

*Unless The  
Grain Of Wheat . . .*



LUIGI VARIARA

AN APOSTLE OF THE COLUMBIA LEPERS

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St. Kieran's Church

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# Unless the Grain of Wheat...

John 12, 24



The Life of Father Luigi Variara, S.D.B.  
An Apostle of the Columbia Lepers and Founder of a Religious  
Order for Lepers,  
*The Daughters of The Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary*

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UNLESS THE GRAIN OF WHEAT ... John 12, 24)

or

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## FOREWORD

In the present unsettled times since Vatican II, when so many of us have a tendency to blame the ills of society in general and of the church in particular on the inefficiency and at times obtuseness of some of its leaders, it is helpful to reflect on the life-story of some of the plain members of God's flock who belong to our times and who looked beyond the human limitations of their leaders and chose instead to follow and imitate their Crucified Savior who *was led like an uncomplaining lamb to be slaughtered* and thus joined with Christ in achieving salvation and glorification for all.

FATHER LUIGI VARIARA, SDB, was one such member within Christ's sheepfold. I hope these pages will serve as a stimulant in the acceptance of the Cross in our own life, the sure sign of the power and mercy of God at work in and through us.

## RE-ENTERING THE FOLD

The year 1856 dawned unsettled and stormy on the village of Viarigi – a small farming community nestled in the vine growing region of Asti in the Piedmont area of northern Italy.

Ten years previously a defrocked priest, claiming to be the personification of Jesus Christ, along with a red-haired female partner, his avowed *madonna*, had descended upon the peasant population of Viarigi and had wrested a good number of them from their simple parish faith.

The local pastor – good father Molino – strove to stem the tide of desertion from the mother church, but to no avail. He had recourse to several well known eloquent ecclesiastics, who came and held their *mission revivals*, but their words fell on deaf ears.

Finally, the pastor heard of a priest through whom the Spirit seemed to reach out and change hearts. This priest was the one who at that time was creating a stir in Piedmont; a certain Don Bosco who seemed to go after and rescue young people at risk, and bring back to God the most hardened sinners. Father Molino appealed to him to come and help his people re-enter God's fold. Don Bosco was at first reluctant. But, he finally yielded to the good pastor's insistence. Sneers welcomed Don Bosco as he ventured into the village: here came another priest going through his pious motions; they would send him packing after he had had his say, and they would remain as he had found them.

However, Don Bosco proved to be the channel of grace Christ had chosen to touch and change the hearts of those alienated souls. At the end of that mission the good pastor had the joy of seeing his people re-enter the fold of the Good Shepherd.

Among those who had listened to Don Bosco's words, but who had not strayed after the apostate priest was a

certain Peter Variara; one, whose son, - Luigi by name - is the hero of our story.

### THE PETER VARIARA FAMILY

As mentioned before, the Peter Variara family had not strayed with the break away parish group of Viarigi. Daddy Peter, from a well to do family, had earned his teaching license and taught in the local grammar school. In 1854 he married a Margaret Ghibaudi. From their union two children were born: Joann and Luigi. As Luigi grew up, he entered the seminary to study for the priesthood. However, death claimed his young life at age 20. Peter's wife Margaret also passed away shortly after, and in 1873 he married for a second time.

His second wife's name was Livia Busso. From their union a son was born on January 15, 1875; his baptismal name was again Luigi to perpetuate the memory of his deceased half brother. The grateful father hoped that God would renew His call to his second Luigi, and crown it with his priestly ordination. Two other sons and a daughter were also born to Peter and Livia.

Besides being an outstanding school teacher, Peter Variara was also, for all of 40 years, in charge of the political administration of the town hall. His sterling character and genuine christian faith insured the life-long esteem and affection of the town's people.

His wife proved to be every bit an extension of his personality. She gave evidence of motherly concern for all the neighborhood children. They used to come together as a group in her courtyard for their games and pastime.

Little Luigi grew in this wholesome environment, surrounded by the love and attention of his devoted parents. He grew well mannered, with a marked penchant for studies; he exhibited early on a marked inclination for music, particularly for singing.

A classmate of his was later to state that he was the one most often called upon by the teacher when chores or other school related duties were requested. Mothers used to hold him up as an example for their own children.

Once finished with his primary studies his father planned to have him go on to secondary education. Recalling the visit of Don Bosco of years previous and the deep impression made on the Viarigi people at that time, he concluded: *I shall entrust to him my son Luigi. Who knows but that God will call him to the priesthood.* Mother Livia, however, was not at first in favor of her son's eventual pursuit of priestly studies. One reason being that she felt a particularly strong attachment to this son of hers, who was proving to be such a joy for her to have around.

True, it is always the most loving parents who are generally called upon to make the greatest sacrifices ... And so it was that mother Livia did finally give her consent. So, on October 1st, 1887, the twelve year old Luigi was enrolled in Don Bosco's school, his famed Valdocco Oratory in Turin. Don Bosco still had a few months to live. Peter Variara handed him over his son Luigi with this parting remark: *"I beg of you to conduct yourself well. Who knows... some day you might take your brother's place and become a priest".* "Daddy, - Luigi shot back - *I have no intention of becoming a priest!"* "In the meantime - his father continued - *study hard and be good. Our Lady will herself know how to enlighten you on the life-road you'll do best to travel."*

After overcoming the initial feeling of homesickness, Luigi soon adjusted to the new environment. He found himself challenged and motivated by his teachers and classmates. The gentle and firm fatherliness of Don Bosco in these last declining months of his life cast a genuine home like warmth on this unique kind of school.



## LUIGI MEETS A SAINT

During this, his first year of school at the Valdocco Oratory, Luigi had the good fortune of meeting Don Bosco several times. Because of his deteriorating health the saintly priest had to spend a good part of the day in his little room on the second floor, facing unto the school playground. Now and then he would come to the window and look down of the noisy crowd of boys below enjoying their games.

One of these meetings, fleeting though it was, remained deeply impressed on the young lad. Towards the end of November 1887, Don Bosco was returning from a coach ride that, on the advice of his doctor, he was taking every afternoon. He dismounted from his carriage and mingled with the youngsters who were playing in the yard. *"We all instinctively gathered around him. - narrates Luigi - Don Bosco appeared thoroughly exhausted. I maneuvered in such a way that I found myself squarely in front of him and as close as I dared."* The good father riveted his eyes on me in an affectionate look for quite a good while...That penetrating glance undoubtedly read into my soul some inner secret that only he was able to fathom.

His brother Celso testified later: *"From the very first year of his stay at Don Bosco's Oratory, Luigi gave evidence of his resolve to join the Salesians."* This sort of "conversion" ripened most certainly in the climate of deep spirituality and enthusiasm for the missionary style of life that was lived during those years at the school of Don Bosco. The presence in their midst at this time of the first Salesian Missionary Bishop John Cagliero, Vicar Apostolic of the Patagonia region in the Argentines, must certainly have influenced Luigi's change of mind, and helped him form his resolve to opt for the priestly life as a missionary in the Salesian congregation.

