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SANCTITY AND MARTYRDOM AT THE DAWN OF THE THIRD MILLENIUM

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Rome, 29 June 1999
Solemnity of SS. Peter and Paul

Almost a surprise beatification

I am writing to you on my return from Poland. On June 13 at Warsaw I was able to take part in the Beatification of 108 martyrs, among whom were our confrere Fr Joseph Kowalski and five young men of our Oratory and Youth Centre at Poznan: a grace and source of joy for our Family which took us almost by surprise.

The process in fact was begun hardly seven years ago and it has been possible to reach Beatification in this year preceding the great Jubilee. The names of the candidates did not figure in the list of our Causes for beatification and they were unknown outside their own country.

The progress of the cause was marked by a curious background and a providential development. On 14 June 1987 Mgr. Michael Kozal, Bishop of Wladislavia, was beatified at Warsaw; he had been killed at Dachau in 1943. The beatification reawakened enthusiasm for the many martyrs of the same period who had been put to death, *in odium fidei*, in the same concentration camps. And since the diocese which had suffered the greatest losses (50%

of its priests) was precisely that of the newly beatified Michael Kozal, the Polish Episcopal Conference entrusted to the Bishop of Wloclawek the task of beginning the process for all the Polish martyrs who died in the death camps of Dachau and Auschwitz.

People of various categories became included in the process: bishops, diocesan priests, religious, and lay people, until the total reached about one hundred and ninety, belonging to seventeen dioceses. In a first phase of the preparation of the process some sixty were excluded through lack of sufficient documentation, and a further twenty at a later date.

The number of candidates for beatification was thus reduced to 108: 3 Bishops, 52 diocesan priests, 26 religious priests, 3 clerics, 7 religious brothers, 8 religious sisters, and 9 lay persons. The official title of the group carries four names representative of the four categories (bishops, priests, religious, laity): Antonio Giuliano Nowowiejski, Archbishop; Enrico Kaczorowski, priest; Aniceto Koplinski, religious; Maria Anna Biernacka, Laywoman; and 104 companions.

Among the religious were representatives of many Institutes of both men and women: Dominicans, Franciscans OFM, Franciscan Conventuals, Capuchins, Carmelites ODC, Marianists, Poor Clares, Michelites, Oblates, Conceptionists, Sons of Divine Providence, Pallottines, Brothers of the Sacred Heart, Handmaids of Mary Immaculate, Notre Dame Sisters, Ursulines, Sisters of the Redemption, Society of the Divine Word and we Salesians. It is not surprising that the beatification brought together a very large group of participants, given this wide panorama of dioceses and religious Institutes.

The speedy progress of the Cause – the decree of martyrdom was read only on 26 May last¹ – has not left much time for preparations, but the news was given in good time in the preceding number of the AGC and in the Italian Salesian Bulletin.²

¹ cf. text of decree in n.5.1 of this issue of AGC.

² cf. AGC 367; Bollettino Salesiano, June 1999

Initiatives are now being multiplied, all aimed at making known our new “Beati”, so as to provide incentives for our spirituality and a stimulus for our mission.

In this movement I myself wish to take part. In pursuit of my intention to write to you from time to time about our family affairs, I would like to outline the spiritual figures of the new “Beati” and point to the significance of their glorification in the history of our Congregation.

Holiness and martyrdom in the Holy Year

The reference to holiness is already contained in the name given to the Jubilee, which is called a “Holy” Year. It is the celebration of the holiness of God, as the merciful Lord of human events, which through his presence and revelation thus become the sacred history of salvation.

In consequence the Jubilee implies a careful examination of the holiness of the Church. “The thanksgiving of Christians”, says the Pope, “will embrace the fruits of holiness which have matured in the life of all those many men and women who in every generation and every period of history have fully welcomed the gift of Redemption”.³

In the light of this invitation he adds a fact which has been noted even by secular newspapers and gives an explanation of it: “In recent years the number of canonizations and beatifications has increased. These show the vitality of the local Churches, which are much more numerous today than in the first centuries and in the first millennium”.⁴

The light of the Risen Christ is reflected today with greater intensity by the numerous testimonies spread over a wide area and in different settings. They become the focus of a search for

³ TMA 32

⁴ TMA 37

the meaning of human existence and what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

The Church, moreover, considers holiness the trump card for the new evangelization of the world which appears with the year 2000. This is an indication which we can by no means take for granted when thinking of our renewal, our witness and our future. "The greatest homage which all the Churches can give to Christ on the threshold of the third millennium will be to manifest the Redeemer's all-powerful presence through the fruits of faith, hope and charity present in men and women of many different tongues and races who have followed Christ in the various forms of the Christian vocation".⁵

In this context of thanksgiving and of witness to holiness, unusual emphasis is laid on the memory of the martyrs. It is characteristic of this Jubilee and it is important to understand why this is so. It is enumerated among the great signs in the phases of preparation and celebration together with prayer of thanksgiving,⁶ with reconciliation and penance,⁷ with asking for forgiveness for our responsibility in the evils of the present century,⁸ with the promotion of unity among Christians,⁹ and with the celebration of the continental Synods.¹⁰

In the Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee, charity to the poor and marginalized¹¹ and the culture of solidarity¹² are included in another series of requirements involving the purification of past memories and the request for forgiveness.¹³

The memory of the martyrs is not therefore something reserved to historians or just a celebration inserted in the

⁵ TMA 37

⁶ cf. TMA 32

⁷ cf. TMA 32

⁸ cf. TMA 33-34

⁹ cf. TMA 34

¹⁰ cf. TMA 38

¹¹ cf. *Incarnationis Misterium*, Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee, 11

¹² cf. TMA 12

¹³ cf. TMA 11

Liturgy, but almost an aspect of membership of the Church.

In fact in the experience of faith and Church history martyrdom appears as a sign of vitality. This is how it was at the birth and early spread of Christianity. And it looks as though the same will be said of the 20th century in which the Christian community "has become once again the church of the martyrs".

Martyrdom is the participation in a real and living way in the sacrifice of Christ, almost a Eucharist. It expresses in an extreme manner an innate and necessary dimension of the Christian life which we must all understand, accept and take up: the offering of life itself.

And so the Christian life is permanently open to the possibility of martyrdom,¹⁴ which appears however as a grace we meet with, rather than as a goal to be desired, achieved or sought after. Furthermore it represents the most direct prophetic encounter between the Spirit, grace, and the aims and style of life proposed by Christ and that which belongs to the world, understood as the ensemble of the powers of evil.

