

Fr. Georges Marie Salvaire, C.M. (1847-1899)

Apostle and Chaplain of the Virgin of Luján in Argentina

by Msgr. Juan Guillermo Durán *

Argentina

Fr. Jorge María Salviare (1847-1899), the most illustrious and beloved chaplain of Luján,¹ referred to as the chosen son of the Virgin Mary of Luján,² formed part of a large group of priests who arrived in Buenos Aires during the second half of the 19th Century. Fr. Salvaire and many other priests came to the shores of Latin America through the intervention of Archbishop Mariano Escalada and Bishop León Federico Aneiros who were able to interest some European religious communities in beginning a new apostolic work in Argentina: Vincentians, Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Bétharram, Salesians, Passionists, Redemptorists, Pallottine Fathers, etc.

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¹ This title was given to Fr. Jorge by his devoted friend Vicente Comas, Director of the newspaper *La Razon* of Luján at the time when he wrote about the burial of Fr. Jorge (*La Perla del Plata*, no. 474, 12 February 1899, 101). Regarding the decision of Fr. Salvaire to be known, first and foremost, as the "Chaplain of the Virgin," Fr. Antonio Brignardelli said: "On 25 May 1889, the glorious day that commemorates the anniversary of our Independence, the faithful received Fr. Salvaire as their new pastor. He took upon himself the title Chaplain of the Shrine of our Lady of Luján" (*ibid.*, no. 333, 31 May 1896, 375). In this way Fr. Salvaire referred to himself with the title that had been used by the first priests who served the Holy Image from the time of Don Pedro de Montalbo (1685-1701), the founder and first chaplain of the Chapel of Our Lady of the River Luján, but had fallen into disuse, replaced with the title of pastor.

² *Ibid.*, no. 475, 19 February 1899, 144.

All of these Congregations were inspired by the idea of contributing their efforts so that the pastoral work in the extensive Archdiocese of Buenos Aires might be sustained and broadened. Because of the deep crisis that resulted from the lengthy struggle for independence and then national organization (a situation that was common for many dioceses in the interior of the country), the diocese lacked sufficient clergy who were adequately prepared to meet the new challenges that the present age laid before them: parish work, missions, hospitals, education, social promotion, care for immigrants, etc.

The destiny of these priests was varied: some remained in the larger cities or in the new towns that began to rise up in the interior of the province of Buenos Aires; others began to visit periodically the rural populations and those towns where the new immigrants settled (Irish, French Basques, Russian-Germans, etc.) and still others committed themselves to preaching missions in rural parishes and frontier towns, thus bringing the Word of God to some small and peaceful Indian tribes.

Fr. Salvaire left his native France at the end of September 1871 and arrived in Buenos Aires on 24 October of the same year. He was a young priest, 24 years old and filled with a desire to realize his missionary dream. Many years later, Canon Juan A. López, director of the newspaper *La Voz de la Iglesia* [The Voice of the Church], recounted the arrival of Fr. Salvaire and highlighted the contributions that this son of St. Vincent de Paul made to this diocesan Church that received him with such great hope:

*Fr. Salvaire was not born on our soil, but it was the design of God that here, on our shores, he would find the right place to develop his vocation. This distinguished priest of the Congregation of the Mission, though very young and recently ordained, came to live with his confreres, and placed his talents, intellect, erudition and especially his outstanding character and wonderful willingness to study at the service of the vast Archdiocese of Buenos Aires.*³

On 4 February 1999, the centennial anniversary of Fr. Salvaire's death was celebrated. Fr. Salvaire has been called *flor de los Lazaristas del Río de la Plata* [flower of the Vincentians of Río de la Plata],⁴ for he is eternally united to Luján by reason of his pastoral

³ Death notice: *R.P. Jorge M. Salvaire (De La Voz de la Iglesia)*, in *ibid.*, no. 474, 12 February 1899, 107.

