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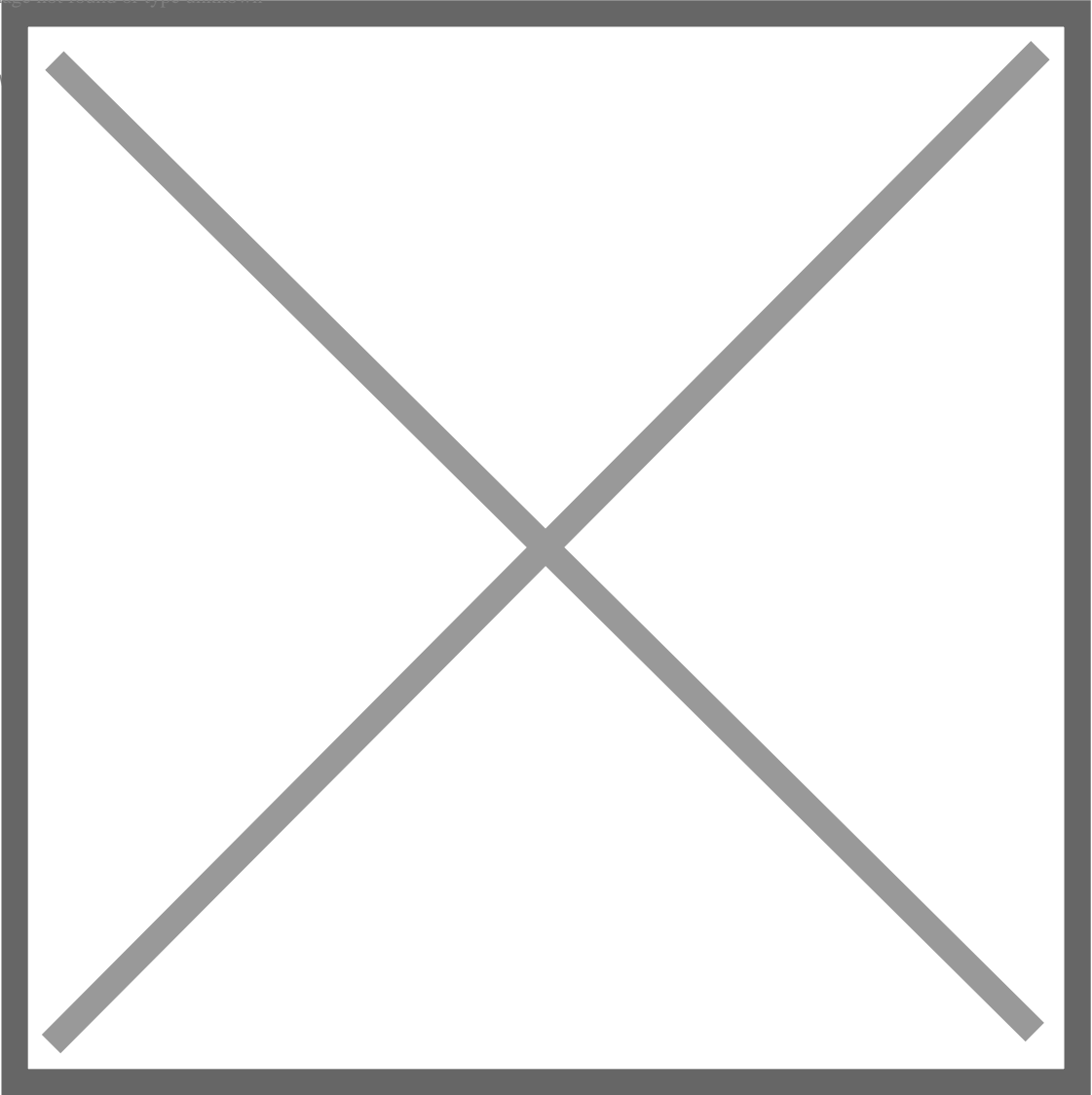
From Satanist to Saint, the parable of Bartolo Longo

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Thanks to the green light Pope Francis gave to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints on Monday 24 February, the way is now clear for the canonisation of Blessed Bartolo Longo (1841-1926). According to the [Congregation's website](#), in the process for the founder of the Sanctuary of the Madonna of Pompeii, a special dispensation has been requested for the formal recognition of the miracle normally required for canonisation, on account of the continuity and expansion of the cult devoted to the Blessed, the testimony - in various parts of the world - of graces and favours attributed to his intercession, and also for the "driving force of his example". A driving force that can be explained by the profound union, typical of saints, between faith and works of charity that Blessed Bartolo Longo embodied in his life, as well as by the story of his extraordinary conversion. This is a serious reminder of the spiritual battle in which we are engaged on earth - often without being aware of it, also because we are immersed in a society that has forgotten God - and on which our eternal destiny depends.

