

Framework of salesian holiness: interiority and spirituality

Alberto Marvelli

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Who is Alberto Marvelli?

A young man who lived "a life in motion" and died at the age of 28. A passionate educator; a mechanical engineer of the automotive manufacturer Fiat; a young sportsman who loved cycling and mountain climbing; an "honest citizen", who during World War II was not afraid to risk his life to save many others; a politician by vocation, commissioner for reconstruction, highly regarded even by his political opponents.

His "adventure" in a sentence: "Love never rests"

If we were to sum up his whole life in one sentence, we could perhaps summarize it with a note found in one of his spiritual notebooks: "Love never rests"¹. This is an "adventure of the Spirit" that Alberto Marvelli lived in his short life. A life in love, lived in continuous desire to transform it into a continuous act of love: "My life shall be an act of love"², he wrote in his *Diary*.

However, the journey of the Spirit, like any other journey, needs a direction; and Alberto, at the age of twenty, when about to finish University studies and had already been an educator in the Oratory Don Bosco in Rimini for many years, felt called by the Spirit to give a more specific direction to his life and - I would say - an acceleration. He writes in his *Diary*:

"To make a point". This statement is often used in the Navy (and also in other fields) *to orient oneself*. But much can be said with good reason for the spiritual life. To make a point from time to time in order to note the progress made, to see whether there is progress or regress, and to resume with greater vigour the way, our journey, what the Lord has entrusted to all, unique, but with the same goal: salvation.

[...] I want to establish a project of life that includes all my spiritual and moral life, in its every expression. The benefits that I expect are of infinite value, because infinite is grace and mercy of the Lord.

The general program is summed up in one word: holiness. [...] For this reason, therefore, I need: prayer, action and sacrifice³.

Prayer, action and sacrifice are the three pillars of the spirituality of Blessed Marvelli, those indicated by Pius XI to the Catholic Youth Action in the 30's of last century. I will develop my talk around these three pillars.

Prayer

For Alberto it is the secret of everything, the most precious treasure, the first and most necessary apostolate.

Prayer in Marvelli is not a prayer of the "garrulous", that is made of many words or religious practices: for him "prayer - he writes - is it to make Jesus part of our lives"⁴; is it to "put all our effort, work, fun in the eyes of God, in order for Him to be always present in us"⁵.

Therefore, an intimate and secret friendship, that is to be maintained throughout the day. This does not mean, however, that Albert does not dedicate specific moments for prayer. Listen to what he writes in his program of life:

¹Quaderno Spirituale: *Appunti e riassunti*, 2, in: A. MARVELLI, *La mia vita non sia che un atto d'amore. Scritti inediti*, (ed) E. Casadei, Messaggero, Padova 2005, p. 92.

²*Diary*, 26 February 1941.

³*Diary*, 18 September 1938.

⁴Appunti spirituali: *Gesù con la Samaritana*, b, in: A. MARVELLI, *La mia vita*, 342.

⁵*Diary*, 18 September 1938.

To make every morning a half an hour of meditation and to never skip it, unless for unforeseen circumstances. To make a half an hour a day of spiritual reading and possibly even more. To listen every morning Mass and draw near to the Holy Sacraments, without neglecting, except due to a major circumstances. To go to confession usually once a week and to go to the spiritual director very often. To recite the Rosary every day and to say the *Angelus* at the sound of midday and of the Hail Mary⁶.

More than a program of life of a layman, his life seems to be that of a monk! However, we know that Alberto would remain faithful to these commitments until the last day of his life, even as government commissioner, professor and freelance.

Witnesses say that upon leaving the office of the Town Hall at the late hour, before going home, he used to go to church to receive Holy Communion and did the same even during the period of military service, giving up hours of rest, to walk to church located closer to the barracks.

His University friends say that Alberto used to fast all morning in order to receive Holy Communion after classes; his sister - who recently passed away - said that at the end of the Mass Alberto was used to remain for a long time in the church, so that they always had to go to tell him to go home.

The Eucharist and prayer to Mary Help of Christians are the pillars of his spirituality, which could be called *Christ-centred* and *filially Marian*.

I conclude, citing another paragraph of the diary of Alberto, describing just one of those moments when he would stay for a long time in the church after the Holy Communion:

Whenever I go to Holy Communion, each time Jesus in his divinity and humanity enters into me, in contact with my soul, it is an inspiration for holy resolutions, it is like a burning fire, which comes into my heart, a flame which burns and consumes, which makes me so happy. [...] Then, I abandon myself to an intimate conversation with Jesus; my humanity disappears, I might say, there, next to him; all the doubts, all the uncertainties are gone, obstacles are smoothed out, the sacrifices are made joyful, and difficulties made pleasant⁷.

