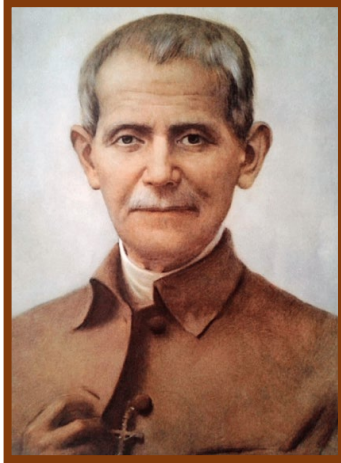


Venerable Simon Srugi
(Nazareth, Ottoman Empire) 1877-1943

*Infirmarian, there was no doctor in the area
and the sick came to him from the fifty villages around
Professed lay Salesian Brother*



Simon Srugi (Simaàn Srugi) was born on April 15, 1877, to Dàlleh, the daughter of Khàuali and Àz'ar es. Srugi (a saddler) in Nazareth in what was part of the Ottoman Empire. The family was Greek-Melkite Maronite Family. He was baptized and confirmed on May 10, 1877, by Father Àun Augustine Àun, in the Greek Melkite church on the site of the ancient synagogue where Jesus proclaimed fulfilled in Himself Isaiah 61:1-2 *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me: He has consecrated me with His chrism, and has sent me to announce the good news to the poor..."* (Lk 4:18). His godfather was Ayüb Butros, son of Jaacüb Ayüb, of the Latin rite.

Simon was orphaned at the age of 3 or 5 and initially raised by his grandmother. On December 8, 1888, when Simon was 11 years old, he was taken to an orphanage, called "the Bread House," in Bethlehem run by Fr. Antonio Belloni, an Italian priest of the Holy Family Congregation. In 1891, the Holy Family Congregation merged with the Salesians of Don Bosco and Simon met the Salesians, an order of which he would eventually become a member. From there, Simon was sent to Beit Gemal, an orphanage-agricultural school. In ancient times Beit Gemal was called caphargamala - Gamaliel's home. The Rabbi Gamaliel was a doctor of the law and the apostle Paul's teacher. It is in this town where the body of St. Stephen, the deacon and first Christian martyr, was buried. At this time, most of the residents in Beit Gemal were Muslims. On July 27, 1895, Simon entered the Salesian novitiate and on October 31, 1896 at age 19, he made his religious profession as a Salesian Brother and made his perpetual profession on September 20, 1900 at age 23.

The Bethlehem, Salesian House Archives records that Simon's birth occurred on June 27, 1878, that he entered the Salesian house in May 1888, was admitted as an aspirant to the Salesian Order in October 1892, accepted as a candidate novice on July 25, 1893, and as a lay brother worked as a baker.

The Salesian Provincial archives - register of Lay Brothers differ from the Salesian House Archives and the narrative above. They both record that Simone Srugi was born at Nazareth June 27, 1878. However he then entered 1st Salesian College at Bethlehem on December 8, 1888. In the Novitiate he was coadiutor tailor. In the Pious Society he worked as a baker, infirmarian and tailor. His ascription occurred on July 27, 1893 and he entered the novitiate at Beit Gemal on August 25, 1894. His first triennial religious profession: Cremisan October 31, 1896 at Bethlehem and his Perpetual profession at Bethlehem on September 20, 1900.

During his years as a Salesian, Brother Srugi was recognized for his holiness. He respected and obeyed his superiors. When working in the mill grinding the farmers' corn into flour, he insured that people received the right portion that was due. Since this was the place

where farmers negotiated their business, got news and very often quarreled, Simon found himself in the role of guardian, policeman and judge. The farmers said of him, "Srugi is Tamàm, the perfect man, After Allàh, there is Srugi!" When anyone disrespected the Muslim farmers, he reproved them gently, stating, "They too are sons of God!" He saw his job to be of service to his brothers. "I will devote myself in the most diligent way to avoid even the slightest sin, especially that of impatience or resentment." "I will bear and suffer everything silently." They called him Muallem, that is teacher.² He treated the orphan boys well. He would say:

They are poor little orphans. We have to take the place of their parents. We must help them, correct them, when they behave badly, but we must not irritate them, so that they don't feel their parents' absence and don't think of running away. We must educate them without having recourse to stick or hands or feet or harsh voice...

