



# The Holy See

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**LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER  
JOHN PAUL II  
TO FR LUIGI PIERINI,  
SUPERIOR GENERAL OF THE CONGREGATION OF ST JOSEPH  
ON THE CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF  
ST LEONARD MURIALDO**

*Very Reverend Father Luigi Pierini, C.S.J  
Superior General of the Congregation of St Joseph*

1. The centenary of the death of St Leonard Murialdo, founder of the Pious Turinese Society of St Joseph, as it was then called, gives me the pleasant opportunity to send you and your confrères a cordial greeting and the assurance of my prayers that this providential occasion may bring your entire religious family a new and abundant outpouring of grace.

In turning my thoughts to the spiritual sons of St Leonard, who work generously and skilfully in Christ's name to raise the moral and material standards of youth, workers and the people, I intend to address all who benefit from their pastoral and social activity.

The anniversary of St Leonard's holy death on 30 March 1900 occurs while the Church is celebrating the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and offers your institute the opportunity to recall the significant phases of your founder's life and priestly ministry, while at the same time to meditate on the prophetic and charismatic insights which made him a fervent apostle of youth.

His commitment to young people is a significant witness to the Church's social charity. In the 19th century, faced with the development of modern industry and the resulting formation of a working, proletarian class, the Church did not promote a subversive emancipation of workers in the grip of need and suffering, but offered them the activity of courageous Gospel witnesses, who gradually opened them to the awareness of their rights and responsibilities.

2. St Leonard Murialdo is numbered among those figures of outstanding holiness who marked the Piedmontese Church of the 19th century. Among others, the strong personalities of Cottolengo, Cafasso, Lantieri, Allamano, Don Bosco and Don Orione were distinguished for their perceptive insights, genuine love of the poor and boundless trust in Providence. Through their efforts, the charity of the Church succeeded in promoting the material and spiritual emancipation of the people's children, who were victims of grave injustices and relegated to the fringes of the tumultuous process of modernization in Italy and Europe.

Growing up in a well-to-do family and a loving home, Murialdo was ordained a priest in 1851. His spirituality, based on the Word of God and the solid doctrine of reliable authors such as St Alphonsus and St Francis de Sales, to name but a few, was inspired by the certainty of God's merciful love. The fulfilment of God's will in everyday circumstances, an intense prayer life, a spirit of mortification and fervent devotion to the Eucharist characterized his faith journey.

Even before becoming a priest, he had personally cared for poor and abandoned boys on the outskirts of Turin, and for the young inmates of the juvenile prison. He continued this experience in the Oratory of the Guardian Angel between 1851 and 1856, and then as spiritual director of the Oratory of St Aloysius for eight years.

In October 1866, at the age of 38, he returned to Turin after a period spent at the then well-known seminary of St Sulpice in Paris, where he had been sent for advanced studies and to learn about several institutions for working-class youth. He was called immediately by the Bishop to direct the Artigianelli College, a task he accepted in the certainty that every person at every moment has a duty to fulfil in order to do God's will, and that this is enough to achieve perfection.

3. St Leonard Murialdo became a friend, brother and father to poor boys, knowing that in each of them lies a secret to discover: the beauty of the Creator reflected in their souls. He saw them frail, left helpless or with unscrupulous adults, forced to live in idleness, ignorance, slavery to passions that would have continued to grow stronger if they were not constantly combatted, and rich only in "ignorance, unruliness and vice" (*MSS*, III, 397, 8). He welcomed all whom Providence entrusted to him, faithful to the motto he gave himself: "Poor and abandoned: these are the two essential requirements for a young man to become one of ours; and the poorer and more abandoned he is, the more he is one of ours" (*MSS*, III, 397, 7). He wanted to spend his best energies for these boys, so that not even one of them would be lost (cf. *Mt* 18: 14).

He was helped by his confrères and broad-minded lay people who understood and shared the profound reasons for his ministry. Among them I wish to recall Fr Reffo and Fr Costantino and several people who worked in close contact with him. St Leonard realized the need for personnel who were suited to the professional task of education, and this meant a heavy financial burden. This problem and other serious difficulties in the early days sometimes caused such

misunderstandings that an effort was made to reduce the number of young men he had taken in for free and to increase the number of paying boys.