The martyrology of the 20th Century

A first characteristic of the 20th century is the number of those who have been called to bear witness by the shedding of their blood. "The persecutions of believers has caused a great sowing of martyrdom in different parts of the world", says the TMA,¹⁵ and adds that their number is so great that many of them remain nameless, "unknown soldiers as it were of God's great cause".¹⁶

But no less impressive is the variety of the martyrs, in respect of their condition: among them, in fact, are bishops and

¹⁴ cf. *Incarnationis Mysterium* 13

¹⁵ cf. TMA 37

¹⁶ TMA 37

priests, religious and lay persons, men and women, young and old, intellectuals and simple people, artists and members of the professions.

Highly expressive of the Jubilee we are preparing to celebrate is the union of the different Christian denominations in bearing witness to God and to human dignity: Catholics of different rites, Orthodox, Protestants of various affiliations. "Perhaps the most convincing form of ecumenism is the ecumenism of the saints and of the martyrs. The *communio sanctorum* speaks louder than the things which divide us".¹⁷

The witness of the martyrs of the 20th century is further imbued with a deep human significance for the individual and for civilization, because of the time and circumstances of their martyrdom: the context of the great wars, the totalitarian systems, the atheistic ideologies with their pretexts and promises of freedom and development, the religious fundamentalisms, the closed-in and secular types of humanism. "From a psychological standpoint martyrdom is the most eloquent proof of the truth of faith; it can give a human aspect to the most violent of deaths and manifest its beauty in the most atrocious persecutions".¹⁸

When we remember the martyrs we go back once again over this century, characterized by great collective aspirations which seemed to justify every holocaust, from the struggle without quarter for the domination of the world to the deviations with scientific pretensions.

"This witness must not be forgotten".¹⁹ "The Church in every part of the world must remain anchored in their testimony and jealously defend their memory".²⁰ They recall, in fact, the absolute sense of Christ in human history – "a sign of that greater love which sums up all other values".²¹

¹⁷ TMA 37

¹⁸ IM 13

¹⁹ TMA 37

²⁰ IM 13

²¹ cf. IM 13

To preserve the memory of the martyrs the intention has been repeatedly stated of writing the martyrology of the 20th century, on the basis of the affectionate care shown by the early Church in preserving the acts and memory of those who gave their life for Christ: The Church of the first centuries, although facing considerable organizational difficulties, took care to write down in special martyrologies the witness of the martyrs. These martyrologies have been constantly updated through the centuries, and the register of the saints and the blessed bears the names not only of those who have shed their blood for Christ but also of teachers of the faith, missionaries, confessors, bishops, priests, virgins, married couples, widows and children".²²

The emphasis on this point and the importance of martyrdom in evangelization has been particularly noted in the Synods.

I have been able not only to listen personally to the words, but to perceive the deeply expressed feelings, fervour and veneration, with which the American Synod and especially that of Asia spoke of the great witnesses of the faith.

In the former were recalled those who gave their lives in the first evangelization and those who were killed in social conflicts or under dictatorships. The whole has been summed up in the following passage from the document "The Church in America". "Among the Saints it has produced, the history of the evangelization of America numbers many martyrs, men and women, bishops and priests, consecrated religious and lay people ... Their example of boundless dedication to the cause of the Gospel must not only be saved from oblivion, but must become better and more widely known among the faithful of the continent".²³

With regard to the Asian Synod, I would like to recall an as-

²² TMA 37

²³ cf., Eccl. in America 15

pect concerning China which touches us more closely. The Pope's desire to canonize all the present Blessed Martyrs of China – they number 120 – is well known. He expressed such a wish in his homily at the canonization of the martyr Jean Gabriel Perboyre on 2 June 1996: "To the memory of Jean Gabriel Perboyre we want to unite that of all those who bore witness to the name of Jesus Christ in China in past centuries. I am thinking particularly of the Blessed martyrs whose common canonization, so long desired by many of the faithful, could one day be a sign of hope to the Church now present among these people to whom I am always close in heart and prayer".²⁴

Strengthened by such a declaration, the Synodal Fathers asked that this step be taken. The intervention of Mgr. Joseph Ti-Kang, Archbishop of Taipeh (Taiwan), caught my attention and that of many others.

The Bishops of China, he said, have for a long time manifested a keen desire that these heroes of the Christian faith, the martyrs, be declared Saints.

As long ago as February 1996 the President of our Episcopal Conference had petitioned His Holiness in this regard, and he had made known his intention of proceeding. Thereupon the Congregation for the Causes of Saints had entrusted to the Postulator of the Cause of the Group of Blessed Chinese Martyrs the drawing up of dossiers to prove the existence of a "*fama signorum*", instead of a physical miracle because of the impossibility of carrying out the required canonical investigation in China.

Nevertheless we Chinese Bishops have declared that we are convinced that "the perseverance of Chinese Christians in the faith, lived for nearly half a century under a long and brutal persecution – as well as the increase in the number of the Christians themselves – constitutes in itself a great miracle

²⁴ Oss.Rom. 6/7 June 1997

granted by God through the intercession of the Blessed Chinese Martyrs, to whom the faithful have recourse in prayer". This official declaration of our Episcopal Conference accompanies the dossiers prepared by the Postulators.

We therefore make bold to ask His Holiness to kindly proceed in the near future to the solemn canonization of the Blessed Chinese Martyrs.²⁵

Among the martyrs of all times and every continent, many belong to the consecrated life. For them too it is hoped that there will be an updating of the Martyrology. Without any doubt a charism is shown with particular clarity in martyrdom and gives to the latter a particular character. "In this century, as in other periods of history, consecrated men and women have borne witness to Christ the Lord with the gift of their own lives. Thousands of them have been forced into the catacombs by the persecution of totalitarian regimes or of violent groups, or have been harassed while engaged in missionary activity, in action on behalf of the poor, in assisting the sick and the marginalized; yet they lived and continue to live their consecration in prolonged and heroic suffering, and often with the shedding of their blood, being perfectly configured to the Crucified Lord. The Church has already officially recognized the holiness of some of these men and women, honouring them as martyrs for Christ. They enlighten us by their example, they intercede that we may be faithful, and they await us in glory.