Young Luigi Variara did spend four years at Don

Bosco's Oratory completing his high school studies. *"He was held in high esteem and well liked by his peers and faculty, - testified one of his teachers, a certain Father Luigi Terrone: - His kindly ways, cheerful outlook, open mind and receptiveness towards his teachers and mentors drew others to imitation."*

On August 18, 1891, his high school diploma achieved, he applied for and was admitted to the Salesian novitiate located in the town of Foglizzo, not far from Turin. He received his religious habit on October 29 from the hands of the successor of Don Bosco, Father Michael Rua, whom we now honor as Blessed Michael Rua.

In September 1892 he was admitted into the Salesian Congregation as he professed the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. He was allowed to profess these vows in perpetuity after barely a month of his temporary profession. Again, it was Blessed Michael Rua, the Superior General of the salesians at the time, who received his religious vows. Young Luigi was only 18 at the time. However he felt determined to commit himself to God for life and his superiors felt justified in allowing him to take this final definite step.

## THE YOUNG SALESIAN

After his novitiate and his religious profession, Luigi went through his philosophical studies at the University level. Among his mentors were two great educational luminaries of the congregation: Fathers Giulio Barberis and Luigi Piscetta. Two of his classmates eventually became bishops: Most Rev. Richard Pittini, Primate of the Antilles and Most Rev. Dominic Comin, missionary bishop of Cuenca, Ecuador. In the University he attended at Valsalice, two other alumni stood out for sanctity of life. The Venerable Father Andrew Beltrami, who contracted a fatal illness from a patient he was caring for. The patient's name was Augustus Czartoryski, of the royal house of

Poland, who through the good offices of His Holiness the Pope had obtained to be allowed to join the Salesians. He is also at present headed for the honor of the altars.

At the school of Valsalice at the time, the mortal remains of Don Bosco were interred under the altar of the University chapel. There was a continuous flocking of the Salesian students at this tomb of their founder - whom, from now on I shall refer to as *St. John Bosco* - to draw strength and courage in their following of Christ.

A decisive meeting took place at the end of his philosophical studies in 1894. A certain *Father Unia*, a Salesian missionary priest, had returned to Italy from Colombia on a visit. His health had broken down and he was now taking a mandated rest to regain his health back. He was returning to his native town of Roccaforte, also in the Piedmont region. He had been the first Salesian priest to volunteer and take up his residence in the great leprosarium of Agua de Dios in Colombia. There were about 800 lepers in that lazaretto, completely left to themselves. Father Unia had been living at this sink hole of human misery for three years, along with two other Salesian confreres: a certain Father Raffaele Crippa and a salesian brother, Giovanni Luzzo by name. But he had come back to Italy also with the avowed purpose to look for a much younger salesian, who would volunteer to come and take care especially of the children sick with leprosy or healthy children whose parents had the dreaded disease. He wanted a young salesian who would know and be willing to teach these children music... to start a children's choir, and yes, to put together a boys' band to bring a note of festivity and cheer in their drab and otherwise somber existence. Father Unia had made this request to Father Michael Rua, who replied "*Go to our studentate of Valsalice; choose from among those young salesians who have volunteered to go to the missions... pick from among them those you judge will be able and willing to meet the challenge.*" And so it was that Father Unia came to Valsalice during the days of preparation for the solemn

feast of Mary Help of Christians, the acknowledged Patroness of the Salesian Congregation. Our Lady would surely inspire some of these young recruits of her congregation to come to the relief of her crucified Son in the persons of these children ravaged by the most repulsive of maladies.

*"When Father Unia came looking for whom he could choose, among the many young salesians who had applied – our Luigi revealed later – my heart was pounding hard... I kept praying and hoping that the Blessed Mother would obtain for me the grace of being among the chosen ones."* And so, Father Unia, after consulting with his superiors and after having evaluated the qualities of each candidate, picked out our young cleric Luigi. *"This one, – he said – will do quite well for my lepers!"* *"My joy knew no bounds – he recalled later – when I was told that I would be assigned to leave for the leper colony of 'Agua de Dios' in Colombia. The Blessed Virgin had granted my request."* And, Luigi was still in his teens!

## LIFE AMONG HUMANITY'S REJECTS

The reader will naturally be surprised at the decision made by Luigi's religious superiors, to send such a young inexperienced newly professed religious to a far off foreign land in the most trying of human situations, where misery and rejection held sway... where unrelieved depression and searing pain went hand in hand with the most hideous human disfigurement.

Over and beyond the danger of contracting this disease, the persons sick with leprosy, because of the resulting severe mutilations, presented a most repulsive sight that discouraged any nearness or contact on the part of a healthy person. Only a heroic brand of love bolstered by granitic faith could have induced a healthy young man brimming over with vitality, good looks and uncommon ability to – let's say it frankly – bury himself in this den of sorrow.

The festivities in honor of Mary Help of Christians over, Luigi received from the hands of Blessed Michael Rua, the Crucifix - the Christian passport to missionary lands. He visited with his family for just three days, bid them a fond farewell and on the 29th of the same month of May he boarded a ship in Genoa bound for far off South America.

Leaving one's family, turning your back on your native land is always a heart rending experience that only those who are called upon to do it can adequately feel and gauge. And, at this point in time it was so especially for parents, for the farewells were generally definite... Only the faith-inspired lofty ideals and the strength flowing from almighty God who provided the call, could mitigate the suffering this separation involved. *"I knew - he was to say later - that I was leaving my native place forever. I was turning my back on what I had held most dear till then. However, I felt that God was providing me with a new country; was waiting for me in a new world, where I could be the instrument of His loving mercy to the most unfortunate members of society."*

After crossing the Atlantic and threading its way through the Islands of the Caribbean, touching the various ports; and after crossing the Panama Canal and exiting on the Pacific rim, the ship finally came to rest at the seaport of Sabanilla. From there they transferred on a river boat and navigated up the majestic Magdalena, that severs the Colombia republic in two. This South American nation is situated astride the Andes chain and goes from the Caribbean sea towards the headwaters of the Amazon; it extends from the Pacific to the immense plane of Venezuela; altogether it covers an area of 439,825 square miles, with a present population of over 22 million people.

Today, starting from the Pacific coast, one can reach the capital city of Bogota in one hour's flight. However, at the time our Luigi and his companion made the trip, the boat they were riding took whole weeks to traverse the distance, stopping at the several river towns to unload merchandise and passengers. The last leg of the journey had

to be made on horseback. Finally on August 6 they reached "Agua de Dios". The trip had lasted over two months.

