

Manuel Foderà: The warrior of light

12-15 minutes

Saints

- Friday, July 31, 2020



By Sr. Maria Carmen Checa, SHM

He offered his sufferings to “convert the greatest number of souls.”

“Jesus has called me ‘warrior of light’ to conquer the evil and darkness of the world.”

Manuel was born to Beppe and Enza on June 21, 2001 in Calatafimi, a town with six thousand inhabitants situated in Trapani, Sicily. Francesco and Stefania were already teenagers when their newborn brother Manuel arrived, and they welcomed him with great affection. Manuel received a Christian education in the heart of a

joyful and lively family, where everything seemed to go smoothly until July of 2005. At the age of four, **Manuel complained about a strong pain in his right leg** as well as a terrible fever and loss of appetite. A few days later, he was admitted to the Children's Hospital of Palermo. Doctors diagnosed him with "a massive infiltration of stage IV neuroblastoma that has spread to the iliac crest of the pelvis." At that moment, his "Way of the Cross" began, and it was to last five years. Little Manuel was going to suffer several operations, thirty chemotherapy cycles, a transplant, blood transfusions, and indescribable pain. It was the beginning of a unique, painful, yet very joyful journey for this little one who **eventually felt the presence of Jesus speaking to him like a close friend**. He first underwent an operation to remove his tumor, recovered from it, and received his first few cycles of chemotherapy. At first, he wanted to go to school and play with his friends, and he cried because he could not go. Then, after some time, the inexplicable occurred: **Manuel accepted his treatment, becoming serene and docile.**

Sister Prisca, a Franciscan religious from the hospital, was the first to notice this change and commented: "He was very small, only four years old. Before receiving treatment, he always came to me saying, **'Sr. Prisca, take me to the chapel because I want to see Jesus!'** .Very gently, I took him into my arms and brought his little head close to the tabernacle. **He was very happy because he wanted to be Jesus' dearest friend**. Afterwards, we prayed the Holy Rosary together and I was moved as I listened to him reciting the litanies by heart.

At the end of the summer of 2005, Manuel returned home to his family and loved ones. After playing games, he always asked them to pray the Rosary because **"the Hail Marys make me feel better."** He often asked those near him to recite Hail Marys in moments of pain because **"they make it go away,"** or when he

was afraid because *“they give me strength and peace.”* **As time passed, his relationship with Our Lady intensified and became almost palpable.**



One on occasion, Manuel was physically exhausted from countless treatments and asked Our Lady for a special consolation. It was the village's patron saint day and they took Our Lady out in procession. *“Mom, Mom!” Manuel exclaimed. “Our Lady said to me, ‘You are my joy and this afternoon I will have fireworks for you.’”* His Mom explained that they were not expecting fireworks that day, but Manuel responded quite certain, *“You’re wrong because Our Lady told me that there would be.”* Afterwards, Manuel went to sleep but was later awoken by fireworks. He said to his mom, **“Now are you convinced? Our Lady told me, ‘You are my joy and these fireworks are for you.’”**

In the hospital, the chaplain normally gave Communion to his mother. Manuel also wanted to receive Jesus. Everyone said that he was too small, because he was only six years old. But because of his persistence, his maturity in the faith, and his alarming physical condition, he received permission from the Bishop of Trapani.

On October 13, 2007, he received his First Communion. Nevertheless, the long awaited day did not begin well. When he woke up, he had terrible pains in his leg that impeded him from

getting out of bed and he was afraid that he would not be able to make it to the chapel. **At midday, against all odds, the pain disappeared.** This is how Manuel explained it: *“Our Lady told me, ‘Manuel can’t receive Jesus limping.’ So, she did magic and cured me. Thank you Virgin Mary of my heart.”* The Mass for his First Communion was very reverent and full of love. He later wrote on a holy card: *“I want to receive Jesus in my heart so that He can become my best friend forever. He will be my strength, my joy, my cure.”*

He said to his priest and religious friends: “Do you know why I wanted to receive Communion so young? I wanted so badly to receive Communion in my heart because when I couldn’t receive it I was very sad and it made me cry. That day I was happy.” He later asked the bishop: ***“Bishop, can you please tell your priests to leave at least five minutes of silence after Communion, so we can talk and listen to Jesus in our heart? Think of the last person who receives Communion—he doesn’t even have time to say ‘hi’ to Jesus!”***

In another letter, little Manuel explained why he felt that he urgently needed to write: *“Jesus is present in the Eucharist; He lets Himself be seen and felt in Holy Communion. You don’t believe it? Try to concentrate without getting distracted. Close your eyes, pray, and speak because Jesus will listen to you and speak to your heart. Don’t open your eyes right away because this communication will be interrupted and it won’t come back! Learn to be in silence and something wonderful will happen: a bomb of grace!”*





One day, after Communion, Manuel shared how he asked Jesus what he could give Him the following Christmas and Jesus answered, *“Always show My joy to others. **Be a warrior of light in the midst of darkness.**”* .

In June of 2008 Manuel went to Lourdes. After dinner, in the hostel, Manuel recited the Rosary with the Sicilian pilgrims and wanted to offer a decade for blind children. No one understood why he had this intention. On their return, they discovered that a blind child from another group had recovered his sight!

In August of 2008 Manuel made his Confirmation. Jesus gave him the gift of His Spirit in abundance. The “bomb of grace,” as Manuel referred to the Eucharist, made his illness appear to be an inexplicably happy one.

There were several priests close to Manuel. **Fr. Ignacio Vazzana was Manuel’s spiritual director from September 2008 onwards, at Jesus’ request.** He visited him every day in the hospital and at home. In March 2009, Manuel asked to go to confession more frequently. **“With great emotion I remember the great sense of sin he had, so much so that he burst into tears during confession,”** the priest said. .

