

CARMELO DRAGO

THE FATHER

fragments from his daily life

2019

Original title: *Il Padre. Frammenti di vita quotidiana*. Editrici Rogate, Roma, 1995.

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Commission on Translations

Rome, June 1, 2019.



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FOREWORD

(English Edition)

On the 150th anniversary of FATHER Hannibal Mary Di Francia's inspiration of the Rogate and the 15th anniversary of his canonization, we welcome the publication of the English edition of Fr. Carmelo Drago's book, *The Father. Fragments from his daily life*. The vivid memories of his personal and concrete experiences with Father Hannibal are now made accessible to the English-speaking world.

The Rogationists, the Daughters of Divine Zeal, formands, students, educators, parishioners, youth, members of our associations, lay collaborators, devotees and friends of St. Hannibal will find in the stories a way to profoundly grasp the Father's spirit, sentiments, and great humanity. I am convinced that Founder's figure that emerges from these pages appeals not only to the Family of the Rogate but also to the contemporary readers.

These memoirs offer valuable lessons on the Congregation's spirit, charism and mission; fraternal life; the educational style in caring for children and youth; the formation of the Rogationist aspirants; trust in the Divine Providence; spirituality and devotion; and many others. They are stories that paint the great kindness and sublime humanity of Father Hannibal, who is for us a master on how to deal with the people, particularly those who are most in need of attention and care. The reader, browsing through these leaves, will be awed by the aura a saintly Father who is a loving, dynamic, down-to-earth zealous priest, who is a model for our times.

Rome, June 1, 2019

Fr. Bruno Rampazzo, RCJ
Superior General

FOREWORD

(Italian Original)

*This posthumous publication of the narrations of Father Carmelo Drago enriches the actual literature regarding Father Hannibal Mary Di Francia. Its title “**The Father, Fragments from His Daily Life**,” expresses the nature of this book and unfolds the spirituality of the Founder, through quick “snapshots” or flashbacks, granting us the chance to observe distinct scenes, or to switch to a movie sequence with movement, life, and action.*

This portrait of the daily life of the “Master” is what makes genuinely actual these fragments written by a faithful disciple. He is an outstanding, attentive observer of the small things and events, which enliven, like light and shadow, this fresco of the biography of the Founder.

Father Carmelo Drago,¹ the privileged son of the Father, and a venerable Father of our Congregation was undoubtedly neither a literati nor a writer. Though simple in his life, choices, and expressions, he was not so in his personality or on the inside, being indeed an insightful and profound person. He was a great observer and was able to grasp the character of the Founder and to express it in these memoirs, basing it not on a study or deductive process, but in the immediateness of the observation of facts and situations. These fragments are blows of a chisel carving, little by little, the true image of the Apostle of the Rogate, on a living stone.

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Calogero Drago (Carmelo was his religious name), the ‘terrible’ boy from Galati, Messina, who not even his mother thought of as a possible disciple of a Saint, entered by force into the life of the Canon of Messina, in his Institution and endeavors, just to try, almost as a challenge. Surprising everyone, the little “Drago”² remained there sharing the adventures of an authentic Apostle, for nearly eighteen years of coexistence, up to 1927. He became Father Hannibal’s companion, in his very original and particular situations, up to inheriting, later, his Work which he will accompany with the witnessing of his life until his death in 1983.

*The memories of the **Father** are alive and imprinted in Father Carmelo’s spirit. He cannot contain it, and, almost by impetus, he describes and hands it on to us. What a difference from Father Vitale, Father Tusino, Father Santoro! They are masters, not only of the spirit but also of literary expression. They have given their qualified and extensive contribution to the history of the Father and of the Congregation. However, it was an arduous task. Yes, because just as Don*

¹Father Carmelo Drago was born in Galati Mamertino, Messina in 1892. After his Rogationist religious profession in 1910, he worked in Oria as Assistant of the Seminarians for almost 20 years, under the direction of St. Hannibal. He was ordained a priest in 1930. He became a General Councilor (1932-1945, 1956-1962) and then, Superior General (1962-1968). He died in Albano Laziale in Rome in 1984.

²In Italian *Drago* literally means *dragon*. Here Father Cifuni uses the family name with some irony to indicate that the little boy was already a *dragon* capable of going against his parents’ decision fighting against all the odds to realize his dream of staying with Father Hannibal.

Orione affirmed, “The virtue and spirituality of Canon Di Francia are so sublime that it is very difficult to fathom them” and indeed to describe them. Father Carmelo himself stated, “I confess that in reading the biographies of the Father, especially on those aspects in which I saw and heard him first hand, it seems that they are like photographs without life.” I believe that these **fragments**, which are not at all ‘small and insignificant’ as their Author says, have all the vigor of a sculptor and are capable of carving out a living image of Father Hannibal. Because of Father Drago’s involvement in these autobiographical events, the Father of the Orphans and the Poor comes alive with the fervor of his charity, the immaculate mark of his soul, and the seal of his sanctity.

These memoirs could also be entitled ‘**The Little Flowers of Father Hannibal**’ and can indeed be considered among the ‘**Hannibalian Sources**’. We hope, little by little, to bring out these sources from the archives and publish them, even though, in their first phase, they are still without their critical apparatus.

The literary genre of ‘**legend**’ also belongs to the sources. It would not be wrong to affirm that these **fragments** form the **legend of Father Hannibal**, according to the meaning of the medieval term ‘**legenda**’³, which means **pages to be read** as an official and authoritative text. In fact, in these pages, we can sense the same candor as the “**Little Flowers of the Poor of Assisi**” of Thomas of Celano. It has the same color as the “**Golden Legend**” of Jacobus de Voragine, or the love of the humble renowned Carmelite friar who left us the first “**Portrait of Teresa of Avila**”, in which the Saint acknowledged herself as “**ugly**”, but faithfully depicted.

The story of the text, which appeared in the typewritten form at the end of the ‘60s, is also to be discovered. The Sons and Daughters of Father Hannibal will be pleased to have this book in their hands because it will help them go back to the image of their Father in the genuineness of its origin and sources and to study his spirituality and charism.

With these sentiments, we entrust this book to the great Rogationist Family and, in a unique way, to the Friends of Father Hannibal.

Rome, February 1995

Fr. Pietro Cifuni, RCJ
Superior General

³ Today, “Legend” is often understood as myth, fable, tale, saga, etc., or something fundamentally fantastic and unreal. Here Father Cifuni explains legend as a literary genre, prevalent in medieval times. The term is derived from the Latin verb “legere” which means “to read”. The medieval meaning of the Latin term “legenda” implies “things to read on a certain day in Church”, usually hagiographical accounts of the lives and miracles of Saints. Thus, Father Cifuni wants to remind us that the stories recounted by Father Carmelo are not merely figments of fantasy, but are **real** and **historical** episodes of the life of the Founder and our Congregation, to be read (legenda) by us for our edification.

TO THE READER

- *This posthumous work of our beloved Father Carmelo Drago, before its first Italian printed edition, has undergone thorough stylistic editing to refresh its expressions and make them more fluent and meaningful.*
- *The footnotes and the analytical index which were not present in the original text of Father Drago were added by the editor in the first Italian publication.*

In the English Edition,

- *Ample footnotes have been added to render the book more easily understandable to contemporary readers who might come from a different geographical and cultural context. These include Italian expressions, traditions, and places; historical events and their contexts; biographical notes on relevant personalities mentioned in the memoirs; and “Rogationist-specific” terms which have acquired a particular meaning in the Rogationist literature.*
- *As regards the footnotes in the original text, other information has been added in some of them. Moreover, some footnotes have been transferred to another part of the book for purposes of unity and coherence.*
- *The footnotes in the English edition significantly differ in contents and numbering compared to those in the Italian original.*
- *Pictures, illustrations, and maps have been included.*
- *Some titles of the Chapters have been slightly modified.*
- *Following the manuscript of Father Carmelo, the expression “the Father” is always used to indicate Father Hannibal Mary Di Francia, the Founder of the Rogationists and of the Daughters of Divine Zeal.*
- *Except for Father Hannibal and some internationally acknowledged names of places (Rome, Naples, Apulia, etc.) and of Saints (St. Francis, St. Anthony, St. Francis de Sales, etc.), the proper Italian names have been kept as they are in the original text.*
- *We used the actual name, **Anthonian Benefactors Office**, to translate both “Propaganda Antoniana” and “Segretaria Antoniana” because they were the same reality.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

(for the English Edition)

- *Fr. Cesare Bettoni RCJ spearheaded the work of the English translation from the original Italian. The first 100 Chapters were translated in collaboration with Rogationist Novices in Silang (Cavite, Philippines), belonging to the Batches 1997-1998 and 2014-2015. He completed the rest of the Chapters recently in Desenzano del Garda (Brescia, Italy).*
- *Ms. Cherry Aquino edited the complete English translation.*
- *The Rogationist Commission on Translations, based in the General Curia in Rome, did the final revision.*

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1. MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE FATHER

In Galati Mamertino⁴ you could hear people praising Canon Hannibal Mary Di Francia and his Orphanages highly. Because of this, Gaetano Drago, a cousin of mine, who had been longing for many years to embrace the religious life, eventually entered our Institute in Messina and, as a Religious, was given the name Brother Francesco Maria of the Child Jesus. He was indeed an outstanding virtuous young man to the extent that the Father used to define him as “angelic by virtues.” He died on November 24, 1908.

Brother Francesco used to write often to his relatives that he was happy in the religious life. After some years, he came to Galati for a few days. On that occasion, my brother Giuseppe, my cousin Salvatore and I, having signified for a long time our intention to consecrate ourselves to the Lord in the religious life, wanted to leave for Messina with him. My brother and my cousin got their parents’ approval without a problem, but there was no way for me to get it. My parents thought that I was not suited for religious life because I was very lively and prone to mischievous tricks. They told me that it would have been useless to send me to the Institute because I would not be able to remain there.

I argued with my parents for more than one year. Finally, though diffidently because of my insistence, they gave their consent. My mother herself accompanied me to Messina.

We paid a visit first to my aunt, my mother's sister.⁵ On the one hand, she could not find adequate words in praising the sanctity and spirit of charity of Father Hannibal, but on the other, she described Avignone Houses with evident commiseration because of their bad reputation in the City, and for what she had seen in her frequent visits to my brother Giuseppe.⁶

This aunt, married to a lawyer, Francesco Lo Sardo, the head of the Socialist Party in Messina, was a nice but slightly vain woman. Though a fervent Christian, she was ashamed to admit having nephews in the Avignone District. This was the reason she tried to convince my mama not to let me enter the Institute, and also to bring Giuseppe home. Mama had a good defense. She would answer that Giuseppe and his cousins had often written her that they were very happy. Besides, she always gave her children complete freedom to remain there if they wanted or to come home if they did not like that life.

⁴ A small town in the Province of Messina, Sicily, Italy.

⁵ This aunt, whose name is Teresa, is also mentioned in Chapter 91.

⁶ The two Drago Families from Galati Mamertino, Messina, were particularly generous in vocations for the newly born Rogationist Congregation. Their presence stretches from cover to cover in these memoirs. It is worth, therefore, to introduce the members of the family of Calogero Drago (his name as Rogationist was Father Carmelo): - Giuseppe, whose religious name was Brother Mansueto (+ March 23, 1917); - Concetto, Rogationist Religious, (+ February 21, 1914); - Mauro, young Religious who died at 19 (+ December 3, 1916); - Francesco (Father Hannibal was the Godfather at his Confirmation) who did not profess as Religious and went back to his family. Aside from these brothers, there were also cousins of Father Carmelo in our Congregation, namely: - Gaetano, whose religious name was Brother Francesco Maria of the Child Jesus (+ November 24, 1908); - Salvatore, whose religious name was Brother Mariano (+ December 3, 1927).

“Auntie, you can say all you want,” I interrupted, “but I want to enter the Institute, and I want to stay there. If you want to visit me, it will be a great pleasure; if you are ashamed, nobody will force you to come.”

My aunt replied, “I am sure, with the kind of character you have, you will not be able to stay there for more than one week. You will feel like you are in jail, and the priests will dismiss you.”

“You will see, auntie. You will see.”

After lunch, mama, auntie, and I went to the Institute.

Brother Placido⁷ received us in the lobby. He looked very simple, running here and there. He was poorly dressed, his clothes were all faded, almost like tobacco in color.

Upon seeing me, surprised, he said, “Aren't you Calogero, Giuseppe's brother?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Why did you come? You are very naughty! Your brother is very good, but you are very naughty. Everyone here says so. That is why your parents did not allow you to come with your brother and your cousin. If you have come to stay here, I tell you that it is better for you to go home immediately with your mama. We do not want bad boys here, and for sure, the Father will dismiss you.”

My aunt, quivering with indignation, was looking alternately at my mother and me. Mama was humiliated. She said, “Truly nobody can say that Calogero is naughty; he is a good boy, generous and available any time. He is a bit lively. He cannot keep quiet, and once in a while, he is mischievous. If we did not allow him to come to the Institute together with Giuseppe, it was only to let him prove his insistence.” Despite this, Brother Placido continued to say in an increasingly contemptuous manner that I was naughty.

At that point, Brother Giuseppe Antonio⁸ entered. He welcomed us with a smile and then, turning to me, he said, “Here you must now behave because we do not accept naughty boys. Do you understand?”

I was thinking to myself: I have a bad reputation here, like a ragamuffin to be hidden in a rehabilitation center. How can I stay here with this kind of reputation? Better for me to go back home before they dismiss me!

When my brother and cousin came, Brother Giuseppe accompanied us to visit the Institute. It was as silent as a tomb because the Orphans⁹ were out, having their walk. We met first Brother Luigi¹⁰, who was sick and was coming out of his room. He looked like a walking corpse.

⁷ Brother Placido Romeo was born in Messina in 1875 and died in Oria on February 26, 1940. His brisk and annoying manners with the newcomer Calogero does not come as a surprise. It is known that the Father had to work hard to form a group of Religious prepared for the intricate works of the newborn Congregation.

⁸ Brother Giuseppe Antonio Meli was born in Castelbuono, Palermo in 1876 and died in Messina on May 24, 1941. Rogationist down to his marrow, consistent, peculiarly dear to the Father and precious for the Congregation, he took care of the Obolo (cf. the footnote in Chapter 92), of the first Anthonian Benefactors Office (cf. the footnote in Chapter 59) and of the printing press.

Then, we met Father Bonarrigo¹¹, suffering from consumption, thin, with two wide-open eyes. He was scary. We were introduced then to Father Palma,¹² who was in bed with a high fever. He was pale with an unshaved beard.

All the rooms were old. Everywhere there was a dreariness which disgusted me, though I come from a small village of shepherds and tenants on the mountain.

However, what struck me more was the sight of the dorms. It was immediately evident that bedbugs and lice infested everything.

All this, however, was not as impressive as the welcoming words of Brother Placido, “You are naughty, better for you to return home with your mama than to be sent out later.” I could not remove them from my mind.

With this persistent thought, I decided to go back to Galati. However, I was ashamed to mention it to anyone. Perhaps my brother was aware that something was bothering me. He asked why I seemed sad. In a low but firm tone, I answered, “Peppino” (the nickname for Giuseppe) “I do not want to stay here. I want to go back to Galati today with mama.”

“Why?”

⁹ In this English Edition, when capitalized, Orphans refers to the orphan boys and girls in the Institutes of the Rogationists and Daughters of Divine Zeal; when in the lower case, they refer to an orphan in the general sense.

¹⁰ Brother Luigi Barbanti was born in 1885 in Militello, Catania, and died in Messina on November 16, 1963. He was outstanding as Assistant (cf. the footnote in Chapter 146). We will meet him several times in these episodes of practical life.

¹¹ Father Francesco Bonarrigo, *a beautiful soul in a frail body*, was one of the first conquests of the Father. He was born in Gualtieri Sicamino, Messina in 1865 and died in Messina on February 16, 1910.

¹² Pantaleone Palma, born on April 13, 1875, in Ceglie Messapica (Brindisi) in a wealthy family and was ordained a priest in 1899 for the Diocese of Oria. In charge of teaching in the Seminary of his Diocese, he asked to deepen his cultural education at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Messina. His projects changed after meeting Father Hannibal and his Work at the Avignone District, in favor of orphans and the poor, expressed in the Congregations of the Daughters of Divine Zeal and the Rogationists. Father Palma asked his Bishop, and he obtained permission to join the Rogationists. He turned out to be a brilliant and enterprising man. Father Palma founded and organized the Anthonian Benefactors Office to spread the devotion of the Bread of Saint Anthony of Padua, and with the offerings of the devotees of Miracle-Worker Saint, he built a dozen Institutes with annexed workshops to train the orphans to acquire professional skills. Saint Hannibal, before he died, named him as his universal heir. This choice increased in some the envy and jealousy towards him, creating a climate of suspicion. Following unfounded accusations, he was referred to the Holy Office and condemned despite the retractions of the accusers: in 1933, following his sentence, he was ousted from the Congregation, suspended from the exercise of the sacraments and confined to the Scala Santa (Rome) at the convent of the Passionists who considered him a saint in life and after death. Father Pantaleone offered himself as a victim for the good of the Rogationist family, trusting only in God, always declaring himself innocent, asking for a review of the trial and rehabilitation for the celebration of Holy Mass. On 6 August 1935 Pope Pius XI granted him to return to celebrate Mass, but shortly thereafter, on 2 September 1935, Father Pantaleone died suddenly. His mortal remains, initially buried at the Verano cemetery in Rome, were transferred to the Shrine of St. Anthony of Padua in Oria (Br) on 12 September 2013, an occasion on which the Bishop of Oria, Monsignor Vincenzo Pisanello, asked to present to Father General of the Rogationists the formal request for the start of his beatification process. (cf. <http://www.santiebeati.it/dettaglio/97337>).

These memoirs of Father Carmelo are studded with references to Father Palma’s untiring zeal for the development of the Works, which are testimonies to his being *the first and principal collaborator of the St. Hannibal*.

“Because that friar at the lobby said that I am naughty. I have become aware that I have a horrible reputation here - a mischievous brat.”

“No! Do not say anything to anyone. At least wait for the Father, so that when you are in Galati, you will be able to say that you saw him and talked to him. He will be here shortly. I am delighted here.”

I replied, “You say that you are happy because everyone says that you are good, while everyone says I am very naughty.”

At that very moment, the Father appeared. All of us ran to kiss his hand. He was serene, and he welcomed us with a loving smile. On seeing him, I thought, finally here is a Christian-like face. Turning to me and laying his hand on my head, he said, “Good, finally you are here. We have been waiting for you since yesterday. Are you tired? Have you eaten?”

“I ate with my mother at my auntie's house.”

“Where is your mama? I want to greet her.”

“She went out with auntie, but she will come later to greet you.”

“Are you happy here?”

“No, I want to go back to Galati immediately with mama.”

“Why? Because you see how old the Institute is?”

“I do not see Orphans. All the people here are sick, the dormitory is disgusting, teeming with bedbugs and lice. However, most of all, I want to go home because everybody says that I am naughty.”

“Who told you that?”

“It was that friar, the porter, the one with a tobacco-color attire.”

The Father asked Brother Giuseppe who it could have been, and when he was told that it was Brother Placido, he said, “No, it is not true. You are not naughty. The Brother said this as a joke.”

“No, he was very severe. He kept repeating it to me, and he told me also that it would be better for me to go home with my mama.”

“Calm down. You are not naughty. I am saying it. If you were naughty, I would not have written to your parents to let you come here. Come with me. Let us go to the chapel to pray.”

“All right, I will go to the chapel, but I want to leave. Besides, my prayer is useless because I am naughty.”

“Never mind what the Brother told you. Listen to what I said.”

Coming out of the chapel, I felt a little bit calmer, but I insisted that I was going to leave. The Father said to me, “Listen to me. Stay for a few days. If you do not like it here, I will have you accompanied back to Galati.”

Speaking sincerely, the longer I talked to the Father, the calmer I became. I said, “Will you always be here? Moreover, can I come to see you any time I want?”

“Yes, and I will like that,” he said. “Come with me, and I will show you the room where I stay.” I went with him, and he offered me some chocolate. I thanked him, but I said that I was not too fond of sweets. When I saw the room, I was moved and puzzled because of so much poverty.

A short while later, Brother Placido came to the room. The Father said to him, “Isn't it true that Calogero is a kind boy?” “Yes, Father,” was the Brother's answer.

“Did you hear that? Brother Placido also says that you are a good boy!”

“Yes, but maybe somebody told him to say that!” The Father then said, “So, would you like to stay, or do you want to go back to your village?” “All right. In the meantime, I will stay,” I answered, “as long as I can come to you any time I want and stay with you.”

From that time on, especially in the beginning, I would run to the Father whenever I saw him. He always asked if I needed anything and if I was happy. After I answered that I was very content, he did not ask anymore.

During my first eight months in Messina, from my entrance to my taking of the religious habit, Brother Placido brought me at least ten times to the Father, charging me with more or less mischievous behavior. The Father would exhort me to behave better, but I do not remember any reproach. Moreover, when I was charged with something unconventional, he would try to hide his smile. I remained in the Institute because of the very paternal understanding of the Father.

2. FLOWERS FOR THE CORPUS CHRISTI PROCESSION

On the morning of Corpus Christi, the Father told us to put on our best suits because we were going to go with him for something significant.

As soon as we reached the Institute of the Holy Spirit,¹³ run by the Sisters, he led us to a room where lots of flowers had been prepared in beautiful baskets.

He told the Mother Superior the flowers were too few. He explained to us that those flowers were to be scattered along the path of the procession of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

He told us what we were to do. Some of us were to sweep the roads while others were to scatter the flowers. Then he called the gardener and asked if there were still flowers left in the garden.

He replied, “Very few, just enough not to leave the plants completely barren.” The Father said, “What do you mean ‘not to leave plants completely barren’? Flowers are cultivated mostly for Our Lord and not for the beauty of the garden.” Then he accompanied us to the garden and had us gather all the flowers left, warning us not to maltreat them.

Then we went to the Cathedral to join the procession. It was an incredible sight. The Father, in his attire as a Canon,¹⁴ was walking with the Chapter of the Cathedral.

¹³ The Mother House of the Daughters of Divine Zeal.

He walked with such devotion that some people were pointing at him, saying, “It is evident that Canon Di Francia is a saint. Look at the saintly way he walks!”

3. TO THE THEATER OF THE SALESIANS¹⁵

At the end of the spiritual reading, the Father told us to put on our new clothes and to go with him. On the way, he asked us to guess where we were going. Some answered, “To a liturgical celebration,” others, “to an excursion.” He said, “Nobody guessed it. We are going to watch a play.” We chorused, “Impossible! It is not allowed to go to theaters, and those who go there, sin.” The Father said, “It is not allowed to go to a theater which is not good, but to a good one you can. We are going to the Salesians’ small theater. It is amusing and educational for both cultural and spiritual formation. It will also teach you to face people and declaim to front of an audience. Don Bosco loved plays.”

When we reached the Oratory,¹⁶ we saw an unusual sight: a crowd of pupils enjoying in many different ways. Some were jumping, others running, all shouting. In their midst were some Salesian Religious animating their games and assisting them with diligent care.

Among them was the Rector of the Oratory. As soon as he saw the Father, he tried to brush off the dust from himself and came toward us to welcome the Father. He started to apologize for the way he looked, but the Father said to him, “No need for an apology. You are doing your duty as Rector, as a Salesian and as a true son of Don Bosco.”

The Father then thanked him for the invitation and introduced us, “These boys are those who aspire to be - God willing - Religious in our Institute. I brought them here to enjoy and to learn the Salesian spirit, which is very similar to ours in the educational field. I always recommend to our Religious to follow Don Bosco’s method when it comes to education.”

It was time for the play. A whistle was enough to silence the boys. All of them rushed to fall in line in perfect silence. The Father then said, “Did you see how disciplined they are? You ought to be like them in the way you have to teach the boys when God willing you will be given the same task. This kind of discipline can be obtained through the Preventive System,¹⁷ not by punishments, but by continuous and loving assistance, persuasion, and religion.”

¹⁴ In the Roman Catholic Church, a Canon is a member of the Chapter of a Cathedral (Cathedral Chapter) or a collegiate Church, headed by a Dean. A Canon’s main task is to perform more solemn liturgical functions in the Cathedral and other tasks that the diocesan bishop entrusts to the Chapter (cf. CIC can. 503).

Father Hannibal was appointed by Archbishop Giuseppe Guarino to be as a regular Canon of the Metropolitan Church of Messina on January 22, 1882. He was just 31 years old! (Cf. APR, 58 4213).

¹⁵ The theater was located near Boccetta Creek in Messina.

¹⁶ In many Italian Catholic parishes, the ‘oratory’ is the place adjacent to the Church used for the catechetical, Christian, liturgical and human formation as well as for the cultural and recreational activities of the youth.

¹⁷ Preventive System is an educative method of actively and positively accompanying a child or a youth in his/her process of integral maturity, by “avoidance” and “prevention” of occasions that can lead to one’s detriment, and guidance to conditions and opportunities that lead to one’s growth and development, with paternal, maternal or

We replied, “We do not understand this method; it is difficult. We cannot understand how we can maintain discipline without punishment. Can you explain it better?”

The Father, “Remind me tomorrow when we have our spiritual reading.”

Salvatore (later he became Brother Mariano) added, “If this is the case, Brother Placido does not observe this Preventive System at all. When Brother Francesco is absent, he always punishes us for any little fault we make.” The Father said, “What do you want? Brother Placido is good. Perhaps he has not understood it properly, that you must be good and disciplined without punishment. However, if you are punished, you should humbly accept it.”

4. UNUSUAL CLANGING OF BELLS

We, Aspirants,¹⁸ were in the study hall, studying. Suddenly the Institute resounded with a long and loud clanging of bells. It was my first time hearing something like that, so I jumped out shouting, “There are thieves! There are thieves!” Then, I saw the Father in the small tower of the chapel joyously ringing the two bells. My companions came out and were laughing at me because I had shouted, “There are thieves!”

They knew the reason. This event happened every time we received a new “*adhesion*” of a Bishop to the Sacred Alliance of the Evangelical Rogation.¹⁹

On seeing us, the Father said that the adhesion of a new Bishop, whose name I forgot, had just arrived. He invited us to the chapel for a prayer of thanksgiving to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament for such a beautiful grace.

fraternal care. It is often contrasted to “Repressive System”, which highlights police-like surveillance, discipline, and corporal punishment.

The Preventive Method has been present through centuries in Catholic educational settings, practiced by Catholic educators such as St. Philip Neri, St. Francis the Sales, St. John Baptiste de la Salle, etc. However, it was St. John Bosco, the Founder of the Salesians, who further developed it as “system”, based on his pedagogical experience with the poor youth in the 19th-century Turin; thus, the Preventive System is often called Don Bosco’s Preventive System. It is built on the three pillars of reason, religion, and loving-kindness.

Father Hannibal adopted the Preventive System in the pedagogical practices in the Institutions of the Rogationists and Daughters of Divine Zeal: Seminaries, Formation Houses, Orphanages, Schools, Oratories, and Training Centers. This topic appears in many Chapters of these memoirs.

¹⁸ An Aspirant is a young candidate ‘aspiring’ to become a priest and/or a Religious. The term is often used also for young women preparing to become religious sisters. In this English Edition, when capitalized, Aspirant refers to Rogationist Aspirants.

¹⁹ Father Hannibal founded two associations to spread the spirit of Prayer for Vocation, inspired by the charism of the “Rogate”. The laity could join the “Pious Union of the Evangelical Rogation” which is still active today as “Union of Prayer for Vocations” (UPV). For the Priests and Bishops, he had started the “Sacred Alliance of the Evangelical Rogation” which is also active until today as “Priestly Alliance for Vocations” (PAV). A member priest or bishop pledges to offer at least one Mass annually for the intentions of the Works of Father Hannibal. Cf. Chapter 137.

Every time he received the letter or the telegram from a Bishop who wanted to sign up to *join* and *support* (= “*adhere*”) the Sacred Alliance, Father Hannibal celebrated the event with “a long and loud clanging of bells”.

When we were out of the chapel, they told the Father how I reacted to the clanging of bells. The Father laughed heartily and said to me, “Rest assured that thieves will never come here because there is nothing to steal.”

Then he spent some time explaining to us the Sacred Alliance, the value of the Holy Mass, our obligation as Rogationists in obtaining the Sacred Allied. He talked about the zeal and sacrifices of Brother Giuseppe Antonio for the Sacred Alliance.

When we went to the refectory, the Father exempted us from silence. This was usually done only for the most important solemnities. We were even given a cake, and we continued to talk about the Sacred Alliance with much enthusiasm. We were also exempted from the afternoon classes and allowed to go and enjoy a walk as we did on feast days.

On that occasion, I told my companions, “It would be a wonderful grace for us to receive every week at least three or four of these Bishops’ adhesions to the Sacred Alliance!” My companions laughed, and the Father asked why they were laughing. He said, “Is it because you want to have more Sacred Allies or because you prefer to have a feast and skip classes?”

I answered, “For both reasons.”

“I admire your sincerity,” the Father said, “but I cannot approve your lack of interest in studying. I can understand that because you entered the Institute just recently. The study is significant for religious life. Also, when you study out of love for God, and because of obedience, it becomes prayer.”

5. THE BROTHER OF FATHER HANNIBAL²⁰

When I was assigned as a server in the refectory, I noticed that after taking his supper with the community, the Father would remain and was very familiar with a Canon who visited him often.

On one of those occasions, after the Canon left, I asked the Father who was that good looking man who was so familiar and affectionate with him. The Father answered, “He is my brother, he is outstanding, intelligent, zealous, and well known. He has founded a women’s Congregation, which is doing very well.” I said, “Wouldn't it be better for this Congregation to join the Daughters of Divine Zeal to form a larger Congregation?” The Father replied, “It is better to do God's will who wanted it that way. Furthermore, his Congregation is doing so well and is developing. In this way, instead of only one Congregation as you say, there will be two Congregations at work for the glory of God and the good of souls.”

The next day, during recreation, I recounted to Brother Luigi my conversation with the Father. Brother Luigi, in turn, told me how the Father's brother was initially working with him,

²⁰ Venerable Francesco Maria Di Francia (1853-1913) was the younger brother of Father Hannibal. He collaborated with the Father for nine years in the initial phases of the Works in the Avignone District. Later, Canon Francesco founded the *Capuchin Sisters of the Sacred Heart*. His cause of canonization was introduced in 1984. On March 19, 2019, Pope Francis promulgated the decree of his heroic virtues.

but later he convinced some of the Daughters of Divine Zeal to follow him in Roccalumera, a small town not too far from Messina, and there he founded another Congregation.²¹

A few days later, I unwisely asked the Father to explain what I had heard about his brother and his Congregation. The Father did not allow me to continue and stopped me abruptly, becoming very serious. The Father asked who told me. When I answered that it was Brother Luigi, he said, “Both of you should mind your own business. You do not understand what you are saying. I fully agree with my brother. We love each other very well. His Congregation does much good, and I help it when I can.”

Later I learned that Brother Luigi had been scolded and sharply reprimanded by the Father.

I remember that a few days after we received the news of the death of his brother Francesco, Father Hannibal came from Messina to Oria. He was despondent, and he said a series of Gregorian Masses. He asked us to offer sacrifices for several days, and he spoke very highly about his departed brother, his good qualities, and the religious Institution founded by him.

6. AN UNLUCKY MAN

A man pretending to be of noble descent used to come daily to our Institute in Messina to have his meal, apart from the other poor. He was treated uniquely. He ate like a wolf, and the amount of food was never enough for him. He was always never satisfied, and he tried to meddle with the problems of the Institute. The Father gave him special attention and much compassion. He was given particular treatments because of his lost nobility.

It was evident though that he was abusing the Father's goodness. He was always on the alert, waiting for the Father to be on his way to take lunch with the community to slip into the refectory with him. He would sit in front of him, ending up getting a share of what was intended for the Father. He had his strategy. At first, he would pretend to be hesitant and shy. Then, he would accept the food and devour everything.

This scenario often happened, depriving the Father of his food. I was one of the servers in the refectory, and I was often enraged by such insolence. I tried, politely, to let him realize that it was not proper to act like that. Noticing that he refused to listen, one day, when he was trying to enter the refectory “to pay his respect to the Father” (this was the way he used to introduce himself), I told him frankly, first politely and then firmly, that he could pay his respect to the Father at the end of lunch. Also, he was forbidden to enter the refectory.

He felt offended and accused me to the Father who, in turn, reproached me. I tried to defend myself by saying, “This man is unbearable and impolite. Every time you are alone eating, pretending to greet you, he comes to the refectory, sits at the table in front of you and eats so hungrily, while you have to fast.”

²¹ For an analysis of this situation, cf. Tusino, *The Father's Soul*, pp. 736 ff.

The Father's answer was, "It is none of your concern! He eats what I give him. Poor man! It means that he is hungry; he suffers so much! He was used to comforts when he was rich, but now he lacks what is necessary! We have to help him. Persons who lose their high status suffer more than those who are used to living in hardship and misery."

I added, "This man is said to have been very rich, but he squandered his wealth by enjoying, spending lavishly, and gambling. So, he is responsible for his misery. Sorry for him, now he is paying for it."

The Father said, "What are you saying? You are truly impertinent. It is not your business! I do not like the way you judge him. This man is a gentleman, worthy of respect. When he was rich, he did so much good. If today he is poor, that is due to events in his life you and others know nothing about. He is to be properly treated. Do not stop him from entering the refectory when I am at the table. His company honors me."

I learned the lesson, but my thought was: "What an honor! The Father fasts and does penance for him!"

7. ROTTEN CHERRIES

One day, a man, accompanied by Brother Giuseppe Antonio, came to the Avignone Houses with a big basket of cherries. Upon seeing the contents of the basket, I said to the Brother, "What are we going to do with these cherries? They are already rotten!"

"I see it too," was the Brother's answer, "but the Father has already bought them. Try to select those still acceptable."

"What a good business," was my sarcastic comment. "The Father had been cheated by this man!"

"Not exactly," the Brother replied. "This man did tell the Father that all the cherries were rotten, but the Father still wanted to buy them. We were on our way to the Holy Spirit Convent when that man with his basketful of cherries approached the Father, who had helped him many other times. He told the Father that he had a large family and there was no food for them. The Father told him, 'Why don't you sell these cherries to buy food for your children?' 'Nobody wants them,' the poor guy answered, 'because all these cherries are already spoiled. I got them from the leftovers of a warehouse.' The Father looked at them and said, 'There are still some good ones. I will buy all. Deliver them to our Institute. Brother will accompany you. How much do I have to pay?' The man replied, 'Their value is zero. Just give me what your kind heart inspires you.' 'They are still valuable,' the Father said. Then he paid him an amount that the poor man, upon seeing it was moved to tears and said, 'Your heart for sure is bigger than the ocean!'"

When the Father came back for lunch, he asked me about the cherries, adding, "Do not throw away the good ones. Serve them to the community. It was practically a gift from that man."

I replied, "Truly a wonderful gift! They are worth nothing! We will not find even one still good!"

The Father replied, "Don't be a pessimist, and don't waste the Providence!"

8. THE GLASS OF THE POOR

The glass used by Brother Luigi during meals broke. Brother Giuseppe told me to replace it with one of the glasses usually used for the poor. The glasses for the poor had a different shape from those of the community.

When Brother Luigi saw that kind of glass, he complained bitterly to me and rejected it. The Father saw this and asked me what the reason for that reaction was. I told him. Giving me his glass, he said, “Offer this to Brother Luigi and give me his glass.”

Brother Luigi felt ashamed. He requested to have his glass back and immediately asked forgiveness from the Father. The Father was adamant, saying that he was honored to use the glass of the poor because they represent our Lord.

Brother Luigi was embarrassed! He felt humiliated. He did not drink anything even if he was suffering because of the hot weather. He also asked Father Palma to intercede for him. Father Palma told him to plead once more with the Father, asking humbly to be given back the glass.

The Father eventually agreed and used the situation to tell us that in the poor we must see the person of Our Lord saying, “All that you do to these least ones in my name is done unto me.” The Father also stressed that the poor are always with us and that the origin of our Work²² is based on affective and effective poverty.

9. THE GOSPEL FOR THE POOR

Every Sunday afternoon, before the 1908 earthquake, a good number of the poor would gather in the court of the Avignone Houses. When the Father was present, he taught them Christian doctrine. He wanted all of us to be present, including Fathers Palma and Bonarrigo.

The Father would talk effortlessly, but with such spiritual fervor that even the most unrefined and ignorant could understand him. They were all spellbound. It was not like this when the Father was absent, and someone else would take his place.

After the catechism, which usually lasted about twenty minutes, all of us had to be available to serve the poor. Some distributed soup, others gave bread, and others handed out some money to all of them.

²² In his Writings, Father Hannibal uses the word Work/Works (Opera/Opere) typically in the capital letter to refer to his entire Institution. Often he also calls it ‘Evangelical Rogation’. The “Work/Works”, whose Founder is Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament (July 1st) is inclusive of the following: the male and female Orphanages; the Daughters of Divine Zeal; the Rogationists Brothers and Fathers; the Union of Prayer for Vocations; the ‘Priestly Alliance for Vocations (Sacred Alliance); the endeavors to pray and spread the prayer for Vocations; the Anthonian Benefactors Offices; the charitable activities for the human and social promotion of the poor (feeding, clothing, sheltering helping, sharing and insertion among the poor...) and in the future, even the Missions or anything else impelled by the ‘Rogate’. For the usual activities like the bakery, the shoemaking, embroidering, educating the Orphans or similar, the word ‘work’ is not capitalized.

This “Rogationist terminology” has taken root and commonly used in our literature; e.g., Guerrero D. – Nalin G., *Our Names – Circular Letter on the centenary of the approval and proclamation of the Work (1901–14/15 September – 2001)*.

The Father was happy being among the poor, serving, and helping them. Before distributing the soup, he always tasted it first. Sometimes he would join them. Heaven help us if there wasn't enough soup or if it was not adequately prepared! On solemn feasts, there would be wine, fruits, cakes, and a double amount of money.

Then, addressing us Aspirants, he would often say, "See how beautiful it is to stay with the poor, help and instruct them in the Christian doctrine! They must be given material food without letting them lack spiritual nourishment. Remember what was said by Our Lord to demonstrate his divinity: 'the poor are evangelized'. Therefore, if you want to be truly good Rogationist Religious, you must love very, very much the poor."

I remember too that several times a week, in the evening, the Father would join the Orphans in their compound, and stay with them as if he was one of them, or like their parent. He would listen to their requests, try to fulfill their desires, and teach them about religion. That is why when they saw the Father, the little ones would often ask, "Father, are you going to join us this evening? We are waiting for you!"

Sometimes we, Aspirants, were also present. In the end, the Father used to say, "What I do now with the Orphans, you too have to do if the Lord will give you the grace to become Religious. This is the dearest ideal of my life now; tomorrow it has to be yours. If you do not feel this attraction for Orphans, you will never be good Rogationists. The Divine Providence has used the spiritual and material needs of Orphans and the poor to inspire me in the foundation of the Congregation."

10. A SMALL PLUM TREE

In the corner of the Avignone Houses, there was a small flower bed where the Assistant, Vizzari by name,²³ used to cultivate flowers. In their midst was a small plum tree. Though little, it was truly rich in fruits, and Vizzari always counted them.

One day I had the foolish urge to get a plum to see if it was ripe. It was so sour that I threw it away then and there. When Vizzari realized that one of the plums was missing, he became outraged. He asked around in his usual style and accused a little Orphan whom he spanked soundly and punished by making him kneel in the refectory without lunch.

As soon as I learned this, I went to Vizzari to tell him that it was I, not the Orphan who got the plum. Upon hearing this, he slapped me twice and brought me to the Father to have me punished.

²³ The title "Assistant" in the Rogationist parlance refers to the immediate educator of the Orphans or Seminarians. Sometimes the words 'invigilator' and 'overseer' are used as synonyms. The main task of the Assistant is to be responsible for the corporal and spiritual well-being of his charges, supervision of their activities, and the overall organization of the House. His presence is "active", that is, engaging and caring, just like a Brother or a Father, using the Preventive System of education. Literally, he "assists" the young towards maturity.

Emmanuele Vizzari, from Messina, was formerly one of the Orphans helped by the Father. Later, he served the Father as an educator of the Orphans, though his style was reproachable as we can see here and in Chapter 28.

The Father said, "You should not get anything without asking permission." Noticing that my face was quite red, he asked if I was feeling all right. I told him the whole story. The Father then reproached Vizzari, "You were wrong! You should have admired Calogero for coming voluntarily to you to confess his fault and to free the innocent Orphan from punishment. There is no need to slap and punish such childish behavior. You should not mingle with the Aspirants! You are not fit to assist the boys!"

11. COMPETING TO CLEAN AN ORPHAN

A small Orphan was not able to run to the toilet on time. What had to happen, happened. Poor little boy! He was leaning on the door of the restroom visible from the courtyard, crying and asking for help.

The Father happened to pass by and went to console him. I rushed there, and so did Brother Luigi who was going to start cleaning him. The Father resolutely said, "I will clean him up. Go and get his clean clothes."

Though Brother Luigi and I both insisted that we wanted to clean him, we could do nothing. The Father repeated, "I told you that I would clean him. Do you want to deprive me of this chance to serve an Orphan, which is my duty? You will have many opportunities to do it." He brought the little boy to his room and did not accept any help. After a while, he came out holding the boy's hand who was all clean and tidy as only a mother could have done!

Then the Father said to me, "Get some cookies from the refectory for him." Giving the cookies to the boy, I impertinently said, "Poor boy. You were filthy!"

The Father immediately reprimanded me, "Do not say that! He is so cute and clean. This is the only time it happened to him, unwillingly." I asked him, "And will this never happen again?" The boy answered, "Yes, I'll never do it again. It was because I have been having stomach trouble for some days." I said, "Did you report this to Brother Luigi?" "No" was the boy's answer. Finally, I said, "Now do you understand why you should always report to the Assistant when you are sick?"

Later, when we were alone, the Father said to me, "Why did you say in front of that boy, 'You are filthy!' It was humiliating for him. Moreover, in the works of mercy, there is nothing filthy. The more a service seems to be naturally repugnant and heavy, the more we must be inclined to do it with greater diligence, out of love for Our Lord, and to gain merits for paradise."

"Read the biographies of Saints, and you will see how they spent themselves in caring for the sick, for those affected with disgusting diseases in hospitals and missions. I will provide you with fascinating biographies of Saints and books about missions because we must also desire missions."

"This is the spirit of our Congregation. The Lord used the human miseries of the Avignone Houses to inspire the foundation of this Pious Work. It is not love if it does not entail sacrifices.

The more sacrifices are made to accomplish works of charity; the more merits are gained. We must remember the sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus Christ for us. He died on the cross!”

12. ASSISTING THE ORPHANS

Due to lack of personnel, the care for our Orphans was entrusted to a certain Bucceroni, a former petty officer as Prefect, and Vizzari, a former Orphan, as Assistant. Both of them, especially Vizzari, used a military, repressive, and disciplinary method.²⁴

Though they tried to hide their strictness, the Father knew and was bothered. He would rebuke, disapprove, and admonish them, but he could not find anyone to replace them. One day, an Orphan did not sweep the dormitory properly. Vizzari slapped him and left the child locked in the same dormitory without meals. The incident spread and came to the knowledge of the Father, who called Bucceroni and threatened to dismiss him. He told Vizzari that he deserved to be sent out of the Institute.

Knowing that we Aspirants, were aware of the strictness the Orphans were dealt with, one day, during the reading, the Father mentioned his disapproval of the approach used by Bucceroni and Vizzari. “Our method,” he said, “must be the Preventive System used by Don Bosco, and not the repressive method because the latter degrades souls.”

He concluded, “We hope that our Congregation will have, as soon as possible, its own well-prepared educators, feeling their responsibility and holding the formation of Orphans as one of the missions most pleasing to God and men.”

13. FIRST FRUITS MUST BE FOR THE ORPHANS

The Mother Superior of the Institute of the Holy Spirit sent a basket of figs to the Father with this note: These first fruits of our garden are for the Father.

On seeing those exquisite and fresh figs, the Father said, “They are truly wonderful.” However, upon reading the note, he added, “The Superior has mistaken the addressee. Instead of ‘for the Father’, she should have written ‘for the little Orphans’. Our first fruits shall be for the Orphans and the poor.”

Then he told me to bring the fruits to the refectory of the Orphans and tell the Prefect to distribute them. I dared to ask for some for the Fathers, but he answered, “No. Little Orphans come first, then the Fathers.” He took three figs and gave them to me, saying, “Take them.” Embarrassed, I answered, “Thank you, Father. I did not mean to ask them for myself.” However, the Father insisted saying, “I know that you did not intend to ask for yourself but take and eat them. You, too, are still a boy.”

²⁴ On the persecution of the Community of Francavilla (cf. Chapter 28), for what we know, was caused by the imprudent methods of Vizzari with the boys.

Upon seeing those delicious fruits when I entered the refectory, the Orphans started shouting, “Long live the Father.”

14. CANON VITALE²⁵

Very often, in the evening, I saw a Canon lingering at supper in our refectory, talking with the Father with great familiarity. I was assigned to serve, and I was edified by the graciousness of the Canon and especially by the respect and veneration he showed for the Father.

One evening, after the Canon had left, I bravely said to the Father. “This Canon must truly be a saint.” The Father replied, “He is a Canon of the Cathedral of Messina. He is exceptional, learned, and esteemed by all. He has a great apostolate.” “If he is exceptional and learned,” I remarked, “why doesn’t he become a Rogationist and come to work here with you?”

Smiling, the Father replied, “This Canon is already a Rogationist in spirit, since the time he was a seminarian.”

“One day I will tell him to become a Rogationist,” I added. “No!” The Father replied. “It is not you who will tell him. It is the Lord when the time comes. Certainly, when the Lord wills it, he will become a Rogationist. He will do much good for the Congregation, and most probably, he will carry the burden of our little Work.”

15. JUMP AS MUCH AS YOU WANT BUT NO SIN AND NO INJURIES!

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In the last days of November 1908, the Father said to me, “I have good news. We have decided to allow you to take the religious habit on the feast of the Immaculate Conception if you want it. Prepare yourself well. Are you happy?”

“Thank you! Yes, I want it. I entered the Institute for this purpose. But...”

“What do you mean ‘but’?” the Father asked. “Are you no longer willing?”

“I want to, but they told me that when one takes the religious habit, he must be serious. He cannot play or jump anymore. Frankly, I cannot take this. I want to be happy, to play, to jump!”

“Who told you such things? We want happy and dynamic Religious. ‘*Serve the Lord in gladness.*’ When we give you the habit, I will always tell you to be happy. You can still play and jump around as long as you don’t commit sin and don’t injure your head.”

“Then, yes! I want to receive the religious habit.”

²⁵ Canon Francesco Bonaventura Vitale (1966-1950) had known the Father from his youth, approximately since 1883, and was fascinated by him, saying, “I loved him from that very first moment” (cf. *Bollettino* 1928, p. 17, quoted in *Father’s Soul* p. 46). With more details, Father Vitale goes back to that first encounter and his Rogationist vocation in his precious booklet ‘*Fall in love with Jesus Christ*’. At the death of the Father, he naturally became the guide of the Congregation so that he can be considered the “alter parens” (*other parent*) of the Rogationists.

In the playground of the Institute, there was a small fishpond. When no one was around, I would often jump to the other side. A few weeks after receiving the religious habit, I was tempted, foolishly, to jump across as usual. Unfortunately, I failed. The cassock tangled around my legs and in order not to fall into the pond, I threw myself to the opposite edge, falling sharply to the ground. This resulted in bruises, wounds on my hands and legs, and a big tear in the habit.

My companions, together with Brother Placido, ran to help me up. Seeing me in that condition, Brother Placido said, "It's always you! You cannot behave! Look at yourself. How many times have I forbidden you to do that? You have to pay for your disobedience!"

Wearily I answered, "What is wrong in what I did? The Father told me to play and jump as much as I wanted, as long as I did not sin, and I did not break my head. I think that I did not sin, and I have not broken my head."

They accompanied me to the dormitory to treat and dress my wounds. I had to stay in bed, waiting for my only cassock to be repaired. Then, they reported to the Father what had happened and the answer I had given to Brother Placido. The Father came to see me in the dormitory, and he inquired about my wounds. Though feeling severe pain, I answered, "It's just a little thing. I am in bed because I am waiting for my torn cassock to be repaired."

The Father advised, "You must be careful when you do these things, do you understand? Play moderately and jump as much as you want, as long as you don't sin, you don't do bad things, and you do not ruin your cassock."

That evening the Father saw me limping, and my hands bandaged.

He said, "You told me that you were not hurt and that it was nothing at all. Do you have to break your legs and arms before you say it is serious?"

16. THE EARTHQUAKE²⁶

When the terrible earthquake happened, the Father was in Rome. As soon as he heard the news, he rushed to return to Messina. However, he encountered so many delays that he was able to reach his unfortunate city only after several days.

When he finally arrived, he was devastated by the suffering, and he was exhausted by the delays in his travel. We surrounded him immediately with great warmth and affection. He had words of comfort and encouragement for us and gratitude to the Lord, who had saved us from death. As soon as he became aware of the situation, he exclaimed, "Thank God! They told me that my two Institutes had been completely destroyed and that all of you were under the debris. Instead, the Lord has taken away only thirteen victims."

²⁶ The 7.1 magnitude earthquake occurred on December 28, 1908, at 5:20 a.m., claiming the lives of an estimated 80,000 victims, and almost the entire city was razed to the ground. The Father had left for Rome on the evening of Christmas. The almost total devastation of the City of Messina caused by the earthquake forced the two Congregations and two Orphanages to move to Apulia. Cf. next Chapter.

As soon as I had the chance, I said, “Father, Canon Vitale is with us, and his sister is also unhurt.” “Let us thank the Lord,” the Father commented.

He started working right away, day and night, trying to bring relief and help not only to the people of our Institute but also of the city.

He was committed to helping to pull out the wounded from the debris and getting them to the hospital; in exhuming corpses, consoling and assisting in any way those affected by the earthquake; in working with the shovel and pickaxe and in carrying away the wounded and the dead. The untiring and fearless Father Palma aided him in this work.

When possible, the Father also helped to dig out ciboria with the Sacred Species, relics, and sacred images from the debris of the Churches of the city.

Some of us youth also helped in the best way we could. One day, at the sight of the crushed and stinking corpses, I threw up and almost fainted. The Father sent me back to the Institute to work inside the House²⁷ instead.

Indeed, there was so much to do inside. Under the wreckage of the bakery and pasta factory of the Holy Spirit Institute, there was plenty of bread, pasta, and flour. They had to be dug out to provide food not only for the personnel of the two Institutes but also, as much as possible, for the people affected by the earthquake.

Seeing how willingly we worked in rescuing, the Father congratulated us because in this way we helped a lot of hungry people. The work was not only to look for edible products under the debris but also to separate them from the rubble and remove the spoiled portions.

One day, the Father asked me if I had informed my parents that none of us were hurt. I said that they had tried to come to Messina to see the situation, but the military²⁸ had not allowed them to enter the city. They heard from survivors that our Institutes had been completely destroyed and all had perished under the debris. Torn with grief, they even set the day for our funerals when in the evening they received a telegram from Catania stating, “Do not worry! The cousins and we, thank God, are completely safe. Only thirteen victims in the Sisters’ Institute.” They still held the funeral service the next day, but it was for the thirteen. Later, they had a thanksgiving Mass because we were spared. The Father told me to thank my folks on his behalf for their thoughtfulness in praying for the thirteen victims.

In Messina, for about a month, we were still under the fear of continuous aftershocks, and we were materially destitute. From all the aid sent by several cities, our Institute for boys only received twenty woolen blankets, two sacks of moldy bread, and a bag of carobs. What was recovered from the Institute of the Sisters was already gone. The Father was very worried and could hardly wait for the time when we would leave for Apulia.

²⁷ In this English Edition, when capitalized, House refers to a Religious House or Community of the Rogationists and Daughters of Divine Zeal.

²⁸ The Army cordoned off the whole area of Messina immediately after the earthquake.

Mother Nazarena Majone was by the side of the Father during those days. She radiated charity and love. She was utterly dedicated to relieving the sufferings of both our male and female communities as well as that of the people outside. No one ever knocked at the doors of our Institutes without receiving comfort and food.

17. TRANSFER TO APULIA²⁹

Almost one month after the catastrophic earthquake of Messina, we, namely: the Father, the Aspirants, Orphans, their Assistants, and one section of Orphan girls with their superior and teachers, left for Apulia.

The Father was very busy attending to all so that nothing would be lacking. We prayed and sang on the train.

The welcome ceremonies and public display of support at the train stations were warm because of the fame of the Institute and more so because of the presence of the Father.

When we reached Francavilla Fontana, our destination, practically the whole town was waiting eagerly for the refugees of the earthquake, the *Anthonian Orphans of Canon Di Francia*, as we were known everywhere. There were posters on the walls, balconies decorated as for a feast, and people moved to tears.

First, we entered the Church to thank the Lord. Then, we were accompanied to the Municipal Hall, where the most prominent persons of the town served us a sumptuous lunch. There was a series of speeches at lunch. The Father spoke so eloquently that he moved all to tears.

At the end of the lunch, we went to the places prepared for us. The school building was for us, and a private house of a Francavilla gentleman for Orphan girls. However, the Father immediately noticed that the facilities and furniture prepared with so much generosity was not enough.

After a few months, some help was sent from Messina.

The Father was aware of what the House needed, and his heart was suffering, but he could do no more than to encourage us to be patient and to thank the Providence for what had been given. His consolation was seeing that we were still happy. It could not have been otherwise after having been one month in Messina always afraid of more earthquakes and financial hardship.

For the first three days, charitable persons gave us lunch at the Franciscan Convent.

18. MY NOVITIATE

A few days after our arrival at Francavilla, the Father called me and said, “You know that before professing the religious vows, a candidate must spend at least a year in the Novitiate. During that time, under the guidance of a Master, he must stay in a place separated from others,

²⁹ Apulia is one of the biggest southeastern regions of Italy. Francavilla and Oria are approximately 300 km from Messina.

attending to prayer, mortification, the exercise of religious virtues, and study to know the Congregation better and to discern whether he is willing to embrace the religious life or not.”

“Yes, Father, I know this.” I answered, “When do I start?”

“Now, at once!” he answered.

Then the Father explained, “Look at our situation here. We do not have an area where you can be separated from the others, and no one can be your Novice Master. Moreover, we lack personnel. For this reason, even as a Novice, you will have to take care of the House and the needs of the community. As for your Master, I will have to entrust you to our Lord, to the Most Holy Virgin who is the Seat of Wisdom and to your Guardian Angel.

Regarding a separate place, the tabernacle will be your safe dwelling. You must have faith in the Lord because when human means are lacking, we obey the Lord. He makes up for what is lacking with his grace.”

19. COOK AND TREASURER... WITH NO MONEY

After pointing out how to practice my Novitiate, the Father said, “Can you see the situation regarding personnel? We do not have a cook or anyone to do the buying. You will have to do it in the best way you can.”

“Me? I do not know how to cook or how to be a treasurer!”

“You will learn. We have very little, anyway. It is not necessary to take a course in cooking or the preparation of special dishes. I know a little. I will teach you. When it comes to buying things, what you call being ‘treasurer’, we have so little to manage and spend. The main problem is not having anything to administer, nor money to spend because, as you can see, we have no money. We have to entrust ourselves solely to the Divine Providence and to our goodwill in getting what is necessary through sacrifices! Meantime, we cannot expect any help from Messina because they have nothing. As I said, we need to pray and trust in the Divine Providence. Indeed, when we cooperate, God will give us what is necessary. This has been the history of our Work for many years. Courage! I will teach you how to cook.”

The Father taught me how to prepare and cook legumes, in particular, chickpeas. This is the recipe: the night before, soak them in cold water with a little salt. In the morning, rinse them thoroughly, then put them in a pot with water and start boiling them.