A past pupil, Mohammed Abu Laban, remembered the kindness with which he taught them calligraphy, guiding their hands "with such sweetness that not even a father could have done better."² He taught the boys to pray and manifested the reality of the divine presence through his own prayer life. When the boys would see him pass through the playground to church, they would spontaneously follow him to prayer. Watching the boys on the playground, he formed them in self-control and Christian forgiveness. "He said one day to a lively little Muslim boy, Dib El Aissi: 'Be humble with all, but bad with no one. If anybody beats you, forgive him and love him as a brother.'"²

Brother Simon Srugi was well loved for the exceptional nursing care he provided. "He was the infirmarian; there was no doctor in the area and the sick came to him from the fifty villages around."³ On fixed days a winding line of over 120 sick persons on foot, on camelback or on donkey came to his clinic. They called him "Hakim" (doctor). Sick people said of him: "Other doctors do not have the blessed hands of Brother Srugi. His hands have power and Allah's kindness."³ His knowledge of health care was empirical, derived from actual experience. He rarely made a mistake. He healed by natural means and gave heartily from his simple medicines. He was like the Good Samaritan of Jesus' story: he took pity on the unfortunate, cleaned them up, looked after them, treated them gently, telling them about Jesus and Mary.³ The poorest who could not pay him rewarded him by saying, 'Long live Jesus' which was his favorite greeting and, when coming from a Muslim person was a striking appreciation.²

As time went on Ottoman domination ended followed by the British mandate: Lord Balfour's Declaration. Curfews and martial law was implemented. Beit Gemal became a dangerous place full of guerillas. The Salesian Rector, Don Rosin was accused falsely of informing the police and beaten by the guerillas. When Brother Srgui arrived the head of the guerillas looked at him and said, "Young men! This is Muallem Srugi. Salute him, out of respect!"² In 1939 he developed malaria complicated by pneumonia and almost died.

He died in Beit Gemal on November 27, 1943 at 2 a.m. in his sleep at the age of 67. He was buried in Beitgemal near the glorious tomb of St. Stephen.³ His tombstone, enscribed after 1964 reads: "Here rests the body of the Servant of God Simon Srugi, Salesian Lay Brother, Nazareth April 27, 1877 Beitgemal November 27, 1943. As countryman of Jesus he saw Him everywhere. He gave himself to everybody in Christ, so as to reproduce in himself the meek and humble traits of the Good Samaritan."

Simon Srugi was declared venerable on April 2, 1993 by the decree of heroic virtues promulgated by His Holiness Pope St. John Paul II.⁴

They too are sons of God!²

*The works of the religious,
however small and simple they may be,
are precious and welcome to God,
when we do them to please Him.²*

Prayer to the Venerable Simon Srugi:

*Dear Simon, you spent your Salesian life pouring the balm of God's merciful love
upon afflicted bodies and souls, as a minister of healing and reconciliation.
Look to our distressed humanity today, especially in the Middle East,
and intercede for us with God that we too, imitating St. Stephen and Don Bosco,
may be signs and bearers of God's love to young and poor people everywhere,
and in so doing we may attain the perfection of our Christian and Salesian vocation.
Amen.*

Send report of graces received to: Fr. Pierluigi Cameroni, Postulator General of the Salesian
Congregation and for the Salesian Family. Sede Centrale Salesiana, Via Marsala 42, 00185 Rome
- Italy.

