

LIFE OF MOTHER TERESA SOLARI

Introduction

A short text, but it tells a great story, and you are about to read it. It is a brief but profound biography of Mother Teresa Solari of Genoa (1822-1908), a very modern figure but also a daughter of the times she lived in. It is an easy text to read and it gives a true picture of Teresa's faith. Mother Solari was a simple, humble, sick woman, but her constancy was unshakable, the fruit of a strong faith which enabled a total abandonment to God: and in this abandonment she realised her mission.

Teresa was left motherless, and was a lonely, ill-treated child. This condition is unfortunately wide-spread in our own days and is stigmatised by the media, in a society that boasts of being very civilised and of its love of those who are small.

From the beginning, Teresa's hard life was sustained by constant prayer and a relationship of total trust in God. It was this, certainly, united to her particular temperament which urged her, in spite of great difficulties, to be concerned about abandoned children, in whom she saw the suffering face of the Crucified Christ: in them she also saw herself as a rejected child, abandoned by her father and unloving stepmother who had left her at the mercy of the waves of the sea.

Her story makes her, at least unofficially, the patron of abandoned and ill-treated children.

In the detailed and sober pages of this mini-biography, we shall learn to know Teresa as she were still among us, caressing a suffering child. It is a story of life and faith, and it lends itself to reflection. We know that Jesus in the Gospel says, "Knock and it will be opened to you: ask and it will be given you". This appears to be a very simple thing to do, but it will happen only if the request is supported by an unquenchable faith; this was the faith lived by Teresa.

From the very beginning of her apostolic activity, Antonietta Cervetto was at her side as travelling companion and faithful friend: later the number of her helpers increased.

Teresa, always busy about her begging quest for material help, or recollected in prayer, knew how to draw groups together: an indispensable gift for a foundress.

With time, her work grew and became a true institute, known as *The Little House of Divine Providence*. Teresa Solari met the Dominican Fr. Vincenzo Vera, who gave a turning-point in her life of service to the humble children of God, a change of direction in which her closest collaborators followed her: in 1870 she became a Dominican Sister. The fame of her willingness and generosity had spread among the people of Genoa, who always looked on her, and venerated her, as a saint. Her tomb in the cemetery at Staglieno is constantly visited by people invoking her help.

The process for her Cause of Beatification is going forward at this very moment.

At Vigevano, in the province of Veneto, the Dominican Sisters of St Catherine of Siena and a group of laypeople are collaborating in the *Mother Teresa Solari Onlus Foundation*: a foundation pursuing social solidarity and supporting activities in the sphere of education and social healthcare for persons who are objectively in conditions of economic, social and physical disadvantage.

Rosaria Marchesi

TERESA SOLARI: UNA VITA NELLE MANI DELLA PROVVIDENZA

In the preface of the book “A short story of Mother Teresa Solari” by Fr Raimondo Spiazzi (1980) we read:

«In the cemetery of Staglieno at Genoa, a short distance from the entrance, there is humble tomb not visited by tourists in search of artistic monuments or reminders of historical events, but by people from every walk of life who go there to find comfort and help in life’s difficulties. It is the tomb of **Mother Teresa Solari, Foundress of the Dominican Congregation, “Little House of Divine Providence”**. People revere her as a saint».

This is the inscription on the stone erected by the Municipality of her epoch; and the memory of this humble sister remains very alive even today.

Every day many people go to visit the tomb. They pray in silence, kiss the marble and leave with a final, trustful glance at her portrait. .

TERESA, ORPHANED AND ALONE FROM INFANCY

Teresa was born at Né, a district of Chiavari, 1 December 1822: this is what she always said, but there is no documentary record of the event.

She must have known tears from her very infancy: firstly because of the death of her mother when she was just three years old, and then on account of a complete lack of affection (and inexplicable ill-treatment) on the part of her father and step-mother.

The little girl was considered an intruder, a burden to be got rid of. With unbelievable hardness of heart, they decided one day to take her to the seashore and abandon her to the mercy of the waves. This fact was recounted many times by Teresa when she was a sister: she remembered, in all simplicity, “Before throwing me into the sea, they dressed me all in white”.

In what mysterious way God saved her, we do not know. She returned to Chiavari, was repeatedly rejected by her stepmother, and was later welcomed into the home of an aunt who lived in the country. The aunt gave her various jobs to do, some of which were beyond her feeble strength. For instance, she had to carry heavy bundles of wood, gathered in the forest, to the houses of other families living in the area, sometimes over long distances.

