

Leopold Mandić: Jubilee Year Saint of Mercy and Reconciliation, Personal and Ecclesiastical
Michael H. Crosby, OFM Cap.

Between this February 8-14, including Ash Wednesday, as part of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis has decided to stress the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The involves bringing to St. Peter's the relics of two of our Capuchin Franciscan brothers/saints who heard confessions for many hours each day for many years. The first is universally known: Padre Pio of Pietrelcina (1887-1968), who lived and ministered in the south of Italy at San Giovanni Rotondo. The second is lesser-known: Padre Leopold of Castelnuovo (1866-1942). Because so much is known about Padre Pio (whether factual or mythical) and because the event is already placing great stress on Padre Pio, this article will highlight the unique life of Padre Leopold and why, in his wisdom, Pope Francis has found in him an example of how the Sacrament of Reconciliation can be transformative in peoples' lives insofar as the mercy received in this Sacrament invites us to be ministers of mercy and reconciliation in our world today.

Given his birth in modern-day Montenegro, Leopold was highly influenced by the tensions between the Serbs and the Croats as well as those between the Latin Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. This awareness led him to devote his whole life to the ministry of ecumenism between these religions. Although his dream was to work directly to bring about their reconciliation his health kept him from being a missionary of reunion. Instead he heard confessions, always having in mind the larger reconciliation of the Churches of the Eastern world from where he was born and the Western world which became his adopted world. Whether in one or the other, he lived by one great saying of the Jesus of John's Gospel: "that all may be one." That room in a city in the West called Padua always housed his Eastern World where he heart never left. Thus he would say: "I am like a bird in a cage," he used to say, "but my heart is always beyond the seas.

The cage where he spent most of his adult life as a Capuchin was a confessional housed in a tiny room between the Capuchin's friary and the church of the Holy Cross in Padua. Isolated from daylight or fresh air, at the time of Leopold it was bitterly cold in winter and stifling hot in summer. Except for a battered armchair in one corner, a crucifix on the chipped plaster wall and an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the only other thing there is a large prie-dieu aged before its time from overuse. Here for almost 40 years, for 8 to 16 hours a day, the bent, bearded little priest heard the confessions of tens of thousands of souls. These included professors and students, politicians and peasants, religious and priests. One of these was Albino Luciani, the future Pope John Paul

Years later (1978) Luciani gave a talk entitled "Leopold Mandić and God's Mercy." He recalled that, while he was a young priest on a retreat in Belluno, he heard that Father Leopold would be hearing confessions there. By then Leopold widely known as a confessor who showed wonderful mercy to his penitents. According to Luciani, "I went to confession. He listened and gave me some advice. I was impressed by the fact that [between confessions] he was reading a book on ascetical theology that had just appeared. You could see that he did not

want to waste even a minute between one penitent and another; he was keeping himself up—to-date and studying.” After this Luciani told how he carried the photo of this small and stooped white-bearded friar in his wallet for the rest of his life. After Leopold’s death, he often stopped at the Capuchin church in Padua to pray at his tomb.

The Early Life of Bogdan Mandić

Castelnuovo di Cattaro (now Herceg Novi) was once part of the Province of Dalmatia (now Montenegro), which was, in 1866, part of the Austrian empire. The Capuchin Franciscan friars of the Province of Venice had been active since 1688 when the area was under the rule of the Republic of Venice. There, in Castelnuovo, Peter and Dragica (Zarević) Mandić, who were part of a fishing family, gave birth to their twelfth child on May 12. They named him Bogdan, Slavic for “the God [Bog]-given one [dan].”

During his whole life, beginning as a child that was physically malformed from birth (in adulthood he was less than 4.5 feet), Bogdan was frail and suffered from stuttering. However he had an inner strength that never allowed these physical ailments nor his small stature impede his dream. He had bigger concerns on his mind. Many of Bogdan’s playmates were Croatians whose ancestors had split centuries before from the Catholic Church. Though he was one of them by birth he was separated from them by his Catholic baptism. By the time he was 16 he felt called to spend his lifetime to bring about reconciliation between East and West. He noted: “I consecrate myself for the salvation of the beloved dissidents,” he wrote. “I will become a missionary to them!”

