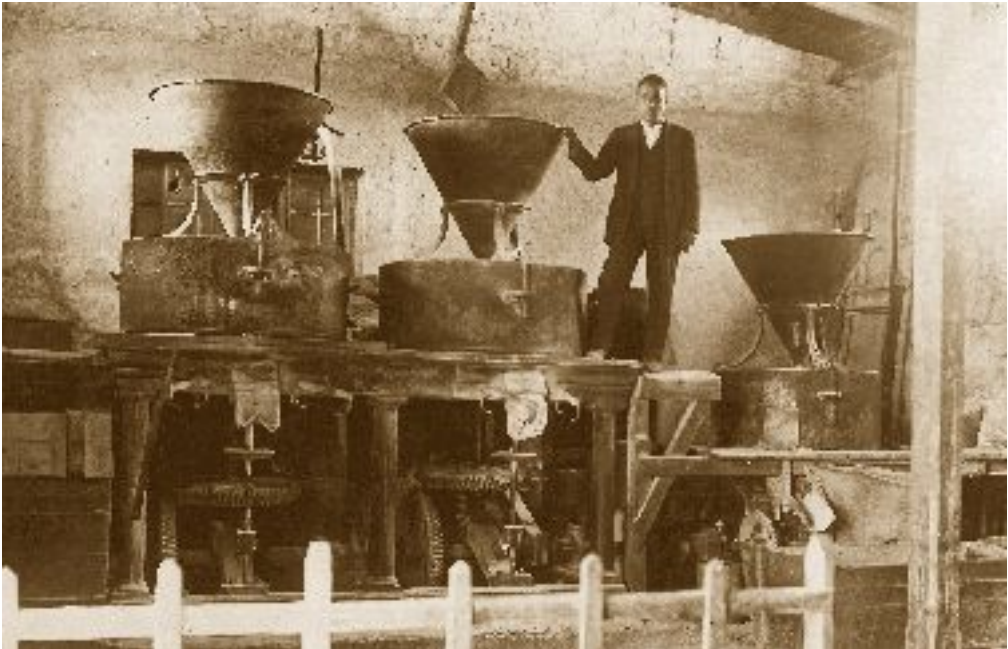
With another group of the sick before the entrance.

35

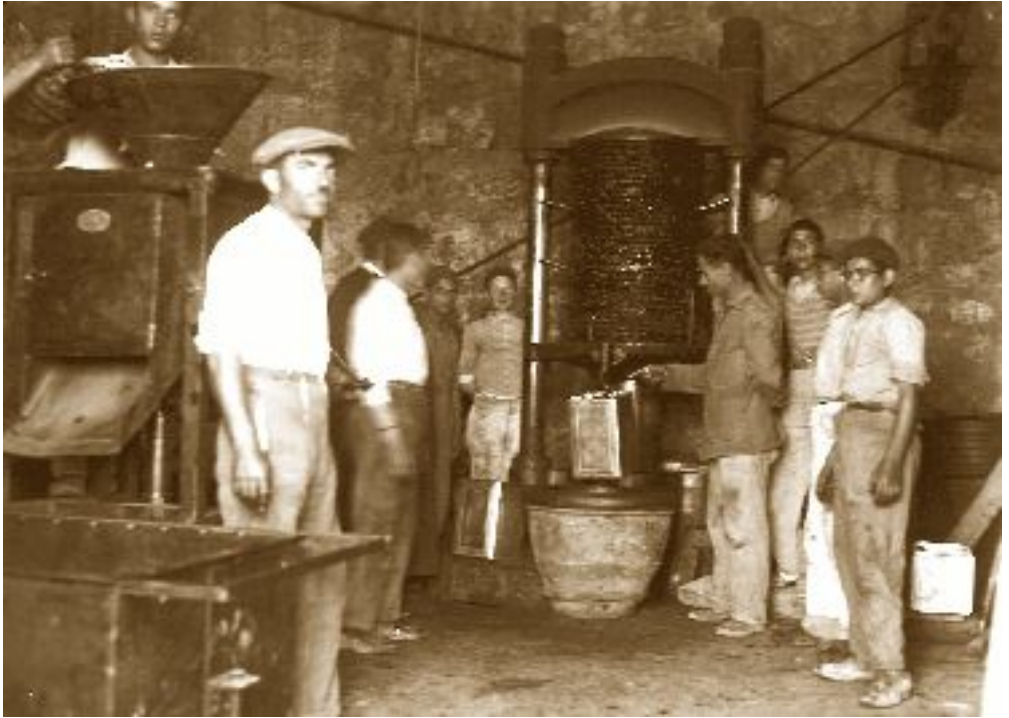


General view after 1931. East: peasant houses and barns. South-Est: driveway; on left: garages, stores, electricity hub. Above: terrazzo with balcony in front of the school and clinic. South: mill and press; N-W the FMA house.