There is a widespread desire that the memory of so many witnesses to the faith will remain in the consciousness of the Church as an invitation to celebrate and imitate them. The Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life can contribute to this endeavour by gathering the names of all those consecrated persons who deserve to be inscribed in the Martyrology of the twentieth century".²⁶

²⁵ cf. Oss.Rom., 25 April 1998

²⁶ VC 86

Holiness and martyrdom in the Salesian Family

The new Polish "Beati" become part of the already numerous constellation of saints and candidates for the altars of the Salesian Family. Our Congregation is at present promoting no fewer than 39 causes of beatification and canonization. They involve 139 spiritual sons and daughters of Don Bosco. If to them we add others linked in different ways with the Salesian Family, even though their cause may be being promoted by their respective diocese or by other religious Institutes (e.g. Piergiorgio Frassati, Alberto Marvelli, Giuseppe Guarino), the number reaches about 150. To the present three who are canonized and twelve beatified must be added 12 others whose heroicity of virtues has already been declared, while in the case of others the process is going ahead with the hearing of witnesses, the drawing up of the *Positio* or the examination of the latter by experts.

The panorama of our saints is representative of the different branches of the Salesian Family: 116, including the martyrs, are members of the Salesian Congregation and 10 of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (including two Spanish martyrs). The young people, with the new Polish martyrs, become 8 in all and cover the range of adolescence and youth from 13 to 24 years of age. Their holiness matured in boarding establishments and schools, but also in the oratory and in youth groups. The Cooperators are well represented by four women: Margaret Occhiena, a peasant mother; Donna Dorotea di Chopitea, a woman of the nobility and a benefactress; the mystic, Alexandrina da Costa, a poor and suffering soul; and Matilde Salem, comfortably placed in life. To these can be added Attilio Giordani. And there are also past-pupils such as Alberto Marvelli, Piergiorgio Frassati and Salvo d'Acquisto.

The geography too of salesian holiness appears universal if we consider their places of origin and the regions where the candidates carried out their mission for many years before

their death: Europe is represented by Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, Belgium Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic; America is represented by Argentina, Chile, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Colombia; and Asia by Palestine, Syria, Japan, China and India.

No less remarkable is the diversity of conditions of life and work. They include Rector Majors (3), Bishops (6), founders of institutes of consecrated life (7), men and women provincials, great missionaries of both sexes, coadjutors, men and women educators, and teachers of theology at university level. And then for some a general description of their situation is not enough, because their biography is marked by special expressions of sanctity: Fr Elia Comini, who died in a wartime massacre; Fr Komorek, already venerated in his lifetime by humble people as a saint; Sister Eusebia Palomino, a typical figure of evangelical simplicity and wisdom.

The experiences therefore through which holiness has been mainly revealed are: the animation of confreres and sisters in the apostolate and in the guidance of the community, charity towards the sick and the poor (Zatti, Srugi, Variara), personal suffering borne with a visible sense of participation in the passion of Christ (Beltrami, Czartoryski, Alessandrina da Costa), missionary work and particular forms of pastoral charity.

Underlying such a diversity of origin, state of life, role and level of education, and geographical origin, there is a single inspiration: salesian spirituality. In it the candidates for the honours of the altar are like the tip of an iceberg below which lies a broad platform made up of many confreres and sisters, consecrated by the special grace of consecration which makes them God's dwelling made holy by the commitment to make clear to the young God's presence in the style of Don Bosco. Together they form a complete treatise on our spirituality. This can indeed be presented in doctrinal form; but there is an advantage in recounting it through biographies which bring its characteristics much closer to the circumstances of daily life.

A martyrology of the Salesian Family

In our array of 'saints' there are also names for a list of martyrs: we have 103 registered martyrs. Others, caught up in war reprisals or situations of social conflict, remain anonymous. The 103 are made up of three groups. The first in the order of their martyrdom and beatification includes those of China: Mgr Luigi Versiglia and Fr Callistus Caravario. Their cause is in progress as is that of all the martyrs of China.

Then come the Spanish martyrs, 95 in all. Those of Valencia and Barcelona, headed by Fr José Calasanz Marques, total 32; those of Madrid, led by Fr Enriquez Saiz Aparicio, are 42, and those of Seville, with Fr Luis Torrero at their head, 21.

In the group of 95 we find 39 priests, 25 coadjutor brothers, 22 clerical students, 2 Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, 3 Cooperators (of whom one was a woman), 2 postulants, a workman and an employee.

The cause of martyrdom of the group of Valencia and Barcelona was examined by the commission of theological consultants on 22 February 1999 with positive results. It is probable that their beatification can take place during the Holy Year, on the date set aside for the beatification of all the martyrs whose process of martyrdom has been concluded.

The rapid progress made in the process of this group is due to the collaboration between seven religious families concerned: Jesuits, Franciscan Friars Minor, Capuchins, Dominicans, Sacred Heart Fathers (SCJ), Capuchins of the Holy Family, and us Salesians.

The third geographical area where the historical events of the 20th century submitted the Church, and in it our Congregation, to the trial of martyrdom is Eastern Europe: a martyrdom carried out in public and therefore well known, but in many cases nevertheless only partially known or not at all: prisons, interrogations, sufferings, civil persecutions, clandestine suppression. The passion began in the year 1917 for some coun-

tries and was to continue until the fall of the Berlin wall (1989), with periods of particular difficulty during and immediately after the war. Our communities were suppressed, or restricted in their life, resources and activities. Very many of our confreres were confined temporarily in concentration camps, where they were kept under close supervision and interrogated. Of all of them we want to “jealously preserve the memory” as a rich element in our history of fidelity.

The salesian martyrology, so varied in its scenarios, circumstances, immediate causes of martyrdom, and for the confreres concerned, prompts many reflections.

The joyful outlook of the Salesian, his profession of kindness and desire to collaborate with others in his work, makes the idea of martyrdom a rather distant concept. And yet pastoral service to the people and dedication to the education of the young cannot be realized without the inward dispositions for martyrdom, i.e. the offering of one’s life and the consequent taking up of the cross. Our mission is in fact the giving of ourselves to the Father for the salvation of the young in the manner that he himself prescribes. The same may be said of fidelity to our consecration, which has long been likened to a bloodless martyrdom because of its character of total and unconditioned self-giving.