However he wanted to assume the financial burden himself. He therefore left his brother's house to settle in a college where he was busy day and night among difficult young men, with administrative duties that involved interventions contrary to his nature. He would say to the "artigianelli" (young craftsmen) in 1869: "It is only because of affection for you that I did not refuse to direct your college at a time when it ... was in the most serious financial straits" (*MSS*, VI, 1232, 4). With this heroic decision, St Leonard made a qualitative evangelical leap: before, he had given "something" to the boys. Now he gave "everything", an everything that would consume him for 34 years until his death in 1900.

4. His confrère and biographer, Fr. Reffo, notes that Murialdo always wanted to have precise information about the family conditions of his young men, in order to know how to deal with them and their relatives, and he took special care of those who came from bad families and thus had already learned corrupt principles at home. Indeed, he "took personal care of the more ignorant young men or those who were the slowest to learn, and tried with great patience to instruct them" (*Pr. Ap.* II, 850r).

He was a father to his young men in everything that concerned their physical, moral and spiritual well-being and looked after their health, food, clothing and professional formation. At the same time, he encouraged the preparation and training of those responsible for the various workshops, seeking to sharpen their educational abilities through pedagogical and religious conferences.

Never did he neglect the young men's religious or human growth. "Our programme", he wrote, "is not only to make our young men intelligent and diligent workers, much less to make them proud know-it-alls..., but on the contrary, to make them sincere and honest Christians" (*MSS*, VI, 1233, 2). He therefore gave them catechesis, encouraged the reception of the sacraments and increased the number of associations for boys and adolescents, spurring them to be apostles among their companions and starting, in this regard, the Confraternity of St Joseph and the Congregation of the Guardian Angels.

5. Gentle in manner, as his biographers note, he was always modest and his face was softened by a smile that invited trust. He appeared calm and friendly, even when he had to reprimand his "artigianelli", so that when they grew up they described him as "an affectionate father, a true father, a loving father". He was convinced that "without faith one does not please God; without gentleness one does not please one's neighbour" (*MSS*, II, 250, 2).

It was the experience of the heavenly Father's merciful love that spurred him to care for youth. He made it his life's decision, letting himself be guided by a ready and enterprising love that transformed his life and made him attentive to the social situation and patient with others. He kept

his gaze fixed on the heavenly Father who waits for his children, respects their freedom and is ready to embrace them tenderly at the moment of forgiveness.

6. Murialdo invites his spiritual sons to be "friends, brothers and fathers" to the young people entrusted to their care. This interior attitude is most necessary in our time. Formation work, particularly when it involves boys and young men in trouble, requires an even more open and patient love. May each of you, spiritual sons of so generous an apostle of youth, follow in his footsteps in order to spread the balm of God's mercy everywhere, especially among the poorest and most defenceless. Like him, be friends, brothers and fathers to young men.

However, all this requires, as the experience of your saint shows, a constant, intimate relationship with Christ. To be zealous apostles of God's kingdom, you must love prayer. Murialdo prayed both day and night. In trusting dialogue with the Lord he found the inspiration and strength for "doing".

And what can be said of Holy Mass? It was the centre and the principal act of his prayer life. He celebrated it with deep reverence and unusual slowness, even when situations disturbed his calm.

The Eucharist, Murialdo recalled, is not a rite to be performed but a mystery to be lived. The tabernacle was "a centre of love" for him (*MSS*, III, 518, 2), so that in order to find him, his contemporaries testify, "if he was not in his room, he could be found in church" (*Informatio*, p. 246).

7. Very Reverend Father, in sharing the joy of this special Jubilee of your institute, I fervently hope that every spiritual son of St Murialdo will interweave his day with prayer and contemplation. Even among so many tasks and preoccupations which might hinder conversation with God, it is necessary to find the time to pray "well", since the spiritual energy for an effective apostolate flows from a heart immersed in God.

May the happy centenary of your founder's death be a favourable occasion for the prophetic renewal of the founding charism. In view of the social and missionary needs of our time, and with particular attention to old and new forms of poverty and the difficulties of youth, may the spiritual sons of Murialdo courageously proclaim and bear witness to the Gospel of mercy and hope in every circumstance.

I entrust the work and projects of your religious family to the motherly protection of the Virgin Mary, whose most devoted son Murialdo declared himself to be on all occasions. I assure you of my constant remembrance to the Lord for all your work, especially for the 20th General Chapter which you will hold from 11 July to 6 August next.

With these sentiments, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you and to all the members of the Congregation of St Joseph, and willingly extend it to those who work with you and to everyone you

lovingly serve in your pastoral ministry.

*From the Vatican, 28 March 2000.*

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