## A BRACING BREATH OF SPRING AIR

Agua de Dios counted at that time a population of 2,000. Well over 50% of the inhabitants were sick with leprosy. Those most seriously ill resided in a huge Government-built lazaretto. Others lived in huts scattered widely through the tropical growth. Today this town with its brick houses, with running water, light and telephone is a welcoming sight. It's cradled on the lap of a mountain at about 1,000 feet over sea level. It has a warm, dry climate and is surrounded by lush vegetation. However, at the time our young missionaries arrived, it was a desolate place where society's untouchables were taken, left and forgotten.

Father Michael Unia had first arrived in Colombia in 1890 with the first small nucleus of Salesians. When he witnessed the pitiful conditions that the lepers were made to endure in Agua de Dios where they were confined, he begged and obtained from Father Michael Rua to be allowed to go and live with them in the leprosarium. He took up his residence with them in 1891, and he immediately got started to upgrade and improve conditions there. He had running water piped into the town and started the construction of the lazaretto-type hospital, which he was able to staff with a religious order of nuns - the Sisters of the Presentation. They were to work wonders among these lepers with motherly concern and professional expertise.

The arrival of young Luigi in their midst was indeed like a refreshing gust of springtime air. Open, jovial and enthusiastic he threw himself with the full exuberance of his youthful energy to the work as outlined to him by Father Unia... Keeping the children busy and happy,

teaching them catechism, setting up an unheard of boys' band and brightening those church functions with their happy singing. At the same time he started applying himself seriously to learning the Spanish language and the local dialect; he pursued at the same time the study of theology. *"Be fully immersed in your work, – Father Unia advised him – and don't worry if you are not immediately fluent in the local language. Don't let your initial lack of thorough knowledge of it hold you back from communicating with people. I don't want them to think that I sent them along a tongue-tied cleric."*

Once he had overcome the feeling of revulsion that at first comes over when approaching the diseased persons, he became the welcome friend of the lazaretto patients. The children, especially the children, found in him the fresh faced big bother who understood them, joined in their games, entertained them with so many amusing and interesting stories, who spoke to them about God who loved them and cherished them, who taught them how to sing, how to make music on the trumpet, on the drum, on the big bass horn... His superior wrote a report Italy in which he said, *"It makes you weep to see those poor boys spending most of the day blowing these instruments with what little breath they have."* Brother Luigi un-afraid of putting his own lips on the mouthpiece where those of the leper boys had been a few seconds before, soon had the boys playing joyful tunes. Music and cheerfulness began to enliven the colony.

And, it was as well during these initial stages of his apostolate that he felt inspired to start a new religious congregation; one, whose membership would be opened to all young ladies whether sick with leprosy, or whose parents were lepers, and who at present, could only look on with envy at the sisters who took care of them, realizing that their repulsive disease or the condition of their parents disqualified them from even applying for membership in a religious congregation. Father Unia himself had entertained this very idea... and Father Luigi would one day give it reality.

## AN ONEROUS ENDOWMENT

The tropical heat, the wear and tear of the daily grind, the scarcity of available means to carry on the work finally prevailed on the once robust constitution of Father Unia. His religious superior, the Very Rev. Evasio Rabagliati, visited the leper colony of Agua de Dios in July 1895. He prevailed on Father Unia to leave his beloved lepers one more time and to return to Italy in an effort to regain his worn out health. He did return to Turin on December 3 that year. However, just six days later, the good Lord called Father Unia to his eternal reward.

Before leaving for Italy, the saintly father had left a note for his dear Luigi. Among other things it said: *"I'm leaving half of my heart here, at Agua de Dios. Somebody more worthy than me will inherit my task. Never fear! Who knows but that you may be the one chosen to carry on."* The sudden death of the great apostle of the lepers at Agua de Dios caused consternation in all who had known and had been touched by his apostolic work. In our young Luigi it left a deep void. He had worked side by side with him for the last 15 months; he had seen and admired his faith and his love for those unfortunate people.

A heavy load of responsibility now fell squarely on the shoulders of Father Rafael Crippa and the young cleric Luigi. For 20 years they will work jointly *"sharing together"* - Father Crippa will write later - *joys and sorrow. Indeed we had the most complete mutual understanding and agreement in everything. We were indivisible, of one mind and heart in all we did."*

Our young cleric Luigi became **"Father Luigi"** on April 24, 1898. His consecrating Bishop was His Excellency Herrera Restrepo. However, he was deprived of the joy of having his mother at his side as he ascended God's altar, and his own father had passed away in August of the preceding year.

A rousing welcome was waiting for him at Agua de



Dios where he arrived on April 30 to offer his first solemn mass. Both the sick and sound surrounded the new priest, their own *new padre* in a most moving show of joy and affection.

The priesthood opened new avenues of apostolate for the zealous young priest: daily masses, hearing confessions, counseling, comforting and visiting the sick, administering the sacraments, directing the recreative activities of the oratory, carrying on and strengthening his music program with the boys' band and choir that brought new life and a spark of joy and hope to that suffering community.

In spite of his youthful age, Father Luigi found himself sought after as a wise and saintly spiritual director. He succeeded in creating in Agua de Dios a true faith community. He established different groups which vied with each other in the practice of christian living bolstered by strong devotional practices; groups alternating in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament; special acts of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Blessed Mother and the saints, etc... A certain Father Baena who lived there during these times testified: "*Father Luigi's apostolic zeal imbued the Agua de Dios community with the Divine presence. He changed it from a valley of tears to a corner of paradise.*"

### A DREAM REALIZED

What had been the wish of Father Unia to build and equip a residential facility for children affected by leprosy and abandoned by their parents, became an obsession in the mind and heart of Father Luigi. He immediately set about realizing it. He mailed a nation-wide appeal to *all the healthy youths of Colombia* inviting them to join forces and donate towards the construction of a residential facility dedicated to the memory of the heroic priest Father Michael Unia. The entire country was caught up in the

project. Assistance came from all sides. On March 7, 1899 the first stone was laid of a large construction, two stories high, and about 500 feet in length. Unfortunately a disastrous civil war broke out in October of the same year and which continued unabated up to the middle of 1902, and during which thousands lost their lives and the nation was wracked by ruinous raids and violence of all sorts, with the result that work came practically to a stand still till the scourge of civil strife finally subsided. The "Father Unia Shelter" could only be opened in 1905. It could care for 150 lepers ranging in age from 6 to 20 years of age. It provided elementary schooling and as they grew and showed an aptitude for a certain type of work, they were able to learn a particular trade be it tailoring, wood-working, shoe making and later on also printing.

Thus, after a number of years, their schooling and apprenticeship behind them, they could, if they so wished, break out of their isolation, at least in a limited way.

At this particular point and time there occurred in the Salesian province of Colombia several changes at the top in its administrative structure. After a visit of control from the mother house in Turin, carried out by a certain Father Paul Albera, it was decided to hand over the running of the Salesian works in that nation to a new provincial: a certain Father Antonio Aime. This new appointment freed the incumbent, Father Rabagliati, from the direct responsibility over the Salesians and their works in Colombia. He was able to accept the position as *president* of a government branch created to sort out and choose the different areas of the country where facilities could be erected to take care of people affected with leprosy.

