

ST. JOSEPH CAFASSO

He was born on the 15th of January, 1811 at Castelnuovo d'Asti, now Castelnuovo Don Bosco, in the Province of Piedmont about twenty miles from Turin. He had as contemporaries two other Saints who, like him, exercised their apostolate in the city of Turin: St. Joseph Cotelengo, who was twenty-five years his senior, and St. John Bosco, who was only a little more than three years his junior. St. Joseph Cotelengo was the founder of the famous hospital at Turin, which has now ten thousand patients and has existed for over a century, without bank account or funds, depending on Divine Providence alone.

Joseph Cafasso was the third child of a family of four. His parents, who were remarkable for their charity to the poor, were small farmers who had to supplement their scanty income by working on neighboring farms. Joseph was a Saint from his infancy; his sanctity was the result of victories gained over himself and it increased with his years. Even in his childhood he had certain days set apart for mortification, and he fasted every Saturday in honor of Our Blessed Lady. From childhood he attended daily Mass which he served with joy when permitted, and was a model of devotion. He was gifted with a keen intellect and a good memory, and was first in his class at school. He never lost a moment, he even took a short cut to the school and studied his lessons on the way. He appeared to be aware that his life was to be a short one, and that it would not be long enough for the work for God he hoped to accomplish. By his strong character based on humility, and his determination never to offend God, no matter what humiliation it might cost him, he gained an ascendancy over the other pupils and even over people older than himself.

As soon as he came to the age of reason, his mother accustomed him to give alms to the poor, which he gladly did, and even added the best of his own meals to what his mother gave him. When scarcely ten, he began his spiritual apostolate. He loved to teach catechism to the poor children of the district, and on Sunday evenings he would gather the neighbors and, standing on a chair because he was of small stature, he would repeat for them the sermon he had heard that morning in church.

Seeing such evident signs of a vocation, his parents decided to educate him for the priesthood. They sent him to a school in the neighboring town of Chieri, where he studied Latin and afterwards Philosophy. As there was no vacancy in the major seminary of Turin, he began the study of Theology under the Pastor of his native parish, and completed it at Chieri, when a major Seminary was opened there.

He was a model student, humble and always ready to help other students. His companions gave him the name of "the new Aloysius" on account of his modesty, gentleness and angelic disposition.

He was Ordained a priest in 1833 at the age of twenty-two, having gotten a dispensation for defect of age. After Ordination, he went to Turin to attend one of the post-graduate courses there. There were three such courses in Turin at the time. Having attended the lectures of the three in succession, he selected the one presided over by a very learned and virtuous priest named Don Guala. The course consisted of moral and dogmatic theology, Sacred Scripture, Patrology, Liturgy and Sacred Eloquence. He was easily the first among the young priests who attended the course, and when his three years' studies were completed he was selected by Don Guala as assistant professor. He was a brilliant lecturer. His fame soon spread over all Piedmont and even beyond it, and attracted students not only from Turin but from the surrounding dioceses. He aimed at making the young priests not only learned in theology but saintly men and efficient ministers of the Gospel.

Jansenism was rampant at the time. A large number of the clergy were tainted with it; they held rigorous views and deterred people from approaching the Sacraments, but their lives were far from virtuous. Don Cafasso was the apostle of hope and confidence and advocated frequent and even daily Communion. By correct explanation of the principles of Moral Theology, by preaching the mercy of God in season and out of season and by training the young priests to work with him in the prisons among men considered by the Jansenists as unworthy of the Sacraments, he fortified them against the errors of that pernicious heresy.

When Don Guala, the Rector of the Institute, became old and infirm, Don Cafasso took charge and was appointed as his successor when he died.

There was a church dedicated to St. Francis of Assisi attached to the College, of which the Rector was Pastor. Don

Cafasso had charge of the Church and spent long hours each day, usually from 7 a.m. till 9:30 or even 11 am., hearing Confessions in it. His fame for learning and sanctity attracted great numbers of penitents there. He gave preference to working men and after them to servant girls, and if there was not time to hear the wealthy and the titled folk before his classes began, he asked them to return.

Besides performing all his duties as Professor and Pastor, never missing a class or being a minute late, he found time for other forms of apostolate in Turin, the chief of which were teaching catechism to poor children, visiting the sick and the various prisons of the city, and giving missions and retreats.

