

# A Young People's Saint

Chiara Luce Badano

Brendan Leahy

The writer is professor of Systematic Theology at St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Ireland. He is a member of the Advisory Committee on Ecumenism of the Irish Bishops' Conference and member of the Inter-Church Meeting. Among his publications are *Ecclesial Movements and Communities: Origins, Significance and Issues* (New York: New City, 2011).

1. Address of Pope Benedict at the Meeting of Young People and Families, Palermo, 3 October, 2010.

2. The material for this article is based particularly on three publications: Michele Zanzucchi, *Chiara Luce – A life lived to the full* (New York: New City Press, 2004); Franz Coriasco, *Dai Tetti in Giù: Chiara Luce Badano raccontata dal basso* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2010); (cont next page)

In Italy they speak of the 'Chiara Luce phenomenon', referring to the recently beatified teenager, Chiara Luce Badano. Her story has attracted great attention not just in Italy but around the world. Clips relating to her abound on YouTube. Websites carry her story along with interviews with her parents now in their 70s. Pope Benedict has spoken of her on a number of occasions.<sup>1</sup> The Youth Forum at the 2012 International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin has been entitled the 'Chiara Luce Youth Space.'

Why does she attract such interest? One reason probably is that she is very close to us in time. She died only twenty years ago on 7 October 1990. So there are photographs of her in modern clothes, speaking on a mobile phone, going on holidays in the sun, acting the clown. We see her dressed in jeans, tea-shirts and sneakers. She was into U2. And yet, in the everyday simple things her holiness shines out. It would have to be added that in any account of her story, the listener cannot but be struck by the significance of her parents, relations and friends along her journey. Indeed, Chiara Luce Badano presents us with an example of a communitarian spirituality lived to the end.

During a visit to Sicily in 2010, Pope Benedict invited young people and families to get to know her because 'her life was short, but it is a wonderful message.'<sup>1</sup> This article is a brief presentation of key moments of her spiritual journey.<sup>2</sup>

'I CAN'T GIVE BROKEN TOYS TO THE POOR'

A fascinating question in approaching the story of any saint is when did his or her holiness start? Given the last phase of Chiara Luce's life was marked by a severe and aggressive form of cancer, it might seem that this heroic phase of facing and transforming her illness was the defining period of sanctity. And yet, reviewing her life it seems holiness started early in life and was then built up in daily small conquests and a growing realization of the destiny to which she was called.

Born on October 29, 1971 in Sassello, a remote town of 1500 inhabitants in the province of Savona, Italy, she was to be the one and only child of Maria Teresa and Ruggero Badano. They had spent eleven years waiting for that gift. The family background was of modest circumstances, her mother, a biscuit factory worker, and her father a lorry driver. From her dad (who later in life would feel he had been unduly severe on her as a parent when she was young) she

and the text of François-Marie L  thel's talk about her during the 2011 Lenten Retreat that he preached to Pope Benedict and the Roman Curia, published in *Fran  ois-Marie L  thel, La Luce di Cristo nel Cuore della Chiesa: Giovanni Paolo II e la Teologia dei Santi* (Vatican, 2011), pp. 251-269.

I also refer to the *Positio super virtutibus*, the document prepared for the cause of beatification and quoted by L  thel in his book.

was to inherit love for the truth, the search for justice and attentiveness to the poor. From her mother she learned gentleness, tenacious perseverance and great faith. Chiara Luce would love to get her parents to tell the story of how they met and fell in love, always ribbing her mother that she had played hard to get.

Small episodes mark her childhood that show a family setting that set her on the right track. One day her mother suggested to the young Chiara that she should give away some of the mountain of toys she had amassed. But the child replied: 'no, Mom, they're mine'. Her mother left it at that and continued what she was at in the kitchen. Then she heard the child's voice, 'this one, yes, that one, no; this one yes, that one, no...'. The mother went to the room and found the child dividing out her toys, putting the new ones into a box. The mother exclaimed: 'but the toys you are giving away are your new toys.' To which Chiara Luce replied: 'I can't give broken toys to the poor.'

Her youthful dreams revealed a maturity well beyond her years. For instance, in her first essay at school she wrote: 'I dream of a day in which the children of slaves and their masters will sit together at the table of fraternity just like Jesus with the apostles.' Amazingly at seven and a half years of age she wrote a reflective piece that has a real existential feel to it: 'one day you are born. No one asked you if you wanted to live. But now you are living. Sometimes it's nice for you. Sometime's instead you are sad. There are many things you don't understand. You are alive, but why are you alive? With your hands you must help to re-order the world. With your mind you must try to distinguish good and evil. With your heart you must love people and help them when you can. There are many tasks that await you. They await our hands, our mind, and our heart.'