⁴ Fr. Fernando Meister, the long-time companion of Fr. Salvaire on the native mission of Azul (Argentina), gave him this title when he received news of Fr. Salvaire's death. In a letter written on 5 February 1899, from San Juan,

ministry and the construction of the basilica. In 1872 he was appointed pastoral assistant of the Shrine and in 1899, pastor and chaplain. It was at this time that he fully dedicated himself to the realization of his dream: the building of a new shrine that would house the sacred image of the Virgin and that would comfortably accommodate the increasing number of pilgrims who traveled there. The new railroad brought many pilgrims to this area, as well as to the ancient shrine of Lezica and Torrezuri, inaugurated on 8 December 1763.⁵

Without doubt, his time in Luján is very well known and is the place where he had a lasting impact. Many people from this town and others who helped him, pilgrims who came to know him as well as the reporters that published his initiatives and undertakings — all of these bear witness to his tireless efforts. Indeed, it was at the shrine in Luján that Fr. Salvaire projected himself as an exemplary priest, an eloquent preacher, a selfless catechist, a tireless promoter of Marian devotion, an organizer of great pilgrimages, a reporter, a historian, an initiator of social and charitable works, and, finally, an architect who planned and began the construction of the monumental basilica.⁶

On two different occasions, many people publicly and in writing expressed their thoughts about the priestly personality of this illustrious son of St. Vincent de Paul: the 25th anniversary of his priestly ordination, 14 June 1896, and his death, 4 February 1899.

In the pages of the magazine that he created, *La Perla del Plata*, we find abundant material about his life, e.g., homilies, discourses,

where he was rector of the diocesan seminary, to Fr. A. Brignardelli, then in charge of the Shrine of Luján, he said: "... What a terrible loss, not only for the members of the Congregation of the Mission, even though he is without doubt *la flor de los Lazaristas del Río de la Plata*, but for the whole country. My God, what will become of the Basilica and his other important works? Where will we find someone with such strength and courage to finish all that remains to be done? All of Luján and Buenos Aires join with you in your grief. I truly believe that the train today will not leave without bringing everyone from San Juan to assist at his burial and accompany you in your sorrow" (*ibid.*, 19 February 1899, no. 475, 135). Others added to the above-mentioned title and said that he was also *la flor de los Lazaristas de Sudamérica* [the flower of the Vincentians of South America] (*ibid.*, no. 487, 14 May 1899, 342).

⁵ Antonio Scarella synthesizes the meritorious work of Fr. Salvaire in Luján in the following words: "Apostle of devotion to Our Lady of Luján. Its historian. Promoter of her coronation. Initiator of the basilica project. Builder of the high school. Founder of the magazine *La Perla del Plata*, the first hospital, the Circle of Catholic Workers, and the Conference of the Ladies of St. Vincent. He worked in Luján for more than 25 years" (*Historia de Nuestra Señora de Luján*, 346).

⁶ *La Perla del Plata*, no. 525, 4 February 1900, 67-78.

articles, letters, etc. In writing a brief synthesis that points out his most outstanding qualities, we present below a commentary that was entitled “*Reminiscences from the Past.*” This article was published, on the first anniversary of his death, in the paper *La Verdad* whose director was the distinguished Julio Jordán. It was taken, in turn, from a “loose transcription” in *La Nación* in 1887 on the occasion of the celebration of the Pontifical Coronation in Luján.

We have selected this account for three reasons: it expresses the powerful impact that Salvaire and his work produced in the press at that time (not simply among his friends and collaborators); it presents him at the time of his greatest pastoral creativity; and finally, it points to the transcendence that his priestly labor entailed for the Church in Argentina. The reporter, writing about the events that occurred at the time of the coronation of the Image, on 8 May 1887, wrote:

... The magnificent way in which the Church was adorned, its historical chromolithograph inscriptions, the order and distribution of functions — all of this is due to the inspired historian of the Virgin of Luján, Reverend Fr. Salvaire, who with untiring zeal knew how to bring about the four works that immortalize his name in the annals of the South American Church: the National Shrine, the History of Our Lady of Luján, the Pontifical Coronation of the Image and his apostolic preaching.... His virtues are like the perfume of the modest violet which, though hidden beneath the foliage, is perceived from afar. Fr. Salvaire is a man whose facial expression reveals his intelligence and goodness. During the festivities of Luján he has been — and without a doubt always will be — the friend in whom all, collaborators and strangers, learned and uneducated, Catholics and liberals, reporters and country folk have found someone willing to meet their needs, always animated by a spirit of evangelical charity without the least affectation. One never saw him annoyed nor much less showing himself upset in the midst of the large crowds that wanted to invade and know everything. Fr. Salvaire realized his dream of the Basilica in the Republic of Argentina and of a National Shrine to Our Lady of Luján because he had great faith, which, as the Apostles to the Gentiles says, is able to move mountains from one place to another.