Don Cafasso and Don Bosco

Though Don Cafasso and Don Bosco were neighbors, they did not become acquainted till Don Cafasso had become a clerical student and was already sixteen years old. Don Bosco was then but a boy who loved games and fun, and Don Cafasso had already acquired the wisdom of a man of experience. He became Don Bosco's adviser, helped him in his difficulties, and when he was ordained Don Cafasso received him into the College of which he was now professor. Don Cafasso was accustomed to bring some of the young priests with him to help in teaching catechism; having found Don Bosco by far the most suited for this work, he advised him to devote himself to it when his three years course was finished. He procured a house for him, and when he was driven out of it on account of the noise the boys made, Don Cafasso got another for him and supplied him with funds for the work. He continued to help him and advise him until the time of his death, and Don Bosco, though only a few years younger than he, would do nothing without consulting him.

His Work Among the Poor

He sought out the poor in their homes and trained the young priests under his charge to visit them and help them. He never refused an alms. He gave away all that he owned himself, and generous people, knowing his great charity, gave him large sums of money, being persuaded that it was the best way to help the poor. He was particularly kind to those who, as the result of some calamity, had fallen into poverty. He did not, however, allow himself to be imposed on, and when he had prudent reason for suspicion, he sent a servant to visit the houses of people who appealed for help, to see what they had for meals. The servant often found that some of the people who said that they were in want had well-supplied tables.

Visiting the Prisoners

The prisons in Don Cafasso's time were gloomy places infested with vermin. There was much communication between the prisoners, and the wicked had the greatest influence. It was among these outcasts of society that Don Cafasso spent most of his free time. He visited each prison at least once a week, and some of them once a day, and spent long hours there, usually four or five hours at a time. He returned home each night bringing with him on his person, the vermin of the prison, which he jocularly called "living silver and moving riches."

He prepared the way for his spiritual ministrations by corporal benefits, but when actually hearing Confession he never gave anything, even a medal. He distributed various kinds of gifts among the prisoners: tobacco, money, fruit, clothes, religious objects.

He instructed the prisoners in the truths of religion, and not being in any hurry to leave, he did that work thoroughly. He prepared them for the Sacraments and heard their Confessions. There is no case on record in which he failed to convert even the hardened sinners among them. He brought some of the young priests under him to visit the prisons and made it part of their training to help the poor and needy and visit those in prison. He helped to get employment for those among the prisoners who from time to time were liberated.

Those Condemned to Death

Don Cafasso singled out for special kindness criminals condemned to death. He visited all these frequently, instructed them and prepared them for death. He accompanied them all to the scaffold—fifty seven from Turin prisons and seven others from other towns. He succeeded in getting all these to go to the Sacraments. He was not satisfied

with merely converting them but endeavored to make them Saints. He exhorted them to accept capital punishment with resignation and told them that if they did so with perfect dispositions, they were in a state to go directly to Heaven without passing through Purgatory, for by dying a violent and dishonorable death they were performing the heaviest penance that could be imposed on anyone in this world. He even gave them a commission for him to execute when they went to Heaven, which was to kneel before the throne of Mary and intercede for him.

Adviser to Bishops and Priests

People of all classes not only from Turin but from distant places came to him for advice: bishops, priests, lawyers, titled folk, simple people and even non-Catholics. He solved difficult cases of conscience with marvelous facility. He was a very learned man and was hardly equaled by anyone of his time for practical knowledge of Moral Theology, but then, he was a Saint and got special light in prayer. He was never known to give a wrong solution or wrong advice.

Don Cafasso as a Preacher

During the twenty-four years that he spent at the College of St. Francis, he was Professor of Sacred Eloquence as well as of Moral Theology. His knowledge of the art of preaching was not acquired by merely reading books but from life-long practice which began when he was a boy. He became one of the most effective preachers not only of his own time but in the history of the Church. He was both learned and eloquent, and had a beautiful delivery. However, he trusted in none of these things, but rather in prayer and penance. In each sermon he made it his aim that not one person would leave the Church without being converted. He preached every Sunday at the Church of St. Francis and he frequently gave retreats to both clergy and laity. His favorite place for giving retreats was at the Sanctuary of St. Ignatius where there was a church and residence on a mountain 2,800 ft. high. It was there that the Conferences were first delivered. The Conferences which he gave on these occasions were always written and his manuscripts are still preserved. There are about sixty sermons in all, including those to the laity, covering about 1060 pages. These were published in Italy and have gone through several editions.