Action

Attracted by the Eucharist, the fire of love, in which he was feeling deeply loved by Christ, becomes immediately a "passion for souls", because "the Eucharist is love - he writes - and love never rests"⁸.

The Eucharist involves us deeply to a pact of love, a covenant sealed in the depths of our being. [...] The Communion is not just ordinary action, routine gesture, a way to close your eyes or put your head between your hands⁹.

For Alberto, the Eucharist is "tremendously", "dramatically" a commitment; a gift that "agitates" his life. "What else we could ask for - he wonders - if Himself we have received"¹⁰.

That is why the field of action of the young Marvelli is so broad: it embraces the *youth*, to whom he was a passionate educator; and those who were not attracted to the Oratory or the Catholic Action, he would go and look for them at school, choosing to be a professor of technology and technical drawing.

His action embraces the *poor*, for which opened the first "soup kitchen" in town and where he himself would distribute food every Sunday morning; as government commissioner he visits personally the poor at home to ask them if they need help in filling out the request forms for aid to repair their houses destroyed by the war; he paid from his own pocket for those who have lost everything, even to sign the vouchers to the bank to get their credit needed to repair a house or start a business.

His action embraces the *culture*, because he understood that in order to rebuild a destroyed at 98% town, it is more important to rebuild the conscience, torn by hatred and suffering of the war, and clouded by ideologies (fascist and communist) that disfigured the dignity of the person. For this, he gathers Catholic graduates,

⁶ *Diary*, 18 September 1938. Cf. also, *ivi*, Pasqua (Easter) 1935.

⁷ *Diary*, February 1938. Cf. also, *ivi*, January 1938.

⁸ Quaderno Spirituale: *Appunti e riassunti*, 2, in: A. MARVELLI, *La mia vita*, 92.

⁹ *Ib.*, 93.

¹⁰ *Ib.*

reopens the People's University in his hometown and invites the most renowned Italian politicians, professors and preachers.

His action, finally, embraces *politics*, because, as Paul VI would later say, it is the highest form of charity. That's why, Marvelli finds the courage to renounce the ID card of Catholic Action and instead to assume that of a political party in order to run for mayor in the first elections with the purpose of the universal suffrage; a choice that was not understood even by his closest associates of Catholic Action; so much so that one evening, when they invited him to explain the reason for his choice, Alberto, cutting everything short, left the ID card on the table of the Catholic Action's office and instead he placed in his pocket that of the newly formed Christian Democratic Party, saying : "*Now this is my apostolate*".

Sacrifice

Alberto understood rather early that the cross is the law of the Christian life, because it belongs first of all to the life of Christ.

At the age of 15 he lost his dad, to whom he was very close, and who was a model of human wisdom and Christian life; before that he lost his brother, being run over by a car running at top speed, and later he lost his brother Lello, who went missing in Russia, who had offered military service in place of Alberto (to be more useful at home with his mother and brothers); and lost many other friends in the tragic story of the Second World War.

Alberto wasn't born a saint: he had to fight like each one of us. But he had a master: Dominic Savio. This gentle giant gave Alberto one of the most valuable tips for his life that ever since he has always held dear, and useful to "pull out the nails" when necessary: "To die but do not sin".

Marvelli had courage and will, he has repeatedly risked his life to save others; He has been able to win in life, because he knew how to win himself.

I would like to conclude with a letter that Albert wrote to a friend, who had just lost his mother: I would like to dedicate it to all those who have lost recently, a loved one, or are not able to accept that loss. Listening to it seems as if Alberto is writing to you and you can just feel his embrace from Heaven:

Dear Vittorio,

Yesterday I learned the sad news of the death of your dear Mother. [...] I wish I could be next to you during this time, but until now it wasn't possible for me to come. I am united with you in prayer and in remembrance of your dear Mother. Have faith, Vittorio, the Lord sends the trials and visits with pain those whom he loves most: cry, because even our human side is suffering and suffering horribly under the lash of pain, but learn how to make a good reason for this pain. Only through suffering, we can come to real life. [...] I went through times of grief too when many times death has taken away to heaven my father and brothers, and I know that human words can only soothe little the deep wounds of our soul; but feeling my friends close to me it has always comforted me. In anything that I can help you, remember that you have in me more than a friend, a brother. I am at your service in everything. I embrace you, Vittorio, with lots of affection [...]. Alberto Marvelli¹¹.

¹¹ Lettera a Vittorio , in: A. MARVELLI, *La mia vita* , 322-323 .