Meanwhile at Agua de Dios our Father Luigi, in an effort to provide continued assistance to the healthy children who had been orphaned of their diseased parents and to those who had already contracted the dreaded disease, astonished his senior co-workers as well as superiors by boldly establishing a brand new *religious congregation*.

He had been for years the moderator and spiritual director of a group of young lady-helpers named: *Daughters of Mary*. Some of them were healthy young women, but some of them were afflicted with leprosy. They all had followed their sick parents into the leprosarium in order to be of assistance to them. Among them there were some who manifested a desire to lead a "vowed, religious life of perfection." They asked to become affiliated with the Salesian Order and to keep Father Luigi as their spiritual director. *"We are stricken with leprosy, driven out of our homes, taken by force from our families, and now we see our most ardent desires being washed away. Father Variara knows the pain of body we endure and the deeper pain of soul, and he has shown us how to realize our dearest wishes in this place of suffering. It has become our paradise... Our aim will be to serve our fellow lepers. In our congregation, we will serve God, offering ourselves as willing victims of expiation under the protection of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and that of Mary Help of Christians... Father Variara cannot see why we should be deprived of religious life just because of our illness."*

Father Luigi had been coaching them along with great prudence and caution leading them towards a total commitment to God in the service of their suffering brethren. Without hardly being aware of it the congregation of the *"Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary"* came to life.

Oliva Sanchez was the first lady to be named superior. She was then 35 years old. At age 28 she realized that she had contracted leprosy and had entered the Agua de Dios compound. Under the guidance of Father Luigi she had not only accepted her heavy cross, but she had even offered herself as an expiatory victim to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, thus becoming an angel of mercy among her sick or sound peers.

### A PAINFUL BREAK

*"If a grain of wheat that falls to the ground does not die, it remains just a grain, but if it dies it produces much fruit" (Jn.12,24)*

The way of the cross is the way of love, and Our Lord calls those souls whom He treasures the most, to follow Him up the steep ascent of Calvary. *"to complete - as St Paul says - what is lacking in the passion of Christ."* (Col. 1,24) Father Luigi was wholly committed to giving life to this religious family he had started. But all of the sudden, an unexpected decision from his superior threatened to quench the spark he had ignited. His provincial decided to change the entire personnel that had been running the Columbia leprosarium of Agua de Dios and Contratación. He overlooked or ignored completely the peculiar psychological mind-set of the lepers who become particularly attached and dependent on those who care for them.

He also thought - a bit naively perhaps - that the change would greatly benefit the personnel in charge. He believed that they needed a break from this environment; they needed a rest away from this grinding and commonly considered most depressing work.

Father Luigi was the very first to be removed by order of the provincial. On January 1905 he sent for him: *"You have been working now for the past 10 years in that lazaretto, - he told him - and you have given of yourself beyond any reasonable limit. To enable you to get some rest I have decided to assign you to our seminary of Mosquera as superior and master of novices."* This order was also at the same time a sign of trust and esteem on the part of his provincial. But, for him, for his spiritual daughters and the whole community of Agua de Dios it was a hard blow, a bolt from the blue.

However, Father Luigi was a man of humble obedience. He was convinced that *"the obedient man will speak of victory."* (Prov. 21,28). With a heavy heart he left those people to whom he had given his the best of his energies, and wound his way to his newly assigned post.

His pain increased beyond measure as the reaction of the lepers at Agua de Dios surfaced. They set about storming with letters and telegrams the Archbishop of Bogota,

the Apostolic Delegate, the president of the Republic, and Father Michael Rua, the superior general of the Salesians. All this animosity and reaction caused Father Luigi intense suffering. However he showed himself fully resigned to his new assignment. He besought all concerned, especially his spiritual "*daughters of the Sacred Heart, to be resigned to God's will with faith, humility and generosity.*" Only after having consulted with his father Provincial, did he write a letter to the superior general. In it he poured out his heart: "*deeply wounded by the news that he was receiving from his lepers among whom he had been sent by him, the superior general - personally!*" He concluded his letter with these words: "*Meanwhile I shall remain at my new post here in Mosquera, doing God's holy will.*"

Confronted by all these reactions and realizing the consequences resulting from the absence of Father Luigi from his field of labor, the provincial decided to reverse his decision. And so it was that on January 27, Father Luigi Variara was able to return to Agua de Dios after an absence of only 20 days. God had rewarded his heroic act of obedience.

*"The welcome he received on his return was overwhelming, indeed delirious. - writes father Emilio Baena who witnessed the event - their enthusiasm was unrestrained; their joy knew no bounds."*

## THE "DAUGHTERS OF THE SACRED HEARTS OF JESUS AND MARY"

Finally on May 7, 1905 the first 6 postulants received their religious habit from Father Rabagliati, who worked along with and held in high esteem our Father Luigi; he had followed him and supported him all these past years.

*"That was a day of unadulterated and pure joy for our dear founding father, for his fortunate spiritual daughters and for all those who took part in this sacred ceremony."* Thus wrote Mother Ana Maria Lozano, who succeeded Sister Oliva Sanchez as

head of the new institute, and who would remain at the helm for fifty years. Now the orphans of the **Father Unia** shelter had finally acquired mothers and sisters who would henceforth devote themselves completely to their care and service. This first tiny seed was quick in sprouting and multiplying. More young ladies requested to be allowed to join the new congregation. On August 15, 1906 the first group of the new religious order, having completed their novitiate, vowed their life to God. Father Luigi, while continuing on one hand to follow the progress of his spiritual daughters, did not on the other neglect the other duties of his apostolate. He would rise at 4:30 A.M.; at 5:00 he was at meditation with his confreres. Then followed, in immediate succession, his hospital related duties, visiting the families, the sick and the classrooms... During the afternoon hours, especially on the days preceding a religious festival, he would be found in the confessional imparting God's forgiveness and some comforting advice on souls seeking pardon and guidance.

During February 1907, there arrived from Contratacion a further 78 orphans sick with leprosy: 40 girls and 38 boys. Father Luigi received them with open arms, happy to be able to share with them his fatherly care and to offer them the balm and relief of a mother's love in the person of the Sisters now helping him in the lazaretto.

However, not everyone at Agua de Dios looked on the founding of the new Sisters' Congregation with a kindly eye. Strangely enough, the one who showed the most bitter animosity towards it was the Mother Superior of the nuns who staffed the San Rafael hospital; and it's understandable. At this point in time it was altogether inconceivable for ladies afflicted with leprosy to seek admission to and be accepted in any religious order. Even the Salesian Provincial, Father Luigi's immediate superior, wasn't all that happy to see this very young priest all taken up on a project for which - in his estimation - he lacked the age and maturity required; also, branching out

towards a project involving women seemed totally foreign to the Salesian spirit and tradition.

