

Pope Francis has recalled childhood memories of the care given by the “silent angels” of the Little Sisters of the Assumption in a forward to a biography of the order’s founder.

By Richard Marsden

Pope Francis has recounted a childhood story in which his father’s anti-clerical work colleague “met the maternal face of the Church” when being cared for by a mother superior, which led him to become a defender of her religious order.

Writing a preface of a new book in the Italian language, the Pope explains how the man “punched” a friend who dared to criticise two nuns after the worker was healed from a serious infection thanks to the help of a Little Sister of the Assumption.

A novice held the infant pope in her arms

The striking story forms part of Pope Francis's forward to a biography of the order's founder, Father Stefano Pernet, by Italian journalist Paola Bergamini. In it, the pontiff also describes how he was held in the arms of a young novice from the Congregation who came to visit the family in Buenos Aires hours after his birth. Pope Francis has been in contact with the nun throughout his life, up "until she went to heaven a few years ago."

In his opening remarks to the book entitled "Il Vangelo guancia a guancia" (The Cheek to Cheek Gospel), the Pope writes: "I have many memories tied to these religious women who, as silent angels enter the homes of those in need, work patiently, look after, help, and then silently return to their convent. They follow their rule, pray and then go out to reach the homes of those in difficulty, becoming nurses and governesses, they accompany children to school and prepare meals for them."

The humble care to an atheist

Describing the dramatic story of his father's atheistic workmate, Pope Francis says the man was one of several workers who had come into Argentina after the Spanish Civil War and was a "rabid anticlerical". When he became ill after an infection, his body covered with wounds, the mother superior looked after the man for more than a month, despite his animosity towards the Church. The Little Sister "was quiet, she did her job, looked after the wounds, brought the children to school, prepared lunch, cleaned the house."

Days after the man returned to work, he and three or four companions saw some of the nuns in the street. The Pope recounts: "One of the friends said some bad words against them. So, my dad's working companion first punched him and then told him, 'You can say whatever you want against the priests and God, but nothing against Our Lady and against the sisters!' Can you imagine? He was an atheist, a priest-eater, yet he defended the nuns."

The man's change of attitude, the Pope explained, came because he "had seen Our Lady's smile in the face of that superior, that patient nun who went to heal him despite his imprecations."

Fr Pernet’s witness

Pope Francis also writes about the charism of Fr Pernet, a French priest who dedicated his life to supporting the poorest families in Paris and who was declared venerable in 1983. The Pope praises the founder’s “deeds of charity” which remind us that evangelisation “leads us to place our cheek onto the cheek of those who suffer, in body and spirit.”

The Pope continues: “By serving with patience and trusting only in the Lord, it can happen that even the hearts of the most distant people are touched. As Our Mother Mary teaches us, the only power capable of conquering the hearts of men and women is the tenderness of God.”

The Little Sisters of the Assumption, established in France by Fr Pernet in 1865, have communities in more than 25 countries across the world.

Bergamini’s 192 page book will hit bookshops from March 6 and will receive an official launch in Milan on March 8.