Prayer for the beatification of the Venerable Simon Srugi¹

*O Jesus, Word-made-flesh who, from Nazareth to Calvary,
revealed to humankind the eternal love of Your Father
by doing good to all,
may it please You to glorify Your humble fellow countryman
Simon Srugi, who so beautifully
showed forth Your goodness and loving-care
towards the poor and the suffering.
Trusting in Your mercy and in his intercession,
we pray You to grant us the grace [...]
which we are asking of You with all our heart.
Our Father + Hail Mary + Glory*

The following is the English language profile for the Venerable Simon (Simaan) Srugi provided
by Fr. Pierluigi Cameroni, SDB, Postulator General of the Salesian Congregation and for the
Salesian Family and published in “*Come stelle nel cielo*” (*Like Stars in the Heavens*):^{5, 6}

SIMON (SIMAAN) SRUGI,
SALESIAN BROTHER, VENERABLE

Declared Venerable: 2 April 1993

Simon Srugi, the last of ten children, was born in Nazareth on 27 April 1877. He was baptised a
fortnight after birth, and according to the Eastern custom was also confirmed. We have little

information about his childhood which he spent in Nazareth where the Son of God spent most of his life. This gap is due partly to the silence Simon Srugi wanted to maintain about his life. After both his father and mother died, he was taken in by his maternal grandmother. Poverty was common in Nazareth, and Simon Srugi lived in this condition until he was eleven years old. He attended primary school at the school run by the Franciscans and breathed in a generally religious atmosphere fostered by the several religious institutions around him: The De La Salle Brothers, Sisters of Nazareth, Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition, Franciscans of the Annunciation. The handful of testimonies we have with regard to his childhood and teenage years already describe the features that would be typical of his personality: calm, reserved, submissive and fully taken up with thoughts of God.

In 1888 he was brought to the orphanage in Bethlehem founded by Canon Antonio Belloni (who would become a Salesian) better known as “Abuliatama”, the father of orphans. Simon Srugi spent four years here, completing his schooling and learning a trade as a tailor. These were also important years for his religious formation. From Nazareth to Bethlehem: these two places and their respective mysteries spoke eloquently to the heart of this youngster who was already docile and religious by nature.

In 1892 he was sent to the Salesian house at Beitgemal where he would remain until his death. As soon as he set foot there, the charm of his kindness did not take long to bear fruit. Still just fifteen years old, this young lad's behaviour immediately drew the attention of every one there: “this boy does everything to perfection. Unlike the others he is extraordinary.”

It was not long before he felt the desire to become a Salesian. He did both his aspirantate and novitiate in the house, continuing to carry out the tasks entrusted to him. They were humble tasks like pumping water from the well for the many needs of the house: “Every turn of the wheel should be an act of love of God”, he later said. Work and piety! Just as Don Bosco wanted. It was his habit to complete his own work then go and help others; and when there was no one to help, he went into the church.

He professed his first vows in 1896 and four years later his perpetual vows. By now he was ready to live as a Salesian in absolute dedication to others. Among his first responsibilities was being an assistant to the orphans. He showed gifts of the good educator thanks especially to his good heart. He was then asked to lend a hand at the mill, a work and activity of primary importance for the house at Beitgemal. As always, he worked there silently and in hidden fashion. It is significant that his name never appears in the house chronicle and yet his service was so very much appreciated.

But the true area where he displayed his apostolate of charity, his love for anyone who was suffering, where he taught for hours and hours and day for so many years until his death, was the clinic. We need to say immediately that he had no certification for this, yet so many witnesses have been able to say that “the sick had more faith in him than they did in the doctors”. At the basis of this respect was undoubtedly his exceptional kindness. The clinic was the daily place, one could say, of his kindness, his patient charity shown to his neighbour but especially to poor Muslims, poor and sick people. He never showed annoyance at anybody: his way of treating people was loving, kind, silent. He won the hearts of people with the goodness of his soul, the charity of Christ. He was truly the Good Samaritan for everyone, the poor and the sick, and his charity knew no limits or pause. He gave of himself to the last bit of strength he had in him.

The work was enormous, because for a radius of 15 kilometres there were no doctors and around fifty villages that had the clinic at Beitgemal as their reference. At that time, malaria and other diseases raged, mostly due to lack of hygiene and extreme poverty. At some periods during the year, the pace was really exhausting. Yet he never sent anyone away for lack of time. When the flow of sick people was such that they became impatient, he did his best to calm them with kind words. Hours for medication especially in summer went from 8:30 a.m. until 2 or 3 p.m. at the point when Brother Srugi would leave the clinic, go to the chapel for a brief visit and then go directly to his room without even a bite of food, so tired was he.