To understand the opposition that will keep increasing during the following years, one must also realize that this was the **very first** religious congregation for women that sprouted from Salesian roots.

The misunderstanding on the part of good people is undoubtedly the most harrowing of all experiences. God, however, did allow it to strengthen the faith and increase the trust of the founder of this new type of religious family, in Him alone, so that no human agency might be able to attribute to itself the origin, development and success of this enterprise.

Father Luigi and the first members of his congregation had to drain the cup of sorrow to the last bitter dregs, accepting every slight, every insult and misunderstanding without ever showing animosity, accepting slander and humiliations, feeling certain in the depths of their being that the truth and love with which they gave evidence by their conduct, would eventually triumph against all opposition.

And, indeed, God seemed to give evident approval to the new religious family from its very inception. More postulants came begging to be admitted to his institute, and on March 19, 1907 another group of 6 novices professed their religious vows. However, much harder times were ahead for this new religious congregation and its founder.

### THE "VIA DOLOROSA"

In Jerusalem one can still follow along the way Christ had to carry his cross on crucifixion day. It is called the "Via Dolorosa", Latin for the: "sorrowful way". For Father Luigi and his new congregation, the "Via dolorosa" began with the death of Mother Oliva Sanchez, who was cut

down by infectious fevers at just 40 years of age on June 15, 1907. A noble soul, tempered by self-denial, endowed with a deep interior life of faith, she was a true mother and teacher of the young ladies who entrusted themselves to her with complete reliance. The entire religious community was plunged into the deepest grief. Father Luigi prescribed immediately a novena to the Holy Spirit for guidance in the choice of a new mother superior. On June 24, the last day of the novena, Maria Lozano was elected.

She had been one of the original members of the congregation having applied for membership along with her sister Carmelina. She was only 23; her very young age was altogether too much to take for those who were already viewing with alarm the rise of this most unusual new religious family. But, humble she was, with a deep spirit of piety and exceptional intelligence. She was to guide with a sure hand the young congregation for more than 50 years. She will die on March 6, 1982 at 98 years of age. She can quite appropriately be considered the Institute's co-foundress. After she was elected, at such a young age, all criticisms misunderstandings and oppositions increased dramatically. So much so that Father Luigi was given orders by his provincial to stop being directly involved with the running of the order.

As he always did, Father Luigi obeyed promptly. In his letter to his provincial Father Luigi ended up with this phrase: *"I would not be at peace were I to realize that my superiors are suffering on my account."*

Meanwhile on March 25, 1908 the Archbishop of Bogota had approved the new congregation to be called the "DAUGHTERS OF THE SACRED HEARTS OF JESUS AND MARY", and he was asking them to live under the rule and authority of the chaplain-priest of the lazaretto. His one great comfort was the backing he received from his Superiors General from Turin, Father Michael Rua. He wrote to Father Luigi on July 1, 1908: *"The institute you started is a good thing. It has to be nurtured, and made to grow."*



However, this letter from Father Rua did not calm the bitterness of those who were opposed to what had occurred. Many considered this start of a new congregation for women totally alien to the Salesian spirit.

Others considered it to be entirely a concoction of an unstable mind and lacking valid justification for its existence.

The youthful age of the founder, his physical endowments, even his brilliant singing voice and his joyous temperament contributed in engendering in those not closely connected with his work, strong misgivings and doubts. The resentment that was smoldering against him burst into the open in February 1909 with a new order for Father Luigi to move from Agua de Dios and go to Contratacion.

To calm the fears of the lepers, the provincial assured them that it was only a matter of a short absence to give the good father a chance to regain his strength.

When Father Michael Rua heard of this new development, he invited Father Luigi to return to Italy. He would thus be able to take an adequate rest and could at the same time give a full and complete report of the whole matter.

Departing from Agua de Dios must have been for him an excruciating experience. *"To have to leave this place would be the death of me, - he confided to Father Baema - but, I shall obey, cost what it may."*

He was to write to his provincial Father Aime: *"I have surrendered myself completely into God's hands, ready to do his will regardless of the cost. I want first and foremost to do the Lord's will as manifested through you. God always supplies the needed strength in everything. His grace will never be lacking and I must at this present moment beg for it with complete trust without ever slacking in my quest."*

This indeed is at the same time, genuine faith and heroic trust.

## THE WEIGHT OF THE CROSS

In spite of the invitation on the part of the superior General Michael Rua to come to Turin, the provincial, probably to put Father Luigi's virtue to the test, ordered him to leave his latest post and go to a still different place.

After making the necessary preparations, settling the matters at hand and after handing over the reins to his successor, on May 18, 1909, physically worn out and deeply depressed, he started out for his new destination, Contratacion. After an uninterrupted 15 year stay, he was leaving Agua de Dios where he had spent his youthful apostolic energies and had achieved such tremendous results.

Some days later he was to write to two young postulants who had just joined his order: *"This small congregation is ever on my mind. May my present sacrifice turn to advantage for all of the Sisters, and especially for you two who, at the last moment, have hastened to answer the call of Jesus to serve Him and to belong to Him entirely."*

Great indeed was the consternation of those poor girls deprived of their father and guide. However, Father Garbari who had been chosen to replace him, comforted them, reminding them: *"This is the moment to be strong, not to yield to discouragement... the moment to place our trust in God, to hope against all hope. Choke back your tears, without complaining, and deposit them at the foot of the altar, while, at the same time, being faithful to your promises. Your lot is entirely in God's hands, the most tender of fathers"*

When Father Luigi reached Bogota, he was joined by the provincial himself, who insisted on accompanying him to his new destination. They rode on, on mule back, for a distance of 340 kilometers, over steep and craggy mountains, trails bordering on sheer ravines, till they reached Contratacion on June 3. Here the Salesian Fathers and Sisters had worked among the lepers since 1898, in an

environment lacking the most elementary facilities. In spite of the bitterness of his his feelings, – he was to write to His Sisters – he felt ready and willing to do God’s will in his new assigned post. He threw himself into his work with all the apostolic enthusiasm he could muster: preaching, counseling, hearing confessions, conducting music classes, organizing a choir and band. *“In a short time he won over the affection and esteem of the entire colony.”* This was the acknowledgement given in writing by the chief supervising Sister Clelia Testa, FMA.

From his new post he continued to provide guidance for his new congregation by means of letters and circulars. He encouraged its members to remain faithful to the call of Christ, never allowing themselves to be conquered by any and all difficulties, and never yielding to feelings of depression. He kept coming back again and again to the theme of the **“cross”**, received and accepted with love from Christ’s hands. *“Sweet is the cross – he would write to Sister Monica Garcia – if we carry it along with Jesus. Let us endeavor to sanctify it every day more by a most perfect submission to God’s will.”*

There are about 40 of these letters extant, and from them shines forth his zeal and love of souls. From them transpires his eagerness in summoning them to achieve perfect self-renunciation; to be on fire with love for the Eucharist; to be devoted to Our Lady and to develop a disposition for self-immolation in union with the Divine Victim for the salvation of humanity. This exile of his will thus bring to light the immense spiritual riches stored up during the many years of his fruitful apostolate now tempered and refined by trial. It will also document the depth of supernatural love that energized the youthful founder of this new religious family, sprung from the centuries old taproot of Christianity.