But Teresa did not complain; she was always ready and happy to obey her aunt, and grew up good and hardworking, thinking often of the mother who too early had been taken from her.

Her main occupation was watching over the sheep while they were grazing. In the long hours of solitude and silence, immersed in contemplation of nature, she felt ever more strongly the presence of God, and the desire to do good to others. She began to take care of a poor old man, rejected and shunned by all. While pasturing the sheep, she would call on him and drive away the insects that tormented him. One day, when she was doing him this service, the old man died in her arms. Teresa, as a sister, would remember this episode with much tenderness.

It is not known how long the young girl stayed with her aunt before going into service with two ladies of Genoa, who treated her more like a daughter than a domestic servant. It was just as if she had found a new family.

Later, however, and we do not know the circumstances, Teresa went to live with the sisters of the Institute of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Orchard, Chiavari, where

she found what she had desired since she was a child; silence prayer, hidden work and sacrifice. And perhaps it was there that the thought of consecrating her life to God and the care of her neighbour crossed her mind for the first time. But first she had to face long and difficult trials which she certainly could not have foreseen. .

For several more years she earned her living going from house to house as a domestic worker. Though still a child, she already lived in an extraordinary state of union with God, who guided and consoled her. She felt herself to be accompanied by the Holy Child, who filled her with joy even when she was suffering ill-treatment. And on certain occasions of grave danger, she felt the saving presence of the Madonna.

A priest who had once been Teresa's confessor was so struck by God's action in this little soul that he was never tired of listening to her. After her confession she experienced "the peace of paradise". When she was left in tranquil silence, she was happy that it helped her to enjoy the company of Jesus better. God's grace urged her to remain where there was more to suffer; she kept this preference all through life, happy to suffer for the love of Jesus, but always in a way that was hidden.

EXPERIENCE OF SICKNESS

At the age of 15, when life begins its full development, she began to be troubled by a series of mysterious illnesses which sent her, pilgrim-like, from hospital to hospital, first in Chiavari and then in Genoa. Several times it seemed that her life was in danger, and once she was believed to be really dead and was taken to the mortuary.

A devout lady who was very fond of her had gone to pay her a visit that day, and with due permission went to see her lying on her bed under the funeral sheet. Deeply moved, she cried out, "Teresa", and approaching the bed realised that there was light breathing. She called the staff on duty to come and see. And to the wonder and joy of all, Teresa came through the crisis which had been considered fatal. This pattern of health crisis and recovery lasted for many years. Teresa bore sickness with unchanging serenity and without complaining, happy to be conformed to Jesus crucified.

One of her companions in hospital related the following episode.

One day having heard of a family in misery which did not dare to ask for assistance, Teresa got out of bed, gathered together all the money she had received from charitable persons, and sewed it into the hem of her dress. She then found some bread, and, avoiding the supervision of the staff on duty, left the hospital to take it all to that needy family. Then she returned to her bed in the ward.

The doctors had no word of hope for her future, but in her heart she felt certain that she had a mission to fulfil.

A FAITH-PROJECT

During these years of her youth, spent in illness in various hospitals, she conceived the plan of dedicating herself to the care of the many children she had seen lost and abandoned, just as she had been.

At the hospital of Pammatone, in Genoa, she had met Antonietta Cervetto who shared her aspirations. "Teresa, I will be your faithful companion. I would follow you to the bottom of the sea!"

With this young friend she decided to undertake a work that seemed impossible to human reckoning.

In 1857 they left hospital, intending to begin immediately a work of helping poor or abandoned girls, whatever the risk. What were the material resources at their disposal? Four small coins and a saucepan!

Their only wealth was an unshakeable faith in Divine Providence. And certainly, it was by God's inspiration that Signor Giuseppe, who belonged to a fraternity dedicated to works of charity, found them a small room in Sampierdarena where they lived for four years, but without being able to begin their project. Instead, they met with insults, sarcasm, even violent aggression towards Teresa. They left that inhospitable house and moved to Genoa at the invitation of Canon Colla. He gave them hospitality in his home for several months, even providing them with food.

From there they moved to a room in Torretta San Luca, but soon had to move because the landlady feared they would not be able to pay the rent. Teresa took herself off to the Church of the Vineyards, and turned to the Madonna: "**You are our Mother and you have to think about your daughters!**" she said. "We poor ones do not know where to go next!"

The Virgin replied, "**Have no doubt that I have already thought about it**".