#### LEARNING THE A,B,C OF THE GOSPEL

As a gift for her first communion, the local priest gave her a copy of the Gospel. It didn't gather dust on a shelf. Admittedly, already as a young child, she had been captured by the stories of the Gospel. A simple episode indicates this. When Chiara was 5 years old, her mother asked her to help in the kitchen and the young child promptly and decisively answered no. A short time later she returned to her mother asking her about the Gospel story about two brothers, one who had said yes but didn't do what was asked of him, and the other who had said no but eventually did do something. On the basis of this story, the young child decided to give a hand in the kitchen.

When she was nine she made a renewed decision to take the Gospel more seriously. She decided to learn to live the Gospel just as you

would learn the alphabet, letter by letter, sentence by sentence. In 1985 she would write: 'I have discovered the Gospel in a new light. I have understood that I haven't been an authentic Christian because I haven't been living it deeply. Now I want to make of this magnificent book the only goal of my life. I don't and I cannot remain illiterate of such an extraordinary message. Just as it is easy for me to learn the alphabet so likewise I must learn to live the Gospel.'<sup>3</sup>

3. *Positio*, Volume I,  
p. 439.

This commitment arose after she and her mother had attended a summer gathering called the 'Mariapolis' organised by the Focolare. They were struck by its atmosphere and so decided to keep in touch. Chiara Luce now began to live the Gospel not just on her own but together with others. Through her teenage years she travelled to other towns to meet up with other friends who had decided to share their holy journey to God together. And it wasn't all prayers! She had a great friend, Chicca, and together with other friends they listened to Bruce Springsteen and U2, had plenty of laughs and went on holidays together.

In little ways she became someone who promoted unity around her. At times even at home she took on the role of educator like the occasion when she wisely advised her father: 'Dad, when you get up early in the morning, don't draw the blinds so that Mom can continue sleeping!' Or when she convinced her mother to make up after a row that had continued for some time with her sister in law. Also in the parish, on the basis of the Gospel phrase 'he who hears you hears me', she lived obedience when the priest wanted her to stay for a parish gathering that coincided with another meeting that she had really been looking forward to attending.

Her strong character and will power combined with an ability to think deeply about things and then act. So when she received money for her confirmation she gave it away to the poor. Once during a fund-raising event she gave away her favourite watch because it was worth a lot. Her parents gave her another one but that too she gave away within a few days! At school she could be found defending Pope John Paul II in class when a teacher criticised him for travelling too much: 'the Pope travels in order to evangelise' was her reply.

And she would pay a price for trying to take seriously her commitment to live the Gospel. Some nicknamed her the 'little nun'. Such remarks caused suffering but she accepted it without closing in on herself and kept in good relations with all. Other sufferings too were taken on the chin. Like when the school she was attending insisted she be kept back a year because of a maths exam she failed.

*And she would pay a price for trying to take seriously her commitment to live the Gospel.*

Perhaps she would be  
an air hostess.



Chiara Luce Badano  
1971-1990

Along with her great love of sport (tennis, swimming, skating), she was an avid reader. Her books included Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Goethe's *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, Joseph Roth's *Legend of the Holy Drinker*, Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. And her preferred book was Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*.

As her adolescent years progressed her dreams of the future were maturing. Perhaps she would be an air hostess. Or maybe a paediatrician who would go to Africa to help children in the third world. Certainly, she would have a family with many children.

#### THE '25 MINUTE' DECISION

One day in Autumn 1988, while playing tennis, Chiara suddenly experienced shoulder pain. Soon she was undergoing a series of intense tests that were to provide drastic news – osteosarcoma, a severe and aggressive form of bone cancer. Later she would comment, 'the illness arrived just at the right moment, otherwise I might have been lost.' But her initial reaction as a young seventeen year old cannot have been simple.

Her mother tells of the day tests made it clear how serious the situation was. It was June 14, 1989 when Chiara once again was admitted to the hospital in Turin for a few days. Following a conversation with the consultant, she realized the gravity of her illness and that there was little hope of recovery. Chiara's mother recalls seeing Chiara approach the house where they were staying, walking slowly in pensive mood. As she entered, the mother opened up a conversation, but Chiara stopped her, saying 'not now...'. The young girl went to her room in silence. The mother had the wisdom not to interfere. Twenty five minutes passed. And then the door opened and a smiling Chiara Luce re-appeared, saying to her mother: 'Now, Mom, let's talk.' She had made her decision. She had said her 'yes'. And there was going to be no turning back. Her mother noticed a new radiance in her face and words. Whatever battle had gone on in her heart was now resolved in a deep conversation with the Lord.<sup>4</sup>

Years earlier, in 1983, after a young people's meeting, Chiara Badano had written to Chiara Lubich, the founder of the *Focolare* to share a new joy in her life. In her letter she referred to a point of the *Focolare* spirituality of unity that focuses on Jesus' cry on the Cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' as the moment when Jesus reunited us with God and with one another. For a member of the *Focolare*, to choose to love Jesus Forsaken means to try to love him in the difficult circumstances and situations of life. In this light, Chiara Luce wrote: 'I rediscovered Jesus Forsaken in a special way. I experienced him in every person that passed by me. This year I have

4. *Positio*, I, p. 35.

made a new resolution to see Jesus Forsaken as my spouse and to welcome him joyfully and, above all, with all the love possible.<sup>5</sup>

5. *Positio* II, p. 413.  
See also Zanzucchi,  
Chiara Luce, p.22.

