

The little letters of “Nennolina”

She was a child who lived in Rome and died of cancer in 1937 when she was six. She may become the youngest, non-martyr saint in the history of the Church. This is her life story

by Stefania Falasca



Antonietta Meo

“There will be saints among the children!” Pius X exclaimed when he opened up the Eucharistic tabernacle to them by bringing forward the age at which they could receive communion. But perhaps he didn’t realize it would come about so soon. “Dear Jesus Eucharist, I am so very, very happy that you have come into my heart. Never leave my heart, stay for ever and ever with me. Jesus I love you so, I want to let myself go in your arms and do what you will with me ... O loving Jesus give me souls, give me a great many!”. The writer of these words was a young girl of barely six. The handwriting and the mistakes are those of someone who has just learned to use a pen. Her name was Antonietta Meo, affectionately known as Nennolina. When she wrote this letter to her “dear Jesus” she had recently made her first communion and the illness that had been devouring her had already cost her the loss of a leg. She was to die of bone cancer in Rome three months later on July 3, 1937. She was only six and a half years old. And yet her death was accompanied by conversions and grace bestowed. Notes of thanksgiving and prayer were to cover her grave in Rome’s Verano cemetery. In the short space of a year two biographies of her were published. Nennolina’s reputation for sanctity immediately and spontaneously spread beyond the confines of the parish of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, of Rome and Italy. By 1940 biographies were coming out abroad, even in Armenia. The cause for beatification was begun in 1942 and the diocesan phase concluded in 1972. It was precisely because of her age, on the borderline of what was considered the age of reason, that made so many of those who had to examine her case so perplexed and this factor created none too few difficulties throughout the process. Although Canon Law sets no age limit, it was not until 1981 that the Sacred Congregation for the Cause of Saints declared that children were also capable of performing heroic acts of faith, hope and charity and may therefore be raised to the honor of the altars.

A foundation named for Antonietta Meo is about to be opened in the parish of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. And it is here, in the Basilica that holds the relics of Jesus’ Passion, that her mortal remains are soon to be transferred. If the cause proceeds quickly, this little Roman girl will soon become the youngest non-martyr saint raised to the honor of the altars, the youngest in the history of Christianity.

The Little Letters to “Dear Jesus”

Antonietta was born into an affluent family on December 15, 1930. The Meo family home stood a few yards from Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. Margherita, her elder sister, showed *30Days* photographs of Nennolina: she had a page haircut and smiling eyes, bucket and spade, as she plays with other youngsters at the seaside... In one photo she is having a good time on the boating lake in Villa Borghese (a central Rome park), in another she smiles in carnival costume... “My sister,” she recalls, “was a merry child, very lively and mischievous, as children are at that age”. In October 1933, when she was three, she was enrolled in the convent nursery school a few yards from home. “She went willingly,” her sister says, “and often enough when we were playing she’d say: ‘I really enjoy myself at school... I’d even go at night!’ She immediately became fond of the teacher and the nuns told my mother: ‘She’s perpetual motion! But she’s very bright and learns straightaway. She’s grown-up for her age’”. She was still only four when her parents noticed a swelling on her left knee and thought it must have been left by one of her usual falls. After various wrong diagnoses and treatments came the verdict: bone cancer. On 25 April 1936 her leg was amputated. It was a tremendous blow, more for her parents than for Antonietta herself, who, after an initial period, went on with her life despite the difficulties caused by an artificial leg: she started playing again and went back to school. To the child’s great delight her parents decided to anticipate her First Communion and so in the evenings her mother began to go over the Catechism with her. It was then that Antonietta began first to dictate and then write the little letters that she placed every evening under the statue of the Baby Jesus at the foot of her bed, “so he can come and read them during the night”. “It began as a game”, her mother declared at the hearing for the cause, “when I suggested to Antonietta that she write a letter to the Mother Superior of the nuns who taught her asking permission to make her First Communion in their chapel on Christmas night. So, often in the evenings after saying her prayer to her guardian angel, Antonietta developed the habit of dictating ‘poems’ as she called them, first for me, then for her dad and Margherita, then to Jesus and Our Lady. I went to find the first piece of paper I found and simply took dictation, smiling, indulgent towards what she was dictating with such simplicity and trust”.

