

Saint Leopoldo Mandic (1866-1942)



he saints make holy the places where they have lived, as Francis of Assisi did his hermitages, Anthony Padua, John Vianney Ars, Pio da Pietrelcina San Giovanni Rotondo. At Padua, however, there is not only the basilica of the "Saint", but also a little cell/confessional in the Capuchin Friary in piazza Santa Croce. It too has become a place of attraction. Here Saint Leopoldo Mandic heard the humble stories of sin for more than thirty years. This little place was spared from the aerial bombardment on 14 May 1944, just as the little Capuchin had predicted: "The Church and the friary will be hit by bombs, but not the little cell. Here God has shown so much mercy to souls that it must remain as a monument to His goodness." The life of the holy "confessor" was contained within those few square metres. And yet it is not easy to tell the story of his life because it is so simple, hidden from the wisdom of the world.

He was born 12 May 1866 in Herceg Novi, or Castelnuovo in Dalmatia, near the entrance to the Bay of Kotor on the Adriatic Sea. He was the last of twelve children and was baptised on 13 June, receiving the name Bogdan (Adeodato). His father was Peter Mandic, the son of a 'paron de nave', that is, a commercial fisherman. Peter had married Carlotta Zarevic, and both were Catholic. Leopoldo often recalled his mother with great affection. "She had an extraordinary piety. I am particularly indebted to her for what I am." A pensive child, he was composed and bright. His life revolved around his home, the church and the school. He was fervent and at sixteen years of age, on 16 November 1882, he entered the Capuchin Seminary in Udine.

Adeodato's Capuchin vocation sprang from a keen apostolic concern. He left home so as to return as a missionary among "his people." His desire for an active apostolate also stemmed from the Franciscan celebrations organised by Pope Leo XIII. In the two years spent in Udine he tried with silence and self-control to correct his marked speech defect that impeded his desire to communicate, a desire prompted by his cordial and extroverted nature. He soon proved himself to be a model for everyone. He did his novitiate at Bassano del Grappa (Vicenza) where he received the Capuchin habit and the name Leopoldo on 2 May 1884. He then completed his three years of philosophy in Padua from 1885 to 1888. On 18 June 1887 – as he wrote himself – for the first time he heard the voice of God speak to him about the return of the Orthodox Christians to Catholic unity. This was a fundamental facet of his whole life, the refrain of his longing, the inspiration for his mission.



In 1888 he was transferred to the friary of the Redentore on the Venice island of Giudecca. There he completed two years of theology, after which he was ordained a priest on 29 September 1890 in the church of La Salute. His missionary dream seemed very close to realisation. Immediately he asked his superiors to be sent as a missionary to Eastern Europe. The reply was negative. His stutter was too pronounced and his superiors did not consider him suitable. Repeated later requests were also rejected. In the silence of obedience and in the mystery of prayer for unity, he submitted to the shadows of the confessional. A mission field much larger than the East appeared before the little friar. His daily Mass, lived out in an ecumenical commitment, gave further depth to his vocation which then shone forth in the confessional with a penetrating light of wisdom.

During his seven year stay in Venice his ecumenical concern continued to grow. So small and almost ungainly in his habit, he had become a significant figure, a true spiritual master endowed with special spiritual gifts. During a short sojourn of three years in the small hospice in Zara it seemed that his dream was coming close to realisation again. Although he was not directly involved, he would have felt at home, so close in spirit to his people. However he was then called back to Bassano

in Italy where he spent five years in the confessional, in prayer and in the study of his beloved Saint Thomas and Saint Augustine.

In 1905 he was sent for another year as vicar in the friary in Koper (Capodistria). Called back to Italy again he spent three years in Thiene (Vicenza) in the sanctuary of the Madonna dell'Olmo. Here he animated groups of tertiary Franciscans. Nevertheless he spent many hours in prayer at night. This intensified after he had been hoaxed by three young workers. Because of this he was relieved from confessional work. He felt that everything would fall apart: his missionary vocation to the East, his desire for an active apostolate and to work for the benefit of the public. He was a small friar, unsuited for anything except hearing confessions. And now he had even been deprived of this: a denial of his self, a mystical abandonment in prayer that was both bitter and serene for him.

In 1909 he was transferred to Padua where the superiors entrusted him with the direction of the students and to teach patrology. He was seized with a new apostolic zeal. He wished to dedicate himself to preaching based on his reading and his teaching. He was stunned when he realised that many priests and religious made a show of secular erudition in their preaching. Even though he was not skilled with words because of his stutter he knew how to instil in others a love for preaching based on the Gospel. This period of intense commitment to study and teaching in Padua represented the dramatic climax of his missionary and ecumenical vocation, transformed into a heroic self-offering as both holocaust and victim. In January 1911 he wrote to his spiritual director, who replied, reassuring him that his "approach based on prayer and victimhood before the Father of all will be a great benefit to many of those people" in the East who were dissident with the Catholic Church. Then on 9 November 1912 he offered himself as a victim for his own students.