When she reached home, an old woman came to her and said, "I know that you are looking for somewhere to live: there is a place in Via Scurreria, go and look at it now". Teresa went to the place indicated and found the owner, who said to her, "This was my workplace. I have cleared it, and I willingly make it over to you".

There were several rooms and the place was secluded and quiet. In 1863, in this poor neighbourhood of Via Scurreria, the two companions finally began the work they had dreamed of for so long. They welcomed as guests the first two orphans they found on the public road; two sisters, aged five and seven, Domenica and Antonia Costigliolo.

Their mother, dreaming of easy earnings, had gone to America, entrusting her two small daughters to their by now elderly grandmother. Some time later she returned disappointed, poorer and more desperate than ever. The two little girls hardly recognised their mother, and the smaller one exclaimed, "You are not my mother; you are too ugly and I am afraid of you!" These words, and the child's rejection, struck the mother hard. She lost all interest in caring for them, and abandoned them on the street, There they were found by Teresa Solari and Antonietta Cervetto.

This is how the **Little House of Divine Providence** in Genoa came into being. The name intended to echo, and especially to imitate, the Little House founded in Turin by Benedict Cottolengo a few decades earlier.

THE FAMILY GROWS

Soon other small girls came to the family, where there was great poverty but immense love. After only three years there were already thirty orphans, and many young people collaborated generously with the two foundresses, working as assistants. Need for more space made it necessary to look for a larger house. In 1867, with the number of orphans still growing, Teresa Solari decided to rent the ground floor of Villa Spinola near Carignano, which later housed a hundred children and 18 assistants.

How is such a large family to be provided for?

The assistants managed the housework and the older orphans gave help according to their age and ability.

The hardest work was that done by Teresa, who went daily from door to door in shops and apartment blocks to ask for alms; she usually went out in the morning, and came back sometimes when it was already night. With great sacrifice and fatigue, and putting all her trust in Providence, she managed to find what was needed for her children.

In this constant pilgrimage, however, she often received refusals, insults and even blows. One day she came to the door of a rich man to ask for an offering. He not only refused to help her, but gave her a slap on the face. Teresa replied with her usual smile, "That is for me, but what will you give me for my little daughters?"

This meek reply, free from all resentment, was the beginning of that man's conversion. He had been living far from God for forty years.

On another occasion she had to suffer a long infirmity which was due to wounds inflicted on her by some ill-intentioned youths. A piece of iron remained in one wound which threatened to turn gangrenous.

While the Lord allowed these purifying trials, he also sent her prodigious help for the good of her orphans, who were "the apple of his eye" as she would often say. He raised up generous benefactors who repaid the Foundress for all the insults and scornful words she received while going round on her begging trips.

Towards the end of 1867, three Protestant English ladies visited the Institute, and were much impressed by the joy and peace reigning in that numerous family. They offered a gift to all the orphans - a uniform dress, already made and ready to be worn.

Another time, the Little House ran short of Mass candles, and did not have the means to buy more. Teresa Solari was informed of the matter, and replied, "God will provide". And in fact, that very day, the priest of St James's parish requested the participation of the orphans at a solemn funeral. The invitation was accepted, and the recompense was a sum of money and a large number of candles for the chapel.

On a similar occasion, there was no wine for the Mass. "Providence will think of us" Teresa repeated. And early the following morning a woman came to the Little House carrying a demijohn of white wine. She said she had felt a strong impulse in her heart: it urged her, "Take that wine to Teresa!"

It was characteristic of Teresa Solari to live a life of simple faith, in total abandonment to Providence in all circumstances, whether favourable or contrary; and to face with serenity every work of charity for the good of others, without ever thinking of herself. In constant humility, she avoided showing in what supernatural light her life was immersed.

PROVIDENCE: "FIORETTI / TALES OF THE LITTLE HOUSE"

As the Little House developed, there was no lack of manifestations of Divine Providence.

Various pages of the chronicle refer to them with great simplicity, even when they appear to be quite extraordinary events. These are the **Fioretti** of the Little House.

At the time when the Foundress slept in the same dormitory as the orphans, there was a night when one of them was awake for a long time, and heard her talking aloud. The child lay still, listening, then woke her companions. The words became clear: "Yes, I promise you, but you must give me the strength! Look, I have nothing for these little daughters to eat. Help me, as you promised!" The girls then heard a sound distinctly like a bag of money slipping to the ground.

In the morning, as soon as they got up, they went up to Teresa: "Did the Lord give you money last night? We heard it!"

They were convinced that God had provided their Mother with the means to feed them.