The first little letter is dated September 15, 1936: “Dear Jesus, today I’m going out and I’m going to my nuns to tell them I want to make my First Communion at Christmas. Jesus come soon into my heart and I’ll hug you very tight and kiss you. O Jesus, I want you to stay for ever in my heart”. And a few days later: “Dear Jesus, I love you so much, I want to tell you again I love you so much. I give you my heart. Our dear Lady, you are so good, take my heart and carry it to Jesus”. But there was something else that was unusual for a five-year-old child: “My good Jesus, give me souls, give me a lot of them, I ask you willingly, I ask you so that you make them become good and so that they can come to you in Paradise”. And Antonietta repeated this many times.

“I noticed the child could express herself much better than I expected”, her mother went on. “Needless to say, at home we gave no importance to these letters and they were put away without particular attention and many have been lost”. This carelessness is confirmed by Antonietta’s sister. “My mother,” she recalls, “was a reserved woman, prudent, concrete, down-to-earth in fact, by no means sentimental or credulous. She used to come down sharply on facile enthusiasm: ‘Look here, I don’t believe in saints until the Church has canonized them’. She always tended to play down any praise of Antonietta and she didn’t like it when people idolized her. I remember that shortly after my sister’s death a priest made a broadcast about the meaning of suffering and mentioned Antonietta. My mother wasn’t at all happy, quite the opposite. She said it was a distortion, an exaggeration. They said that Antonietta proclaimed her love of Jesus with large gestures... ‘What? No, never!’ Mother retorted. They said that Jesus was the first word Antonietta uttered. And she: ‘No, Mommy, she said Mommy! Like every child!’”.



The Roman Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in the 1930s, Antonietta Meo's parish church

“Keep your grace for me always”

However, as soon as Nennolina had learnt to use a pen, which she did in the first grade of elementary school, she wanted to sign: “Antonietta and Jesus”. “My dear Jesus, today I learned to do the ‘O’, so soon I’m going to write to you myself”. Antonietta addressed Jesus and Mary with trusting tenderness. Her letters always end with hugs, caresses and kisses sent to their heavenly addressees. And this tender trust was witnessed by the nuns who often saw her approach the tabernacle before leaving church and exclaim: “Jesus come and play with me!”. She also wrote it in her letters, wanting him always near: “Dear Jesus, come to school with me tomorrow”.

In the months leading up to Christmas her letters express all her love for Jesus and the ardent desire to receive him into her heart. They go over and over the same thing, counting the days, the hours, the minutes. The form of the letters is repetitive and the thoughts jump about, as they do in children’s writing, but between the childish lines the thoughts are not trivial and never puerile. On the eve of her First Communion she dictated this to her mother: “Dear Jesus, tomorrow when you are in my heart, pretend that my soul is an apple. And as there are pips in the apple, make it that there is a little cupboard in my soul. And since under the black skin of the pips there is the white seed, make it so that in the little cupboard there is your grace, like the white seed”. At that point her mother broke in: “But Antonietta, what are you saying? What’s this inside that’s inside? What does it mean?”. Antonietta’s mother went on: “I tried in vain to put her off. Finally she explained to me: ‘Listen Mommy, let’s say my soul is an apple. In the apple there are those little black things that are the seeds? Then inside the skin there’s that white thing? Well, think of that as grace’. I found that comparison, which I had never come across, profound, but I didn’t want to give in and took it up again: ‘But these things you’ve been telling me ... the teacher at school took an apple to explain to you ...’ ‘No, Mommy,’ she said outright, ‘the teacher didn’t tell me, I thought it up myself.’ Then she finished off her thought: ‘Jesus is seeing to it that this grace will always, always, be with me’”. On the evening of Christmas and although her artificial limb was causing her pain, the people in church saw her kneeling for more than an hour, quite still, with her hands joined.

