



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of November 15, 2012,
Feast of Saint Albert the Great

Dear Friends,

ON the afternoon of January 29, 1920, in Cernusco sul Naviglio, near Milan, two nuns from the Marcelline Sisters, accompanied by their chaplain, watched as three deceased religious were exhumed, so that their remains might be transferred to the convent cemetery. The scene promised nothing to celebrate, yet... Time had done its work on the bodies of the first two sisters exhumed. But when the grave-digger came to the coffin of the third, Sister Maria Anna Sala, he found it so heavy that he thought the mortal remains were not decomposed. In fact, when the casket was opened, there was the intact body, with a fresh and rosy face, under the shroud which had remained as white as snow. The chaplain, who had not known Sister Sala, concluded, "This was a young Sister. She could not have been more than 30 years old." But, at the time of her death, Sister Maria Anna was 62 years old, and then she had been buried for 29 years!

Informed of the event, the Superior General of the Sisters of Saint Marcellina put this unusual discovery in the Lord's hands. A few days later, Sister Gulfi began suffering from hemorrhages so serious that surgery was considered. The Mother General asked the sick sister to pray to the Sacred Heart of JESUS for three days that, through Sister Maria Anna Sala's intervention, the operation might be avoided. Three days later, Sister Gulfi was out of danger. Right away, they began to collect testimonies and documents about Sister Maria Anna. Many remembered her, her very simple life, and the virtues she humbly practiced in her daily responsibilities. When she died, many people had called her a saint, in particular her Sisters and her former students. So in Milan in May 1931 the process began that would result in the Sister's beatification on October 26, 1980. On that occasion, Pope John Paul II would highlight three lessons drawn from her life and her example: "The need to form and possess character—firm, sensible, balanced; the sanctifying value of commitment to the duties assigned by obedience; and the essential importance of teaching."

Maria Anna Sala was born and received baptism on April 21, 1829, in Brivio, in northern Italy. Her family, which was comfortably off, was faithful to the Christian traditions of Lombardy, at the time a province of Austria. Maria Anna was the fifth of eight children. Her father, a man of great faith, worked in the timber trade. Through the example of their authentically Christian life, the Salas directed their children toward God, while watching over them with wise foresight. Maria Anna had a happy childhood, and had her first schooling at home. The little girl was very gifted, with a lively and balanced



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Blessed Maria Anna Sala

mind. When she was thirteen, she was sent to a school that had been opened the year before in Vimercate by the Marcelline Sisters. The Marcellines were founded in 1838 by Don Biraghi, the spiritual director of the major seminary in Milan, and by Mother Marina Videmari, also from Milan. The primary purpose of this Institute was to educate girls in the light of the Christian faith, allowing them to follow a serious course of studies without neglecting domestic activities. The new religious family was placed under the patronage of Saint Ambrose's sister, Saint Marcellina, who had received the veil of the consecrated virgin from the hands of Pope Liberius in Rome in 353. From the time she entered school, Maria Anna was at the head of her class. She studied so intently that at times she would forget to go to the refectory at mealtime.

A precious virtue

Diligence in work is in itself a virtue, for "idleness is the enemy of the soul" (*Rule of Saint Benedict*, ch. 48). Work holds an important place in God's plan for man. From the beginning, God wished to include him in the work of His creation, and entrusted to him the mission of subduing the earth and governing it in holiness and justice, so that the very name of God might be glorified by the whole universe. Work enables man to support himself and his family; it is also an opportunity to work together with others and be of service. Each person

who carries out the duties of his state with care and professional integrity contributes to the development of his nation and society. The Church “exhorts Christians ... to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the Gospel spirit. ... The Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation” (Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 43). Some are unable to work due to sickness, unemployment, or age. They are encouraged to offer their state and their sufferings to God, in union with the Passion of JESUS, which can yield rich fruit for the salvation of souls.

Pope Saint Pius X expressed, in a very beautiful prayer to Saint Joseph, how Christians can sanctify their work: “Glorious Saint Joseph, model of all who are devoted to labor, obtain for me the grace to work in the spirit of penance in expiation of my many sins; to work conscientiously by placing love of duty above my inclinations; to gratefully and joyously deem it an honor to employ and to develop by labor the gifts I have received from God, to work methodically, peacefully, and in moderation and patience, without ever shrinking from it through weariness or difficulty to work; above all, with purity of intention and unselfishness, having unceasingly before my eyes death and the account I have to render of time lost, talents unused, good not done, and vain complacency in success, so baneful to the work of God. All for JESUS, all for MARY, all to imitate thee, O patriarch Saint JOSEPH! This shall be my motto for life and eternity.”

