

SERVANT OF GOD SERGIO BERNARDINI (1882-1966)

CHRISTIAN LAYMAN AND FATHER

Sergio Bernardini was born in 1882, in the town of Pavullo (Modena), in a family of small landholders; his parents were cultivators and owned a mill on the Panaro River. Gifted with practical intelligence, he easily learned different trades, so he was later called "the man of a hundred trades." Sergio received moral and religious education in his family, especially from his mother, a wise and strong woman. In 1927, at age 25, he married Emilia Romani. They almost immediately lost their first child. Then, at short intervals, he lost his father Giulio, his mother Cunegonda, his second son, his wife Emilia, his brother Ettore, and finally his last-born child, Gina. In the second family that he later founded, he will not say much about them; but he always remembered them in his daily prayer. Alone and with many debts because of the doctors' bills, the medicine and funerals, he rented out the mill and went to work as a bricklayer with his uncles; then, with a companion, he went to the United States, with the prospect of being able to earn more and paying off his debts. With the money earned in America, he covered all the debts and even offered a chandelier for the church, to give thanks to God. Then, he started working again as a bricklayer with his uncles. The pastor, who had great esteem for him, asked him to become a priest, but Sergio could not bring himself to start studying at age 32, and so he thought about getting married again. He met Domenica Bedonni (born in Verica on April 12th, 1889), the daughter of wealthy farmers, who owned a house and land. She was a cheerful girl, lively, very pious, active, and hardworking, with a third grade education. They married on May 19th, 1914, in the parish church of Verica and went to live in Barberino de Verica, on the small farm she had brought as a dowry. They spent their lives between family, work and the parish, with serenity, joy and gratitude to God.

In 13 years, Sergio and Domenica had ten children, eight girls and two boys, all welcomed as great gifts from God. They accepted and supported the religious and missionary vocation of six daughters and two sons. Participating personally in their spirituality, in 1927, they became Pauline cooperators and in 1937-38 tertiary Franciscans. They adopted an African seminarian, Felix Ade Job, who later became a priest in Nigeria, then Bishop and President of the Episcopal Conference. Another son, Giuseppe, became Archbishop of Izmir, Turkey. During the dramatic period of World War II, Sergio demonstrated his great faith in God and love of neighbor. The Germans captured him in a raid, but then released him because he was already old. After the war, the communists in Emilia Romagna, burning with hate against the Church, killed many priests and other prominent Christians. Sergio, for his open witness of faith, was put on the list of those who were to be eliminated after the forecast victory in the election of 1948. From 1950 to 1951, Sergio and Domenica nourished a desire to consecrate themselves to the Lord, by following more closely the example of their children, and to pray better and longer. Although dissuaded by their spiritual director, Father Cipriano Nellini, they nevertheless extended their prayer time and even spent time in religious houses.

In 1960, Sergio and Domenica began spending wintertime in Modena, with their daughter Maria, a nurse at the hospital. They devoted themselves to prayer and correspondence with the children who were abroad. In the last two years, the Servant of God fell ill with progressive arteriosclerosis. His physical and mental decline began in 1964, accompanied by a painful crisis of scruples. The patient prayed and maintained himself by talking with the priests. On October 12th, 1966, at 3:00 am, he died peacefully at home, in

Verica, in the presence of his wife and children, except Sister Agatha and Sister Amalia, who were missionaries, respectively in Australia and Brazil.