I asked if this was also the way to cook pasta and rice. The Father laughingly responded, “I can see that you do not know anything! If you cook pasta and rice this way, you will make glue! Pasta and rice are placed in the pot when the water is already boiling.”

Initially, the good people of Francavilla helped us by bringing food, clothes, etc. but as time went on, their support slowly faded to the point that we could not go on anymore. Brother Giuseppe Antonio and I did all we could so that the community would not lack the bare necessities.

We would go to the market not to buy things since we didn't have any money, but to beg. We did the same in factories and farms.

We wrote to the Father, in Messina, to let him know the condition of the House. I remember that we were in such dire need that the musical band of the Orphans would accompany funerals to the cemetery.

20. ASHAMED TO BEG!

We wrote to the Father, informing him that our financial condition had reached a point of no return.

After a few days, the Father came to Francavilla, bringing only five hundred Liras. That was all he could gather in Messina. The Houses in Sicily were also suffering financially.

He remarked, "It means that in the meantime, the Divine Providence has decided that to survive, we had to go begging like we used to do at the beginning of our Work. It is necessary that you and Brother Giuseppe Antonio be assigned to beg."

I reacted, "But Father, you know that I am busy with the marketing and cooking."

"Yes, but what can you buy without money? Moreover, if there's nothing, what can you cook? You will go begging in the afternoon."

I added, "I am ashamed to go begging like a Capuchin friar (*in Galati we had a horrible concept of the Capuchins roaming around begging*).

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"Why are you ashamed?" the Father asked. "You are not going to beg for yourself, but for the Orphans. On the contrary, you should feel honored and fortunate to be able to offer your service for the Orphans. You should sympathize with our actual condition. We hope that in the future, the Providence will set things differently. However, today, it seems that Providence wants this from us. I understand that begging in itself, is naturally repugnant, and since you are still a boy, you do not understand some of these things."

"Tell me, what shall we do? Shall we leave the Orphans in the streets? However, I trust your goodwill, and I will not force you. Just let me know your answer."

I bowed my head and said, "I will do it, Father!"

So for several months, after lunch, I would go begging for bread and other goods in the city. During the harvest season, I would go to the place where they were threshing and ask for wheat and cereals. It was humiliating because of the criticism and mockery often addressed to me.

One night when I returned from begging, I found the Father at home. When he saw me, he said, "You are tired. Buy a straw hat to protect yourself from the sun, and also for the boy who goes with you. We are really in need, but you have to take care of your health. You do not have to go begging every day. Go when you can. If you get sick, you will not be able to go at all. With this, you are having a good novitiate. Do everything with faith, and the Lord will certainly

bless your sacrifice. How much do you get per day? Thank God, there are still good people, and we admire their charity.”

The Father continued, “Try to use these occasions to give them good advice. Give them images of Saints, or our printed materials. This is an apostolate. Take care that the boy who goes with you is not always the same one because he too, poor child, will get tired. Choose the boy from among the older ones. I know that it is not helpful for their education to bring them with you to beg, but what else can we do? Necessity compels us to do this.”

21. ‘CARUSELLI’ AND PROVIDENCE

Every time the Father would come to Francavilla, he had to stay at the Capuchin Convent because there was no room at our place. At supper, one evening, they gave him a salad of small cucumbers, called *caruselli* in Francavillan dialect. This gave him indigestion and a high fever. I went to visit him. He was in bed in a dreary small cell lacking all the comforts.

He spoke about the cause of his indigestion and jokingly added, “They told me that these cucumbers are called *caruselli*; if these *caruselli* cause so much pain, what would have happened if they were *grown-ups*?³⁰”

I said, “Is this the way these blessed friars treat their guests?”

The Father immediately reprimanded me, saying that I was despising the charity of those good, kind and cordial friars doing their best to be hospitable. Then he told me, “Thank God you came. A few days ago, a poor widow with several little children came to me in extreme need. I had only 50 Liras. I gave it all to her, so I had nothing left. However, Providence helped me immediately. That same day I went to visit a sick old lady of the Salerno family. She gave me 1,000.00 Liras for the Orphans. Here. Take them!”

I objected. “At least keep what you need for your travel back to Messina.”

However, the Father replied, “No, take all. If the Providence does not provide otherwise, I will ask money from you.”

22. CARE FOR TWO SICK ASPIRANTS

Once, upon arriving at Francavilla from Messina, the Father discovered that the Aspirants Drago Giuseppe, whose religious name was Brother Mansueto, and Angelindo Varotto³¹, who later became Brother Stanislao, were so sick, the Father feared for their lives.

³⁰ In Messina’s dialect, the word ‘caruselli’ also means “little boys”. Jokingly, the Father combines the two meanings of the word.

³¹ Angelindo Varotto, from Teolo, Padua, was accepted initially as an Orphan, and later became a Rogationist Religious. In the beginning, he was devout and of good character, but then he turned to such bad behaviors that the Father was forced to dismiss him.

He reprimanded Brother Giuseppe Antonio and me for not providing them with adequate medicine at the proper time. He led them to Oria so that they could recover.

He had them checked by several doctors and some specialists in Taranto. At Oria, they stayed at the Seminary, but our Sisters of San Benedetto prepared their meals.

The two Aspirants were amazed by the Father's medication and attention. They could not find enough words to thank him. He kept them at the Seminary for fifteen days.

It was at that time that Father Palma informed him that his presence in Messina was urgently needed. However, the Father responded, "The more urgent thing now is getting these two young men back to good health."

When he brought them back to Francavilla, he said to me, "See how they recovered properly? When it comes to health, whatever sacrifice is needed must be done because health is a precious legacy for the person and the Congregation. For this, St. Francis of Assisi dared to say that he could sell even the altar clothes, if there were no other means, to take care of the sick."

23. OPENING OF THE HOUSE IN ORIA³²

On the morning of October 6, 1909, we, the Aspirants, were transferred from Francavilla to Oria, where the Father and Father Palma were expecting us. They had been there for several days cleaning the Convent which, having been left abandoned, was in a dismal state.

A large group of our Sisters from San Benedetto Convent had also been busy cleaning for several days, but there was still much to be done because the Convent had been left abandoned the whole time it belonged to the Salerno-Meli family.

As soon as the Aspirants arrived at the Convent, the Father celebrated the Holy Mass and gave a touching homily. After breakfast in the garden, we all started to work removing the garbage, which was still left around, and put several rooms in order.

The first three days, while we were preparing for the arrival of the Blessed Sacrament, we did not cook at all. Though he was having problems with his stomach, the Father did not want to take anything different from the rest.

Since we had no mattresses during those first days, we had to sleep on the straw containers for pressing olives, which were left there. The only bed available was given to Aspirant Angelindo Varotto because he was sickly.

Seeing us cheerful and contented with those small beds, the Father, smiling, told us, "I am pleased that you are so happy. We must thank the Lord, who grants us the grace of starting this

³² The Rogationist Institute in Oria was an ancient convent built in 1783 by the Discalced Fathers of St. Peter of Alcantara (Alcantarinians). Confiscated because of the 1886 law of suppression, it became private property, and it was used for agricultural purposes. Eventually, it purchased by Father Hannibal (cf. Chapter 25). In Oria, it was known as San Pasquale Convent. The Institute of the Daughters of Divine Zeal in Oria was also an ancient convent, known in Oria as San Benedetto Convent. The two convents are about 1 km distant from each other. The relationship between these two communities is described in the succeeding Chapters.

new House in holy poverty. Somehow this gives us an idea of the Chapter of Mats³³ in Assisi at the time of St. Francis.”

For a long time, we lacked a suitable place, so we ate in the kitchen, sitting on bricks, including the Father. As for the only two chairs existing, the Father wanted one of them to be used by Father Palma and the other by an Aspirant.

Though he enjoyed seeing us cheerful, he was suffering about our struggles and tried his best to provide at least the bare necessities.

24. ORIA IS OUR ASPIRANTS' FORMATION HOUSE

For about two weeks, the Father gave us several lessons every day on religious life and how to live in the new House.

He spoke to us with so much clarity and spiritual depth that the more we heard him speak, the more we wanted to listen to him.

He told us that the new House was being planned to be used for religious formation. We were to be grateful to the Lord for this grace and to show gratitude through how we live in practice. He told us how to organize our day, giving us the written schedule and the assignments.

Then he said to us, “Until we can find someone, I will take care of the kitchen.” This lasted around fifteen days.

I said, “Father, I can be the cook. I can't say I am an expert, but having done it for about a year in Francavilla, I can do it here. Besides, it is you who taught me. Now I know that pasta and rice are not soaked in water the night before cooking. You put it directly into boiling water.”

Smiling, the Father replied, “You have improved. I can see that my lesson has been effective. However, you cannot do the cooking because I am giving you another assignment. I will tell you later.”

He assigned Father Palma to provide for the needs of the House the best way he could. Father Palma was a dynamic man. He started to work immediately. He brought some things to Oria from Francavilla. Other stuff came from the Sisters' Institute. He provided the rest by going around Ceglie and elsewhere, from his relatives, friends, and benefactors. At least we were able to have some of the necessary things.

The Father later directed that the cleaning in the kitchen be done on a rotation basis. He put himself and Father Palma first on the list. It was amusing to see him wearing a small apron more fitted for a little boy, cleaning the plates, the pots, and the floor.

³³ The “Chapter of the Mats” gets its name from the first Chapter (=meeting) of the Franciscan Order. Upon the convocation of St. Francis, around 5,000 friars came. Apart from the inability of the poor friars to pay for lodging, the town was also too small to accommodate such a large number of people. Thus, the friars stayed scattered in the fields, living in huts made of straw and slept on mats.

I was not on the list, and I asked why. “You have to watch over the boys,” the Father replied. I objected.

“Father! I do not feel I am ready to be the Assistant for the boys. I still have to be supervised, especially because of my character.”

“I am more aware than you,” the Father conceded, “that you are not an ideal Assistant because to be a good educator you should be a great philosopher, a theologian, and a saint. However, we do not have such a person. Do I have to call a Franciscan, a Jesuit, or a Salesian for this task?”

“Call whoever you like! But I will not be the Assistant!”

“Petty words,” he said. “Come and see me tomorrow. I will teach you what to do. I will also give you some written rules that I am preparing so that it will be easier for you to do your task properly.”

The next day I went to him, and he said, “I have reflected, and I have prayed, but I did not find any solution other than to put you with the boys.”

“You will do what you know you can do. Neither God nor we can expect something more from you. Don’t be discouraged because you lack systematic and pedagogical training. When it comes to education, two important factors that depend on you, making up for this deficiency: love and charity for your pupils. Most mothers do not know even the simplest elements of pedagogy, but their natural and maternal love instinctively gives them an educational method ignored even by longtime qualified teachers. It depends on you to love the boys as much as you can.”

“If natural love can make up that much for systematic and pedagogical training, how much more supernatural love and charity can. This means to look at the boy in relation to God; as created in the image and likeness of the Holy Trinity; as redeemed by the Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ who has always shown a very special fondness for young boys to the extent of considering what is done for them out of love as done to him. As he said, ‘Whoever welcomes one of these for my sake, receives me. Whatever you do to one of these for my sake, I consider it done to me.’”

“These sentiments and this spirit depend on you. Add to this that you did not choose this task. It is assigned to you in holy obedience as a sign of God’s will. He will give you his special grace for obeying. I do not mean that in the work of education, we have to be just practitioners, without feeling the need for systematic learning and pedagogy. To neglect these, when we could achieve them would be tantamount to tempting God, and going against our conscience.”

“When it is possible, it will be one of our main duties to obtain diplomas and doctorates in education, always inspired by the Preventive System. We should keep in mind that love, charity, and science, combined with the educational field, qualifies a person into the art of molding man.”

Later he gave me some written rules. They were a straightforward synthesis of the whole educational plan for our boys, truly a treasure of practical life. It is a pity that I lost them when we were expelled from the House.

25. HAPPINESS AMID HARDSHIPS

During the first years after the opening of the House in Oria, we lived a life of poverty. The Convent had been completely abandoned after the government had sent out the Alcantarinian Friars and the Salerno Meli family had acquired it for a small amount until the Father had bought it.

Some areas and rooms had been used as storage for firewood, straw, and trash.

Several doors and windows had been removed, and those left were destroyed and no longer had the glass. Parts of the pavement were broken. The walls were dirty and filthy; the grounds were full of garbage. The Daughters of Divine Zeal had been there for weeks before we arrived to remove the trash and to clear and clean the rooms as much as they could. After our arrival, we continued to do the same for weeks.

Little by little, we restored the rooms to make them habitable somehow. We painted the walls with lime-water and repaired the facilities most urgently needed. We were grateful to the Providence for a door, a window, a table, or used bricks that we would occasionally get from the Bishop's Palace which, at that time, was under renovation.

We lacked the most necessary items. Food left much to be desired in quantity, quality, and preparation. Our clothes were not in any better situation.

Imagine! About eighty patches of different colors, poorly arranged, could be counted on the cassock of Brother Teodoro Tusino. You could no longer see the original material. This was in 1912. Imagine how it was before!

Despite such squalor, we were all amazingly in acceptable good health. It was even more amazing to see us cheerful and contented.

When we opened our private *Ginnasio* school,³⁴ Canon Nacci, the Rector of the Diocesan Seminary, was one of our teachers. He visibly enjoyed the gladness and order reigning in the House, saying, "When I come here to teach, I feel rejuvenated and time goes by without my noticing it. I enjoy the happiness of these dear pupils very much."

In 1911, when the Aspirants of the Congregation of Father Montemurro, the so-called *Montemurrini*, came, they were amazed at the behavior and happiness found in the House, in spite of so many hardships.

The Father was aware of this. One day he called for a meeting with Father Palma and me after the community reading. He had something to say to us.

As soon as we got to him, he said, "Thank God. It seems that in this House, there is a spirit of poverty, and this is certainly an assurance for the Congregation. Many commodities are still lacking, thus, requiring sacrifices that are not small. You see clothes and cassocks with patches on top of patches, which honor holy poverty. However, it seems that the best sign is that no one complains and all are contented and joyful."

³⁴ *Ginnasio* was equivalent to Junior High School, for the Humanities track preparatory to University or College.

“However, concerning poverty and living its spirit, it is not enough to be deprived of useful and necessary things. This has to be accepted with love and out of imitation of Our Lord, who was very poor and had nowhere to lay his head. We have to insist much more on this so that it is clearly understood.”

“The perfect observance of poverty enriches the soul with goodness and preserves and consolidates communities. When its observance becomes lax, the whole religious life collapses. We learn this from the Orders and Religious Congregations that were more advanced but later perished miserably.”

“At the time of St. Francis of Assisi, when poverty was highly honored in the Order of the Friar Minors, the famous Chapter of Mats was attended by more than 5,000 Friars. Out of poverty, we have also keep in mind our humble origin in the Avignone Houses.”

“Allow me to say, however, that, generally speaking, I have noticed some negligence in cleaning. This carelessness cannot go on. Poor, yes; dirty, no! Lack of cleanliness shows neglect and laziness. The Saints were poor, but very clean, except when it came to a particular state of poverty or spirit of penance, like that of St. Joseph Benedict Labre.”³⁵

He had a friendly complaint which he addressed to me, “For example, you are not very clean. Your cassock is dirty. What example do you set for others? How can you demand others to be clean? Also, when you meet people seeing you looking like that, what will they think? If they see you with a patched cassock, but tidy, they could think of the spirit of poverty; but if they see you dressed badly, they will say that you are careless, and they are right.”

“Also, aside from being clean, the boys and Religious are to be clothed better. Clothes that are too old and faded and cassocks with too many patches are not to be used any longer. Thank God, our financial condition has improved.”

“I don't mean that we display the luxury or grandeur Providence provides us. May the Lord spare us from this! We will always adapt modestly and poorly to the times. We do not have to be ashamed of poverty, but, being an Institute of education, our image in society must be a dignified one.”

“As to cleanliness, I understand that the House has a scarcity of water, but with some diligence and sacrifices, cleanliness is possible. Lack of water seems to be a general problem in

³⁵ St. Benedict Joseph Labre (1748-1783) was a French Third Order Franciscan who lived as a pilgrim, traveling to the most prominent Shrines in Europe, and living as a beggar. He wore rags and shared his food with the poor. He lived the evangelical poverty radically, convinced that “our comfort is not in this world.” Moreover, as a result of his poverty, Benedict soon ceased to be clean; the smell of Benedict was not always pleasant; even his confessor, who wrote his life, tells us very frankly that when Benedict came to confession, he had to protect himself from vermin. Pope Leo XIII canonized him in 1881.

St. Benedict Labre had often been portrayed with ragged clothing, awful smell, and infestation by vermin. His intercession was invoked to be released from these troubles. Father Hannibal himself had recourse to this Saint to be freed from insects in Avignone... and was heard!

Apulia, but the people and families are more or less clean. Thank God, we have wells with abundant water. We must have the patience to fetch it.”

I called the Father’s attention about the significant inconvenience that there was still no bathtub nor a shower nor a place to wash the feet in the House. The Father answered, “What are you waiting for? Provide them! Father Palma, take care of this problem! Fix it right away. Do not wait for the *Apulia Water System* to reach our House because, as they say, nobody knows how many years it might take.”

26. THE CARETAKER OF THE CONVENT

When Mr. Salerno-Meli of Oria was the owner of the San Pasquale Convent, he had allowed a poor old shoe-repairman to stay in one of the rooms near the entrance on condition that he would be the caretaker of the Convent.

This man was miserable and abandoned. The room where he lived was messy and dirty. Garbage and rags were everywhere. He slept, cooked, ate, and worked there. He also kept his tools and shoes he repaired in the room.

Sometimes, we would hear him hammering and singing loudly at the top of his voice. One day the Father, together with Brother Giuseppe Antonio, went to see him. The Father asked him how he was. The poor man replied that he was in poor health and that he had no money. The Father said, “Don’t you have a family or relatives?”

“I don’t have a family, and my relatives have abandoned me completely.”

“Didn’t Mr. Salerno Meli give you a salary for being the caretaker of the convent?”

“Not only did he not give me a salary, but he also wanted me to pay for using this room.”

The Father continued, “You earn something from the work you do, don’t you?”

“I only work from time to time. What I earn from repairing shoes is not even enough to buy a glass of wine.”

I interrupted, “You are lying! You drink so much that no amount of money will be enough! It’s not a glass of wine but liters per day. Most of the time, you are completely drunk!”

“Who, me?”

“Yes, you! I saw you one evening coming from town, staggering and saying strange things. Even now, you smell like a barrel of wine!”

“When I stagger, it is not because of wine but because of weakness since I have no money to buy a piece of bread.”

At this point, the Father looked at me and said, “Keep quiet! Instead, let us clean the room and put it in order. Get a mat, a bedsheet, and some clothes.”

“Where will I get them, Father? We don’t even have any for ourselves?”

The Father replied, “While we slowly find a way to provide for ourselves, we also have to provide food for him. We will treat him like one of us.”

Later, he called me to his room and pointed out to me that my conversation with the old man was out of place, impolite and offensive. I should not have said that he was completely drunk. “You cannot offend your neighbor that way.” He added, “Who told you that he is a drunkard? You have only seen him a few times, and you already judge him as such. Some become more ‘excited’ than usual because of a small glass of wine. However, even if he is a drunkard, you should not taunt him about it. Your behavior says nothing good about you.”

A few days later, when the Father returned home, the old man began to say in a loud voice, “You are a saint! You are a saint! Saintlier than St. Barsanuphius!³⁶” The Father said, “Quiet! Be silent! Stop that foolishness.” However, the man shouted even louder, “Indeed, you are a saint, a saint greater than St. Barsanuphius. I say it.” The Father walked away, hurriedly. He said to me. “Poor man! He does not know what he is saying. Perhaps, it is the wine that makes him talk like that.” I replied, “There is truth in wine.” The Father immediately said, “Are you discovering the Americas? Are you drunk too?”

“Yes, Father, I drank too much water.”

The Father would visit him often and provide the old man with food, clothing, and linen until he the day left his room and our Convent. The Father even ordered that, aside from lunch and supper, the old man be given half a liter of wine at every meal.

One day, when the Father passed by, the old man said, “Father Hannibal, with the little wine you give me, maybe your lordship thinks that I use it to say Mass. It is not even enough to moisten my lips.” The Father said, “That is enough for you. Otherwise, you will get drunk.” “I don’t get drunk,” the old man replied, “even if I drank six liters a day.”

“You must not do this,” the Father replied, “because it is not fine, and it is bad for you.”

27. BE PATIENT AND TRUST IN THE LORD

The Father and Father Palma remained in Oria for several weeks, working untiringly to straighten out the House.

However, their presence was badly needed in Messina to continue putting up the two Houses, and to prepare for the return of the Orphans who were uncomfortable in Francavilla.

³⁶ St. Barsanuphius of Palestine (died ca. 540 AD) was a hermit of the 6th century. He lived in absolute seclusion for fifty years near the monastery of St. Seridon of Gaza. He wrote many letters, 800 of which have survived. His relics arrived in Oria, in Italy, brought by a Palestinian monk in 850 AD. During a Moorish siege and taking of the city, the relics were lost but then later rediscovered and placed in the city's basilica. Since then, St. Barsanuphius has been the Patron Saint of Oria. He was considered to have saved Oria from the destruction wrought by foreign invaders. A legend states that he repelled a Spanish invasion by appearing before the Spanish commander armed with a sword.

Underneath the Chapel of the Rogationist Institute in Oria, there is a very ancient Byzantine crypt believed to date back to the 9th century and was used by the Basilian hermits. It has a fresco of St. Barsanuphius.

Before leaving, the Father gathered us and informed us about the situation. He urged us to continue to be competent and disciplined and to pray hard.

At the end of the meeting, feeling discouraged, I went to the Father's room to tell him that I did not want to be left alone in charge of the Aspirants in the House in Oria. Even Brother Giuseppe Antonio had already returned to Francavilla.

The Father answered, "Don't you realize that we cannot do otherwise? Be patient and trust in the Lord."

"How can you say that you will be alone? There is Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, the Most Holy Virgin Mary, your Guardian Angel, and the Angels of the boys."

"Entrust yourself to them. When in doubt, have recourse to them with faith, and for sure, they will help you much better than Father Palma or I."

28. EMERGENCY IN FRANCAVILLA. A LESSON ON THE PREVENTIVE SYSTEM

While the Father was in Messina, in our Orphanage in Francavilla, the judges began their merciless and determined inquiry about the maltreatment of the Orphans by Vizzari, a former Orphan himself. He was in charge of the general discipline.

All of us had to undergo repeated cross-examination by the Police Commissioners who, with promises and threats, made us state and sign things which were exaggerated and sometimes absolutely false.

During the questioning, the Commissioner tried to accuse the Father of maltreating the Orphans himself. Not only did all the boys deny the accusation, but they defended the Father by saying that he loved them and cared for them like a mother.

The Father did not know about the abuse because nobody informed him out of fear of Vizzari who would have taken revenge.

The Father rushed back immediately to Francavilla, saddened by the maltreatment of the Orphans without his knowledge.

Meanwhile, in Francavilla, the situation had become so complicated that it turned into real merciless persecution.

One day, the Father asked me if I knew about the maltreatment inflicted by Vizzari on the boys in Francavilla. I was so fed up with the abuse, having witnessed them, that I could not bear it anymore. So, I related the facts in their harsh reality. While I was speaking, I noticed that the Father became very serious. Disgusted, he exclaimed, "Poor children! Why did no one tell me about all these? You, too, why didn't you tell me?" I tried to look for alibis. I said that on several occasions, I decided to stop Vizzari, but he told me to mind my own business. More than once, he was on the verge of hitting me. I also mentioned this to Brother Giuseppe Antonio, who told me that several times he had also reproached Vizzari who, instead became crueler to the boys.

The Father became angry. “Yes, yes, you said it to this one, you said it to another, but you did not say anything to Father Palma nor me. This silence is serious. If you did not have a chance to say it verbally, you should have written to me immediately wherever I was. This is the work of the ‘mute devil’. Neither Brother Giuseppe, who is mainly responsible, nor you, nor the boys let me know anything! You and Brother Giuseppe deserve severe punishment. Both of you have shown that you do not understand. How can the Congregation trust persons who don't understand the impact of such oppressive and inhuman treatment?”

“How many times have I told you and taught you that the educative method to be adopted in our Institute is the Preventive System of Don Bosco, which is based on persuasion, religion, and love? I have also said that if this method is beneficial and effective for all pupils, it is much more so for orphans who, being deprived of parents and abandoned, are more in need of affection. On the other hand, the repressive method is based on strict discipline and tormenting punishment. If it is harmful to the pupils, it is more harmful and dangerous in a particular way for orphans.”

“It means that you have not understood anything I have said and taught so many times! I cannot imagine how you reached such a level of irresponsibility. Poor children! They have been hurt and treated inhumanely.”

“Vizzari will be punished. He deserves to be put in jail, not just for some months but for several years. Now that I know the truth, I regret having defended him for several years.”

“For not telling me, you and Giuseppe Antonio deserve to be sent out of the Congregation.”

Later, I learned that poor Brother Giuseppe Antonio went through a very distressing period because of what happened in Francavilla.

29. THE PERSECUTION EXTENDS TO ORIA

From the Orphanage of Francavilla, where it continued without mercy, the persecution extended to the House of Oria, where the Police Commissioner started his questioning and constant harassment.

We were all terrorized. The Commissioner would often come, calling us, trying to confuse us with deceiving questions, promises, and threats. All these were intended to make us confess that there were also abuses in Oria and that the Father approved.

After losing hope that we would not say what he wanted, the Commissioner also lost his patience. Fuming with anger, he said, “It is evident that the priest (referring to the Father) has instructed you to lie. I will resolve the situation. I will arrest the two of you.

When the investigation in Oria began, the Father gathered us and said to us, “I want you to answer the questions of the Commissioner truthfully even if it means I go to jail.” An Aspirant, Calogero Drago (who later became Brother Pasquale as a Religious), interrupted him and said, “Father, if they are going to ask me what I know about the injustice inflicted by Vizzari on the Orphans in Francavilla, I will say that I did not know or see anything.”

The Father said, “Then you did not understand me. You have to answer the questions of the Commissioner truthfully no matter what happens after.”

“I understand,” Calogero replied. “When he asks me, I know what I am going to answer.”

After so much harassment, the Commissioner invited us one by one to sign what we had stated. We realized, however, that, in the statements, there were things we had not said. Some had been changed or exaggerated. We refused to sign.

The Commissioner lost his temper again and exclaimed, “The priest told you not to sign. Now I will arrest all of you, including the priest, immediately.”

When it was my turn to sign, it was a disaster. The Commissioner was continuously shouting curses against the Father, who, according to him, had instructed us how to answer and not to sign. It was useless to argue that it was the opposite, that the Father had repeatedly told us to tell the whole truth.

When I realized that he did not want to believe me and was obsessively threatening and shouting, I stood up saying, “You can arrest me.” The Commissioner was furious because he knew that I had been in Francavilla, and because I was the only one wearing the cassock, aside from Brother Concetto, who was very old.

I immediately went to the Father and told him everything that had happened. The Father said, “You must not lie. Don’t do it. He cannot force you. However, do not be disrespectful because he is a public official. He is in authority, and every authority is from God.”

I said, “For me, he is a mason, and his authority is not from God but the devil.”

“Enough!” the Father reprimanded me. “Calm down and go to the Church to visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.”

Later, the Father went to the Commissioner and had a long talk with him. We knew nothing about their conversation, but when the Commissioner left, he had changed and calmed down. Whenever he greeted the Father, he was very respectful. He was even heard saying, “I am sorry, very reverend Father.”

However, the questioning continued relentlessly. The authorities asked not only about the events in Francavilla, but also about what we ate, the work we did, the schedule of the day, whether we received punishment, blows, or had been placed in solitary confinement.

30. THE ORPHANS RETURN TO MESSINA

Through rumors, we learned that the Prefecture of Lecce³⁷ had ordered the immediate closure of our Orphanage in Francavilla Fontana.

³⁷ Lecce is the Provincial capital of the Region of Apulia.

For this reason, the Orphans left secretly very early in the morning. Each with a musical instrument on the shoulder, we started walking to our Institute in Oria. Since the boys did not know anything, they enjoyed the whole day.³⁸

Later the day, the Father called me and said that he had decided to leave for Messina from the station of Oria that same evening, with all the Orphans, accompanied by Father Palma and their Assistants.

The Father knew that, as a consequence, the persecution against the House of Oria would get worse. "It is necessary," he added, "not to lose courage, but to remain calm and rely on the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary. If the questioning resumes, always answer calmly and truthfully." He also told me to inform him in detail, the development of the situation. He added that I write to my parents so that they could assign my brother, Brother Concetto, who was still in Oria and an adult, as the guardian of all of us siblings.

My parents wrote to him as suggested. My uncle Giacomo did the same regarding his sons, entrusting them to the guidance of Brother Concetto. However, the Commissioner did not give any value to these documents and had us repatriated. The Orphans left that same evening on the train bound for Messina.

Imagine the surprise of the Police Commissioner the next morning, when, having gone to Francavilla with the order to get the Orphans and to bring them to the Mayor, they found the House completely empty! There was only Brother Mariano with three Orphans from Francavilla who were to be entrusted to their families. They bombarded him with questions to know where the boys were and when they left. They had to be content with the evasive answer that the Orphans had left early the previous morning, with their musical instruments, but he did not know where they were going to play.

31. THE HOUSE OF ORIA ORDERED CLOSED

As the Father had foreseen, with the departure of the Orphans from Francavilla, the persecution on the House of Oria increased.

The questions were unending: Why were we in that Institution; the address of our parents, etc. We were living a life beyond words. I often wrote to the Father, keeping him informed about everything. He responded twice, urging all to pray and to trust in the Lord.

I wrote to him that probably all of us minors were going to be escorted by the police to our towns to be returned to our families. He replied that we should not resist and to entrust ourselves to the Divine Providence. He asked me to send him the address of the family of each of the boys so that we could stay in touch with all.

³⁸ The distance between Francavilla and Oria is about 7 km. For the boys, it was about a couple of hours' walk. At that time, they were used to this. The Orphanage had a musical band.

The time for the closure of the House was set. Early in the morning, guards and police officers surrounded the House. They gathered us and showed each one of us the order issued by the Prefecture of Lecce to return home, and our train tickets. We tried to resist, but it was useless.

I remember that the Rector of the Seminary, Father Nacci, sent by Bishop Antonio Di Tommaso, came to tell us to remain calm and to follow the orders. He removed the Blessed Sacrament from the Tabernacle.

Then, escorted by the police, we left for our respective towns. At the station in Oria, while waiting for the train, people asked who we were and why the police accompanied us. The policemen replied that we were the boys of an Institute in Oria, where we were maltreated and were in poor condition. We protested loudly at this.

Our families were happy to see us but wanted us to continue and remain in the Institute. In spite of this, the Prefecture of Lecce had ordered repatriation.

A woman who knew that we were boys of Father Hannibal confronted the police shouting that they were all liars and that the Father had motherly care for his children.

The police officer, to avoid other similar scenes, told us to keep quiet. "Let us agree that if people ask you, you will answer that you are going to spend your '*Carnevale*'³⁹ vacation with your family. Also, since you are minors, your Director⁴⁰ has requested us to look after you during the trip."

Those of us from Sicily was to be accompanied to the Police Headquarters at Messina and from there to our families.

Having been previously informed, Father Vitale came immediately. The Commissioner was a close friend of his and the Salerno family of Francavilla, so it was easy for Father Vitale to get permission for us to spend the night at the Institute instead of the Police Headquarters.

The day after, we continued our journey. All of us were escorted to our respective families.

Our trip to Galati was terrible. We walked under the rain, without any protection, for more than 20 kilometers. The police officer accompanying us sent 'blessings'⁴¹ to Galati and to whoever founded it.

We arrived late in the evening. Our families were reluctant to open the door because they thought that we were people wearing masks for the carnival. We were tired and thoroughly drenched.

Father Vitale had told us that we could return to Messina the following day. However, we were so tired from the journey that the next day we remained in bed the whole morning. That same morning, the Father sent a telegram telling us to stay with our families until further notice and that a letter was on the way. The letter arrived. In it, the Father said that the devil was

³⁹ *Carnevale* is the last three days of revelry before the Lenten season.

⁴⁰ *Director* is synonymous to *Superior*.

⁴¹ "Blessings" here is a euphemism to indicate swearing of every kind of curse word.

hurling himself against the Institute, but we had to trust in God, and everything would have settled. He told us to wait for his notice before returning to Messina. After a few weeks, we were informed to return to Messina, where the Father welcomed us in a genuinely paternal manner.

32. THE ASPIRANTS GATHER ONCE MORE IN MESSINA

Fifteen days after the authorities closed the House in Oria, the majority of Aspirants gathered in Messina, where we concentrated on household chores and our studies.

In the beginning, the Father and Father Palma would alternate in teaching us. Later on, however, the Father entrusted us to Professor Freni. He was very good, obese, and hilarious in his movements; we would often burst into laughter. The Professor reprimanded and scolded us and threatened to report us to the Father several times. When he could not bear it anymore, he complained to the Father, who was very displeased. As punishment, we were suspended.

We asked pardon from the Father, and we promised not to do it anymore. The professor returned to school, and we apologized to him as the Father had ordered us to do.

In spite of our promises, we laughed at him again. The professor did not come back. However, by then there were only a few days left before the end of the school year.

The Father scolded us, threatening to send out the unruliest. However, when we were alone, he told me, “I said that I would send them away, to scare them, but I will not do it. I know that some human weaknesses are not voluntary.

33. THE FATHER VISITS GALATI, MY TOWN

One day the Father gave me a detailed report of his visit to my town, “I have been to your town. Your father and your uncle had asked me to go to Galati many times. I wanted to please them because of their generosity to the Lord in giving several of their children to our Congregation.”

“The journey was difficult. I did more than 20 kilometers, partly on the saddle of a mule and partly on foot. Since I was not used to riding, I got tired and felt dizzy. When I arrived in the town, they welcomed me wholeheartedly. The parish priest was kind and courteous. He thanked me for a visit, and we agreed to do some apostolic ministry in the Church.”

“The people looked at me like I was out of the ordinary, the kind of person they had never seen before. They were pleasant and very respectful.”

“I stayed there for three days, preaching, hearing confessions and giving advice. They were thirsty for God’s Word. It would have taken more than three days to satisfy them! However, I could not stay longer because I had commitments in Messina that could not be postponed. I promised them that I would return when it was possible and if it pleased the Lord. So much good could be done for them. It could also be a way to propagate the Rogate and to obtain some vocations. I noticed that they were very interested in this topic.”

“While I was in Galati, your mother gave birth to another girl, and they wanted me to baptize her and to be the godfather at the confirmation of your brother Francesco. I accepted willingly.”

“My travel back to Messina, unfortunately, was more uncomfortable than going to Galati because while it was less tiring to walk on the slopes of the mountains, it was much more uncomfortable for me to ride the horse.”

34. THE FATHER’S GREAT FAITH AND CHARITY

One day, the Father asked me to go with him. Taking a coach, we went to a small town not very far from the city.

During the trip, he recounted what had happened in that village a few years back. Thieves had entered the Parish Church at night taking all they could, including the ciborium with the consecrated Hosts which they later scattered on the road about a kilometer from the town. On every anniversary of the event, as reparation for that sacrilegious act, they would have a procession with the Blessed Sacrament from the Church to the place where the people found the hosts. The Father would go early to carry the Blessed Sacrament and to preach.

Along the way, the coachman was telling the Father about the miserable financial state of his large family. When we reached the Church, the Father asked how much the fare was. The coachman responded, “One Lira.” The Father gave him 100 Liras saying, “This is all I can give you because that’s all I have.”

When he saw the large amount in his hand, surprised the coachman said, “There is a mistake, I said one lira!” And the Father, “Keep all for your needs.”

Turning to me, the fortunate coachman whispered, “Is he a Bishop?” I said, “No. He is Canon Hannibal Mary Di Francia.”

As soon as he heard the name, he got down on his knees kissing the Father’s hand, exclaiming, “What luck! I have heard so much about him, not only here in Messina, but also in Catania, where I often go because my old mother still lives there. Everyone speaks of Canon Di Francia. He is famous for his sanctity and his charity.”

Jokingly the Father answered, “Yes, you are correct, good man. I am famous because I eat much.”⁴² Then he added, “When poor people receive a benefit, they do not know what they are saying.”

When we reached the square in front of the Church we saw booths with various items spread out; some people chatting, others shouting... and others dancing to the sound of accordions and ‘jew’s-harp’. The door of the Church was closed.

At this sight, impulsively, I said to the Father, “Is this how they make a day of reparation?”

⁴² The Father jokes on the assonance, in Italian, of the nouns ‘fama’ (fame) and ‘fame’ (hunger). In Italian, ‘famoso’ (famous) could sound very similar to ‘affamato’, that is, being very hungry.

At lunch, the Father mentioned the impression I had to the parish priest adding, “Previously, the Blessed Sacrament was exposed the whole day. Why is it not done this year?”

Embarrassed, the parish priest responded, “First of all there is a lack of adorers. Then, I could not avoid all that noise in front of the Church because the organizing Committee wanted this kind of celebration this year.”

The Father responded, “We have to strive to educate people, politely,”

Holy Hour was held in the afternoon. The Father preached with so much holiness and fervor that people were crying. The procession with the Blessed Sacrament started in the evening with the Father carrying the sacred monstrance. Reaching the site where the particles had been found, the Father gave a moving sermon and imparted the Eucharistic blessing.

Going back, before the procession could reach the Church, the Committee organizing the feast requested the Father to put the monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament on a table with a cloth and two candles and to leave it there until the end of the fireworks display. The Father answered, “That can't be” and carried the Blessed Sacrament straight into the Church. A commotion started, provoked by some rioters yelling protests and threats.

All the candles were extinguished, and, in the darkness, we had difficulty getting to the parish. The parish priest was so humiliated that during supper, he could not eat even though the Father, though profoundly saddened, tried to comfort him.

When the parish priest had composed himself, he said, “This year the new Committee deceived me. They could not have done worse. However, tomorrow, there will be a reckoning.”

“Never mind,” responded the Father. “Tomorrow, before leaving, I will talk to them.”

He gathered the members of the Committee the next day. He was so convincing that they apologized, and promised to make up for the scandal.

To keep me busy, while we were in the house of the parish priest, the Father gave me a volume of the Sacred Scripture, the *Book of Kings*. He realized that I read it with much interest and that I could report to him all that I had read. Then he said to me, “I am very pleased that you like it. When we are home, come to me, and I will give you the Bible of the library: it is a thick volume, fully illustrated so that you may be able to read it when you have time.”

One day, however, seeing me handling that book, Father Vitale ordered me to return the book to the library. I said that the Father had given it to me to read.

“How can you understand it? Moreover, did you understand what the Father told you? Put it back?”

I returned the book.

A few days later, the Father asked me about my reading. After I told him what happened, he brought me to Father Vitale, and in my presence told him, “Canon, I have given him that Bible. Let him read it. He doesn't have to understand it as your Reverence does. However, he will try to understand what he can. The Word of God is nourishment for everyone.”

I got the Bible back.

35. AN UNPAID TICKET

Brother Giuseppe Antonio told me that returning to Messina from a neighboring village, where he had gone to get the money from the collection boxes, he was not able to buy a ticket because of the large crowd on the tram.

The Father heard him and asked Brother Giuseppe if he was able to pay. Brother replied that he did not.

“This cannot be!” The Father added, “It is not right. You had to pay!” The Brother replied, “Father, I had the good intention to pay, but the ticket controller could not reach other passengers and me because of the great crowd. Many passengers did not get their tickets.”

The Father replied, “You must pay for the ticket. You were wrong. Go immediately to the ticket office and pay for it.

Someone said to the Father that sending Brother to the office for that reason might put the ticket controller in trouble for having failed in his duty.

The Father said, “Then send the amount anonymously through postal money order without mentioning the reason.”

I interrupted, “Is it worth it to go through all that trouble just for 20 cents?”

“So, in your opinion,” the Father responded, “you only need to return amounts of several thousand Liras? When it comes to justice, you do not distinguish between grave or light - especially you. You are with the boys. You have to set a good example and form them to have a delicate conscience. Our society had huge expenses to provide citizens with the convenience of a tram. Therefore, it is only right to pay for the ticket.”

36. THE ASPIRANTS RETURN TO ORIA

When the rough seas of the situation in Apulia had calmed down, the Father thought of bringing the Aspirants back to Oria. His fear, however, was that the return of the boys to Oria could relight the spark.

Before our departure from Messina, he gathered us and said, “We think that it is time for you to return to Oria, where the House is more suitable for religious formation. We hope that the Lord will bless you and grant you to become Religious according to the Most Holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary. If it pleases God, we will also re-organize the school.”

“Yes,” one of the Aspirants said, “but we hope that they will not start questioning us again and then send us back to our towns.”

The Father replied, “We truly hope that will not happen. In the meantime, in Oria, you will be called “*Little Workers*” and you will work in the printing press. If it pleases God, we will buy

as soon as possible a printing machine, and the shop will be called *Anthonian Printing Press of the Little Worker*.”

“This means that you will be little workers of the Gospel, preparing yourselves to propagate the Divine Rogate through printed matter.” Taking me aside, he said, “In Oria, do not make public announcements. If anyone asks about the boys, the answer is that they are apprentices of the Printing Press.” Then he added, “I advise you to have the utmost material and spiritual care for these boys. They are to be considered as the most precious assets of the Congregation. You should be for them a guardian angel, following them everywhere and guarding them as the apple of the eye of the Institute.”

Thus, we left for Oria, where there were already other Aspirants who had also returned from their families.

We also found Father Palma, who welcomed us with much affection and set the schedule of activities for the day.

Shortly after, the Father came to Oria and remained with us longer than usual. His main concern was the formation of the community and the organization of the House with the help of Father Palma.

His long and diligent presence produced enormous benefits for the House. He took care of the spiritual formation of the community who always listened lovingly, especially to his homilies and instructions.

Father Palma was busy mostly in improving finances, and he was indeed successful. In a short time, the House had significantly developed and acquired an unusual character. The number of both Aspirants and Orphans continuously increased.

37. CHILDREN SNATCHED FROM THE PROTESTANTS

One time, the Father arrived in Oria from Trani, late in the evening, bringing three little orphans. As soon as I saw them, I told the Father that we had no available place for them. He said, “A place must be found. You may use the cell where I have my writing desk; just put a small table in my bedroom.”

“They are too small,” I continued, “and the Orphanage is not a kindergarten. I know that you are against taking in boys who are too young.”

The Father agreed, “That is true. But sometimes, actual practice becomes the opposite of theory.”

“Ordinarily, we would not accept boys who are too small. However, this case is an exception. I snatched, so to say, these three little orphans from the hands of the Protestants who were going to accept them in one of their Institutes, which has a nasty reputation.”

“The parish priest of Rappolla⁴³ brought them to me in Trani just on time. He showed me the letter of acceptance from that Institution. I know it will be a problem for this House to have orphans as small as these, but are we going to be outdone by Protestants in charity? The exercise of charity brings problems, but the more problems there are, the more meritorious the work becomes.”

“Yes, Father, I understand. However, I do not know what to do and to whom to entrust these little ones who still need the help of a mother. If I handle them, I will not be able to follow the other Orphans, and some of them are 20 years old already.”

The Father replied, “You say that you understand, but it seems that either you don’t get it or you don’t want to do it. You are looking for so many excuses and difficulties as if you wanted to send back these little ones into the hands of the Protestants.”

“You act like some of our Sisters when they do not like something. They always say, ‘Yes, Father’, but later they turn things upside down until they get to do what they want. You are tasked to see to whom you can entrust them. Pray and take care of them in the meantime.”

After a while, he summoned me and said, “I think that these little ones can be entrusted to that Postulant who is rather grown-up, well built, and with a nice voice. He seems very good to me and available to all.”

“Oh,” I responded. “Appi,⁴⁴ the Postulant.”

“Yes,” the Father said. “Maybe, we can allow him to wear the cassock before the official taking of the religious habit to give him more authority.”

One of those three little boys was Pietro Marchetti who, later on, manifested signs of kleptomania as mentioned by Father Vitale in his biography of the Father.

38. REGULATION FOR THE ORPHANS⁴⁵

One day, in Oria, I said to the Father that our Regulation for the Orphans was seldom read. It needed updating having been written before 1908 when the Orphans were at the Avignone Houses in a very different context.

Upon hearing this, the Father replied, “I wondered how you are aware only now that this Regulation needs updating. It is surprising how you could go on without regulations; you do not even read it anymore!”

⁴³ A small town not far from Trani.

⁴⁴ Luigi Appi, his religious name was Luca, was born on August 18, 1903, in Rome and grew up in Pontecorvo (Frosinone, near Rome) from where he was conducted to our House in Oria in 1919. He was ordained priest together with other Rogationists: Father Carmelo Drago, Father Redento Levi, and Father Camillo Ruggeri, on July 20, 1930, in Oria by Mons. Antonio Di Tommaso. He was assigned to important roles, being outstanding in his generous zeal. He was Superior General of the Congregation of the Rogationists from 1956 to 1962. He died in Messina on October 25, 1974.

⁴⁵ This episode can be dated around 1923, because the Father says that the Regulation for the Orphans, prepared some time before the earthquake, was already 15 years old.

“Where a community is, rules are necessary. In any educational Institution, not only do they guide the order and mutual relations, but they also foster the unity of method, which is an essential factor of harmony and growth.”

“How could you do it this way? Concerning the boys, everyone did what he thought was best. However, it is possible that without intending it, one might have destroyed what another had built.”

“To adopt the Preventive System, which is so relevant for us, it is necessary for the boys to know the regulation. It is important to explain it to them. It might even be very useful for them to memorize it, especially when it comes to the most important items.”

“Therefore, you have to update it as soon as possible and, if necessary, revise it.”

“If the Regulation is still the one I made before 1908; it is already fifteen years old. The Regulation I made was not a real Regulation but only rules written with time, place, and age of the boys in mind and the capability of the personnel assigned to implement them.”

“Thank God, today, the condition of this Orphanage, its ambiance, and the person assisting the boys are different. The Avignone Houses in their extreme poverty were not conducive at all for a pedagogical project while this House in Oria is equipped with schools, arts, trades, means, spaces, and personnel.”

“In Avignone, the boys were entrusted to laymen who took care of them; today they are guided by Religious who are assigned for this specific mission.”

At this point, I interrupted saying, “Father, if you want, I will get the Regulation so you can update it.”

The Father said, “No! The Regulation will be done by you who are with the boys and who know the needs of this community better than I.”

I protested, “Father, no one can do this job better than you?” The Father replied, “I told you that the Regulation is to be done by you who are closer to the boys. Out of necessity and for lack of personnel, I was with the boys, and for several years, I was even their immediate Assistant. Back then, I used to prepare the rules according to the needs of that time. However, now, thank God, you are in direct contact with the Orphans so that you can prepare the Regulation better than I. Besides, it is necessary also for you to try. When you are done, show it to me. We will go over it together.”

“When you work on the Regulation, remember that, first of all, pray fervently to Our Lord and to the Blessed Virgin to give you the necessary discernment. Then study and select the best arrangement for the Institute to obtain the complete formation of the boys.”

“The Regulation for the Orphans, as much as possible, should be set according to the family spirit and social life.”

“It is also good to take into account not only the Regulation written by me but also those written by similar Institutions and to take from them what fits our situation. A good Regulation generally consists of two parts. The first part comprises the general and essential principles

applicable almost always for all regardless of age, time, and space. They are like God's Commandments. This part is the true and proper rule. For us, it has to be grounded, as much as possible, on the principles of the Preventive System which has as its pillars or basic values: reason, religion, and loving-kindness."

"The second part comprises the practical application of the general principles and has to be adapted according to age, environment, time, and place."

"This second part could be titled "Rules and Regulations." They should not be rigid because rules are for men and not men for rules."

"In the second part, a certain freedom of movement is to be granted to those who stay with the boys and direct them."

"The practical implementation of the Regulation should be intelligent, that is, the Assistants should discern whether in that particular case the observance of that norm is appropriate or not, and then stay with that solution."

"It is not difficult to draft a good Regulation, but it is difficult to observe it and still more to transform it into an instrument for real formation. Aside from an intelligent vision, the implementation of the rules requires also a loving instinct from both the boys and their Assistants."

"We know that each rule implies by itself a limitation of freedom, and, as such, is an undesirable duty that everyone would like to escape from. This happens especially to those who, like the boys, have to reach intellectual maturity yet. They do not see the reason for that particular rule, that is, the good which comes from its observance or the evil that results from disobeying it. Therefore, it is necessary to let them understand that the rule is a sure guide towards their success. It is like a railway which binds the train but also leads it surely to its destination. With these and similar suggestions, the boys will love their regulations and benefit from it."

"If love is missing, you will obtain, at best, a mechanical orderliness, but this will not form the man. The boys, confined within the rigid restraints of a forced observance, will be led to act in the opposite manner. With this insight regarding the problems, start preparing the Regulation for the Orphans. When you finish writing it, I will go over it."

39. ACCEPTING AN ORPHAN IS LIKE ADOPTING HIM

Every time the Father arrived in Oria, especially after having been away for a long time, he would ask for a report on the health, discipline, piety, study, and work in the House.

Once, after a long absence, he requested a detailed report about the Orphans. From my description, he realized that we had not given importance to several points on education as he would have wanted. He complained and spoke at length with me to make me understand my deficiencies in dealing with the Orphans and to explain the authentic spirit of our Institute.

He added that he was also going to complain to Padre Palma. “You must bear in mind that when we shelter the Orphans in our Institutes, we substitute as their parents. So we should love these boys the way parents love their children, and perform the duties of parents. It is not easy because parents are irreplaceable, and we are only surrogate parents. The closer we resemble the original, the better substitute we are.”

“Even when we do more than parents do, we remain strangers, substitutes. We are always surrogate parents of the Orphans. All the care and attention of others cannot compare to a glance or the kiss of a mother.

The acceptance of the Orphans into our Institutes is for us as an act of adoption that lasts as long as the Orphan remains with us. It would be wonderful if it could last much longer. The adoption assumes all the obligations of parents to their children. As parents, the one adopting is responsible for the success and health of the adopted without counting expenses and sacrifices. The one adopting must also form his adopted morally, spiritually, religiously and, according to his potential, instruct him and teach him a craft, an art, or a profession so that in the future he can live honorably in society by the fruits of his labor. We have to do the same with the Orphans in our Institutes. Let me say that we should do more than adopters and parents. Those adopting are connected to the children legally, parents naturally. A supernatural bond obliges us; the bond of love which is higher because it is directly related to God who holds that all that is done to the Orphans is done to him. Our Lord said, ‘He who welcomes a child out of love for me, welcomes me; and he who welcomes me, welcomes Him who sent me’ and ‘Whatever you do to one of these little ones in my name, I will hold it as done to me.’”

While speaking, the Father looked so inspired. When he got to the words of Our Lord, he was so moved that he had to dry his tears. Then he continued, “How I wish that these divine words of our adorable Lord Jesus Christ were carved in the minds and hearts of our confreres, be put into practice perfectly and become the heart of their hearts and the life of their lives, with great faith and charity. If the adorable Jesus Christ loves the little ones so much and recognizes that what is done to them because they are little is done to him, how much more pleasing would it be to him what is being done for our poor and abandoned little Orphans?”

“I believe that this is the work of love most acceptable to the Lord and most useful to society because the poor and abandoned orphans are the neediest among the children. Since they are deprived of parents, the dearest persons in their lives, they need everything: people to support, instruct, educate, direct and guide them to become good Christians and honest citizens. Without this help, they are destined for failure!”

“If we think about it, all the works of mercy are summarized in the acceptance of abandoned orphans, as we do in our Institutes.”

“When we welcome an orphan, we have to receive him as coming from the hands of our adorable Lord, who seems to be saying to us what the Pharaoh’s daughter said to the mother of the newborn Moses, found abandoned and left to die on the riverbank, ‘Take this child and nurse him for me; and I will give you the reward’ (Ex.2, 9).”

“What is the reward that Our Lord will give to those who sacrifice themselves for the success of the poor and abandoned orphans? First of all, they will be placed among the elect and will be told by the Divine Judge, ‘Come, you, blessed by the Father, take possession of the Kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world, for you have shown much mercy toward the poor.’ The other reward given by Our Lord is the generous Providence that he rains down like manna, every day, on our Institutes for the sustenance and success of the Orphans. The Providence’s great generosity on us is a sure sign of the Divine Will, who desires that our treatment of the Orphans and care for their success us to be as generous as His.”

Lastly, he said to me, “It seems that you have not yet understood the importance of this noble mission properly. I exhort you to be more diligent in the future.”

Realizing that somehow this had saddened me, he changed his tone and continued, “I did not intend to humiliate or discourage you. I just wanted to call your attention to something very vital for our Institute. I want to think that you put in all your goodwill, but things turned out this way because you had been left alone very often. I am seldom here. Out of necessity, Father Palma is often absent. Due to a lack of funds, the House needs many other facilities, but the more serious issue is that we do not have well-trained personnel. Do not be discouraged and try to do your best. Pray and continue in the best way you can. Trust in the Lord. He will certainly help you, and he will compensate you for the sacrifices you make for the success of the Orphans.”

40. PRAY THAT THE LORD SEND US THE MOST ABANDONED ORPHANS

58

When we went to Rome with the Father, I was disappointed when I saw the new House⁴⁶ to be purchased on Circonvallazione Appia Street. Before the negotiations started, I gave my observations. The Father, with good reason, was very firm with his answer.

The main reason for my objection was that the whole structure had been built as a factory of films for movies. Two-thirds of the facilities were underground and completely dark. The Father requested the engineer of the Salesians to take care of the necessary changes. The engineer, however, declined, saying that it would be costly. He suggested instead creating an elevation, or better still, constructing a completely new House on the adjacent land which had already been bought. The underground part of the building could be used as a depot and warehouse.

The Father approved the adjustments, but since the engineer was trying to delay the situation, the Father called Father Palma and said to him, “Gird yourself with courage and use all your ability. Try to adapt these facilities in the best way you can and make them functional as soon as possible.”

⁴⁶ The property consisted of an existing building and a large piece of land. Father Hannibal signed the contract of purchase on October 12, 1924 (cf. Chapters 199 and 200), before the Holy Year of 1925.

Today, located in this property are the General Curia of the Daughters of Divine Zeal, the Female Anthonian Institute of Rome, a kindergarten, a primary and a secondary school, and the Parish of St. Anthony of Padua entrusted to the pastoral care of the Rogationists. The topic on the House in Rome appears in several Chapters of these memoirs.

Though he was not at all enthusiastic regarding the building, Father Palma put all his efforts into it. He called a master builder, Alfonso Carovigno, from Francavilla, and with other local workers, he started. The results became visible soon, and the Father congratulated Father Palma. However, since he had to absent himself from Rome for a while, I was called in to substitute for him *pro-tempore*.

When I arrived in Rome, the Father enthusiastically showed me the progress of the work. I had been pessimistic. He added that upon seeing the way the building had been renovated, the engineer said, "I could not believe what I saw! The Father (referring to Father Palma) must certainly be an expert!"

The Father turned later to a more significant issue: the future of that foundation. He said, "From the beginning, I thought that, once the adjustments were made, the House could be used to host the pilgrims of the Holy Year, especially the priests, religious and those who cannot pay. To shelter pilgrims is a corporal work of mercy which is pleasing to Our Lord. Later, I changed my mind because it seemed more urgent and useful to have an Orphanage for little infant boys. This has always been a permanent idea of mine: accepting orphans at their most tender age is the most beautiful, effective, and urgent work. I have already experienced it with the little infant girls."

"The reason is very obvious. Everyone knows that smaller infants are the ones who need more specialized help. They need affection, maternal care, specific nutrition, and specific cleanliness. If they lack these, they may lose their life at a very tender age, or, if they survive, often their future may be jeopardized."