A necessary presence

On November 16, 1846, Maria Anna earned her teaching certification in elementary education. Clearly perceiving Christ’s call, she wished to immediately enter the community of religious who had educated her. But that same day, a cousin came to take her back to Brivio. Her mother’s poor health, the many demands of a large family, financial difficulties caused by a swindle to which her father had fallen victim, required Maria Anna’s calm and attentive presence at the house. Her mother thought highly of her, and her father drew from her heart the strength of Christian forgiveness and the courage to resume his activities. The young woman’s hard-working attitude was infectious, but her father protested when she gave alms to a poor man. “Right now,” he said, “we need to think of ourselves!”—“It is better to help a pauper,” Maria Anna replied. “God will think of us.” In addition to taking care of her family, Maria Anna found time to give children lessons and teach them catechism. With one of her sisters, she liked to go to the Oratory of Saint Leonard, a small shrine near the village, where the Madonna was venerated. Many people brought their personal troubles there; in exchange, they received the comfort that Christian hope brings and sometimes, great favors. Their mother having fallen ill, the two young women prayed to the Virgin there especially for her intention. As a Sala

family keepsake portrait records, the sick woman felt cured at that moment, with the certainty of having seen, beside her, the Virgin blessing her.

Two years later, her family’s situation had improved considerably, and Maria Anna was able to return to the Marcellines’ convent in the company of her two younger sisters, Genoveffa and Lucia, who were admitted as students at the school. After her period of formation, she made her perpetual vows on September 13, 1852. Her life then proceeded in accordance with the needs of a teaching Congregation. Several Marcelline schools were the beneficiaries of her fruitful apostolate—those in Cernusco, on the via Amedei in Milan, in Genoa, in Chambery (during the autumn holidays), and lastly, Milan’s Quadronno, the boarding school that, at the time, was also the motherhouse. In spite of her very sensitive nature, Sister Sala always welcomed these changes—which nevertheless affected her—with an obedient spirit. She initially taught French and music in elementary classes. Then in 1868, she was appointed vice-superior of the Congregation, at which time she left for Genoa. Students’ parents were won over by her kindness. Sister Maria Anna’s relationships with the girls were characterized by great sincerity and loyalty. She sought the truth in everything and for everyone.

Right away

Her perfect spirit of obedience was manifested in the complete subordination she showed to her superiors, and even to her fellow sisters. “One would have said that she had vowed to obey all the Sisters,” one witness said. Her generous availability to her students whenever they wished was legendary. “I’m coming right away” was the motto for her entire life, which was irrevocably offered in the service of others. This “I’m coming right away” sometimes made her interrupt more important activities. This constant concern to serve did not even allow her to extend her time of intimate encounter with the Lord, moments that her soul however, in love with contemplation, desired. This motto expressed her response of love to God in a great spirit of humility and poverty.

In 1878, Sister Maria Anna Sala returned to Milan, where she continued her teaching assignments while at the same time serving as assistant general to the superior, chancellor, and bursar for the Congregation. This change cost her dearly. “Dearest Superior Catherine,” she wrote November 1, 1878 to the superior of the school in Genoa, “I received the news of my new assignment yesterday; I cannot yet express the effect it has had on my soul, as I am still so stunned by it. But enough argument! The Lord wills it this way, the Lord will help me. Is this the holy indifference we talk about? Oh! I still have so much to do to acquire it! I am ashamed of myself observing that at the very moment I believed myself ready for any sacrifice; in practice, my nature still reacts so strongly... And our dear students? Especially

the older ones? If you knew how deeply I feel the separation! I did not know that I loved them so much..." Nevertheless she maintained her deep interior peace.

The foundress, already old, also used her as a secretary, so that she was soon called "Mother's old age cane." The Mother consulted her often and entrusted her with delicate tasks. The foundress thought her a saint, and, in her conviction that saints must be tried, she did not treat her gently or with kindness, and humiliated her. Her intensely difficult temperament also made her suffer. For thirteen years, Sister Maria Anna endured all the foundress's mood swings. In spite of everything, she remained deeply attached to the foundress by ties of respect and affection. For her, becoming a saint was a matter of living in truth, faithfulness, and consistency with one's vows of baptism and consecration. She applied herself to these vows with great simplicity—the asceticism she imposed on herself was discreet and did not draw attention, but trained her to practice the most ordinary virtues with perseverance.

Gentleness and kindness in challenging circumstances

Sister Maria Anna was also gentle and kind to her students. At this time, however, which in Italy was marked by anticlericalism among the well-to-do, the girls were sometimes haughty and rebellious, and did not tolerate the slightest contradiction or correction. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Sister Maria Anna understood that the way to exert a real and good influence on her students was to impress them with her broad and deep knowledge. So she ceaselessly applied herself to intense private study, acquiring a very thorough knowledge of Italian literature, and also foreign literatures, the physical sciences, (physics, chemistry, botany, medicine), and the sacred sciences (theology, philosophy, and Holy Scripture). She took an interest in the arts, particularly music, and in pedagogical methods. She also perfected her Latin and Greek, and spoke French and English fluently.

She adapted to different levels of intelligence, encouraging the better students, and helping the less gifted, whom she called her jewels. For seven years, she worked particularly closely with a mentally retarded child. Her teaching method was to harmonize the Gospel and culture, faith and life. In effect, consecrated religious dedicated to educating children "are called to bring to bear on the world of education their radical witness to the values of the Kingdom, proposed to everyone in expectation of the definitive meeting with the Lord of history," as Blessed Pope John Paul pointed out (Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, March 25, 1996).