We live the spirit of martyrdom in the daily pastoral charity, of which Don Bosco said: “When it happens that a Salesian yields up his life whilst working for souls, the Congregation has registered a great triumph”.²⁷ And it is interesting to note that in the context of this daily offering we must be open to the possibility of a cruel martyrdom: “If the Lord in his Providence disposes that some of us should suffer martyrdom, should we be afraid on that account?”²⁸

²⁷ cf. Don Bosco's spiritual testament, in Appendix to Constitutions

²⁸ MB XII, 13

Fr Joseph Kowalski.

Our attention is drawn to the group from Eastern Europe, headed and represented by Fr Joseph Kowalski, because of the recent beatification.

He was born at Siedliska, a rural village near Cracow on 13 March 1911, the son of Wojciech and Sofia Borowiek, into a deeply practising family. He was baptized on 19 March, the feast of St Joseph, in the parish church of Lubenia, some 4 km. from his birthplace which at that time had no church. Today, on a piece of land donated by the Kowalski family, there stands a modern church in which there is a commemorative plaque with a photograph of Fr Joseph in the prisoner's uniform of the concentration camp, and showing his number: 17350.

At the end of his elementary schooling at the age of 11, he was sent by his parents to the Don Bosco College at Auschwitz, where he remained for five years.

Of these five years the records show that "he was noteworthy for outstanding devotion", that he was clever, diligent, cheerful and available; he was liked by all and was one of the best students. He was a member of the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception, president of the missionary group, and an animator of religious and cultural activities among his companions. A witness in the process says that he and others like him were called the "the holy brigade".²⁹

It was not surprising therefore that the desire grew in him to follow in the footsteps of his educators, and that they saw in him signs of the grace of a true vocation.

He asked to become a Salesian and in 1927 entered the novitiate of Czerwinsk. The years of study and philosophy followed at Cracow (1928-31), then the period of practical training which concluded in 1934 with perpetual profession, and the normal course of theology culminating in priestly ordination in 1938.

²⁹ Witness XX, p.1676, § 5893

The Provincial, Fr Adam Cieslar, immediately called him to be his secretary and he retained the role for the next three years until the day of his arrest. He is described as a confrere "with outstanding self-control and exceptional esteem for each of his brothers". He was kind and obliging, always unruffled and especially very hard-working. To the extent that his duties allowed, he took up the study of languages (Italian, French and German), read with interest the life of the Founder, and prepared his homilies with great care.

His duties as provincial secretary did not prevent him from taking up pastoral work. He was always available for preaching and giving conferences, especially to young people, and for hearing confessions. He had a gift for music and a fine voice, and so was able to form a youth choir in the parish to add solemnity to liturgical celebrations.

It was precisely this zealous priestly activity among the young that attracted the attention of the authorities, and led to his arrest by the Nazis on 23 May 1941 together with a further eleven Salesians.

He was first imprisoned at Cracow in the Montelupi prison, but was transferred after a month with the others to the concentration camp at Auschwitz. Here he saw four confreres killed, among them his rector Fr Joseph Świerc and his confessor Fr Ignatius Dobiasz. As n.17350 he spent a year of forced labour and abuse in the so-called "hard labour gang" which few managed to survive.

It had been decided to transfer him to Dachau, but at the last moment this was stopped in circumstances well described by witnesses in the process³⁰ and also referred to in the process of beatification of Fr Maximilian Kolbe.³¹ He remained in the "hard labour gang" at Auschwitz.

Thanks to a plentiful documentation in his regard and also

³⁰ cf. Witnesses XIV, Summ., LXXX, p.1671, § 5876;

³¹ C.P. p.65

to certain particular features in connection with the manner of his death, our Blessed Martyr is an outstanding figure among his martyred companions.

His memory has remained fresh in Poland throughout the years. The acts of the process document a true "*fama sanctitatis*". It is referred to by eye-witnesses of the martyrdom. "When I consider the life of the Servant of God Fr Joseph Kowalski", says one of the witnesses, "and especially his conduct in the last moments of his life just before his death, I believe that he is a true martyr of the faith and that he fully deserves to be raised to the glory of the altars".³² This conviction prompted our Polish communities immediately after his death to gather together the documentation associated with his life and activities, with the precise intention of introducing the Cause for beatification. This was in harmony with the conviction of the ordinary people. The faithful of his native Siedliska, considering him a true martyr and in agreement with Bishop Tokarczuk, built at his birthplace – as we have said – a church dedicated to St Joseph, in which since 1981 they have been praying for the beatification of their fellow-villager.³³

Fr Francis Baran, parish priest of Krolic Polski, in 1968, was able to declare in his deposition: "The martyrdom of Fr Joseph, in my opinion, has become in our parish of Lubenia a providential seed of very many vocations for the Church. It is sufficient to recall that 27 zealous diocesan and religious priests have come from this parish since the last war".³⁴

Interesting publications about him have appeared, especially locally, though mainly in Polish. In 1972 the Italian Salesian Bulletin published an interesting profile which spread knowledge about him, and recently a short biography has been published and translated into various languages.

³² Prof. Zygmunt Kolankowski, Summ., Doc.VI

³³ cf. *Positio*, LXXXV, p.10

³⁴ Deposition of Fr Francis Baran

I too want to make a contribution by presenting some aspects of his life-story which concluded with martyrdom, as I have gathered them from a careful reading of the available documents. Among the latter I have also been able to consult the Process of St Maximilian Kolbe, with whom our confrere shared part of his imprisonment and made contact. Albeit indirectly, his name appears in some of the testimonies in that process.

A 'salesian' process of growth

It has been rightly said that "martyrdom is not something that takes place on the spur of the moment".³⁵ It is not brought about by the executioner but is a grace worked by the Spirit. It is not in fact the externally inflicted torments and agony that make a martyr, but the internal act of offering. It is therefore a gift so great that it cannot happen by chance, even if we suppose that anything at all can happen without an intervention of grace. Martyrdom is a vocation and is prepared for in mysterious fashion by the whole of life.

Just as death is unique for each individual, so to martyrdom each martyr gives his own individual touch. In addition to his self-oblation, there is the particular style with which each martyr faces the supreme moment of trial.

Whoever looks into the short earthly existence of this our new Beatus will have no difficulty in detecting the signs of a strong and vigorous holiness, externally perceptible as such and with specifically salesian characteristics.