Bogdan decided that the best way he could realize his dream would be to follow St. Francis of Assisi as a member of the Capuchin Order who ministered in Castelnuovo. He went to Italy and, despite his small size and significant stuttering, on November 16, 1882, was received into their Seraphic Seminary in Udine. On April 20, 1884 he entered the novitiate at Bassano del Grappa, getting the name “Leopold.”

On May 4, 1885, Frater Leopold made his first vows. He then moved to the house of philosophy in Padua. Here his sense of calling to be a reconciler between East and West became more pronounced. Thus he wrote in 1887: “I, Brother Leopold, have understood the plan of divine grace today: I have been called to the salvation of my people, the Slavonic people.” In another place he noted, “I am chosen for the salvation of the Oriental people, that is, of the separated Orientals.”

After pronouncing his solemn vows in 1888, he went to Venice to complete his course of studies in Theology. During this time in the seminary he also studied various Slavic languages that he might be able to communicate to the people he dreamed of serving. He also taught Croatian to his fellow Capuchin seminarians. There he was ordained a priest on September 20, 1890.

Early Ministry as a Capuchin Priest

When Leopold was asked to indicate the ministry he preferred, he said his great longing was to return all separated Orthodox to the Catholic Church. This meant returning to his homeland and the Capuchin mission there. However, they told him that, because of his frail constitution, his speech defect, and his overall bad health (including stomach ailments, poor eyesight and arthritis), they felt obliged to deny his request.

Even though this shattered a life-long dream, his disappointment wouldn't be great enough to conquer him. His body might have to remain in Italy. But his heart would be in the East, like a bird in a cage. Admitting his frustration but acknowledging his frailty, he made a commitment "to devote all the actions of my life for the return of the separated Orientals to Catholic Unity. In the meantime: each soul who needs my ministry will, in a way, be the Orient for me." From this saying it is clear that his ministry of mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the micro-level of each person was viewed by him as part of a broader ministry to bring about the broad reconciliation between the Churches of the East and West.

During the first few years as a priest, Leopold was transferred to different places in the Province of Venice. In 1906 he was sent to Padua where, except for about a year during the war, he would remain for the rest of his life. That year was spent in a prison situation because he refused to renounce his nationality.

His was first assigned to be director of the Capuchin students studying philosophy and theology. He also taught patrology. Here, he thought, were other Capuchins whom he could inspire to fulfill his dream. Thus he wrote: "I will use every means in my power to encourage young apostles who will engage in this work of the reunion of the churches." In his formal conferences and informal sharing with the students he kept repeating his dream. This was communicated in other ways as well. A piece of paper with the date "1914" noted: "The whole end of my life is to gain the return of the separated Orientals to Catholic Unity." Other notes made the connection between the sacrifice of the Mass and his desire that "all be one." "All the intension of my life," he wrote another time, "will be in union with the Holy Sacrifice." Elsewhere he noted, "Whenever I celebrate Mass, if I am not previously engaged . . . the whole fruit of the Holy Sacrifice will be for the return the separated Orientals to Catholic Unity."

The Capuchin form of life, especially in the houses of formation was quite austere and regimented. Nonetheless, both in his use of authority and in the style of his teaching, Leopold differed from his peers. His whole approach was defined not by the law but by mercy. Consequently this created tensions. This contributed to his abrupt removal in 1914. He was assigned to be a confessor in the adjacent Church of the Holy Cross. He was 48 years old.

Leopold's Ministry of Mercy and Reconciliation for the Reconciliation of the Churches

Here most of his waking hours were spent hearing the confessions of Padua's citizens as well as many pilgrims who had heard about the merciful way he treated penitents. In the words of Albino Luciani: "He was there in a tiny little room, freezing in winter, a furnace in summer.