In history, for example, Sister Maria Anna showed that Napoleon's power began to decline when the Emperor attacked the Pope. Commenting on Dante's *Paradise*, she inflamed her students' hearts with love and

desire for Heaven. Explaining the *Iliad*, she pointed out that the idea of God is present among every people.

She put into practice the teaching of Saint Francis de Sales: "If you really love God, ... you will speak entirely naturally of Him with neighbors and friends, not giving sermons, but with a spirit of sweetness, love, and humility; distilling as well as you can the delicious honey of divine things, drop by drop, first in the ear of one, then in the ear of another, praying to God in the secret of your soul to make this holy dew pass into the hearts of those who hear you. Above all, this angelic duty must be done sweetly and gently, not as correction, but as inspiration; for it is marvelous how the sweetness and kindness of a good word is a powerful bait to attract hearts" (*Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part III, ch. 26).

An adaptable piety

Sister Maria Anna's job was often thankless, but she did not become discouraged. In 1869, she gave this advice to one of her sisters who had also joined the Marcellines: "Do not believe useless the effort that does not immediately produce fruit; have patience and, with the help of God, you will be able to gain much by working in His vineyard. If, by chance, we find our duty beyond our strength, let us take care not to lose our heads. It is then that we have a reason and even the right to expect greater assistance from the Lord." She passed on to her students not only intellectual knowledge, however useful it might be, but also instilled in them the wisdom and love of God. For her, everything took place in the presence of God, very simply; by her example, she eventually made others love this piety: "True piety," she said, "is a treasure at every age and in all conditions of life. It knows how to adapt to the demands of family and society, and to make itself lovable to all." During the process of beatification, a student testified: "In education, Sister Maria Anna had a single goal—to form true Christians who later would start Christian families, thus spreading the Reign of God."

Sister Maria Anna desired to resemble JESUS crucified, but without seeking extraordinary penances. "There is no need," she said, "to scourge oneself. But if, each day, we accept in peace the cross God sends us, we can be certain of our salvation. Even the smallest difficulties we endure are of great merit... Put vexations in the good Lord's savings bank, and you will get them back again in the next life, transformed into joys ... The wood of the Cross serves wonderfully for lighting the sacred fire of love of God." She wrote to a nun: "Oh, my dear Genevieve, let us never cease to serve the Lord the best we can, even when He demands sacrifices, if we can use that word for the little difficulties we encounter in the practice of the virtues. In effect, what is our suffering in comparison to all that JESUS, our beloved Spouse, suffered because He loved us? On the contrary, should we not rejoice with the Lord, and thank Him when He offers us a good opportunity to prove our love and faith-

fulness to Him? Oh, yes! Let us abandon ourselves entirely to the Lord, and He will help us become saints" (letter of October 16, 1874). She advised later: "Every day one more step on the path that leads to good and virtue, this courageous virtue that feeds and grows stronger on the little sacrifices that are so often demanded, even in the best living conditions and the happiest age."

Sister Maria Anna always had the Lord with her. Her students noticed it—in classes, during which their attention and their hearts were captured by her explanations, always so striking; when they found themselves near her in chapel for community prayer; or when they saw her pass in the hallways, hurrying, consumed with a thousand and one responsibilities; but above all in the evenings, when in the half-light of the dormitory, they watched her, kneeling by her bed, recollected in a last intimate conversation with JESUS crucified.

About eight years before her death, while she was living in the Quadronno boarding school in Milan, the first symptom of the disease that would carry Sister Maria Anna off appeared—a malignant tumor in her throat, easily seen by the swelling of her neck. Sister Maria Anna

wore a black scarf to hide the deformation that became too visible. And when severe pains made her interrupt her classes, a sweet smile still lit up her calm face. She got in the habit of laughing at her illness by calling the deformation on her neck "my necklace of pearls." From time to time, she endured a veritable torture that brought her to tears. "Excuse me," she would then say, "I have set a poor example. I will be more careful... The suffering will have earned me something for Heaven. Up there I will pray for everyone. How beautiful Heaven will be!"

Transfigured

In October 1891, Sister Maria Anna was forced to stop working. The disease had overcome her physical and moral resistance. The days that followed were marked by extreme suffering. Finally, on November 24, while the litanies of the Most Blessed Virgin MARY were being sung in the chapel, and Sister Maria Anna, completely trusting in God, repeated with fading lips, "Pray for me", at the invocation "Queen of Virgins," she peacefully rendered her soul to God. On her deathbed, she seemed transfigured by a new beauty. Even the traces of the cancer that had led to her death had disappeared.

Sister Maria Anna Sala's very simple example reminds us that we are all called to sanctity: "Thus it is evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society. In order that the faithful may reach this perfection, they must use their strength accordingly as they have received it, as a gift from Christ. They must follow in His footsteps and conform themselves to His image seeking the will of the Father in all things. They must devote themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbor. In this way, the holiness of the People of God will grow into an abundant harvest of good, as is admirably shown by the life of so many saints in Church history" (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 40).

Travel the path of humility and of trust in God Who can do all things—that is the message given us by Blessed Maria Anna Sala, through the example of her entire life.

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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