## RETURN VISIT TO HIS HOMELAND

Seven months of all-out, dedicated work in the leper colony of Contratacion, further impaired and eventually caused a complete breakdown of Father Luigi's physique; he found himself literally exhausted.

After a spiritual retreat held at Bogota for the Salesians, the provincial, who by this time had had the opportunity of observing at close range and better appreciate the qualities of Father Luigi's generous soul, invited him to return to his previous post at Agua de Dios.

He would have liked to return unobserved without causing any stir. But the community's enthusiasm bursts all restraint like a mighty river in flood stage.

He took up his old post at Agua de Dios at the beginning of the month of January 1910. He resumed his duties as if nothing had ever happened, even though hostilities still lingered against his religious congregation. During this year 1910 quite a few things were to happen.

Father Rabagliati, also a fearless pioneer in the work on behalf of the lepers, was called back to Italy. On April 6, Father Michael Rua died. He had replaced St. John Bosco at the helm of the Salesian Society in 1888, and in that position he had been the most influential promoter of missionary work among the lepers in Colombia. With his passing Father Luigi had now lost his most powerful patron; the very one who had known him as a teen-age student and who had sent him to work for the lepers in Colombia along with Father Unia, had now left the scene.

His provincial, Father Antonio Aime, was also called to Italy to take part in the election of the new Superior General to replace Father Michael Rua. On August 17 of that year 1910 Father Paul Albera was elected as second successor of St. John Bosco to guide the Salesian Congregation.

He was already acquainted with the Salesian work in

Colombia having previously been sent there to visit all schools, churches and mission posts as a delegate of the Superior General. After the election of Father Paul Albera, the provincial returned to Colombia and sent for Father Luigi. He invited him to take time off and return to his native Italy for a much needed rest, and where he was most anxiously waited by the surviving members of his family and by his own religious superiors.

He left Agua de Dios on July 9, 1911. He boarded the ship *Veloce* at Barranquilla on July 24, and a month later to the day, he landed in Genoa. That very evening he reached Turin, and with tears streaming down his face he knelt before the tender likeness of Mary Help of Christians; the same image that had smiled on him as he departed for Colombia 17 years previously.

He was greeted with great warmth by his superiors. *"The Superior General, Father Paul Albera, embraced me like a son,"* - he wrote later.

On August 28 he reached his native Viarigi with his brother Celso and held his old mother in loving embrace. His people were overjoyed at being able to welcome in their midst this family relative who had spent so many years as a missionary of Christ in far off lands among the most unfortunate members of society.

A nagging dilemma, however, was bothering him: should he return to Colombia or remain definitely in Italy?

Worried about the future of his congregation, he wrote to Mother Lozano on September 4: *"With heart in hand I declare to you that if it wasn't for my dear lepers and you Sisters in particular, I wouldn't return to Colombia even if forced by threats."*

His relatives were insisting that he should remain in Italy. Only his mother was willing to renew her sacrifice of seeing her son leave again. *"If God wants you down there, go. Do not worry about me. We shall meet again in heaven."*

He had lengthy exchanges with his superiors, particularly with the new Rector Major, to whom he gave a

detailed description of the work accomplished during those years and of the situation in which he was finding himself.

Father Albera read attentively the "memorandum" that Father Luigi handed him and listened to him with fatherly concern. He gave his full unconditional approval to his return to Agua de Dios.

After a last visit to his father's tomb and a fond embrace to his mother and relatives, he left Italy again from Genoa on December 1, 1911. He had with him a small group of Salesian confreres and was headed for his beloved Agua de Dios.

### DRAINING THE LAST BITTER DREGS

He arrived at Agua de Dios on the 10th of February 1912, and was received with indescribable joy by the people and his "Daughters of the Sacred Hearts." From 1912 to 1916 he pursued the manifold form of his apostolate: five years of uninterrupted heavy work, performed without fanfare. He worked as an assistant to the officially appointed pastor, so as not to ruffle the feelings of those who still resented his activities.

On November 5, 1913, Father Ciriaco Santinelli, who had been the incumbent pastor and superior of the entire complex, passed away. A substitute was appointed by the Salesian provincial; the choice fell on an Italian priest, a certain Joseph Marmo, who for the last 20 years had served the congregation as a priest in Spain. He turned out to be a true fatherly image not only for the adult lepers, but for the young ones as well boarding in the **Father Unia** shelter, and for the religious sisters **The Daughters of the Sacred Hearts**. Because of his devoted zeal towards their spiritual formation and the development of their work, he can rightly be considered as their **second founder**. Meanwhile the Sisters' congregation continued

to flourish in spite of the unremitting hostility from some quarters. Individuals kept sending slanderous reports about the Sisters and their founder to the Chancery Office of the Diocese in an effort to discredit them. These reports became increasingly offensive and reached a climactic crescendo towards the end of the year 1916. The chief instigator was a certain Jorge Miguel Alvarez, a hothead who had instigated a slanderous campaign against Father Marmo and the Salesians. A young leper patient was also found who did not hesitate to launch a seamy and criminal accusation against Father Luigi and the Sisters. Sometime later he withdrew his accusations on his own, stating that he had made the whole thing up.

As the cynic Voltaire used to say: "*Slander and slander some more; some of it will stick!*"

This campaign of slander compelled again the provincial to order Father Luigi to leave his work. His theory being that if it was indeed God's work, it would endure and outlast the present storm. If not, it would collapse under its own weight. So, at the start of year 1917, he ordered him to leave Agua de Dios and take over the direction of the Don Bosco Boys' Club - locally known as Don Bosco Oratory - in the capital city of Bogota. So, once again, with agonizing turmoil in his heart, Father Luigi tore himself away from Agua de Dios saying: "*I consider my superiors' wish to be the expression of God's will*" No less great was the the sacrifice and grief suffered by those spiritual daughters of his, deprived again by their father and guide. As he bade them farewell he reminded them: "*Let's continue to put our trust in the Lord. Pray that God's will may ever be accomplished in me and in all of you.*"

He took over his new post at the beginning of March 1917. The Don Bosco Boys' Club, - called: Don Bosco Oratory - was frequented by some 500 youths. Father Luigi involved himself fully in the running of this work. He expanded its program, increased and diversified the number of existing clubs; opened day and night classes for

those who could not afford the cost of formal education and for those who had to work during school hours. He encouraged and promoted stage productions; started a boys' band. He gave special attention to the Christian formation of the young people attending the club. They, in their turn, soon surrounded him with loyal and sincerely unabashed affection.