But there is another side to his life, one that is often overshadowed by his “Luján ministry”; namely, his missionary work among the Indians of the “pampas” who settled near the present-day cities of Azul and Bragado. This experience, though lasting only two years (1874-1876), was quite intense, selfless and had a profound impact on the evangelization work of that era. It offered the national

government an alternative: the Indians could be integrated into "civilized life" by the peaceful system of missions or reservations (chapel, school, organized work) with the purpose of avoiding using a simple "political offensive," which hoped to achieve the subjection of the Indian tribes by military campaigns of persecution and the taking of prisoners.

In this sense, Fr. Salvaire became part of that group of priests who collaborated closely with the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Federico Aneiros, in giving shape to this pacific missionary outreach. This initiative began among some gentle and submissive Indian villages; later, when a certain development was reached and there were sufficient personnel, it was extended to the interior of the country, the way to Salina Grandes and Carmen del Patagones, in the direction of the distant region of Patagonia.

This aspect of Fr. Salvaire's life, so rich in evangelical experiences and commitments, and in deep humanitarian tradition, was unnoticed by many of his contemporaries. Even today, the work of Fr. Salvaire is practically ignored by everyone except members of his Congregation and some specialists in this area.

At this moment, as the centennial of his death draws near and because of the great esteem that we have for him, I decided to study this aspect of his ministry. I examined his personal papers and supporting documentation (Archives of the Provincial House of the Congregation of the Mission in Argentina, Archives of the Basilica of Luján, Archives of the General Curia of the Vincentians in Rome), as well as newspapers from that era that reported his activities and journeys.

Abundant material was gathered together, enough to write more than one page about his work among the Indians. Therefore as a modest contribution to the centennial celebration mentioned above, I have published two extensive works, hoping to keep alive the memory of this venerable son of St. Vincent de Paul. In following the teaching of St. Vincent, he knew how to reveal a compassionate heart and a merciful soul to these "new poor," the Indians of the Pampas Plains. My books are entitled: *El Padre Jorge María Salvaire y la Familia Lazos de Villa Nueva. Un episodio de cautivos en Leubucó y Salinas Grandes. En los orígenes de la Basílica de Luján (1866-1875)*, Ed. Paulinas, Buenos Aires, 1999, 669 pages; and *En los Toldos de Catriel y Railef. La obra misionera del Padre Jorge María Salvaire en Azul y Bragado (1874-1876)*, Buenos Aires, 2002, 1042 pages.

I am in the process of preparing a third book dedicated to the life of Fr. Salvaire: an account of the period that begins with the completion of his missionary activity in Azul (1876) until his sudden death in Luján (1899). Several times I questioned myself about the title for this work. I think the following title is most appropriate:

De los Toldos a Luján. El Padre Jorge María Salvaire, Párroco de Luján y Capellán de la Virgen (1876-1899). This title is sufficiently broad so that I can include the various pastoral and cultural works that he undertook when he returned to Luján, including his missionary activity in Uruguay. This was also the era when his mind and heart were set on the realization of his dream: the construction of a great basilica in the French neo-gothic style, destined to house, as in a precious jewelry box, the sacred image of Our Lady of Luján, which he called “La Perla del Plata,” Patroness of Argentina.

God willing, with the publication of this work, the “historical trilogy” will be complete. My purpose in writing this book is to publicize the life of the unforgettable Fr. Salvaire. I am encouraged by the fact that in the not-too-distant future the Congregation of the Mission contemplates the possibility of introducing his cause for beatification.

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(CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M., translator)