The educative environment and the principles of Christian formation of his youth which we have referred to above are all characteristic elements of the preventive system: a youthful setting, trusting relationship with educators, committed

³⁵ Pius XII, AAS 32, 1950, p. 958

groups, increasing acceptance of responsibility, devotion to Mary Help of Christians, use of the sacraments.

That in this setting Joseph pursued his personal path to holiness as an “emulator of Dominic Savio”, is revealed also by some pages of his “personal notebooks”.

“Let me rather die than offend you even by the smallest sin”. “O my good Jesus, give me a fixed strong and steadfast will, that I may persevere in my holy resolutions and attain my ideal, the holiness I have set for myself. I can, I must become holy”.³⁶

The same notebooks indicate his personal relationship with Jesus Christ, which matured as the years went by, especially after profession: “Jesus, I want to be truly faithful and serve you unswervingly (...). I dedicate myself completely to you (...). Grant that I may never depart from you, that I may be faithful to you until death and be faithful to my oath ‘to rather die than offend you by the least sin’ (...). I must become a holy Salesian, as my Father Don Bosco was holy”.³⁷

As a young student of philosophy in 1930 he had drawn a small cross on a page in his diary and had written beneath it in blood: “To suffer and be despised for you, O Lord (...). With a firm will and ready to accept all the consequences I embrace the gentle cross of Christ’s calling, and I want to carry it to the end, to death itself”.³⁸

Pastoral charity even to the sacrifice of life

His love for the imitation of Christ and his adherence to his Father Don Bosco reflect his spiritual efforts in generous apostolic activities. We have already recalled his work of animation among his companions and his dedication to the oratory during

³⁶ Witness XX, p.1676, § 5893

³⁷ Summ., LXXXV, p.1678, §5897; p.1680, §§5904, 5908

³⁸ Summ., LXXXV, p.1680. §5902

the brief years of his priesthood. His approach to young people grew in kindness as time passed.

The testimony of Fr Francis Baran, a priest of the diocese of Przemyśl, is interesting: "I met Fr Joseph Kowalski for the first time in June 1938. I no longer remember the exact date of this happy encounter. I was a pupil of the second class of the elementary school, and I was on my way home from school. I met Fr Joseph who was coming back after Mass in the parish church, some 4 km. from his home. He spoke to me kindly for a while, asked my name and gave me some of his ordination cards. Then he embraced me and told me that I too would become a priest. I no longer remember his exact words".³⁹

The prison camp became for him his field of pastoral work. With his suffering he combined constant attention to his companions especially strengthening their hope and confirming their faith. "The SK officers", we read among the testimonies, "knowing that he was a priest, tormented him whenever possible, used every excuse to beat him, and gave him the heaviest work to do".⁴⁰

Yet he never ceased to offer his companions every possible priestly service: "Despite it being severely forbidden, he gave absolution to the dying; he strengthened those who were discouraged, uplifted spiritually the poor souls awaiting the death sentence, brought them communion secretly, and even managed to organize holy Mass in the huts, as well as leading prayers and helping the needy".⁴¹ "In that death camp in which, according to the guards, there was no God, he was able to bring God to his fellow prisoners".⁴²

His internal and external attitude during all this Calvary can be seen in a letter to his parents: "Do not worry about me, I am in God's hands (...). I want to assure you that I feel his

³⁹ Deposition of Fr Francis Baran, 30 Aug., 1971

⁴⁰ Witness XIX, Summ., LXXXV, p.1676, §5892

⁴¹ cf. Witness XIV, Summ., p.1671, §5875

⁴² Witness XVII, Summ., p.1675, §5887

help at every step. Despite the present situation I am happy and completely at peace; I am convinced that wherever I may be and whatever happens to me, everything comes from the fatherly Providence of God who perfectly directs the destinies of all nations and all men”.

Two facts speak eloquently of his heroic pastoral zeal. The first is the organization of daily prayer in the camp. The following evocative description comes from one of the witnesses: “In the morning as soon as we were free to move about and while it was still dark (about 4.30 a.m.), we used to gather together as a group of from 5 to 8 persons, in one of the blocks but in a less noticeable place (the discovery of such a group could have cost us our life), to say together prayers which we repeated after Fr Joseph. The group gradually grew bigger, even though that brought greater risk”.⁴³

Much more tragic were the events of his last day of life, preserved for history by eyewitnesses, who later succeeded in emerging from that inferno and were able to give sworn evidence during the Process.

The day was 3 July 1942. Every word and deed of the final 24 hours take on a particularly significant importance, and it is fitting that we relive the culminating moment of the passion of our confrere, even in its details.

“When we finished work”, said one of the witnesses, “our companions brought Fr Kowalski back to the block; he had been ill-treated by the guards. After his return I spent the final moments with him. We became aware that after the killing of our companions in the group (three of the five had been already killed) it was now our turn. In that situation Fr Kowalski recollected himself in prayer: ‘Kneel down’, he said, ‘and pray with me for all these who are being killed’. We prayed together until late evening, waiting for them to call more of us.

⁴³ Letter of Prof. Joseph Kret, eyewitness

After a while Mitas came along and called Fr Kowalski. The priest left his camp-bed with his mind at peace because he was ready for this call and for the death which would follow it. He gave me the piece of bread he had been given for supper, saying: 'You eat it, I don't need it any more'. And with these words he went knowingly to his death".⁴⁴

But before we come to the epilogue, which took place in the early morning of 4 July, on the 3rd a sacred action had been played out, which revealed all the heroic dignity of a true witness to the faith. It has been reported by eyewitnesses with a wealth of details. Listen to what they say:

"That day, linked with the memory of Fr Kowalski, remains imprinted on my mind. It was the last day of my stay in the camp. It was early in July 1942 and the day was very hot. The guards were going mad in their mania for killing people and they were amusing themselves with acts of cruelty. On that day they did not stop even during the interval for the midday meal, and went on with their sadistic entertainment of the morning. At times they would drown some in the nearby cesspool, others they would hurl down into the muddy waters of a deep canal they were digging. Those whose groans showed that they were not yet dead were pushed into a huge empty barrel, lying on its side, which served as a refuge for the dogs kept by the SS. There they were compelled to imitate the dogs by barking, and then lick up from the ground soup that had been thrown down there to feed them. The leader of the thugs, a German, shouted in a raucous voice: 'Where is that Catholic priest? Let him bless them for their journey into eternity'. Meanwhile other torturers were throwing Fr Kowalski (it was him the leader was looking for) into the mud for their entertainment. Now, hardly recognizable any longer as a man, they dragged him to the barrel. Pulled out naked from the cesspool with only tattered trousers clinging to him, dripping from head

⁴⁴ Summ., LXXXV, p.1685, §§ 5920f.

to foot in that horrible sticky mess of mud and filth and driven forward by furious beatings, he came to the barrel, where some were dying and others already dead. The thugs continued to strike Fr Kowalski, sneering at him as a priest, and made him get up on the barrel and give to the dying 'the final blessing for their journey to paradise, according to the Catholic rite'.