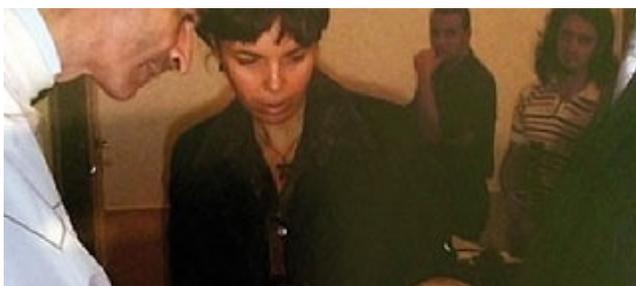
On July 2, 2009, Manuel had to undergo a very painful scan and did not want to see anyone nor answer the phone. He asked the Blessed Virgin for a sign to show that she loved him and was helping him. A little before midnight, he started to hear fireworks. *“Mom,” he said, “today I suffered a lot, but Jesus wanted to reward me.”*

Fr. Ignacio relates that from the first moment, Manuel spoke to him about his special friend, Jesus. In the chapel, he would lie down on the pew or floor to pray. If he was in the hospital, he went under the sheets, covered his head, and remained in the same position for ten to twenty minutes in absolute silence. At the most important moment of Communion, he conversed with Jesus as with his closest friend. Fr. Ignacio explained, **“I asked him if he saw Jesus face to face and he answered me by saying that he felt His voice in his heart.”**

One day after Communion Jesus said to him, “Manuel, your heart is not your own; it’s mine and I live in you.” But Manuel did not quite understand, so he asked Fr. Ignacio, “What does Jesus mean?” The only words that came to the priest’s mind were those of St. Paul: “Yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Manuel said to his friends, “Jesus gave me suffering because He needs suffering united to Him to save the world. Jesus called me me ‘warrior of light’ to conquer the evil and darkness of the world.”

The little boy saw what his mission was with total clarity: “*Mom, are there really people who don’t love Jesus? We should bring the greatest possible number of souls to Him.*” Love, sacrifice, and gift of self were inseparable realities for Manuel. One day, he candidly explained to his mother: “To love Jesus you should pray a lot, work hard, study, and offer sacrifices to Him.” Sacrifices? His mother then asked him for an explanation. “For example,” the boy replied, “you don’t want to eat pasta with zucchini, but you eat it anyway and offer it up out of love for Jesus.





Friends gathered around him at home and in the hospital, drawn to the joy and peace that he radiated while his body was slowly giving out. Many priests who visited him heard him say, “I love you. I pray for you. Take Jesus to children, to those who suffer, to the sick. Take Jesus to everyone you meet.” **The bishop of Palermo also went to visit him** and heard him say, **“I am offering myself for you and for your priests...but give me a gift: tell your priests to remind the faithful that they always have to receive Jesus in a state of grace, without sin, and afterwards to always spend at least fifteen minutes giving thanks. Jesus is very great! He’s God and has to be treated like God.”**

His mother and the priest encouraged him to take painkillers to ease the pain, but the child said, *“I want to wait a little longer before I take medicine because Jesus needs my suffering to save souls.”*

Towards the end of Manuel’s life in the early summer of 2010, he suffered excruciating headaches. After a test, **the doctors found two tumor masses in his head, but his mother decided not to inform Manuel.** Fr. Ignacio recalls, *“One day after receiving Communion he broke down in tears and confided to his mother, and later to me, what Jesus had said to him. We had asked him what was wrong since he was crying, and he told us that **Jesus had given him a special gift and that he was crying because he was happy. Jesus gave him two thorns from His crown and he had them in his head.** I was dumbfounded by his words because it was humanly inexplicable. The two things perfectly coincided: two tumor masses and two thorns from the crown of Jesus—as a gift—in his head.”*

On June 21, 2010 Manuel celebrated his last birthday and told his

friends: "Jesus let me see Paradise and it's a wonderful place, a beautiful banquet prepared by Jesus. Jesus told me that I would die when I was nine and that now I should suffer a little for Him. Afterwards, I will appear to Mom and my loved ones and I will be touched and embraced by them."

The last days of his agony arrived. His hemoglobin levels went down to a historical low. The doctors stopped giving him transfusions, because there was no hope. **To the doctors' amazement, the heart of this "warrior" continued to beat for four more days.** His mother understood immediately. "*Manuel, you made another agreement with Jesus, didn't you?*" The little boy affirmed with a gesture. **He clearly offered his last drops of blood for someone whose name will never be known .**

He gave his mother precise instructions for the day of his death: that day he would wear his First Communion suit and instead of a pillow for his head, he would rest on a Bible opened to the passage of Jeremiah 17:14 in which it is written: "Heal me, Lord, that I may be healed; save me, that I may be saved, for you are my praise." He also said that she shouldn't cry and that no one should cry, but rather that they should be recollected in prayer so that his funeral could reflect the great feast he was going to live in Heaven.

July 20 was his last day on earth. He was lying on his bed with his Rosary tightly held in his hands. Mass was celebrated in his room. **After receiving Communion, he whispered, "I have finished."**

During terrible suffering one night, two months before he died, he had said to his mother, "*You're my only true witness. You'll have to write a lot of books about me so that everyone can come to know my story.*" It was not easy for her to keep her promise because of all the pain she suffered after her son passed away, but in the end love had the last word. Enza wrote **Manuel: The Little Warrior of**

Light, based on the diary Enza wrote during the long illness. Through this book, much can be learned from this little friend of Jesus. As Bishop Pierino Fragnelli (Diocese of Trapani) observed, **“From his bed, the hospital, or at home, Manuel taught us the lesson of trusting in the life that never dies.”**

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