"The little ones have positive potential, but they also have some negative attitudes. Losing their parents at such a tender age, they lack the necessary care; therefore, their future is severely compromised, especially when they come from poor and abandoned families. This explains why there is a bigger percentage of individuals with difficulties among the Orphans.

"In fact, in Orphanages, there are often boys, adolescents, and also youths whose defects are difficult to correct. Consequently, the sooner a child is taken away from deprivations and abandonment, the less chance there is that negative tendencies can take root in him as environmental scars. Education will then be easier and success more certain."

"By accepting infants into the Orphanage, aside from liberating them from pain and suffering, we also accomplish a work of redemption. It is like the *Work of the Holy Infancy*.⁴⁷ For this reason, I have also always thought of accepting small infants into our Orphanages, but until now, it has not been possible due to a lack of proper facilities. I have become aware that when I

⁴⁷ The Pontifical Society (or Work) of the Missionary Childhood, or Holy Childhood, was founded in 1843 by Charles De Forbin Janson (1785-1844), bishop of Nancy, France with the goal of educating children with a missionary spirit, helping them to see the need to support their contemporaries in missionary countries with their prayers and material aid. This Work aims at spreading among children and youth missionary information and awareness to promote the missionary cause with gestures of solidarity for their contemporaries, thus widening the horizon of their fraternity and collaborating in the mission of the Church.

Father Hannibal was somehow fascinated by the involvement of very young people in the mission of the Church and saw his work with the Orphans as something similar or complementary: as the Work of Holy Infancy aimed at saving the children in the far-flung missions so was his Work in his Orphanages in Messina.

have been forced by compelling circumstances to accept a completely abandoned infant, it has been a great burden for the one who also has to manage the older boys. Also, the infant suffers because of an environment not suited to him.”

“Finally, Providence gives me now a wonderful opportunity to fulfill my desire. This House in Rome is fit to welcome infant orphans, thus starting an Orphanage for infant boys. Those who have heard about it, including the ecclesiastical authorities, has been positively impressed, also because this Work, which is so necessary, is very scarce.”

“In opening this House, I will compose a special prayer to the Divine Superiors⁴⁸ and the great St. Anthony of Padua, so that they send us, preferably boys who have lost both parents, the poorest, most abandoned and unruliest because these are the ones most prone to failure.”

After this, he specified, “I said the unruliest, but I have to correct myself. I meant the most difficult because children by themselves are never unruly. They can all be taught and corrected.” He continued, “In the meantime, I have thought of entrusting this House to the Daughters of Divine Zeal for two reasons. First, the Sisters are more suited to care for little children, given their maternal commitment and patience. Second, because as of now, we do not have Religious men available. When it will be possible for us, and the boys have become a little older, the House will be entrusted to the male community who will handle their Christian formation and train them for a job or a trade.”

“Meanwhile, we will look for another House in Rome for the Sisters because, if it pleases God, both Congregations must have their center in Rome where the Work can succeed and propagate more easily, especially for what concerns the Rogate.”

When it comes to the Orphanage for infant boys, we will look for another distinct and a separate House in Rome or somewhere else, always entrusted to the Sisters. They will take care of the boys until they are eight years old and can be transferred to our Orphanages where the Fathers will take care of their formation and education.”

41. WE PREFER TO ACCEPT EXTREMELY POOR ORPHANS

A peddler from Manduria, a widower with six little children, came to our Institute in Oria begging and imploring that at least two of his little boys be accepted. He presented the case as genuinely pitiful, adapting a pale, thin, and miserable look to his pleas.

He told me his sad story as a widower and the situation of his children all still small who were neglected. He had no relatives in his town who could attend to them. Thus, the burden of the household chores fell mostly on the daughter, who was only twelve. An old woman, a neighbor, would occasionally, and out of charity, care for the children. Every day, he would

⁴⁸ Father Hannibal has always considered Jesus and Mary as the real and effective Superiors of his Works.

roam around the neighboring villages to earn money to buy a piece of bread for his children. The vicar forane,⁴⁹ the Mayor, and everyone else could have testified of his extreme need.

His presentation appeared pitiful, but I was convinced that a peddler could earn a lot of money every day. That is why I said that we could not accept the boys because, with his earnings, he could support his family and hire a woman to take care of the house. On one side, he kept insisting and begging me to accept his boys, but on the other, I opposed him all the more with a firm refusal. At last, however, to calm his almost convulsed crying, I proposed, "All right, I will accept only the six-year-old, but you must supply him with the proper personal set of clothes and pay a monthly fee."

"How can I pay a monthly fee?" he answered. "You don't want to believe that I live in extreme poverty! After the death of my wife, I lost everything. I am burdened with debts because of her prolonged sickness and having to feed my unfortunate children. The only things left to me are my eyes to cry night and day."

However, thinking that a peddler could earn every day, I decisively said to him, "It's useless to insist. If you don't provide your child with his set of clothes and pay the monthly fee, we can't accept him." Dejected, he went away crying. I was suspicious because I had experienced people who were well dressed, pretending to be poor, to obtain help.

After a few weeks, the peddler returned to Oria to sell his trifles in the vicinity of our Institute. He happened to tell someone his sad situation and the refusal he had received from me.

The Father happened to be in Oria at the time. They advised the peddler to introduce himself directly to him to present his case. The Father would surely help him. "Father Hannibal is a saint," they said to him. "He is all mercy and is known to identify himself with other people's miseries. Brother Carmelo is still young. He does not have the experience and the heart of Father Hannibal. You have to speak personally with Father."

The man took courage and succeeded in speaking directly with the Father. He informed him about his situation, of the need for shelter for if not two, at least the youngest boy. He also told the Father about my refusal and the conditions I set.

The Father summoned me, and, in a formal tone (an antiphon which was the prelude of a solemn scolding), he asked me how many vacant places we had for the Orphans. I replied that perhaps there was one, maybe two.

The Father said, "I have determined that this case is truly miserable. Therefore, this good man, in a few days, will bring his two children, one eight and the other six years old. Accept both. Poor man! He cannot even provide the normal set of clothes, much less, pay the monthly fee. We must help him."

Then, pulling me aside, he added, "I don't have enough money to help this poor man. Do you have any?" "I only have six hundred Liras," I answered. The Father continued, "Give them

⁴⁹ A vicar forane is an ecclesiastical title for priests with supervisory duties over several parishes (vicariate forane or deanery). He is also called archpriest, archpresbyter, or dean.

to me. Providence will surely take care of the House. Later, please come to my room. I want to speak to you.”

Later, I learned that the Father gave him 1,500 Liras, which was a considerable amount at the time. The peddler went away, drying his tears.

After a while, the Father summoned me to his room. Sure that I was going to be scolded, I tried, as usual, to appear cheerful because I knew that this was the softer side of the Father. He did not want us to feel sad, and though he had to reproach us, the scolding was more of a paternal warning. However, this time, my sense of humor failed. In fact, in a solemn and displeased tone, he said to me, “It is so evident that you don’t understand anything. You even come joyfully, as if you had done something great. You misbehaved with that poor man. It seems that you still have no experience of life, and you do not understand the spirit of our Institute.”

“I am aware that among the poor there are some who, to move people to pity, paint their case with the darkest colors, thus, before accepting an Orphan we must check and assess the reality. However, in this case, a little common sense would have been enough to realize that his situation was awful. It would have been enough to look at his clothes, his being skin and bones, worn out by fatigue, sad and suffering.”

“You thought that he was not poor because he was a peddler. You thought of him as one of the great traders of the city! So then, you did not think that since that poor man was out of the house the whole day, the children were abandoned?”

“What kind of criteria is that to determine the acceptance of an Orphan through his capability to have his own set of clothes and to pay a monthly fee? If he were capable of paying, he would not have been poor. He could have put the boy in a boarding house. Until now, you do not understand that the mission of our Institute is to accept the poorest and abandoned boys, and those who can’t pay the fee themselves or through the help of others. These are the ones who attract plenty of graces and the Divine Providence to our Institute.”

“If you were in doubt, your duty was to get information about his situation by writing, for example, to the parish priest, or better yet, by sending some of our people to inquire. Since Manduria is quite near, you could have gone yourself to find out and help those poor people. Instead, you remained insensitive and refused acceptance.”

“Only the set of personal clothes and the tuition fee would have rendered your heart sensitive! Pity us if we continue this way! It will be a ruin for the Institute if you do not teach these boys who one day if the Lord desires, may become the future members of the Congregation! If this is your way, you cannot be assigned to these young men destined for the religious life.”⁵⁰

“I don’t know where you learned this spirit. What did I tell you when I assigned you to the acceptance of the Orphans? It looks like you didn’t understand anything, or that you don’t want

⁵⁰ Brother Carmelo was also the Assistant/formator of the Seminarians. However, since the House in Oria also had Orphans, Brother Carmelo was also responsible for their acceptance (cf. Chapter 46).

to understand. Beginning today, I remove you from your present assignment. It will remain entrusted to Father Palma and me. Do you understand? You will work only on the necessary documentation for the acceptance.”

This was the procedure we followed for approximately a year. Then, since he was often out of Oria, sometimes for an extended period, Father Palma told me to take care of the acceptance according to the criteria that by then I should already have learned.

I reminded him about the disposition of the Father, and he answered that he had already informed him.

Later on, the Father called me and gave me lots of advice on how to be faithful to the purposes of the Institute in the acceptance of the Orphans.

He instructed me always to receive the poorest and abandoned; those who couldn't pay any fee by themselves or through others. If they don't come to us, we have to look for them through the parish priests, or our printed materials. The Father repeated what he had said to me many times, “As long as the Institute remains faithful to these principles, the Lord will bless it and not let the Institute lack the Providence. He will surely make the Institute prosper. If we do otherwise, it will be our ruin.”

Then he pulled out a sheet of paper where he had written more precisely and in order of importance the kind of orphans that we had to accept:

- a) Orphans of both parents when they don't have relatives and benefactors supporting and educating them;
- b) Orphans whose surviving parent is affected by a contagious disease or permanent inability;
- c) Children who are truly poor and abandoned, or who are living in immoral conditions;
- d) Orphans of mothers;
- e) Orphans of father and those whose surviving parent has remarried. The acceptance of this category is subordinated to special reasons;
- f) Illegitimate children;
- g) Children of a large family who cannot support them;
- h) Orphans who can pay a fee, when we still have vacant places, without filling them all. We must always keep some vacant places available for the pitiable cases.

42. ACCEPTANCE OF ORPHANS SHALL NOT BE DECIDED BY THE TUITION FEE

One day, a laborer from the shipyard of Taranto came to Oria to entrust his two little boys to our Orphanage. Both the Father and Father Palma were out. He presented his sad case to me.

His wife had died years before, leaving him with two little boys and two little girls. Since he was out of the house nearly the whole day because of his job, his small children were entrusted to various people.

He had married a woman who seemed to have a maternal heart. Instead, she turned out to be of a problematic and mistrustful nature. Worse, she would terribly maltreat the children. She hated and tortured them. The youngest child, in particular, had become like a skeleton.

The woman would present the children to her husband as rebellious and stubborn, and she wanted him to beat them to teach them a lesson.

Presented with such a scenario, I suggested that it would have been better for him to slap his wife to settle things once and for all. He answered, "Reverend, I have already done that several times, but she has become furious. The only solution left is to kill her or move the children out of the house. I have come here for this purpose: to shelter the two little boys."

I answered, "I will report this to the Director, but for me, it seems impossible to accept them because we accept only real orphans and the poorest and abandoned. You have a job, and your children have a father and a mother."

The poor man replied, "Do you call that angry bitch a mother? When it comes to supporting them, I will make an effort to pay a small fee for the two boys." I replied, "If you pay the fee, then it's a different matter. Send me the documents, and you will have the answer as soon as the Director comes."

When Father Hannibal and Father Palma came, I reported the matter to them.

The Father said sarcastically, "That was good advice you gave to that man, to slap his wife! You should have advised him to be calm and patient; to try to convince his wife to change, to pray to the Lord for strength to bear her, and that she may be converted. Not all stepmothers can be considered as mothers. Some good ones have a real maternal concern and others who are like the one described by this man. However, even in these cases, we must study the situation carefully."

"I don't understand why, when the man said that he would pay the fee you answered that the situation changed. What did you mean by that? The fee must never determine the acceptance of a boy. That would distort the aim and mission of our Institute. It would also mean a lack of trust in the Divine Providence. I have said and repeated this many times to you."

"In cases like this (if it's true), when the relatives can afford to pay a minimal contribution, we should accept."

Then he said to Father Palma, "Kindly take care of this case personally and do as you think fit in the Lord. Brother Carmelo is not yet aware of situations in the family and social life. He has not yet grasped the spirit of our Congregation. Then, he continued, "When it comes to the sheltering of boys in our Institute, you don't have to take the meaning of the words *orphan - poor - abandoned* literally, but rather in the moral sense. A boy, who, though having parents, is practically abandoned, must be considered an orphan because he does not have those

who can take care of him. A boy whose parents are physically, intellectually, morally, or practically incapable, can also be considered as a real orphan. If there is a case where a boy is the bone of contention in a family, he can be accepted to bring peace to that family. We also do not exclude the acceptance of illegitimate children when they are abandoned.”

43. MORE HARMFUL THAN THE REPRESSIVE SYSTEM

Over the high altar of the Church of Oria, there was a large painting of St. Mauro, which also covered an opening that had been made in the wall. There was a small ladder, completely hidden, which was used to go behind the painting. In that position, one could easily see what was going on in the Church through some small gashes in the canvas without being seen.

Sometimes I would do that to see how the boys were behaving in the Church without my presence, after entrusting them to one of the older ones. When I saw someone misbehaving, I would scold and punish him depending on the fault he committed. The boys tried with all their might to find out how I knew their behavior but in vain.

One morning, I saw one of them behaving naughtily. I punished him by sending him out during the Holy Mass.

By chance, Father Hannibal met the boy. He asked me the reason. I told him what I was doing, thinking I was clever and smart.

Instead, the Father objected saying that my method was more harmful than the repressive method because I was the one giving the boys the occasion to misbehave for them to be punished. “You act like a policeman, not as an educator. For the boys not to make mistakes, the solution is the constant and loving presence of the educator.”

He insisted that the tactic was created for boys who had no trust and led them to look at the educator not as a friend, but as a policeman. He added that to use such a scheme in Church could be harmful because it might make the boys anxious or commit other mistakes.

He was upset that I assigned the care of the boys to one of them, and said, “It is a serious error to trust one of the boys, one of their companions, to report to the Assistant. The others might easily become annoyed and do more wrong than when they are alone. This situation can cause jealousy and other mistakes. No matter how intelligent and good the boy might be, he only reports things the way he understands it, as a boy. Thus your punishments were based, more or less, on the information you received, possibly exaggerated, or at times, completely wrong. The boy who commits a mistake, even when he is wrong, doesn’t easily acknowledge it, and considers a liar the one who reported the matter to the Assistant.”

“Instead, you must encourage and praise those who, to counter evil, and to prevent some serious harm to the Community, feel bound in conscience to inform their Superiors.”

44. “THIEF!”

One evening Father Hannibal arrived in Oria with five little orphans: three boys and two girls. He sent the girls to the Sisters at San Benedetto Convent and brought the little boys to San Pasquale Convent.⁵¹

When I saw them, I said to myself, “We are going to become a kindergarten!” They were very young; they looked like they were still in need of a nurse.

Turning to the Father, I said, “Father, we don’t have a place for them.”

The Father replied, “A place for them must be found at all cost! I have snatched them from the Protestants.”

I added, a bit sarcastically, “I will pull the beds a little closer, and try to make more room. Besides, they are too little; we can put the three of them in the same bed.”

“Bravo!” The Father reacted. “What wonderful educational insight! No! Each one must have his bed, even if this means getting mine or that of any other Religious. I am surprised by your reasoning. Three in one bed! Moreover, you don’t have to pull the beds closer than normal. Don’t you know the consequences which can result from doing that? Try to accommodate them the best way you can in the small empty room, but don’t put them there alone, they might be scared, or they might need to be attended in some necessities. Try to have true maternal care for them, in particular, their food, their rest, and for all. Avoid giving them heavy food because it expands their stomach. Aside from the three main meals, they need some snacks in the morning and in the afternoon. When it comes to their rest, at their age, they need to sleep 13 to 14 hours a day. They must play a lot in the open air. Movement is life for them.”

From the very beginning, one of the three small kids, Pietruccio Marchetti, from Rapallo, started to get and hide all that he could. This continued as he got older. It was a real obsession. He would even take any insignificant objects, hiding them in the most unlikely places. Every time he was searched, something was found: very small items and useless things, in his shirt or pants which would be bulging. Often he would be sleeping in his bed clinging to a simple object which he would be holding tightly in his hand. Strangely though, he never got money or food.

All the exhortations, reproaches, and punishments were useless. I had even promised to give him anything he would ask me to make him stop. He never asked for anything. His pleasure was in stealing. He had to do it.

One night he snatched some keys from the pocket of his Assistant and threw them into a deep hole where it was very hard to retrieve them when we learned where he had hurled them.

⁵¹ This story is connected with Chapter 37, integrating and clarifying it. San Benedetto was run by the Daughters of Divine Zeal, while the Rogationist offered them service in spiritual chaplaincy. San Pasquale was run exclusively by the Rogationists and for the Rogationists, while the Daughters of Divine Zeal were staffing and managing the kitchen and the laundry, and at times... even the large garden.

One morning, the Assistant could not find his shoes. The little thief had thrown them into the toilet. One day, a bunch of cutlery disappeared from the refectory. He had hidden them behind a painting in the Church.

We could have written a whole anthology of similar deeds! The little boy, however, was honest because whenever he was asked where he had placed the stolen items, he always told the truth. This, however, was not enough for him to recover his loss of respect in front of the others. With sarcastic malice, his companions called him "*the magpie*", "the stealing bird."

He promised me many times to amend his ways, but, instead, it got worse. The situation became untenable. I was forced to write to his grandmother, to notify her about the behavior of her grandson. I also told her that we had tried everything to correct him, but all of them were ineffective. I asked her to withdraw the child from the Institute.

The poor woman was very disappointed by the news. She showed our letter to some people she trusted to know what to do and what to answer. She was advised to put the boy into a rehabilitation center. To do this, she needed our detailed written report on the conduct of her grandson, to be presented to the judge for minors.

She wrote, telling us that she was anxious about the behavior of her grandson. It seems he had inherited this from his father and grandfather. Because they stole, they had spent a good part of their lives in jail, although they did not need to steal for a living. So she was determined to put the boy in a rehabilitation Institute.

We informed the Father about this situation. After meticulously studying the gravity of the case, with a heavy heart, he assigned me to make the report. I exaggerated the vice of the boy to make sure that he would be accepted for rehabilitation.

When the Father read it, he became upset and exclaimed, "This is a final sentence for this boy. He will be locked up, and instead of gradual correction, he will become corrupt. In my ministry, I have become familiar with similar Institutions, and I have a terrible impression of them. I don't know how the Government could allow such a corrupt system of correction. It is completely the opposite of the Preventive System, which is based on religion, reason, and loving-kindness. The methods used in the Institutes of correction are harsh and repressive. The abuse of punishment and the violence on the boys in those Institutes can lead to a completely moral disaster. Those Institutions are all, more or less, filled with a group of poor unhappy people, who were brought there because of some defect or vice. They leave with many other vices that they acquired inside through contact with other wretched people. Don't send the report yet. I want to offer the Holy Mass first for this purpose. Let us pray that the Lord may enlighten us. We will see what to do tomorrow morning."

The following morning, when I approached the Father to ask what to do, he said, "I have thought it over, and I have prayed a lot. We will try something else though it may look a bit eccentric. Hang on the boy's neck a placard with the words 'I am a thief'. Let us see if, through shame, we can correct him. In itself, this is not educative. It might even be counter-productive in the sense that by often saying to a person 'Thief! Thief!' he will believe it and become one.

I answered, “For me, this measure is useless because if the boy is a kleptomaniac, it is a psychophysical defect which cannot be corrected.”

The Father replied, “Don’t be arrogant! Where is the physical connection? Does he have one leg or an arm longer than the other? It is only a defect of psychological origin, which, unless it has reached a state of mental imbalance and madness, can still be corrected. If the placard cannot correct him, will not prayer do it? That is why we must pray a lot and trust in prayer. Can’t the Lord use the placard?”

We did as the Father said.

At first, it did not bother the boy. He was even proud and boastful about it as if it were some recognition.

However, when he became the object of ridicule and blame by those in and outside the Institute who saw him wearing the placard (in fact, the outsiders were wondering why he was in the Institute instead of the juvenile jail), he began to feel ashamed, to hide and then to cry. He did not even want to eat.

I said to him, “You are ashamed because they call you a thief. You should be more ashamed that you are one.”

After using for some time that placard, he promised he would change. The placard was removed, and his companions were forbidden to call him a thief; otherwise, the shameful placard would be transferred to the one insulting the boy.

However, after a few days, he was caught red-handed stealing. Consequently, he had to undergo once again the shame of wearing the placard. He repeated the script: shame, tears, and promises. The placard would be removed. However, the power of the vice was stronger than his will, and he would fail. Yet, the positive effects of the punishment were seen after approximately three months. He no longer resorted to even the smallest theft. Thus, he remained in the Institute always behaving, until he reached the age of military service.

Even in the army, though assigned to the office of the quartermaster, where there was much opportunity to steal, and the items were appealing, he no longer succumbed to the temptation to steal.

I believe, however, that his transformation or healing was to be attributed more to the prayers of the Father than to the shameful placard.

45. A GENERAL REGISTRY FOR EACH CATEGORY AND PERSONAL INDIVIDUAL FOLDERS ARE REQUIRED

In 1924, Father Hannibal assigned Father Palma to follow up on the reconstruction of the House on Circonvallazione Appia Street in Rome. When the work was in its final phase, Father Palma had to leave because of important transactions in Sicily. From Rome, the Father thought of calling me to substitute for Father Palma while he was away.

Speaking about the new House, the Father said to me, “Thank God. It seems that we are now starting to have male personnel also for the Rogationists and there are high hopes for the future;⁵² if the Lord blesses our Houses, they should be modern, up-to-date to the current times. The Divine Providence has helped us so generously. It is, therefore, necessary to organize the Houses, to set up our schools, and to implement the educational method better, with all that is necessary for the improvement of the Work. Are you writing the history of the House of Oria?”

“No,” I answered. “Frankly, before the war, we tried to take some notes, but later we stopped.”

The Father said, “But I have recommended it to all the Houses. It is imperative. Moreover, what about the registry of each category: the registry of the Religious Community, one of the Aspirants, and that of the Orphans? Are they kept?”

“The registry of the Community,” I answered, “follows the format set by Mr. Micalizzi in Messina. For the Aspirants, we keep some very general records in notebooks. Concerning the little Orphans, there is practically nothing.”

“That is not good!” The Father said. “It is not difficult to do, and it doesn’t take up too much time. You have to start as soon as possible to keep the records updated. Start with the record of the Orphans which does not exist. Their records are necessary and useful, not only for the history and the proper flow of the life of the Institute, but we also have the exact statistical data, which we can use, based on the results, for a practical assessment on our educational method.”

“When it comes to the set-up, the organization and the improvements of the Houses in general and in particular, don’t expect everything from me or Father Vitale and Father Palma. It is necessary that you, as a young Religious, do what the young Salesian students of Don Bosco did.”

“I will give you the general criteria on how to set the Records of the Orphans; then do your best to do it. When you finish, show it to me. Use the opportunity now while you are in Rome.”

So, in general, he told me how to proceed. I tried to follow his criteria. When it was done, I showed it to the Father. After his corrections, this is how it was.

“The Registry shall record the general information about Orphan, his serial number according to the order of admission into the Institute. On the front page of the registry, write its ordinal number, the date when the data starts, and when they end.”

“For every Orphan, the following data are to be written in the Registry:

- a) Date of birth;
- b) Place of birth;

⁵² In 1924, the first Rogationists formed at the school of the Founder, namely Father Serafino Santoro, Father Teodoro Tusino, and Father Giovangelista Tursi were ordained priests. There were also other Religious already on the way, who reached priesthood in 1930: Father Carmelo Drago, the author of these memoirs, Father Luca Appi, and Father Camillo Ruggeri.

- c) Father and Mother's name;
- d) Date of Baptism;
- e) Date of Confirmation;
- f) Date of entry into the Institute;
- g) Guardian or person who presented him;
- h) Title of study achieved;
- i) Professional Qualification;
- j) Date of departure from the Institute (Write in the registry if the boy has left the Institute after complete regular training, or because of withdrawal, or expulsion);
- k) Who accepted him;
- l) Does he now have a job outside;
- m) The number of the personal folder."

"The title page of the personal folder must carry the first and last name of Orphan and his registration and the ordinal number. The folder shall keep:

a) The documents required.

b) A report stating:

1. The age of the father and mother when the child was born;
2. If parents have other children who are alive or dead;
3. Occupation of parents;
4. Parents' cause of death;
5. Eventual hereditary or mental diseases in the family;
6. The moral and religious conduct of the family after the birth of the child;
7. The guardians with whom Orphan stayed after the death of his parents;
8. Medical record of any previous sickness;
9. The school he attended;
10. Does he have a legal guardian, and who is he;
11. Whether the boy has hereditary properties or benefits, allowances, or other rights or grants or loans."

“The data about one’s personal history, though difficult to collect, are useful for the formation and the physical, mental, moral, religious, social, and professional education of the boy. If you can't have everything, at least try to collect what you can.”

“The folder must also contain:

1. *The health records*, i.e., the report of the medical examinations done by the health personnel on the occasion of periodic illnesses and visits regarding the health and physical conditions of the boy.
2. *The psychological records* which include the assessment regarding the main mental abilities and character of the boy.
3. *The scholastic records*, consisting of the school grades from where we can gauge the intelligence, the aptitude to study, and the academic performance of the boy.
4. *The professional records* which describe the boy’s actual inclinations toward a kind of job and his achievements.
5. *The moral and religious records* must contain the conduct of Orphan, religious sentiments, and his practice of piety.

“If, because of study or apprenticeship, an Orphan is to be transferred to another Institute of ours, the personal folder shall be forwarded to the Institute where the boy goes.”

“If an Orphan is expelled from the Institute, the reason for the expulsion is to be recorded in the personal folder.”

46. METHODOLOGICAL INDICATIONS FOR AN EFFECTIVE PASTORAL CARE FOR VOCATIONS

The Father, from the foundation of the Work, wanted the candidates to the religious life to be separated, as much as possible, from the Orphans. He did this with the first clerics⁵³ of the Avignone District in Messina. Each group had separate dormitories, as well as refectories, courtyards, and study halls. They met only on special occasions in the chapel for the sacred celebrations; and even here, the clerics were placed in a sort of choir loft. It was the same for the first Aspirants, then known as Scholastics in 1907 and 1908. I remember that there was an absolute prohibition for any group to communicate with another. Even in Francavilla Fontana,

⁵³ A Cleric is a member of the clergy of the Catholic Church. In the strict sense, clerics are those who have already received the Sacred Ordination for service in Catholic Church (deacons, priests, and bishops), but in a broad sense, it can also be referred to all those who are preparing for the priesthood. In these memoirs and many Writings of Father Hannibal, the term is mainly used to indicate the seminarians, the young men who were still studying and preparing for the priesthood. At times, they are also called ‘Religious Students’ to distinguish them from the Coadjutor Brothers who were part of the Congregation but not aspiring to priesthood.

though the buildings were not conducive to it, as much as possible, we tried to meet this standard. The Aspirants ate in the kitchen while the Orphans in the refectory.⁵⁴

This concern also determined the purchase of the House of Oria, that is, to provide a place exclusively for the candidates to the religious life. In the beginning, for about a year, there were only Aspirants. Later, however, when the Orphanage was transferred from Francavilla to Messina, as soon as there were cases of poor and destitute orphans, they were accepted in the House in Oria, even mixing them with the Aspirants, since both Aspirants and Orphans were very few. Consider that there were no Religious except for myself, and I was only 18 years old!

At that time, the Father and Father Palma were always busy with the restoration of the damages of the two Institutes in Messina caused by the earthquake; thus, they were seldom in Oria.

This situation lasted for quite some time. However, one day, since the number of Aspirants, as well as that of the Orphans, increased and more help was needed, the Father called me and said, “We acquired this House of Oria to be used for the formation of our Religious. However, in reality, the Providence, as we can see, has decided that it shall also serve as a shelter and formation of the Orphans. Oh, the ways of the Lord! In this way, He gives us a better chance to practice our most important mission which is the Works of charity, and opens the way for the material support of those who are destined to the religious life. Until now, we have been forced by necessity to allow the Aspirants and the Orphans to live together. However, now, thank God, it seems that there is a possibility to separate the two communities. The House is large, and both economic and charitable means have improved. When Father Palma comes, tell him in my name to study how to accomplish this separation in the best way possible.”

“Each group shall have its dormitory, refectory, school, study room, and Assistants. When I return, I want to see this separation realized. This is very important. However, this separation is not at all intended to detach the hearts of the Aspirants from the Orphans. That would be very detrimental to their formation. We must try in all ways to instill in the heart of the Aspirants the most tender love for the Orphans, for the poor and the suffering. These sentiments are to be considered one of the most important signs of a vocation to our Institute.”

“The separation of the two groups is intended for the greater good of both because both have been received in our Institute with different intentions, so must they also be formed differently.”

“There is a great difference between the Aspirants who are preparing for the religious life and the Orphans who have to prepare for life in the world. Therefore, we cannot expect from the Orphans the same disposition, the same love for prayer, compassion, and practice of the holy

⁵⁴ Orphans and Seminarians are two categories of boys and young men in the Rogationist Houses of Messina and Oria. They are separated, having different schedules, activities, and formation because of the difference in educational goals. As described in several Chapters in these memoirs, there were circumstances when the two groups were constrained to be together. However, Father Hannibal had always in mind the separation of the two not only in terms of the organization of their formation but even in the physical structure of the House. (Cf. also Chapters 52, 111 and 123).

virtues like the Seminarians.⁵⁵ Consequently, the whole formation must be different and have a specific meaning in its elements.”

When Father Palma returned, I informed him about this. After a few days, the separation of the premises was put into effect.

When the Father returned, we presented the plan to him. He liked it so much that he said, “Maybe we could have done this even before. Now we can indeed work better for a greater organization and development both of the Aspirantate⁵⁶ and of the Orphanage.”

“But now it is urgent to study the criteria and the modalities of the operation for the greater development of the two groups. Tomorrow I have to go to Trani. When I come back, we will talk about it.”

When the Father returned, Father Palma had left for Messina. The Father, however, wanted it done sooner, so he said to me, “Since Father Palma is absent, in order not to waste time, let us begin studying the criteria for the development of the Aspirantate.”

I took the following notes of what he said:

1. Vocational problem

a) Before anything else, prayer is the infallible means to obtain vocations. Vocation is the most precious gift of God that He alone can give; and for Him to provide it, He requires that we pray according to what Our Lord Jesus Christ himself said, “The harvest is truly great, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send laborers to His harvest.” If we pray, surely we will have vocations; and if we don’t pray, for sure we will not have them. Without prayer, human efforts are useless. Now, if by virtue of the fourth vow we have an obligation to pray incessantly in order to obtain good vocations to the Holy Church, in a particular way we have to feel obliged to pray so as to obtain vocations to our Congregation which has as its final goal the increase of the apostles of the Rogate. If we want vocations, this spirit and this prayer must become the soul of our Aspirantate.

b) Secondly, we need to advertise. To have vocations, our Institute needs not only to be known as a Work of charity and beneficence but especially as a religious Congregation which has, first of all, the most important goal to pray to the Lord to send workers to the holy Church, and then to support and educate the orphans, the poor, the abandoned and delinquent children. Advertising is all the more necessary because our Institute is still unknown. This is to be done through preaching, catechetical instruction, and printed materials, especially with the periodical *God and Neighbor* and the booklet *The Miraculous Secret* which today, thank God, are widely spread. To obtain vocations, it is also useful to involve, in particular, the members of the Sacred Alliance, and the ‘zealous’ men and women of the Pious Union of the Evangelical Rogation.

⁵⁵ In this English Edition, when capitalized, ‘Seminarian’ refers to the category of boys and young men preparing to become the Rogationist priests; when just in the lower case, ‘seminarian’ refers to seminarians in general. Sometimes, a seminarian is also referred to as a cleric.

⁵⁶ Aspirantate is the House for boys aspiring to become Religious or priests; a Seminary.

c) The third is the excellent reputation of the Institute. The Institute shall shine with the real zeal of love for God and neighbor, according to the Institute's spirit and purpose and its members shall live the perfect religious observance always joined with the perfect bond of mutual charity. This is what attracts more divine graces and chosen and numerous vocations to our Institute.

2. The Requirement for admission to Aspirantate

a) According to his capacity, the Aspirant must show, at least in general, his willingness to consecrate himself to the service of God in our Congregation.

b) He should have the right intention, kind-heartedness, good character and intelligence, inclination to piety, the integrity of behavior.

c) Age: the young men who will take up the study for the priesthood, in general, shall be between ten to fourteen years old; those who want to be Coadjutor Brothers shall be from fourteen to approximately thirty years old.

d) The Aspirants must enjoy good health; before being admitted, they must undergo a medical check-up by the doctor of the Institute.

e) They should come from a God-fearing family, who agrees that their son consecrates himself to the Lord, or at least does not prevent him.

f) They must not come from families in which the parents can, later on, have the moral and material needs of their son.

g) They shall not come from other religious Institutes, nor have been expelled from a Seminary.

h) Those coming from our Orphanages are to be accepted with much caution. First of all, the Orphans are not to be exhorted to become Religious. Furthermore, it is to be ascertained that they possess the necessary requisites, and the conditions of their future are to be well examined. Rather than being hasty to transfer them to the Seminary, it is better to cultivate their vocation, as much as possible, in the Orphanage itself.

i) The parents of the Aspirant will have to pay a monthly fee, according to their capacity, in agreement with the Institute.

j) When they have the capability, the parents will supply the Aspirant with suitable personal wardrobe, toiletries, etc.

3. Documents required

a) Certificates: of Baptism and Confirmation, of attendance to the Sacraments, of good conduct issued by the parish priest and a statement that the parents leave the candidate free to enter the Aspirantate.

b) Certificate of birth issued by the competent local office.

c) Medical Certificate of a healthy constitution and absence of contagious and hereditary diseases.

d) Parents' statement, issued as an official document, in which they commit to allowing their son to follow his vocation freely, and in case they withdraw their son from the Seminary against his will, they will pay the Institute 30 Liras per month, for the entire time that the boy has been in the Institute until he reached the age of 21.

4. Safeguarding vocations and spiritual formation of the Aspirants

If obtaining vocations to the Congregation is necessary, it is also vital to safeguard and form them correctly. It would be a grave error if, because of us, vocations fail or were not correctly formed. Inflicting the most serious damage to the Congregation would make our accountability to God very grave.

Therefore, during the Aspirantate, we must:

a) Create a favorable atmosphere for the vocation, which is realized through piety, prayer, frequent reception of the Sacraments and devotion to the Most Holy Virgin Mary;

b) Care for the practice of virtues, according to the capacity of the candidate;

c) Nourish them with religious instructions of Catechism and the Sacred History [= History of Salvation], adding the reading of good books and the lives of the Saints, crowning it all with the essential teachings regarding the excellence of the religious life, and the purpose and spirit proper to the Congregation.

d) Give good examples. Instructions persuade, but examples fascinate, especially the young. In the Aspirantate, all must shine because of fervor, the spirit of prayer and piety, and in a particular way because of unity and fraternal charity. In particular, the Assistants and those who are more in contact with the Aspirants must be exemplary. They must be mirrors of what the Aspirants have to be when they become Religious.

e) Maintain a continuous, diligent, attentive surveillance, inspired by the spirit of faith and charity which the Lord considers what is done out of love for His children is done to him. During formation, we must use the persuasive method, and the Preventive System of Don Bosco, preferring it than any other.

f) Use all of one's energies and be generous with personal and communal sacrifices, keeping in mind that the greatest good that we can provide to the Church and for the Congregation is to give them good vocations.

g) Keep the Aspirants in the House as much as possible, not to let them go outside even for catechism or sacred functions. In case of sickness, the Aspirants should stay in the hospital in the shortest time possible. In all of this, I agree with Don Bosco.

5. Study

a) Culture and science are among the main requirements, especially for the Seminarians preparing for the priesthood out of obedience.⁵⁷ Therefore, they must focus on studies with much interest. No one shall be in a hurry to ascend to the priesthood; a more mature age is preferable when the young men are well-formed in the holy virtues and sciences.

b) As much as possible, the teaching is to be done by our teachers. We know how with their knowledge, work, and example they can enlighten the pupil, stimulate him, spur him, gently encourage him to take care of his intellectual, moral, and religious development. The teacher infuses something of himself into the pupil. When the Lord grants us the grace of having Rogationist teachers, they will have to dedicate themselves seriously to this most important task, especially to cultivate and to conserve the vocation of our Aspirants. It will not be necessary for them to wait until they have attained a diploma or doctorate. They shall start teaching as soon as they are prepared to do so, helped by goodwill and sacrifice, which places them in a position to do good. This was also the way of Don Bosco at the beginning of the foundation of the Salesians.

c) Until we have our own teachers, we will look for them, through diligent information, among the religious and secular clergy who shine in virtue and knowledge. In our internal schools, we shall follow the complete government program so that the Seminarians can also attain legal or government recognition to acquire legal titles.

d) Until we can manage our own schools, we will send our Seminarians to those of religious Institutes or of the Episcopal Seminary. In this case, we will do everything so that our Aspirants are acknowledged as Seminarians and not just as students. At the cost of any sacrifice, we have to keep our Seminarians away from the public school because this would be a sure ruin of vocations.⁵⁸

e) We also have to be vigilant so that the textbooks are not harmful to their formation. Readings are nourishment for the spirit which affects the heart. Don Bosco also disapproved of the figures of Don Abbondio and Geltrude as they are described by Manzoni in *The Betrothed*.⁵⁹ I have the same opinion. At least until the boys come to a certain age, we must always give them edifying and positive examples, not negative ones because the young men have not yet acquired the habit of knowing how to evaluate correctly.

⁵⁷ At that time the Superiors often decided who among the Aspirants would become a Coadjutor Brother or a Priest.

⁵⁸ At the time of the Father, Public Schools were all run and staffed by government people. Since the national and local administrators were for the vast majority anticlerical, masons, and socialists, even the school programs were tailored in that direction. That is why Father Hannibal always did his best to set up his own private school in each of his Houses. Cf. also the episode in Chapter 195.

⁵⁹ In *The Betrothed (I Promossi Sposi)*, an important novel of the classical Italian literature by A. Manzoni, the characters of Don Abbondio and Geltrude are mostly 'negative' even though the literary work firmly upholds the Catholic family values.

6. Work

a) The Aspirants must also be accustomed to work. Ours is an Institute of active life and an eminently educational and charitable Institution. Therefore, its members must learn the value of working for a living and also as good examples. Thus, they must start practicing it from their boyhood.

In the House, everyone will have work to do, according to his ability, and he shall try to do it diligently.

b) In the daily schedule, there must be a convenient time assigned for learning an art or trade, according to the spirit of our Institute.

c) During Aspirantate, it is also beneficial to cultivate the fine arts, like music and painting, according to the inclination and abilities of everyone.

7. Selection

An accurate selection process has to be done at the proper time to maintain an atmosphere suitable for the preservation and development of vocations. Otherwise, this may cause serious damage to the Aspirantate.

a) The first step in selection has to be done before the acceptance by trying to determine the good dispositions of the young men, even before they enter. Accurate information can be obtained from the parish priests and competent persons who are in the position of providing them. Every effort must be exerted so that before the young man is admitted to the Aspirantate, one of our Religious has examined him personally and also has personal knowledge of the family. Brother Giuseppe Antonio was not assigned to this task because he was too eager to get vocations and his kindness made him easily see vocation in everyone, thinking that everyone could become good Religious.

b) At the proper time, we must exclude and dismiss from Aspirantate those who are sickly, those with little diligence, those with unruly nature and character, those who have very little inclination to piety and discipline, those who do not love the Institute, and especially those who, in any way, are an occasion of scandal for others especially when it comes to moral behavior.

At this point, the Father concluded, "That is enough for today. Tomorrow, if it pleases the Lord, we shall discuss the Orphans,"

I was not used to writing fast, and I was absorbed in taking notes. I was jotting them down in my awful handwriting, not caring about errors or following the lines on the paper. When the Father noticed it, he said to me, "Oh blessed son, when you write, you have to write well. The way you wrote, perhaps not even you would be able to read what you have written! If you do this, when you have to write a letter, you might need an entire paper mill!"

47. THE PROPER RUNNING OF THE ORPHANAGE: INDICATIONS FOR ITS PLANNING

One evening, after supper, a few days after the Father had discussed the topic of the Aspirantate,⁶⁰ he told me that he was going to leave for Messina the next day and that he might not be able to return to Oria for two months. I mentioned what he had told me to remind him to discuss also the Orphanage, as he had done with the Aspirantate.

He replied, "I know, but we only have this evening. It means that after the prayers, I will think about what we must write, and then I will call you."

He called me even if it was a little late, and said to me, "It is too late, and you have to sleep. We will deal with this topic on my return, though I truly thought it to be urgent."

"No problem, Father," I said. "I can listen to you until tomorrow morning."

The Father said, "That's what you say. Don't make this kind of mistake because you will pay for them later on. However, let us begin and let us see how far we can go."

While he was speaking, I tried to take notes in the best way I could. Here they are.

"Now, that thanks be to God, we had seen that in this House of Oria there is the possibility to operate both the Community of the Aspirants and that of the Orphans, with a distinct separation as we saw when we spoke about the Aspirants.⁶¹ Now we have to discuss how to manage the acceptance of the Orphans and how to organize the Orphanage. All this is very important because it is required by the very nature of our Institute, which is both a religious and charitable Institution."

"First of all, we must keep in mind that with the acceptance of the Orphans into our Institute, we assume an obligation, for as long as they are with us, to give them all the care and attention that parents give to their children. At the same time, this is also an obligation of justice and charity because our benefactors send us donations for the sustenance and success of the Orphans."

"We take the place of the parents in all matters, and therefore we must have a love for the Orphans and concern for their success as parents do. We should love the Orphans more than their parents because parents love their sons naturally. Our love should be supernatural, that is, out of love for God."⁶²

"We must think as if the Lord himself entrusted them directly to us saying, 'Take these little creatures, nourish them, sanctify them for me, and I will give you your reward. Remember that

⁶⁰ We spoke of Aspirants in the previous Chapter. Father Hannibal intended that after setting the general Regulations for the Aspirants, he would do the same for the Orphans, but could not do it because he was urgently called back to Messina. Chapters 46 and 47 are to be dated after 1910 because they mention a visit of Father Founder to the House of Trani, which was founded precisely that year.

⁶¹ Cf. Chapter 46.

⁶² About love for the Orphans, which is expressed here in such strong words, cf. Chapter 39.

he who receives one of these children, receives me, and whoever receives me, receives the Father who sent me; anything you do to one of these for love of me, I deem it as done unto me.”

“We should be aware that if Our Lord says this about children in general, what will he say about the Orphans, who do not have the persons most loved in one’s life, the parents, and therefore are poor and abandoned? I believe that there is no work more pleasing to the Most Holy Heart of Jesus than that of the sustenance, education, and sanctification of the Orphans.”

“In no other good work do we practice so much the corporal and spiritual works of mercy as in helping the poor and abandoned orphans.”

At this point, the Father noticed that I was perspiring trying to write down what he was saying. He exclaimed suddenly, “What am I doing? I feel like I am preaching a sermon. If we continue at this pace, even the whole night will not be enough. Rest for a while, then we will go to the practical indications, and I will try to speak more slowly.”

Then he resumed, “First of all there are two important premises. The first is that in our Orphanage, we must accept orphans and little ones who are truly in a situation of poverty and abandonment, without looking at their nationality, the color of the skin, or religion. We have to be like the Good Samaritan.”

“The requirements for choosing an orphan are his degree of poverty and abandonment, with no favoritism.”

“Secondly, when an orphan cannot be sheltered because we lack the means for his maintenance and proper formation, it would be better to let him remain with his family and help him there financially. The love of the family is irreplaceable and is the most conducive for education. No matter how excellent and fully equipped our Institute may be, it will always have some negative sides. It could be about the number of the pupils, or the diversity of their characters, or the separation from social life, or even lack of initiative.”

“In the educational field, the Orphanage is always a substitute for the family. Therefore, it depends on how much we strive to make the life of the Orphanage conform to the life of the family. Therefore, the premises of the Orphanage, its disciplinary system, the service, and even the prayers, as much as possible, should be adapted to the style of the family.”

After these premises, let us go to the application.

1. Requirements for admittance to the Institute

“Regarding age, acceptance, ordinarily, will be from 5 years up, but not beyond 10. It would be best to accept them when they are still small because the younger they are, the more they resent the sad effects of misery and abandonment. However, as of now, this is not possible. The ideal will be when the Institute has been developed and have suitable premises and personnel. However, exemptions regarding age can be made for cases where it is necessary.

2. Conditions

They must really be poor and abandoned. Ordinarily, the order of precedence is the following:

- a. Orphans of both parents.
- b. Orphans whose surviving parent is in pressing physical, moral, economic, or social needs.
- c. Those who have no mother.
- d. Those who have no father. If there are no specific reasons, they shall not be accepted. Mothers seldom entrust their children to an Institute for the complete formation and also because caring for the son keeps the mother morally sound.⁶³
- e. Orphans coming from a large family.
- f. Illegitimate children.
- g. Young men, especially from a large family, who are really abandoned because their parents cannot afford to maintain and educate them.
- h. Orphans, whose surviving parent has remarried. Ordinarily, these shall not be accepted because they have found a complete family again unless there are special reasons.

N.B.:

a) Do not accept any payment for the acceptance in the Orphanage, unless relatives, benefactors, or private or public organizations are willing to pay or to supply a set of personal clothes.

b) If there are two boys, one of whom can pay a fee and the other cannot, we prefer the second because he is more abandoned.

c) Accurate information about the situation of poverty and abandonment is to be acquired before accepting an Orphan. If during the stay in the Institute the reasons for sheltering the boy no longer exist, he is to be entrusted to those who can duly take care of him.

d) For boys orphaned of both parents, we ought to request, when possible, that they have a legal guardian.

3. Spiritual and Moral Formation

The main task of the Orphanage shall be to give a solid and in-depth religious instruction to the boys through teaching Catechism. We have to explain to the boys the reason why they were created: to know, love, and serve God in this life to enjoy paradise in the other life.

⁶³ Father Hannibal believed that even in the contexts of poverty, good mothers, even if widowed, will not entrust their children to an Institution, that is why he insists on helping the children in their family. There are exceptional cases, though, like in the episode in Chapter 50. Widows at home with no children to take care, especially if poor, may be more easily tempted to give up moral principles out of necessity.

The secret of this formation is the strengthening of the will, that is, to convince the boy not just to do, but to be willing to do. Also, everything is useless without a firm religious belief. Religious practices done without conviction are more harmful than useful. Our Lord said, "Let the little ones come to me." He did not say, "Lead them to me," or "Push them, force them," He said, "Do not prevent them from coming to me."

Therefore, I repeat: we have to give more importance to teaching Catechism. However, more than requesting the boys to memorize the formulas, we need to explain and make them understand the meaning. For this, we have to choose the best book. It may be necessary to divide them into classes to make the teaching more convenient. Furthermore, to make the lessons more effective, use little stories and other effective didactic means. Contests and prizes are also worthwhile to sustain the interest and enthusiasm of the boys.

4. Practices of Piety

About practices of piety, we expect two things. First, don't demand from the Orphans the same piety the Aspirants, who are aiming at the religious life. Second, the practices of piety must be set in such a way that the Orphans can continue to practice them even after they have left the Institute.

We have to make the boys understand that we pray to St. Anthony to ask for graces for benefactors and in thanksgiving for the graces granted. This is an obligation of justice because the benefactors send donations for this purpose.

The prayers are to be said with fervor, slowly and with clear pronunciation.

The Orphans will have daily prayers in the morning and the evening, the visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, the Holy Rosary, and attend the Holy Mass. They are urged to receive Holy Communion frequently, but they are not to be forced to do so. Regarding confession, they shall be given an easy way to avail of it whenever they want.

Let the grown-up boys be given a little daily meditation and at least a three days retreat every year. Before and after every common action, let them recite the usual prayer.

5. Academic and Cultural Formation

Knowledge is the nourishment and the ornament of the mind; it renders the boy easier to educate.

School is the first step to acquire knowledge more efficiently and more perfectly. Therefore, all the interns in our Institute have to complete at least the compulsory education. Let the boys who show potential and willingness, according to the local and financial capabilities of the Institute, also attend the senior high school, as parents do for their children, at the cost of heavy

sacrifices. Cultural titles elevate the person to a higher level in society and establish a precious legacy.⁶⁴

The schools for our boys must be our own,⁶⁵ at the cost of any sacrifice. For the boys to attain legal scholastic titles, we have to send them to take the exams in public schools. It is desirable when this will be possible that our schools be officially recognized. The teachers, even if it entails huge sacrifices, as much as possible, must be our Religious. Only when necessary shall we resort to teachers outside the Institute after checking their cultural, moral, and religious qualities.

Thus, when the Lord wills it, our Religious will have to take regular studies, to achieve the legal titles qualifying them for teaching.

Let our schools be equipped and furnished with the best educational materials. They shall not lack books, notebooks, and all that is needed. It is good to offer the pupils cultural support in their studies by creating a small library.

A regular time for school and study should be given to the boys.

6. Professional Formation

The reason why we receive the Orphans is not only to get them out of the state of misery and abandonment, and to treat them well while they are with us, but mainly, to make them live well in society later on, by the fruits of their labor. If we fail in this, our work of charity would be imperfect.

Therefore:

a) We must commit ourselves, as much as possible, to have a suitable apprenticeship, with several specializations so that there is a wide choice, according to every one's inclinations. The laboratories must be equipped in the best possible way. They must be modern, with a variety of options, productive and helpful for learning.

We have to do all we can so that the machinery is suitable for the capacity of the boys and with the proper safety protections to avoid accidents.

We have to provide expert trainers. For this task, we have to prepare our Religious, sending them to the Salesians or even to other specialized centers to qualify themselves.

b) Before admitting the boys to the different arts or trades, we have to assess their inclinations and abilities accurately so that they can smoothly progress, and not forced to frequently switching of courses.

⁶⁴ "Compulsory education", a term which is not often used in English, refers to the "basic education" consisting of Elementary and Junior High School. In the time of Father Hannibal, attending formal schooling and obtaining a diploma in basic education was a privilege for a few; many could not afford to go to school.

⁶⁵ Father Hannibal wanted the Rogationists to run schools inside the Orphanages (and Seminaries) so as not to send the Orphans to Public Schools.

c) Our laboratories are not set up and intended for a commercial and lucrative purpose, but above all for the formation of the boys. However, without undermining the primary objective, it is also good to consider the possibility of earning both to instruct the *little artisans*⁶⁶ as well as to open another source of income for the Institute. It is even better to accept orders from outsiders.

If this is realized, it is good to involve the older boys already accustomed to produce. After deducting expenses, those who are deserving may be allowed to share in the future profit.

It is good to have in the Institute a showroom for the best items produced by the apprentices, with their respective names, age, and years of apprenticeship. This could also be very useful in making the annual awarding ceremony more fruitful and exciting because it will show the performance and progress of the boys in the arts and crafts concretely. It will also give greater prestige to the Institute.

Lastly, the professional curriculum shall be regulated by a rational theoretical and practical plan to be accomplished yearly in a progressive manner.

7. Civic Education

The family is the first and most ideal institution of education for the child because it follows the natural laws established by God, and is the one that answers all the human demands. The family is the first and most perfect cell of society, as well as the highest school of humanity.

Unfortunately, orphans have lost the priceless love of a family. It is necessary, therefore, as we have pointed out, that the Institute shall try to be, as much as possible, their family. The more it strives to resemble a family, the more perfect an Institute will be.

The more the set up of the Institute is inspired by the family spirit, the more suitable and effective it will be in educating and giving complete formation to the boys. Therefore, the Orphans must be loved and treated by us as members of our family, and we have to do this in a way that they feel it.

If we don't strive to create this family atmosphere, the Orphanage becomes for them a place of suffering, not of formation, and they will enter in the society frustrated.

Here lies one of the great difficulties for the true education and formation of the Orphans. Since they are not destined to remain in the Institute, but to be included in society, it is necessary to educate and form them in such a way that, though they feel like the Orphanage is their family, they are prepared to live in the society, so that they do not become maladjusted when they have to leave the Institute.

Consequently, the Orphans must learn and be well trained in the standard norms which can help them succeed positively in society: the observance of good manners, courteous and gentle in speaking, conversing and behaving correctly, and above all in being sincere and loyal, sociable and punctual, amiable and generous.

⁶⁶ *Artigianelli*, little artisans, is the name used for the apprentice boys learning arts and crafts.

It is also suitable that the Orphans be accustomed to always speaking in Italian and not in their dialect.⁶⁷

8. Physical Formation and Care for Health

In the natural physical order, health is the most precious good. If it is so for all, the more is it so for the poor and abandoned orphans because their only material means of livelihood is the fruit of their activities. This can only be accomplished when they enjoy good health. Therefore, health must be guarded with all possible means.

However, the health of the orphans, especially of the poor and abandoned that we accept, is usually not that good because of where they come from. At times they have inherited traces of diseases from their parents; other times, it is the miserable and filthy condition of the environment and places where they were born and lived. The lack of affection in the family may take a heavy toll on their bodies. Sometimes it is all of these.

Life in an Institution is not the most suitable for normal physical development. Therefore, better and particular care for the physical development and health of the Orphans is demanded. For this purpose, cleanliness is to be given more importance. Therefore:

a) Let the premises be well set: rooms shall be well ventilated, bright, and clean. The dormitories have a cubature of air more than sufficient in proportion to the number of pupils. Let beds be at least a meter distant from one another. Particular attention is to be given to the cleanliness of the toilets and bathrooms and for the change of air in the premises where the boys live.

b) Let there be care for personal hygiene, that is, the boys shall keep themselves clean, take a bath at least once a week and, if necessary, as many times as they need. Let them wash their hands before and after meals, and brush their teeth daily.

c) Clothes shall be of a material suitable to the season, and not too tight that it hampers the healthy blood circulation. Linens are to be replaced at least once a week.

d) The food for the Orphans must be more than enough, nutritious, and well prepared in variety as much as possible, both for health and for keeping the boys happy, but not to create useless needs in them. They are to get used to eating everything, keeping however in mind that there may be cases of natural dislike for certain foods. In such cases, do not insist.

Don't let the boys get used to sweets. Don't give wine or liquor except to the grown-ups during special solemnity and occasions. Don't give pure coffee, but when needed, give them a good substitute.

e) Let them have a convenient time for rest according to the age. They are not to be forced to work more than what is expedient, both manually and mentally. Let them have a convenient

⁶⁷ Dialect was spoken in the family and the countryside. Each village, town, city, province, and region, has its own dialect, mainly rooted in Latin and medieval Romance languages. Italian was the language of the literati. With the unification of Italy at the time of the Founder, Italian became the official language. To prepare his Orphans to become proficient citizens, Father Hannibal insisted that they speak Italian in the Institution.

time for recreation and relaxation. Remember that life is movement. Don't forget walks and excursions.

f) Have periodic medical check-ups for all, aside from the occasional ones, offered during the year. The House must have a suitable infirmary, with the necessary equipment and medicines. A record where the doctor writes his diagnosis of every sickness and the respective cure shall be kept in the infirmary.