Fr Kowalski knelt on the barrel and after making the sign of the cross, in a loud voice, as though inspired, began to recite slowly the Pater noster and Ave Maria, the Sub tuum praesidium and the Salve Regina. The words of eternal truth contained in the divine phrases of the Lord's Prayer made a vivid impression on the prisoners who from day to day and hour to hour were awaiting a terrifying death, similar to that now being endured by their companions in their departure from this vale of tears, disfigured to such an extent that they no longer seemed to be men at all. Crouching together as best we could in the grass, not daring to raise our heads so as to keep out of sight of the torturers, we tasted the words of Fr Kowalski as material food for the peace we longed for. That ground, sodden with prisoners' blood, was now bedewed with the tears we shed as we witnessed the sublime mystery celebrated by Fr Kowalski against that macabre backdrop. Nestling close to me in the grass, a young student of Jaslo (Taddeo Kokosz) whispered in my ear: 'A prayer like that the world has never heard... perhaps they did not pray like that even in the catacombs'" ⁴⁵

From a careful reconstruction it is clear that he was killed during the night between 3 and 4 July 1942. He was drowned in the camp cesspool. This is attested to under oath by his fellow-prisoner Stefano Boratynski who afterwards saw his corpse covered in dirt and abandoned alongside the so-called punishment block.

⁴⁵ Joseph Kret

An unmistakable Marian touch

The devotion of the people of Poland to the Madonna, with its expression and centre in the sanctuary of Czestochowa, is well known. It is sown in the soul of everyone at baptism, and it surfaces in a powerful way at crucial moments in the history of the Church and the nation as a source of inspiration and energy, of wisdom and hope.

This characteristic, common to many Christian regions, makes a special point of contact between popular faith and devotion and salesian Marian spirituality.

In the notes made by Blessed Joseph, even when he was a pupil at Auschwitz, we find deep sentiments of his devotion to Mary: "O Mother I must become holy because that is my destiny. Let me never say that I have made enough progress; no, I shall never say enough. Grant, Mother, that the idea of holiness which shines in the eyes of my soul may never grow dim, but rather that it may grow, be strengthened, and shine like the sun".⁴⁶

His *via crucis* is marked by Marian stations. It was on 23 May 1941, vigil of the Feast of Mary Help of Christians that the foreseeable though unexpected arrest took place. He himself recalled the comfort he felt when he saw the tower of the Church of Mary Help of Christians, near the concentration camp, which the Salesians inherited from the Dominicans and transformed into a Marian sanctuary.

But this trait emerged especially at the moment of the supreme sacrifice. His rosary was always with him in his days of imprisonment. He recited it both by himself and with his companions. With it is linked his assignment to the 'hard labour gang' and the final heroic act of his existence. We read the following in his Acts of martyrdom.

"Among the 60 priests and brothers ready for transport to

⁴⁶ Witness XX, p.1676, §5893

Dachau there was Fr Joseph Kowalski. We were standing naked in the camp bath-house. In came the officer Plalitzsch – one of the major criminals of the Auschwitz camp, note the Acts – in charge of the move. ‘Attention!’, he commanded.

He paced up and down among the prisoners and noticed that Fr Kowalski was holding something tightly in his hand. ‘What are you holding?’ he asked. Fr Kowalski remained silent, and the commandant struck him a heavy blow on the hand. The rosary fell to the ground.

‘Stamp on it’, shouted the enraged official. But Fr Kowalski would not do so and the commandant, angry at the unflinching attitude of Fr Kowalski, took him out of the group. The fact made a deep impression on us. We understood that because of the rosary severe punishment lay ahead of him”.⁴⁷

An outstanding witness.

His Holiness John Paul II knew Blessed Joseph personally because he had lived during the Nazi persecution in our parish of St Stanislaus Kosta at Cracow. Speaking as Cardinal in this same Church on 30 January 1972, he spoke as follows of the Salesians who had been killed:

“I remember those times also for personal reasons. I am convinced that my own priestly vocation, in those times and precisely in this parish where I was a boy, owes much to the prayers and sacrifices of my brothers and sisters and of the pastors of the time, who paid with the blood of martyrdom for the Christian life of every parishioner, and especially the young ones”.

It is not surprising therefore to read in a letter of Fr Rokita of 29 November 1971: “The Archbishop of Cracow, Cardinal Wojtyla, who knew Fr Kowalski well, insisted that this cause be

⁴⁷ Witness XIV, Summ., LXXX, p.1671, §5876

speeded up". Now he has experienced its culmination in declaring him Blessed.

The grateful and humble testimony of the Pope, we have just quoted, speaks in the plural of the "pastors of the time", and it leads us to broaden our gaze and embrace all the confreres and members of the Salesian Family who stand behind the figure of Blessed Joseph Kowalski. We want to see him today not only as a single figure but as representing all those who like him, and for the same reasons, in the same country and in the same period of history sacrificed their own lives.

We think in the first place of the confreres who were arrested with him at Cracow. Some of them died in the death camp of Auschwitz between 1941 and 1942. They included Kowalski's rector and confessor as we said earlier. But if we include all those who were killed in Poland during the last war, the list rises to eighty. Of these an impressive little booklet was published by Fr Tirone in 1954, with a biographical profile of each of them: "Portraits of 88 Polish confreres who perished in the war". They included 55 priests, 27 coadjutor brothers, and 7 clerics.

But if we extend the range still further so as to include all the countries of Eastern Europe, the figure goes up to 183: from Poland to the Czech Republic, from Slovakia to Slovenia, from Croatia to Hungary. My thoughts went to all these confreres during the Beatification of Fr Joseph Kowalski; they are all personified in him and, like him, they are shining witnesses to the martyrdom dimension of the Congregation.

