

WITNESS

Sister Zaira, from religious vocation to holy death

ECCLESIA

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**Ermes
Dovico**



"No matter how it will be, I will fall into the arms of the living God. We do not know the plan of love He has for each of us. But, you won't miss anything because, if I go to heaven before you, I will be able to obtain many graces". This is just one of the things my sister Zaira Dovico (25 November 1974 - 26 May 2024), said - in my presence - last 26 April, a month away from death, to our mother, who had travelled to Munich from Sicily

the day before to be at her bedside. Those few words encapsulate the cornerstones that Sister Zaira, in health as in illness, always conveyed: faith in the resurrection, the certainty that God loves us all, the communion of saints. If we did not believe in this reality, "we would be pagans", she still recalled, also in Sicilian dialect, to render the concept more effective.

She felt the first symptoms of her illness between January and February this year, between one activity and another in 'her' Munich. Here there is a small community of the Sisters of Bell'Amore, an institute founded in 1994 in Palermo by Sister Nunziella Scopelliti and of which Zaira was one of the first members, since it was precisely at that time that she was beginning her preparation for religious vows.

After an initial interlude at the beginning of her consecrated life, my sister moved to Bavaria permanently in April 2012, bringing the joy and smile - combined with a determined character - that those who met her know so well. "You united us not only with our children but also with other families", reads one of the various letters dedicated to her, which we family members have received in recent days from Italian friends in Munich and which also reflects what we have been told, in writing or verbally, by other witnesses both in Germany and Italy. "With simple words you conveyed your love for Jesus and Mary and showed us the way of faith. You taught us to unite in prayer for others. And in praying we saw great things, we saw the presence of Jesus among us". This presence, which the Lord himself promised us (Mt 18:19-20), has manifested itself in a whole series of graces, many 'invisible' and more spiritual, others still more tangible, each answering to a precise name. It has revealed itself among children, towards whom my sister nurtured, or more truly, nurtures a special love. She made herself known among the sick, her other great field of apostolate in Munich, where she went from hospital to hospital to bring comfort.

Last September, Sr Zaira had celebrated the 25th anniversary of her first vows. It had been an unforgettable celebration, with attendance far beyond expectations. Several of my sister's merits were not unfamiliar to me, yet at the time, that people united by a common faith, it made me reflect on what it means a consecrated person who is faithful to the Lord, a thought I 'found' at the end of the account that a contributor to *Contatto* (a magazine of the Italian Catholic community in Munich) had written for the occasion.

On that occasion, my sister had recounted the birth of her vocation, how the encounter with the living person of Jesus had become for her "an experience of happiness", that which more than anything else gave meaning to her life, which had

smiled at her since childhood, rich as it was with friends, "naughtiness", as she called it, study skills and various interests, such as ballet, in which she excelled. "The more I went on", she recounted, "the more my joy (...) revealed itself to be a gift and fruit of my relationship with God, for which I adhered deeply to all aspects of life, including pain. In fact, even when I suffered or when my mistakes awakened in my conscience the pain of having offended Jesus, the stronger my trust in His Love, I put my hand back in His and continued on my way". The idea of marriage did not displease her and, when she first fell seriously in love, she knew her love would be reciprocated. But God's voice was "irresistible" to her, so she followed through on her long-standing intention to consecrate her virginity to Him.

This path would then culminate in her adhesion to the charism of Bell'Amore (Beautiful Love), among those nuns who, she summarised last September, "do not want to leave Jesus alone in the Church, wounded in every age by various evils, and want to live in communion with Mary without being scandalised by the cross". She wanted to be a sign, in the various interpersonal relationships, of the "beauty of Trinitarian communion": this is the first point of the charism of Bell'Amore, which Sr Zaira recalled again in September, both at the end of the account of her vocation and at the end of a short speech on the meaning of our life here below ("a pilgrimage towards Heaven").

It was important to make this excursus because she, despite her human faults, was not scandalised by the cross, not even when it touched her directly. In March of this year, she was diagnosed with a metastatic tumour in various parts of her body, a diagnosis that was only fully defined during her hospitalisation, which lasted all of the last 73 days of her earthly life. As I also recounted on the day of her funeral, I had the grace of being able to be with her for a long time, and I can testify - like other loved ones, sisters and friends who were able to keep her company, some daily, some just for a few minutes - to the serenity she had throughout the course of her illness, along with her joyful disposition and laughter.

Of course, there were days and moments that were more difficult than others, but this serenity even grew, thanks to the support of her faith and the countless prayers that were said for her, even by complete strangers, involved by family members, friends, friends of friends... We asked, especially through a novena, for the grace of a recovery, if this would be to the greater glory of God. But for God's holy designs, this greater glory was to come not through a physical healing, but through a holy death, as my sister understood very well: a death capable of conforming her more fully to her Bridegroom, Jesus, crucified and risen, participating in His work of Redemption.

She had understood - and therefore quoted St Bernadette to me - that she had to be, through the acceptance of this cross, an instrument for others. The heavenly Mother accompanied her, with St Joseph and other saints, throughout this journey. "It would be wonderful to go to heaven in May, in Our Lady's month", she said on 29 April. She felt that she was a beloved bride of the Lord, sustained by the firm hope of eternal life. Therefore, knowing the extreme moment was near, she left this 'testament' to Sr Nunziata: "Celebrate, because I am with Jesus!".

That final moment came precisely in the month of Mary, on Sunday 26 May, on the feast day of the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity according to the Church calendar this year: the very Trinity that was at the apex of her speeches. And this was only the last of many caresses received, while still on this earth, from the good Lord.