There he became a saint. There he was ten, twelve, sometimes even eighteen hours a day." When the people came to celebrate the sacrament of God's mercy they experienced that mercy in the way Leopold dealt with them. That mercy made it much easier for people to confess. This is evident in a story told by Albino Luciani (whom, we noted above, became Pope John Paul I):

He welcomed the sinner like a brother, like a friend, and for this reason it was not a burden to go to confession to him. One person who went to him had not been to confession for twenty years. When he had finished, Fr. Leopold got up, took his hand and thanked him: "Thank you, thank you, for coming; you have agreed to have me

When he was accused of being too merciful in assigning penances, Leopold would respond, "If the Lord wants to accuse me of showing too much leniency toward sinners, I'll tell him that it was he who gave me this example, and I haven't even died for the salvation of souls as he did." He also said: "Some say that I am too good. But if you come and kneel before me, isn't this a sufficient proof that you want to have God's pardon? God's mercy is beyond all expectation" In the same vein of mercy Leopold would often remark, "Be at peace; place everything on my shoulders. I will take care of it." And for those who did deserve a greater penance, he explained he would be merciful toward them but hard on himself: "I give my penitents only small penances because I do the rest myself." At nighttime, he would spend hours in prayer, explaining: "I must do penance for my penitents."

In October, 1923, it was announced that Father Leopold would be transferred to Fiume, part of Dalmatia. He would be hearing confessions in the Slavic tongue. Upon hearing of his transfer he went into the church next door filled with joy. He recited the *Te Deum* in front of the statue of the Blessed Virgin. After more than 40 years the caged bird would be freed to fly from his cage.

However, within a few days, after the people of Padua heard the news of his transfer, they besieged his superiors for his return. Among these was Monsignor Elia dalla Costa, who later became Cardinal of Florence. Because of the great commotion, the superiors relented. Within a week of his transfer Leopold was told to return to Holy Cross Church. His loss was their gain. Although deeply disappointed, Father Leopold made another offering of himself for the unity of the churches under the patronage of Our Lady whom he called his "parona benedeta" (blessed patron). He wrote:

Most Blessed Virgin Mary:

I brother Leopold Mary Zarevich, through the grace of Our Lord and according to the wish of our Seraphic Father, St. Francis, within the limits and in order that I might accomplish the mission you have entrusted to me concerning the Oriental people, make a vow to labor for the eternal welfare of this people.

You can see in what circumstances my life has developed and with what anxiety I am oppressed. Please, I beg of you, take this cause into your hands. Your most humble servant, Fra. Leopold

Back at Holy Cross Church, beginning with daily Mass the people of the East were on his mind. There he presented himself "as a victim for the Redemption of my brethren through the unbloody Sacrifice of Christ which I offer daily on the holy altar." After that he would sit each day for 12 to 15 hours in his old rough chair hearing people's confessions, offering them the mercy of the God of both East and West. As he sat there patiently, he found a way in the Sacrament of Reconciliation to realize his larger mission of reconciliation between East and West: "Each soul who needs my ministry will, in a way, be the Orient for me." Or, as one of his penitents, Albino Luciani, would say: "His East was that little confessional."

Toward the end of his life Leopold contracted a form of esophageal cancer. On July 30, 1942, while preparing for the liturgy, he collapsed on the floor. The friars took him to his room (his cell) where he received the sacrament of the sick. While they sang the "Salve Regina" to the Mother of Mercy, as they prayed the words, "O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary," Leopold died.

During the bombing of World War II the church and part of the friary where Leopold lived were demolished, but Leopold's cell and confessional were left unharmed. Earlier Leopold had predicted this "The church and the friary will be hit by the bombs, but not this little cell. Here God exercised so much mercy for people, it must remain as a monument to God's goodness."

I conclude this reflection with the words how the future Pope John Paul II ended his 1976 sermon about Father Leopold Mandić: "above all we should try to imitate his great example of a good and holy life."

Michael Crosby, OFM Cap. is based in Milwaukee. His latest book is *Fruit of the Spirit: Pauline Mysticism for the Church Today* (Orbis, 2015).