We remember them with veneration and deep interior gratitude, knowing well what spiritual fruitfulness they have merited for our religious family by their martyrdom. If we think of the vocational development which has marked the difficult years of the postwar period and the recent rapid extension of our works in the same geographical areas, we cannot fail to see the relationship between the mystery of growth and the mystery of the shedding of blood.

A 'youthful' salesian group

In the group of beatified martyrs there are five young men of Poznan. They are: Edward Klinik (aged 23); Francis Kesy (22); Jarogniew Wojciechowski (20); Czesław Józwiak (22) and Edward Kaźmierski (23).

They have certain characteristics in common: all five were oratorians; all five were consciously committed to their own human and Christian growth; all were involved in the animation of their companions, linked together by personal and social interests and projects, targeted almost simultaneously and imprisoned in different places but over a very short period of time. Subsequently they shared the same prison experience and suffered martyrdom on the same day and in the same manner. Their oratorian friendship remained alive to the last moment.

The presence of these young men with Fr Kowalski in the same beatification ceremony is significant: they were young men we had evangelized; they had been involved in our apostolate, and they followed their educators to martyrdom and to the honours of the altar.

Though they came together in prison and death, each of them had his own particular biography which became intertwined with that of the others in a common salesian setting.

Edward Klinik was the second of three children. His father was a mechanic. He finished his schooling in our house of Auschwitz, and later passed the maturity-exam at Poznan. During the occupation he worked in a construction company. His sister Mary, an Ursuline Sister, testified: "when Edward went to the oratory his religious life became much deeper. He began to take part in the Mass as an altar-server, and he also involved his younger brother in this oratorian life. He had always been quiet and rather self-conscious, but he became much livelier after joining the oratory. He was a conscientious and systematic student".⁴⁸

⁴⁸ *Positio*, p.758

In the group of five he stood out because of his deep commitment to every form of activity and gave the impression of being more serious and thoughtful. Under the guidance of his salesian educators his spiritual life became ever more firm and centred on the Eucharist, a most tender Marian devotion and enthusiasm for the ideals of St John Bosco.

Francis Kesy, on the other hand, was born in Berlin where his parents had gone for reasons of employment. His father was a carpenter, but when they moved back to Poznan he worked in an electrical centre in the town

It had been Francis' intention to become a candidate for the salesian novitiate, but since he was prevented by the occupation from continuing his studies, he found employment in an industrial establishment. His spare time he spent at the oratory where, sharing the ideals of the other four, he animated youth groups and associations. He was the third of five children in a poor family.

He is remembered as being sensitive and frail, and of poor health; but at the same time he was cheerful, good-natured, a lover of animals, and always ready to help others. Every morning found him heading towards the church, where he was an almost daily communicant; and every evening he recited the rosary.

Jarogniew Wojciechowski was a native of Poznan, where his father had a shop selling cosmetics. The family life was marked by a long series of traumatic situations because the father was an alcoholic and ended up by abandoning the family. Jarogniew had to change from one school to another and remained under the care of his older sister. In this situation he found support in the salesian oratory, where he joined in the activities with enthusiasm.

Of him witnesses recall that he became an alter-server with the Salesians, took part in camps and outings, played religious tunes on the piano, joined in the religious life of the family and

was a daily communicant. Like his other companions of the group he was well known for friendliness, good humour and the commitment he gave to activities, his duties and good example. He was outstanding among the others because he seemed rather meditative and had a tendency to see into things more closely; he tried to understand what lay behind events, but without becoming gloomy about them. He was a leader in the best sense of the word.⁴⁹

Czesław Józwiak was linked with the salesian oratory of Poznan from his childhood. He was only ten when he first set foot in it. His father was a police officer. He attended the St John Kanty School and at the same time acted as animator of a youth group at the oratory. When war broke out and it was impossible to continue at school he took employment in a chemist's shop.

It is said of him that he was irascible by nature, spontaneous and full of energy but without ever losing his self-control, consistent and ready for sacrifice.⁵⁰ Under the guidance of the rector, Fr Augustine Piechura, he could be seen to be striving after Christian perfection and to be making progress in that direction. There was no doubt about the hold he had on younger children.

According to one of his follow-prisoners: "He was good natured and a character with a soul as clear as crystal... When he spoke openly to me I could see that his heart was free from any stain of sin or evil... He shared with me one of his particular concerns, that he should never fall into impurity".⁵¹

Finally **Edward Kaźmierski** was born at Poznan into a poor family. His father was a shoe-repairer. As soon as he finished elementary school he was obliged to find work in a shop

49 cf. *Positio*, p.766f.

50 cf. *Positio*, p.730

51 *Positio*, p.731

and later in a machine shop. He soon became a member of the salesian oratory and in that environment was able to develop special musical talents.

It is said of him that the keen religious sense he had acquired in his family soon led him to Christian maturity under the guidance of the Salesians. All his spare time after work he spent at the oratory and grew in Eucharistic and Marian devotion. At the age of 15 he took part in a pilgrimage to Czestochowa, travelling more than 500 km. on foot. He was president of the St John Bosco Circle and was full of enthusiasm for salesian ideals.

Lively, faithful to his decisions he liked to sing in the church choir, or as a soloist. At the age of 15 he wrote some of his own musical compositions. Among his characteristics were balanced good sense and kindness. In prison he showed a great love for his companions. He willingly helped the older ones and was completely free of any feeling of hatred towards his persecutors.⁵²

Both individually and as a group, these young men manifest the shaping power of the oratory experience when the latter can count on a proper environment, a responsible youth community, a project for the individual, and one or more confreres able to accompany the young in their pilgrimage of faith and grace. The five came from Christian families, and with this foundation the life and program of the oratory encouraged their generosity towards God, their human maturity, prayer and apostolic commitment.

The group was crucial as a place of growth and commitment. They were always called the "group of five". It is impressive to read of each one: "He was one of the group of the oratory-leaders, closely linked with the other four in friendship and aspirations after high Christian ideals".⁵³

⁵² cf. *Positio*, p.742

⁵³ *Positio*, p.741

The oratory experience produced in them a youthful comradeship based on ideals and projects, manifested in sincere sharing, mutual support in time of trial, and in spontaneity and joy.

Their friendship led them to continue their meetings when the occupational forces requisitioned the oratory, and transformed the whole building and the church into military store-rooms, leaving the Salesians with only two rooms.