36



Mr Dikrān Ciakmāgjan, in charge of the mill.



Mr Artin Keklikian with instructor and young people at the oil press.



Visit by the Armenian patriarchal vicar Mons. Manugian:  
left. Fr Bianchi, Fr Sacchetti, Fr Sarkis, second last is Srugi (1930).

39



Bethlehem, Retreat. 1931: Arab confreres from various rites: G.Hawīla, B.Sarkīs, G.Shalhūb, I.Gia'nine, G.Lutfy, G.Nahhās, A.'Awad, S.Srugi. Standing: S. Rummān, G.Calīs, G.Helu.

40



Confreres and boys from Bethlehem, Betgamāl, Cremisan and Jerusalem around Bishop L. Mathias; to his right Fr Gisler; left. Mons.Fellinger, Fr Sacchetti, second last is Fr Raele, last Fr Candiani, behind Fr Ubezzi cl. Morra, Bro. Fusi, cl. F.Laconi (26.03.1932).



41

Bogino's marble statue of Jesus the Adolescent in the basilica at Nazareth.



42

Nazareth, Retreat 1933: Srugi 3rd left above. Seated, centre: Fr L.Nigra, provincial, either side the preachers Fr E.Carnevali and Fr G.Tamburino; second last Fr Sarkis, behind him Bro. G.B.Ugetti who seems to be looking at his great friend Simon.

43



1930s, *Corpus Christi* procession: Srugi supporting the rear pole of the canopy,  
“so that I can watch the Eucharistic Jesus pass by blessing our home.  
Right: Sr Tersilla covered by the edge of the meteorological observatory.

44



Srugi catechist of a group of boys he prepared for First Communion (8.12.34).





Fr. P. Tirone canonical visitor, centre. Rectors meeting:

li,  
ji



Same occasion: Srugi between printer G. Neri and Bro. V. Milani.



Simon in 1939-40

... primo piano di Simonc regni anni 1939-40

48



Fr Mario Rosin loses his life returning from Deir Rafāt , for his fidelity to the priestly ministry with the “Dorothy” Sisters at OL of Palestine Shrine (23.06.1938).

49



Dorothy Sisters on the terrazzo of the Marian shrine with Patriarch Luigi Barlassina.



Festivites for the newly Blessed Mary Domenica Mazzarello. The second FMA beside Fr Candiani is Sr Tersilla Ferrero (14.05.1939).



Scouts 1939: Fr Candiani centre, on right Fr Dal Maso, Bro. Harūni, Bro. Srugi, Bro. Milani. Left. Fr Spiridiōn, cl. Farneti, Bro Fusi and Bro. Aloī.

52



Final visit of Fr Maurizio Gisler osb, in front of the *Martyrium* for which he was architect (03.08.1939).

53



Closure of school year. Prizes. Fr López Rector, on right Fr Gosslar, Fr Calís, Bro. Sruji; to his left Fr Cattān, Fr ‘Awād, last Fr Rummān (29.06.1941).



54

Closing of centenary of the beginning of the “Opere Don Bosco”:  
Bishop Radònski presiding, with Srugi as m.c. (31.01.1942).



55

Bishop Radònski says goodbye to Bro. Srugi; either side Fr Kot and Fr López.

56



31.01-1942: Srugi with practical trainees (from left) Swider, Kot, Orio, Michałek.

57



1942-43: teachers, instructors, families, pupils. Seated from left. cl.Orio, Bro.Harūni, Fr Cattān, Fr Spiridiōn, Fr Fathallah, Fr López, Fr Gosslar, Fr Sciueri, Bro.Srugi, Mrs Ciakmakgian and Mrs Keklikian. Behind: from left. 7th Dikrān, 8th Artīn, 9th Bro. Hawīla. Last row 1st from left. cl Michałek.



1942-43: with neighbouring village leaders of whom Bro Harūni was, at the time, the *mukhtā*th left above).