His Saintly Life

Don Cafasso was truly a man of God, a holy priest. All his words and acts breathed forth the delicious odor of celestial virtue. Some saw in him a resemblance to St. Philip Neri on account of his humility, others to St. Alphonsus Liguori for his learning, others to St. Vincent de Paul for his devotion to the poor and those in prison, others to St. Aloysius Gonzaga for the innocence and purity of his life, others to St. Francis de Sales for his burning love for God and his gentleness of manner, others to the Cure of Ars for the austerity of his life and his work in the Confessional.

His Austerities

In the matter of food, he mortified himself from his very infancy. One would imagine that he had no sense of taste for he preferred unsavory to tasty food. He fasted every Saturday even as a child, and from the time of his Ordination, every day was for him a fast day. For breakfast he took only a little bread without coffee or milk; for mid-day meal he took a plate of soup and a little bread but no fruit or sweets of any kind. When he became Rector, he began by waiting until dinner was nearly finished before he came; after some time, he did not come until dinner was over, and then he took a little bread and wine as he passed through the Refectory on his way to visit in the College Chapel.

He was a man of prayer; the views that he expresses in his Conference on Prayer were exemplified in his life. In spite of his many duties, he was able to find long hours for prayer. The secret of how he was able to do the work of several men and to do it well, and at the same time to find long hours for prayer lay in the fact that he spent little time eating, and little time sleeping. He was always last in the Church each night and was first up in the morning. After a long preparation, he began his Mass each morning at 4:30 a.m. He spent no time idly. He had taken two vows: one to do what was most perfect, the second to waste no time. St. John Bosco stated in his panegyric that in the thirty years that he had known him, he had never known him to waste time. Besides his fasting he practiced other rigorous austerities; he used instruments of penance: the hair-shirt, chains, the discipline. His undergarment was found each week by the woman who washed it to be stained with blood. Whenever a criminal was to be executed he watched the

whole night before the Blessed Sacrament and often scourged himself to blood.

His Devotions

His great devotions were: to the Passion, to the Sacred Heart, to the Mass, to the Stations of the Cross, to the Blessed Sacrament, to our Blessed Lady, to St. Joseph, to many of the Saints, to the Souls in Purgatory in whose favor he recommended the Heroic Act.

His Holy Death

When he was completing his forty-ninth year his health was still good, and to judge by appearances one would say that he had many years still to live. He himself was aware that such was not the case. St. John Bosco was convinced that the day and the hour of his death had been revealed to him, and in his panegyric of him gives several reasons for this belief.

Judged by the amount of work he had accomplished, and the small amount of time he spent at meals and in bed he had lived a very long life. "For venerable old age is not that of a long time, nor counted by the number of years. A spotless life is venerable old age. Being made perfect in a short time, he fulfilled a long time."

He made his preparation for death on the first Sunday of the month and devoted the whole day to it. He made his Confession as if it were to be his last, received Holy Communion at Mass as Viaticum, and received Extreme Unction in spirit as if he were a dying man. He recited the prayers for the dying and kissed the Crucifix as if it were the moment of expiring, and then imagined that Our Lady obtained for him another month to prepare for death.

His last illness began on the 9th June as he was hearing Confessions. He was obliged to go to bed and, on the third day of his illness, finding that he had still a little strength left, he got up and spent a few hours in the Confessional until he became quite exhausted. He had great devotion to Our Blessed Lady and it was his constant prayer that he should die on a day dedicated by the Church to her. His prayer was granted, for he died on a Saturday, a day consecrated by the Church to Our Lady. It was a Saturday within the Octave of the Feast of Mary Consolatrix, and was on the vigil of St. John, who is the principal patron of pious works of mercy for those condemned to death, to whose benefit he had devoted so much care. St. John Bosco believes that Our Lady appeared to him at the moment of death and conducted him to Heaven.

Conclusion

St. Joseph Cafasso died on 23rd June, 1860 at Turin, Italy of pneumonia, a stomach haemorrhage, and complications of his congenital medical problems; his will bequeathed everything to aid the ministry of Saint Joseph Benedict Cottolengo; Saint John Bosco preached the funeral Mass homily. He was canonized in 1947 by Pope Pius XII.

St. Joseph Cafasso, Pray for us.