A choice field of action for him was the nearby institute of the "DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS", commonly referred to as "Salesian Sisters", while at the same time he kept up the spiritual guidance of his Sisters, the "DAUGHTERS OF THE SACRED HEARTS". This he accomplished by his frequent letters.

He took particular care of providing Mother Lozano with his spiritual direction. On several occasions he was afforded the joy of being able to visit his beloved Agua de Dios, when invited to preach and on the occasion of the silver anniversary of his religious profession, which he was able to celebrate with the community of Sisters he founded.

As the years rolled on, the full significance of the spiritual fatherliness that had brought into existence this new religious family, that had cost him such grief and great sacrifices, came into clearer focus.

## A CRUEL DISFIGUREMENT

All the varied activities set in motion by Father Luigi seemed to be progressing in unstoppable fashion. Uppermost in his aspirations had been the care of young people and the relief of the poor. He had gained the affection of all. His own provincial was now multiplying his tokens of trust and affection in his regard. But... underneath it all, under this smooth surface a new, violent storm was brewing.

Of late his health had seemed to be on the decline. The unremitting work and the relatively cold climate of



Bogota, situated as it is at an altitude of over 8,000 feet over sea level, and above all, the ceaseless hammering he had been subjected to by the unpleasant past events had taken a cruel toll. The bow had been stretched too tightly for too long and it was now close to snapping.

The above mentioned colder climate of Bogota delivered the latest cruel blow... disfiguring skin lesions began appearing on Father Luigi's face and arms... Could it be that the good Padre had contracted leprosy himself? After all he had been in close contact with lepers for over 20 years at Agua de Dios.

This rumor spread like wild fire, alarming the salesian confreres and the sisters as well. They all now cast suspicious glances on Father Luigi and pointedly took care of avoiding him for fear of being infected. He was the only one unaware of this sudden change of attitude.

The provincial, Father Aime, using as a pretext the need of a preacher for some spiritual exercises, decided to transfer him back to Agua de Dios. However, he did not tell Father Luigi the real reason behind this sudden change. He left it up to the present local superior of Agua de Dios, Father Joseph Marmo. And so, Father Luigi, completely uninformed as to the real reason for his transfer, returned, his heart overflowing with joy. Alas! The unsettling insinuation had preceded him there. The grief of the "Daughters of the Sacred Hearts" plunged to its deepest, for they felt themselves to blame for father's condition. They imagined that some one of the sick sisters had perhaps transmitted to him their disease. There was no one who felt brave enough to tell him the real reason why he had been sent back to live among the lepers.

The pastor, Father Joseph Marmo, just wasn't up to telling him. So, he pleaded with Mother Lozano to pass on the information... *"The words of one of his daughters - he went on to say - will sweeten the bitter truth."*

Father Luigi received the shattering disclosure with a

smile, as if it was being told him in jest, even though in very bad taste. Who could ever have had the gall of ostracizing him in such a vile way, robbing him even of the joys of his priestly apostolate? He was personally conscious of being in perfect health, but he couldn't certainly remain insensitive to the excruciating doubt that was confining him to the living dead, to the outcasts of society.

Once again he accepted with faith and undaunted courage this new crushing blow. *"My dearest father - he wrote to his provincial on July 2 - I could have imagined being struck by everything else except by this disease. I must confess to you that I was seared by inconceivable grief. However, here I am again ready to do, as I always did, my superiors' bidding. I declare myself ready, if they think it proper, to shut myself in forever in this place among my brother lepers, so as not to be the cause of any grief to others by my presence."*

The victim was ready for the supreme sacrifice, as were so many of his spiritual daughters stricken by the same disease and who had, under his guidance, offered themselves as victims to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in expiation for the sins of mankind and to implore salvation for all.

### DEFINITIVE LEAVE TAKING

A thorough medical check-up and clinical tests showed that all the fearsome conjectures had been a colossal misconception, a most cruel hoax. Father Luigi was in sound physical shape. Elementary justice would have demanded that he be immediately re-instated in his previous position as director of the youth center in Bogota. However the provincial had in the meantime assigned another priest to that post. And so, he opted to leave Father Luigi at the Agua de Dios lazaretto.

With a happy heart the good father now apparently cleared of any suspicion, resumed his work with his lepers and spiritual family. He was to write to the Superior

General of the Salesians on March 19, 1919: *"I feel happy and contented to be permanently assigned to this field of endeavor, where I have spent such a great part of my life. Starting on the very first day when I made a wholehearted gift of my life to the lepers of Agua de Dios, I have always entertained the desire to live and die in their midst. Such was the parting wish Father Unia made to me as he said the last 'good bye' when I left Italy for the lepers of Colombia."*

He resumed his work with zest and serenity. Those, however, who had set themselves against him and were determined to see the disappearance of the religious order he had started, rekindled the conflict. Anonymous accusations began arriving to the provincial and the Archbishop through the mail. So much so that, at a certain point it was almost decided to shut down the religious congregation he had founded. The Archbishop declared: *"I cannot tolerate that at Agua de Dios there be set up a heretical altar against the legitimate one."* Thanks to Father Marmo, who was well acquainted with the real situation, disaster was averted and the situation saved. But his courageous move cost him his job. He was transferred from the direction of Agua de Dios to a lesser work in the town of Ibagui on January 15, 1919. And, 20 days later, Father Luigi as well was ordered to go to an institute in the city of Barranquilla on the Caribbean shore.

By removing both priests from Agua de Dios the provincial hoped to put an end once and for all, to all slander and loose talk.

Great was the consternation of all concerned at the departure of the two priests. However, the ones who suffered most severely were the Sisters of the congregation he had founded.

The day before he was to leave, acting on a premonition that this would be his final act of leave-taking, he interviewed all the nuns one by one. During the Holy Hour of Adoration the community prayers were punctuated by heart-rending sobs... Father Luigi celebrated his last Mass for them on this First Friday of February, 'OBEDI-

ENCE' being the theme of his Gospel homily.

The liturgy over, holding back his tears, he left for his exile. The house chronicle reads: *"He has left grieving as a tender father, his head held high with the martyr's fortitude. His example has lightened the weight of sorrow and given soothing relief to us his daughters, who now feel a great void deep inside... His virtues already form an aureola around him, for we see him at peace and serene in the midst of the severest travails."*

Writing to the Superior General, Father Paul Albera, on March 19 in order to appraise him of the new situation, he was to say: *"I felt such grief as I never had experienced before in having to leave my lepers. I understand however, one more time, how beautiful obedience can be when it demands sacrifice, and I certainly did not want to miss out on the opportunity of practicing it as this could perhaps be the last time God was offering it to me."*

Before starting out towards his distant place of exile he turned a last glance filled with yearning on this place of pain and suffering, on which he had lavished so much energy, so much love. He had just completed his 44th year of life, but an inner foreboding kept intruding, telling him that he would never lay his eyes again on what had been the land of his dreams, the calvary where his identity had merged with the crucified Christ.