A few months later, just after her twelfth birthday, she wrote, 'The most important thing for me during this congress was the rediscovery of Jesus Forsaken. Before, I lived it rather superficially, and I accepted him in order afterwards to feel the joy. In this congress I realised that I had got it all wrong. I shouldn't just exploit him, but love him for himself. I have discovered that Jesus Forsaken is the key to unity with God. I want to choose him as my spouse and get ready for when he comes – to prefer him.'<sup>6</sup>

6. *Ibid.*

And now he had come not only in small ways but in a major way. It is impressive to see how much Chiara Luce remained faithful to him throughout the whole course of her illness. In doing so, she expressed her love for God and her love for others. When Cardinal Saldarini of Turin visited her in hospital, he was struck by Chiara's face and said: 'You have a marvellous light in your eyes. How come?' After a moment's pause, Chiara replied: 'I try to love Jesus.'<sup>7</sup>

7. Zanzucchi, *Chiara Luce*, p. 38.

All those who knew her prayed for a miracle. It was proposed that Chiara Luce might go to Lourdes, but her reply was: 'If Our Lady wants to do a miracle for me, she can do it here too. And if that is not the will of God I ask Mary for the strength to never slacken.' To her father who was clearly burdened by the worry of the situation, Chiara Luce advised, 'you've got to break it up into pieces, Dad, live each moment well in union with Jesus.'

161

The wisdom she manifested struck many. In a school essay she had written on Virgil's *Georgics*, she wrote: 'Often people don't live life because they are immersed in times that don't exist – either in the memory of or regret about the past, or projected towards the future. In reality the only time we possess is the present moment that should be lived fully, making the most use of it.... When we look back over past years we realise how much time was wasted and how we could have used it.... People can give a meaning to everything by going outside their selfishness and giving value to every action done in favour of others. When you think of it, everyone works already for others: even the worker putting a bolt in place or a farmer sowing in the field, and yet often the truest and most important meaning of work is lost.'<sup>8</sup>

...the only time we  
possess is the present  
moment that should be  
lived fully,....

8. Coriasco, *Dai Tetti*,  
76-77

On her 18th birthday she received many money gifts. But she commented, 'it's no use to me, I have everything.' When her mother asked what she should do with the money, Chiara Luce responded: 'listen to the Holy Spirit, the money is his and He will tell you'. Eventually the money was sent to a project in Chad for street children.

young people. Chiara Luce Badano's life speaks of a holiness that is lived in the family, in a movement, with friends. We go to God together.

During her illness, Chiara Luce kept great contact by letter with Chiara Lubich. At a certain point the younger Chiara asked Chiara Lubich to suggest a line of scripture that might guide her. The phrase chosen was: 'Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit' (John 15:5). And it does really seem that this young saint's life has borne much fruit and is continuing to do so.

Twenty-five thousand young people attended her beatification and a common sentiment expressed by many was their discovery that holiness is possible also for them. As Cardinal Amato observed during the beatification ceremony, Chiara Luce conveys 'a message of optimism and hope. Even today, young people can be holy.'<sup>15</sup>

15. Quoted in Megan Bodenschatz, 'A Celebration of Life, Love and Light' in *Living City* 49 (2010), p. 10.

\* \* \* \* \*

(Continued from page 151)

Henriette Coppens, and the Secretary General, Adèle Cahier. Sophie accepted that the task was complex and offered her a possible way to resolve, or at least alleviate, tensions:

I cannot recommend enough that you use all your religious spirit and tact when dealing with them, especially Mère Henriette. Be the same with Mère Cahier. She really is working on her character. For your part, do the same. Normally we do not become perfect in a day. Imitate the silence of Jesus, the eternal Word. It is so true that silence is indeed more excellent than anything we could say, when we are not obliged to speak out.<sup>9</sup>

Sophie Barat knew how roles take centre stage and create power cliques within a community or school, and that this applied not just to leaders but to all office holders: the headmistresses, cooks, infirmarians, farmers, treasurers. Sophie called on them to remain conscious of the fundamental purpose of their lives, asking that they be honest with themselves and with her. When Marie de Tinsseau wrote frankly about her struggles, Sophie responded warmly:

Learn to appreciate this divine Light and walk only in its radiance. It will cost you, without any doubt, to watch over your natural impulses and not allow them to dominate or take action. But the practice of watching how you act, which you must consent to without limit and in complete inner freedom, will make this habit easy and reassuring.<sup>10</sup>

Such inner guidance was a call to a life of prayer and contemplation, and this will be taken up in the next article. (To be continued)

9. SB to Eliane Cuénot, La Ferrandière, December 29, (1851).

10. SB to Marie de Tinsseau, Paris, September 18, 1858.