9. The Method

The method to be adopted in the Orphanages must be the Preventive System of Don Bosco, which is based on reason, on persuasion, loving-kindness, and religion.

a) First of all, it is based on reason. What is said or is requested from the boy must be reasonable. We have to do this in such a way that the boy himself understands the reason for what he is asked to do. The goal is for him to do it voluntarily. If we don't try to reach this willing acceptance, education will only be superficial and external and therefore in vain.

b) This method is also based on loving-kindness. There is nothing stronger than love when it comes to bending the will because it is said that love makes a person want or not want what the loved one wants or does not want. For this reason, parents are the best educators.

Our loving-kindness towards the Orphans has particular effectiveness because it is a holy loving-kindness, all based on charity.

c) When it comes to religion, then, it is known that when one loves God and has his holy fear, he will live righteously, respecting his neighbor.

10. About Punishments

If appropriately applied, the Preventive System in itself excludes punishment because no faults are committed.

Never use humiliating or scornful words, injurious punishments, especially if painful, with the Orphans. Never, never hit them.

If it is necessary to give punishment for the personal and common good, a moral punishment is to be preferred. Punishment is to be always given after having prayed earnestly and reflected on the reason for the fault and the effects that the punishment may have. Punishment is to be administered with calm, persuasion, and loving-kindness, always ready to pardon when the boys recognize their wrong and show repentance.

In serious cases, after having exhausted all the loving means of persuasion and correction, the separation from the Community could be tried. Never isolate them in locked premises.

However, if this still does not work, it would be better to discharge them, than to turn the Institute of education into an Institute of correction.

As much as possible, great charity and help are to be used with those who were expelled so that they can join the civil society.

Since we are dealing with the Orphans, I have to add that greater precaution is to be used concerning punishments because the Orphans may resent it, thinking of them as a consequence of their being orphans.

11. About Prizes

Let a solemn awarding ceremony be held yearly to encourage the Orphans. Let a certificate and an appropriate prize in cash when they leave the Institute be given to those outstanding in conduct, religion, school, and work.

All that is possible should be done so that the Orphans do not leave the Institute until they have completed their formation. Let a special suitable preparation to join society be given before their departure.

They are to be helped in looking for a convenient place of work. Always maintain friendly contact with them, by following and supporting them lovingly as much as possible.”

At this point, the Father said, “Thank God, we did a pretty good job. If the Lord desires, when Father Palma comes, we can finalize together a definite set of instructions. It is obvious that you are already tired. It is all right. Go to sleep right away and don’t get up early with the others tomorrow morning.”

“Yes,” I answered. “But if you allow me, I would like to drink some water first.” “Go then,” he replied, “and since you are already there, please bringing me a glass too.”

On my way to the refectory, the two clocks of the town struck the sound for midnight. The Father heard them. I did not. When I offered him the water, he asked me if I had already drunk, and without telling me that midnight had passed, he said to me, “Put the glass on the table and go to bed.”

The next day he confided, “Last night before you drank, the two clocks of Oria struck midnight. The clock that I use had the same time. However, I didn’t say anything to leave you in good faith and to be able to receive Holy Communion.”⁶⁸

48. THE DAILY HOLY COMMUNION

The Father wished that the holy practice of Holy Communion was not only frequent but daily in our Institutes.

⁶⁸ Before Pius X’s Decree ‘*Quam singulari*’ in 1910, Communion could be received only with the permission of the confessor, and one of the requirements was complete fasting, from midnight to the time of the Communion. It was not allowed even to drink water, as the story tells.

He used to say that spiritual progress, everyone's sanctification, and the life of the Pious Work depended on daily Communion properly done. He repeated the words of St. Joseph Cottolengo, "Full Ciboria empty storerooms; empty Ciboria full storerooms."⁶⁹

He insisted, however, that regarding daily Communion, he expected us to do it properly with all the necessary disposition and always with the greatest freedom.

In this regard, he also wanted us to be well instructed; that deliberate venial sins be avoided; that a fervent preparation and thanksgiving be always done. For this purpose, he would give all the time and means for the preparation, meditation, as well as easy access to confession.

He would often speak with words burning with faith and love for the Eucharist.

He wanted the little ones to be prepared for First Communion with care beyond description.

If someone could not go to Church for Communion because of sickness, he would have the host brought to him in the room.

When he was the one celebrating the Holy Mass for the Community, often, before the initial rites, he would mention the general and particular intentions for which the Mass was celebrated. He would make a fervent preparation for Holy Communion, always so beautiful and varied, leaving all spellbound. Very often, he would pray a fervent exhortation immediately before the Holy Communion.

It pained Father Hannibal to learn that often we were left not only without Holy Mass but also without Communion because of the lack of priests.⁷⁰ We had to go to the different Churches outside to look for it. In the beginnings of the House of Oria, this often happened because the Father was far away for long periods and Father Palma was also absent for weeks and weeks. The Father at times said, "Perhaps the Lord allows this to make us realize even more the preciousness and the necessity for priests, to commit ourselves to pray more fervently so that He may send numerous and holy ones." I remember how concerned he was when he wrote to us while we were in the military service, exhorting us to frequent Communion. When I was a soldier in Palermo, he came many times to visit me lovingly. Once, when I confided to him the serious difficulties that I was encountering to receive Holy Communion, he tried his best to help me.

From the new barracks where I was transferred, I could go out only in the evening during my time off. To be able to receive Communion, I gave an alibi to be able to get an exemption from the meal; so towards eleven, I was allowed to go out, barely half an hour, to buy something to eat. Instead, I used that time to run to the nearest Church, which was that of the Franciscan Conventuals, where I received Communion. Given that inconvenient time, the sacristan Friar was usually annoyed to have to look for a priest, often leaving me without Communion. Then, I would have to wait for my evening time off to make it.

⁶⁹ "Full ciboria" means few people going to communion: the Lord will not send His Providence. "Empty ciboria" means many people receiving communion: the Lord will fill one's storeroom.

⁷⁰ Before the liturgical renewal of the Vatican Council II, Communion was easily distributed outside the Eucharistic celebration, generally in the morning because it required fasting beginning from the previous midnight.

The Father said, "I am sorry that you have to fast and wait until that hour." However, with a smile, he added, "But it seems that fasting does you good because I have never seen you look so healthy. This evening we will speak with the Father Guardian⁷¹ of the Church, so that they may be available when you go there for Communion."

When the Father introduced himself, Father Guardian received him with reverence saying, "What a fortune to welcome Canon Di Francia! I have longed so much to meet you!"

As soon as he heard the purpose of the visit, he immediately summoned the sacristan Friar and told him that anytime I would come for Communion, he had to leave everything immediately and inform the priest, even if he was in the confessional. Then turning to me, he said, "Just come to our Convent as if you were one of our Religious."

Regarding Communion, I remember another story.

One morning in Oria, as it happened often, we could barely find a priest for Communion. The priest was a certain Father Ferdinand, a former Alcantarinian. They said that he had been the Superior of that same convent where we were staying. I noticed that when some younger Orphans approached the altar, he was hesitant to give them communion. One day, he called me to the sacristy to give me a good scolding because we had admitted to Communion boys with such a tender age and added that in the future he would no longer provide Communion to little kids.

I told him that the smallest was approximately eight years old and had been adequately prepared for First Communion.

The priest, almost angry, said, "And what can eight-year-old understand about transubstantiation? These are useless Communions... almost a profanity! I wonder why you can't understand that! To receive Communion, the boys must be at least 15 years old."

When the Father came, I told him what had happened. He said to me, "There are several priests who still think this way even after the beautiful decree on daily Communion also for the little ones.⁷² It is a trap of the devil who tries to keep especially the children who are the favorite of Jesus away from Communion. Not for anything did the Lord say, 'Let the little ones come to me.'"

"You should have asked that good Father: 'Do the 14 and 15 years old boys understand the mystery of the transubstantiation? What about those who studied Theology, or St. Thomas, who wrote so well about the Eucharist to deserve the approval of the Lord himself: did they understand this mystery adequately? Only God can understand it! For creatures, it will always remain a mystery based on the omnipotence and infinite goodness of God. We believe it because it is the word of Our Lord, 'This is my Body; this is my Blood. My Body is true food; my Blood is true drink. Who eats my flesh and drinks my blood, remains in me and I in him.'"

⁷¹ "Guardian" is the Franciscan title for the Superior of the religious House.

⁷² Pope Pius X in the Decree 'Quam singulari' in 1910 allowed children to have the First Communion and First Confession at the age of seven (age of reason), as long as they were able to distinguish an ordinary bread from the Bread of the Holy Eucharist which is the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ, and approach the altar with proper devotion.

“This was the explanation that the Lord gave to the Jews, who, scandalized, asked how that was possible.”

“Therefore, our attachment to the Eucharist is founded on faith, meaning, on the words of Our Lord and not on possible explanations and comprehensions. It is sufficient that the boy is well instructed according to his capacity to understand the main mysteries of our religion; that he knows how to distinguish the common bread from the consecrated Host; that, in faith, he knows that in the consecrated Host there is Jesus, alive and true, in body, blood, spirit, and divinity, as the Catechism teaches, and as he wishes to receive Communion. Then, Jesus is happy to enter that innocent little heart.”

“Don’t listen to just anyone and make sure that our children are well prepared and desire to receive Communion even every day, as we shall always wish.”

49. FROM URCHIN TO PRIEST

Luigi Levi, who later became Father Redento, with childlike simplicity, often and willingly told us his vocation story this way:

One day, in 1909, I was on the street in Naples, my city, among many other ragged and starving urchins. Completely forsaken, unable to have what was being prepared in a restaurant, we were satisfied to savor at least the smells coming out of an iron grill on the sidewalk.

The Father happened to pass by. He stopped and tried to speak to us, but we swiftly ran away. With ineffable kindness, he repeatedly called us saying, “Don’t be afraid, I don’t want to harm you. Come, come. I’ll give you some candies.” Then, he put his hand in his pocket.

I, the most insolent, approached him. He embraced me, gave me candies, a small medal that I kissed, and some money.

My companions, who had been watching from afar, came closer and crowded around the Father. All received his gifts and some kind words. Soon, encouraged by his goodness, we became each one noisier than the other. The Father, with much patience and kindness, asked some questions about Christian doctrine. However, we were far more ignorant on this topic than on any other. Had he asked us about our mischiefs, we could have answered at great length. Mischief was the only thing we knew.

The Father asked us if we had parents. I said that I had no father or mother, only a sister. Then, the Father, putting his hand on my head, said to me, “What a dear son you are! Do you want to come with me to a beautiful Institute, where life is nice?” I said, “Will I eat well and make merry as I like?”

The Father answered, “You will eat well, dress well, keep clean; you will play, enjoy, study, learn a trade, play in the lyre and bugle as well as get Christian and civic education.”

“Then I’m willing to come!” I answered. “But where is this Institute?” “In Messina,” the Father answered.

“Oh, no! I won’t come to Messina: there is an earthquake there, and I’m afraid to die.”⁷³

The Father said, “We will just pass by Messina because you will go to Apulia where there are other boys that are very happy and are enjoying.”

“If it is so, I will come. Let us tell my sister.”

We went to my sister. She immediately answered that she liked it, but had no money for the travel and for clothes less tattered than those I was wearing. The Father reassured her that he would take care of everything.

Since I was barefoot, he bought me a pair of shoes, an outfit, and had me take a bath. Then, he got my personal data and gave some money to my sister before we left.

I felt awkward walking with shoes because I was not used to them. I wanted to take them off. I calmed down when the Father said that we would go to the train station with the coach. On the train, I was restless and impertinent, but the Father was patient with me.

I grew immediately fond of the Father, to the point that I cried when after some days of staying in Messina, I was told that I had to leave for Apulia accompanied by Father Palma because the Father had to remain in Messina. He assured me that he would come soon, and so I agreed.

During the travel, Father Palma tried to keep me quiet with short bits of Christian doctrine. No way! I pestered him with continuous and repeated mischief, to the point that on a detail of the Ten Commandments, he became distracted, and corrected me about the wrong item. I said to him without restraint, “You don’t know the Commandments yourself! Yet, you teach them to me?”

When I arrived at Francavilla Fontana, where the Orphanage was at that time, I became the amusement of the boys.

On the first day, during classes with the other Orphans, bored of keeping quiet, I suddenly jumped on the desk of the teacher and did a headstand while the teacher was explaining at the blackboard. You can just imagine the laughter of the boys!

Moreover, though my Assistant, Vizzari, didn’t let anything go scot-free, but always punished me heavily according to his system, I did not stop doing all kinds of mischief. I was the entertainment of my companions.

I used to say to justify myself, “The Father told me that I would enjoy in the Institute, and I cannot stop having fun.”

Aside from school, the young Luigi Levi was also allowed to study music. He excelled in both because he was intelligent and willing.

⁷³ Luigi Levi (1897-1949), whose religious name was *Redento* Levi, was from Naples. He entered the Congregation in January-February 1909 when he was 12. This fear of his is understandable since the earthquake happened just one or two months earlier.

While always retaining his lively nature, little by little, he became more refined, and he started to change, increasingly becoming a better and more loving boy. He was excellent, diligent, and simple as a dove.

He began to insist on the Father that he was willing to become a Religious because he wanted to go to the missions. After much delay, advising him to be kind and to pray more, the Father finally brought him to Oria and admitted him among the Aspirants.

When I saw him, I was cold and hesitant. The Father noticed and calling me aside; he wanted to know the reason. I said, “He is an urchin. I knew him when I was in Francavilla. Even Vizzari with his Spartan method couldn’t tame him, how can we, as Religious, form him with beautiful words? If we begin admitting this kind of person as Aspirants ...”

To this, the Father answered, “On the one hand I must say that I am pleased that you want only excellent persons as Aspirants and that you want to maintain a truly healthy atmosphere. This must be the interest of all. Otherwise, it is useless to keep the Aspirantate.”

“But on the other hand, I must tell you that, though you show goodwill, you are still like a boy lacking the ability for reflection and experience. You don’t know how much this boy has changed and improved recently! Besides, you have to remember that I am more concerned than you about admitting a young person to the Aspirantate. Therefore, if I admit him, it means that I am aware of his qualities. Certainly, only God knows the future, but if we are to judge humanly, it seems that this boy, always if it pleases the Lord, will succeed and become an excellent Rogationist.”

So I can say that the Father was a prophet!

The Father always had a particular tenderness for Luigi Levi. At his taking of the religious habit, wanting to remember his origin, the Father gave him the name *Redento*.⁷⁴

Brother Redento, after completing his military service, though he was a little bit above the age, the Father enjoined him with much confidence to study for the priesthood.

On his part, Father Redento always preserved boundless esteem and devotion for the Father. When he heard a Superior of the Sisters speak about the Father in a way he did not like, bravely and frankly he confronted her in public.

He used to tell the story that when the Father got him from the streets in Naples, there was a reckless young man who slapped the Father. The Father not only did not resent it but continued to love him.

Indeed, Father Redento, as the Father said, succeeded in being an excellent Rogationist, very much attached to the Congregation, industrious and exemplary in everything. He maintained that cheerful, simple, and pleasant character, and used it for a fruitful apostolate.

As a priest, he was very successful in teaching the boys, but he was unsurpassed in the ministry of confession because of his diligence, attention, and endurance. He could stay in the

⁷⁴ *Redento* means *the one who was redeemed*.

confessional the whole day and even for several consecutive days without any complaint or signs of fatigue.

He always longed for missions abroad until the eve of his death, when his departure for Argentina was already imminent. The Lord called him instead to a more satisfying and definite goal. He left this earth on November 4, 1949.

50. AN ORPHAN, A WOMAN, AND A DIFFICULT RECOVERY

After World War I, a letter from Monsignor Mazzella, Archbishop of Taranto, personally addressed to the Father, reached Oria.

Father Palma was absent because he was sick. I forwarded the letter to the Father in Messina. It was a request to shelter a fatherless orphan from Taranto.

The Archbishop wrote: The very zealous parish priest of a district of the city, where the practice of Christian life is very unsatisfactory, presented a very pitiful case to be helped. It is about a child, approximately seven years old, whose father was killed long ago out of jealousy. The mother, who is still quite young, lives a dissolute life. This poor child, the only son of the unfortunate woman, is alone amid the worst scum of Taranto. The child is intelligent, and, though very young, already understands the kind of life that the mother leads, and hates her.

The parish priest has tried in many ways to correct the woman and convince her to take care of her son, but it was useless. At last, she answered, "I can't change my life. If you want to take the boy away from the streets, you take care of putting him in an Institute."

I know well that your Reverence is the Father of the orphans and the abandoned: kindly accept this poor boy in one of your Institutes. I heartily beg you.

Upon receiving the letter, the Father answered the Archbishop immediately saying that he had forwarded his request to the Director of the Orphanage in Oria, whom he had recommended to immediately get in touch with the parish priest to ask for the boy's documents. The boy would be accepted as soon as there was an available place. When I received the letter from the Father, I asked for the documents, which arrived shortly.

At that time, however, there were very few places available and many requests for admission. In accepting the orphans then, I was following the general criteria given by the Father when the House had been opened: I gave preference to those orphans of both parents. Hence, after approximately two months, the orphan recommended by the Archbishop was still on the waiting list.

When the Father came to Oria, he asked me to report on this. When he heard that the boy had not yet been accepted, he remarked, "Is it possible that after all this time you were not able to get a little place? The case is serious, and we must try to remove the boy from the street where he lives amid many scandals."

I answered, "After I received your letter, only one place became vacant, and we filled it immediately with an orphan of both parents. There will be another vacant place soon, but there is

also another orphan of father and mother who lives with his very poor aunt with a large family, and she can't keep him anymore.”

“But I wrote you,” added the Father “to accept the boy immediately from Taranto because the case is very pitiful.”

“Yes, it's true,” I continued, “but you have said in the criteria for acceptance, that absolute preference must be for the poor and abandoned orphans of both parents. The boy from Taranto is orphaned only of a father and has the mother who is still very young, and you often object to accepting orphans who still have their mother.”⁷⁵

The Father said, “This poor boy is more than an orphan of both parents because the mother exists just to give scandal to him; and the gravest of scandals since it comes from his own mother. We must accept him immediately, giving him preference over any other. When it comes to the boy you mentioned who is with his much needy aunt, until we find a place for him, we can help him in the house of his aunt by sending that poor woman three or four hundred Liras a month. If with this financial help the aunt can maintain and educate him in the house, like in a family, it is better to leave him there because in itself the education in the family is preferable to that in the Institute. Let the boy from Taranto come immediately.”

I said, “Let us hope that he does not come to spoil our boys here. I have this fear. They say that he is a real rascal of the street, very intelligent, that he understands a lot despite his young age. The mother, they say, is a slut... by profession.”

The Father said, “Yes, we must be very vigilant regarding this. We have to warn him and instruct him well before placing him to live together with the boys. What do you think? That the poor and abandoned orphans that we accept are all Saints? This is a further reason to admit the boy immediately. While he is young, he can still be corrected easily; when he is grown up, it will be tough. Do whatever it takes to make him come while I am here. I will instruct him on how he has to behave in the Institute.”

After a few days, the boy was with us. He was accompanied by the same parish priest who gave a worse description of the unfortunate mother of the little boy.

The Father listened to the boy speaking and was amazed at how many things he knew about his father and his mother, whom he didn't call mother, but Rosetta the slut.

The Father instructed him very well. The child promised not to swear anymore, not to use the words he used with his bad companions and not to mention the situation of his father and his mother. What appeared as a wild boy beforehand, after the talk with the Father seemed like a boy on the way to a profound transformation.

The Father advised him to be good, to pray for his mother, to prepare himself for First Communion, and ended by giving him some holy cards and sugarcoated almonds. He told the boy that when he returned to Oria, he wanted to hear good news about him, so he could write to his mother and tell her that he was well and happy in the Institute.

⁷⁵ Cf. Chapters 2, 4, and 47.

The first days he had difficulty adjusting, so much so that the boy wanted to return to Taranto. Thank God, the Father was there. The boy often ran to the Father and wanted to stay with him. The Father succeeded in consoling him and persuading him to stay.

As soon as the initial period passed, the boy adjusted and was happy. He resolved to study and prepare for First Communion.

After approximately two months, the mother came to visit him. She was very young and attractive. From the way she behaved, it was evident that she was truly immoral.

Despite having attempted to instill in him feelings of respect for his mother, the boy felt almost repugnant at first to go to the parlor when he learned that she had come to visit him. However, exhorted to show himself as an affectionate and respectful boy, he went and was truly so tender, that the woman wiped tears from her eyes. Nature will always be nature.

The boy said that he was happy in the Institute, that there was the Father who was a saint who loved him very much. He was doing his best; he was studying and preparing for First Communion. In the Institute, he did not curse and say bad words anymore, and he prayed a lot. Then in an affectionate tone, he confided, "You know, mommy, when the Father Founder sees me, he tells me, 'You must be good, you must love Jesus, Our Lady, and your mother, and pray a lot for her.' He is truly a saint. Mommy, I would be so pleased if you could come when I make my First Communion on June 13, the feast of St. Anthony. Would you like to meet Father Founder? He is here for a few days."

The woman felt ashamed and answered, "And what shall I tell him?" The boy said, "What can you say? Recommend yourself to his prayers; thank him for loving me, for the beautiful holy cards and the candies that he gives me. It will be helpful for you to know a saint."

Moreover, turning to me, he said, "Can I call him?" I said, "Stay with your mother. I will call him."

"Willingly," the Father said. "I will go to greet her and try to say some good words to her after the boy leaves the parlor."

And so he did.

The Father spoke with her for quite a long time.

When the woman went away, she looked like a penitent Magdalene.

The Father looked at me and said, "Poor daughter! She has a good heart. Let us pray to the Lord to convert her."

After a few days, the woman wrote from Taranto, a lovely letter to her child. She told him that she would most probably move to Brindisi to be with her sister who desired it. She promised to come to Oria on the feast day of St. Anthony to attend his First Communion and asked him to pray for her.

On the feast of St. Anthony, she came from Brindisi together with her sister, and both received Holy Communion with the boy. They were so moved and were wiping their tears.

I don't know how to describe that beautiful moment, when, after Holy Communion, mother and son embraced each other! The sister beside me said, "Your saintly Father Founder has performed a true miracle with my sister. From the devil that she was, he has turned her into a saint, so much so that a wonderful young man, the owner of the store where she is employed, seems to be willing to marry her, despite knowing her past. No one else was able to convert her. For us in the family, it was a true pain in the heart. Now, with my sister, may I ask for a favor? We would like to have the boy with us for two or three days. He will be with his mother and with my good boys. I promise to bring him back to the Institute punctually on the day agreed upon."

I made an exception at that time, something I had never allowed before. The boy's mother was very grateful.

After two days the boy returned very happy and said to me, "How good my mother has become! She goes to Mass with my aunt and receives Communion every morning. In these two days, we received Communion together, also with my little cousins. In the evening, she says the Rosary at home, like we do here. The owner of the store, where she works, likes her very much."

The woman often came to see the boy and showed herself genuinely exemplary. After a few years, she got married to that fine young man who was financially well off, having in Brindisi a popular store of clothes, where she was employed. Both were very happy, and after a little while, they asked to bring the boy to their house.

We willingly agreed because, as the Father often said, when it is good, the family is the environment suited adequately for education. The Orphanage is always a substitute to be used as an extreme remedy.

The whole time that I was in Oria, the mother and the boy often wrote me beautiful letters saying that they were happy.

Upon receiving the news of the Father Founder's death, they wrote to me, "We write with eyes swollen with tears. A great Saint has died!"

51. A WISE DECISION TO SEND THEM BREAKFAST

Though he didn't know music, Father Palma was very enthusiastic and had a very sharp ear for it. The Father, however, though very good with words, was out of tune when it came to singing.

Once the Father said playfully to Father Palma, "To make a beautiful duet for the two of us, you write the poems, and I will be the singer!"⁷⁶

⁷⁶ The Father was completely out of tune in singing, while Father Palma was an administrator who did not have any particular skill in poetry or literature.

Father Palma was so sensitive to music, that when someone was out of tune, he would get so disturbed to the point that he couldn't continue what he was doing.

One morning in Oria, it happened that while Father Palma was celebrating the Community Mass, the singing was out of tune because the boys had not prepared well. He was so bothered that he could not continue the celebration, so he stopped the chanting. After the Mass, he punished the entire community having no breakfast. This happened two or three times.

Knowing the temperament of Father Palma, without saying anything to him, I sent breakfast to our students who were attending classes at the Diocesan Seminary and because usually, they returned very late for lunch. I did every time they were punished, and all the more when I realized that Father Palma had indirectly come to know what I was doing, though pretending that he did not.

When Father Vitale came to Oria and was informed about what I had done, he disapproved saying that I had acted wrongly, that I had been imprudent, and that I had practically contradicted the instructions of Father Palma, who was the legitimate superior.

At the proper time, I informed the Father about it, and he told me that what I did was right.

Then, Father Vitale, for his delicate conscience also reported the matter to the Father who, as soon as he heard it, analyzed the problem, "No, no, Father Vitale. In this case, Brother Carmelo not only did no wrong but acted properly. The punishment was wrong because, if it was necessary to punish, only those who sang out of tune should have been punished, and not all of them including those who don't know how to sing. What fault did these last ones have?"

The punishment was not even proportional because this can easily happen: one or two who are out of tune can drag the rest with them. Such a painful punishment is not to be given for something that can happen unintentionally, and especially to those who go to the Seminary and who will have to fast for a long time since they come back from school very late."

"Lastly, Brother Carmelo did not act against the will of Father Palma, but only against his involuntary temper. In fact, at the proper time, Brother Carmelo informed me about this incident and said that Father Palma, though pretending not to know and saying nothing, was aware that Brother Carmelo had sent breakfast to the Seminary. Therefore, he tacitly approved, or at least did not disapprove Brother Carmelo's action."

Father Vitale respectfully answered, "This is true, but the boys don't think. They have the impression that the act of the Superior was not obeyed, and the contrary was secretly done. This is not formative, but a bad example."

Turning to me who was listening to the conversation, the Father said, "Did the boys know that you had sent the breakfast secretly?" "No," I answered. Continuing, the Father concluded, "The boys may also have thought that the breakfast was sent with the approval of Father Palma. Indeed, when it comes to things favoring them, the boys will think more in their favor, in this case, about breakfast, than anything else."

52. CHILDISH THINGS AND EDUCATOR'S FINESSE

At the beginning at the House in Oria, and for some time after, Religious, Aspirants, and the little Orphans ate together in the same refectory. However, when they increased in number, the different groups were separated.

The Orphans were the first to be separated in their refectory and later on the Aspirants until every category had its own refectory.

I used to eat either with the Aspirants or, more often, with the Orphans.

One day, while I was at the table with the Orphans, the Father entered. At his appearance, there was a thunder of applause and shouts of joy.

The Father approached me and asked, "Are you eating here?" "Yes, Father," I replied. "That pleases me. Do you do it habitually?" "No," I answered. "Just now and then. I also eat in the refectory of the Aspirants.

"How do you feel in this situation?" "Very well," I answered.

Then, looking at the table, he noticed that the second course consisted only of potatoes, and very few at that. He turned to me and said, "Is this all? It's not enough."

"Unfortunately, it is so," I answered. "I don't know what our blessed cooks are thinking of. I was aware of this, and I have already sent some boys to get some cheese from the kitchen."

"Don't you give fruits to the boys?"

"They still have to serve it. Today we will have fennels."

"Treat the boys well. They are small; they have to grow. Make these beloved children happy and cheerful. What book are you reading during meals?"

"The life of Don Bosco."

"Read also that of Dominic Savio, but only a few minutes per meal, and then let the boys talk, but remind them not to speak too loudly and to behave politely."

While he went around talking affectionately with the boys, I finished my lunch. When he went out of the refectory, I followed him. He said, "I am pleased that you eat with the boys and eat what they eat. Do you find any difficulty?"

"No, not at all. I like it. Thank God, I am fine. I eat everything, and I don't have any particular needs. I have noticed that when an Assistant cannot take the same food as the boys, he would better go to the table of the Religious."

"For this reason," the Father added, "in some rules for the Sisters' Institute I wrote that the educator should not eat with the Orphans. The Sisters, in general, are uncomfortable eating with the girls, and then, they easily create for themselves special needs. I repeat, therefore, that I think it is advantageous to eat with the boys, for many reasons."

“First of all, because the educator⁷⁷ will easily be aware of the quality and quantity of the food and how it was prepared so that it is served on time.”

“Secondly, the boys are happier with what is given them because the educator is the first one who gives the example of eating it with them. The way the boys are treated is also the best promotion for the Institute.”

“Thirdly, it is an excellent means to cultivate a family spirit in the Orphanage. At the family’s table, there is no distinction between father, mother, sons, and all the relatives. They eat together at the same table and eat the same food, except in cases of sickness or particular needs.”

“This is one way of teaching good manners through practical observation because eating is an action which we have in common with animals. The action becomes human when it is regulated by sound reason.”

“Lastly, you must bear in mind that individual and especially community reproaches and punishments must be avoided in the refectory because they upset and disappoint.”

“Moreover, in a gentle way, we have to accustom the boys to consume everything, even though those who may feel a natural dislike for a certain type of food shall be given consideration. There can be cases of strong resistance to specific foods. Finally, it is not educational to punish the boys by forcing them to eat in the next meal the food he did not finish in a previous meal.”

“Instead, excess in the kitchen is not to be wasted. It would be an offense to the Divine Providence. The food is to be recooked properly again and consumed in the next meal.”

53. RESPECT FOR A BOY’S SECRET

In Oria, an Aspirant confided to me that he had committed a fault which I would not have known if not from him. I supposed that he did it because his confessor advised him. The boy showed repentance and willingness to amend, and later on confirmed this with facts, when he had an occasion to do it again.

I don’t know how, after some months, Father Palma came to know the fact, with the detail that had been confided to me.

At first, Father Palma just started asking me in general about the boy’s behavior. I answered that the boy was good. However, Father Palma insisted, saying, “Is there anything else?” “As far as I know, that’s all,” I answered. Also, he said, “How can you say that there is nothing when I know for certain that he has done such fault?”

⁷⁷ The term “educator” is more often used than “teacher” in many of the Rogationist literature that speaks of the topic of education. In Europe, the philosophy and practice of education are much broader than school education and instruction (thus, education includes also other activities such as work, crafts, recreation, theater, music and arts, prayer, meals, etc.), and the educational environment is applied in contexts other than the classroom (such as the workplace, playground, refectory, auditorium, garden, Church, etc.). On the other hand, the North American concept and practice of education are somewhat narrowed down to formal school education.

“If you know why are you asking me?”

“You don’t know?” he insisted.

“No.”

“How can you say no, when I know for certain that you knew it. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“If I knew it and I did not tell you, it means that it was told to me confidentially and therefore I could not reveal it. It was as if I didn’t know anything.”

At this point, in an assertive tone, he told me that I had to dismiss the boy immediately.

I answered that I did not feel like doing it. If he wanted to send the boy out, he had to do it himself because the boy had disclosed his fault to me in confidence; he had amended his ways, and I was aware that he had indeed corrected himself.

The Father was in the House, and Father Palma went to report the matter to him, saying that I had refused to obey his order.

The Father summoned me and asked me, in the presence of Father Palma, how things had gone. I told him all the circumstances. After having reflected, the Father said, “Since the matter developed this way, it seems that Brother Carmelo did no wrong. Father Palma, you are a brilliant person; you have studied morals well. You are an expert confessor, and therefore, you know how one must behave when dealing with confidentiality. In this case, the confidentiality, more than for natural reasons, is related to the fact that Brother Carmelo supposed that the fault was told to him upon the advice of the confessor.”

Father Palma tried to explain, “When I told him that I knew and I asked him if he was aware of it, he answered that he didn’t know anything!”

The Father continued, “By himself, the Brother didn’t know anything because he only came to know it when the boy told him confidentially. That means it was to be revealed to no one. So for the Brother, it was as if he didn’t know. When the truth is bound by confidentiality, it is not a lie to say that we do not know. However, since you have come to know the fault from non-confidential sources [*external forum*], you can act as you wish: dismiss him or not. However, when a person repents and gives proof of amendment, it seems wrong to dismiss him. But, I repeat, you shall act as you like, according to your conscience. We know, however, that if the boy is not sent out, we must supervise him carefully so that he may not fall again in the same error; this is to be done without bias and without letting the boy feel that he is carefully watched.”

Father Palma answered humbly, “You are right, Father. Frankly, I did not think about that.”

54. FAITH AND POETRY IN FRONT OF AN IMAGE OF THE VIRGIN MARY

A person who is not a real devotee of the Blessed Virgin cannot become a saint because he cannot love Jesus without loving his Most Holy Mother Mary with great tenderness, love, and fondness. Among the Saints, however, some excelled in an extraordinary way in their devotion

to this divine Mother, like St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure, St. Alphonsus de Liguori, and many others. They have been outstanding for their most tender love for Our Lady in their works, preaching, and writings in her honor.

Without danger of exaggerating, we can number our venerable Father among them. It is enough to take a simple look at the works he accomplished in honor of the Most Holy Virgin during his life, or to read some lines of his very many sermons or other writings in her honor, to see the extraordinary and sincere devotion he nourished toward her.

He wanted this devotion to be felt in his Institutes. He wrote, “The Congregation of the Rogationists of the Heart of Jesus shall have as its special glory the greatest devotion and fervor of love towards the great Mother of God, who is the main Patroness of the Congregation.”⁷⁸ He used all occasions and means to instill in the hearts of the Religious Brothers and Sisters, and also of the Orphans, the most tender devotion towards this great Mother of God.

To the Religious, he used to say that they would be degenerate sons of our Work if they were not in an exceptional way real devotees of the Most Holy Virgin Mary.

To the Aspirants, he repeated that the sure sign of their success was the special devotion to this divine Mother. If they did not have this devotion, there was nothing to hope for.

To the Orphans, he said that the Most Holy Virgin should be not only their celestial Mother, but also their earthly Mother as a substitute for the real one, and as such, they have to acknowledge, love and venerate her.

In this regard, the Father told us that he had in mind very often to have someone mold a magnificent statue of the Most Holy Virgin with the title of Mother or Our Lady of the Orphans, to put in all our Institutes and to spread her devotion under this name.

When it came to the Father’s devotion to the Most Holy Virgin, allow me to tell one of the many great, and creative episodes in connection with the inauguration of the beautiful image of the Most Holy Immaculate Virgin venerated in our Church in Oria.

The Father had told us about it several times to create in us a sense of anticipation. Finally, he said to us that he had ordered the statue and that it was due to arrive.

When it came, he let us see the crate, but not the statue, despite our excitement and desire to glance at it.

The Father said that before opening the crate and seeing the image, we had to make a triduum of preparation with prayers and songs. In those three days, he spoke to us several times, as he alone could, about the love and devotion toward the Most Holy Virgin.

Finally, the third day came. He had the Church prepared as for a feast, and he wanted the walls of the House covered with leaflets and banners cheering the Most Holy Immaculate Virgin with the most beautiful and expressive titles. He also prepared a kind of stretcher on which the sacred image was to be carried in procession.

⁷⁸ Rogationist Anthology, p. 84.

However, the night before, he summoned Brother Giuseppe and me and showed us where we had to transfer and hide the statue secretly. It was a long and utterly dark corridor in the basement of the House. The crate, now empty, was left in the same place where it had been during the three days, closed as it had come from the railway station.

The following morning, all dressed for the feast, we went with the Father who wore the surplice and stole for the blessing to the place where the crate was. What a disappointment it was when the container was opened and ... it was empty!

The Father then said, "The mystic dove has flown elsewhere. Let us go and find it! Perhaps it hid in some remote corner of the House." Thus, praying and singing, we went around the corridors, searching at all the premises and corners.

We also went around the paths of the small forest and the garden, always carrying the empty stretcher. We could not find it!

We returned to the House and tried again, even in the dark premises of the basement. Finally, in the dim light of the candles, we saw the statue at the end of the long corridor. The joy we experienced was indescribable; all of us were cheering: long live the Immaculate Mary!

The statue was taken and brought to the Church. After blessing it, the Father said appropriate remarks the way only he could, moving us to tears.

Then we had the procession, singing, and praying. We went through the whole House. We reached the terrace, then down the paths of the garden where some of us read the sermonettes prepared for the occasion. Finally, the statue was brought back to the Church and placed on a small temporary altar while waiting for the preparation of the proper niche.

If we consider these rites objectively, like many similar others performed by the Father, they seem to be somewhat artificial, sentimental, or even childish. However, you should have seen them in the interpretation of the Father. The rites were transformed into expressions of intimate, sincere, deep, and immense faith. They were external living signs of the burning love that consumed his heart with love and devotion for the Most Holy Virgin. Those rites moved us to tears and instilled fervor and affection for the Celestial Mother.

Those who had not seen and participated personally would hardly be able to imagine. That is why, in writing about the virtues of the Father, Father Vitale says, "Certain inner virtues of deeply devout persons are not always understood as they are in front of God, or, even when they are understood, it is difficult to describe them in human language. The spiritual perfection has certain shades that in the eyes of those who consider them superficially may appear as superfluous or trivial, or even scrupulous. They may look like inventions or resources that cannot commonly be explained at least immediately, and in which human judgment cannot always be invoked."

Don Orione,⁷⁹ who knew the Father intimately, used to say, “The virtue and spirituality of Canon Di Francia are so sublime that it is impossible to grasp them.” How will those who did not see and witness his actions and his devotions be able to understand them?

We learned later that the Father gave twenty-three more statues of that same image of the Immaculate as a gift, aside from those installed in male and female Institutes.

55. JESUS LOVES CHILDREN EVEN WHEN THEY SLEEP

The Father was very eager in wanting us to go to Church clean and well-dressed. For this reason, he authorized distinctive uniforms for Aspirants and Orphans, known as the uniform for Church. With more reason, he wanted the Religious to do it all the more. He could not bear to see the Religious come into the Church with the same cassocks they used in the House.⁸⁰ He used to say that the attire is a sign of respect and reverence for the House of God, and added, “We are so careful when we visit someone, a friend, a benefactor in their house, or even more when we visit a respectable person, like a Minister, a Bishop, the King, the Pope! Should we not have, therefore, more respect when we go to Church, the House of God, where Jesus is alive and real in the Tabernacle?”

One morning, in Oria, he celebrated Mass for the Community. He would start the Mass, recalling the main intentions for which it was offered, and making a fervent preparation for the Most Holy Communion.

While he was facing the people, he saw a little Orphan boy sleeping and the Assistant insistently trying to keep him awake, thus distracting the others.

He also noticed the boys coming to the altar from their pews to receive Holy Communion in order, one by one. The Father immediately corrected this, saying, “Don’t waste the time of the priest. Let those who want to come to Communion come together like a hungry crowd.” After the Mass, he sent for me in the sacristy and said, “After breakfast, come to my room. I have to talk to you.”

He noticed that I had worn-out shoes, so he called me back immediately, “If you come to Church this way, what kind of example are you giving to the community? How can you ask others to be properly dressed? Would you go in those shoes to the Bishop or the Pope? Is our Lord lesser than the Bishop or the Pope? Just this morning, I noticed that Mr. Pietro Palma was entering the Church without a tie. I told him gently that it wasn’t proper, and, thanking me for the reminder, he immediately went back to his room to sort it out. You should be the one giving a good example more than the others, but you go around like this!”

After breakfast, I went to his room. The Father said, “I called you to tell you, first of all, that this morning in the Church, I saw a child was sleeping, and the Assistant was trying to wake him up, to the point of distracting the others. Poor child! He should have been allowed to sleep! Our

⁷⁹ Cf. the footnote in Chapter 214.

⁸⁰ That is, the cassock used when doing chores or manual work inside the House.

Lord likes children even when they sleep! If the adorable Jesus at the last supper, allowed the youngest Apostle St. John, to recline his head on his chest, will He not, all the more allow this little child to sleep on his Divine Heart?" Then he asked me, "What time do the children wake up in the morning?"

When I told him that they woke up at 5:00 a.m. together with the others, he exclaimed, "This is inhuman! Sleeping is life, especially for children. They need at least nine to ten hours' sleep!" I said, "Father, what about the Mass?"

The Father said, "The little ones can even go without Mass. Maybe they can attend on Sundays, even though they're not yet required to, also because the Sunday Mass is not so early in the morning."

"But there are those," I continued. "who desire it."

"They can do it at the end of the Mass. For the smaller ones, you can reschedule dinner and let them go to bed earlier so they can have the regular sleeping hours required by their age."

"The next thing I have to tell you is: I don't like the orderly way they receive Communion. Coming out from their bench one by one falling in line to receive Communion is not good. Those who don't receive Communion will be noticed, and this is dangerous because it could compel some of them to receive Communion without the proper disposition. This can be avoided by letting them come to the altar in no particular order."

"For the same reason, it does not seem appropriate to let the Assistant stay where the boys can see that he is checking those who receive Communion and those who do not. It is your duty to be aware of the boys' attendance to the sacraments, educating them if it is needed but always without letting them notice it. We have to use the greatest prudence in this matter to grant the children the greatest freedom."

56. A BOOK ENTITLED *BADLY EDUCATED BOYS*

Once, the Father saw me holding a book entitled *Badly Educated Boys* written by F. Nicolaj, a magistrate. It was quite voluminous, but the style was simple, practical, and popular. It wasn't ideal, but there was material to learn. What was most surprising was the fact that such a man had poured out so much passion and patience into a field that wasn't connected with his profession.

The Father asked to take a look at the book. After a few days, he returned it saying, "I have read it, and I learned a lot from it. I noticed that the author thinks just like me about many things. It is evident that this magistrate has understood the importance of the educative mission, and gives an example, especially to those who have this vital mission but don't appreciate it. At times it happens with the words of an author, that education is the most excellent and difficult art entrusted merely to the most inexperienced people. We must confess that we don't have personnel fittingly prepared for this mission. This has been one of my biggest concerns and often the cause of suffering. Out of necessity, we had to be content with the goodwill and spirit of

charity of the person to whom we assigned our Orphans, trusting mostly in the Providence to make up for our lack of professional and systematic preparation.

Though I had a particular inclination for the field of education, I was not able to dedicate myself to it in a systematic way due to many circumstances. Out of necessity, I had to content myself only with giving general and practical norms according to the conditions, times, and places of pupils and educators, which at times form an organic whole, but others do not have a similar connection among them.”

The Father went on saying enthusiastically, “Given the nature of our Congregation, besides the Rogate, our mission is to keep and educate the poor orphans and children; hence, this mission of education. From this comes an obligation for the Congregation to form systematically trained personnel in the educational field, with regular titles, diplomas, and degrees in pedagogy as soon as it is possible.”

“To prepare ourselves well in this science or art, we have to keep in mind the excellence of education. It is the art of arts. As St. John Chrysostom puts it, education is the most excellent and difficult art. It has, as its object, man, the masterpiece of the Creator; and man who has to be formed. For this reason, it is said that pedagogy is the art of making a man because man will be what has been formed by the pedagogically prepared educator. The Creator has given life to the child but has entrusted to the educator the task of instilling, developing, and refining that same life, according to His adorable designs. We can say then that the educator continues the work of creation in the child. That is why a sound pedagogy has as its object not only human perfections but mainly the restoration of the divine image in man and the achievement of man’s ultimate goal. Consequently, the conditions of a pedagogical science must be faith and charity. Pedagogy without this lacks its soul.”

“When it comes to the education of orphans, I have to add that this requires greater science, faith, and charity because it is more difficult compared to the education of other children. First, because of the lack of affection and family environment, orphans are usually less disposed to education. Second, because an orphan's educator must supply all the parents’ obligations.”

“We cannot, therefore, be content with just a partial education of the boys. We have to take care of all of the physical, religious, moral, intellectual, social, and professional aspects. Because of this when it will be possible if the Lord wills it, we Rogationists must feel an obligation to have an excellent pedagogical preparation according to the sound scientific and religious principles, always following the Preventive System, updated according to the needs of the times.”⁸¹

⁸¹ When referring to the study of education, the term “Science/Sciences of Education” is used in Europe, and not “Education” as used in the United States. In Europe, the scope of education is considered much broader than school education, educational action is not solely instruction inside the school setting, and teacher training is not merely on didactics, teaching techniques and methods. Instead, education is seen as an inter-disciplinary approach that takes principles and insights from various fields (thus, the plural form, *Sciences of Education*), for example, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, theology, methodology, sociology, politics, etc. In the last paragraph of this Chapter, Father Hannibal aims at education that is not just the formation in knowledge (which he calls “partial education”), but the education of the whole person, in his/her multi-dimensionality.

57. THE BIG DONKEY MAKES MISTAKES AS WELL AS THE SMALL ONE . . .

While the Father and Father Palma were absent from Oria, a Health Committee came from Brindisi to inspect the House.

It was my first time to experience this, and I did not know its importance. I was suspicious. I did not answer the questions they asked, keeping quiet and reserved in such a way that the Committee did not get a good impression, and filed their complaints.

In the presence of the Father, Father Palma reprimanded me with insistence, recalling the mistake I made, which could have had dangerous consequences for the Community. He kept repeating and wondering how I could have committed such an error on a matter that was so easy and important.

Finally, the Father interrupted him, saying, “Enough, Father Palma. We understand. What do you want? Big donkeys make mistakes. Can’t the little ones make mistakes, too? I mean, at our age and with our experience we still make errors, and yet we want this 19-year-old fellow who still has no experience, not to commit mistakes? He did the best in his judgment. I am sure he did not intend to make mistakes. He would have been guilty if one of us was in the House and he would have acted by himself without consulting us. We can’t expect from someone more than what he can give. How difficult were some things yesterday, which seem so simple for us today?”

58. THE FIRST SCHOOL IN THE HOUSE OF ORIA

At the beginning of the school year 1909-1910, the Father took charge of the opening and organization of the classes in the House of Oria.

Before starting, the Father made a novena of special prayers and instructions about the importance of studies for Religious students, especially those whom the Lord had destined for the priesthood. He said that study, done with the right intention and out of obedience, is prayer. It is not only an excellent means for spiritual formation but also a requirement for spreading the Rogate through instruction, preaching, and printing. Furthermore, cultural formation enhances the prestige of the Congregation.

The school year was opened with a grand celebration in the Church on the first day.

The Father took care of looking for teachers and hiring them. Among others, he requested Canon Nacci, the Rector of the Seminary of Oria, who gladly accepted the invitation. Father Hannibal set a specific schedule for classes, study time, and house chores. In that situation, trying to find a balance among the various activities, he reduced the common prayers twice. He asked me to share any observations I had about the schedule. As for the spiritual reading, he asked me to give a signal, when it went beyond the allotted time, whether it was him or Father Palma reading.

He would often go to the classroom to see for himself the progress of the students. He would ask for information from the teachers; at times, he checked the homework.

Every day, except Sunday, during the time of the spiritual reading, all of us had to recite some of the answers in the catechism and some Bible passages that we had memorized.

In the holiday schedule, he also introduced a one-hour study of Fine Arts, saying, “We must also study music, drawing, painting, molding, calligraphy, etc. As of now, we do not have the teachers for these fine arts . . . However, in the meantime, have them start practicing to get them attracted to these subjects. Then, when Providence gives us the means, and it pleases the Lord, we will create, in this regard, a more organized school. It is also good to start immediately the study of foreign languages, which will be useful first of all for our Anthonian Secretariats⁸² (Anthonian Benefactors Office), and secondly to prepare for the missions abroad, to which we must continually aspire.”

59. POOR CHILDREN! IN WHOSE HANDS HAVE THEY FALLEN!

Somebody was crying desperately. It was a small Orphan in the toilet. The Father, who was in his room, ran immediately and found the poor boy smeared and shivering. While the Father was trying to console him, the Assistant of the group came with a jug of water to wash the boy and with some clean clothes.

“Give them to me,” the Father told him. “Don’t worry. I will clean him myself.”

The Assistant insisted on being the one to clean the boy, but in the end, he had to give in.

However, when the Father realized that the water was icy (we were in the middle of winter!), he rebuked the Assistant exclaiming, “Poor children, in whose hands have they fallen! This is not only uncharitable, but it is also inhuman.” Then he said to the Assistant, “If you don’t change, certainly you will not become a Rogationist.”

⁸² The “*Anthonian Secretariat*” (= *Segreteria Antoniana*) was the Office of each House tasked with keeping in touch with its benefactors and trying to find always new ones. Under the guidance and genial organization of Father Palma, the Anthonian Secretariats became one of the primary sources of income for all the Houses. Usually, they were staffed by the Daughters of Divine Zeal while the Rogationists provided the printed matters. This English Edition refers to the Anthonian Secretariat as “**Anthonian Benefactors Office**”.

The main aim of the Anthonian Benefactors Office is to ‘**propagate**’ the devotion to St. Anthony, especially in connection with St. Anthony’s Bread (cf. Chapter 156). This was done by looking for benefactors, organizing lists and records, keeping in touch with them through personalized (handwritten!) letters of request or thanksgiving, and later through the printed periodical ‘God and Neighbor’. Through these activities of reaching out to thousands of benefactors in Italy and abroad, especially among the Italian immigrants in the USA and Europe of the epoch, the Anthonian Orphanages of Father Hannibal Di Francia became well known. Thus, the Anthonian Benefactors Office is also called “*Propaganda Antoniana*” (= *Anthonian Propaganda*). *Propaganda* in Italian, akin to that in Latin, is related to the propagation, diffusion, or spread of information, cause or advocacy (for example, the Holy See’s *Propaganda Fidei* is the Office for the *Propagation of Faith* and the Evangelization of Peoples). In English, however, *Propaganda* has a negative connotation; that of spreading information designed to mislead or promote a bias on a particular political cause or point of view. Thus, this English Edition refers to the *Anthonian Propaganda* also as “**Anthonian Benefactors Office**” since both the Anthonian Secretariat and the Anthonian Propaganda are the same reality.

The Assistant was Brother Stanislaus, whose civil name was Angelindo Varotto.⁸³ After a few years, the Father dismissed him considering him unsuitable for our Institute.

After cleaning the child, the Father called me to illustrate to me that that way of dealing with the boys was inhuman. I said that in similar cases, I always gave orders to use warm water. However, the Father pointed out to me that it was not enough to provide instructions; it was also necessary to make sure that they are followed. He concluded, “It seems that you too are neglecting your task.”

60. DISCREET PRESENCE DURING THE NIGHT

When he was in Oria or passing by the House, the Father often used to pass through the dorms before retiring to bed. He did it more often during the winter nights. He would get up from the bed and pass through the various dormitories of the children: a discreet and paternal presence, tucking in the blankets, regulating the air and checking the position of the little ones.

One night, while the Father was passing near my bed, I woke up suddenly with a gesture of fear. He said, “Don’t be afraid,” he reassured me in a fatherly manner. “This is me; I am just checking if these dear children need anything. I noticed one of them breathing with difficulty. From checking his pulse, it seems that he has a fever. As soon as possible, have him checked by the doctor. By the way, how long has it been since these boys had their general medical check-up?”

I answered, “Actually, the boys are checked only when there is a need. We did not have a general check-up.” The Father said, “Oh, no! At least twice a year, all of them have to undergo a thorough individual medical check-up. This is important for their health and to prevent diseases.”

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61. WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO TO ROME FOR THE CANONIZATION OF ST. THERESE OF THE CHILD JESUS?”

The Father was in Oria a few days before the canonization of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, and he asked me if I wanted to go to Rome to attend the proclamation.⁸⁴

I thanked him for the kind thought, but I answered that on that day I was going to say a special prayer from Oria, and I was sure the Saint would accept it as if I were in St. Peter’s Basilica. The Father smiled and said, “Yes, it’s true that the value of prayer depends on the degree of faith and love in which it is done. However, you don’t need to be too pragmatic. Even casual things, such as the external manifestations, religious services, processions, visits to holy places, and sanctuaries can foster the spirit of prayer and devotion. This is the purpose of the

⁸³ Cf. Chapters 22 and 23.

⁸⁴ St. Therese of the Child Jesus (1873-1897) was beatified in 1923 and canonized in 1925. The Father, addressing her as *Sister Teresa of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face*, proclaimed her a *Celestial Daughter of Divine Zeal* in 1915 even though she had not yet been beatified.

liturgy, celebrations, and all external manifestations. You must have affection for these things, and let the boys become affectionate to them too.”

62. TWO PATIENTS LOCKED IN THE INFIRMARY

After World War I, cleanliness and hygiene, in general, left much to be desired. A boy with scabies was accepted in the Orphanage in Oria. We did not notice it, especially since the medical certificate from his town required for the acceptance was very recent. We realized it only when the contagion spread.

The doctor of the Institute found that, in addition to the newcomer, one of the grown-up boys was already infected. Both patients were isolated in a room where they slept and ate, with the doctor’s prohibition to leave the room and to go around the House.

Days passed, but they did not get better. The boys were bored, and it was no longer possible to keep them in the room. They started going around and often joined the other boys. Scolding or threat was useless.

When the doctor learned about this, he lost his temper and threatened that he was going to put on record that there were cases of infection in the Institute and send it to the Provincial Health Office, with all the consequences that might ensue. The doctor himself advised us to lock the two in the room.

I don’t know how I allowed myself to be convinced, but I locked them in the room, leaving the key hanging nearby on the wall. Only the nurse could get in to bring them food. From inside, the two inmates could ring a special bell in case they needed anything.

They ate the same food as the others in the Community. One day they were given a soup of unshelled broad beans (*fave*) with vegetables, and some fish soup as a second course. The beans were old and full of weevils, and worse, they were not even cooked. The grown-up boy ate some, but the little one, seeing those tiny insects, did not even want to taste it. He even refused the fish and ate only the bread with some fennels. He was crying and ringing the bell repeatedly, also because he wanted to go to the bathroom.

He kept ringing and ringing the bell, but no one could hear it because all were having recreation in the garden.

The Father had just arrived that day. Hearing the insistent sound of a bell, he came out of his room to check. Following the direction of the ringing, he went to the room and tried to open it. However, the door was locked. He shouted, “Who is inside? What are you doing there? Open up!” “We cannot open because the door is locked. The key is outside, hanging on the wall.” The Father got the key, opened the door, and saw everything.

He tasted the soup and the fish. He asked how long they had been locked in, how were they treated, if they were following the prescription of the doctor, how often did I go to visit them, did the older boy have the opportunity to receive Communion if he wanted?

Then he went to the kitchen, scolded the Sisters, especially for the soup prepared that way, which could also mean a lack of respect for the Providence. Since it was for sick people, it was inhuman to treat them that way. Those unshelled and uncooked beans were never to be served again.

He told them to prepare eggs and cheese because there was no meat, and include some fruit. He served the sick, to whom he said, "Dear children, you have to be patient. You have to remain in the room and not roam around because your companions will get your disease. Do you want all your companions to become sick like you?" "No, Father," they said. "Can you promise me that even though I leave the door unlocked, you will stay in the room and not go around the House?"

"Yes, Father."

Addressing the older one, he said, "I trust you. Be good."

Then he called me and stated what follows:

1. It was a grave imprudence to lock the room, a thing that you should never do with boys for any reason. Serious trouble can happen like jumping from the window, and so on. Then there are some boys who, just at the thought of being locked in, can be so shocked as to lose their mind, and no longer become aware of any danger. They have claustrophobia. However, regardless of everything else, it is inhuman. The incident that happened today, with the boy calling desperately and helplessly can lead to bitter thoughts.

I tried to apologize though he knew that I was wrong, putting the responsibility on the physician.

The Father said, "The doctor has partially something to do with the matter, but we are responsible. Yes, scabies is contagious, but only moderately. It is not a plague, like cholera, or a similar disease. Don't you know that after having been in hospitals for four years?"

2. Another fundamental thing that you must know: it is not prudent to put together two boys that way. With kindness put them in different rooms without locking the door. They promised that they would not roam around the House. Just watch them and from time to time have someone accompany them to the garden to get some fresh air and sun. Sunshine is the first therapy.