“Without your grace I can do nothing”

Antonietta wrote 105 letters to Jesus and others to Mary, to God the Father, to the Holy Spirit, one to Saint Agnes and one to Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus. She always asked Jesus for the help of his grace: “Today I was a bit naughty but you, good Jesus, take your child in your arms ...”; “but help me, because without your grace I can do nothing”; “help me with your grace, help me, for without your grace I can do nothing”; “I beg you, good Jesus, keep for me always grace of soul”. She never stopped asking grace from him and his mother for those close to her, for those who recommended themselves to her prayers, and for sinners: “I beseech you for that man who has done so much wrong”; “I beseech you for that sinner you know, who is so old and is in the hospital of San Giovanni”.

“Behold the wonderful workings of God,” wrote Father Pierotti, who was the first to make an

edition of the letters: "The grace of God chooses souls where it will ... That is the only explanation for the words, the playfulness, the attitudes, the life of Nennolina".

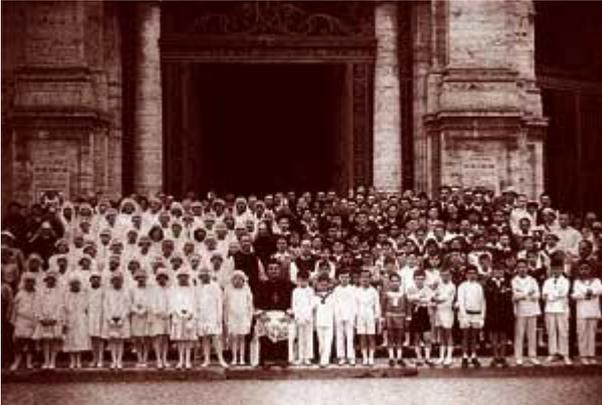
"Truly the Lord *ludit in orbe terrarum*," exclaimed the future Paul VI, then substitute Secretary of State, when he read the letters and biography of Antonietta Meo, "and, working through souls in the most mysterious ways, he grants to many, through the life of this child, not yet seven years old, the chance of penetrating the knowledge that is hidden from the proud and revealed to little ones".

In May Antonietta was confirmed. She was now dying. Here is how her mother saw it: "After her Confirmation Antonietta grew progressively worse. Her pain and cough gave her no rest. She could no longer sit upright and had to take to bed. It was obvious she was in pain but she always told everybody, me included: 'I'm fine!'. Though she had difficulty she always insisted on saying her prayers morning and night. Then she asked the priest to bring her Communion every day, and the hours after Communion were always the most calm ... Whenever she was able she asked me to write her little letters". The last is dated June 2. And it was this one that ended up in the hands of Pius XI. This is what her mother had to say: "I sat by her bed and wrote down what Antonietta struggled to dictate: 'Dear crucified Jesus, I love you and am so fond of you! I want to be with you on Calvary. Dear Jesus, tell God the Father that I love him, too. Dear Jesus, give me your strength for I need it to bear this pain that I offer for sinners'." Her mother said: "At this point Antonietta was consumed by a violent fit of coughing and vomiting but as soon as it was over she went on dictating: 'Dear Jesus, tell the Holy Spirit to enlighten me with love and to fill me with his seven gifts. Dear Jesus, tell Our Lady that I love her and want to be near her. Dear Jesus I want to tell you again how much I love you. My good Jesus, look after my spiritual father and grant him the necessary grace. Dear Jesus, look after my parents and Margherita. Your little girl sends you lots of kisses ...'. I suddenly fell into a rage seeing all that suffering. I crumpled up the paper and stuffed it into a drawer. A few days later, Professor Milani, the Papal archiater, came to examine Antonietta at the request of Doctor Vecchi. He said she was very sick and that she should go back to hospital for another operation. He stopped to chat with her and was astonished at the pain she endured without complaint. My husband spoke about the little letters she was writing. He asked to see them and I didn't have the courage to refuse. I took the letter out of the drawer where I'd put it that day and handed it to him. When he'd read it he said he wanted to tell the Holy Father about Antonietta and asked whether he could take the letter with him. I hesitated and said: 'Well ... I'm not sure ... if ...' But, he said, 'we're talking about the Pope, Madam!'

