

The Servite Third Order has a new Blessed: Don Luigi Caburlotto

On next 16 May there is going to be a beatification in St Mark's Square, Venice for a Venetian priest Father Luigi Caburlotto (1817-1897). This has direct and special interest for the Secular Order of the Servants of Mary. Yes, direct interest, because the new Blessed was enrolled and professed in the Third Order in Venice. Indeed, he was the founding member of the male branch of the Venice fraternity. And in the register of that men's fraternity, which was founded in 1885, he is enrolled as Number One. He was also the Corrector – meaning the spiritual assistant – right up to a year before his death, which happened on 9 July 1897. He took the fraternity name of Brother Joseph of Saint Luigi Gonzaga, and this was the name he used to sign all the minutes which were kept meticulously at every meeting, to be read, approved and signed by him each time.

Perhaps this discovery of a link between the new Blessed and the Third Order of the Servants of Mary comes as a surprise for many people. It certainly did for me, and I am a friar who has lived for over 20 years in Venice: I had heard speak of this priest often enough, but never with any reference to our Order. Only now, with the fervour and preparation for his beatification, have I been able to find out that there was this deep and significant link with the Order. Indeed, we can rightly say that Blessed Luigi Caburlotto is another Blessed Ferdinando Maria Baccilieri. Just like Fr Baccilieri, Fr Caburlotto was deeply imbued with the spirituality of the Servants of Mary. He recited the Rosary of the Seven Sorrows of Our Lady every day; he was a parish priest and Tertiary of the Servants of Mary. He gave himself to the education of young people and he founded a congregation of sisters who would take Mary as the exemplar for their service.

His life was not especially complicated, because he spent all his life in the city of Venice. But his many tasks and the duties that he undertook were intense and varied. He was born in Venice on 7 June 1817, the son of gondoliers. He was ordained priest on 24 September 1842 and was almost immediately named assistant and then parish-priest of the church of San Giacomo dell'Orio. On 20 April 1850 he started a local school for the most deprived of young girls in local families. Within just a few years his group of voluntary teachers in the school became a religious institute of sisters, and he himself composed their Rule of Life, calling them Daughters of St Joseph. Since his young days Fr Caburlotto had great regard for the Discalced Servite Contemplative Nuns in the nearby Venetian monastery. We can see how his early Rule for the sisters drew generously on the Rule of the Nuns. He included their devotion to the Mother of the Seven Sorrows, and called on the new sisters to celebrate with solemnity the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows on 15 September, and to meditate every day on her sorrows, reciting 7 *Hail Marys* after each of the sorrows. The standard greeting of the sisters was: *Hail Mary, Mother of Sorrows*. He called them Daughters of St Joseph, but their spirit was to be a spirit of service. In the Rule he wrote: "Your ambition shall be to

serve the others just as Joseph in Nazareth served Mary and Jesus”, and “All the sisters shall conform to a single purpose, to imitate Saint Joseph in the home at Nazareth, where there was no-one but Joseph at service of Jesus and Mary. Likewise, each sister shall consider herself at service of Jesus and Mary and a servant to the other sisters.”

As well as being parish-priest for many years, Fr Caburlotto was specially committed to the education of the poorest of young people and those most in moral danger. He gave himself generously to the education of young women who had gone astray, and was often heard to say, “Educate a young girl well, and you will be saving an entire family.” But he was dedicated to the young boys too, sparing not efforts for their wellbeing. Then in 1866 the Venice Region was annexed to be part of Italy (having been under the Austro-Hungarian Empire for so long). Shortly after this the religious orders were suppressed and their properties seized. There were so many orphanages and educational institutes in Venice that had been started and run by religious orders and congregations; these were seized by the new liberal government and taken from the Church into secular control.

It was a social disaster! It was not just because the secular employees made everything so much more costly than the religious arrangement, way beyond the possibilities of secular finances. But also the new plan ignored moral education and the young people behaved without any discipline.

The Commune of Venice, directed by anticlerical leaders, turned to the parish-priest Fr Luigi Caburlotto and begged him to remedy the situation and assume direction for all the charitable education institutions in the area. More than this, in 1870 the new Kingdom of Italy (which had conquered Rome and removed the Pope) name Fr Caburlotto a Knight of the Kingdom. Fr Caburlotto accepted all this out of love for his young people, and within a few years had re-established a sense of order, discipline, serenity and frugality in the various institutes, male and female, to everyone’s satisfaction.

Not everyone approved, however. The most strict Catholics and many fellow priests (including even the Patriarch of Venice) began to look on him with suspicion, like a collaborator with the enemies of the Church and a renegade priest. Fr Caburlotto was more than aware of this opposition and suffered much. He felt very marginalised among the Venetian clergy. But he would not stand down from his position and continued to serve the needs of education for young people as long as he had the strength to do so. This was his dominant purpose.

In 1800 the Servants of Mary were not to be found in Venice, having been suppressed under Napoleon in 1806-1810. Their two splendid priories (Santa Maria dei Servi and San Giacomo alla Giudecca) had been vandalised and stripped of their treasures and artwork with the friars expelled from the city. They were only able to return in 1896 when the Patriarch of Venice Archbishop Giuseppe Sarto (future Pope Saint Pius X) gave them the former Abbey of the Misericordi. The contemplative Servite Nuns from the Monastery of Santa Maria del Pianto were also suppressed and laicised in 1806-

1810, but they already had a “restoration” in 1817 and resumed their monastic life at Campo della Lana. This is where Fr Luigi Caburlotto came to know the spirituality of the Order of the Servants of Mary. It was here that he founded the women’s branch of the Servite Third Order. He went on to start the men’s branch of the Third Order, becoming its first brother and its Corrector, nominated by the Patriarch. As mentioned earlier, he took on the religious name of *Brother Joseph of Saint Luigi Gonzaga*, honouring his devotion to the saintly spouse of Mary and her first “Servant”. He retained his baptismal name, Luigi.

In the historical archive of the Venetian Province of the Order in Vicenza we still have all the records of the men’s branch of the Venetian Third Order from his time. We can see how every meeting is recorded in great detail, with lists of the prayers that were said, themes that were presented and charitable funds collected. At the end the records are all signed by the Corrector, Blessed Luigi Caburlotto, using his special religious name in the Order. We can also easily see how very precisely he kept the records with order and precision right up to the time of his death. After that the records are much more generic, vague and even not written at all. His attention to detail seems almost petty by comparison, but it shows a quite rare seriousness and love for the Order.

If you would like to take part in the solemn Beatification ceremonies for Don Luigi Caburlotto, the first Venetian parish-priest, which will happen on 16 May in Venice, you can enlist on the website www.beatificazioneluigicaburlotto.it It is to be hoped that the Order of Servants of Mary, and especially the Secular Order, will be generously represented on that occasion, even though it coincides with the Annual National Pilgrimage Night-March of the Order. And it is hoped that the new Blessed will become an inspiration for many in our time, for apostolic zeal, dedication to education for youth, Marian devotion and a spirit of service.

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