3. I saw the food that was brought to them. Is that the way you treat the sick? It's true that they did not have a stomach ache, but the very fact that they are locked up in a room, motionless and airless is almost more than sickness. How can they digest, particularly those unshelled and uncooked beans? You should give them pasta, meat, eggs, fish, and digestible and nutritious food. I told the kitchen that they shall not provide food like that to the Community and that they must be more diligent with the quality of the food, as well as with its preparation.

He continued, saying, "You must realize this also, especially for the sick. Don't look at the expenses. Had I not gone there, that little boy would have fasted. Certainly, you have eaten the same stuff. Did you complain to the kitchen?"

“Actually, no,” I replied.

“See? You have been negligent. You should know that, while the Religious on their part must learn to eat everything and be mortified, always thanking the Providence and never complaining, on the other hand, Superiors have the duty to ensure that Religious are well treated and have no reason to complain.”

“It also slipped my mind into telling you that you did not give the older boy the chance to receive Holy Communion.”

63. THE CORRECTION ROOM

Once I told the Father that the Regulations for the Aspirants and the Orphans in the House of Oria needed to be updated because they were still the regulation used in Messina before the earthquake.⁸⁵

He told me that we were the ones who should do it since we were closer to the boys and knew their needs and their environment.

He only suggested some general criteria and told us that after completing the rules, we should let him see them. We started the work and prepared the rules. The next time the Father came to Oria, we presented them to him. He began checking them making the necessary corrections, but seeing that it would take much time, he said, “In general, they are good. Put them into practice, and we’ll see if they work.”

And so we did.

For a long time, we would remind the Father to check the rules, and his reply was, “I don’t have time now. Remind me later.”

Finally, he said to me, “I think that I do not have the time here to do this work the way it should be done. It’s better to do it in Taormina, where there is more silence and recollection. When it is possible, I will call you there, and we hope, with the Lord’s grace, to do everything with calm and in the best possible way.”

One day, I received a letter inviting me to Taormina for the correction of the rules. So, I left everything and went there. Upon arriving in Messina, I learned that the Father was already in Taormina. I caught up with him there immediately, and I found him busy preparing the stage play to be performed in the afternoon on that same day.

He told me, “Soon the program will begin at the theater. You shall come also. I’ll tell the Sisters to inform you about the time. In the meantime, take a look at some of my notes about the Orphanages.”

⁸⁵ Cf. Chapter 38.

No one came to inform me about attending the program. Thus all my time was spent reading those notes. I didn't know where the small theater was, and even if I wanted to go, I was ashamed to go around the House alone.

After the program, the Father came to see me in the room where he had left me. He said, "I did not see you in the theater. Why didn't you come? It was nice, and they performed well. I said, "Nobody came to inform me, but it's all right." Also, the Father said, "Most probably in today's confusion, the Sisters didn't understand or forgot. However, you could have come nonetheless."

I said, "I don't even know where the theater is, and I was ashamed to go around the House alone. I have great respect for the Daughters of Divine Zeal, and I make myself available to help them as much as I can when there is an opportunity because they deserve it. But when I go to their Houses, I try to keep myself reserved as much as possible, to the point that some interpret my behavior as shyness, while others as arrogance. However, it is neither one nor the other: it's only respect for the Sisters."

The Father nodded, "I'm glad that you feel that way about the Sisters. Of course, when we go to their Houses we need to be cautious and prudent, but without exaggeration, otherwise, we can't help them properly, and this could be seen as a lack of respect."

"We have to consider the Daughters of Divine Zeal as dear Sisters in the Lord, as persons consecrated to God and as such we have to respect and honor them. We also have to consider them great benefactors of the male Institute and be grateful for them. They deserve it. First of all, the female Institute has the same purpose as the male in such a way that the good of one is the good of the other. Secondly, the Sisters deserve it due to justice, as they have always given themselves with great sacrifice to help the male Institute. Their contribution and work have given much to our progress."

"We can even say that they are our Marthas. They have provided and continue to provide the male Institute in Messina and Oria with bread, clothing, and whatever is needed for the material life. They manage the Anthonian Benefactors Office, which is the only means of life and material subsistence for our two Houses."

"So you can imagine my disappointment when I noticed in Oria, just before the war, that some of you do not trust and are ungrateful to the Sisters."

"You were also involved then; thus, I had to scold you. Thank God, now you have changed your attitude and live in holy harmony with the Sisters, even though, from time to time, the demon, the sower of discord never ceases to put his hand on this."

"Today, we cannot do anything about the rules. Tomorrow, God willing, we hope to begin the revision."

The next morning, he called me to start the work. The first question he asked me was whether I had read the notes about the Orphanages. I answered that I had, but very quickly because there wasn't enough time.

“Of course,” I added, “when they will be finalized, arranged, and properly printed they will be vital. I spent some time on the list of punishments that you placed at the end. From that list, it seems that you are in favor of punishments, while, having been in the Institute for about 15 years,⁸⁶ I do not remember seeing you giving such punishments. On the contrary, when I or others give punishments, not only do you dislike it, but you always complain and reproach us. Especially the punishment *Correction Room* that could be understood more clearly as a *cell* or a *prison*. I remember that you always disapproved of that cell. I remember how bad you felt and were horrified in Francavilla Fontana when you learned that Vizzari was using that system of punishment, and had imprisoned an Orphan who later was the spark that ignited that terrible persecution. Even the boys at that time testified for the record that you did not want the use of those punishments and that Vizzari was doing it secretly.”

“I can still remember when in Oria, several years ago, in order to know what I thought about the use of the prison cell, you said that in the House we needed a room to be used as a prison; and how happy you were and praised me when you realized that I was totally opposed to it.”

“I also remember after the war, the case of an Orphan from Reggio Calabria, a certain Calabrò, who had a bad influence on the other boys, and was trying to convince them to leave the Institute. You told me to separate him from the Community, to place him in an unlocked room, and let him eat and sleep there until he would correct himself.”

At this point, the Father interrupted me saying, “That’s what I mean by correction or separation room. In the meantime, let us start to revise the rules. We will talk about punishments and discipline when we come to the articles that deal with them.”

We had just started to work on the rules when a Sister came in to tell the Father that Mother General was calling him on the phone from Messina. When he came back, the Father said, “I have to go back to Messina for an urgent matter. Let's see if we can continue the work there.”

When we arrived in Messina, we were not able to do anything for two days because the Father was always busy. When I saw that it was hopeless to wait for a time to continue our revision, I told him that in Oria I had left both my classes and those of the Aspirants, and therefore it would be better for me to go back and postpone the editing of the rules to another time. The Father agreed, and so I left.

64. THE FIRST FEAST OF JULY 1ST IN ORIA

July 1st was going to be celebrated for the first time in Oria. The Father gave the candidates the usual sermonettes and hymns to be recited and sung. He gave the anthem of the Blessed Virgin to the Aspirant Giuseppe Drago (later on he became Brother Mansueto) so that he could memorize it. However, we agreed among ourselves not to memorize the hymn of the Blessed Virgin to force the Father to declaim it so we could enjoy his words.

⁸⁶ Father Carmelo Drago entered the Congregation in 1908. Therefore, the revision of the Regulations for Aspirants and Orphans mentioned here and in the Chapters 46-47, was carried out in 1923.

The Father came to Oria the day before the feast, and he wanted to check the preparation of sermonettes and hymns. When he found out that Giuseppe Drago had not memorized a single verse, the Father rebuked not only him but also me because I had not taken care of it. So he said that I should be the one to recite it. However, I replied that I couldn't learn it even in a week. The Father replied, "And what shall we do since all has been prepared for tomorrow?" Shyly and timidly I said, "Can't you be the one?" The Father reacted, "Thank you for the compliment. Nice! I wrote the poem, and I have to recite it?" However, since there was no choice, he had to take it upon himself.

The clergy and the Seminary, the 'Gentlemen of the Mission', and other dignitaries and friends of the Institute had been invited for the feast. The hymns had been printed, and copies were distributed to all the guests.

The marvel of it all was to see how the Father, in declaiming the hymn, often changed and added entire verses. This aroused so much admiration that even the local press mentioned it.

65. THANKS TO THE DIVINE PROVIDENCE

One evening in Oria, the Father entered the refectory when dinner was almost over, and, he asked Brother Stanislaus what he had eaten. The Brother, in a discontented tone, almost of contempt, muttered, "A little maize porridge (*polenta*) and two prickly pears."

The Father rebuked him for the way he answered, and said, "Give thanks to the Divine Providence. Many poor people can't even have a piece of bread."

Later, however, he called Father Palma, Brother Giuseppe Antonio, and me to his room, and pointed out to us that this wasn't the way to treat the Community.

He said, "I scolded Brother Stanislaus for the manner he expressed himself. But what do you expect? He's still a boy, and you can't expect a state of perfection higher than his age. However, this is not the way to treat the Community. The boys are in the process of developing, and they need good nutrition, especially since they are also studying. The effects of the lack of nutrition will be seen later. We must trust in the Providence, and treat the boys properly. For lunch and dinner, aside from bread and soup as much as they want, we must give them the main course with vegetables, if possible give even fruits because it is good for the boys."

The Father wanted and demanded that his Religious should love and practice the spirit of mortification and penance, even bodily penance. He believed that an Aspirant who would show unnecessary pretenses and complaints because of deprivation was lacking in a religious spirit. However, he was also concerned that Superiors and those responsible make sure the Community did not lack what was needed. When it came to treating people, the Father wanted them to be generous without violating holy poverty.

I remember one day in the refectory, noticing that the main course of the Community was too much, he said, "With these blessed Sisters you never know what to do. If we tell them that the food is too much, they will give you only the bottom of the plate. If you say that it is too

little, they will make it a full plate! So it is better not to tell the Sisters that the food is too much. It is a lesser evil to lose some money than health.”

The Father used to say that we must have more than maternal care when dealing with the Orphans because, in them, we had to see the person of Our Lord. In this, the Father seemed exaggerated. Theoretically, at times he said and wrote not to let the Orphans get used to sweets or similar things, but to treat them in a manner appropriate to their condition and state. In practice, however, the Father cared for them in a way that was more than maternal, and he was happy when, in any way, he could please or satisfy the boys.

66. RESPECT FOR LAWS

Brother Giuseppe was tasked to ship the machine for the printing press from Messina to Oria. Among the crates of the machine, he included one filled with salt. As soon as the Father heard about this, he sent a telegram of reproach from Oria.

When the Father told me about it, I said, “What wrong did he do?” The Father reacted, “You ask what wrong he has done? Don’t you know that salt is a government monopoly in continental Italy? It is free in Sicily, but not in the rest of Italy.” I said, “Brother Giuseppe did well. In Sicily, there is so much salt that it is thrown away!”

The Father replied, “What kind of reasoning is this? There is a law prohibiting the export of salt from Sicily. The government has the right to make just laws, and the citizens must obey them. The laws establishing the monopoly are correct because the government has to obtain the means to cover all the necessary expenses of the nation. I repeat! I don’t like your reasoning. Laws are laws, and they must be obeyed without making a distinction if they are criminal laws, or if they are grave or light. We have to form the consciences of our students this way.”

67. PRICKLY PEARS AND PAINS OF A PEASANT

Brother Giuseppe Antonio was telling us about one of the peasants working in our garden in Oria, how the man, when caught stealing some prickly pears, hid them under his shirt, with all their sharp, tiny spines.

The Father, becoming serious, exclaimed, “Poor man! This means that you have scared the peasants about getting produce from our garden. It’s not fair. It is not charitable to forbid them to get what they cultivate. They have more rights than us! Today, gather all the workers in the garden and tell them that they can freely eat what they have produced. However, if they want to bring any home, they have to ask permission. And when they ask, you have to be generous in granting it.”

I observed, “What they grow in the garden will not be enough even for them! Besides, we also give them a daily wage.”

The Father continued, “It is obvious that you are still young and you don’t fully understand the ways of life. I tell you, whether they are paid or not, they must be free to eat the fruits from

the garden. Besides, are you paying them a big amount? We have to be generous, not only to rely on mere justice but to use charity, especially with those who work with us. They are to be treated not as servants but as our collaborators.”

68. PRAY, TRUST AND USE ALL MEANS

Some Capuchins from Francavilla Fontana were obsessed with making strange reforms in the Order. After having used all means to correct them, their Superiors were forced to dismiss them from the Order the two most stubborn members: Father Gerardo and Father Tommaso.

The Father, who knew them well, did all he could to make them repent, but did not succeed, so they remained separated from the Order. However, he did not abandon them but continued to persuade them to, at least, become part of the diocesan clergy. This is why he thought of taking them temporarily as guests in our House in Oria.

Before they came, the Father told me briefly their story, and added, “They are two good Fathers, although they are a bit misled and obsessed about their ideas. However, we must not abandon them. They will be our guests for a while, hoping that they will repent and transfer to the secular clergy. We have to pray a lot, trust in the Divine Grace, and use all possible means. It would be a pity to lose them. If much is done to have a priest, much more is to be done not to lose him. This, too, is part of our specific mission, to pray and work for the preservation and sanctification of the clergy.”

The two former Religious came to our House. The Father welcomed them with gracious charity. He obtained for them the habit as secular priests, provided for all their needs, and personally served them in a separate room with the attention that only love can suggest.

The Father told me to pray in the Community, special novenas to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph so that they would reform. He said the Holy Mass for this purpose, and most probably, among other penances, he also held some vigils. During the day, he often stayed with them and talked personally to them in his room and the Church.

They remained with us for ten days. For Father Tommaso, the one more balanced, the Father obtained from Msgr. Di Tommaso the incardination to the Diocese of Oria. Nothing, however, could be done for Father Gerardo, who was eccentric and showed a totally weird mysticism. After several years, we learned that the unfortunate man had fallen into the hands of the Holy Office, after trying to establish a kind of female Congregation in Francavilla Fontana. He was reduced to the lay state and excommunicated. Despite all this, the Father continued to pray for him, and one day he said to me, “In cases like this, don’t be discouraged or stop praying. Keep trying everything possible to bring back on the right path those who, unfortunately, have abandoned it. Keep in mind how much Our Lord did for Judas.”

69. BREAD AND TOMATOES

One morning I was walking with the Father through the paths of the garden in Oria when we met a worker who was having his breakfast with bread and tomatoes. The Father asked him, “Is this all you have for breakfast?” The worker said, “This is what the Institute gives us.”

“Would you like some coffee?”

“It would be so nice, *papa*⁸⁷ Hannibal.”

The Father turned to me and said, “The men who are working in the garden must be given coffee every morning.” I said, “Father, what are the workers going to do with the coffee? In the morning they are used to eating bread and onions, or bread with olives or tomatoes or lettuce . . . like what we eat in the morning.”

The Father insisted, “I said, you have to give coffee for breakfast to the people who work in the garden.”

I gave them coffee, but after a few days, they said to me, “Enough of this thin broth which makes us weaker! It is better to go back to the previous menu.”

I told the Father, and he said that instead of coffee, I should give them cheese. Then he asked me how much their daily wage was. When he found out, he added, “It is meager pay.” I said, “Father, they are old men and produce very little.” “Nevertheless, you shall not take advantage of that. Don’t old people have to live like the rest of us? We should show greater charity to them and reward them because, despite their age, they still strive to work.”

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70. ASSIST THEM WITH CARE AND KINDNESS

In August 1911, the Father accompanied a group of very young men to our Church in Oria. We called them *Montemurrini* because they came from a Congregation founded by the pious priest Father Eustachio Montemurro.⁸⁸ The Congregation had been suppressed, and so that the boys may not get lost, the Father took them under his protection. He hoped in the future the

⁸⁷ In the dialect of Oria, *papa* means ‘Father’ and is used for priests.

⁸⁸ Servant of God Father Eustachio Montemurro (1857-1923) was from Gravina of Apulia. He was a medical surgeon who at the age of 45 asked the Bishop to admit him to the Seminary and was ordained priest two years later. He founded two Religious Congregations: the Little Brothers of the Blessed Sacrament for men; and the Daughters of the Sacred Side (Sacro Costato) for women. For certain circumstances, the local ecclesiastical authority ordered him to cease the direction of the two Congregations, which he obeyed faithfully. The Bishops entrusted the care of the seminarians and the sisters of his Congregations to St. Hannibal, a friend and staunch defender of Montemurro. In 1911, the Holy See upheld the suppression of the male Congregation, while Pope Pius X permitted the female Congregation to continue. In 1912, the seminarians of Montemurro (*Montemurrini*) were integrated into the Rogationist Congregation. As for the Daughters of the Sacred Side, St. Hannibal accompanied and guided it until 1926, practically until his death. For the details of ordeals surrounding Montemurro and the Congregations he founded, cf. the footnote of Letter no. 119 in *The Father’s Letters*, pp. 366-370. There is a rich correspondence between Father Hannibal and the Superiors of the Daughters of the Sacred Side and the Bishops who had jurisdiction over the Houses of this Congregation (cf. *The Father’s Letters*).

In 1992, the cause of the canonization of Father Montemurro was submitted to the Holy See.

reestablishment of the Congregation, and he would have given the boys back to Father Montemurro. That is why the Father considered it inappropriate to mix them with our Aspirants. He kept them as a separate group, with one of them as Assistant.

Most of the boys were good, but the Assistant left much to be desired in terms of spirit and discipline. Unfortunately, this affected the whole group. The Father called me and said, “That Assistant of the *Montemurrini* is not good. I have decided to put you in that group. Our candidates shall be entrusted to Brother Pasquale, under the leadership of Brother Giuseppe. Take care of them, they are good. Treat them with kindness because they are still disoriented, and do not persuade them to become our Aspirants. Leave it to the Lord because we don’t know what will happen to the Congregation of Father Montemurro. Let us hope that it will be restored.

71. IT IS BEAUTIFUL...VERY BEAUTIFUL!

In the small internal chapel of the House of Oria, there was an image of the Divine Shepherdess. Its colors were so faded that it had almost lost its features. The Father entrusted it to a painter from Taranto, a certain Mrs. Basile to do the restoration.⁸⁹

When the painter brought it back, the Father, before showing it and exposing it in the chapel, to foster our fervor, told us the story and the devotion with which we have to venerate the Virgin Mary under this title.

When he uncovered the picture, he said, “Look how beautiful it is! Shout: Long live the Divine Shepherdess! Look how beautiful it is; very beautiful!”

Seeing in my eyes, that I was indifferent, he said, “Brother Carmelo, look how beautiful it is.”

I had the imprudence to respond publicly to him, “I don’t like it at all.”

At this, the Father turned serious and said, “What are you saying? I can see that you don’t understand. She is beautiful, indeed, very beautiful. Say with me: It is beautiful! It is very beautiful.” Confused and ashamed, I repeated, “It is beautiful, very beautiful!” The Father continued, “We all say that it is beautiful. You are the only one who says you don’t like it. Are you the only artist here?”

Then he called me aside and told me, “You have truly been unwise to say in front of the boys that you don’t like the image. I really expected more from you. I don’t like that I had to reprimand you in front of the boys because if they are not told that a sacred image is beautiful, they will not have even the feeling of addressing a prayer to it. I want the sacred images to be beautiful, in a way that expresses somehow the spiritual beauty of those whom they represent. For me, the beauty of a sacred image is not in the preciousness of the material from which it is

⁸⁹ Teresa Basile had several paintings commissioned by Father Hannibal. She lived in poverty, and that was enough for the Father to give her preferential treatment, more than her artistry. The Father granted her a monthly allowance, as well as a generous amount for each painting. When she died in 1920, the Father continued to support her daughter. Cf. *The Father’s Letters*.

made, nor in mere artistic value, but in the expression by which it inspires devotion. When a sacred image does not inspire devotion, don't expose it."

"This is not to say that you should not consider the importance of art. Indeed, we must cultivate an aesthetic sense in the boys from their adolescence. What is beautiful is always beautiful and ennobles the heart. It is a reflection of the beauty of God, the beauty of grace! In our Institute, whenever possible, we shall cultivate the fine arts."

72. AN OLD MAN IN THE HOUSE OF ORIA

For many years, in our House in Oria, there was a dear old man, a manservant, whose name was Giacomo Bontempo.

He was outstanding and pious, an untiring worker very much attached to the Institute. He attracted the sympathy of all in the House. The Father had exceptional attention to him. Every time he arrived in Oria, one of his first thoughts was to ask about him and visit him.

Once, when the Father was in Oria, the old man fell ill. The Father went to see him often, sometimes, even at night, just in case he might need something. One day, having gone to him in the afternoon, the Father noticed that the plates used for lunch were still on the bedside table. From the leftovers, he also noticed that the food was not suitable for a sick person.

The old man, to excuse us, tried to let the Father understand that we were taking good care of him and that the food was good for him.

However, the Father called me and scolded me because he realized that Giacomo was not being given the proper care.

"Look! The plates used have been here for some time. They are just drawing flies. Pasta with vegetables and cheese, as the main dish, are good for those who are healthy, but not for the sick. We should give them soup with tiny pasta, meat, fresh eggs, fruit, and for an old man like him, a little bit of wine although you have to follow the doctor's prescription even for the food."

"You have to take the utmost care of the sick without any distinction. You should treat the last person in the House as you treat the Fathers. In the Institute, when it comes to the sick, there is neither first nor last. I have said it many times: when it comes to the sick do not be afraid of spending money on what is necessary."

"The one assigned to take care of the sick must be trained well to assist them. These tasks must be entrusted to intelligent and sympathetic people. And then you have to guide and follow them up."

When the old man needed a cane, the Father himself took care of buying a very nice one for him.

73. THE ORPHAN WHO USED TO WET HIS BED

A little Orphan in Oria wasn't aware when he needed to pee at night and by day. This annoyed his companions, especially the Assistants because they had to take care of cleaning him.

To cure him, Brother Giuseppe and Brother Pasquale could not find a better way than to reprimand and impose painful punishments. Poor boy, he was truly pitiful! Several times, I pointed out that their approach wasn't respectful, and besides, it was contrary to the sentiments of the Father. I was told to mind my own business. In the meantime, the child was becoming increasingly sad. I said to them that I would report the situation to the Father when he came to Oria. The Father arrived that very evening from Messina and, after dinner, notwithstanding the inconvenient timing, I told him everything.

Exceedingly displeased, the Father exclaimed, "Poor child! In whose hands has he fallen! Why didn't you inform me earlier? You should have written to me wherever I was. Did you tell Father Palma?"

"No. Because, as you know, he too has been absent for a long time."

"Had you written to me, I would have come even just for that. I didn't think that you were so irresponsible. It is the work of the mute devil, as it happened in Francavilla. Would you like to have the same problems that we had in that House? Is this the spirit of charity or religious spirit? Send Brother Pasquale to my room. "

"Father," I said, "at this time he might already be in bed."

"Wake him up." (Ordinarily, the Father did not like to scold anybody late at night or before meals).

After some time, Brother Pasquale came to see me in the dorm, terrified. He told me about the scolding he had received. The Father had even threatened to remove his religious habit and send him out of the Congregation.

Then it was the turn of Brother Giuseppe. The scolding he received could be heard from the corridor.

The next morning Brother Giuseppe asked me who reported to the Father the punishments that they gave to the Orphan. The Father was very displeased to the point of threatening to send him away from the Congregation. I replied that I was the one who informed the Father and that he had harshly rebuked me for not doing it earlier.

Then the Father confided to me the reproaches he had made to the two Brothers and said, "I don't know how to put into your minds that I am totally against punishment, especially painful ones."

About punishments, I don't remember the Father punishing anyone throughout the eighteen years that I was with him. When he had no choice, he used moral punishment and wanted others to do the same. He suffered a lot when he noticed that some of us would act differently. In these cases, he disapproved and scolded firmly. For this reason, I, too, had been called by him several times.

What cannot be explained, when it came to punishment, is that theoretically the Father admitted and spoke and wrote about them in a way which seemed very strict, but in practice, as I mentioned above, he never punished. He was always opposed to punishment, especially physical ones.

Only once, I remember, about a boy that was unbearable and harmful to the others, the Father ordered me to keep the boy separated from his companions until he reformed. The separation consisted only of not letting him join the others during community activities.

74. THE SICKNESS IS IN THE FEET, NOT IN THE STOMACH

Brother Serafino, who later became Father Santoro, had sores on his feet, caused by sweating, that kept him in bed with a high fever.

The boy assigned to assist him brought him a soup of pasta with beans for lunch.

At that moment, the Father happened to be beside him. He called the boy and ordered him to bring the meal back to the kitchen and then summoned me.

The Father scolded me because I had not given the kitchen proper instructions on how to prepare food for the sick. I told him I was not worried about the food because there was nothing wrong with the Brother's stomach. The fever was due to the sores on his feet.

The Father said, "What kind of reasoning is this? You don't understand anything about illness and how to treat and assist the sick! This is really too much. I will get you some books that deal with these things. Knowledge in this matter is fundamental, especially in the communities. In this regard, I should invite some doctors to give special courses on the care of the sick and the hygiene needed to remain healthy and prevent many diseases."

75. WHY DON'T YOU TAKE YOUR BREAKFAST?"

One morning, during Lent, the Father noticed that I wasn't eating breakfast. He asked me, "Why are you not taking your breakfast?" I said, "Because I am now obliged to fast. I am already 21!"⁹⁰

"No, you cannot fast because you are frail, and you are assigned to the care of the boys, day and night. This task, if properly done, will wear out even your health. I replied, "It seems like being an Assistant is like the farmer tilling and hoeing the ground."

The Father added, "I told you that if the task of assisting the boys is done as it should be done, the work is as heavy as tilling and hoeing. To always be with the boys, to make one's self like one of them and following them in everything so that they will not get hurt or make mistakes, and to educate them physically, morally, religiously, intellectually, and civilly: all these tasks are very demanding."

"The Assistant, especially of the Orphans, must have a maternal concern for the boys, letting them get affectionate with him, without letting discipline become a burden."

⁹⁰ Cf. the footnote in Chapter 48.

“The most difficult, but at the same time most effective in the art of education, is not so much to encourage young people to do a certain thing but to persuade them to be willing to do it.”

“If the Assistant does not have full control of his temper and nerves, he becomes oppressive for the boys while they become a cross for him. If mothers can exhaust themselves caring properly for two or three children, the more this can happen to an Assistant who takes care of so many boys?”

76. PRACTICES OF PIETY AND SLOTH

For a few months, I was transferred to Messina to replace Brother Luigi as Assistant of the Orphans who, unfortunately, left much to be desired in discipline and even more in the practices of piety. When he was in Messina, the Father was personally aware of this and tried in every way, with instructions, exhortations, and prizes to improve them. He realized, however, that the boys were not profiting as expected.

One day he said, “I am distraught regarding the apathy of these boys, especially in matters of religion. I don’t know if it is worth it to allow them to attend the Holy Mass and to receive the Holy Communion once a week. What do you think?”

I replied, “Frankly, I would give them the freedom to attend both the Holy Mass and receive the Holy Communion. I would offer them the chance of going to Mass every day.”

“You are right,” the Father said. “Besides, in our printed materials, we say that the Orphans offer their daily prayers, Holy Mass and Holy Communion for their benefactors. Also, some of these boys pray well and are behaved in Church.”

So the boys were left free, and after a couple of weeks, all the boys were freely attending Mass and receiving Communion more frequently.

77. REPRIMANDS AND PUNISHMENT ARE LIKE SURGICAL OPERATIONS

After a few months, Brother Luigi returned to Messina and resumed his task as Assistant of the Orphans. I had to remain a few more days there, waiting to have my check-up for the military draft.

One evening, while the Orphans were reciting the Rosary in the chapel, there was a boy who was not responding to the prayers and also disturbing his companions nearby. Seeing this, Brother Luigi went to scold him and slapped him. The boy was so angry that, instead of responding to the prayers appropriately, he used the tone of the prayers to curse the Assistant. Since I was behind the boy, I shook and scolded him. He reacted with a gesture of defiance.

The Father, who was at the back of the chapel praying, saw the gesture. When we left the chapel, he asked me for an explanation, and I told him everything. At once, he said, “Tell Brother Luigi to send the boy to my room. I want to talk to him. How is this boy?”

“He is good, but when he is hurt, he loses his temper and seems unaware of what he says and does,” I replied. Also, the Father, “But if you know that he is like this, yet he is good, why

don't you handle him from his positive side?" Then he remarked, "You must realize that reproaches, and much more, punishments, are like surgical operations. Before starting a procedure, the doctor checks whether the surgery is really necessary. And, if he deems so, in order not to send the patient easily to the nether world, before the surgery, the doctor takes all the necessary precautions. He checks the heart, the blood pressure, and whatever else prudence suggests. The educator must do the same before reprimanding, and even more, before punishing. First, we must check the extent of the fault; then we have to determine if correction is absolutely necessary. If we think that it is needed, we have to adjust it to the character, temperament and individual susceptibility, and follow every rule of prudence, so that the correction may be effective and not useless, or worse, harmful."

"Sometimes a reproach and, worse, a wrong punishment, instead of producing good, generates a completely opposite effect. In fact, what did Brother Luigi gain by slapping the boy in the chapel? Moreover, if hands⁹¹ are never to be used on the boys, the more this should never happen in the Church. It was an occasion of general distraction, and the boy instead of praying, as Brother Luigi wanted, ended up cursing him, which was a scandal for his companions."

"You were right in telling him to stop, but not in sharply shaking him. Knowing his character, you should have acted gently. Had Brother Luigi warned him politely instead of slapping him, the boy wouldn't have cursed him instead of praying. Had he continued to harass his neighbors, he could have been sent out of the chapel. Likewise, had you politely warned him to stop, the boy would have stopped without reacting."

"Finally, since we are dealing with the practices of piety, we have to avoid imposing it. By motivating the boys to love and understand their beauty, their usefulness, and the necessity for eternal salvation, the boys will end up desiring them. It is known that even the holiest act of religion, is an act of religion when it is done voluntarily. Is there anything more beautiful and holier than the Most Holy Communion and Confession? However, if they are practiced because they are imposed, they can be fruitless and even sacrilegious when the essential dispositions are not present!"

78. WHEN THE CLOTH . . . MAKES THE MONK

I was in a dorm, and some boys were helping me move and arrange the beds. Upon seeing me, the Father said, "These tasks are to be done using an apron, out of cleanliness and respect for the religious habit. Isn't this the cassock you use when you go out of the House?" "Yes," I replied. "This is not proper." The Father continued, "Inside the House, you can use an old one, provided it is clean and still decent. However, when you go out, you have to wear a better one, to look presentable in public. We don't even let our boys wear the same outfit inside and outside the House. Do people inside their houses dress the way they do when they are out in the streets?"

I said, "Ordinarily, I have to go outside the House several times a day, so do I have to change every time?"

⁹¹ 'Hands' here stands for corporal punishments, like slaps, punches, smacks, etc.

The Father replied, “Does it matter so much? It can also be an exercise of poverty. Common people do it for economic reasons; should we not do it out of love for holy poverty? Besides, the cassock you ordinarily use inside the House is not always in good condition. How then can you wear it when you go out of the House? This is politeness. When a person gets used to wearing the proper clothes, changing becomes easy and almost natural.”

“It is also a good example that you give to the boys.”

79. GIVE HIM A CIGAR A DAY

One day while I was with the Father at the Sisters’ convent of San Benedetto, in one of the squares of Oria, we saw a gentleman who had fallen into poverty and was well known by the Father who often helped him.

He was relaxing and smoking, but as soon as he saw the Father, he felt ashamed. Unable to find a better place, he put the cigar in his pocket while it was still lit. I laughed and told this to the Father, who, coming close to the gentleman, with remarkably good manners observed, “You put the cigar in your pocket without putting it off. Check it, that it may cause you no harm.”

The gentleman, mortified, replied, “Father, it has been several days that I have not been able to smoke because I had no money to buy a cigar. A friend offered me one, and the truth is I was enjoying it with real pleasure. I suffer a lot without smoking. Damn vice! I tried quitting, but I couldn’t.”

The Father asked, “How many cigars a day do you usually consume?”

“In good times, many, but now that I have no chance, two a day is enough,”

“Two is too many at your age; they are dangerous for your health,” the Father replied. Turning to me, he said, “Give him a cigar a day.”

When we left, I protested, “When it comes to helping him with food and clothes, that’s fine, but now must we also help him to maintain his vice?” The Father replied, “What do you want to do at his age? He is already suffering from other deprivations. Don’t you think that it’s also a charity to reduce his suffering? Or do you want to teach him a lesson in his old age?”

80. THIS ORPHAN MUST NOT BE ACCEPTED

Once, while the Father and Father Palma were out, Count Dendice from San Vito dei Normanni, accompanied by one of his administrators, came to our House in Oria to recommend the admission of an orphan.

I assured the Count that because it was his recommendation, the Father would give preference and accept the boy as soon as a place would be available.

When the Father came, I reported this immediately to him, as a very important matter. But he answered firmly, “This orphan shall not be accepted, not ever, precisely because he is

recommended by Count Dendice, a very influential and rich man. It is evident that you still don't understand the spirit of our Institute."

"Our mission is to welcome the poorest and most abandoned orphans, who can't be helped by anyone. This must be for us the first requirement and consideration for admission. Even though he might really be poor, the orphan recommended by the Count is not abandoned at all because the Count can help him. A man so influential will easily find a solution elsewhere."

"This is the purpose of our Institute, to which we must remain faithful if we don't want to distort the nature of the Congregation itself. The Lord will bless the Work and the Divine Providence will never fail."

I asked the Father what to tell Count Dendice since he had already sent the documents.

The Father said, "Reply that there is no place for the boy (that is, of course for the boys who are not really poor and abandoned, such as the one recommended by him)."

I replied, "Father, the administrator of the Count said that if they had to pay a boarding fee for the orphan, they would pay."

The Father said, "Again! Did you not understand what I said? It is a matter of principle. I repeat: we admit the poorest and most abandoned boys. Our mission is to receive and to look for the most pitiful cases. The preference for a boy who can pay the fee would be contrary to the nature of the Institution, an offense against the Divine Providence, and we will be going against the will of our benefactors. The Providence comes so generously for us to care for the Orphans. We don't have anything to do with fees! Woe to us if our Institutes do not keep themselves with this spirit of faith. This doesn't mean that when we can get some help, we shouldn't accept it, provided that help is not a condition for accepting a boy."

81. GIVE AND YOU SHALL RECEIVE

At the door of our Institutes in Oria there was a to and fro of the poor, not only during the distribution of soup but during the whole day. Much more when they knew that the Father was in Oria.

When going through the town proper, the Father would soon be surrounded by beggars and needy people. He would even tell others to come back. When he didn't have anything to give, he would invite them to the Institute. Upon arriving, he would ask money from Father Palma, from me, or Brother Giuseppe, and when we didn't have any, he would go around the House, and give the poor what he could find: food, clothing, etc.

Though the Father was generous with the poor, he did not let the Community lack for anything. He often said that charity is established with a certain order; thus, charity should start at home, with those we have more obligations.

When he asked money for alms, the Father often used the word '*borrow*'. One day I asked, "Father, why do you say '*borrow*'? If we have the money, then that's it. There's no problem. Anyway ..."

“What ‘anyway’...! Do you mean that I never return the amount? I say ‘*borrow*’ not for me but for the Divine Providence, who is very generous, and returns a hundredfold.”

One day the Father was besieged by the poor. He asked me if I could lend him 300 Liras. I replied that in the whole House, there was barely 250 Liras left. Should I give all of it to them?”

He said, “Yes, give it all to me; actually, that’s not even enough. As for us, the Divine Providence will take care.”

After a few days, the Carissimo family sent a letter to Father, with 2,000 Liras. They also sent a large demijohn⁹² of oil and another of wine. The Father said, “See how the Divine Providence helps us? I have experienced that the life of our Institute is a continuous miracle of the Divine Providence. The more I give, the more the Providence returns a hundredfold to me.”

Another time he said, “Gather all the money in the House. The same will be done in the Sisters’ Institute because we have to help a monastery of cloistered nuns who have a serious and urgent need.”

We were able to collect 565 Liras.

A few weeks later, a letter from a zealous American lady arrived with 150 dollars collected from the Anthonian devotees. The Father called Father Palma and me, and said, “See how generous the Divine Providence is with us? We have sent to the monastery 565 Liras, and the Providence today sends us 150 dollars! This spirit of faith in the Divine Providence must always reign in our Institutes.”

82. FATHER PALMA DOES EVERYTHING WITH DILIGENCE

I was mentioning to the Father the complaints and comments circulating among us about Father Palma because he was often missing from Oria and going to the Houses of our Sisters.⁹³

The Father became serious, and with a tone of surprise and disapproval said to me, “Are you also listening to the gossips? I am surprised! All of you should mind your own business! Be grateful instead to Father Palma for all that he does. Remember that if he is often gone from Oria, he is not doing it for fun. He is taking care of the set-up of the Houses and the financial issues. I have assigned him to this because I cannot manage everything, and because Father Palma does everything with diligence and zeal according to my directives.

For this reason, he also goes often to the Sisters’ Houses, especially for the installations, the development, and management of the Anthonian Benefactors Office. These Offices are the channels of the Divine Providence, who is using Father Palma for such a rational set-up that all admire. Since this work has to be done in the meantime by the Sisters who don’t have adequate

⁹² A *damigiana* or demijohn is a 50-liter glass container for wine, oil, etc.

⁹³ Father Carmelo Drago gave detailed testimony about Father Pantaleone M. Palma (1875-1935), which can be read in the *Positio*, Vol. II, pp. 329-346.

education and preparation for this task, it is necessary that Father Palma assists them with great diligence.”

“So rather than complaining and making uncharitable comments, be grateful and admire the sacrifices made by Father Palma and by the Sisters to support you and our Communities.”

“You, in particular, must commit yourself to dispel these complaints and comments, which are the works of the devil who wants to destroy what is good.”

83. NO EXTRAORDINARY PENANCES

While the Aspirants were heartily enjoying their recreation in the little grove of the House of Oria, the Father arrived with two Monsignors, and they visited the garden.

The two visitors, seeing the boys, happy and well-fed, said to the Father, “It’s truly a pleasure to see how healthy and happy the way these boys are. The Father said, “I do not prescribe extraordinary penances for my boys. Those imposed by the Holy Church are enough. The greatest penance in our Institutes is, first of all, to do one’s duty, working for the Lord and helping the neighbor; then community life, observance of the evangelical counsels, and mortification of the senses. As for corporal mortifications, they are left to one’s initiative, directed by healthy prudence and by holy obedience.”

Even though the Father personally did corporal mortifications and penances of all kinds, such as fasting, discipline, cilices⁹⁴, vigils, etc., which he would hide using different tactics so as not to attract attention, he wanted his Religious to be moderate and prudent in performing them.

84. I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE A PUMP ALWAYS SPEWING GOLD

Once the harvest in the countryside of Oria was scanty and with the approaching winter, prospects were very gloomy for the people. Many families reduced to starving joined the poor. You can just imagine the crowd of needy people swarming around our Institutes as well as the difficulties in facing such an emergency.

Fortunately, for those people, the Father was almost always in Oria at that time. He did not want to miss the opportunity to do all that he could in the field of charity, which was so dear to him. However, though he tried to do even the impossible, money, food, and clothes were never enough.

To a butcher who was unable to feed his large family, the Father gave the only sheep that was grazing in the garden. Later, out of hunger, the butcher returned but refused the little alms being offered to him. Maybe he was hoping to receive a cow!

⁹⁴ A cilice, also known as hair shirt or sackcloth, was originally an undergarment made of coarse cloth or animal hair or metal worn close to the skin, by penitents and ascetics. Discipline was a time of self-flagellation done by Religious usually on Friday while reciting the ‘Miserere’ (Psalm 50). Father Hannibal was familiar with ‘discipline’ and used ‘cilices’, which are displayed in the Museum of his memorabilia in Messina.

The Father felt very bad about the situation and was continuously urging us to raise our thoughts to the Divine Providence. Towards the end of February, the House looked like an empty warehouse. There was really nothing for the Community and the poor.

However, the Father did not give up. He wrote to the Houses in Messina to send some help to the poor of Oria. One day, when he didn't have anything to give to the crowd, he gave vent to his feelings.

"I wish I had a big pump spewing much gold to allow us to give alms to all the needy. It shall not be for our convenience. On the contrary, it will be more of a burden for us because we would have to safeguard, administer, and distribute it as gifts from the Divine Providence."

"It is good to try to have properties for charitable works. However, woe to us if we use these for amassing wealth; or even worse, if we use them for our conveniences, pleasure, and luxury. It would be our spiritual destruction, and the ruin of the Congregation. The goods of the Providence are like sacred objects which should serve only and exclusively for the worship of God and the help of others."

"We are merely custodians and administrators of what the Divine Providence sends us. Let us manage everything according to the will of the Church, and the directions of the Constitutions and Regulations. As long as this spirit reigns in the Congregation, each of us will progress in holy perfection, and the Congregation will increasingly establish itself in the Church."

He continued, "We must avoid gathering money and depositing it in the post office or the bank to gain interest. Instead, all must be used for the greater development of the apostolate of the Rogate and the charitable works. These are our real deposits that yield well and compel the Divine Providence to help us. Our bank, our safe and inexhaustible warehouse, our pump always spewing gold, is our trust in the Divine Providence."

"Bank deposits are dangerous because they can decrease our confidence in the Providence, bind our hearts to money, and create occasions to use the money to our spiritual detriment."

"The Anthonian Benefactors Offices are our pump that always spews gold, as we see every day. They are the precious channels of the Divine Providence."

"Therefore, we must appreciate and be grateful to the Lord for the Anthonian Benefactors Office. We must also be faithful in constant prayer and devotion to St. Anthony of Padua, whom the Lord uses to provide for us. We must also be concerned that the Anthonian Benefactors Office be well organized and managed, in the spirit of faith, to make them centers of apostolate and charity."

"Work is also a pump spewing gold. We need to have faith in the Divine Providence, as well as in the Anthonian Benefactors Office, but this should not exempt us from the obligation to work. We must feel compelled to work, even by making sacrifices if necessary. We have to keep in mind that work is not only a source of income but when carried out in a spirit of obedience, makes us atone for our sins and is a source of merit for paradise."

“We also have to remember that in the early days our Work was supported primarily by the proceeds of our labor. We should also keep in mind how right is the saying, that ‘The Devil finds work for idle hands.’⁹⁵ Unfortunately, if idleness enters our communities, vices will undoubtedly follow, and the Work will be ruined.”

“Finally, our economy is the other pump spewing gold to support our charity, especially when financial matters are carried out with a true spirit of poverty. All this is a source not only of material gain but also of many merits for heaven, and serves for the edification of others as well.”

85. HE WHO PUTS HIS HAND TO THE PLOW...

One day, in Oria, while I was reporting to the Father about the situation of the House, Father Palma came in and said that there was a priest in dire need at the door asking for help. The Father immediately said to help him in the best possible way. Father Palma added that the priest was a Franciscan, who had been the last Guardian of San Pasquale and had eventually transferred to the secular clergy. Father Palma also said that the priest belonged to one of the wealthiest families in the Diocese of Oria, but they had abandoned him. Father Palma continued, “I have always helped him whenever I could because his situation is really pitiful.”

The Father said, “It is a pity. However, let us not forget the words of Our Lord: ‘He who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven!’ Nevertheless, on our part, let us take it all the more as a duty of charity because he is a minister of God. Try to help him. Give him also these 100 Liras which I had promised to St. Joseph for the poor when I was bitten by a dog that we feared might have rabies. If we are to be generous in giving alms to everyone, we have to be likewise with consecrated persons: religious men, nuns, and priests.”

“What do we know about this poor man? What were the reasons that led him to leave the Order?”

“We have to pay special attention to these poor religious and priests who have gone astray. Our spiritual and material charity may help them go back again.”

86. SACRED IMAGES IN THE SACRISTY

Many sacred images were exposed on the altars and walls of our Church in Oria. Once, I foolishly collected and hung almost all of them on the walls of the sacristy, which then looked like a picture gallery.

When the Father saw it, he asked me who had come up with such a ridiculous idea.

⁹⁵ The Italian proverb is more explicit: *L'ozio é il padre dei vizi* - Idleness is the father of vices.

When he heard that I was the one who did it, he reprimanded me, “I don’t understand how you thought of doing this. You are truly an *iconoclast*.⁹⁶ How dare you do this without permission? Who do you think you are? The sacred images are beneficial for devotion, especially for the boys. That is why the Church exposes them for divine worship. Thank God you did not also remove the statues from the Church! Make sure that you return the images within the day to where they were before.”

I was so embarrassed that I did not dare even to apologize because it wasn’t easy to find excuses and alibis with the Father in dealing with sacred things. Afterward, I took courage and ventured to observe, “Actually, it wasn’t my intention to remove them. I thought of exposing them again in the Church when we have prayers, triduums, and novenas in their honor.”

The Father himself came to the sacristy and told me which ones I should not put back. He told me to replace those that were not so beautiful and expressive with better ones.

87. THE STRUCTURE OF AN INSTITUTION IS AN ELEMENT OF GOOD EDUCATION

Upon entering the reception room of Oria with the Father, Father Palma noticed that the door handle was broken and asked who destroyed it. I said that I did not know, and he told me that I should try to find and punish the guilty one.

“Actually,” the Father intervened, “do not look for the one who broke the handle but for the one who installed it. This is not a model to be used here, where there are boys of all ages (it was a bent handle covered with porcelain). This kind of handle can be placed where there are people who know how to use it properly. To open the door, a boy will hang on the handle, push it left and right, up and down, without regard for the proper way, and thus easily break everything.”

Father Palma protested, “But logic itself teaches how to use a door handle.”

The Father said, “Father Palma, you talk about logic as if the boys had studied Rosmini and Pestalozzi.⁹⁷ You have to keep in mind that children only begin to have the use of reason at the age of seven. Therefore, in constructing and furnishing our Houses, we must be aware of the purpose for which they are intended. The adaptation of the structure and the setting of the premises help in proper discipline and formation.

For this reason, while we have to rely on the engineers and technicians for the stability and aesthetics of our constructions when it comes to the distribution, function, and adaptation of the premises; but we should not blindly rely on them. Give them our guidelines according to the purpose of the House, following the moral, disciplinary, and pedagogical principles. It would be so delightful to have our own technicians and engineers! This would be very useful and would

⁹⁶ An *iconoclast* literally means a destroyer of holy images (icons) used for religious worship, especially prevalent during the persecution of the Orthodox Church (which venerates icons) in the 8th and 9th centuries. It also figuratively means a person who strongly opposes generally accepted beliefs and traditions.

⁹⁷ Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855) was an Italian philosopher, and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) was a Swiss pedagogue.

produce greater efficiency in our Institutes, as well as to save us a lot of money. In the meantime, we have Houses adapted to small boys and grown-ups alike, without distinction. Later, however, if the Lord allows the Work to expand, we must build Houses adjusted to the needs, proper to the age, type of school, and profession of the boys we are planning to shelter.”

88. TRUE PRAYER

A certain Father Fazio, a Jesuit, guided excellently the annual spiritual retreat in Oria which was also attended by the Father, Father Palma, and Father Vitale. They were all contented.

Having completed the retreat for the Religious community, Father Fazio was asked to give a three-day retreat to the Aspirants together with some of the older Orphans.

This time the result was very different. The preacher could not connect with them.

One day, talking about prayer, he said, “Your way of praying is not prayer. You are always saying *Our Father, Our Father*. You have to think about what you are saying, ‘You have to meditate.’ Prayer must be an act of adoration, a thanksgiving, a petition to God for the things you desire.”

I was present, and I did not like the way he spoke to the boys, which seemed to me rather unwise. So, when I saw Father Fazio alone in the garden, I approached him, and I told him straight, “I attended your conference with the boys, and I have to tell you that I did not like the way you spoke about prayer and the recitation of *Our Father, Our Father*. My point is that in the Gospel, I have never read that to pray, you have to set up the place, the introduction, and so on. Instead, I found that when the Apostles asked Jesus Christ to teach them how to pray, Our Lord replied: ‘From now on, this is how you should pray: *Our Father ...*’

Father Fazio resented my observation. He rebuked me and complained to Father Vitale, who summoned me.

He was scolding me in the corridor when the Father happened to pass by. Father Vitale informed him immediately of my imprudence.

After listening to the facts, the Father answered, “Certainly neither you nor I would have said to the Preacher what Brother Carmelo said. In any case, he has not expressed a heresy, but a well-grounded observation. Certainly, things that can be addressed very well to grown-ups might not be the case when said to the boys.”

During the entire three days, Father Fazio requested the boys to keep perfect silence. The Father was not in favor of this, but because of the way the preacher demanded it, he agreed out of respect for him.

At the end of the retreat, as soon as they were allowed to talk, there was an explosion of joy on the part of the boys, who began to shout and jump wildly. The Father, who was present, said, “It’s useless; nature will always be nature. When practices of piety and even spirituality are imposed, they can produce an effect opposite to what was expected. We have to remember,

especially in the practices of piety, not to impose them, but to lead people to love them. This is the art; this is the real secret,”

89. THE FATHER IN PALERMO

I had been in Palermo for twenty days in the military, when the Father, knowing that I was going for another medical check-up, came from Apulia hoping that I would be rejected or at least get a long period of convalescence. His hope was based on the many prayers said in the Houses because of my delicate health (I had already been rejected once), and on the strong recommendation that a certain Father Messina would make to the President of the Committee.

The Father and Father Messina did all they could but to no avail. I was declared fit for the Medical Corps. The Father said, “We have done everything humanly possible. It means that this is God’s will. Besides, it is also a duty to serve the country. Being assigned to the Medical Corps, you can make your service a true mission. To cure the sick and the wounded is the best service in military life. Do your service to the sick with the spirit of divine charity, and you will earn great merits before the Lord. I urge you to pray and do everything that you can to receive the Sacraments. I will send you an Agnus Dei.”⁹⁸

During that visit, the Father found me still wearing the religious habit. Astonished, he asked, “So you introduced yourself in that habit to the military?” “Yes,” I replied.

“And how are you in the midst of this crowd of young people?”

“I am very much at home. In the beginning, some were making fun of me, but when they saw that I took it cheerfully, even soldiers and officers began to respect me.”

“Usually, I don’t have to join them when they march, or during military exercises. Those in my dorm know that I get up early every morning to go for Holy Mass and Communion in the nearby Church of Father Messina, and they are more than respectful. There are some socialists, with whom I get along easily, who tease me with humor: ‘Let him do that, he is obsessed with religion.’ I know, however, that this week they will give us uniforms. When I have to wear it, I will send my religious habit back to Messina.”

The Father replied, “I’m pleased that you have great respect for the religious habit. It’s true, as they say, that *the cowl does not make the monk*, but it is also true that when you live as a Religious, the habit is the badge of honor.

The Father stayed in Palermo for three days. He urged me to write often and to present with simplicity my future needs.

When he left, Father Messina told me, “I often heard of Canon Di Francia. Sometimes we also had a glimpse of each other. However, I never had the opportunity to know him like this time. It can truly be seen that he is a man wholly of God, a true apostle of prayer to obtain priests

⁹⁸ Agnus Dei is a disc of wax impressed with the figure of a lamb and blessed at determined seasons by the Pope. It is regarded, like holy water, blessed palms, etc., as sacramentals.”

for the Church, and a true apostle of charity like St. Vincent of Paul, Don Bosco, and Cottolengo⁹⁹! He gave me wise advice like no one else ever did about my foundation of Sisters and Orphanages.”

90. THE FATHER IN PALERMO WITH THE SICK BROTHER MAURO

I had already been in Palermo for several months in the military service when the Father arrived with Brother Mauro¹⁰⁰ for a check-up with a renowned specialist.

After the check-up, the Father told me, “The doctor said that the case is serious because the disease is already in a very advanced stage. I feel sorry for this dear son. He is so good, intelligent, hard-working, self-sacrificing, and diligent in the practices of piety, exemplary in his religious life, very attached to the Congregation, and has special skills in mechanics. It would be a great loss. We are praying very hard for his recovery, but let us surrender to the Divine Will. How are you here? Do you need anything?”

I said, “I feel... the way a man in the army would feel! There are many difficulties in going to daily Mass and receive Holy Communion. Thank God, I’m in good health, I don’t need anything. I learned that tomorrow, I would be transferred to the military hospital in Acireale.” When the Father heard that I was leaving for Acireale the following day, he said, “Then, Brother Mauro can go with you.”

“But I am taking the inner railway line that passes through Catania.”

“It doesn’t matter. Both of you can go together until Acireale, and then Brother Mauro will proceed alone to Messina. I want to take this opportunity to stay a few days in Patti for an affair.”

He checked the train timetable and saw that in Catania there was enough time to take lunch. So he said, “In Catania, take your lunch in a restaurant. I ask you to let Brother Mauro eat well.” Then he insisted on giving me some money.

Upon arriving in Catania, we went to a restaurant near the train station, where I ordered spaghetti with tomato sauce, grilled meat, and good quality bread, asking the waiter to treat us well. The waiter, a jolly fellow, answered, “Leave it to me. I will bring you a good ‘*norma*’ and *Di Francia* Bread.” I asked what he meant. He replied, “Here in Catania ‘*norma*’ means a tasty dish of spaghetti with layers of fried eggplant, tomato sauce, and parmesan cheese. The *Di Francia Bread* is a unique quality bread baked in Messina in the bakery of Canon Di Francia. This Canon is reputed to be a saint. He is charitable to everyone. In Messina, he has put up a mill that grinds the most exceptional quality of wheat, and set up a quality bakery so special, that his

⁹⁹ St. Joseph Cottolengo (1786-1842) was a priest born in the Piedmont region. Inspired by St. Vincent De Paul, he founded Congregations of priests, Brothers, and Sisters in the service of charity. Pope Benedict XVI included him among the Saints of Charity in the Encyclical *Deus caritas est*.

¹⁰⁰ Brother Mauro Drago was born in Galati Mamertimo (Messina) on August 31, 1897. He was one of Father Carmelo’s brothers and among the first Rogationist religious, a generous collaborator of the new Congregation (cf. Chapter 162). Due to his illness that caused him to cough blood, he died at the age of 19 on December 3, 1916.

bread is much sought after, and often prescribed by doctors, not only in Messina but also here in Catania. It is difficult to get that bread here because it is mainly sold in Messina. Here there is a shop that receives every day a small quantity of this bread, which is immediately sold out. I was so lucky to meet this Canon Di Francia personally, and I had the impression that he must indeed be a saint.

91. AUNT TERESINA AND ATTORNEY FRANCESCO LO SARDO

The last time the Father came to visit me while I was in the military service in Palermo, he asked me if I knew the lawyer Francesco Lo Sardo. I said I did not know him.

The Father continued, "He is a fierce socialist, a staunch anticleric. However, with me, he has always shown much respect. Several years ago, when the Council of the Provincial Office of Messina wanted to stop the small annual subsidy for our Institutions, to the amazement of all, unlike others, he defended us. Now, that the Attorney is a member of the Executive Council of the Province, whenever I meet him, he is very respectful. The people who know his feelings as leader of the Socialists in the Province of Messina are surprised."

"But for some time now he does not answer me when I greet him because he says that in our Institute he has relatives whom I have forbidden to greet him when they meet him. I asked if you knew him because I learned that he is married to a very kind lady from your town. Do you know her?"

"Of course I know her. When I was in Messina with my brothers, before the earthquake, she used to visit us in the Institute at least once a month, each time bringing a donation for the Orphans. She is the sister of my mother."

"Why did it take so long for you to say that she is your aunt? And how is it you told me that you don't know the Attorney?"

"Because I have never met him personally. My brothers have never seen him either. So we might have met him but did not greet him. I don't know how he could have recognized us."

"Listen to me," the Father said, "as soon as you or your brothers have a chance to go to Messina, you have to visit him. You will bring him my regards and apologize for not greeting him so that the situation will be clarified."

When I went to Messina on leave, since I didn't find any of the Fathers in the House, I told Canon Celona that I had to visit Attorney Lo Sardo. As soon as he heard that name, he said, "What are you saying? That man will throw you down the stairs if not from the balcony. Don't you know who Attorney Lo Sardo is? He is the socialist leader, and the most anticlerical person in Messina."