1943: Fr Gosslar economer and vice rector for Fr López, Fr Sciueri clerics Orio and Mikalek keeping Bro. Srugi company, by now nearing the end. (see following photo no. 60).

60

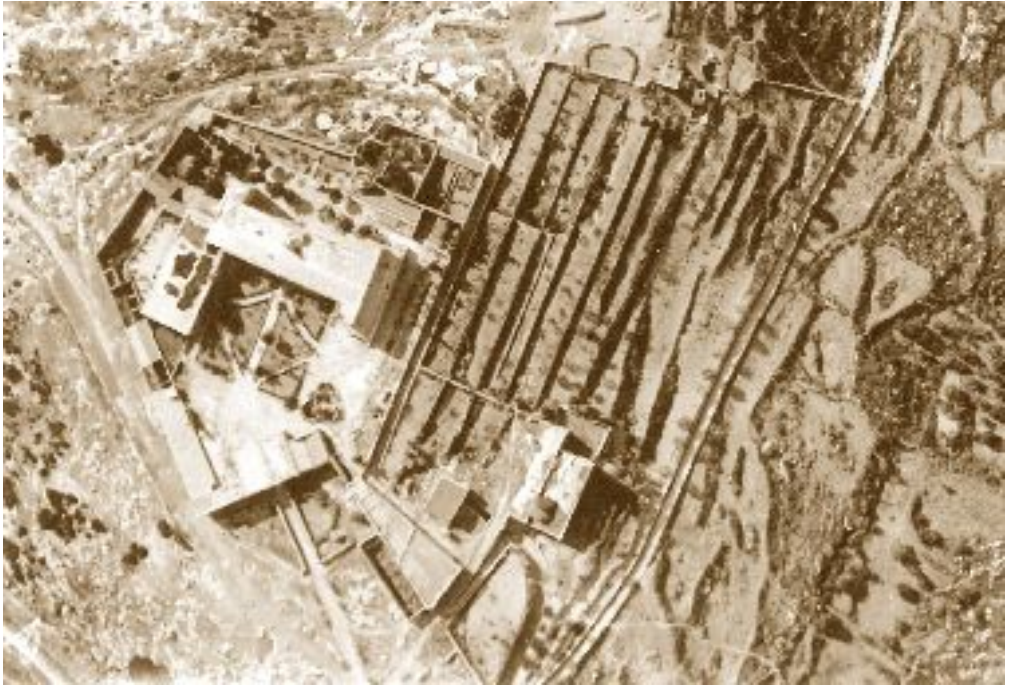


61



Simon's room next to infirmary. He died here on Sat, 27 November 1943.





Ca. 1922: main buildings, north and south gardens before excavations in Byzantine area; veg. Garden and barns, driveway to east before Srugi's clinic was built.



Agricultural machinery for work in fields, vineyards and olive groves.

64



65



66



Photo Gallery



67

Cellar for ageing and bottling wine.



68

Pupils in class with Fr Sacchetti in chemistry and agricultural physics lab.



69

New graduates in 1929 pose for photo with the Rector Fr Bianchi.

70



“King David” 25.07.1933: Agricult. Gener. Couns. of Palestine (Fr Sacchetti F on right above).

71



Early 1930s: excavation of the rocky ridge under the barn to widen the road.

72



Wady Bülos: Well excavation, submersible pump and valley irrigation channels (1934).



73



74

Boys and instructors with Bros. G.Aloi and G. Harüni. Corn, beet and potato harvests.



75

76



Group of “band members”: Bro. Porro, Bro. Milani, bandmaster Dikrān with baton, instructors and boys.

77



Gymnastics display for feast day of the Rector Fr Candiani (1939-40).

78



Jericho and Jordan river: Fr Rummān, Fr López, Bro.Hawīla, Fr Calís, Fr Sciueri, families (29.04.43).



79

In the crypt, Bros. A.Rossetto and G.Castelli disinter Srugi's coffin present: Fr V.Pozzo Provincial, Fr I.Mancini Custos ofm of the Holy Land, G.Beltritti Latin Patriarch, L.Laham Greek-Melkite Pat. Vic., Fr F.Laoni initiator of the Cause (10.12.82).



80



81

Fr E.Praduroux (vice-postulator), Srugi's relatives, members of ecclesiastical tribunal, Mr Dikrān witness, dr 'Abdallah Khoury, Fr G.Caputa (secretary), around the new coffin which will be walled up in the western niche of the crypt.

