By Maurizio Brunetti

"At the Cross Her station keeping, stood the mournful Mother weeping, close to Jesus to the last." (*Stabat Mater dolorosa iuxta Crucem lacrimosa, dum pendebat Filius*.)

It is the beginning of the *Stabat Mater*, one of the four sequences which survived the liturgical reform of 1969, recited during the Mass on September 15, feast of Our Lady of Sorrows.

The twenty heart-rending verses, in triple-lined rhyme, which compose the prayer, date back to the 13th Century, and are traditionally attributed to Blessed Jacopo de Benedictis – better known as Jacopone da Todi (1236-1306).

It was during the course of the Middle Ages, thanks in a special way to the work of the Order of the Servants of Mary (the Servites) that the devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows took a consistent form. The realization of its relevance in the life of the Catholic Church continued to develop in the following centuries. In 1814, Pope Pius VII (1800-1823) decided to insert the feast of the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin in the Roman Calendar, to be celebrated during the third week of September, extending to the entire Latin Church the formulary of the Divine Office granted in 1692 only to the Order of the Servants of Mary. The liturgical memorial of the Seven Sorrows was then "stabilized," by Pope Saint Pius X (1903-1914), placed on September 15, the day following the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

He who is accustomed to look for spiritual meanings in the composition of the liturgical year, sees in that proximity, the perfect union (also in suffering) of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary – singular Cooperator in the Redemption – Whose Maternity became universal, specifically under the Cross.

The popularity of the *Stabat Mater* which extends to all social classes and generations, is due above all, to the widespread, centuries-old custom of singing one or more verses between stations, during the *Via Crucis*.

The tenderness of its verses has inspired dozens of composers, so much so that today we can count more than two hundred different musical settings. Among these stand out, for deserved notoriety, that composed for soprano, contralto and controtenor, string orchestra and figured bass, by the twenty-six year old Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-1736); who already gravely ill with tuberculosis, finished it just in time at the Capuchin friary in Pozzuoli, where he spent the last days of his earthly life.

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The composer from Jesi, who had his artistic formation in Habsburgian Naples, and had already achieved a certain fame thanks to the operatic production of a single quinquennial, when the *Stabat Mater* was commissioned by the Knights of Our Lady of Sorrows (*Cavalieri della Vergine dei dolori*) belonging to the Neapolitan Confraternity of Saint Aloysius (*San Luigi*) of Palazzo. Published in London in 1749, the work was republished numerous times and its popularity grew, solidifying itself in all of Europe. Pergolesi's version was quickly understood not to be one (other) musical setting among many, but the *Stabat Mater* par excellence, leading various composers to write their own pieces, reusing its principal themes. Its musical significance also fascinated Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), who elaborated on Pergolesi's Psalm 51, the *Miserere* (BWV 1083).

Among the (recordings of) the live performances available on Youtube, I advise listening to the one conducted by Nathalie Stutzmann at the Royal Castle in Fontainebleau, France in 2014, on the condition that one doesn't let himself be distracted by the soloists' facial gestures.

Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* opens with the exposition on the part of the orchestra, of the first theme, perhaps the most famous. It is the same melodic line on which the soloists will sing, in imitative style, the verse *Stabat Mater dolorosa*. It's a piece that even filmmakers hostile to Christianity, like the Danish director Lars von Trier, have chosen to use in describing the pain of a pierced and resigned soul.

The structure of the sequence is substantially bipartite: the first eight verses are of a descriptive nature; with the verse *Eia Mater, fons amoris* begins a true prayer, instead, specifically to the Virgin: one asks Her for the grace to feel the violence of Her pain, to be able to weep with Her, that our heart burn with the love of that Son Who is subjected to torture and lashes for the sins of His people.

Even though moments in which Pergolesi employs a secular, operatic style are not lacking, (the *Quae maerebat*, for example," a sense of moving participation emerges in others (like in the *Quis est homo*). Intimate and sublime at the end, is the *largo assai* (very slow) movement, in the form of a duet like the first one, where some dissonances just hinted at and resolved (almost) immediately, symbolize the consternation of a soul before the prospect of (his own) death which however, turns into Christian hope for salvation: "While my body here decays, may my soul Thy goodness praise, safe in paradise with Thee." (*Quando corpus morietur, fac, ut animae donetur paradisi gloria*.)

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