"Yes, I know, but the Father told me that I should visit him. The Attorney is married to my mother's sister."

"It is really a great honor for you to have an uncle of that kind!" he said with irony.

I went to visit him. At the main gate of the block, I met a man and asked him which floor Attorney Lo Sardo lived. He looked at me from top to bottom and said, "Are you looking for him, or his wife?"

"Both."

"Do you know who he is? He is a scoundrel."

"I don't know him personally, but my aunt spoke so well of him. Canon Di Francia also speaks well of him. The Attorney is respectful of the Canon and has also helped him. Canon Di Francia has asked me to bring him regards."

"Come with me. I will accompany you so that you don't make a mistake."

"No need, sir, thank you. I know where I'm going."

When we reached the house, the Attorney kissed me and told me, "Dear nephew!"

I remained for quite a time in a familiar conversation with him and with my aunt about our relatives, our town, and also about religion. When my aunt would notice that sometimes the Attorney was grossly mistaken about religion, she would say in a familiar tone: "Ciccio¹⁰¹, don't don't say crazy things about the topic." And he would reply, "Teresina, do you believe that I can ruin the mind of your nephew? His head is harder than yours. You are always with priests, and you live by the power of rosaries, Masses, and Communion!"

"Dear nephew, you have an aunt who is truly over devout. If she does not hear Mass and receive daily Communion, she is restless the whole day. However, I give her freedom. Before we got married, we made this pact: I don't meddle in matters of her religion, and she must not meddle in my politics. So we are at peace. Is that not true, Teresina?"

My aunt answered, "Yes, it's true. But when I hear you speak ill of religion and priests, though I keep quiet, I am dying inside."

The Attorney resumed, "Listen, my dear nephew, if you want to become a priest and live like Canon Di Francia, then become a priest, and you will be respected by society, heaven, purgatory, and hell, if they exist. However, if you become a priest to be like other priests, take off your robe and hang it on a tree immediately, or don't soak it in oil, but in gasoline and put it on fire so that it burns immediately. I have great esteem for Canon Di Francia because I have never met any other man in my life who has given himself totally for humanity, a priest who truly lives as a priest. However, I must confess that, recently, I had changed my mind because I was told that he had forbidden you to greet me because of my principles. But now I know that you were not greeting me because you did not know me."

¹⁰¹ *Ciccio* is the familiar nickname for Francesco.

When Fascism¹⁰² took over, Attorney Lo Sardo was exiled and imprisoned because of his liberal views. His wife followed him, residing in the vicinity to assist and comfort him as best as she could. She prayed and prayed for his conversion.

Finally, her prayers, sacrifices, and sufferings were heard, and she had the joy to lead Attorney Lo Sardo to meet a good priest who, thank God, was able to make him repent. He approached the Holy Sacraments and lived as a good Christian in the remaining years of his exile.

After his conversion, he used to offer the Lord his imprisonment and his pains (in fact, his health had become poor). He would say, "I offer to you, O Lord, these days of exile and suffering, in atonement for my sins."

He died in exile, but with all the comfort of the sacraments.

After a few years, I met my aunt, who, moved to tears, told me about the pains and conversion of her husband. She added, "Canon Di Francia was right in always telling me when I had the fortune to meet him: 'Madam, pray, continue to pray hard for the conversion of your husband. I am also praying for him because he is a good friend of mine. Be assured, madam, that your prayer will not remain unheard.'"

My aunt also told me that her husband had received the booklet of the Father, "*Letter to my Friends*." Now and then, Attorney Lo Sardo would read and reread it, at first surprised and thoughtful, but increasingly more calm. Sometimes, he was heard exclaiming, "It is evident that Canon Di Francia is truly a man of God."

My aunt concluded, "My dear nephew, I can't explain how I felt when I heard your uncle uttering God's Name!"

92. A SHORT VISIT TO THE FATHER DURING MY MILITARY STINT IN ACIREALE

While I was serving in the military hospital of Acireale (Catania), on the eve of the feast of St. Anthony, I was able to get three days' leave to go to Messina. I left at night, and by dawn, I was already in the Institute.

When the Father saw me, he exclaimed, "The Providence sent you! Today, we are so much in need of personnel. Yesterday, I prayed to St. Anthony to come to our help. I offered the Mass for this purpose. How did you get here so early?"

"I left Acireale last night."

"So you have not slept, and of course you're tired. If you want to receive Communion, prepare yourself, I will give it to you."¹⁰³ Then, take your breakfast. Today, there is much to be

¹⁰² Fascism is a form of radical, right-wing, authoritarian ultra-nationalism, characterized by dictatorial power, forcible suppression of opposition, and strong regimentation of society and the economy, which came to the prominence in the early 20th-century Europe. The first fascist movements emerged in Italy during World War I (1914-1918) before it spread to other European countries. Fascism was opposed to Socialists who were left-wing advocates.

done. You will take care of receiving the donations. When I am free, I will come to replace you. At 10:00 a.m., I have to deliver the sermon in honor of St. Anthony because the preacher has failed to come.”

I spent the whole day working. When the Father was with me at the *Sala Obolo*,¹⁰⁴ a lawyer from Calabria came in to donate. Turning to me he said, “I really want to meet Canon Di Francia. Everyone says that he is a saint who does much charity and looks like another St. Vincent of Paul.” When he heard this antiphon, the Father tried to slip away without being noticed. I signaled the lawyer that Canon Di Francia was the one walking away. The lawyer hastened to reach him and had a long talk with the Father, which ended with a confession.

When he returned to receive the donation, the Father said, “That good man had a false opinion of me. Who knows who and what was told to him! If he knew my shortcomings, my lack of response to the divine graces and my ingratitude to the Lord, he would see that I am so far from what he thinks.”

The day after the feast, before leaving for Acireale, he asked me how I was doing in the military hospital. He reminded me to be a true Samaritan with the sick. Then, he added that in the hospitals, it is possible to do much good for the souls and bodies of sick people. When everything is done with the spirit of faith, it becomes a real mission. He asked me if I had the opportunity to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist every day. When I answered affirmatively, he said, “Being able to hear Mass every day and receive the most Holy Communion, especially in the army, is a great grace.”

He wanted to give me some money. When I tried to refuse to say that I didn’t need it, he said, “Take it. It may be useful later. I know that you don’t spend money unnecessarily. It can be useful, for example, for the train ticket, so that, without failing in your duty, you may come to Messina, and this will please us much.”

93. BE THE FIRST COLLABORATORS

The Hospital of Acireale where I was serving my military stint was housed in a portion of the Pennisi College, run by the Jesuits.

A certain Father Cipolla was among the Jesuits who served there. He was highly learned and so good, with whom I often liked to talk about all sorts of things. One day, he told me confidentially, “I don’t understand how you were convinced to join a newly born Congregation, which does not have a guarantee for the future, while there are other religious Institutions scattered throughout the world which are well organized, and defying the centuries.”

¹⁰³ Before the Vatican Council II, Communion outside the Mass was common. Cf. the footnote in Chapter 48.

¹⁰⁴ *Sala Obolo* or Obolo Room is the place where donations and Mass intentions were accepted at the St. Anthony Shrine in Messina. In the history of our Congregation, it has also been the venue for a true apostolate of evangelization to the devotees of St. Anthony who came to the Shrine.

I resented his words and angrily said, “It makes me truly wonder how a Jesuit priest as qualified as you can think this way. I feel happy and lucky to belong to a newly born Congregation, whose purposes, I think, are among the most beautiful and useful for the Holy Church. According to your reasoning, it seems that all the Orders and Religious Congregations, including the Society of Jesus, since their beginning were born well organized and ordered as they are today, scattered all over the world and with thousands of Religious.”

To my reply, almost ashamed, the Jesuit admitted, “You are right. I apologize. I wasn’t thinking. I admire your attachment to your Congregation.”

At that moment, we met along the hallway, another Jesuit, Father Mistretta. He knew that I belonged to the Rogationists and was very familiar with the Father and the Institute. He was very humorous and was always joking with me. As soon as he saw me, he said teasingly, “Don’t listen to Canon Di Francia and Canon Vitale otherwise they will bring you to hell! I know them very well.” Father Cipolla told him what had happened, my resentment, and my answer.

Turning to me, Father Mistretta said, “Bravo! You were right in answering that way. Stay strong in your vocation. Canon Di Francia is truly a man of God, a true apostle of vocations and works of charity. I know how much trouble and ordeals he had to go through for his Institute. I’m sure that your Congregation will succeed because its aims are the most beautiful and useful there can be for the Holy Church.”

When I was on leave in Messina, I told the Father about the incident. He observed, “Indeed, this isn’t the first time that people will try to discourage vocations from entering an emerging Congregation. They don’t consider that each foundation has to start from scratch. They don’t realize that the first collaborators have greater merit because it requires more trust in God, and because of the greater inconveniences of the beginnings. The first collaborators can be considered as co-founders, therefore sharers of all the good that the Congregation will accomplish.”

94. PRIESTS IN THE ARMY FIND COMFORT WITH THE FATHER IN MESSINA

In Palermo, some priests in the army, while serving in the hospitals in their own city, were often able to find opportunities for short and unauthorized visits to their own families.

After being scolded and punished several times, they were transferred to the Military Hospital of Messina.

There were eight of them, and the morning after their arrival, they all went around the various Churches of the city, to be able to celebrate Mass. They encountered many difficulties. For the lack of time, some were not able to celebrate. Two of them, however, after many rounds, came upon our wooden Church.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ It refers to the wooden Church of the Avignone District donated by Pope Pius X after the destruction caused by the earthquake in 1908. The Church burned down in 1919. In the same place, the Father built the Temple of the Evangelical Rogation.

The Father was in the sacristy and received them with a great charity so that they were embarrassed. He personally helped them get dressed, prepared the altar and the Mass and served them. In the end, he invited them to have breakfast in the refectory, serving them personally.

Then, they confided in him about their difficulties. The Father replied that they could come every day to celebrate the Mass in our Church, the two of them as well as the others, provided they agreed on the time depending on the availability of the altars.¹⁰⁶

From then on, all the eight priests, almost daily, came to celebrate Mass in our Church with the usual welcome, including liturgical service, breakfast, and many invitations to lunch.

The Father was also a great help in another way. Having been transferred to Messina for punitive reasons, those priests were subjected to stricter discipline, so that at times, they could not leave the hospital. When he learned about it, the Father went to talk personally to the First Major Adjutant, who was also a priest, and thus, from that time on the discipline became milder for the eight priests. They were granted permission to celebrate Mass every day.

After several months in Messina, some of them were allowed to return to Palermo, where, having learned that I belonged to the Institute of Canon Di Francia, they told me about their ordeals in Messina. They couldn't find adequate words to describe the Father's welcome, his goodness, his love, his holiness. They said, "We will certainly never forget it in our whole life. Blessed are you who are with that great servant of God."

As soon as I met the Father, I told him the good impression that those priests had of him because of his welcome. The Father noted, "We haven't done anything extraordinary. We should have done more. For our Institutes, hospitality shall be one of the main duties, especially for priests."

Once, when from Acireale I went to Messina, I found the vicar forane, Father Celeste from Galati at lunch in the refectory. He told me that he and two other priests from the military had been eating at the Institute for several months for health reasons. They could not take the food rations given in the army.

He told me about the kindness and charity the Father had shown them.

He continued, "Everyone talks about the Father's charity. However, those who get to know him soon realize that what is said about him is an understatement."

He went on to tell me confidently that he had the chance to get to know the Father in his visit to Galati, where, in a few days, the Father alone had done so much good, that not even a whole group of missionaries had ever done, as far as he could remember. He told me that the three priests had insisted on paying a monthly fee for the lunch they ate in the Institute. And finally, the Father after their insistence accepted, "Let them pay one Lira each as a monthly fee, and that is enough."

¹⁰⁶ The practice of "concelebration" did not exist at the time of the Founder. Each priest celebrated his Mass at one of the many secondary altars which could be found in the Churches.

The vicar forane added, “We really didn’t want to abuse his kindness, and thus we repaid it in another way.”

When the Father saw me, he asked me if I had seen the vicar forane of Galati. When I said yes, and added that in fact, he told me he was delighted with his hospitality, the Father said, “Poor military priests, they suffer so much! It would be ideal if we had some rooms, where in addition to the military priests we could host even simple soldiers. We could do much good.”

95. BROTHER MANSUETO’S DEATH DURING THE WAR

The Father had a particular concern for the Brothers who were in the army, and even more when they were in the battle zone.¹⁰⁷ He often wrote to them, wanting to hear their news and tried every way to help them.

When Brother Mansueto was drafted, he told me, “We used everything to have your brother assigned to the Medical Corps, where he will be less exposed to danger, and where he can practice charity towards neighbors. Thank God, we succeeded. He will serve on the special trains used to transport the sick and wounded.”

Unfortunately, after a few months of this service, Brother Mansueto was transferred to the infantry and sent to the front lines. There, at the first assault on Mount Nero, he was killed.¹⁰⁸

On that occasion the Father wrote me a beautiful letter, expressing his pain and that of the Community, assuring me about the funeral and the prayers for the dead that were done in the male and female Institutes. He emphasized the goodness of Brother Mansueto, his religious spirit, attachment to the Congregation, and kindness of character, concluding with: “He was truly Mansueto in name and fact.”¹⁰⁹

He assured me that he had expressed his condolences to my parents, and advised me to write to them often to give them serenity.

During my military life, I received many wonderful handwritten letters from the Father. I don’t know how he managed to find such time while he was already so burdened with works. It is a pity that in leaving Caporetto,¹¹⁰ I lost my backpack and everything in it.

96. FROM MILITARY BACK TO RELIGIOUS LIFE: THE FIRST SCOLDING FROM THE FATHER...

Two months after the Armistice,¹¹¹ I was still serving in the military hospital in Udine, where the Spanish flu was endlessly claiming from fifty to sixty victims a day.

¹⁰⁷ The Rogationists called to the army during WWI were assigned mostly to the Italian-Austrian front.

¹⁰⁸ Brother Mansueto Drago, brother of Father Carmelo, died on March 24, 1917. He was born in Galati Mamertino, Messina on February 4, 1895.

¹⁰⁹ Giuseppe Drago was the brother of Father Carmelo Drago. On his religious profession, Father Hannibal gave him the name *Mansueto*, which literally means meek, gentle, kind.

¹¹⁰ Cf. the footnote in Chapter 196.

I received an unexpected letter where the Father told me, “We applied for your discharge from military service, and, thank God, the process has made good progress. There is hope! When the discharge arrives, go directly to Oria, where they are in great need of personnel. I hope to be able to come to Oria as soon as possible. If you are there ahead of me, write to let me know how things are going. Take care of Father Palma; he has not been in good health for quite some time.”

When I was discharged, I went immediately to Oria.

The House was greatly affected by the war. It lacked even the most essential items, mainly because Father Palma, with his sickness, had not been able to do what he did before.

I was waiting for the arrival of the Father, but, seeing that he was delayed, I wrote him a letter presenting the most urgent needs.

After a few days, he came to Oria, leaving behind in Messina pending important and urgent matters.

Together with Father Palma, who was recovering, the Father drafted a program to improve discipline, food, finance, and the schools. Then, he left again for Messina. Later, he called Father Palma to Messina to be cured and to recover his health. From Messina, he also sent a substantial amount of cash to the Superior of the Sister’s House for the most urgent needs of both Houses.

I decided to set things in order and carry out some work, which was perhaps beyond the financial budget allowed by the situation. I wanted to create a small infirmary with three partitions; an isolation room and a room for the nurse with flooring of painted enamel tiles. Someone informed the Father that I had undertaken a work of great importance, an infirmary that was like a hospital...

Immediately, I received an express mail from the Father reminding me of my responsibilities, with the order to suspend any work until his arrival in Oria.

When the Father came, after realizing the work I had just started, he said, “This is not according to the information they gave me. An infirmary is needed, but you are not allowed to do any work even when it is needed, without obtaining first my permission or that of Father Palma’s. Perhaps, after four years of military life, you forgot that in religious life, everything must be done with permission, at least implicitly. You have to keep this in mind; otherwise, the Lord will not bless what you do.”

97. DISPUTE OVER PURCHASE OF A BALL

The Father loved to see the recreation of the boys animated and happy. He thought that it was essential for healthy physical development, for relaxation of the mind, and even for moral improvement. He used to say that, for boys, especially the interns, recreation was the most beautiful moment, a natural requirement that deserved to be respected.

¹¹¹ The Armistice of Villa Giusti, outside Padua, in November 1918 ended the warfare between Italy and Austria-Hungary on the Italian front during World War I.

He enjoyed it very much when he saw the boys playing happily, jumping, chasing each other, shouting. At times he would stop and watch them with pleasure as if he was watching a show.

The games in the Institutes at that time were the traditional ones: owl, blind man's bluff, hide and seek, French war, dodge ball... Ordinarily, we would wind pieces of cloth into a ball. We rarely had a rubber ball.

During the military life, I had known the use of the ball which, although not yet used in actual matches, was nevertheless attractive to the boys.

One day, knowing that it would have been the best gift for the boys, I asked Father Palma if I could buy a ball. He told me that since it meant introducing something new in the Institute, it would be better to ask the Father.

Thinking that I wanted to buy a balloon¹¹², the Father immediately replied, "No, no, because these games are often the cause and occasion of fires." I replied, "Excuse me, Father, I am not talking about paper balloons launched into the air during popular feasts. What I mean are those rubber balls covered with leather used for playing by throwing them into the air or kicking them. It's an entertaining game, innocent, and at the same time very lively and, I think, very useful for the physical development of the boys."

Hearing this, the Father replied, "If that is so, buy not only one, but two or even three balls, as many as are needed to let the boys enjoy: every kick to the ball which will be a kick to the devil! However, you must be careful that they don't get hurt."

When the boys received the ball, it was quite an event. When the Father saw how they played, he said, "It's really delightful. Why didn't you buy them before?" I answered, "Because I knew very little about football. I saw it for the first time when I was in the army in Palermo."

98. A SOCIALIST MAYOR AND THE BATTLE OF WHEAT

Right after the war, one of the lowest peasants of the town, an ardent socialist was the Mayor of Oria. He refused to give the ration book¹¹³ to our two Institutes. Thus, we were forced to buy food secretly at a high price in the black market to survive. It was a situation that could not go on.

To get some support, I agreed with the wheat producers who were selling the wheat to us. They would declare that it had been given free, as a donation for the Orphans. So one day we sent two carts from Oria to load around 2,000 kilos of wheat. It happened that, as they passed

¹¹² The Italian *pallone* means both hot air balloon and any ball for football, volleyball, and basketball games.

¹¹³ It is an official document entitling the holder to a ration of food, clothes, or other goods issued by government authorities, prevalently during the war or in time of famine, intended mainly to control the scarce supply of the essentials.

through a village close to Oria, the constabularies seized the grain and stopped Brother Camillo Ruggeri¹¹⁴ (who later became a Rogationist priest) and the driver.

The driver was detained at the barracks that night, while the parish priest of the place was able to have Brother Camillo released and allowed to sleep in the rectory.

I was informed immediately. The next day I went to Lecce to the Prefect of the Province, and I begged him to return the wheat to us because the two Institutes of Oria were without bread, since the Mayor didn't want to grant us the ration books.

The Prefect replied, "You want me to return the wheat now? Don't you know that this is a great offense, and there are heavy fines and even imprisonment?"

"I know this," I answered, "but certainly I couldn't let Orphan boys and girls starve, rejecting the wheat which was given for free, for charity. I am willing to go to jail, provided that wheat is given to our Orphans so that they don't die of hunger. Is it perhaps a shame to go to jail to feed the sons and daughters of those who died for our Motherland? For me, it would be a great honor to go to jail for that reason. I served our Motherland for four years! I was discharged from the military service just a few months ago."

Then, I began to describe the nature and purpose of the Institute, the number of Orphans, and how we sustained them. I saw the Prefect listening to me carefully, until he said, "Well, Reverend, don't worry. We'll do everything we can to help you."

He called his Head Clerk and said, "Listen to this Reverend and then call on the phone the Director of the Annona (Food Ration Administration) on my behalf. Tell him to help the two Institutes of Oria, as best as he can."

Then, I went to the Head Clerk's office, where there were two lawyers from Messina, one of them named Furci. When I finished telling them about the confiscation of the wheat, they said that they knew Father Di Francia and his works, and praised them beyond my expectation.

The Head Clerk informed the Director of the Food Ration Administration, who was a Major, about the desire of the Prefect.

The Major received me immediately and assured me that I would receive 1,000 kilos of wheat for free within three days. Then, he suggested agreeing with the producers so that they would declare that they were generously giving the wheat that we needed for the Orphans. To this end, he released the authorizing vouchers.

When the Father came to Oria, I told him what happened. He knew Attorney Furci, who was his friend, and even though he was one of the leaders of the Freemasons in Messina, he was active in helping the Institute. However, when he heard that I had made an agreement with the producers and made them declare that the wheat was given for free for the benefit of the Orphans, while indeed it was paid more than it was worth, he immediately added, "You were wrong in making the wheat producers declare what is false. This is a lesson on how to tell lies."

¹¹⁴ Father Camillo Ruggeri was born in San Pier Niceto, Messina on March 14, 1903, entered the House of Oria in 1913, and was ordained a priest on July 20, 1930. He died in Rome on December 12, 1979.

"Father, what kind of lie is that?" I answered. "It did not harm anyone because we paid even more than the cost of the wheat. At its most, it would be a pious lie."

The Father answered, "A pious lie? Are there now pious lies?"

"Father, even the Director of the Food Ration Administration told me to let the producers declare that it was being given for free."

The Father said to me, "You must remember that, even if certain actions in themselves are not bad, they are still not to be done if others can misinterpret them. Ordinary people don't make any distinction between harmful, unofficial, and playful lie (and now you add the 'pious' one). They look at it as one says something different from what it really is. They call this a lie. We must refrain from giving people the impression of lying. We are always bound to set a good example for all."

99. HOSPITALITY IS SACRED FOR US

It was a rainy winter night, and while we were at dinner, Brother Giuseppe arrived at the railway station of Oria. He told us that he had traveled with two Capuchin Fathers, who were going to the Episcopal Seminary looking for accommodations. They were worried because being late; they might have found the door of the Seminary closed.

The Father said, "Poor friars! Why didn't you invite them to come to our House? We would be honored to receive two sons of St. Francis! The Capuchins are also very generous in hospitality with all, but especially with us."

Brother Giuseppe said, "Father, I really did not know if I could invite them without permission, and whether it was possible for them to sleep here."

The Father said, "These things don't require permission. Don't you know that hospitality has to be one of the characteristics of our Institutes? We have many rooms here. We were always hospitable in Avignone Houses where we lived in extreme poverty, and there was a shortage of facilities. Should we deny it here? Go immediately to the Seminary, and, if you see that they have not yet found accommodation, invite them here."

The Brother went and found them still knocking insistently and uselessly on the door. They were relieved at the unexpected invitation and rushed to our Institute. The Father welcomed them with affection, embraced them, and did all he could by immediately preparing dinner and rooms for them. He washed their feet and had some fire brought in so they could dry themselves. The two were edified and embarrassed by much attention, kindness, and charity.

When they were well settled, the Father said to me and Brother Giuseppe, "You have to be very big-hearted and generous with hospitality. For this reason, in our Houses, we should never lack some small and decent rooms for guests. Moreover, as long as guests will honor us with their presence, we must treat them well. Hospitality is most acceptable to the Lord. St. Paul says that because of hospitality, Abraham deserved to shelter Angels."

The next morning the Father surrounded them with further care. As they were leaving, he said, “When you come to Oria, consider this House your Convent. We will always be happy and honored to have you.”

100. THE HONOR OF BEING A POOR RELIGIOUS

Once, when the Father was in Oria, he became ill and was in bed with a high fever. The Bishop, Monsignor Antonio Di Tommaso, sent notice that he would come to visit the Father.

I proposed to the Father to move him to a more decent room because that little cell where he stayed appeared very miserable.

The Father replied, “No, not at all. The Bishop knows that we are Religious and have the vow of poverty; as such, he knows that he will find a room of a poor man, not of a rich one. Poverty for the Religious must not be a shame, but an honor.”

Since he refused to transfer, we tried to remove from his cell, or at least to cover, what looked very miserable, like the clay basin, supported by a tripod that was a surplus of scrap metal... It would have been better to have at least a basin of enameled iron. Also, what to do with the nails in the wall, covered with cloth, used as hangers?

The Father said, “I don’t understand why you’re rushing around so much. Leave things as they are. Cleaning properly, placing things in order, yes, this must be done because cleanliness and order are the decorum of poverty.”

The Father used to take care of his room in Oria by himself. Only sometimes he was assisted by the helpers Bontempo or Lombardo.

101. FATHER PALMA’S 25th ANNIVERSARY OF PRIESTHOOD

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Father Palma’s Priestly Ordination, the Father gathered the Community of Oria to inform them about the date. He wanted to celebrate this event solemnly, for the great importance that the Mass has by itself, and also as a sign of gratitude to Father Palma who was doing so much for the good of the Congregation.

So we prepared a beautiful feast offering prayers, sacramental and spiritual Communion, and little sacrifices to the Lord for Father Palma. The Father also sent a circular to all the Houses of the Sisters and the Rogationists.

When Father Palma learned about the preparations, he tried to dissuade the Father, who, however, replied, “No, no, Father Palma, we have to celebrate this date as best as we can. We do this primarily for our specific mission, which acknowledges the greatness of the priesthood. In particular, we also want to use this occasion to exalt the priesthood, and to speak of its excellence, usefulness, and the necessity in the Holy Church.”

On the day of the feast, aside from the male and female communities, there were also friends of Father Palma and admirers of the Institute. There was also a cousin of Father Palma, a female

university student who, in the opinion of the Father, was not dressed according to Christian modesty. He called the Superior of the Daughters of Divine Zeal and said, "It is not proper for that young lady to attend the feast dressed like that. Speak to her politely and let her know. If she refuses to understand, tell her, on my behalf, that she should not come into the hall."

The Mother Superior said, "That lady is the cousin of Father Palma."

The Father replied, "All the more reason to tell her what I told you."

The Mother Superior tried to defend the young lady, "She is not dressed that immodestly. It might humiliate her and the other relatives also."

The Father answered firmly, "I don't understand what the meaning of immodesty is according to you. If you don't want to tell her, I will tell her myself, though that will be more humiliating for her."

"All right, Father. I will take care of it," Mother Superior said.

The Father gave an excellent speech for the occasion, extolling priesthood and the qualities, the zeal, and sacrifices of Father Palma for the Work. He spoke so passionately that many in the audience were moved to tears.

On that occasion, our communities, relatives of Father Palma as well as friends and acquaintances competed in offering gifts.

The Father distributed all the gifts. He assigned the sacred items to our various Churches, while he sent those useful for communities to our Houses. As for those extravagant or valuable ones, he said, "These things are not for us. I will use them as gifts for important persons and benefactors. If we are not careful, the devil can also use these occasions to bring into the religious Houses items that are not suitable for holy poverty and may also be an occasion of scandal for the laity."

102. THE POOR PICK UP EVERYTHING

One year there was in Oria such an abundant harvest of olives, that the cost to collect them was higher than the proceeds of their sale. In our garden, there were many olive trees, and they were so laden that year that the branches tended to break.

Given the way the price in the market was going, we did not bother to harvest them. The olives were scattered, abandoned, and trampled upon everywhere.

The Father happened to go to the garden. Seeing so much waste, he summoned me. I explained to him the reasons for not harvesting them. He ordered me to collect them immediately, saying, "The boys cannot understand these reasons. They see that we don't appreciate the gifts of nature. In the future, they will be tempted not to value the good that the Lord sends us and to neglect them. At times, for educational purposes, we must sacrifice, in some way, even money itself."

Another day, returning home, the Father realized that in front of the Institute, there were chickpeas and beans scattered on the ground, fallen previously from downloaded bags. He began to collect them himself. Summoning me, he complained that it was a lack of poverty, of respect for the Providence, and a negative factor in the formation of the boys. I blurted out that it would have been more effort than gain...

The Father went on, "See how little you still understand about economics and even less about poverty and formation! How then can you educate others? You call a waste of time what is needed to maintain poverty and to educate the spirit of poverty and economy! Keep in mind what the Lord said to the Apostles when He performed the miracle of the multiplication of loaves: '*Gather the leftover fragments [Colligite fragmenta].*' Everything we have in the Institute and all that comes in belongs to the Divine Providence, and we must appreciate them, keep them, share them and use them in the best possible way. Our Brother Giuseppe Antonio is commendable in this. He picks up even a nail, a piece of wood, or a piece of paper. You too have to get used to this. The poor pick up everything."

103. CUT DOWN THE OLIVE TREES

In our property in Oria, there was a flat portion of land filled with olive trees. Every year they were so laden with fruits so that their branches broke, but the olives were so small that it took a long time to harvest them.

We tried to have them harvested by the Aspirants and the Religious, but it took months. This was time taken away from their studies, their work, household chores, and recreation, and it did not solve the problem. So we hired some ladies who were paid a regular daily salary. However, the expense was more than the income so that at times, we were tempted to give up the harvesting.

We realized that a vegetable garden and an orchard, especially of citruses, would have been much more useful for the House. The land planted with olive trees was most suitable for this purpose.

Several times we proposed to uproot those trees and make the land more productive for our real needs. Father Palma, however, had a love for trees, especially for olive trees, and didn't even want to hear about the plan to uproot them.

One day, convinced that the Father would never allow this because he was also fond of the olive trees, Father Palma said, "You know that cutting down tall trees require special permission from the Major Superior, so when the Father comes, ask him."

Happy with this, I prepared all the reasons to convince the Father to grant permission.

When the Father came, in the presence of Father Palma, while we were in the garden, I introduced the problem. The Father understood my plan. Astonished, he exclaimed, "What are you saying? It would be a real shame! Look at those huge trees! They are centuries old! When

they bend under the weight of the fruits, they are a joy, truly a marvel to see! It naturally leads one to thank the Divine Providence for such generosity.”

Father Palma felt revived by this, and having been asked by the Founder to express his opinion; he opened his floodgates against me, “Brother Carmelo has also said this to me, several times and I always resolutely answered no! However, when he is fixated on one thing, he gives so many reasons until he gets what he wants. He does not have experience. He doesn’t understand how many years it takes to grow trees like these.” And he went on with a sermon of praise for the olive trees...

“Excuse me, Father,” I said. “May I speak? Can I at least give my reasons?”

The Father agreed, “Go ahead. Speak.”

Father Palma intervened, “You see, Father? He will not stop until he gets what he wants. He spins a thing around so many times until you surrender.”

The Father reacted, “Father Palma, let him talk. Let us listen.”

So I started to explain my reasons to the Father.

After having listened to me carefully, he turned to Father Palma and asked, “Father, do you realize what Brother Carmelo said?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Is it true then, that it takes so long to collect the olives, and that at times the expenses are more than the gain, while an orchard and planting vegetables would be more useful for the House?”

“Yes, Father,” Father Palma replied. “All this is true. However, wouldn’t it be a shame to cut down these magnificent trees that have been growing here for centuries? I don’t dare to do it.”

“It seems,” the Father replied, “that the reasons given by Brother Carmelo are justifiable, and even confirmed by you. So, I think that this permission for a change of crops can be granted. I too, really like plants. But feeling should be guided by reason. Otherwise, it may become sentimentality. You say that it is a sin to cut down those olive trees. In reality, it is not a sin. Moreover, I can absolve this sin completely. So, be at peace. If you do not have the courage to cut them down, don’t worry. Brother Carmelo will take care of that.”

Father Palma insisted, “But Father, it is also good for our Aspirants and Religious to get used to some manual labor like collecting olives. It is not a demanding job. It also serves to show them how to earn their bread. They have to learn to make sacrifices. Otherwise, they will grow like spoiled gentlemen.”

The Father replied, “I agree that our boys should be available to do anything, even to cultivate the land and do menial tasks. If they don’t have these dispositions, it is useless for them to be in the Congregation. However, it is our duty to make them practice and apply the works

that are suited to their formation, what they will be doing in the future. We should not waste their time by having them do work that is not related to their formation.”

“What is the main work for the Aspirants and the Religious? Isn’t it to be formed by their studies, to become good Religious tomorrow, good priests and educators, to work, to carry out the tasks assigned in the House? We must, therefore, train them in all these things. The time used to harvest olives would be subtracted from the time intended directly for their own specific formation. Work is not only manual. It is also studying. Any other dutiful occupation is also work.”

“Regarding the Orphans, the reason we keep them in the Institute is to give them an appropriate education and to let them learn an art or a craft so that in the future they can live honestly in society by the fruits of their own activity. It is for that reason that they have to be trained. To use them regularly and for a long time for things other than these would be distracting them from their formation.”

“Often the formative aspect cannot depend on the economic issues unless it is a necessity for existence. Thank God, however, for now, our Institute does not have this problem because Providence is generous to us. We can take care of the specific formation of the Aspirants and Religious, as well as that of the Orphans.”

“Cut down the olive trees!”

104. NOSTALGIA FOR THE OLD ROOM

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In Oria, the floor of the room where the Father lived since the opening of the House had an old floor. Like all the other rooms, it was a mixture of lime and shards of pottery, completely worn out.

I tried to have it repaired more than once, but the Father always insisted that it was still good.

Then, when he realized that there was the danger of stumbling, he finally permitted me to have it repaired. Seeing the condition of the floor, the mason said it was beyond repair. It had to be redone entirely but not with that old system which, aside from being no longer used, would be expensive. However, with monochrome concrete tiles, it would cost less and look more decent. I was convinced, so I let him do it.

Back in Oria, the Father went to his room. Upon seeing the new floor, he scolded me saying, “You have taken away what was most beautiful in this room. It is no longer what it was. The floor looks luxurious. I will not go in. Find me another room with the kind of floor it had before.”

He refused to accept any reason. He laid it on thicker by adding, “The spirit of poverty does not always get along with the economy. Sometimes, items that cost less give a feeling of luxury vis a vis another costlier. We must also pay attention to this for the good example that we must give to our neighbor.”

“In our Houses, everything that is used for the Religious, such as buildings, furniture, everything must be according to the spirit of poverty. We can make a few exceptions for the Orphans because we have to keep them well, and they are not intended for the religious life.”

105. A STRANGE RELIGIOUS AND THE FATHER’S FIRMNESS

A certain Angelindo Varotto from the Province of Padua, whose religious name was Brother Stanislao, before undergoing military service showed himself to be so good that he was respected by all, especially for his piety and simplicity. During military life, however, he began reading everything that he happened to find.

After his military stint, he seemed to have acquired strange ideas about the Catholic doctrine and the religious life, though he maintained an appearance of devoutness. We tried in every way to correct him and to bring him back on the right path.

The Father, in particular, tried his best to make Brother Stanislao mend his ways, telling him several times that if he did not reform, he would be dismissed from the Congregation.

Aside from having strange ideas, there was also the fact that as Assistant to the Orphans, he was neglectful and intolerant, and even inflicted burdensome punishments and easily using his hands (slapping the boys). He was incorrigible. The Father said to us, “We cannot keep this blessed son in the Congregation. He is hopeless. We have done everything we could. Before dismissing him, I thought of letting him get a teaching diploma so that he will have the means to earn an honest living.”

I ventured to object, “Is it really indispensable to grant him a chance for this diploma? When he leaves, he can manage for himself. We don’t have to worry about him anymore.”

The Father answered, “This is not the right way of thinking, more so of acting. This is not only contrary to the spirit of Christian charity; it is not even human. Those who are in the Institute, as well as those who are outside, are all children of God. That is how we should see them.”

“We have to give special attention to those who leave the Work, even to those who did so due to their fault because they have rendered services to the Institute. Moreover, it might be that they left because of our fault, or because we did not form them properly, or we have given them the occasion to leave.”

Angelindo obtained a teaching diploma in Francavilla Fontana. Then the Father called him and informed him that the Institute had decided to dismiss him. He gave the news with so much compassion that the young man was moved. He considered, however, that it was an unjust measure because he maintained that his ideas and criteria regarding the boys were correct and because he believed he had the Rogationist vocation he had no intention of leaving the Congregation.

The Father still insisted persuasively promising that he would help him financially until he was settled. However, when he realized that all these efforts were useless, the Father told him firmly that in a few days, he had to remove the religious habit and leave the Institute.

Seeing himself cornered, Angelindo said to the Father, "I have the Rogationist vocation. You are sending me out, and I cannot do anything except leave. However, I am determined to enter the Seminary of Padua, and when I become a priest, I will come back to the Congregation of the Rogationists." The Father answered, "And I will leave it written in my last will that they shall not accept you unless the Lord does a miracle and changes you completely."

106. EDUCATING DOES NOT JUSTIFY SLAPS

An orphan from Francavilla Fontana was accepted in our House in Oria. His father was in prison for killing his wife. The crime had been committed in the presence of their little son. He was so overwhelmed and shocked, and it really affected his personality. He was angry and abusive.

One day while quarreling with a companion, he hit him on the head with a piece of wood, which wounded the other boy severely. The victim began to scream and was immediately brought to the infirmary.

While I was dressing the wound, I summoned the culprit and slapped him on the face twice saying, "Thug! You're going to end up in prison like your father."

At that precise moment, having heard the crying, the Father entered the infirmary, saw the slaps, and listened to the reproach.

He scolded the boy for beating his companion. He ascertained the extent of the wound and watched me dressing it. When I was done, he said to me, "When you finish everything, come to my room; I have to talk to you."

I knew what to expect. So, before entering the room, I took some time to calm myself. I knew from experience that the Father always wanted to see us happy, and he did not like to break one's cheerfulness even when he had to scold. Thus, I entered serenely. But I found him quite serious. He said, "I could not believe that you would behave like that. This is not the way to teach. It is true that the boy had committed a grave fault in hurting his companion. However, you know that he has been affected by the tragedy in his family, so somehow his behavior is excusable. Given his state of mind, you have to correct him more appropriately."

"You want to correct his anger with your anger, his beating with your slaps. The boy will not understand that you slapped him to teach him a lesson because you were angry."

"How can you justify those slaps? It is dehumanizing! Still worse when you accompanied the slaps with that word 'Thug!' Boys are never to be insulted or offended this way. You have to respect their person, their honor. Being often branded as 'criminals', they will become such."

"Not to mention the gravity of the other words that you said to him: 'You are going to jail, like your father!' That was the last straw. You reminded him of the scene that haunts him most,

the atrocity of his father, the agonizing death of his mother, the most horrible example that he could get from his father!”

“You must keep in mind that if corrections are not done as they should be done, instead of producing good, they hurt, and sometimes might even do irreparable harm.”

107. THE PERPETUAL RELIGIOUS PROFESSION

One day, the Father asked me, “Do you want to make the perpetual religious profession with Father Palma and me?”¹¹⁵ I replied, “I wish I could.”

“However, you have to prepare yourself properly. Of course, you know what perpetual profession means: to consecrate yourself to God forever. It is like a second baptism. The Saints say that religious profession can be compared to baptism and martyrdom. You must be willing to sacrifice yourself completely to God.”

He was talking to me this way in the presence of Father Vitale, who said to the Father, “Are you aware that Brother Carmelo has not made the canonical novitiate? What novitiate, in fact, was he able to do? Immediately after the earthquake, he went to Francavilla Fontana amidst so many distractions.” The Father reacted, “What are you saying, Canon, that he did not make the canonical novitiate? I remember well the life, the works, and sacrifices that he had to undergo the year he stayed in Francavilla! And then, he fought four years in the war, which is much more than a year of novitiate! Amid so many dangers for body and soul, thank God, he remained faithful to the Lord and returned to the Congregation. What else do we want? And what about the two of us? What canonical novitiate did we have? Unless we mean by canonical novitiate the fact that people still call us Canons!”¹¹⁶

108. IF I WERE I A CAPUCHIN...

While having recreation with the confreres among the Aspirants, we were talking about Orders and Congregations. I remember saying that I admired and had a great veneration for the Order of Capuchins in preference to many other religious Institutes, but had I been a Capuchin, the convent would have been like a nuthouse for me and their religious habit a straitjacket.

Sensing a feeling of contempt in my last statement, someone reported what I had said to the Father.

The Father called me and started to tell me, “You must have respect and profound reverence for all Orders and Congregations. They are inspired by the Holy Spirit to fulfill a very special

¹¹⁵ This happened on April 22, 1923, on the 3rd Sunday of Easter, Feast of the Patronage of St. Joseph. Father Hannibal made the perpetual profession in the House of Oria, together with Father Palma and Brother Carmelo Drago. On the same day, in our private chapel of the Messina, Father Vitale made the same perpetual profession, together with Clerics Teodoro Tusino and Serafino Domenico Santoro (cf. Chronology in *Positio*, Vol. II, p. 1364; BOLLETTINO, A. II, n. 3 Maggio-Giugno 1923, p. 47-48.)

¹¹⁶ A joke by playing with words *noviziato canonico* (canonical novitiate) and *Canonico* (Canon) of the Cathedral.

mission in the Church for the greater glory of God and the good of others. Each Institution is a mine of great Saints and chosen souls. Certainly, the Order of Capuchins excels among these Institutions for its spirit of observance, penance, and seraphic poverty, as well as the flowering and variety of its great Saints. I never imagined that with your superficiality, and I should say, with so much temerity, you dared to say those words. Don't you know that a Capuchin monastery is a Church of God, where day and night those holy Religious praise God with their prayers and the holy sacrifice of the Mass, and where day and night Jesus dwells in the Blessed Sacrament? You called straitjacket the religious habit, the sacred habit, the habit of St. Francis! Have you lost your mind? Don't you know that you have scandalized the Aspirants? Is this the way you form them? You have to remedy that somehow. Later, I will tell you how to do it."

After he finished speaking, I pointed out calmly, "Father, if you allow me, I will tell you that this has not been reported accurately. They said only the second part, omitting the first. In speaking about the Capuchins, I first said that I had great admiration and veneration for the Capuchin Order in preference to many other religious Institutions. However, if I had been a Capuchin, the convent would have been a nuthouse for me and the habit a straitjacket."

The Father said, "Well, in that case, the situation changes, thank goodness. Since the Lord has called you to our Congregation, it is clear that you must feel attracted to us, and not to other Orders or Religious Congregations."

"This is an effect of one's specific vocation. For this reason, the Lord has called you to be a Rogationist and not a Capuchin, a Jesuit, or a Salesian."

"Your imaginary assumption was out of place and absurd because while you are a Rogationist, you could not also be a Capuchin."

"Though the situation changes, and is different from what I was told, you have, however, committed a serious impropriety by calling the Capuchin monastery a nuthouse and the religious habit a straightjacket, especially for saying this in front of the boys, who, very often, are not able to understand and may be disappointed."

Also, when it comes to religious Institutions, we must always speak well of everyone and everything: of their purpose and mission, of their apostolate and habit. Nor should you express unfavorable comparisons between our Congregation and other religious Institutions. They are all equal works of God, and all of them, according to their nature and specific purpose cooperate equally in the Church for the glory of God, and the salvation and help of neighbors. It would be a great mistake to belittle other religious Institutions to give greater prominence to our Congregation. It would truly be very dangerous selfishness."

109. WHERE IS THE ROOM FOR OUR PRISON?

Between 1919 and 1920, contrary to his custom, the Father was not able to be in Oria for a long time. Meanwhile, some work was done in the House. One of them was a charming small dormitory for the Orphans built and furnished, and modern for those times, and perhaps even refined.

When he arrived in Oria, the Father said to Father Palma and me, “I learned that you had made some improvements in the House. Show them to me.”

We started by visiting the better equipped and more welcoming classrooms, the improved laboratories, and finally, the new dormitory. The Father became upset. He asked whom the dorm was intended for. Learning that it was for the Orphans; however, his face lit up and said, “Thank goodness! If it is for them, it is fine.” Noticing that the area was well ventilated, with a well-polished stoneware floor that had a particular design; skirting board in enamel with a flowery frame, white beds symmetrically arranged, he said, “It is really nice. I like it! May the Divine Providence be infinitely blessed and thanked for helping us so generously. Woe, however, if we misuse it and fail in holy poverty, creating unnecessary conveniences for us. For the Churches, for the sick, for the Orphans and the poor, we can make exceptions regarding the economy. For the Orphans, in particular, we must have more than maternal care, in the way we treat them as well as, relatively, in the other conveniences. For them, the Divine Providence helps us so generously. Poor boys! They do not have parents, the dearest people in the world! How can we replace them? Even if we could do more than parents, we would always be just a replacement. Let us try at least to be good substitutes.”

“Somehow we can succeed if we try to look at the Orphans with the spirit of faith desired by Our Lord: Whoever receives one of these in my name welcomes me. Whatever you do to one of these for my sake, I will hold it as done for me.”

Changing the topic, the Father added, “Still, I cannot help but point out to you that there is still one very important thing for educational Institutions which is missing. There is no cell. I mean... the prison.”

I said, “The prison? What are we going to do with a prison? What is its purpose? Is our Institution a correctional one, or perhaps an army camp?” The Father replied, “You ask what is the use of a prison here? Is it so difficult to understand? It is needed to jail boys that do wrong in serious matters.”

“If it depends on me,” I added, “I would never put a boy in jail.” The Father replied, “I don’t understand why you have so much loathing for the prison. When you were in the military, were you ever put in prison?”

“No, thank God. In my four years in the military, I did not experience what prison is, but I repeat: I would never throw a boy in there; it is not education, it is the opposite of any pedagogical criteria.”

Winking at Father Palma, the Father went on, “Nevertheless, let's find a suitable place for it.”

The conversation of the Father seemed completely strange to me, and knowing the Father’s sentiments, I could not find a reason. I would never suspect that he could say those things to test me and to know my thoughts. Maybe someone had accused me of being strict!

So we started looking for a suitable place for a prison.

After discarding several proposals, Father Palma finally led us to a dark closet, with some sort of hole for air and light and where one could enter only through a trap door. The Father said, "This is very good; it seems to be made on purpose just for a prison." And turning to me he said, "Is it not so? Don't you like it?"

I was getting heated. "Not at all! Only firewood should be placed here..." I said contemptuously and scornfully.

"Bravo!" the Father finally smiled, "I am glad that you think so. I did this just to test you. I wanted to be sure of your thoughts on this."

He continued with a series of reflections:

"Often, educators who are taking direct care of the boys make a big mistake: they think of correcting and educating them by force, bitter reproaches, painful punishments, beatings, and imprisonment. The boys cannot be educated this way. Instead of being formed, they are disfigured, debased, irritated, and dehumanized. Some would legitimize their punishments, comparing them with those given by parents to their children. The reference does not hold because there is a big difference between the influence that parents have on the minds of their children, and what educators have on their pupils. Besides, parents ordinarily do not go to excess in punishing their children. If they overdo it, they are not educating well."

"To succeed in the difficult art of education, the educator must always get to the boys using their heart and reason. The educator has to adopt Don Bosco's Preventive System, which is also ours, as I have said many times."

"We have to remember that more care is required for the Orphans than for the other boys because the Orphans lack their parents' care. Also, when it comes to punishment, they are more harmful because the Orphans will consider them as a consequence of their having no parents."

110. A BRUISE ON THE FOREHEAD

One evening, at a late hour, I had not yet prayed the Rosary. I was exhausted, and I kept falling asleep. To overcome it, I prayed while walking through the corridors. However, I was so sleepy that the rosary would often fall from my hands, I could not remember the mystery I was praying, so I would begin again.

Walking half-asleep, I banged my head against one of the edges of the corridor, getting a bruise on my forehead.

The next morning, when he saw me, the Father asked what happened. When I told him, he said, "This is a lack of common sense and an exaggeration. The Lord does not want things done by force. It is true that we must do everything in order not to miss the practices of piety. We ahead to be able to accomplish them in due time. However, when, because of one's assignments or an unexpected event, you are not able to do some of them, don't worry or try to do what is impossible. Have you not been working for the Lord the whole day? The effort in doing one's duty is prayer. It would have been better for you to go to bed since it was already so late. At least

you would have done one thing. Instead, what kind of Rosary did you pray in that way? With what attention and devotion were you able to pray it? Even in religious practices, we must be reasonable. Indeed, we must be moderate in some activities more than in others because piety and devotion do not consist of the recitation of many prayers and practices, but in reciting and doing them well, with attention and love.”

111. THE FATHER’S DREAM FOR HIS INSTITUTES

In his biography of the Father, Father Vitale writes about a boy who was a kleptomaniac. I remember that the Father used to tell me, “When our Institute will be developed, if the Lord wills it, we shall give the Orphanage a more complete setup and organization.”

He would offer the following points:

1. - It is a major disadvantage to keep boys of all ages together in one classroom, as we are forced to do now. To avoid inconvenience, it is not enough to have them divided into sections. We should educate them in different Houses. This would be ideal for organizational, moral, academic, formative, and economic reasons.

2. - It would be ideal to have Orphanages specifically to welcome the tiny ones, those completely abandoned. Their condition is pitiable because they are often abandoned at the age when they are most in need of assistance. They should be entrusted to women educating them under the guidance of our Sisters. It is not proper to keep very small boys in our male Orphanages. First of all, they will suffer because the environment is not suitable, and they become a hindrance to the Assistants and to discipline.

3. - Sometimes, in the Orphanages, because of their character, some boys cannot remain in the community because just one or two of this type can put the whole section or even the Institute into chaos. For the good of all, we are forced to dismiss them, even though we know that they need help the most and that leaving and left to themselves, they will easily become failures.

This type of boys should be accepted in a House with personnel well trained in management and education.

It would be a redemption! Some boys are easily judged as incorrigible because they are stubborn and keep doing the same fault. It is true that some of them are predisposed to this because of a hereditary defect, or by the environment or by traumatic events in their childhood. However, I am sure that with the right formation, they can be corrected.

At this point, I said, “But Dr. Lombroso¹¹⁷ says instead that some people are naturally predisposed to be considered incorrigible.”

¹¹⁷ Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) was an Italian psychiatrist and criminologist with high authority in his time, despite the opposition and criticism of his methods and conclusions. According to him, genius and recklessness, holiness, and perversion are already determined by genetic inheritance. Hence, the assertion that criminals are born

The Father replied, “If you start reading this kind of book, you will fill your head with incongruities. You will not understand anything anymore. And besides, don’t you know that the Lombroso theory, the so-called determinism, has been condemned?”

I replied, “How shall I deal with those who could definitely cause misbehavior in others?”

“If they don’t reform,” the Father replied, “I am sorry, but we have to dismiss them for the common good and try to help them when they are outside as best as we can.”

4. - He continued saying: There are cases where we cannot accept the boy because of chronic and hereditary diseases, and there are others whom we need to dismiss. These poor boys are more in need of care. We should do everything possible to have a separate large infirmary, a *valetudinary*,¹¹⁸ in a pleasant and healthy place, where we gather the boys that cannot be better placed elsewhere. Understandably, we are referring to cases that don’t require hospital treatment. Otherwise, we have to resort to that. Furthermore, when boys are admitted to the hospital, we must consider them as our own children.

5. - This House is even more necessary for the religious Communities. Our Religious, as well as the Sisters, should be hospitalized as little as possible, and only when it is requested by the greater good of the one who is sick, but never to remove the inconvenience or discomfort.

6. - It would then be a beautiful charity and very suited to our mission as Rogationists to be able to take care of aged and disabled priests, welcoming them to suitable homes. Likewise, to be available to help in the formation and management of Seminaries.

112. THE QUALITY OF PEOPLE GIVES LUSTER TO THE CONGREGATION

Upon returning to Oria after a long absence, the Father said to me, “You have not yet submitted the evaluation of the Aspirants. Among all the activities of the House, those regarding vocations deserve more attention. We need to get many vocations and most of all to form them well because the life and development of the Congregation depend on them. First of all, we have to pray for vocations because they are the fruits of prayer. This is the secret, the sure and infallible means to have vocations.”

Then, we need to advertise primarily with the help of our Sacred Allies and through our printed materials: *The Miraculous Secret; God and Neighbor...*”

I said, “We have approximately 40 Aspirants.”

The Father resumed, “Thank God they are a good number, but try to have more because many of these boys will not persevere. As our Lord says, ‘Many are called, but few are chosen.’”

as such, without a possibility of social or religious redemption (cf. *L'uomo delinquente*, Milan, 1876). Father Hannibal, like Don Bosco, Bartolo Longo, and others, were proud opponents of this theory and belied it with facts.

¹¹⁸ Ward for people with chronic and long-lasting diseases.

“Most of all we must care about the quality of the Aspirants and their formation. The number should never compromise quality. Remember what the Holy Spirit says in this respect, ‘A good child gives greater honor to the parents than a hundred of mediocre ones!’”

“One of the most important signs of a vocation is to see a young man diligently doing his exercises of piety. However, he must not be overburdened by them.”

“We must assist these boys with care, and gradually accustom them to the religious life to make them love it. A very healthy, affectionate, and serene environment is important. If there are candidates who do not have good dispositions, in due course and with proper precautions, they must be dismissed because it takes only a few to spoil the environment. We have to give much importance to the school. It is useless to keep a boy who does not succeed in academics because of habitual laziness.”

“Before adopting textbooks, we must examine them well. The school, as far as possible, shall be staffed by our confreres because this influences formation a lot. Thus, let the school be well organized.”

“At the end of the school year, send me the results of the exams of the Aspirants as well as of the Orphans.”

I pointed out to the Father that because of lack of space, we could not accept more Aspirants and Orphans. This also affected discipline because there was no possibility of a separate set-up for Aspirants and Orphans. It was, therefore, necessary to extend the Institute.

The Father called Father Palma immediately and asked him to study the possibility of an extension for the Institute.

113. THE ROTARY-PRESS IS NOT CONDUCTIVE TO LEARN PRINTING

The Community of Oria rejoiced at the news of the purchase of the rotary printing press in Messina. It was the best we could dream of. It could print, cut, fold, and load on the cart; it could print up to 25,000 copies per hour on one side; 50,000 on both sides. When a paper was spoiled, it would stop automatically, and a bell would ring. However, I dared to say, “I think that this machine is not good for our school since it does everything by itself. It does not help to teach how to print, which is the more important thing for our Orphans.”

They reported my judgment to the Father. He called me and said, “I am glad that you are interested in the things that are done in the Institute. It is true that the facilities of the laboratories should encourage the learning of arts and crafts. It is also true that the rotary press is not suitable for that purpose because it is intended primarily for production. However, you have to be aware that the number of copies of our newsletter *God and Neighbor*, the main organ of our Anthonian Benefactors Offices, has increased to the point that we had to install a high quality and fast producing machine. In this way, we have not only high-speed production but also the workforce employed in works that have nothing to do with learning the art of printing can be set free. How much time were they spending in feeding the sheets into the machine, in cutting and folding? At

times they spent a whole month always doing the same things, and we were not able to produce what was needed for the Anthonian Benefactors Office. Now the rotary press allows us to save much time, which can be used more effectively than the simpler machines, which are most suitable for learning.”

The rotary-press proved to be very useful for the purposes indicated by the Father.

114. THE FATHER AGREED

One day, while going with Father Palma to the printing press of Oria, he noticed that, through the window, the sunlight was striking directly on the printing machine. Looking at me, he said, “Do you realize that the printing machine directly exposed to sunlight dries up the ink, with the result that the printouts are not sharp? You have to put a white curtain to shield the window from the sun without reducing the light required for printing.”

I ventured to observe, “Father, you cannot put a white curtain here!” The Father immediately and resolutely interrupted me, “You always have to make comments! Put up the curtain as soon as possible, do you understand?” “Yes, Father, I understand, but allow me to tell you why I make an observation. I do want to put the curtain, as you say. If I had no intention of doing it, I would not have said anything. I would just have used the inconvenience later to excuse myself from not having done it.”

“A white curtain will be handled by the boys often with their hands dirty with ink and other things so that it will have to be replaced every day. I think it would be more convenient to use a colored curtain, yet would not dim the light.”

