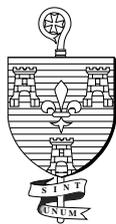


April 8, 2008
Easter tide



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval
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Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“THE path of holiness lived together as a couple is possible, beautiful, extraordinarily fruitful, and fundamental for the good of the family, the Church and society.” John Paul II spoke these words during the beatification of the married couple Luigi and Maria Beltrame Quattrocchi, on October 21, 2001.

The only daughter of two Florentines, Maria Luisa Corsini was born on June 24, 1884 in Florence. Her father, an officer, was short-tempered, and her mother was lively and domineering. From her earliest years, Maria Luisa, a child with a shy and sensitive temperament, would, when she set the table, place a small olive leaf under her parents' napkins, to express her desire for peace. One day, she said to her father: “You know, Papa, I would never have married you like Mama did, with your bad temper!” Nevertheless the Corsinis loved their daughter very much. In 1893, the family moved to Rome. There, Maria Luisa enrolled at a business school where she learned accounting as well as French and English. Her personal tastes drew her to literature, in which she acquired a vast knowledge. Maria also developed her talent for music in playing the piano.

Luigi Beltrame was born on January 12, 1880, in Catania, Sicily, his parents' third child. He added to his father's name that of his uncle Quattrocchi who, unable to have children of his own, adopted him. In 1891, he moved to Rome with his aunt and uncle. After studying law, Luigi began a career as a lawyer. He loved the great literary classics, as well as music, theater, the beauty of nature, and travel. A friendship between the Corsini and Quattrocchi families provided the opportunity for Maria and Luigi to meet. At the end of 1904, Luigi fell gravely ill; this caused Maria great distress, and she sent him a picture of the Madonna of Pompeii. This episode revealed to the two young friends the depth of their love for one another. On November 25, 1905, they were married at the Basilica of Saint MARY Major in Rome, and then moved into the Corsini family home. There they were very cramped for room, since Maria's parents and grandparents also lived there. Nevertheless, Luigi showed great deference towards his in-laws. Every night, the newly-weds joyfully met and relaxed together with the family. Each was interested in the other's work. Luigi often had to travel away from Rome for his work. This was a source of suffering for the couple, but they wrote to each other extensively.

Maria's first pregnancy brought them unspeakable happiness, which was soon replaced by the anguish the future mother felt at the thought of childbirth. But they were overwhelmed with joy at the birth of Filippo on October 15, 1906. In motherhood, the young mother experimented with the degree of selflessness needed: “Certainly, for her, who was used to being up-to-date with the latest in theater, music, and literature, it was no small renunciation to reduce her reading to almost nothing, and to attend no theater or concerts at all...”, one of her daughters would write. In September 1907, Maria was pregnant again. She was overwhelmed with a feeling of confusion and loneliness, even more so since Luigi was in Sicily for several days. She wrote to him: “Who will give me the strength to think of two children? To endure the physical and physiological exhaustion of pregnancy and the rest? Believe me, I am truly in despair.” Bit by bit, thanks to prayer, peace returned to Maria's soul, along with acceptance of the will of God. On March 9, 1908, a little girl was born, whom they named Stefania.

A categorical “no”

On November 27, 1909, a third child, Cesarino, was born after a difficult labor. In September 1913, Maria conceived another child. In the fourth month, violent hemorrhaging began. The diagnosis fell: *placenta previa*, which, at the time, amounted to a death sentence for the mother and child. The gynecologist, a very famous professor, declared that a termination of the pregnancy was the only hope to save the mother. Maria and Luigi were appalled. Directing their gaze to the Crucifix hanging on the wall, they drew from Him the strength to respond with a categorical “no” to abortion. No reason, “however serious and tragic, can ever justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being,” teaches Pope John Paul II (Encyclical *Evangelium Vitæ*, March 25, 1995, no. 58). Contradicted and at a loss, the professor said to Luigi: “You do not realize, Counselor—with this decision, you are preparing to be a widower with three children to care for!” The answer remained

unchanged: the “no” remained “no”. Terrible anguish fell on the family. The only source of light came from a boundless trust in God and in the Most Blessed Virgin MARY. The communion of husband and wife, rooted in God, became stronger than ever. Four months passed in this way, with Maria staying in bed. Finally, on April 6, 1914, at the end of the eighth month, confronted with the mother’s weak condition, the gynecologist intervened to induce labor, and Maria gave birth by natural means. Little Enrichetta was born. In spite of the pessimistic prognosis, both mother and child were saved.