One evening they saw her return home from her begging tour of the city very tired and sad. "My little daughters, I have found nothing to give you, but I cannot send you to bed like this ... Say the prayer to St Joseph and I will go out again - and this Patron of ours will help us."

While the evening church bells were ringing, the children went on praying trustfully; and suddenly they heard the doorbell. The Foundress came in carrying a large basket of white bread, enough for the evening and for next morning too.

Another day, dinnertime was near and there were no provisions whatsoever in the house, or money to buy any. With that faith which was her only strength, she entrusted herself to St Joseph's protection. A few moments later, an old man appeared at the door, leading a donkey laden with rice and other provisions, all as a gift to the Institute. When they went back to the door to thank him, the benefactor had disappeared and was never heard of again.

Could that Providence which feeds even the birds of the air forget the creatures who are even dearer to him? When Teresa was in the entrance hall of the Little House one day, talking about how they were to meet certain urgent needs, the bell rang and a stranger appeared at the door, dressed as a pilgrim. He gave her a bag of money and said, "Accept this, for now ... and I will come again".

In 1869, Teresa had been aware that for some time food had been getting scarce, and she did not know how to provide for her numerous family. One day she ran to the church of Our Lady of the Vineyards, and kneeling before the Madonna, implored her help to satisfy the hunger of her little daughters. At last, a voice was heard: "Go and see what there is in the house". She returned home immediately to ask if anything had been thrown out, and started to look herself. In the corner of the garden she found a piece of rather mouldy bread. She ate it and returned to the altar of the Madonna. While she was praying, she felt a hand gently tugging at her clothes. She turned to glance in that direction and found a bag full of money. (The child who had hidden that bread, because it was not to her liking, revealed that childish gesture of hers many years later, when she herself was a Dominican Sister in the Little House.)

Mother Teresa Solari considered that the practice of poverty was an indispensable condition for obtaining the help of Providence.

FATHER VINCENZO VERA, DOMINICAN

Fr. Vincenzo Vera entered the Order of St Dominic at 17 years of age, and was ordained priest in 1848. He began his ministry of preaching, and showed himself to be an eloquent and persuasive speaker.

What led him to enter the very heart of an almost unknown work?

Teresa Solari met him for the first time at Genoa, in a church where a service in honour of the Madonna was taking place. While she and the other faithful were listening to the homily, she had the clear perception that the preacher could be at her side as a guide and support for the new Institute. In humble trepidation she introduced herself to him, and he asked her what she wanted.

“The Word of God” - she said promptly.

“Well, you shall have the Word of God” - he promised.

Father Vera soon understood the greatness of that soul and the importance of her project of charity. This was the first of a series of meetings preordained by God, who had chosen him for the same mission. Indeed, Fr Vera had a decisive role to play in the origin and development of the Little House, to which he dedicated himself enthusiastically from the time he first met Mother Solari.

Invited by the Archbishop of Genoa to be official Director of the Institute, he declared himself willing to take on that charge, and persevered in it for more than forty years. His presence gave a Dominican soul to the Little House: traditional devotions of the Order, like the Rosary, the singing of the Salve Regina every evening, etc. flowered there in all simplicity. Under his wise and authoritative guidance, the day was organised according to norms corresponding to community needs, so well-adjusted that they regulated the life of the Little House for decades, for both the orphans and the sisters.

A COMMUNITY OF SISTERS

One of the first preoccupations of Mother Teresa and her companion Antonietta Cervetto, was to ensure that the life of the Institute and the assistance of the orphans would continue in the future.

From the outset, the plan of the Foundress and of her spiritual director, Fr Vera, was to establish a religious family which would have as its principal aim the care of young girls who were poor, orphaned and abandoned, based on a consecration to God by the vows and living a common life.

It was essential to form leaders and educators for the Little House, persons entirely dedicated to the glory of God and the good of their neighbour, capable of forgetting themselves in order to make themselves mothers of children without families and without love. Fr Vera, while promoting the spiritual growth of the assistants, was also seeking the gradual establishment of the norms of common life proper to a religious family. In the plan slowly maturing in his mind, there were sometimes initiatives inspired by particular circumstances to prepare them for this. They included the reception of the first habit, of uniform grey with long sleeves and a black shawl.

Above all he inculcated devotion to St Dominic and introduced many typically Dominican practices in order to orientate their lives towards the spirituality of the Dominican Order.