Then the Father said, “You are right. It is not good to see the difficulties and not present them, using them later as an excuse when one does not succeed.”

115. BEWARE OF ACCEPTING CHARITIES

One morning, I had gone from Oria to the Military District Office of Brindisi to obtain a document concerning Brother Serafino Santoro. At the station of Brindisi, I heard Father Palma call my name. He was on a train bound for Lecce. He told me to get into the train where, aside from him, I found the Father, the Mother Superior of San Benedetto, and another Sister. The Father told me to go with them to Lecce to see and visit an Institute, founded by a certain Monsignor Chiriat, who wanted to entrust it to us.

Once at Lecce, a man showed us around the Institute while we were waiting for the Monsignor. The Institute was in a central location. It looked good both in size and architecture, but it was not very functional. There was not enough space for playing. The furnishings were not in bad condition, however.

The principal observation from the Father was the Institute’s lack of space for playing. Especially in a city, space is an essential aspect of the proper functioning of an Institute.

When the Monsignor arrived, he presented the legal part. The Institute could neither be given nor sold because it was a ‘moral entity’.¹¹⁹ It could only be entrusted for several years, with an agreement in accordance with the nature of its by-laws.

After listening to this, the Father said very politely “Monsignor, we thank you very much for your kindness and for the esteem and preference that you have for our Institution. However, in principle, we do not accept works that are *moral entities*. So you can freely entrust its management to anyone else you like.”

The Monsignor continued, “Very Reverend Father, I assure you that the current Administrative Council is composed of reliable persons.”

The Father answered, “Yes, I understand. But, as you well know, that could easily change. We want to be free in the way we treat the boys, and according to our criteria of education. The Administrative Council, though composed of well-disposed persons, may not allow us the freedom because it is not possible to give an account of our special needs and the needs of an Institute.”

The Monsignor added, “Very Reverend Father, I cannot help but agree with your principles. Frankly, I am so sorry to have established this work into a *moral entity*. If I were as sorry for my sins, I would go straight to Paradise. I was badly advised.”

The Father thanked him for his frankness, and we left for Oria.

On the train, I said to the Father, “It’s a pity to give it up. It is a beautiful building. Could we not just try?” The Father answered, “It is evident that you don’t know what a *moral entity* is.”

116. SHORTCUT PRAYERS

Once at the House of Oria, after he finished the Mass, the Father went back to the Church for the thanksgiving, when he heard the prayer leader saying, “One Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory for all other intentions.”

As we walked out, he said to me, “You have found a way to skip the specific prayers You just recite one Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory for the various intentions, and everything is done... While I am still alive, you have confirmed my concern about what will happen to all these prayers after my death. I am not saying that the Community must be burdened with a heap of formulas. This may happen when prayers of homage [*ossequi*], triduums, novenas, monthly prayers coincide.”

“This can be avoided by studying a proper calendar and following the criteria of the *Ordo*¹²⁰ of the Church, which, when several feasts coincide, solemnizes the main one, making a simple commemoration of the others. Thus, it is not left to the discretion of the prayer leader to shorten,

¹¹⁹ *Moral Entity* was the equivalent more or less of a Foundation or a Non-profit Organization.

¹²⁰ *Ordo* is the Church’s universal or diocesan calendar with the official indications for the liturgy.

or worse, eliminate some prayers. Let the Superiors be vigilant so that prayers are not neglected, and make sure they are always recited well. This is a great responsibility.”

“At times, with the excuse that there is a lot to do in the House, today we fail to recite a prayer, tomorrow will be easier to recite two, and so on. Activity blocks prayer. Little by little, we lose the religious spirit, which is the soul, the breath, and especially the life of our Institute. Unlike other Congregations, ours is essentially based on prayer, as evidenced by our specific goal, our special vow, and our very name as Rogationists.”

“The perfection and life of our Institute are all placed in the spirit of prayer.”

“We must also keep in mind what St. Bonaventure says, that Our Lord compensates our time at prayer with many graces and blessings upon our works. We should not omit prayers so easily because while the specific nature of our Congregation requires the prayers to obtain good workers for the Holy Church, those to St. Anthony for the benefactors are also required by the spirit of justice.”

117. A LIE IS WORTH YEARS IN PRISON

Our confreres in Messina told me the following story. While unloading a truck loaded with rolls of paper, one roll, weighing three hundred kilos, fell on top of a worker who was crushed. He died a few days later in the hospital.

It was a tragedy: a life cut short with a grieving family, but also a grave responsibility of the company and the Institute as an employer. The worker was not insured because he had only been recently hired. After a short agitated meeting, the Council decided to enter the name of the deceased into the list of the insured workers of the printing press antedated before his death.

That evening, when the Father learned about it, he immediately told the Council that what they had done was wrong. The next day, before celebrating Mass, he went to the Insurance Office to tell them the truth.

The employees were surprised at the righteousness, and said, “Father, we don’t know anything about what happened. Just leave, and don’t tell anyone that you came here.”

Back from the Insurance Office, the Father informed Father Vitale what he had done. He added that he could not sleep that night because of what happened to the worker, and he felt guilty about the misrepresentation. Father Vitale, pointed out that the consequences could be serious both for the company and for the Institute not only financially but also on the criminal side, and that we could even go to jail. The Father replied that it was always a lesser evil to pay any amount or spend years and years in prison than to tell a lie.

He was so against lying that he did not even want to hear about them.

118. DON’T COUNT ON PRIESTS FROM MESSINA FOR THE NEEDS OF ORIA

Father Palma often pointed out to the Father the great need of another priest for the House of Orta, especially since he had to be away for long periods. He kept saying to the Father that all his

hopes were placed on the priests who would come from Messina as soon as they were ordained. The Father interrupted him, saying, “Father Palma, I am more convinced than you of the need for another priest in this House, but you cannot count on the Religious who are studying in Messina because as soon as they are ordained if the Lord wills it, there will not be enough of them even for Messina. So, try to do your best here. Without waiting for these young Aspirants who are still in their *Ginnasio*, put the Brothers Redento, Luca, Camillo, and Tarcisio immediately to study, and let them take accelerated courses, but done properly.”

“Free them from some of their tasks, provide them with good and skilled teachers, and all other necessary means. It doesn’t matter if they are advanced in age. It just means that they will have to apply more goodwill.”

Then the Father also briefed me, “I said to Father Palma that Brothers Redento, Luca, Camillo, and Tarcisio have to study; thus, they are to be dispensed with some tasks. When will you make up your mind? We have a great need for priests. You yourself have experienced how they are needed in this House. We have to pray and pray a lot for this purpose. If we pray with trust, the Lord will certainly send good vocations to us. If we don’t pray, for sure He will not grant them because He has established that in his divine plan. He said: *‘Rogate ergo Dominum messis, ut mittat Operarios in Messem suam.’*”

“I will compose a prayer to St. Francis de Sales so that he may obtain from the Lord many vocations to this House. You will recite this prayer on the 29th of each month. However, it is not enough to pray. We have to keep the good vocations that are already here and to use all means to obtain more.”

“The zeal for the good of the Church and the increase of the Congregation should consist mainly of obtaining vocations through our prayers as well as through our work.”

“This is the most important of all our activities. We don’t have to be afraid of any cost and sacrifice for vocations and their formation. He who does not show interest in vocations is a sure sign that he is not called. He should, therefore, be dismissed as soon as possible from the Congregation because he will just spoil the environment and destroy the spirit of the Institute.”

119. THE HOUSE OF ORIA SHALL PROMOTE VOCATIONS FOR ITS NEEDS

Regarding vocations, the situation in the House of Oria had become problematic. During World War I, almost all of the Aspirants had returned to their families, and the few remaining had been transferred to Messina. Even Father Vitale had returned to Sicily, thus shrinking, even more, the religious community of Oria.

A few Orphans, plus a small group of Aspirants as Coadjutor Brothers, remained. The idea of an Aspirantate for Brothers was Father Palma’s idea, and the Founder applauded it in a letter on August 21, 1919, to Father Vitale: “It’s a wonderful idea to form a community of lay Brothers, which is just as important as the community of priests since one supports the other.”

Later, Father Palma called the Father's attention to the fact that the communities of the Aspirants and the Orphans were increasing. Consequently, he felt the need to have at least one more priest. Father Palma said to the Father, "I can hardly wait for the time that our clerics of Messina are ordained so that at least one could come here, where there is so much need."

However, the Father said to him, "Father Palma, it is useless to keep hoping and insisting on having one of the ordained priests from Messina. I am as convinced as you are of the need for more priests. When they are ordained, the priests in Messina will not be enough even for Messina alone. If you want priests for Oria, you have to work as you did for those aspiring to become Coadjutor Brothers, with the help of the Lord, and form them yourself here (in Oria). Moreover, I see that the House of Oria is moving towards a normal and regular life. I noticed that some of the Aspirants are outstanding. Put the most capable of regular study for the priesthood. Indeed, I propose that more than the boys, preferably choose the Brothers like Carmelo, Camillo, Redento, Luca, and Tarcisio who have the skills and attitudes, to have a greater guarantee of consistency in a shorter period."

The Father said this in 1919. He added further, "We know that to have vocations, we must promote them or better yet, look for them. However, first, we must ask God through prayer. He is, in fact, the only Master. One's vocation, as we know, is a very precious gift from God, who, in His divine plan, does not grant it if He is not requested. He said, 'The harvest is plentiful, the laborers are few, pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.' Therefore, if we pray, God will infallibly give them to us because He Himself has promised it. If we don't pray, for sure He will not grant them to us. It can be said that vocation is a son or daughter of God and prayer. God is the Father, prayer the mother. Therefore, we need to pray and pray a lot."

"Not only must we pray to the Lord without ceasing, but we also have to pray to the Most Holy Virgin Mary so that she may implore vocations from her divine Son."

"We still need to pray in a special way to the Celestial Rogationists and all the holy men and women of heaven, asking them to join our prayers to obtain this greatest of all graces."

"I will write a special prayer to St. Francis de Sales to be recited in this Community."

"We have to cooperate, by adding our work to prayer. Work joined with prayer becomes important, and is effective. Work alone is worth nothing."

"The most important and most effective way to acquire good vocations is our fervent life as Rogationists, the exemplary observance of the holy vows, the perfect mutual charity, and the attachment to the spirit of the Congregation. This is the most powerful magnet that will attract to our Institute those to whom God has given the holy vocation. This is the main way vocations come to us."

"Another means of attracting vocations is to make known the Congregation and its works, especially because its twofold purpose is ever clear and timely."

"However, no matter how valuable and attractive something may be, if it is not known, it cannot be desired. Very little is known about our Congregation. It is better known as a charitable

Institution rather than a religious Congregation. So you have to advertise its beauty as much as possible. We must make use of the press. We can send the booklet *The Miraculous Secret* by mail. There is something of the life and the works of the Congregation in it.”

“In the newsletter *God and Neighbor* I tried several times to explain the nature of the Institute. I hope to continue to insist on it.”

“Meanwhile, it is good to put up an occasional publication and to send it immediately especially to the Sacred Allies, to parish priests, to the priests whom we know, as well as to the groups of the Catholic Action. Whenever it is possible, it is also good to go around. The vivid voice of a person is more effective.”

The Father continued, “However, it is not enough just to obtain vocations. We must learn to safeguard and to form them. It would be a kind of sacrilege to lose vocations out of carelessness after having obtained them since they are so precious and holy.”

“The first requirement to keep vocations is to form them on the solid foundations of piety, through the practice of prayer, frequent reception of the holy Sacraments, spiritual reading, and reading the lives of the Saints. We have to add the practice of virtues, knowledge of the religious life, and the Congregation. Everything, however, shall be according to age and capability.”

The Father continued, “A good example is also paramount, as well as a suitable environment for formation. For this, we require that boys and youth without the basic qualities should not be admitted to the Aspirantate, except those who give at least some hope of success. It is also necessary to remove, at the proper time, those who do not show a willingness to embrace the life of the Institute, especially those who would not be a good example.”

“Consistent impartiality, thoughtfulness, and affection are essential for preserving vocations. Without this, vocations, sooner or later, will be lost.”

“Besides, to keep vocations, we must treat the Aspirants well, without skimping on what might be necessary or useful for them, but in a way that does not create unnecessary needs or requirements. Little by little, in time and with good manners, they will become accustomed to the traditions and life of the Institute.”

“As for the method of education or formation in the Aspirantate, with greater preference for the Orphanage, the Preventive System must be implemented, focusing on reason, religion, and love.”

“The Aspirants have to understand what they do. We have to lead them to do what they do because they are willing. All is to be done with supernatural motivation.”

“On the practices of piety, they shall not be overburdened. We must try to lead the Seminarians to love prayer. Overburdening Seminarians with prayers would have a counter-productive effect, and may even endanger perseverance in their vocation.”

Finally, turning to me, the Father said, “Everything I said is primarily addressed to you because you assist the Aspirants directly. You are the one who will have to take care of these things. With holy humility, follow the directives of Father Palma.”

“Pray to the Lord and the Most Holy Virgin to enlighten you. Remember that providing and caring for vocations is the greatest service that you can render to the Lord and the Congregation while to lose even just one is the greatest damage you could do.”

120. THE FATHER INSISTS I STUDY FOR PRIESTHOOD

On several occasions, the Father had expressed his desire that I should study for the priesthood. He often spoke of the excellence of priesthood, of the great good that could be done for the souls and the Congregation’s need for holy priests.

I was always negative because I preferred to be assigned to the direct care of the Orphans, and I thought that if I became a priest, I might not be able to do it anymore.

When I returned from military service, the Father kept repeating the invitation with greater insistence.

At that time, Father Celebrano, a Jesuit, came to Oria to preach the annual spiritual retreat. If I remember right, there were rumors that he had been the confessor of the Pope. He tried in every way to persuade me to study for the priesthood. His insistence was so strong that I felt he was biased. A few days later, the Father returned with greater determination to repeat his invitation. When I gave him the reason for my refusal, he said, “For us Rogationists, the desire to take care of the Orphans is not only commendable but mandatory. It is our very mission, like the Rogate. However, you have a completely wrong idea thinking that the Rogationist priest cannot devote himself to the immediate assistance of the Orphans. It is the exact opposite. To be a good educator, one should be a great philosopher, a great theologian, and a great saint. A priest is more equipped to educate than the simple Coadjutor Brother because of his higher preparation.

Moreover, don’t Jesuits, Salesians and others work immediately with the boys and young people? As a priest, you would be more helpful to the Orphans. Besides, God’s will is also better known through the will of one’s superiors. Your resistance might denote a strong attachment to your own will and a sign of selfishness. Pray more and think about it.”

A few days later, he wrote to me from Messina asking for an answer.

I replied that I was entrusting myself to his will.

When he returned to Oria, the Father said to me, “Now I urge you to put yourself into a good attitude because priesthood requires many studies, aside from a great spiritual formation. Try, therefore, to disengage yourself from house chores. Get the help of our interns and where it is possible, also from externs. It does not matter that you’re already advanced in age. Many Jesuits are being ordained at an advanced age.”

121. OUR SCHOOLS, A FATHER'S CONCERN

When the *Ginnasio* school began in Oria in 1910, the Father wanted it accurately set up, so that the students could successfully take their exams in the government or legally recognized schools. That is why he wanted our first Aspirants to have regular admission to the *Ginnasio*.

We pointed out to the Father that the main difficulty for such a school in Oria was the lack of teachers and the challenge of finding them in the town proper and in the vicinity. The few we could find were already committed to the Seminary.

The Father said to Father Palma, “Look for teachers. You know where since you have many friends and acquaintances. Pay them well, and don’t worry about expenses. It is a crucial issue for the Congregation. What is important is to find them and that they teach well. If we don’t start now, we will never start. We will always expect to encounter difficulties.”

Father Palma took the matter seriously. In the beginning, the school functioned relatively well. However, with the increase of classes, the difficulty in finding the teachers also increased, to the point that it became impossible to continue.

We informed the Father, who said, “This worries me. We have to pray a lot. You too, Father Palma. Apply some Holy Masses so that the Lord may enlighten us on what to do. Given the nature of our Congregation, academic formation is vital for its development. Nor can we simply improvise when it comes to studies.”

“The school must be run well so that our students can acquire the legal titles, and be able in the future, God willing, to teach and to assure us of having private schools that are officially recognized, with flexible curricula, carried out according to our criteria; and all this without sending our Aspirants and Religious to schools outside, not even for exams.”

“We must strive for this, with the Lord's help and with our goodwill, at the cost of any sacrifice.”

“All this is very important both for education as well as for the spirit of the Congregation. It is known that the teachers from outside are always, more or less, mercenary. We also know that with his knowledge, by his work and example, the teacher enlightens, urges, animates, motivates, and almost drags the pupils, gently, to work actively at their knowledge and individual perfection. The teacher imparts not only an objective but also a subjective influence on the pupils because, while he presents to them things as they are in themselves, he adds, even without being aware, a personal color and contour according to his feelings.”

“The teacher communicates to the pupil something of himself. If the teacher is a Rogationist, he communicates something Rogationist; if he is a secular priest, he conveys something of a secular priest; if he is a layperson, something of the laity.”

The Father went on to say, “There is also another advantage with our own teachers: we know those who are better to make a more rational and timely selection. That is why Don Bosco used to say that teaching is one of the best ways to get to know the students.”

“The teaching done by our Religious is also a good exercise of apostolate. It serves the cultural education of the persons themselves, and all comes back to the honor and prestige of the Institute.”

“We must also add that there is an economic benefit because we save on the salary of external teachers.”

Finally, he concluded, “In the meantime, these are good desires that might be fulfilled, who knows, in how many years from now, if ever the Lord wills it. But in the meantime, this should be our aim, and we shall try to start seriously now. Otherwise, they will remain just wishes forever.”

“Meanwhile, what can we do to ensure regular classes for these children, since we cannot find any teachers?”

While I was still present, Father Palma answered, “If you agree, we can ask the Bishop to allow our boys to attend the school in the Diocesan Seminary.”

The Father said, “In principle, I am against this, but, since we cannot do otherwise because of lack of teachers, we have no choice except to ask the Bishop to grant us this help.”

“I would have preferred to have our internal school, even with all external teachers because they could somehow follow our directions, and the boys would not be in contact with the seminarians. No matter how good they may be, they, follow an ecclesiastical career, which has some similarities with religious life, but also some profound differences. However, given the absolute necessity, let us pray to the Lord that He may guard our Aspirants.”

“For those who go to the Seminary, we have to prepare a set of regulations telling them how they should behave on the road, with the professors, and with the seminarians. We have to advise them to be courteous and good examples for the seminarians, without being too familiar.”

Then, turning to me, he said, “I exhort you to have special care for them. Provide them with everything they need and follow them diligently. If you notice that someone does not want to listen to the instructions given, remove him from the studies.”

The Bishop, Monsignor Antonio Di Tommaso, willingly consented for our students to attend classes in the Seminary, where they were welcomed and appreciated.

122. THE BENEFITS OF HAVING OUR OWN AS TEACHERS

One day in Oria, when I was leaving school, the Father told me, “I have to talk to you. I deliberately waited for the end of the lessons.”

I answered, “Frankly, Father, I am not yet finished. I still have to teach the Aspirants. But if you like, I can skip it and come immediately to you.”

The Father replied, “No, you should not easily leave unless it is something serious and urgent. I am glad that even though you are still studying you are also teaching. That is great for your education and the Aspirants.”

“It is similar to when Don Bosco’s first collaborators were both students and teachers. You may not have the capability of more experienced teachers, but you make up for it with careful preparation.”

“When the teachers in our schools are our people, there are multiple benefits. Teachers advance in their cultural development, to the advantage of students, while the House receives

substantial savings. Then, when these teachers are our Aspirants to the religious life, it helps to give them a more profound knowledge of their qualities and inclinations, to achieve a more definite discernment of their vocation.

It would be excellent for the Institute to be committed so that our schools may be legally recognized to confer civil titles to both Religious and Orphans. It would also give a higher prestige and good to the Institute.”

123. THE NEW BUILDING IN ORIA

From the beginning, the House of Oria had proved to be inadequate for the needs of a charitable, educational Institute where there were two communities of boys, Orphans, and Aspirants, to be kept separate.

There was, therefore, the need for new premises because we could not continue with the adjustments and modifications of the existing building, which were too expensive and not practical.

After much praying, thinking, and studying, the Father granted permission for a new building for the Orphans, to separate the two communities.

First, however, the Father asked me to go and visit the best Institutes in Italy, to get an idea of what could be useful for our purpose.

He gave me a letter of introduction to the various Institutes explaining the purpose of my visit.

I was welcomed almost everywhere I went and presented the letter, especially in the Institutes headed by Religious and in an exceptional way by the Salesians, who were warm and hospitable.

I was amazed at how famous and highly esteemed the Father was. I told him everything when I got back, and he said to me, “See how useful those visits are? It does not mean that we imitate them. We must do like the bee, which only takes what it needs for its honey from the various flowers. From the other Institutes, we take what can work for us, bearing in mind our needs and financial capabilities.”

He added, “Now we have to pray, especially for the success of the Work. Have a good plan drafted by an engineer, so that the new building has everything that is required for the proper life of the Orphans: dormitories, classrooms, laboratories. Let there be classrooms not only for the primary but also for high school. Let the laboratories be set up with advanced and technical criteria. Remember that charity for the Orphans should not be limited to keeping them well during the time they are in the Institute, but has to aim primarily for their complete training on the human and professional level, so that they can succeed and live well their entire life. Before implementing the plan, let me see it!”

The blueprint had one floor more than the current building, but during the construction, we had to limit ourselves because we realized that it would have been difficult to develop professional schools in a small town like Oria.

124. ALLERGIC TO PORK

At an early age, I had a natural repugnance for pork. When I entered the Institute, I had to adjust to eating it because, to tell the truth, it was not really harmful to me. However, my aversion was such that, after eating it, I would often throw up.

One day, the Father came to the table almost at the end of the meal. That day I had eaten pork, and while the Community was reciting the thanksgiving prayers, I felt sick. I was forced to stop praying, I had to go out, and I threw up everything.

The Father was worried and asked, "What happened to him?"

The others, knowing my weakness, replied, "Nothing, Father. He just went out to vomit." The Father remarked, "Vomiting is nothing?" So they informed him about my allergy.

Later the Father called me and said, "We eat to feed our body and not to reject what we have eaten. This is also against poverty. It is as bad as if you had thrown away your share. You don't have to do so anymore. When the Community eats pork, get something else. Sometimes, people are naturally intolerant to certain foods."

125. THE LENGTH OF THE HAIR IS NOT A PROBLEM

A young man, about 20 years old, had come from Altamura as an Aspirant for the lay Brotherhood. He had well-groomed hair. A few days after his arrival, he was told to cut his hair like all the others. The young man was so resentful that he began to cry inconsolably. Rather than give up his hair, he kept saying that he would rather give up his vocation.

When the Father heard about this, he called him and said, "Is that all? Don't worry. Keep your hair as long as you want as long as it doesn't cover your eyes and keep you from seeing because you might fall."

The Father called me, and before the young man said, "I told him that he could keep his hair as he likes it."

Later, however, he said to me, "That is not the way to treat newcomers. It is a lack of tact and prudence to demand that a new Aspirant to the religious life has to adjust immediately to those who have been in the Institute for many years. At first, you require the conduct of a good Christian, then a gradual effort against defects, and finally, the practices to acquire the holy virtues. This must be the primary criterion for formation, adjusting it to the natural, environmental, and cultural attitudes of each person."

The young man was encouraged by the words of the Father. After some time, feeling more cheerful, he asked to have his hair cut shorter and later to cut it as short as everyone else'.

The Father pointed out again, "We must use great prudence and charity with the new ones entering the Institute, both Aspirants and Orphans. This is very important because first impressions, good or bad, will last for a lifetime."

“We must welcome them with great gentleness, words of kindness, gestures, and works; provide them with everything they need at the appropriate time; initiate and teach them gradually the customs and duties of the Institute. If you don’t do these, the new life can become so heavy that they may be discouraged to the point of leaving the Institute.”

I personally experienced all this when I entered the Avignone District in Messina.

126. RECITATION OF THE ROSARY OUTDOORS

At times, especially during the hot season, our Orphans were permitted to recite the Rosary in the garden, outside the Church. Though not too often, even the Aspirants were allowed to do the same. However, some of them reported this to the Father, who called me and asked me to explain.

I replied that this didn’t happen as frequently as was reported to him. Secondly, we did not use the same method for the Orphans and the Aspirants. The latter recited the Rosary outside only when it was very hot, and during walks or outings. It was more often for the Orphans to get them used to say the Rosary wherever they were, with the thought that once they leave the Institute, they would no longer have the convenience of going to Church, so the habit of reciting it everywhere would help them.

“That is a good reason,” the Father said. “Make sure, however, that the Rosary is always recited with devotion and concentration. It is good at times even to allow the grown-ups free to recite the Rosary on their own. This is a good method. The prayers and devotions for the Orphans must be formulated in view of their future life in the world.”

127. THE BOY PUNISHED TO REMAIN IN THE CHURCH

A little boy disturbed his companions during study time. As punishment, the Assistant instructed him to remain in the Church during all the recreation times of the day.

Entering the Church, the Father found the boy snoring peacefully. He woke him up and told him to go to recreation with his companions. The boy replied that he could not because the Assistant had punished him to remain in the Church during recreation because he disturbed his companions during study time.

At first, the Father reprimanded him and exhorted him to behave during study time. Then he told him to go with his companions and to say to the Assistant that the Father had sent him to recreation. The Father sent the boy to summon me. He told me, “The Assistant of this boy evidently doesn’t understand anything. Tell him to come to me. How can he choose the Church as a place of punishment, as if it were a prison? It is the opposite. When a person is at fault in serious matters, he could be punished by not allowing him to enter the Church. I don’t know how things so basic and logical cannot be understood! It becomes like that when you do not follow up on the discipline of the community.”

128. WE HAVE TO LOOK FOR THE POOR!

Once, when the Father was preparing to leave Oria, a poor man approached him and told him that in the “*Ospedaletto Vecchio*” there was a poor abandoned man who had been seriously ill for a long time.

The Father said, “I am very sorry, but I cannot go to see him because I am leaving.”

Then, he turned to me and said, “Either you or Brother Giuseppe go with a companion. Try to help him. Have a doctor see him, and if necessary, bring him to the hospital at our expense. Administer the sacraments if he is seriously ill.”

I replied, “I don’t know where this *Ospedaletto Vecchio* is. This is the first time I heard it mentioned.” The poor man who approached the Father said, “I will take you there. It is not very far from the town square. It is a group of abandoned shacks without doors and windows, owned by the Municipality, where the poor take shelter at night to avoid being completely in the open.”

The Father replied, “How is it that after so many years that we have been in Oria, we don’t know about such a place? Especially you who have always been here? This clearly shows that we don’t care for the poor. This is serious.”

The next day, with an Aspirant, I was accompanied by the poor man who had volunteered to the unknown *Ospedaletto Vecchio*. It was, indeed, a horrible scene. That unfortunate poor man looking like a cadaver was lying on the bare ground, unable to move. He was covered with sores that had worms, exhaling an unbearable stench so foul that the Aspirant who accompanied me threw up.

With the help of others, we tried to clean and dress the wounds as best we could, and placed him on a straw mattress. His condition, however, seemed hopeless.

Without delay, I agreed with a physician who was a close friend of the Institute, to have the sick man admitted to the Martini Hospital in Oria the next day.

Three days later, the poor fellow died peacefully after having received the last sacraments.

When the Father returned to Oria, he asked if we had taken care of the sick old man of the *Ospedaletto Vecchio*.

I told him in detail the gruesome and pitiful story. He said, “Poor fellow! It doesn’t seem real that in the twentieth century there are still cases so pitiful in Italy. Did you have Mass celebrated for the repose of his soul?”

“Yes, Father,” I replied, “at the St. Francis Church.”

The Father said, “Tomorrow I will say a Mass for him. Truly I could not believe that there were poor so abandoned in Oria! Even by us! One of our main missions is to help the poor materially and spiritually. It is serious and shameful that we have not been diligent and discerning in preventing the poor from falling into this extreme neglect.”

“Our Institute must not only take care of the poor who come knocking at our doors, or who come daily to get soup, bread, and money. We must go and see where they live, visit them and help them in every way, materially and spiritually, at the cost of any sacrifice.”

“It is good, however, that in going out of the Institute to look for them, you never go alone but be accompanied by some other Religious.”

One day, I noticed the absence of a poor man named Toro, who, though not yet advanced in age, often came to get soup. The condition of his health was terrible. I asked the other poor for news about him. They replied that he was very ill and urged me to visit and help him.

I told them that I was hoping to visit him within the day and asked for his address. In the meantime, through one of them, I sent some milk and cookies for him.

In the afternoon, I went to the square, where I met the poor through whom I had sent the milk and cookies. He told me, “Toro thanks you and is waiting for you. He lives nearby. If you want, I will take you there.” I tried to refuse because I was planning to go there with Brother Giuseppe. But, given the presence of the poor and accompanied by him, I went.

When I reached the house, I saw some women at the foot of the stairs. The old man said to them, “You see how kind the *Papa* [the Father] of San Pasquale is? He immediately kept his promise to come to visit Toro.”

The women were very respectful. As I entered, I met other women, and then others more to whom the poor accompanying me repeated what he had said. I did not have the slightest suspicion of the shameful house where I was.

Arriving at the bedside of Toro, who was, unfortunately, a sort of protector of those women, I found him very ill, almost looking like a cadaver.

I tried to comfort and encourage him. I spoke to him of religion and confidence in God, urging him to receive the holy sacraments. I promised to send him some linen, some food and gave him money to buy milk, medicines, and anything else he also needed because two women who were present told me that they kept him there out of charity since he had been abandoned. They also said that they had called the doctor several times but to no avail.

I promised to inform our doctor and to come back to visit. Around me, there was a repetition of thanksgiving both from the sick man and from the women.

While we were going down the stairs, the one who accompanied me murmured, “You see how thin poor Toro is? If it were not for these lost women who assist him, he would be totally abandoned, and by now, he would have died like a dog.”

I added, “Why do you call these women lost when they seem to be so good?”

The poor man clarified, “This is a house of whores!”

At these words, I felt like fainting. Cold sweat spread through my body. Shaken, I said, “Where have you brought me? Why did you not tell me before I was entering this house?” He

coolly replied, “But my *Papa*, what is the problem? Do you regret having done a great work of charity? So what kind of *Papa* are you?”

In front of the door, in the twilight, there were two women peeling beans who asked how Toro was. Out of shame, I could not even respond. The women observed, “How good the sons of *Papa Hannibal* are, they grant charity to anyone.”

The poor man who accompanied me said to them, “While coming down the stairs when I told him what this house is, he almost fainted out of shame.”

The women said, “No, no, our *Papa*! Don’t worry! In Oria, the children of *Papa Hannibal* are regarded in high esteem and held as angels.”

On the way home, I tried to comfort myself with what the Father had said, “You have to look for the poor and help them wherever they may be found.”

Upon arriving home, ashamed, I told the Father, Father Vitale, and Father Palma, who happened to be together, where I had been. Father Vitale said to me, “This is imprudence! You have to be careful. You can create slander, and the Institute may lose its reputation!” However, the Father immediately interrupted, “Enough! Don’t think about this anymore. You did well. Someone accompanied you. In cases like these, however, when you go to visit a poor person at home, it is better to be accompanied by another Religious, as I told you before.”

129. FOSTERING THE MISSIONARY SPIRIT

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One day in Oria, while speaking of the zeal that each of us must have for the glory of God and the good of souls, the Father dwelt on the missionary spirit which every Rogationist must nourish.

After speaking so effectively that it aroused a holy enthusiasm in everyone, he asked us, “Who among you would like to go to a mission?” We replied together, “I, I ...” The Father commented, “I like this holy desire, but this is not enough. First of all, we must deserve this grace. This can be done through prayer and preparation. Furthermore, the preparation is to be done through observing discipline and practicing the holy virtues.”

“Beginning now you have to gradually start practicing for the mortifications and hardships inevitably connected with the missionary life. Without neglecting your academic duties, it would also be very advantageous to try to learn the most common foreign languages spoken in the missions. Later, I will explain the importance of missions. Then, I shall send you printed materials and books dealing with this topic.”

An Aspirant asked the Father if assignment to the missions was limited to priests. The Father answered that even lay Brothers could go, as long as they had the right dispositions.

130. WHEN YOU BECOME PRIESTS...

One of the last times that he came to Oria, the Father asked me how many Aspirants we had and which classes they attended. When he heard the number, he rejoiced and said, “Thank God.

We must pray to the Divine Superiors to grant them holy perseverance. Try your best to increase their number..., of course, first of all, we must pray because religious vocation is a gift from God who does not grant it if we don't pray to Him. Then, you have to advertise, especially through our Sacred Allies, the periodical *God and Neighbor*, the *Miraculous Secret*... However, it is not enough to have many young men. It is necessary to know how to guard them as the pearls of the Congregation. The most useful service that one can provide to the Congregation and the most effective means to acquire merits for heaven is to take care of the formation of the Aspirants to the religious life. If we neglect this field, it would be a serious disadvantage for the Congregation and, certainly, a serious error."

"Try to form them well while they are young because, as the Holy Spirit says, the young man who has chosen his own way will not forget it, even when he becomes old. It is, therefore, necessary to instill a love for the religious life, for our mission, for the prayer for good workers for the Holy Church and the propagation of this prayer, in the tender minds of these boys. We must educate them to care for the support and sanctification of the destitute orphans and poor children with the true spirit of charity."

"I urge you to keep the environment pure because this greatly enhances the formation. When you see that a young man does not have the requirements for his success, dismiss him in due time, so that he will not influence the others."

Then he asked, "What about the four of you (referring to Brothers Carmelo Drago, Luca Appi, Camillo Ruggeri, and Redento Levi)? When will you start studying Theology?" I answered, "This year if the Lord wills."

The Father replied, "Then, thank God, you are nearing priesthood. It does not matter if I will not be lucky enough to see you become priests. The important thing is that the Congregation will have some more priests. They are badly needed."

"It is necessary, however, that you become good priests, inflamed with zeal for constant prayer, holy meditation, and the exercise of the holy virtues. I also encourage you to study, to acquire the necessary knowledge for the priesthood. In particular, study thoroughly the Sacred Dogmatic and Moral Theology, Sacred Scripture, Liturgy and the Fathers of the Church in such a way that in the future you may dedicate yourselves to preaching and to the practice of holy confession, to which every Rogationist priest must feel a heartfelt attraction."

"I also recommend a specific preparation for our twofold mission of *Rogate* and *Charity*, to be well prepared for any of the works that holy obedience will entrust to you."

131. CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE FATHER AND MISUNDERSTANDING

Once the Father wrote me a letter of disapproval from Messina. (About the letters addressed to me by the Father, I have to confess a grave sin. Given the exceptional circumstances in which the House of Oria was, I often received letters from him. Unfortunately, instead of keeping them zealously, after accomplishing what had to be done, I destroyed them as I usually did with all the

other letters. Also, they often contained things that were not appropriate for others to know. But now I acknowledge that it was a serious loss.)

The Father wrote to me that he had heard that the House of Oria had encountered some problems, and I should have informed him. Instead, I had deliberately concealed them. In his letter he said:

“I wonder how, after we trusted you so much; you did not inform me (about those things). I did not expect this from you. You have not been faithful. I cannot understand it.”

I replied immediately, saying that first of all, it was not as they had reported to him. I said that when those problems occurred, I had written to him in detail about everything.

When the Father came to Oria, he insisted that he had not received that letter of mine. I showed him that he had received my message because he had thanked me for the Christmas wishes that I had sent to him in the same letter. Then the Father said, “Never put reports with Christmas wishes in the same letter! I receive so many; I don’t always have the time to read them all.”

132. A RECKLESS YOUNG MAN WANTS TO BE A RELIGIOUS

A young man, about 25 years old, from Acquaviva delle Fonti, had applied to enter our Congregation as a lay Brother. While we had sent a letter to the parish priest asking for information, the young man, without waiting for our response for acceptance, came to the Institute.

As soon as he saw him, the Father said, “He does not look like he has what it takes to be a Religious,” while Father Palma added, “He seems a reckless, young man who likes to drink.”

The next day we received the parish priest's report, which characterized him as a dangerous person. The Father instructed me to dismiss him politely and give him some money, more than what was necessary for his trip. I tried to tell the young man as best as I could, but he became furious. It was useless to argue with him, and when I gave him the money for the trip, he threw it on the ground, cursing. He threatened to hit me. He said he would not leave the Institute even with the police.

I reported the matter to the Father. He called the young man, rebuked him firmly for the blasphemy, and authoritatively told him to leave the Institute. At this, the young man flew into a rage. He put his hands on the shoulders of the Father and growled, “Wicked priest! I will slap you.” At that moment, Father Palma came in, grabbed the young man, and slammed him powerfully against the wall, and shoved him out the door where he fell to the ground.

The Father intervened, “No! No, Father Palma, leave him alone! Poor fellow!” He tried to follow the young man to see if he was hurt, as the young man walked away, shouting insults and curses.

Father Palma held the Father, and I said, “Let him drop dead.”

The Father reacted, “Don’t say that!” And he asked me, “Did you give him the money for the trip?”

“Yes, Father, I did. But he refused and threw it on the ground.”

After that, the Father tried to make Father Palma, and I realize that the way we acted had not been proper. However, Father Palma replied, “Father, some people are like animals. You need a stick to make them reasonable.”

The Father replied, “Poor fellow! He might be abnormal. He might not know what he is saying or doing. And he wanted to be a Religious!”

133. PINUCCIO, THE LITTLE ORPHAN FROM TARANTO

I had gone to Taranto from Oria to buy plumbing materials. At the entrance of the swinging bridge, I saw a boy standing still as if he were impaled. He was barefoot and poorly clad. The sight was truly pitiful. I went over, held him, and asked how he was. He shielded himself with an abrupt gesture and muttered in a low voice, “Nothing! Leave me alone!” He refused the money I tried to give him.

A guard on duty at the bridge approached me and said, “Father, he is an unfortunate case. About two weeks ago, his father, who had a chronic and incurable sickness, in despair, jumped off the bridge, dying instantly. Since then, every day, this poor boy stands stiffly or crouching where his poor father ended his life. It is a scene that breaks my heart, especially because his mother has a heart ailment, and according to one of my colleagues, is dying. She is consumed with grief, worried that this small child and his little sister will be abandoned. There are no close relatives who can take care of them.”

“Some kind people are trying to have them admitted to an Institute. They also brought the case to competent authorities. There have been promises and promises, but nothing positive has yet been seen.”

Then I said to the guard, “I would like to visit this woman, to see if I can help shelter the little children. Let us try to persuade this little boy to accompany me to his house.”

After repeated insistence, the boy finally gave in. Passing through many narrow streets of the old Taranto, he took me to a dark basement, lit by a ray of light coming from a loophole. It was a real squalor. In a corner, on a miserable straw mattress, the poor, sick, deadly-pale woman lay.

As soon as she saw me, she reacted, and in a faint voice said, “What do you want? Why did you come? I have already taken the sacraments, thank God. My conscience is at peace. I just want to die now. It breaks my heart, thinking that this unfortunate little son of mine and this unhappy little girl will remain abandoned.” While saying this, she burst into tears, sobbing.

“Calm down,” I said to her. “I came to see if I can help.”

The woman replied, “I don’t believe anymore; I have received many promises, I prayed to all the Saints, and still I don’t see anything positive. Even St. Anthony, to whom I am so

devoted, has not listened to me. Today, I finished the *tredicina*¹²¹ in his honor.” Then she showed me a holy card of the Saint Miracle-Worker hanging on the wall by a nail, in front of which a little candle was burning.

I added, “Madam, be assured that St. Anthony will grant you the grace. Are you decided to find a home for your children now?”

“Why not? For the little girl, there is some hope to put her into an Institute of Taranto run by nuns. But for the boy, there is no hope.”

“Would you be willing to put the boy right now in an Institution, even today?”

“For sure!”

“Well, ma'am. I will take care of it, I promise you. In Oria, not far from here, there is a huge and nice Orphanage. There the boys are very well treated, and I know this very well. I belong precisely to that Institute called Anthonian Orphanage. If you want, I can take your son with me today. Do you see, ma'am, how St. Anthony has granted you the grace?”

The sick woman was moved and burst into tears. She made an effort to stand up to remove the image of the Saint, and started kissing it saying, “Thank you! Thank you, St. Anthony, for the grace you granted me!”

“Let us do it like this. I will bring the little boy to Oria today. As for the documents, don't worry, we will take care of them. Just give me the main data. In a few days Pinuccio (the name of the little boy), will return to visit you. There is also in Oria, an Orphanage for girls for your daughter. If you have not made arrangements here in Taranto, I will speak with the Superior in Oria to accept her there.”

The scene of the separation of the mother from her child was heartbreaking. The last words of the mother to the son were, “Be good, pray for my soul, and for that of your father.” She also said to me, “Father, be a mother to my Pinuccio!”

When we passed by the bridge and came to the place where I had met him, the boy began to cry and threw himself on the ground, not wanting to leave that place. It took all possible good efforts, helped by the guard who was still there on duty, and by other people.

Upon learning that I was taking the boy with me to Oria, the guard was moved and said, “These are true works of charity!” The same comments could be heard from the people who were present.

When we reached Oria, the Father was in the House. I informed him about the case apologizing for having accepted the boy without prior permission from him or Father Palma. The Father immediately answered, “You not only made a good decision but a very good one. Do you think that Father Palma or I would not have accepted him? When the cases are so clear and pitiful, what permission do you have to ask? This is our mission. We have to be like the Good

¹²¹ *Tredicina* is the traditional novena prayer in honor of St. Anthony consisting of 13 days' prayers.

Samaritan. Besides, for a case like this, even if there is no place available, we have to find one at any cost.”

A few hours after he had entered the Institute, the boy started crying, wanting to return to Taranto. He threw himself on the ground, screaming, rolling on the floor, banging his head, and scratching and biting those who approached him. The Father got a bite while trying to prevent the boy from hurting his head. Through all this, however, the Father did not lose his patience. He was kind and sympathetic to the boy.

Later, the boy calmed down when I promised to bring him to Taranto to visit his mother.

After five days, we received the news that the poor lady had already passed away, and his sister had been admitted to an Institution in Taranto.

The little Pinuccio Digiorgio grew up very well. Quite diligent in his studies, he learned printing and also became an accomplished first trumpet soloist in our musical band of Oria, and later, in the band of Taranto.

After several years, I met him in Taranto one morning after a terrible bombardment of the ships in the harbor. He was walking with his little family, so happy. Both he and his wife were moved and had words of affection and sincere gratitude to the Institute. His wife said, “My husband is always talking to our children and me, as well as to his friends so nicely about the Institute as his paternal home. Father, I tell you that my husband is so good, and we are really delighted. Let us thank the Lord!”

134. CHARITABLE WORKS ARE ALSO A MEANS TO SPREAD THE ROGATE

A parish priest from Santeramo in Colle (Bari), was in Oria to preach the novena to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the Cathedral. He came one day to visit our Institute, accompanied by Canon Ciccio Conte, and asked information about the goal of our Congregation. I explained our twofold purpose: prayer to the Lord to send good workers to His harvest, and the education and rescue of the orphans and children, especially the poor and needy.

He countered, “I don’t understand the first one. For me, it does not accomplish anything. I understand very well the second one, and it is great.”

I reacted in a somewhat angry tone, “I wonder why you don’t understand. You say it doesn’t accomplish anything. On the contrary, it is easy to do, and for us, it is very important, since it is simply obeying the divine words of Our Lord Jesus Christ: *Rogate ergo Dominum messis, ut mittat operarios in messem suam.*”

The parish priest felt offended by my answer and blurted out offensive and humiliating words, to the point that Canon Conte felt terrible and apologized to me.

Later, I shared this episode to the Father, who replied, “You must not be surprised. Unfortunately, many do not understand the importance, usefulness, and necessity of this prayer. What is most distressing, is the fact that it is not understood by some of the clergy and, sometimes, even by people in authority. This easily happens because they don’t meditate enough

on the need for prayer to obtain good workers, and therefore people don't give this prayer the importance it deserves, nor do they think of its effectiveness."

"They don't realize that vocation is a gift of God. As we can infer from the Gospel, the Lord seems to have established that, to send good vocations, He wants us to pray to Him. If we don't pray, we will not be granted what we ask for. It's like saying that if we pray to Jesus to send holy priests to the Church, He will send them, and if we don't, He will not." The Father used to repeat, "Just as how important and clear the matter is, nonetheless is it misunderstood. These words are written very clearly in the Gospel. Yet, we see how this essential command has been little understood throughout the centuries."

"As far as I know, in the past and present history of the Church, there has been no Order or Congregation that has received directly those divine words so that they could form their aim and ideal the way it is with our two Institutions which are related to this mission by means of a fourth specific vow. It seems that the Divine Providence has reserved this priceless gift for our Institutes. So we have to consider ourselves lucky and take care of this divine mission with all our strength."

"This prayer should be for our Congregation and us the secret soul and breath of our hearts. For this holy purpose, to obtain good gospel workers, we must offer God all our prayers and good works. We must feel devoured by the spirit of the Rogate, which we need to make known and practiced everywhere."

"As much as possible our commitment must be the propagation of this divine prayer. However, we must always remember that the sanctity of our life is the best and most effective advertisement."

"Our works of charity are also a great means to make the Rogate penetrate and extend into society. These works are better understood than the Rogate. They affect the senses and the heart more easily, mainly because of their external appearance, which is social and humanitarian. You have seen how that good parish priest praised the finality of the works of charity, while not grasping at all the value of the Rogate."

"To make the Gospel penetrate the lands of the infidels, especially in the early days, missionaries had to make use primarily of the corporal works of mercy. I have experienced that, for the foundation of the new Houses, I, myself, have availed of the works of charity. Not only did I find no opposition, but through these, I have even been given the necessary resources to maintain and develop the works of the Rogate! This clearly shows how the Divine Providence, for the spread of the Rogate in the world, has used the charitable works of our Institutes as a very effective means. We, therefore, need to appreciate and love these works which are so dear to Our Lord, and also because they are an effective means to spread the Rogate."

135. THE FATHER'S FOOD POISONS THE HOUSE HELPER

To give the impression that he was famished and ate a lot, and to be considered a glutton, the Father frequently spoke on this topic and tried to find every opportunity to be regarded as such.

One day, while accompanying him in the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome, Father Palma told him, "Father, do you see how many niches in the Basilica are still empty?"

The Father replied, "Yes, yes! Most probably one day they will place our statues there.¹²² Your statue will represent you with a bowl of chicory¹²³ in your hands, while mine will show me with a dish of *fedelini*,¹²⁴ which I like very much."

Father Vitale, who had a weak stomach and ate very little easily judged others according to his stomach. In his holy simplicity, in the life of the Father, Father Vitale writes, "The Father, by nature, had a strong appetite, and suffered much internally because of the stimulation of gluttony."

The Father's appetite was actually the ordinary appetite of a healthy man. We can say that he suffered because he ate very little so that at times he had such pangs of hunger that he had to take something in order not to faint. His meals were meager because of his spirit of mortification.

However, the Father knew a thousand tricks to confuse those who were close to him. He would try to let them label him an uncontrollable glutton or a fussy person about eating. At times, he said he did not eat much because he did not feel well; other times because he was not hungry or he was afraid that the food could harm him. Sometimes, he said that the food was not cooked properly, other times that it was not properly seasoned or salted.

One evening, in Oria, with the usual alibis, he had almost nothing for dinner. I thought of asking him if we could bring him something else. But he promptly replied, "No, no, don't worry." Because of my insistence, however, he whispered under his breath, "I said, don't worry if I wanted I could eat everything that is on the table." Then, he added quickly, "I don't eat, not because I don't feel like eating, but because I don't know how to control my immoderation."¹²⁵

The Father used to carry a snuffbox containing a powder of bitter wormwood and centaury, which was truly disgusting and unbearable. He often flavored his dishes with these ingredients and used every subterfuge to avoid being detected.

Once, in Oria, during lunch, perhaps to avoid being discovered, he put a wrong dose of the bitter powder, which made the rice soup inedible. Despite his efforts to try to eat, he could not finish it and was forced to leave some soup on the plate. In Oria, there was a very simple young

¹²² It may be interpreted as a kind of humorous prophecy... which became true. On July 6, 2010, a huge (5 meters!) statue of St. Hannibal was placed in a niche on the outer right side of St. Peter Basilica. He is represented carrying the word of Rogate ... not a dish of *fedelini*!

¹²³ Chicory was the vegetable preferred by Father Palma.

¹²⁴ *Fedelini* is a thin kind of spaghetti, which Father Hannibal liked very much.

¹²⁵ The sentence in the original Italian seems confusing; apparently, it lacks a 'not'.

man, Raphael Stella, who worked tirelessly, even strenuous works, from morning to evening. He was ordinarily very hungry; he could eat even stones. That day, clearing the table, he asked me if he could consume the soup leftover by the Father. Without suspecting anything, I permitted him. He began swallowing the soup with his usual appetite. However, just after gulping down a mouthful, he began to cry and shout, "Poison! Poison! I am dying." The Father, who was nearby, in the entrance hall, upon hearing the screaming, came rushing to the refectory. Stella continued to howl, "Poison! Poison! I am dying." I reassured the Father, "Don't worry, it's nothing." He replied, "How can it be nothing? He says that it's poison!" Then Stella turned to the Father, and said, "You will die, too, because you ate the poison that was in the soup." The Father understood and pulled the boy aside, trying to comfort him. Then he called me and said, "Why did you allow him to eat what I left? What was leftover should not be used anymore?" I answered, "He was the one who asked for it!" The Father replied, "This means you don't give the poor fellow enough food."

I added, "Father he had two full plates of rice, but he always eats a lot. He is never satisfied!"

The Father continued, "Do not spread this story."

The Father had a particular fondness for Stella because he was such a simple boy, good and hardworking. The Father always brought Stella what he liked and ordered everyone to respect and care for him.

One day, Brother Stanislaus Varotto jokingly said to Stella, "You did not sweep the dormitory well today. As punishment, tonight, you must stay in bed under the bedsheet." Stella burst into tears and continued to sweep the corridor. The Father happened to pass by and asked why he was crying. He said, "Brother Stanislaus punished me with spending the whole night under the bedsheet." The Father convinced him that the Brother was just joking. Later, however, he called me and told me to call the Assistant because we should not shame the poor boy. I dared to say, "But Father, it was so easy to understand that it was not a punishment and that the Brother said it to him as a joke." The Father reacted, "I wonder at your reasoning. The punishment is not measured in itself, but according to the person who receives it and his comprehension. For Stella, that joke, that little thing was such a heavy punishment, that he was saddened to the point of crying! You need to have more charity and try, by all means, not to make the neighbor suffer."

When Stella went to Brindisi for the military service check-up, he answered the questions about his personal data strangely.

The Commissioner asked, "What is your name?" "Stella Natale¹²⁶ Reversed."

"Where were you born?" "In the manger."

"Whose son are you?" "Of the mule."

"How old are you?" "Thirteen."

He responded so quickly and so easily that those in the Committee laughed uproariously.

¹²⁶ *Stella Natale* literally means *Christmas Star*.

The boys, during recreation, for fun, often asked Stella to repeat this story. Once they had him repeat it in front of the Father, who did not laugh. He was displeased and said, “Poor child! I think that someone suggested to him to answer that way. It is not good. This way, Stella gets used to thinking even less.” Politely he tried to correct him.

Then, turning to me, he said, “Did you check if this boy is capable of receiving Holy Communion?” I replied that Brother Giuseppe, with great patience, had tried to prepare him as best as he could and that the Canon Penitentiary thought him capable of receiving it. So he was admitted to go to Confession and receive Holy Communion.

136. PRACTICAL PEDAGOGY

In 1911, the Father and Father Palma were often away from the House of Oria, sometimes for long periods because of urgent affairs and important necessities of the Work. This became a serious difficulty for me because the House lacked everything, and I had to provide, but mainly because of my inadequate preparation for that office. Several times I became discouraged, and I went to the Father to ask to be relieved from that heavy responsibility.

Once, when I was more stubborn than usual about my request, the Father told me nicely, “Calm down, please. Tomorrow we will talk.”

The next day he called me to his room and said, “I understand that the difficulties you encounter in this office might overwhelm you, especially when you are left alone in the House. A true educator, according to a great expert in pedagogy, should be a philosopher, a theologian, an expert of the human heart, and a Saint. However, where can we find all these qualities combined? We must be contented with our possibilities.”

“Remember: *the best is the enemy of the good.*¹²⁷ Don’t you see that we cannot do otherwise? Can we put these children on the street? Or can we call a Jesuit, a Franciscan or a Salesian to help? Let us do all we can, and then let us pray fervently to the Most Holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary that they may make up for what is lacking in us.”

Seeing that I was not convinced, he continued, “I will teach you an easy and very effective way to accomplish your assignment relatively well.”

1. First and foremost you must pray a lot to Our Lord and the Most Holy Virgin of Good Counsel to enlighten and guide you and then try as much as possible to accomplish your office as if Our Lord Himself entrusted it directly to you.

2. The second rule is: love the boys as yourself and do them everything that you would like done to you. On the other hand, don’t do to them anything you would not want them to do to you. This very wise rule was given to us by the Lord Himself: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’. This is a very easy rule for the educator, and, at the same time, it is very useful when

¹²⁷ A proverb meaning that those who want to achieve too much, often don’t get even the essentials.

practiced well. It is more worthy than a treatise on pedagogy! So try to put it into practice, and you will see how easy and effective it is!

This rule must be applied with balance. Otherwise, it could become harmful. Let me explain. You don't have to apply it according to your personal needs and views, not even according to your age and vocation, or your own desires, nor in the same way for everyone. You have to take into account the age of the boys, their personalities, characters, qualities, and physical, moral, intellectual, and social needs, according to their ideals and inclinations. With the little ones, you have to become little yourself. This is the difficulty. Some teachers, at times, are entirely wrong in this aspect resulting in serious damage to the education of the boys. They demand that the boys think and reason like them. It is the same as asking a child of ten to carry the same weight as a young man of twenty.

3. The third and just as important and effective rule is to look at the parents as models. The educator must love the boys as much as their parents love them. Like parents, the educators shall genuinely want the good of the boys. Indeed, no one naturally loves children more than their parents. Thus, when we want to express the highest love on this earth, we refer to parental love.

The secret of education is love. It is also said that parents are the best educators. Often, parents don't even know the basic elements of pedagogy, yet they can be so brilliant and effective in the education of their children, to the amazement of the most outstanding experts in pedagogy.

Love your boys as parents love their children, and you too will be an excellent educator. See how much care parents endeavor to provide the highest possible good for their children. To safeguard their children's health and life, parents don't look at expenses or sacrifices. They give even their lives. See how much they care that their children are educated according to their capabilities. They will even give their share of food to them. Look at how concerned they are to have their children educated, virtuous, religious, successful, and accepted in society, capable of living well with the fruits of their activities.

Do for the boys what your parents did for you and your brothers and sisters, and you can be sure you will do well. This is a real and practical pedagogy, easy and very effective!

It is clear, however, that the real educators don't look and imitate all parents unconditionally. There are parents who, blinded by too much love for their children, give in easily to all their whims, without realizing they are spoiling them. Instead of forming, they deform them. It is also good to note that all the sensible manifestations of affection that parents use with their children are not always proper for educators. This could even be dangerous and harmful.

4. The fourth rule is the most important and effective! To make up for your lack of preparation, it is wholly based on a supernatural principle, namely on charity, or rather on the very tender and preferential love that the Divine Master had for the children, to consider as done to Him what is done to them out of love for Him. Thus, the educator must love children as the Lord loved and gave His life for them. The educator has to think that everything he does for the boys, is as done to the Lord Himself.