The next day a car from the Vatican stopped in front of our house. A personal messenger from the Holy Father Pius XI had come to bring the apostolic blessing. He told us that His Holiness had been very moved on reading the letter. He also left us a note from Professor Milani in which he asked Antonietta to remember him to the Lord and to beg for him those graces she had asked for herself". The next day Antonietta grew worse. She was breathing with difficulty. Liquid was drawn from her lungs. On the 23rd, with just local anaesthetic because of her general condition, she had three ribs cut out. Her mother said: "I cannot tell you how that poor tortured body suffered. Holding back my tears that day I said to her: 'Wait and see my darling ... as soon as you're stronger we'll go on vacation, we'll go to the seaside ... you love the seaside ... you'll be able to swim, you know ...'. She looked at me ... and she sweetly said: 'Mommy, cheer up, be glad ... I'll be gone from here in under ten days'". Her mother cannot have known that Antonietta had just told her the precise date of her death.

During the days that followed she continued to smile with disarming strength even at the nurses who came to dress her wounds, although the metastasis had invaded and devastated her whole body, although the tumor in her chest was so swollen it had forced her heart out of position. Everybody at the hearings spoke of their astonishment at her serenity. Her mother even wondered whether her child was in pain: "I went to the doctor and said: 'Doctor, I don't believe it ... tell me the truth, tell me the truth really ... Is Antonietta in great pain?' But lady, what are you asking me! What are you saying! Don't say anything more to me! The pain is atrocious'. I went back to her bedside ... I

couldn't control my voice, for the first time I said to her: 'Antonietta, bless your Mommy ... Antonietta, bless Mommy'. And with an effort she made the sign of the cross on my forehead".



A group photo of the children who made their First Communion at Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in 1931

"... smiling, slipping into sleep"

Her father had this to say at the hearings: "One day she'd grown worse and so I decided that my little girl should be given the Last Rites. I asked Antonietta: 'Do you know what holy oil is?' And she replied: 'The sacrament they give to the dying'. But I didn't want to upset her so I added: 'Sometimes it cures you as well ...' Antonietta refused it. 'It's too soon,' she said, and I didn't insist. But later when the priest told her that the holy oil increased grace she listened carefully and said: 'Yes, I want it'. She replied calmly to all the prayers, recited the act of contrition, and held her palms out for the priest's anointing ... She kissed her First Communion crucifix tenderly. It was all very simple and quiet".

"I have seen martyrs in flames prepare their evergreen palms thus," wrote Charles Péguy in his *Le Mystère des Saints Innocents* (Mystery of the Holy Innocents). "I have seen the tears drip under the iron hooks / Drops of blood shining like diamonds. / I have seen tears of love drip down/ That will last longer than the stars in heaven. / And I have seen looks of prayer, of tenderness, / Ecstatic with charity ... I have seen the greatest saints, says God. Well, I tell you / I have never seen anything finer in the world / Now I tell you, said God, / There is nothing so fine in all the world / Than this child falling asleep saying its prayers / And smiling, slipping into sleep. / Nothing is finer than this small creature falling asleep in trust ...".

It was barely light on July 3, 1937 when her father came to settle her pillow and give her a kiss. Antonietta murmured: "Jesus, Mary ... Mommy, Daddy...". Her mother recalls: "She was staring in front of her. She smiled ... then took one long last breath".

The following day the little white coffin was taken through the mourning crowd to the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. Six years earlier Nennolina had been baptized in that same Basilica where the relics of Christ's Passion are kept. It was October 28, Feast of the Holy Innocents.