In one of the rooms with a piano which the Brothers of the Sacred Heart had placed at their disposal, they continued their choral activities and friendly meetings. Later, when even this became impossible, they met in the city parks, the fields near the river and the nearby woods. It was not strange that the police identified or confused them with clandestine associations. Their friendship became a mutual support during their passage through various prisons to their death.

Imprisonment and martyrdom

All five were arrested in September 1940. Edward Kazmier-ski was taken directly from his place of work without the possibility of taking leave of his dear ones. It was on a Sunday. On Monday 23rd it was the turn of Francis, in the evening after curfew when he had just returned home. The other three were taken from their families usually at dead of night.

They met again in Fortress VII of Poznań, from where they were moved on first to the Neukoln Prison near Berlin, then to that of Zwickau in Saxony; they were interrogated, tortured and then condemned to hard labour.

On 1 August 1942 sentence was pronounced: death for treason against the State. They stood to hear the sentence. It was followed by a long silence, interrupted only by the exclamation of one of them: "Thy will be done".

We must not be deceived by the official political motivation.

The witnesses and subsequently the *Positio* dwell on the documentation of the material fact of martyrdom, i.e. that death was inflicted by the persecutors. Their imprisonment was marked by torture and interrogations, by forced hard labour, hunger until they dropped from exhaustion, inhuman treatment, and association with common criminals which added new sufferings to those resulting from their condemnation.

But the same documents also make clear the anti-religious mentality and intention of the persecutors who sought the human destruction of the prisoners. Certainly these young men were aiming lawfully, like every other citizen, at the rebirth of their country's culture, values and social justice. But no criminality was found in their actions. They were taken and condemned without being able to defend themselves because of their membership of Catholic organizations, which it was suspected might give rise to resistance. Among the witnesses, statements like the following are frequently found: "The reason for their condemnation to death was certainly not that published by the authorities..."⁵⁴ "The Nazis knew it, and even though they did not say so directly, they carried on a persecution for motives of faith, they were upset by signs of Christianity, by prayers said aloud, by religious hymns..."⁵⁵ "It was from faith that they got the strength to remain faithful to God and their homeland".⁵⁶

Finally must be added what was inflicted on them, directly connected with the open practice of their faith and their devotion, by those of an anti-Christian and atheistic regime who kept them in custody. They were persecuted "because of their religious and patriotic behaviour".⁵⁷ "After occupying Poznan the Nazis made it a crime to celebrate Holy Mass in church, and to gather young people in the oratory".⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Witness I, *Summ.* p.1695

⁵⁵ *Positio*, p.734

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ Witness IV, *Summ.*, p.1700

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

Abundant also is the documentation concerning formal martyrdom on the part of the victims: i.e. the awareness that they were offering their lives as a confession of faith, the filial acceptance of the will of God, the absence of any rancour or resentment towards their persecutors, and even the Christian love they had for them.

And so was made clear the *fama martyrii*, i.e. the conviction on the part of those who had known them and had witnessed their sufferings and the martyr-like character of their death, manifested by their request for intercession and graces. Among these were young companions of their own age, but also direct testimony from the prisoners. A representative expressed the opinion of all: "Whoever knew these five young men saw them as martyrs for the love of God and their country".⁵⁹ "Personally I am convinced that their sufferings in prison and especially their death, which they faced as a test of faith, provided the conditions necessary for their recognition as martyrs. The annual meetings [...] of the past-pupils of the oratory tell us that the 'five' are models not only of love of their country, but of the faith".⁶⁰

Three weeks later they were brought into the prison yard at Dresda where a guillotine had been erected and were beheaded. It was 24 August while our communities were celebrating the monthly commemoration of Mary Help of Christians.

Before they died they were given the opportunity of writing a final note to their parents. When we read those last sentiments we can only stand in silence as before those of great stature. They constitute remarkable documents of the spiritual life, which in due course can be given wider circulation. That of Józwiak Czesław can serve as an example: "I have to leave this world, but I want you to know that going in this way to the next world gives me greater joy than if I were to be set

⁵⁹ *Positio*, p.738

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

free. I know that Mary Help of Christians whom I have honoured all my life will win me pardon from Jesus [...] A priest will bless me during the execution. We have the great joy of being together before we die. We are all five of us together in the same cell. It is now 19.45. At 20.30 I shall be leaving this world. I beg you not to weep; do not give way to despair; do not be worried. This is God's will..."⁶¹

As with Fr Kowalski, so with these five young men, there is a moving aspect linked with the rosary. When they were arrested all their belongings were taken from them. Their rosaries were thrown into the trashcan, but when their captors' backs were turned they courageously recovered those beads which were to be their precious companion in the moments of greatest difficulty.

To our three young people: St Dominic Savio, Blessed Laura Vicuña and the Venerable Zeferino Namuncurá, we now add these five young martyrs as if to complete the saintly categories with the one adornment that was missing: martyrdom. It is now up to us to draw out the full meaning of this event for the area of youth. In them we want to recognize a model for so many young people who are suffering in different parts of the world for their Christian faith. We point to them as intercessors as well as being patterns of the highest ideals.

Conclusion

In the afternoon of 13 June, after the solemn celebration in the Piazza Józef Pilsuski, we gathered with the young people who had come for the beatification from different parts of Poland, Slovakia and Russia. Accompanying them were Salesians and animators, with novices, young confreres in formation and postulants of the FMA.

⁶¹ *Summ.*, p.1707

It was a truly "oratorian" manifestation, which took place in our Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Warsaw. The joy of being together under the guiding inspiration of Don Bosco could be seen in every face and felt in the atmosphere. Signs of the 'oratorian' process of growth found lively and complete expression: music, prayer, group projects, and just being together.

In this mosaic the image of Fr Joseph Kowalski and the five young men, outlined in a calm and expressive presentation, seemed to be back in their natural setting. It was in the oratory, in fact, that their holiness took root and blossomed, and was later proved by martyrdom. The preventive system makes the educator holy, it proposes sanctity to all and helps the young to become holy: its place of birth and rebirth is the oratory.

In an era like our present one, in which we turn to the young with new hope, may the Lord and his Mother help us to discover its possibilities and live its spirit.

With my greetings and blessing to you all.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Juan Trecchi". The signature is written in a cursive style. A large, sweeping horizontal stroke underlines the name, starting from the left and ending under the 'i'.