## TOWARDS LIFE'S SUNSET

The greatest sacrifice Father Luigi had to endure was the impossibility of bridging the distance between himself and "his daughters and lepers."

As soon as he arrived in Barranquilla on February 22 he was to write: *"I'm at peace, but I must confess that I feel as if a vice is gripping my heart. I have a choking sensation that causes me to weep. I cannot put Agua de Dios out of my mind, and I am convinced that I don't have to... I shall remain where obedience has sent me; I shall do as much as I am able to for the glory of God and my beloved congregation. But, at the same time I am convinced that I am not*

*going against the virtue of obedience in the enormous grief I am experiencing in being away from my lepers."*

Even in his new post, the suspicion lingered in some that he could have contracted the feared disease, and caused him to be shunned. Many were even afraid to get near his confessional box. His health continued to decline. The humid climate of this port city was just too much for his physique accustomed to the dry heat of Agua de Dios.

And, shortly after his arrival, an unexpected piece of bad news informed him by telegram that his mother had passed away. Another bitter pill to swallow was the change at the top in the running of his congregation, decided on and willed by the church authorities. Father Luigi had great esteem for Mother Luzano who for 12 years had been guiding his congregation with a firm and competent hand, the sisters responding well to her leadership. However on June 24, 1919 another Sister Julia Serra, was placed at the head of the congregation, while Mother Lozano was appointed member of the Sisters' Council and mistress of novices.

He spent the following two years at this new post, his health gradually fading, and always hoping to be able some day to return and end his days at his beloved Agua de Dios. God, however, was asking him to drain the bitter chalice of adversity to the last drop.

A letter from his provincial arrived on December 20, 1919, ordering him to move out of the country, to Caracas, Venezuela. At that time Caracas was part of the Salesian province of Bogota. He tried to ward off this last most painful blow that was distancing him even more from his spiritual daughters and from his lepers. However, he was to write to the on February 21, 1920: *"We are victims, and as such must carry the cross with Jesus. Let us bear with patience and serenity this additional trial. Men come and go, but the Will of God endures forever."*

On August 20, 1920 he had a last face to face encounter

with his provincial, Father Aime, who ordered him to desist from any further contact even by mail with the Sisters of the congregation he had founded.

Thus Divine Providence made use of this superior of his - who was himself sincerely trying to do God's will - to complete the purification of his faithful servant, requiring of him complete and total detachment.

*"God puts to the test the souls He loves, - says Holy Writ - and purifies them as gold in the furnace."* (Proverbs) Sorrow will always remain the supreme test of love, the most sure way leading to holiness. And God, father of infinite power and goodness knows how to draw good even from evil. In fact, his departure from Colombia caused the opposition to his Sisters' congregation to crumble. The order was thus enabled to recoup, increase in membership and expand.

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On February 6, 1921, Father Luigi left for Tariba; a town on the Venezuela border, situated at about 5,000 feet over sea level on the Andes mountains. There the Salesians had established a school for boarders and day students in 1914. Here Father Luigi spent 22 months in school related work.

On December 1, 1922, he was suddenly seized by very sharp pains. His doctors ordered him taken to the town of Cucuta, a Colombian outpost with a milder climate. There being no Salesian residence in that town, he was housed with the family of an Italian immigrant, a certain Rodolfo Faccini, whose children had enrolled in a Salesian school in the town of Tariba. By God's design he was back again on Colombian soil. In this house he was also able to celebrate the Eucharist, the constant comfort and source of energy in his apostolic life. Very Rev. Fr. Provincial

For a few days he seemed to rally, but on January 27 his condition took a down turn. On Sunday, January 29, which

in those years was kept as a solemnity in honor of St. Francis of Sales, after whom the Salesians took their name, he celebrated his last Mass. Next day he requested to be anointed, and after he had made his confession, he turned to Mrs. Mercedes Faccini who had assisted him with the tender concern of a mother, and exclaimed: *"You cannot imagine how happy I feel!"*

On the evening of January 31, feast of his founder, St. John Bosco, he lapsed into his agony. However, his mind remained clear. He renewed his religious vows and kept invoking the Holy Names in a continuous flow of short invocations.

His soul returned to his Maker at dawn on February 1st, 1923. HE WAS ONLY 48 YEARS OLD.

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*"A saint has just left us"* was the comment from those who had assisted his peaceful passing. Ten days later his body was finally returned to Agua de Dios, among the people he had loved so intensely... there to wait for the church's verdict, to put her seal of approval on the heroicity of the virtues and life of this champion of Christ.

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A BRIEF CONCLUDING NOTE ON THE  
DAUGHTERS OF THE SACRED HEARTS  
OF JESUS AND MARY  
FOUNDED BY THE SERVANT OF GOD,  
FATHER LUIGI VARIARA, SDB

- It was the first congregation born of the Salesians of Don Bosco's mother root. It forms at present an integral part of the world wide Salesian family.
- It was founded at Agua de Dios (Colombia), in 1905,

to make it possible for women to consecrate their life to God in the context of a religious community with vows, whether they were affected with leprosy or in sound physical health, but born of parents who were themselves lepers. N.B. At this particular time no other congregation would have accepted such candidates.

- This religious congregation, the first of its kind, opened its doors to women candidates whose particular CHARISMA was the surrender of themselves to God as "Victims".

- FIELD OF WORK. From its inception the specific mission of this congregation was the care and assistance of lepers. Later on other forms of activity were added, including the work of evangelization in the mission fields.

- It received diocesan approval in 1930 and became a pontifical congregation in 1964.

- During its 1973 General Chapter a constitution for a "parallel secular institute for both sexes" was drawn up and approved. This made it possible for persons of either sex, who had contracted leprosy, to live out the "VICTIMIZATION CHARISMA" of the congregation even while living at their own homes, away from the community residence.

- In 1976, the first priest was ordained from out this new form of the congregation - a Father Augusto Naranjo Corraera, from Ecuador. At the same time at Agua de Dios a group of 6 men and 12 women after a three year preparatory period, took their pledge of consecrating themselves as VICTIMS in 1981. Groups in 8 other localities are preparing to do the same.



For additional information on the progress of the cause of Beatification of the Servant of God Father Luigi Variara inquire from:

Rev Luigi Fiora  
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Rev. Angelo Bianco, SDB  
(Same address as above)

Rev. Mother Rosa Ines Baldion  
Daughters of the Sacred Hearts  
Apartado Aereo 50113  
Bogota, Colombia

Rev. Carlo M. Carli, Salesiani  
Via M. Ausiliatrice 32  
10100 Turin, Italy

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For further information about the Salesian works in the United States and the rest of the world, write to:

Very Rev. Fr. Provincial  
148 Main Street  
P. O. Box 639  
New Rochelle, N.Y. 10802

Salesian Missions  
2 Lefevre Road  
New Rochelle, N.Y. 10801



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