“Apostolate of the pen”

Possessed of a very open mind, Maria had a thirst for knowledge that would not diminish with time. She delegated many material tasks to the staff that served the family, as was customary at that time among middle-class families. Over the years, she wrote articles and books—it was her “apostolate of the pen.” Her writings, which her husband also worked on, were addressed to mothers and families. Maria was also involved in charitable works. In 1925, she was asked to work with the women’s Catholic Action; but difficulties and misunderstandings came, and she preferred to withdraw. Whenever they were able, Maria and Luigi participated in the activities of the National Italian Union for Transporting the Sick, whom they accompanied to Loretto and Lourdes. In politics, the Beltrames initially supported fascism as a way of promoting the moral, religious, cultural, and social ideas the party espoused. However, over time they became more suspicious of the regime, and eventually came to disapprove of it entirely, when its racial laws were introduced. They then went to great lengths to save Jews.

Luigi, who had received first prize in the Treasury Department’s national competitive bar exam in 1909, went on to positions of great responsibility in various ministries, as a result of his extensive legal and administrative knowledge. In 1943, he would be chosen by the President of the Council of Ministers to become the Counsel General of the Italian State. “An eminent personality in the bar of the State,” one of his friends would say, “he would have been the first of all to be given the supreme responsibility. A surreptitious campaign led by secular and anti-religious members of this same bar blocked him. The servant of God, despite being deeply wounded in his heart by the injustice he had suffered, had no visible reaction.” Luigi can be seen as an example for those who pay for their honesty and adherence to their faith by being marginalized professionally. In 1948, he was invited to step forward as a candidate for a seat in the Senate. With Maria’s agreement, he declined this offer, because he did not share

certain orientations with those who extended this invitation.

Luigi was a discreet man, naturally endowed with a certain air of distinction and friendliness in his relations with others. More interested in apostolic than professional activities, he was involved in them at the parish and national levels, particularly in programs for the formation of youth and especially scouts, for whom he sacrificed hours that could have been used for rest and relaxation. The responsibilities he took on in the community earned him numerous honorary titles and awards, but once received, they were put away in the bottom of a drawer, and never spoken of again. One of his sons would write of him: “He did not overrate himself in comparison to others, but neither did he systematically devalue himself. ... With those who were ‘far from faith,’ he showed a particular tact that always attracted their friendship. ... And as for those who were ‘far from morals,’ he avoided disturbing them, unless they themselves put the topic on the table.” Luigi wrote, “We must not hide our religious feelings, we must publicly profess them, but, principally and before all else, we must demonstrate them by our works. It is through honesty and the Christian spirit that permeate our conduct in human relations, through unselfishness, love for our neighbor, charity lived and put into practice that we profess to men our religious convictions.” One of Luigi’s friends, a non-believer and a Freemason, moved as he stood before Luigi’s mortal remains, admitted to one of the sons of the deceased: “You see, during all the years that we worked together, your father never pestered me with sermons. But I want to tell you; it’s through his life that I discovered God and that I love the Gospel. Pray for me!”

To pray is not to evade reality

The care of their family remained Maria and Luigi’s main commitment. Prayer was central to this, and Luigi was the soul of this prayer: “From our childhood...” wrote one of his sons, “we were struck by Papa’s particular attitude of deep recollection during visits to the Blessed Sacrament at church... It was always my father who, after dinner, led the family rosary... As I recall, my father and mother daily received the Eucharist, and they passed this practice on to us... I also remember with emotion how much my father loved to serve the Mass ... in particular those of the many priests who came regularly to our house.” For a Christian, Pope Benedict XVI would observe, “to pray is not to evade reality and the responsibilities it brings, but rather to fully assume them, trusting in the faithful and inexhaustible love of the Lord” (Angelus, March 4, 2007). Also, Luigi spent himself without reserve to lighten the inevitable burdens of motherhood on his wife. He understood the teaching that Pope John Paul II would give in the Apostolic

Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, on August 15, 1988: “Human parenthood is something shared by both the man and the woman. ... Although both of them together are parents of their child, the woman’s motherhood constitutes a special ‘part’ in this shared parenthood, and the most demanding part. ... It is therefore necessary that the man be fully aware that in their shared parenthood he owes a special debt to the woman. ... The man — even with all his sharing in parenthood — always remains ‘outside’ the process of pregnancy and the baby’s birth; in many ways he has to learn his own ‘fatherhood’ from the mother” (no. 18).

In 1922, the sons Filippo and Cesarino expressed the desire to devote themselves to God. On November 6, 1924, Filippo entered the seminary, and Cesarino the Benedictine abbey of Saint Paul outside the Walls. Cesarino would become Father Paolino. “When the two boys left the house, it left a huge emptiness,” stated their sister Stefania. “Papa was the one who felt it the most, to the point of physical illness.” However, these sufferings soon passed. Maria would write to her sons: “Thinking of you is for me, after the Mass and Communion, my only rest, the single radiant refuge in my soul blessing the Lord.” At the end of his first year of philosophy, Filippo had to leave the seminary for health reasons. Shortly thereafter, he joined his brother and became a Benedictine—he would become Father Tarcisio.

A costly gift

In 1920, the famous Father Mateo enthroned the Sacred Heart of JESUS in the Beltrame home. With his encouragement, Stefania decided to consecrate herself to God. In 1927, she entered the Benedictine convent in Milan and took the name Sister Cecilia. Enrichetta reported, “My sister’s departure made a violent tear in Papa’s heart. I can still see, more than seventy years later, the silent, discrete tears of my father on his knees, while on the other side of the grille, the ceremony of his daughter’s taking of the habit took place.” Maria had dedicated herself to giving her children a human and Christian upbringing, pious but without excesses: “I have often wondered,” she wrote, “if a life oriented in this way must necessarily lead to a vocation. *You did not choose me, but I chose you* (Jn. 15 :16), the Lord said, and so my answer is no. ... For parents to whom God has given this royal and free gift, there remains the duty and eternal need to humble oneself, to thank God, to live the *Domine non sum dignus* (Lord, I am not worthy) in a life of thanksgiving, devotion, and piety.” Moreover, Maria did not lose sight of the variety of God’s gifts: “All states of life, provided they are lived under the sweet thumb of the divine will, are noble and holy, being effective means of arriving at the goal (holiness).” She noted that if children choose marriage, “it’s

certainly a great and sublime vocation,” but this path, too, is not easy.

For the Beltrame family, the home represented the intimate world where love for one another in God reigned. Like every woman, Maria ascribed great importance to the care of the home, down to the smallest details. She made use of her talent for hospitality, establishing for her guests an atmosphere most in keeping with the spirit of the Gospel, in which rancor, resentment, and gossip were banned. In conversation, one kept to the facts without passing judgment on people. Vacations were usually spent in the countryside, which Maria preferred to the sea. In 1928, the Beltrames acquired a piece of land in Serravalle, on which they had a house built. There they set up a little chapel where, by special permission, they reserved the Most Blessed Sacrament.

The return to serenity

In their daily life, Maria and Luigi tried to outdo each other in charity. One of their children wrote, “Their life together was a veritable contest in respect, in self-giving, in loving dependence and mutual obedience, in a common search for what was ‘the best’ for the other, at an eminently spiritual level, in a harmony of souls in which the very concept of obedience was surpassed by a transcendent demand for charity... even in the loving practice of fraternal correction and a sincere and humble consultation of the other’s thoughts.” Nevertheless, opposing opinions, animated discussions, and even frictions were not unknown. Maria was resistant to outside influences, and getting her to change her mind was not easy. At these times, Luigi could feel upset and nervous, while Maria seemed aggressive. But this never lasted long, and prompt requests for forgiveness brought serenity back. Tobacco was a source of disagreements. Luigi had been a heavy smoker in his youth. To be a good example to his children, he stopped smoking when Filippo was born. When the children had chosen their paths, he resumed smoking, despite Maria’s disapproval of it.