Finally the moment arrived to establish the new community. After an intense spiritual preparation, on 4 June 1870 he proceeded to clothe Teresa Solari, who took the name Sr Mary Dominic Catherine of the Holy Spirit, Antonietta Cervetto, who became Sr Rose of St Mary, and Colomba Queirolo whose new name was Sr Emilia of the Cross. In two later celebrations other assistants took the veil and white habit: twelve in all. . On 30 April 1871 Teresa Solari and Antonietta Cervetto made religious vows, and later in the same year their companions did the same. The new community was given the name, “Daughters of St Catherine of Siena”.

More than ever the Director felt that it was urgent to proceed with the sisters’ formation, and his first thought was to establish a rule and a fixed timetable for religious duties.

On occasion he was not sparing with severe words and penances. We remember the case of a sister occupied from morning until evening in supervision of many children who put her patience to the test. One day she let out this lament: “How tired I am!” Later, sorry for her outburst, she accused herself of it at a community meeting. The Director reprimanded her sharply, and gave her the penance of carrying several buckets of water up to the top floor, a climb of a hundred steps.

This punishment arouses wonder today, but the aim was to train the sisters to the spirit of sacrifice and courage in overcoming trials. And in fact, it was a very effective lesson, setting a seal on being serious about work and on fortitude in facing difficulties.

After more than a decade of experience and development, on 25 March 1879 the Little House was given official recognition by the Church as a community of Diocesan Right.

In the document of erection it says: “.....we approve and confirm the Institute and its Religious Community, as also the Constitutions proposed for the Dominican Tertiary Sisters.....”

It was an important step: but the Foundress and Fr Vera dreamed of passing under the jurisdiction of the Dominican Order, something that happened much later. They died still carrying in their hearts the desire of entering this “Promised Land”.

MOTHER TERESA SOLARI’S FINAL YEAR

At the beginning of 1907, Mother Teresa made known her desire of giving the Little House to the Master of the Order, who at that time was Father Hyacinth Cormier. And on 7 February that year, by a notary’s act which began with the words “**In the name of God**”, she donated the Little House and all its goods to the Master of the Order.

The text and all relevant documents, was sent by Mother Vincenza Scerni, who had governed the Little House for many years. But there were various difficulties of a civil law kind, and the project was never realised.

Meanwhile, Mother Teresa felt her strength growing weaker. Her health had always been unstable, and no longer allowed her to be occupied with the work or with the community. Yet it was good to see her sometimes moving around the house and stopping near the children to caress them and give them her lovely smile. She lived quietly and abandoned to God's will, as she had been all her life. At the beginning of May 1908, she developed bronchitis, which showed that the end was near.

On the evening of 7 May, all the sisters gathered round Mother Teresa's bed. She had followed the Anointing of the Sick with lucidity of mind and serenity of soul, and had asked forgiveness for any pain she might have caused. No-one had told her anything about a campaign of calumnies and insinuations about the Little House that was taking place just then; but she smilingly said, "You do not dare to tell me anything, but I know you are troubled ... Courage, it will all work out!"

She then entered serenely into her agony. .

The sisters, in tears, intoned the Salve Regina, and followed this with the Litany of the Saints. During this time she heard a sister coughing loudly, and said, "Give her something, can't you hear how she is coughing?" And she continued to respond to the prayers until she gently gave up her soul to God. She was 85 years old, and had been professed for 37 years.

Her birthday in Heaven was, therefore, 7 May 1908.

Death seemed not to have touched her. Her face retained her usual smile, which showed her natural goodness and sweetness. For four days there was a continual pilgrimage of sisters, pupils, ex-pupils, priests, and citizens of every social class. All the people participated in the funeral, making it a kind of triumphal procession for the humble sister who, moved by her ardent love for God and her brothers and sisters, had driven her faith to the extent of "moving mountains" as Jesus said.

Numerous letters of condolence were sent, of which we remember two. The first was from the Mayor of Genoa, which declared that "the name of Teresa Solari will be written in golden letters in the book of the city's charitable work, and her memory will remain imperishably in the hearts of the people of Genoa". A year later, a decision was made by the Municipal Council to give her a special tomb in the cemetery of Staglieno.

The second precious testimony comes from the Master of the Dominican Order, Father Hyacinth Cormier, who wrote, "I unite myself to the sorrow of the Little House for the death of its venerated foundress ... the sisters will exert themselves to imitate her confidence in God, her patience in difficulties, her prudence and discretion, and that pleasantness of character with which she made herself all things to all people ...". He was a holy religious, giving testimony to another chosen soul to whom we can now turn to obtain graces from the Lord.
