

Sister Antonia Moioli: A Charism Lived to the Fullest

The Night is a Splendid Day

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Born in Bergamo, Italy, in 1950, Sister Antonia Moioli, a member of the Institute of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus, died on July 30, 2021. Her life was one lived fully in the charism of her founder, Nicholas Barré. It was a call from the Lord Jesus to follow and love Him exclusively and to recognize Him in the youngest, the poorest and those most vulnerable. She was a tireless educator who passionately served with creativity and with a particular passion for unity.

"The spirituality of unity illuminated my own founder's charism in a new way. It is as if his insights from the 1600's were fully revealed to me and gave me a new ardor to put them into practice. My only heartfelt desire is that everyone may experience that God loves them immensely." These words of Sister Antonia Moioli express her life well, a life clothed in the Word of the Gospel and embodied by her founder's spirituality and mission: "God so loved the world that he sent his Son so that whoever believes may have eternal life. Whoever welcomes a poor, abandoned child doubly welcomes Jesus" (N. Barré, Statutes and Regulations 1, 1-2).

An encounter and a calling

Antonia was typical of the Bergamo people: Practical, hardworking, full of initiative and profoundly Christian in their roots. Deeply restless as a youth, however, she set out in search of an authentic meaning for her life which she discovered in 1969 during a meeting in Vallo Torinese, near Turin, in the parish where the Venerable Maria Orsola Bussone has grown up. "There, at the age of 19, I encountered the Spirituality of Unity.", recounted Antonia, "Listening to experiences centered on the Gospel, I was deeply touched by the joy in each of those people. It was the first time I heard someone speak about God-Love and it changed my heart which until then had been focused on social issues but closed to God."

During Mass, I said my yes to this God-Love. I wanted to follow him but did not know how. But I was open to putting myself on the right path. When I was teaching the next day, I tried to see Jesus in each child. Without their asking, I would tie the shoes of one or the other child because it was as if it was for Jesus. I launched myself into loving. God is Love and concrete love is a consequence. [...] I had been a young person without ideals. The discovery of Jesus and the Gospel life gave me everything and allowed me to find God again and to follow him."

Fascinated by the educational freedom and passion of some colleagues who were also women religious, she discovered that they too lived the spirituality of unity. "I read a book by their founder and felt a joy for it resonated with my own heartfelt passion. In my heart I felt strongly that I could live unity in the Church in a religious community and began a period of discernment. So here I am, a Sister of the Infant Jesus with the Ideal of unity in my heart."

Sister Antonia began her teaching adventure with the desire to give God to everyone, especially where Jesus was not known and loved. At the same time, she remained connected to the Focolare Movement which she considered inseparable from her vocation.

Energetic, Intelligent and Thoughtful

After years of working enthusiastically in schools and parishes around Bergamo, she went to Rome's Institute of St. Mary of the Angels in 1977 where she would later become director. Energetic, intelligent and thoughtful, her pupils received a solid human, intellectual and Christian formation. She paid particular attention to the least and more vulnerable among them and became a reference point for many young people. Despite the fact that she later had to focus more on administration duties, she never distanced herself from the concrete needs of students.

Vast Horizons

In 1990 she became part of the Focolare Movement's Center for Consecrated Women. "Being a religious animated by the spirituality of unity," she wrote, "means living for a united world and letting Focolare's universal dimension become my way of life. From my own experience over 30 years, I sense it is also a positive gain for my Institute."

In contemplating the wonders worked by the Holy Spirit through both older and newer charisms, Sister Antonia not only discovered her founder being alive and relevant for today, but she embraced the calling to live unity with other women religious. It was a "loving the Congregation of the other as one's own." Frequently traveling to different continents, she met many consecrated women and also nuns from other Churches and other religions. There was a wholehearted sharing in the gift and calling to be women of communion.

Being 'present' for the other

Sister Antonia embodied the highest vocation of the feminine genius in the Church: that of knowing how to be a mother who constantly generates children to the faith and to encounter Jesus. She knew how to "step back" and let students take their own path, despite their fears of doing so. Sometimes they felt her pushing them forward and would complain about her insistence. But she continued encouraging them, just like a mother who knows her child's potential. Her example of strength taught the young people not to settle for less.

Focused on those on the margins

In the late 1970s, the Sisters of St. Mary of the Angels Institute welcomed refugees from the Ethiopian war, despite the fact that not everyone in the local area was in agreement. Sister Antonia saw it instead as an opportunity to allow oneself to be educated in universal fraternity.

When, at the request of the diocese of Rome, two communities were opened in the suburbs, Sister Antonia moved to that neighborhood and an extraordinary missionary experience flourished among the young people there. The then Bishop Nosiglia, impressed by her passion for education and engaging with young people and her organizational skills, called her to serve as the only woman member of the Youth Council of the Archdiocese of Rome. It was during the period of preparation for the World Youth Day in Paris.

Service to the Institute and inspired by a charism

After being chosen in 1996 as the new head of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus in Italy, she left Rome to work with her usual enthusiasm and with the desire to express the timeliness and beauty of Nicholas Barré's charism.

For the World Youth Day 2000 in Rome, she and other sisters worked to prepare and welcome young people to the capital. A former high school student described Sister Antonia's humanity: "During the welcoming of arriving youth pilgrims, Sister Antonia entrusted some of us student volunteers with precise tasks, knowing full well that shortly thereafter I would choose the path of consecration to God. She approached me and said, "You can wash the bathrooms in the gymnasium." I would have preferred to devote myself to other activities but I showed up the next day ready for duty. Before starting, Sister Antonia told me that to really serve people you had to get your hands dirty. And then I saw what made her a true educator: She started cleaning the bathrooms with me. We were the two of us! As we cleaned, we spent hours talking together about everything. The next day I arrived even faster at the school so that I could continue our conversation. I found myself before a strong and completely fulfilled woman."

The final race

After her term as director finished, Sister Antonia asked her Institute for permission to collaborate full-time with the Focolare's Center for Consecrated Women. She remained there until her health began to markedly deteriorate.

As her physical health worsened, one was reminded of how those who follow Christ are spared nothing. If previously she spoke to large audiences and was a gifted speaker, now she found herself without words. If before she remembered the smallest details about a person and their story, she now no longer recognized those in front of her. She slowly lost everything. In her lived experience of detachment, abandonment, and emptiness, the words of her foundress prophetically re-emerged in all their beauty: "This night is a splendid day."

Sister Antonia Moioli bore witness to the radical call to follow God and to her love for the Crucified-Resurrected Jesus. She was a consecrated woman who helped reveal God's Love to countless people, creatively and tirelessly committed to serving the Church and humanity with a passion for unity.