Luigi left the management of their finances to his wife, although he would be involved in major decisions. Maria stressed in her writings that, in order for one to become holy, the renunciation of all one’s goods was not required. On the other hand, the couple gladly practiced the spirit of solidarity toward those who appealed to them with a thousand requests. In addition to financial assistance, Luigi placed at their service his professional abilities and the prestige he had gained in the most exalted circles. As for Maria, she exercised in her way a sort of “spiritual direction,” not only among her family but also among friends, even among priests and religious, who placed their confidence in her.

Directed for more than twenty years by Franciscan Father Pellegrino Paoli, the Beltrame family belonged to the Franciscan Third Order. Father Mateo also held an important place in the family's spiritual development. In August 1918, Luigi went through a difficult period that one of his sons described thus : " Our father passed through an intense spiritual crisis, linked to the harsh spiritual asceticism that his wife entered into under the apostolic influence of Father Mateo... He succumbed to a moment of discouragement, and ended up developing a 'fear of God,' almost as though a rival who was too attractive to his wife had robbed him of her, so to speak... His wife helped him overcome this obstacle, and helped him allow himself to be drawn by the Spirit as well, in a love that never diminished but was ever increased by the living presence of grace." Much later, Maria would make a vow to do "whatever was most perfect," in the presence of the Dominican Father Garrigou-Lagrange, who became her spiritual director after Father Mateo.

Intense communion

After their children, except for Enrichetta who remained with her parents, left home, Luigi and Maria considered withdrawing to a monastery, but they understood that this was not God's will. Their desire for perfection would be realized by maintaining their life together, in which their souls would become more and more deeply united. In 1941, Luigi's health was shaken by two heart attacks, but he recovered from them and

regained satisfactory health. On November 1st, 1951, he updated his will : " I hope that God will grant me the grace of final perseverance in this faith that I feel so alive in me today, and that I try to consistently maintain in my thoughts and actions, as I know it and as I am able." On the 5th, by a happy coincidence, the entire family found itself together in Rome for Holy Mass. During the night of the 7th to the 8th, another heart attack led to Luigi's death during the evening of the 9th, at the age of 71. A few months later, Maria wrote, "Luigi is always and incessantly the love and inconsolable sorrow of each and all of us, yet he helps us, he is near to us, and he loves us as much and even more, if it is possible, than before... Little by little, he is present to me ever more, most of all in prayer, at Communion, before the altar." Speaking to herself, she added, "You realize that all these little gestures of love that sought to make the house more attractive for him (Luigi), no longer have any reason for being, any meaning ... It is only the communication of souls, the communion between them, cemented by faith, that gives birth and life to the unity from which you can never free yourself." In the years that followed, Maria gradually gave up her external activities and spent all her time in prayer, writing, and caring for her family. In 1962, Father Paolino revealed to her his decision to enter the Trappists, in which she rejoiced. During the summer of 1965, she had a beautiful time on vacation, but on August 26th, she died of a heart attack. She was 81 years old.

The Beltrame Quattrocchi couple had trials in their life, but they did not know certain sufferings that afflict other families, as Pope John Paul II noted in the homily at their beatification : " Married and family life can also experience moments of bewilderment. We know how many families in these cases are tempted to discouragement. I am particularly referring to those who are going through the sad event of separation ; I am thinking of those who must face illness and those who are suffering the premature death of their spouse or of a child. In these situations, one can bear a great witness to fidelity in love ... I entrust struggling families to the providence of God and to the loving care of MARY ... Dear married couples, do not be overcome by hardship : the grace of the Sacrament supports you and helps you constantly to raise your arms to Heaven. "

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it. – Also available free of charge are: tract about the divinity of Jesus Christ; tract about the Truths of the Catholic Religion; scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, with explanatory notice; the promises of the Sacred Heart; the mysteries of the Rosary.

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