Whatever he did was done for free. Some of the statistics found in the house chronicle speak volumes: 8,500 medications given out free in 1928; 10,200 in 1931; 11,400 in 1932; 7,250 in 1933. His charity never made any distinction between Christian and Muslim. The figure of this poor nurse, who had no other influence than his holiness, became more and more respected. The sick came from afar and had no means of travelling. They came on donkeys, camels, and they all wanted to be treated by him. They could have gone elsewhere, but they wanted to be cured by his holy and blessed hands. In fact, they considered him holy and attributed the healing to his great virtue and friendship with God, with Allah, more than to the medicine. This is what the Muslims thought.

Among Simon Srugi's gestures of charity was one that gave him him particular inner joy and he was visibly moved whenever speaking about it, an exception to his usual reserve: baptising infants when he was certain they were about to die. He baptised around 360 "little angels" – as he called them.

A very natural desire in the heart of a Salesian is to want to know about the very cradle of the Congregation: Turin. "Oh, that would be most fortunate for me!" Bro. Srugi exclaimed on one occasion when the offer was put to him. But it was enough for him to learn that the rector needed him for him to say with great detachment: "I renounce the opportunity, so I can see a more beautiful Madonna in Paradise." And there was no further opportunity for him to go to Italy.

The years from 1936-1939 were marked by Arab-Jewish terrorism. The Salesian house at Beitgemal was affected by this difficult time and was closely monitored by guerilla fighters. One day the rebels were wrongly of the view that the telephone had been made available to British police, and took revenge by attacking the rector of the house, Fr Mario Rosin, who had gone to hear the confessions of the Sisters. He was stoned to death on his return, and his body left beneath a pile of rocks! Some years earlier the small shrine built over the remains of St Stephen's tomb had been opened. He was the first Christian martyr and had been stoned to death: and now a similar tragic event had taken place! Some days later a man arrived at the clinic who many thought was the one who had killed the rector. He had a head wound and the British were looking for him. The Sister who was with Simon Srugi told him to hand him over to the British who were about to arrive. But Simon Srugi, looked at her with concern: "Hand him over to justice? Why? Do we have to do wrong? We always have to do good to everybody. If he has done wrong let him deal with God who will see to justice. But we always have to do good to our neighbour and forgive"; then he added: "Let's act as if nothing happened! This way our religious attitude will give them good example and so they will understand that we Christians are more than they are because of our practice of Christian forgiveness. This is what Jesus wanted. He forgave people." He then gave the man all the proper medical attention he required.

The Second World War broke out in 1939. The British imprisoned all the Italian confreres, first in Jerusalem and then at St John of Acre. Among them was Simon Srugi despite the fact that he was an Arab! A few days earlier he had suffered a severe bout of malaria and was in a pitiful state: thin, all skin and bone. When someone, amazed, asked how come he was there and how he managed in such a situation, he replied calmly and serenely: "Nothing to be afraid of. This is God's will and he will see to things. Jesus suffered even more for us. We need more than this to end up in Paradise!"

When he returned to Beitgemal he immediately resumed work but his health was now visibly worse. In May 1941 he had a serious relapse. He was taken to hospital in Bethlehem. On return to Beitgemal he was no longer able to resume his work, but his mere presence was a shining testimony. Although he had lost all his strength, as long as he was able he went to the church and spent many hours before the Blessed Sacrament. A chair was placed halfway there for him to rest on and another in the courtyard where he liked to sit during recreation to watch the boys play and offer a good word to boys and confreres alike when the moment was ripe. He recognised that he was now near the end, but was not afraid of death. The day he received the Anointing of the Sick he thanked everyone there then said: "Now I can go." He happily

recommended himself to his “little angels”. And these little angels were the only witnesses to his death which occurred during the night of 27 November 1943.

PRAYER

O Jesus, incarnate Word, from Nazareth to Calvary
you revealed the Father's eternal love to all people
by doing good to all.
Deign to glorify your humble fellow citizen Simon Srugi,
a luminous example of your kindness and concern
for the poor and suffering.
Trusting in your mercy and in his intercession,
we ask you to grant us the grace of ...
that we ask you with all our heart,
you who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit
forever and ever. Amen.

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