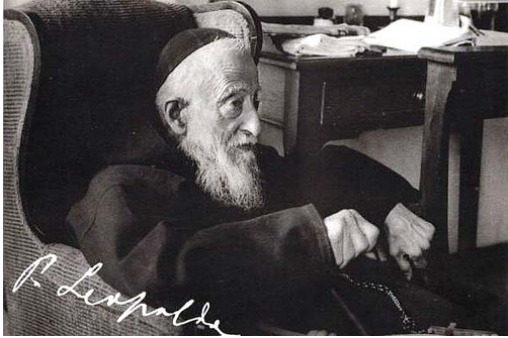
These heroic actions mark a turning point in his life, the foundation a new spiritual reality. Father Leopoldo had now chosen the permanent state of being a victim, a radical obedience that had something of the tones of a strict Ignatian obedience and the mysticism of self-denial undertaken with all the wealth of his strong Dalmatian humanity. By now he was forty seven years old. It was difficult for him to substitute his dreams of a missionary apostolate with sufferings accepted in conformity to Christ and Saint Francis. As one biographer wrote, he replaced it with all he could of himself – physically and existentially – for his students, penitents and friends. His life-dream was entirely compromised by this, compromised because it was cast off."



Released from the direction of the students in 1914 his future life would have been a martyrdom of confession, a crucifixion to the confessional. However his heart always remained focused on Eastern Europe. Because of this he always refused Italian citizenship. Consequently he was exiled during the First World War and from 1917-1918 he had to sojourn in southern Italy. He travelled from friary to friary, as a citizen of the Hapsburg empire then at war with Italy. In 1923, when Istria and Kvarner were annexed to Italy, Leopoldo was made a confessor in Zara. This was an immense joy for him. He immediately transferred to the new destination, but a short while later he was called back to

Padua on 16 November. His sudden departure upset a veritable crowd of penitents who approached the bishop Elia Dalla Costa. However Odorico da Pordenone, the Minister Provincial, was compelled to call the little friar back. He continued his silent martyrdom, relieved somewhat in 1924 by a course in Croatian held in Venice for the young the friars. He hoped at least that he could nurture a group of missionaries for the East and his teaching was adorned with examples that would be useful for the apostolate. He was fifty five years old. Then on 13 November 1927 he edited a brochure on his wish for the return of dissidents to Catholic unity.

Everyone, small or great, learned or ordinary people, religious, priests, clerics and lay-persons, all flocked to his confessional. Shut within his little two by three metre



room, with its small window poorly defended by curtains that opened onto a narrow and stifling yard, Leopoldo exercised the ministry of reconciliation and mercy and until his death. His East became each and every soul that came to seek his spiritual help. On 13 January 1941 he wrote, "Any soul that needs my ministry will be an East for me." He heard confessions for ten to twelve hours a day, irrespective of the cold, heat, weariness or illness. "Stay calm," he used to say to his penitents, "put

everything on my shoulders. I will look after it." He took on himself sacrifices, prayers, night vigils, fasts and disciplines. He met each penitent with joy. He even thanked penitents would have hugged them. Once a penitent entered Leopoldo's cell and sat on his armchair. Leopoldo heard his confession while kneeling down himself.

He was accused of being too lenient, and he endured many conflicts. Pointing to the Crucified he used to answer with his marvellous experience of the mercy of God. "If the Crucified would correct me about leniency, I would answer: 'paron Benedeto', you have given me this bad example yourself. As yet I have not arrived at the folly of dying for souls." However the story of his confessional would be an epic royal poem, a joyful dance of gifts, graces and miracles, that would take too long to tell. The victim was now ready for the ultimate sacrifice.

By the end of autumn of 1940 his health had declined and became ever worse. At the beginning of April 1942 he was taken to hospital. He ignored the fact that he had a tumour in the oesophagus. He continued to hear confessions in the friary. He was not afraid of death or the pain that consumed him. On 29 July 1942 he confessed without a break and then spent the night in prayer. The following morning, on 30 July, he fainted as he prepared as he prepared for Mass. Taken to bed he received the Sacrament of the Sick. While reciting the final words of the Salve Regina, he raised his arms, as if he were going towards something. Transfigured, he breathed his last. All of Padua turned out around his remains and his funeral was a triumph. Thirty four years later Paul VI declared him "blessed" on 2 May 1976. On 16 October 1983 John Paul II proclaimed him "saint."