Born in Latiano (province of Brindisi) on 10 February 1841, Bartolo was raised as a Catholic. But during his years as a law student in Naples, he was led astray by the strong anticlerical and positivist climate of the time, especially in the university environment. One of the products of this climate was a famous essay by the French philosopher Ernest Renan (*Vie de Jésus*, published in 1863 and translated into Italian the same year), which denied the divinity of Jesus and all his miracles. Bartolo also read this book, which, together with the university lectures of some teachers who were openly hostile to Catholicism, contributed to alienating him from the faith. For about five years he was involved in practices and meetings related to spiritualism, and at one point, for a year and a half, he was even a Satanist "priest".

Having fallen into this abyss of sin and feeling devastated inside, Bartolo found the strength to confide in a faithful fellow villager, Professor Vincenzo Pepe, who not only gave him a brotherly warning, but also advised him to seek the spiritual guidance of Father Alberto Maria Radente (1817-1885), a Dominican. And from here, providentially, began the spiritual rebirth of a man who became one of the greatest apostles of the Rosary in the history of the Church, author of books and devotional practices (from the novena to the supplication to Our Lady of Pompeii), advocate of the modern Pompeii that developed around the Sanctuary he founded, with social works in favour of children, the poor and the marginalised, all of which testify to the explosive power of following Jesus and trusting in the maternal help of Mary.

The rebirth and the discovery of his vocation, which led to the works mentioned above, obviously didn't happen overnight. First of all, other fundamental encounters

with people working for the Kingdom of God were necessary. Thanks to his participation in the spiritual circles led by the Neapolitan Saint Caterina Volpicelli (1839-1894), a great promoter of the cult of the Sacred Heart, Bartolo met the Countess Marianna Farnararo De Fusco (1836-1924), widowed at the age of 27 with five children to raise. After discovering the saintly qualities of the future saint, the Countess entrusted him with the management of her properties in the Pompeii Valley.

And it was in these lands, one day in October 1872, that the final turning point in Bartolo's life took place. He had renounced Satanism years before, but his past still tormented his soul, sometimes almost to the point of despair. Suddenly, just before the bells rang out the midday Angelus, that darkness was shattered, as he himself would recount several years later: "A friendly voice seemed to whisper in my ear the words that I myself had read and that the holy friend [Father Radente, *ed.*] of my soul, now deceased, had often repeated to me: If you seek salvation, pray the Rosary. It is a promise of Mary. Whoever prays the Rosary will be saved!". At that moment Bartolo committed himself to spreading the Rosary and immediately felt a great inner peace.

From this foundation, the flowering of 1874, his apostolate grew, changing the face of Pompeii for the better and making it a centre radiating the love of Jesus and Mary. Bartolo began by teaching catechism to the peasants, filling in their serious religious gaps. Then, at the invitation of the Bishop of Nola, he began the construction of a church dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary, the first stone of which was laid on 8 May 1876, a day of solemn celebration. The construction of what is now the Pontifical Sanctuary of Pompeii was made possible thanks to donations from all over the world. And the restoration of the image of the Blessed Virgin of the Rosary, the object of miracles since it was first displayed for public veneration on 13 February 1876 (see the sudden recovery of the twelve-year-old Clorinda Lucarelli), contributed to an increase in devotion.

This reawakening of faith, only briefly mentioned here, was accompanied by a great attention to others. Thus, in the course of the years, from 1886 onwards, nursery schools, catechism oratories, workers' houses and, once again, an orphanage for women were founded, as well as two hospices, one for the children and the other for the daughters of prisoners. These hospices were created after the prisoners themselves asked the Blessed to take care of their children. An educational challenge that was practically impossible for the positivist science of the time, linked to the ideas of Cesare Lombroso, according to which the children of criminals had sealed their fate. Not so for Catholicism. "I don't look at their faces or their skulls. I just make sure that they are outcasts and abandoned innocents; I hold them in my heart and begin to educate

them", said the Blessed. He educated these children not only to live righteously, but also to be an instrument of eternal salvation for their parents.

At the origin of this charity was his fidelity to the promise he had made to the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom he also invoked with the title of Co-redemptrix. The promise to spread her Rosary, "a tower of salvation against the assaults of hell", as the text of the famous **supplication** composed by Bartolo Longo himself says.

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