If you do this in your work with a true spirit of faith and charity, you can be sure that you will succeed a lot better than if you had studied many pedagogical treatises, also because the Lord will surely come to your help with the enlightenment of His grace. Therefore, take courage, trust in the Lord and do all that you can in His name.”

He dismissed me with his blessing.

137. ZEAL FOR THE SACRED ALLIANCE AND THE PIOUS UNION

Brother Giuseppe Antonio had a strong attachment to our Congregation. He truly lived the spirit and life of the Institute more than his own life. At work, he was untiring and willingly accepted any job without distinction, even those strenuous or humbling.

He took such care of the things of the Institute to the point of appearing scrupulous. He would pick up and use even the most insignificant objects. He was a man of prayer and great recollection. He used to spend all his energies in trying to recruit vocations for the Congregation. In this aspect, however, the Father pointed out that he was not so lucky. His zeal made him see in people qualities which, unfortunately, they did not have. He had as his foundation the words of the Gospel, “Many are called, but few are chosen.” He used to say, “Why are the chosen few? Because many, having a divine vocation, lose it because they do not find a supportive environment. Instead, if they want, they could easily respond to the divine call to the religious life of its favorable environment.”

He also had a special dedication for the diffusion of the Sacred Alliance and the Pious Union of the Evangelical Rogation. With great sacrifices, he went wherever it was possible to recruit new members and availed of all opportunities for this apostolate. The wonder was how, in spite of his good nature and simplicity, he could be so successful among the faithful as well as among the priests, bishops, and cardinals.

He was so convinced about what he was saying, that his words could get through to everyone. All admired his kindness, exemplary religious life, simplicity, and zeal for the Rogate.

With great zeal in dealing with clerics and prelates, he was also concerned in advocating the insertion of the verse: *Ut dignos ac sanctos Operarios... [That you may send worthy and holy laborers ...]* to the Litany of the Saints, as proposed by the Father.¹²⁸

One day, in the early years of the House of Oria, having seen that Brother Giuseppe had worked almost the whole night to prepare a shipment of material for the Sacred Alliance, the Pious Union, and the insertion of the verse, I volunteered with some boys to help him. While Brother Giuseppe Antonio was absent, the Father happened to pass by, and seeing all the vigorous activity, said, “I am very pleased that you work with so much zeal for this. It is an

¹²⁸ Father Hannibal, during a private audience by Pope Pius X, presented a written plea in which he explained to the Pope the aims of his Institutes and begged that the verse quoted above be inserted in the Litany of Saints. The Holy Father, on the same letter of request, wrote with his own hand: “Request is granted, but only in the Institutes of the petitioner. 11 July 1909. Pius PP. X.” Cf. APR, 15-757 and 64-4440; Chronology in *Positio*, Vol. II, p. 1335.

excellent thing that the little Aspirants, from their early years, get used to this apostolate so inherent to our mission and the spirit of the Rogate. This is also a great means to nourish their vocation and to let them develop affection for the Congregation.”

I then pointed out, “Actually, we have hardly done anything. It is all the work of Brother Giuseppe Antonio, who sacrifices himself even at night.”

The Father said, “This Brother is a true blessing of God. He is a real Rogationist who lives the spirit and life of the Institute.”

Then, turning to the little Aspirants, he said, “You too must be like him. At an early age, you should get into the habit of studying, becoming familiar with the works of the Congregation, and practicing them. Do you know what the Sacred Alliance is? It is a very important reality, concerning both the prayer for holy priests, as well as for spreading it. The bishops and the cardinals who are Sacred Allies join us in our prayers, and every year, they offer one or more Masses for this purpose. Besides, through their instructions and sermons, they spread this prayer. I learned that some parish priests in their Churches not only recite these prayers, but they also hold meetings and form Pious Unions to spread the Rogate.”

“In some seminaries, our Bishop Sacred Allies let their seminarians recite the same prayers we recite daily, and they asked for our booklet. This way, the seminarians fall in love with this prayer, and when they become priests, they will certainly spread it among the people.”

“The Pious Union of the Evangelical Rogation is also important because it unites many thousands of faithful to our prayer.”

Then, turning to me, he continued, “We have to explain these things very well to the boys and have them understand. I repeat; they will like them.”

One of those little Aspirants said, “Father, I will write to the priests I know in my town to get them to enroll in the Sacred Alliance; and I will also write to my family and friends to get them associated to the Pious Union.” Another added, “I will do the same.”

Then the Father turned to me and said, “See how to it is made known? Sometimes we spread information to those outside and neglect to do it to those inside, who by the Lord’s grace, should be the apostles of the Rogate.”

He went on to say, “This zeal for the Rogate is a sacred duty for all the members of our Pious Work, and in a particular way, we have to feel and practice this zeal in pleading for vocations to our Congregation.”

138. THE VOCATIONS OF THE DRAGO FAMILY

My parents wrote to me that they had decided to send my brother Francesco to study in a boarding house of the Salesians. That letter was opened by Father Founder, who said, “Write to your parents, on my behalf, that instead of sending your brother to the Salesians, they can send him here together with you, the four brothers.” I said, “This brother of mine does not feel he has a religious vocation. He wants to study and later to remain forever with his family.” The Father

answered, “It doesn’t matter. Let him still come to study here. It means that if the Lord gives him the vocation, he will remain; if not, he will return home. Of course, he must be a good boy.”

I asked him what fees my parents would have to pay. The Father replied, “Tell them: no fees. They send generous donations often and spontaneously.”

So my brother came to Oria, where he remained for several years. To comply with the desire of my parents, the Father, was the godfather for his Confirmation.¹²⁹

The boy, however, did not do well in his studies. At the start of World War I, my parents brought Francesco home. He remained very fond of the Institute and an admirer of the Father.

The Father went on to say, “On the occasion of my visit to Galati,¹³⁰ I noticed that although simple, your family is an exemplary one. They have much faith and charity. In the town, they enjoy high esteem. The Lord has rewarded your family greatly, giving the religious vocation to four of its children. Your parents have responded generously to this grace, giving their consent willingly.”

I interrupted him, saying, “Actually, they did not permit me immediately. They made me wait for several months, given my restless personality, my mother was concerned that I would not be able to stand the Institute.”

The Father continued, “All of you must be very thankful to the Lord because He has granted you to be born in such a good family. He has given you the holy religious vocation, and He has called you to this small Institute so dear to the Most Holy Heart of Jesus. You have to show gratitude with facts, which means, by living your religious life as if the zeal of the Rogate and the Institute’s works of charity was devouring you.”

Then he asked me, “How is it that you chose this humble Institute, among others more famous and popular in the holy Church?”

I answered, “God’s ways are many. Maybe we were greatly influenced by my parents, especially my mother’s dedication to the needy, in particular for the little ones and to orphans whom she looked at as her children. She taught us with her words, and by example, at our young age.”

This feeling for orphans took a stronger root in us after the following experience. In December 1906 the entire mountain region of Galati was covered with very heavy snow. Fearing that the snow could bury them, the shepherds started to come down with their flocks toward the coast.

We children had fun watching from the window, the thick and wide-brimmed snowflakes whirling in the air in a flurry of wind. However, while we enjoyed watching the snow falling, a herd of sheep, massed, and compact to defend themselves from the storm crossed the narrow road. Among the shepherds, we noticed a boy trailing behind, being beaten by the wind. He was covered with snow, and he was trying to protect himself by wrapping himself in an old cloak. At this sight, we called our mother to let her see the shepherd boy who was freezing.

¹²⁹ Cf. Chapters 1 and 33.

¹³⁰ Galati Mamertino is the hometown of the Drago family.

Upon seeing the boy, Mother grabbed a shawl, rushed to the street, and pleaded with the shepherds to let the boy into our house, promising them that, once the storm stopped, she would have him accompanied and brought to where they were. The men willingly agreed since they were concerned for the little boy who was also an impediment, slowing them down.

I noticed that the Father was following the edifying story with great interest, so I felt encouraged to continue.

Mother brought the boy into the house. He was all wet, barefoot, dirty, and shabby; indeed, a pitiful sight. Numb from the cold, he was shivering. Our mother immediately took him to the kitchen, washed him with warm water, clothed him with clean clothes trying on one of ours to fit him, and fed him, lavishing him with genuine maternal care, then she let him join us who were eagerly waiting for him. At first, when he found himself surrounded and bombarded with questions, the child was shy and taciturn. But then, little by little, he gained confidence and answered our questions brightly. He seemed to be quite smart.

Tearfully, the boy began to tell his painful story. He was about ten years old. At seven he became an orphan of both parents, and for two years, totally abandoned, he wandered around, begging for a crust of bread in deprivation and suffering. Finally, a distant relative, one of those shepherds we had seen, took him to guard the flock. That uncle of his was, in fact, a poor employee, and his pay was not even enough to support his family.

For his service, the child received only daily food. He kept saying how hard his life was.

We treated him like a brother, and he soon became affectionate to us. Our mother meanwhile continued to pay him attention.

After four days, the snow stopped, and the time came for the little boy to be brought to the location indicated by the shepherds. At the news, the little shepherd burst into tears; we too. We begged Mother to let him stay with us forever. However, though she also was unhappy, Mother said that it was not possible, and, keeping her promise, she had him accompanied to the designated place.

This event etched an indelible impression in our souls and produced a burning desire to help underprivileged children, especially orphans.

A few months later, Brother Francesco Maria of the Child Jesus¹³¹ came to Galati. As a Religious, he was fascinating. He spoke to us about life in the Institute with real enthusiasm. When he told us that the Congregation's first goal was to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send good workers to the Holy Church, we did not understand, and we asked if these workers were carpenters, tailors, or peasants. He tried to explain that by "workers" he meant the priests primarily. He wanted to make us understand the excellence of priesthood and the need for the prayer to obtain holy priests from God. Despite his explanation, we could not grasp the meaning, so we were not impressed. However, when he spoke of the goal of the Institute to help the poor

¹³¹ Cf. Chapter 1; Brother Francesco Maria of the Child Jesus is Gaetano Drago, the cousin of Father Carmelo Drago.

and destitute orphans, how they were treated, and how happy they were in the Institute, we exclaimed, “Oh, what a beautiful Institute! We, too, would like to come to do what you do, to be Religious like you, and become good priests. Will Father Francia accept us?”

Brother Francesco said, “And why should he not welcome you? However, it is necessary first of all that the Lord gives the holy religious vocation. You must also pray a lot, be good, and reach the proper age.” On this topic, he gave us a long explanation.

Later on, four of us siblings and two of my cousins, Brother Francesco’s brothers, little by little, entered the Congregation. Brother Mansueto and Brother Mariano were the first.

In the end, the Father concluded, “See how great the ways of the Providence are? Evidently, no matter how much more excellent the Rogate is, the works of charity appeal to the human heart more easily because they are visible. For our Institute, it seems that the Providence has chosen the works of charity as one of the most effective ways for the fulfillment and spread of the Rogate.”

139. “THIS IS NOT THE WAY TO DO IT”

One day, in Oria, the mail was brought to the refectory. The Community had finished lunch and was having recreation. The Father had come late and was still eating. I remained because I had to sort out and check the mail. I gave the Father the mail addressed to him and continued opening the letters, at times using a table knife or my finger, damaging the envelopes. Then, I took one of these letters, and, after opening it, I gave it to the boy serving in the refectory and told him to bring it to an Aspirant having recreation in the garden.

When the boy left, and only the two of us remained, the Father, who had been observing everything, reprimanded me, “This is not the way to do the mail. First of all, for reasons of hygiene, don’t use the table knife to open letters. People do not always use a moistened sponge to close the envelope. Some simply lick the envelope. The person may have an infectious disease. Instead, use the proper knife, a small knife, but from time to time, clean it.”

“Letters are not to be opened the way you did. Some envelopes were half torn. It is not proper to deliver a letter crumpled or damaged as if it were something shameful. This way, you offend the feelings of the recipient. A letter joins two physically distant persons in a gentle and longed for dialogue. It does this through words, which may be those of a father or mother to their son, or a brother or sister to their sibling. As such, a letter is to be valued and respected. Teach others to do the same. Mail is important. It enjoys the strictest confidentiality; thus, only the recipient should open it. We open it to educate the boys on how they should write and respond. For a Religious, it can be opened because it is an explicit requirement of our internal regulations. However, this policy should be used with a lot of discretion and reason, that is, when it is considered useful for the good of the individual or the Institute. Otherwise, it would be a lack of trust by the Superiors towards deserving Religious. However, it is good that, in a spirit of mortification, Religious are ready even for this.”

“Furthermore, all that you come to know from the letters, both about the Religious and the boys, is to be kept confidential. If necessary, you can report it only to their duly constituted authorities.”

“I also noticed that you sent a letter to an Aspirant through one of the boys serving in the refectory. This is not right. The boy, out of curiosity, may read it, and, worse, may reveal the contents to others. That could certainly make the person to whom the letter is addressed deeply outraged. Assuming that the carrier does not read it, the one who receives the letter can always suspect that his sacred right might have been violated.”

“You have to give the letters of the Religious, directly and personally, especially if they are opened. Do the same for the mail of the boys. It is one of those small gestures, full of positive educational implications. The boys will feel respected and cared for when the Superior deals with them in a familiar way, asking how is their health and whether they have any need.”

140. OBEDIENCE TO ONE’S CONFESSOR

During World War I, while the Health Unit to which I belonged was in the Carso area,¹³² in the vicinity of Sagrado (Gorizia), a fierce battle raged in the front lines. An officer and a non-commissioned officer of the ‘Arditi’ Company came to the clearing hospital carrying a soldier who had to undergo medical examination immediately. The soldier, at the time of the assault, had refused to enter the fray, which, according to martial law at the time, meant execution by shooting. But since at the time of his refusal, he had signs of serious illness, the implementation of the sentence was subject to the judgment of the physician.

The poor man looked dazed and devastated, babbling incoherently. Meanwhile, the doctor on duty was not around. The case was urgent; the pelting rain gave no respite, discouraging any effort to go out even for a short while to look for the doctor. So, I hung on to the phone to communicate with him. He told me to take the soldier’s temperature, then call back to let him know.

However, because of some signs, I was almost sure that the soldier was just pretending. I don’t know why that man’s misfortune struck my mind deeply. So, I decided to save him at any cost. I could do it with the help of the thermometer and put on a harsh attitude. To avoid any suspicion, I began to maltreat the soldier, arousing indignation against me even from those who had brought him on a stretcher.

I placed the thermometer so carelessly that it broke while he was holding it. Then, much irritated, I began to abuse him with contemptuous words and insults and took another thermometer. Pretending to be always irritated, I began to shake the thermometer vigorously as if to lower its temperature, but from the wrong side, and so, when I put it on him it was already marked 40 degrees Celsius. When I removed the thermometer, I showed it to the officer who had

¹³² Carso is a limestone plateau region extending southeast of Gorizia on the borders of Italy, Austria, and Hungary. It was the primary battlefield of the Italian offensives against Austria during WWI.

brought him, saying, "He's making such a fuss just for a fever of 40 degrees, as if he was about to die." The others were indignant at my apparent cynicism.

I phoned the doctor, informing him that the patient had a fever of 40. He asked to speak with the officer who had accompanied the soldiers. The official confirmed: 40 degrees! It worked! The doctor told me to prepare the prescription for the hospitalization with the diagnosis, "Excessive fever of undetermined cause."

He told me to make three copies and to bring them to him for signature. A copy was for the Unit Office, the second had to remain in the hospital, and the third was to be sent to the Corp of origin of the soldier.

I carried it out. Soon the ambulance arrived to transport the soldier who was still pale.

By then, he realized that I had helped him. So, when the ambulance that brought him had left, and I was attaching the tag to him, he clasped my hand tightly and deeply moved, with tears in his eyes, he said, "Thank you, thank you infinitely! You saved my life." I replied, "Do not do this again because it will go bad with you. Be good; be thankful to the Lord who has freed you from death. Do not tell anyone what I did because you can ruin me." I sent him to the farthest hospital.

After a few days, I was able to go to a confessor of a field hospital. He was a Capuchin friar, and in my confession, I told him how I had lied to save a soldier from execution. After checking the facts in detail, the friar said that I had done wrong on a moral level. What followed was a scholarly discourse with arguments from both sides. The confessor, however, drew a bitter conclusion. He said, "It is useless for you to reason out to excuse yourself. You were wrong, very wrong."

I replied, "Excuse me, Father, I am not totally convinced that I did wrong. I see no reason."

Then, annoyed, the confessor added impatiently, "It is evident that you are proud and unwilling to confess well because you are obstinate in your argument. You can leave because I cannot give you absolution."

After a few days, I had the opportunity to confess with the Chaplain of our Unit, who was also highly respected by the Headquarters of the Division for his kindness and extensive knowledge.

When I told him about the incident, he said, "Since at that time you believed you were doing it in good faith, you have done no wrong, knowing that the death penalty has as its main aim to prevent scandal in the army. In this case, there was no scandal. But do not do it again because you might wind up in the military court and receive severe punishment."

After my discharge from the army, among the many facts of my military life, I told this story to the boys.

One day, when we were at recreation with the Father in the garden of Oria, one of the boys blurted out rashly, "Tell the Father how you saved the life of the cowardly soldier and how the confessor refused to give you absolution."

Worried immediately, the Father said, “How, how? What’s that?”

Thus I tried to tell briefly how things had gone. As I spoke, I could see that the Father followed with particular attention. When I came to the part of confession with the Capuchin, he became serious and said, “You were wrong, very wrong in not abiding by the judgment of the confessor. Even if he did not convince you, you should have humbly accepted what he said.”

I added, “But later, my military Chaplain told me that I had done no wrong.”

The Father retorted, “Well, it means that later you followed the judgment of the other confessor. I repeat, you should always submit yourself in all and for all to the judgment of the confessor. Even if he is wrong, the Providence will certainly fix the error.”

Later, he called me aside and duly ‘catechized’ me saying, “Some things should not be told to the boys they are not yet mature enough to understand matters like these. They may be scandalized. What may have been etched in the minds of the boys is that you saved the life of a soldier by lying and that you opposed the judgment of the confessor. Later, the second confessor judged differently. Matters like these don’t help in educating the boys. They might be confused and misinformed.”

141. RATIONING DRINKING WATER

At the end of the war,¹³³ the Father wrote to me that, as soon as I was discharged from the military, I had to go directly to Oria, where there was a need of personnel. Father Palma, in fact, because of his exemption from the military service had to appear as the Director of the House of Altamura. He had also been suffering from malaria, which had significantly weakened him. The Father seldom came to Oria because it was difficult to travel. The other Brothers were still in the army. It could be said that the entire burden of the House weighed heavily on the shoulders of the humble Brother Giovangelista who was too young to be in control of a sea of trouble, the aftermath of the war, and the insubordination of the few boys who were left.

We don’t know whether because of the weakness of the bladder or plain laziness, two or three of these boys often wet their bed. They became unpopular even with their companions who avoided them.

When the Father came to Oria, these problems were pointed out to him, hinting that the boys should be dismissed. The Father was definitely not in favor, mainly because the boys were orphans. He replied, “No! You cannot send them out. I don’t know how you can suggest this. There is no charity without discomfort, or without cost and sacrifice. A work is meritorious in proportion to the love of Our Lord and the sacrifice it entails.”

They explained to the Father that it was not just a nuisance, but that beds were being destroyed, and clothes and beddings had to be washed frequently. The Father replied, “Never mind. All that is in the Institute and the House belongs to Divine Providence, who will certainly

¹³³ It was the end of World War I in 1918.

be all the more generous to us, the more we make ourselves available to help our neighbor.” After giving the general principles, the Father went on to the details with the finesse of the great educator that he was. “These boys do not only need to be greatly pitied, but we also have to use maternal kindness and care with them. The mattresses must be washed and changed often. The boys should never be sent to bed with a mattress still wet. The linen and clothes should be changed every time the boys wet them. The boys concerned must be bathed with warm water. You also have to control the amount of water they drink. I realize that some of them drink too much at the table, even before starting to eat, and the food is still very hot. This is not good for the stomach and damages their teeth, especially when the water is very cold. Again, the boys have to be moderated and taught. I believe that a few glasses of water at the table would suffice. After lunch, there should be two hours before drinking they say that before that, it harms and spoils the digestion.”

These instructions of the Father about drinking were misinterpreted, and thus, the boys became very thirsty. At the table, they were allowed to drink only one glass of water at the time the Assistant gave the signal. The first ones to grab the jug were always the quicker ones; the sprinters who in the confusion were always able to snatch some extra glasses of water.

When I arrived in Oria, I was immediately affected by those scenes. I asked Brother Giovangelista the reason, and he told me that it was the Father’s instructions. I said to him that surely there must have been some misunderstanding also because the glasses that were used at that time were made of clay and so small that it needed at least three to make a regular one. So I was more than sure that the words of the Father had been misinterpreted.

In order not to let the boys know the mistake (though later they found out), I said to Brother Giovangelista, “I will be away for a few days. Take the opportunity to instruct the boys about the use of water in the refectory and tell them that at the table, they can drink water as much as they want, but not too much.”

The Brother was not convinced. He believed that the instructions of the Father were correct, and he wanted to obey them faithfully. I tried to persuade him, but I wound up telling him to do as I said. I would have personally taken responsibility for it in front of the Father.

When the Father came to Oria, I informed him of the incident. He replied, “I don’t exactly remember what I said, but I am sure I did not mean to let the children suffer thirst. We spend so much to make them feel good and happy, can we ever think of making them suffer because of water which costs nothing? Our Lord says that those who give a cup of cold water for His sake will not lose their reward. How can anybody think that I would give such a directive? Maybe when I noticed that some boys, in my opinion, abused a bit by drinking too much, I told him to be careful. I may have suggested not to drink too much before taking the soup in order not to lose the appetite or even not to drink while eating very hot dishes it damages the teeth. I may also have said to avoid drinking for about two hours after meals, while digestion is taking place because they say that it’s bad.”

I remember that this latter belief, was widespread in our Institute, and I used to observe it, even though I was not convinced about it. In the Army, being in the health department, I had the

chance to ask several doctors for an explanation regarding this. They all said that it was absolutely not true that water spoils digestion. I ventured to summarize for the Father what I had learned while I was in the military. I learned that water is very essential for life, that while a man can survive for several weeks without food, he will only survive for a few days without water. Food cannot be used and absorbed by the body if it is not dissolved in water. The amount of water required by the body is higher, the lower the age, but always according to the seasons. Therefore, the doctors concluded that water is never harmful.”

The Father said, “I am convinced that I am like that. It makes me wonder how, at my age, I was led to believe that drinking water earlier than two hours after a meal could spoil the digestion, as I heard many times from others. It is necessary to study things properly.”

Still, on the subject of drinking too much or too little, I told the Father the following story:

Since I did not drink wine, did not eat sweets, nor take any stimulant, I really enjoyed the taste of water. Having confession once with Father Porzio, a Vincentian, I don’t know why it came to my mind to tell him that I drank a lot. The confessor asked me whether it was during or outside the meals, and, more or less, how many glasses. I answered, “I drink a lot. I cannot keep track of how many glasses in a day.”

The confessor then became serious and began to lecture me, saying:

“What kind of Religious are you? And what example are you to others when they see you totally drunk.”

I immediately clarified, “No, Father, I drink only water. I cannot even drink wine.”

Then, almost in anger, he said, “In that case, drink as much as you want, and don’t bother me!”

Laughing heartily, the Father concluded, “The confessor had mistaken you for a drunkard. In confession, we must be clear and not use words that may lead to misunderstanding.”

142. LIKE A MOTHER WITH HER CHILDREN

One evening, the Father, arrived at Oria from Trani accompanied by Brother Antonio Maria. The following day, he noticed that the shoes of Brother Giuseppe Antonio were worn out. So, he ordered Brother to use his spare pair of shoes.

The same day, the Father called me and told me about the incident. However, instead of saying Brother *Giuseppe Antonio*, he Brother *Antonio Maria*, and he scolded me saying seriously, “It is evident that you are negligent in your work. You don’t provide the needs of the Community on time.”

“One of the most beautiful signs of being together should be the generous and caring attention of charity. You must also have a lot of loving care for the Aspirants and the Orphans and deal with them like a mother with her children. In a special way, you have to take care of the younger ones because they need it most, and of those Religious who are humble, more observant and don’t manifest their needs, like our dear Brother who is so attached to the Institute, so

observant, so laborious and so in love with poverty. I had to insist he take my shoes. I practically had to force him. He said that he didn't need them; that his shoes were still good; and that, he could have had them patched again. He also said, 'Then why did I make a vow of poverty? There are poor who go completely barefoot.'"

As I listened in silence, I was wondering why the Father's praise of Brother Maria Antonio was a bit exaggerated, aside from the fact that Brother's feet were so large and out of proportion. How could they have fit the Father's shoes?

So to justify myself somehow, I objected, "Father, I didn't realize it. Brother Maria Antonio just arrived last night, and I have not seen him yet." The Father replied, "What is the matter with Brother Maria Antonio? I am speaking of Brother Giuseppe Antonio." I answered, "You said, Brother Maria Antonio."

The Father said, "Oh, that means that I exchanged the names by mistake. Brother Maria Antonio, although he too is so dear and good, knows how to ask for things. Had he been the one, sitting down, he would have said, 'I'm not moving from here until you give me a good pair of shoes.' I exchanged the names by mistake, but your negligence remains. I repeat, be sensible. I urge you to be more diligent and charitable to please the Most Holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary, for the good of the House and to earn merits for paradise."

143. BATHROOMS AND SHOWERS BUT... NO WATER!

Since the opening of the House in Oria until the city was connected to the Apulian Water System,¹³⁴ there was a critical shortage of water. Whether for drinking or other purposes, water in buckets had to be drawn with great difficulty from the wells. Thank goodness there was a young house helper, Stella, who dedicated himself to the heavy work of drawing and carrying the water to the tanks of the washbasins. He seemed sent by Providence. He often spent the whole day hauling water.

We were trying to save water as much as possible. We could not even think of taking showers. There were no bathtubs or showers in the entire House. For personal washing, we had to be content with a simple ablution, using only a small amount from a clay jar.

We lived in considerable discomfort. The children suffered most of all, especially those who needed to bathe every day.

We were all aware of this serious inconvenience, especially the Father who was very concerned about our cleanliness and hygiene and that of the House. He also felt sorry for poor Stella, who was forced to pull and carry water for a great part of the day, looking like a person sentenced to hard labor.

One day, the Father asked Father Palma if it was sufficient to install a pump to solve the problem of the water supply.

¹³⁴ The renowned "Acquedotto Pugliese."

Father Palma replied, “Father, it is not possible because there is no electricity in Oria. We could try using the dynamo of the motor which operates the printing press.”

The Father agreed, “Let us try right away.”

We wrote to a factory in Milan, detailing all the characteristics of our generator. The pump was forwarded, a mechanic came to install it, but it didn’t work. Later, he came back with an engineer from Milan, but not even he was able to make the pump work. So, the pump was not paid and was put with the scrap iron.

Meanwhile, to address the critical problem somehow, we built a small cabin, near the water wheel of the garden, converting it into a primitive shower. It had two defects: it gave only cold water, and the flow of water from the well was not regular. So we used it only in summer, and it took endless hours to enable all the boys to take a bath.

One day, seeing so many boys in the garden, the Father approached me and said, “At last you have found a way for the boys to take a bath. I am truly pleased! Let me see how it works!”

When he saw the reality, he added, “But this is primitive. It is not good; it is not good.” I said, “Father, almost everyone does it with pleasure.” The Father continued, “I understand that according to Dr. Kneipp¹³⁵ taking a bath with cold water is good for some, but it can be harmful to the stomach, and, especially, for the heart. It may cause cardiac arrest. Before taking their bath, did all have a medical check-up?” “No,” I answered. The Father continued, “Before starting to swim in the ocean or taking a bath with cold water, one has always to pass a medical check-up and then follow the prescriptions. Meanwhile, in my behalf tell Father Palma to build a set of bathrooms inside the House, with hot and cold water adjustable according to the prescriptions of the doctor, and not according to his judgment, even though, to tell you the truth, both of us follow Dr. Kneipp’s method. We agree on many things.”

I answered, “What shall we do for the water? It’s useless to build shower rooms with no water. Many say that the Apulian Water System is going to reach Oria, but nothing can yet be seen, and nobody knows when it will happen.” The Father said, “Can’t you use the new water well on the hill? It seems that there is enough slope from there where you can build the showers.” (About that well, I remember that when its water was discovered, the Father was in Oria, and upon learning about it, he went to the spot and said, “It’s a real Providence. When the Jews dug wells and found water, they used to celebrate and offer sacrifices to God. We, too, must raise special prayers of thanksgiving to the Lord.”)

I went on, “Yes, Father, but this can be done when the windmill motor, which will draw the water, will be installed. The well is deep enough. The order has already been placed, but it will

¹³⁵ Sebastian Kneipp (1821-1897) was a German priest proponent of naturopathic medicine and developed what is known as the Kneipp Cure hydrotherapy, for the prevention and treatment of serious chronic conditions. It mainly consists of the application of water through various methods of the combination of temperatures and pressures. This cure is used even today. Cf. https://www.kneipp.com/us_en/natures-expert/water-cure/hydrotherapy/

Father Hannibal used this method, and claimed to have been cured of his malady, thus in his letters and writings, he highly recommended its use to others.

come from America, so nobody knows when it will be installed.” The Father replied, “Anyway, start building the bathrooms so that when we have water, we will not lose time because this matter is urgent.”

We built the shower rooms, but we still had no water. The Father wanted to see how they would work. He realized the inadequacy of the bathtub and the small space of the dressing area. He approved the number of showers, but he pointed out that, for the little boys, the hot and cold water should be controlled because they might open only the tap of the hot water and get burned. The Assistant should regulate the temperature to a comfortable level from the outside.

Father Palma, who was present, turned to me and said, “Have the boys use their swimming trunks.” I answered, “Showers are for cleaning the whole body. What's the use then of swimming trunks if the boys would undress them in shower-room anyway?” Father Palma explained, “Swimming trunks are needed for personal modesty.” The Father intervened, “Father Palma, leave it to them.” And turning to me, he added, “Settle this with the doctor. (I understood that he said this not to contradict Father Palma). If we start meddling, it turns out that it is useless even to build the shower rooms. Father Palma, do you know what Canon Vitale told me when he learned that here in Oria you were building the shower-rooms? Baths can be an occasion of sin! Of course,” the Father continued, “all things can become an occasion of sin if they are not used as they should be. Even the holiest items. If one does not receive the Holy Communion with the proper disposition, or worse, if one receives it in the state of mortal sin, it becomes a cause of very grave sin, a sacrilege. With diligence and caution, we have to teach the boys what is good and what is bad.” And turning to me, he said, “Showers are to be taken at the appointed time, with much supervision because they could become occasions of serious disciplinary problems.”

144. THE SICK DESERVE ALL THE CARE AND SACRIFICE

The 1908 earthquake had heavily damaged both male and female Institutes of Messina. In fact, the female Institute was almost completely destroyed. We lived in tents put up to shelter us from the cold and rain. There was a severe shortage of food.

They said that food and relief were pouring into the unfortunate city, but throughout the whole month we remained in Messina before moving to Apulia, we received only a sack of moldy bread and a handful of carob for comfort. The entire time that we lived in the tents, we survived on a providential bag of beans dug out of the rubble. We carefully rationed the rotten scraps of bread, pasta, and flour also from the ruins. What we were able to recover, we shared with the many unfortunate victims of the natural disaster who came to us for help.

We hardly slept at night. However, what destroyed our morale most and exhausted us physically, were the frequent tremors of aftershock, which occurred day and night, to the point where some people showed signs of insanity.

The Father and Father Palma were doing their best to alleviate the suffering. They tried to hasten our departure for Apulia. Finally, after a month [on January 29, 1909], we all left for

Francavilla Fontana: the Orphans, the Aspirants, and the smaller Orphan girls - accompanied by the Father.

When they reached Francavilla, the Orphan girls were housed in a private home by a gentleman; the male Orphans, and the Aspirants in a portion of the municipal school building, where we were very crowded and lacking any comfort. We could only use three classrooms.¹³⁶

During the first weeks, the good people of Francavilla supported us as best they could. Then the help became less and less so that after a few months we had to start begging. No other income, no support from Messina even there they lived in great scarcity.

In the biography of Father Founder, Father Vitale writes that after the earthquake, Providence did not neglect us. The circumstances have to be understood considering the situation.

Father Palma remained in Messina, repairing what could be recovered. The Father made short visits to Francavilla to check on the situation of the Houses in Apulia, and to try to help them in every way. However, it cannot be denied that we lived in poverty. The only income was the 10 Lira sometimes given to the small musical marching band of the Orphans when they were invited to play. Together with the material aid he could get, the Father also tried to instill confidence in the Lord in all of us. He urged the two Communities to remain good, to trust in the Divine Providence, to pray fervently, and to do what they could. He said, "If you are good and you pray well, certainly what is necessary will not be lacking."

In order not to worry the Father more, Brother Giuseppe Antonio, who was in charge of running the House, was trying to make the needs of the two Communities appear less severe than they actually were.

The health of the Orphans and the Aspirants started to deteriorate because of the many hardships, as well as the poor diet. This state of things contributed to the severe persecution that later broke out against that House.

During the last few months that we were in Francavilla when he became aware of the health situation of the two Communities, the Father became alarmed and much bothered. Then he asked us one by one how we felt, whether we had the appetite, and we were able to rest, taking note of those who appeared malnourished, anemic, or pale. He called the doctor and had all undergo a thorough check-up, which he personally attended to gather the results and prescriptions. The doctor found widespread malnutrition and prescribed a general improvement in the diet and in particular, some reconstructive therapy. He immediately hospitalized two little Orphans and ordered exceptional care for the two Aspirants Angelindo Varotto and Giuseppe Drago, who had a grave risk of tuberculosis. The doctor ordered Brother Concetto Drago, who was found with advanced TB, to be sent to a mountain place where the air was fresh or if that was not possible, to send him home. When the doctor left, the Father called Brother Giuseppe Antonio and me because I was in charge of the kitchen and marketing. He reprimanded us paternally, but also said frankly, "I could not believe that the situation had reached this point. You never told me

¹³⁶ Cf. Chapters 17 and 155.

how it really was! This is irresponsible. It is a serious lack of charity; it is truly inhuman! If health is the most precious thing for everyone, for the Orphans, who will have to live by the fruits of their labor, their health is more valuable. It is just as valuable for the Aspirants whose good health is a requirement to be admitted to the religious life.”

Brother Giuseppe tried to justify himself, saying, “You are right, Father. I was wrong, and I beg your forgiveness, but allow me to tell you that, given the impossibility, or rather the great difficulties that we had in providing, I felt it would be useless to bother you more by presenting the matters just as they were.” The Father objected, “What a nice reason that is! What wonderful charity! This is the mute devil that will not allow things to appear as they really are. Had I known how things were, as St. Francis of Assisi would say, ‘I would have sold even the altar cloths for the health of these boys and Religious. I would have gone back to begging door to door, as I did for several years in the early days of the Work, to safeguard the health of our boys.’”

He turned to me and said, “You were doing the purchasing and preparing the food, why didn’t you call the Brother’s attention to this serious problem?”

“I would tell him, but he always insisted that there was no money. Sometimes, he would give me a few Liras a week, sometimes none. I had to make do with what we gathered from begging in the houses, farms, and markets.”

The Father continued, “You should have told me. I did not think that things were so bad. You should have written to me. It shows that you have no experience and not enough love and heart. You, too, allowed the mute devil to win over you.” He went on, “Meanwhile, have you seen the state of health of your poor brother?¹³⁷ Poor son! This is the result of your carelessness. Did you hear? The doctor has recommended that he should not stay here. He needs therapy and mountain air, possibly near his place. I am forced, for the sake of his health, to send him home. Today, I will write to your parents that your sick brother is going to spend some time at home, where the mountain air and maternal care will certainly benefit him. What news I am going to give to your parents! They sent a healthy, strong child with flourishing health to the Institute, and now they see him so ruined! He will stay in Galati until we open the House of Oria, the purchase of which we are negotiating.”

After a few days, my brother left for home. The Father assured him that as soon as possible, he would call him to Oria. He wanted to give him some money which he was able to scrape together, assuring him that later he would send him some more. The Father exhorted him to get well, without worrying about expenses for the Institute would provide everything, at the cost of any sacrifice.

Brother Concetto did not want to accept the money, believing that his family could afford him. However, in the end, he gave in at the Father’s insistence, who said to him, “You belong to the Institute, and the Institute will take care of everything. This is not only charity but justice.”

¹³⁷ We refer to Brother Concetto Drago, the brother of Father Carmelo. Cf. Chapter 155, which integrates the information about this Religious and the situation of extreme poverty of the Houses of Messina and Oria after the 1908 earthquake.

Then, he wrote a note explaining to us how to improve our food. Handing it over to Brother Giuseppe, he added, "Treat the community better. Pray more. Have more confidence in the Divine Providence, and do your best all the more. Give more alms and make sure that you do not lack what you need. Our poverty is due to lack of prayers, lack of trust in the Divine Providence, and your lack of generosity to the Community and the poor. I hope to send from Messina what I can."

The Father brought the two Aspirants who needed special and urgent treatment to Oria and lodged them in the Seminary. He lavished them with the most diligent care for about twenty days until they had completely recovered.

Father Palma wrote to the Father saying his presence was urgently needed in Messina. The Father wrote back, "As of now, the most urgent matter is to take care of the health of these two dear sons."

He continued to send money to my parents for the cure of my brother, despite their insistence, that they did not need it. They returned the Father's money, adding more, in the form of an offering for the Orphans.

When the House of Oria was bought and settled, he said to me, "Thank God; now we have many rooms and a beautiful garden. Write to Brother Concetto that he can come back. He will be separated from the others to prevent contamination, and we will take good care of him whatever the cost."

I said to him, "I think it will be better for him to remain in Galati, both to be cured completely and because he might just be a nuisance here and require many expenses."

At these words of mine, the Father became furious and exclaimed, "Are you saying that in our House, the sick brings inconvenience and enormous expenses!? It is obvious that you still don't understand! You should know that the sick attract God's blessings, His choicest graces and mercies on the Houses. They are true lightning rods. The expenses incurred to cure the sick, are the best expenses, blessed by God. If a House wants to get rid of its own sick, it is a sure sign not only that it lacks charity, but also justice, and certainly, the Lord will not bless it."

"Our sick will have to be taken care of by us, as much as possible, selling even the altar cloths, if there is nothing else."

"With the help of holy grace, when it will be possible, we hope to establish a House in the Congregation able to treat our patients, with the help of good doctors, properly paid."

"I repeat, as much as possible, we attend to our sick in the House. We shall avail of the hospitals only when it is necessary or to prevent contamination."

"In case of hospitalization, as much as possible, it should be in a hospital that has fewer inconveniences. The sick should be visited often, and be granted all that is necessary."

145. ADMINISTRATORS OF THE GOODS OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE.

The Father purchased the House in Oria in 1909. As soon as he took possession of it, he immediately put a picture of the Most Holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary, clearly visible on the wall, at the foot of the main staircase. Under the images, he wrote the inscription: *I am the Owner of this House and of those who live in it and love me. I am the Lady owner of this House and of those who live in it and love me.*

One day, he gathered us in the room adjacent to the sacristy, and he said, “This House is intended mainly for the formation of the Religious of our Congregation. It is truly suitable for this purpose. See how large and beautiful it is!”

At first glance, it did not look nice at all; it had been abandoned for a long time. The interior was dilapidated, fixtures were rickety and broken. The floor tiles were chipped here and there, and the premises were dirty and full of garbage. However, it looked like a palace to us coming from the Avignone Houses and from Francavilla Fontana where we were packed like sardines.

The Father went on to say, “You see how conducive it is for meditation in the open countryside, away from noise and distractions? See how well ventilated and bright it is. Surely you have already gone around. Have you seen the many rooms, the long corridors, and the magnificent atrium with its grand portico, under which you can have recreation even when it rains? Have you seen the beautiful Church with many sacred images? It is so conducive to pray, to do our beloved celebrations! Certainly, you have seen the vast garden with citruses and many other fruit trees. We can grow vegetables to have fresh produce and to be able to save a lot. Have you seen the beautiful little grove, where in summer you can have recreation ‘al fresco’? Whose are all these beautiful things? Who is the Owner?”

Angelindo Varotto answered, “All these things are ours, and you are the owner.” The Father replied, “Son, you are wrong. All of these things are neither mine nor yours. I am not at all the master. I can see that you have not yet read what is written below the pictures of the Most Holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary.”

The boys answered in unison, “Yes, yes, Father, we have read it.” The Father said, “Therefore, this House and all these beautiful things belong to the Most Holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary. And so we have to respect and care for them. We are only the tenants who reside in the House of the Lord, to administer everything as a gift from the Divine Providence.”

“We must be very grateful to the Divine Providence, who has given us the use of all these beautiful things! What shall we give to the Lord in return? We have to give Him love, love, love! You do all this when you are truly good, pious, disciplined, obedient, and when, if the Lord wills, you will become Religious and workers in the vineyard of the Lord, in our Congregation, and you will be devoured by the zeal of the Rogate and by the works of charity.”

146. SURVEILLANCE MEANS LOVING CARE

Once, in Oria, the overseer of a section of the Orphans had to be absent. He asked me to replace him.

While substituting for him, I thought of taking advantage to look at a book by Micheletti entitled *The Educator*. The Father saw me and said, “Come with me to my room; we have to talk about several little things.” I said, “I cannot come right now because I am substituting for the overseer of this section, and I cannot leave the children alone. As soon as he is back, I will come immediately.” And so I did. I went to the Father’s room with the book under my arm.

He then asked me, “Were you alone supervising the boys in the courtyard?” “Yes, Father,” I said.

“Bravo! And you supervise the boys like that? It is evident that you don’t know what overseeing means, and much less understood its importance and necessity.”

Thus, he started a long talk on the meaning and importance of surveillance, with hints of precious pedagogical wisdom. In particular, he said, “Supervising is not acting like a policeman. It must be loving. We are not there to see if the boy errs, and once he makes a mistake, scold and punish him. This is not educating, but using a repressive method, which should be completely banned from our Houses. It does not educate nor form; instead, it annoys, irritates, and exasperates the boy.”

“Positive and, therefore, educative surveillance, is loving assistance, which gently bends the boy’s will to do what is good and to avoid evil. This is the implementation of Don Bosco’s Preventive System, which we must follow faithfully.”

“Without the perfect surveillance, there can be no order, discipline, and real education. For an educational Institute like ours, surveillance is of major importance, a necessity. Accurate, diligent, continuous, and affectionate surveillance is a true and valuable apostolate. The greatest overseer is a true guardian angel visible to every boy entrusted to his care. He performs the same task as the Guardian Angel by his continuous presence and by his actions supported by a spirit of charity, he watches over the boys and prepares them to do what is good and to avoid evil.”

“Close supervision is valuable when it is done with a true spirit of charity. It can even substitute for the practices of piety. It is a precious work of charity and mercy since the supervisor loves and serves the Lord Himself in the boys.” The Father went on, “Supervision is so important, that if a priest was an overseer and found it impossible to get a substitute, and there was the danger that the boys who were unattended could seriously misbehave, the priest not only could but should forgo celebrating Mass. Because though the Mass has an infinite value, it is not obligatory,¹³⁸ while there is a strict obligation to prevent persons from committing a grave offense. The priest, however, would receive equal merit, as if he had celebrated the Mass because this is a case where one leaves God for God. The good that comes to the overseer for the good work he accomplishes with watching over the boys is priceless. He shares in all the good deeds done by his boys because of his assistance, while the opposite is also unfortunate, in that he partakes in all the faults committed by the boys because of his lack of supervision.”

¹³⁸ Just like at the time of Father Hannibal, current Church laws oblige priests to celebrate Mass “frequently” (CIC can. 904), particularly on *Sundays and Holy days of obligation*, in the same way as all faithful are obliged to go to Mass on those days. However, the celebration of the *daily* Mass is not obliged. The canons state that priests “are earnestly invited to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice daily” (CIC can. 276) and “daily celebration is recommended earnestly...” (CIC can. 904).

“For our Institute, which has as its particular goal the education of boys, especially the poor and orphans, assisting the boys is so important that for those who are not willing to do it, it would be a sign that they cannot be part of the Institute. And therefore, those who are negligent and incorrigible [*in this task*] should be dismissed. You have to understand better the seriousness of your failure in assisting the boys. By reading the book during recreation, you have neglected the good of the boys, and you have given a bad example to the other supervisors to do the same. Now tell me what book were you reading?”

I answered, “It’s a book written by a Jesuit priest, a certain Micheletti, entitled *The Educator*. He has written several other books dealing with education.

The Father said sarcastically, “Bravo! I can see that you were profiting from the reading! But I don’t think that Micheletti teaches not to watch over the boys, especially during recreation! Leave the book here. I want to take a look. How is it? It seems to me that it has a lot of words. It could have been more concise, but there is much to learn. However, a Jesuit priest told me that despite Micheletti having written extensively about the education of boys, in practice, he was not able to supervise a group of ten. In that case, there will be little to learn theory without practice is worth little. But theory and practice together are very precious.”

147. A LAMB AS CHARITY FOR A BUTCHER¹³⁹

A very religious and wealthy family of Oria, the Martinis, nurtured sincere esteem for the Father. They had chosen him as their spiritual guide and often consulted him. In turn, the Father was willingly available for them, and when he was in Oria, he occasionally visited them.

The Martini family helped our House regularly, frequently sending money and food. They even promised to leave all their property as inheritance to our Institute. However, I don’t know why their last heir left everything to the Cistercian Fathers of Cotrino (Brindisi).

Once, on the occasion of Easter, the Martini family sent us a snow-white lamb. It was so beautiful and graceful that it was a pity to slaughter it. So we let it grow, entrusting it to the boys. They became fond of the little lamb and called it *Martinelli*. They took very good care of it. The boys competed as to who could pasture it better. They also got the lamb used to eat bread and fruit. During recreation, it had become their joy. The boys could not be without the lamb and the lamb without the boys. It followed them like a little puppy, and when the lamb couldn’t see the boys, it would begin to bleat louder and louder as if searching for its mother. When *Martinelli* was left alone in the garden and could escape, it would run bleating to the Institute, up the stairs searching for the boys, at times in the study hall, at times in the classrooms, other times in the refectory, and, sometimes, even in the Church. It would not keep quiet until it felt the caress of someone. After about a year it became a big sheep.

¹³⁹ This story is already hinted in Chapter 84.

That year, however, the harvest in the area of Oria was very poor, and the following winter was very harsh more so than usual. There was a continuous flow of poor people to our Institute asking for help.

The Father was in Oria and trying his best in every way to help those poor people. He had ordered us to do the same so that in the House there was literally nothing, not a cent nor a handful of flour.

One day, a man shabbily dressed and very gaunt came to the Father, asking help for himself and his large family. We barely had a loaf of bread to eat. The Father called me and asked if I had the money or groceries for the poor man. I replied that that same morning, many had been sent away empty-handed. At most, we found for the poor man a few loaves of bread. The Father, worried and sad, said, "And what about his family? In the meantime, take this bread." Noticing that the man had a youthful appearance, the Father asked what his job was. When he answered that he was a butcher, the Father became thoughtful for a moment then happily exclaimed, "Oh, yes! The Divine Providence has helped you! In the garden, we have a huge sheep. We will give it to you, butcher it and with the proceeds from the meat help your family." Then turning to me, he said, "Go, get it and give it to this man."

I was a bit hesitant and began to say, "But, Father, the lamb is a pet! How will the boys take it?"

The Father stated, "Set the sentimental feelings aside. Give him the lamb."

I waited until the boys were in class to give him poor *Martinelli* to be slaughtered.

When the boys came out of the classrooms and learned about the unhappy end of their 'companion', they mourned. Some cried, others of their sadness, refused to eat their lunch.

When the Father saw me, he asked if I had delivered the lamb to the poor man and if he was contented. I replied that I had already given it and that the poor man was thankful, happy, and moved to tears. The Father commented, "Let us thank the Divine Providence that has given us the means to do this work of charity."

I added, "But, Father, when the boys learned about it, they took it very badly. Some even cried, and others refused to eat lunch."

The Father replied, "I understand. They are still boys. Let them cry. They have to get used to sacrifice for the works of charity." Then he added, "I was told that this morning several poor had left without receiving anything. This is not good. As a rule, no poor should leave our Houses without being helped. Why didn't you tell me? It means that you did not know how to look. If there was nothing else, you should have given some clothing, or linen, or some of the chickens and rabbits which, thank God, we have. If you search with faith to give charity, you can be sure that the Divine Providence, working a miracle will help us find something."

That same day, during the afternoon spiritual reading, the Father noticed that some boys were still dejected. He took the opportunity to tell them, "I heard that you are very sad because we gave the big lamb to that poor man. The lamb was really lovely! But I think we could not do anything more pleasing to the Lord than to give it to that poor man because the proceeds of the

sale would feed his large family. It is as if we had given the animal directly to Our Lord Himself. He said that He counts as done to Him whatever we do for the poor.”

“Do you remember what we read about Abel? He would offer the most beautiful lambs as a sacrifice to God. If the Lord Himself had asked you for the lamb, would you have denied Him?”

“No,” the boys answered.

The Father added, “So, having given it to a poor, as I said, it is as if we had given it to the Lord Himself. Was the lamb ours? Certainly not. The lamb was sent to us by the Divine Providence, and, after letting it grow, we have returned it to the Divine Providence. And you should be very delighted. If you want to be true Rogationist Religious, you have to get used to sacrifice for the sake of the works of charity because this is the spirit of our Institute. It is evident that you have goodwill. In fact, for the sake of the Lord, you have left your families.”

After a few weeks, the butcher returned to the Institute to ask for help again. I reported it to the Father, who fumbled in his pockets and found half Lira. He asked me if I had money, and when I said none, he said, “Give him this, and see if you can add something else.” Having nothing else, I tried to give him only half Lira. The poor man refused it, saying, “What can I do with this?” Those days you could buy nearly three kilos of bread with half Lira! Annoyed, I said, “What! Perhaps you expected us to give you a cow? Since the reality is that we don’t have a cow, you may go.”

I reported what happened to the Father, who remarked, “Of course, the poor should not have refused alms. But you should have pitied him. Maybe he is so miserable; he wasn’t thinking. You must have great patience with the poor. You should have let him realize kindly that it was not good for him to refuse Providence, and that, we didn’t have anything more to give him.”

“You should have checked in the pantry to see if there was anything else to give him, like pasta, bread, beans, maybe a chicken or a rabbit. It seems you forgot so soon what I told you a few days ago, that we must trust in the Divine Providence and never send away a poor empty-handed.”

“Remember that whoever gives one, says the Lord, will receive a hundredfold. For us, the poor are the support of the Institute. If by faith, we are concerned about the people of Our Lord Jesus Christ, then, for sure, we will give even our lives for them.”

148. FETCH ME AND A JESUIT...

One day in Oria, we received this telegram sent from Trani by the Father, “This evening... fetch a Jesuit and me at the train station.” So, we prepared two rooms; we informed the kitchen and ordered the driver of the coach to go to the station to pick up the Father and the Jesuit.

The Father was still in the station, and the train had just left when a Jesuit, out of breath arrived. He had to go to Grottaglie. When he realized that he had missed the train, he was dumbfounded and grew pale. After that hour, there were no more trains, and the poor priest would have had to wait until the next day.

When he saw the Jesuit's dismay, the Father approached him and asked him to accept the hospitality of our Institute for that night. To persuade him, the Father said that he felt honored to host a son of St. Ignatius, adding that he had been hosted many times by the Jesuits in Grottaglie, who had overwhelmed him with their kindness and charity. Relieved, the Jesuit agreed and got into the carriage with the Father along with a nun, who was first brought to the Sisters' Institute before proceeding to our House.

Along the way, the Father apologized to the Jesuit for the poor coach... a little old-fashioned, often the object of laughter.

When they reached the Institute, since the Community was still at dinner, the Father let the Jesuit wait in the parlor. Summoning me, he said, "Tonight, we are fortunate to have a Jesuit priest as a guest. We have to treat him in the best way possible. We have to prepare for him a room, the bed and everything he needs. Take care of this and then show them to me.

Meanwhile, I'm going to ask him if he has special needs, or if he can eat everything, and what he likes. Take care of preparing the room. I will take care of informing the kitchen."

"Father," I said, "the room is already prepared, and the kitchen was informed that you were coming with a Jesuit priest."

The Father inquired with curiosity, "How could you know that a Jesuit priest was coming with me?"

"Didn't you send a telegram?"

"Me?" The Father said, "I did not!"

"Here is the telegram."

"O my God! The telegraph office misunderstood me. I wrote to fetch me with Gesuita, that is, Sister Gesuita, and not with a Jesuit priest."¹⁴⁰

He went immediately to the Jesuit priest to tell him about the misunderstanding, adding, "Father, see how St. Ignatius has decided that you make an act of mortification here tonight." Then, accompanied by me, he went to the kitchen to settle everything. We wanted to check personally and in detail, the quality of the food, its variety, and the way it was prepared. Then, he went to the refectory. He had the tablecloth changed, put everything in order, and requested the best plates and glasses we had. Back to the Jesuit, he told me, "Show our guest the toilet." And addressing him, "You will excuse us, Father. I called them 'toilets'. In reality, our toilets are not that good they are still as the friars had left them many years ago. Because of the lack of water, we don't have bathtubs. To wash, we are forced to adjust as best as we can with a basin and jug in the room."

The Jesuit stopped him politely, saying, "Reverend Father, no need to apologize. You embarrass me with so much love and kindness. I don't know how to thank you. Let me tell you that we, too, in Grottaglie, for the same reason, do the same."

¹⁴⁰ In Italian, *Gesuita* is really used as a name, as in this case; but it usually refers to the "Jesuit" Religious.

At the table, the Father himself served him with such gentleness. After dinner, the Father asked him what time he wanted to celebrate Mass the next day, and at what time he intended to leave. Then, he instructed me to have him accompanied by a coach to the train station. We brought him to the room prepared for him. When we reached the room, the Father gave me a sign of disapproval and apologized again to the guest. The Jesuit, somewhat puzzled, renewed his thanks and said that for him it was just fine. Then he bade us good night and said that he would go to the Church to complete the recitation of the Office [= Office of the Readings of the Liturgy of the Hours].

While the priest was at prayer, the Father took the chance to put a second wool mattress on the bed the one prepared was too thin, and it was placed on wooden boards supported by iron trestles. At that time, all of us used that kind of bed. He replaced the blankets and the cover. He got the best basin, bedside table and chairs found in the House. Then he said, “Guests are not to be treated like this. When we are lucky to welcome guests in the House, don’t trust the one in charge of preparing the room. You have to check it personally check and if necessary, provide.”

I had the imprudence to argue, “I understand that guests must be treated well, but when it comes to a Religious, like this Jesuit, I think that they can adjust to the situation because they too have the vow of poverty.”

The Father added, “Blessed son, I am sorry to tell you that you still don’t know what hospitality means. And this is bad because this way, you will not form our young people about one of the most important obligations in our Institute. You should know that for us, hospitality must be practiced in the best possible way, that is, with good manners, true generosity, thoughtfulness, kindness, and charity. Put that into your head and make it clear to everyone that guests have to be welcomed with a spirit of animated faith, as if we were welcoming Our Lord himself, especially when they are Religious and priests.”

While I was still with the Father in the room the Jesuit returned from Church, and, seeing those signs of kindnesses, he said, “I’m so sorry, Reverend, to have brought so much trouble tonight. Please forgive me.”

The Father replied, “No inconvenience at all. It is a great grace for us to have a son of St. Ignatius in our House. We have to thank you for giving us such an honor.”

The guest replied, “Reverend Father, I thought of leaving tomorrow morning on the first train. I will celebrate the Mass in Grottaglie, especially because it is the First Friday and there, in our Church, we have much work to do. So, allow me to tell you now that I appreciate you sincerely. I thank you, and I renew my apologies for the trouble given.”

The Father, having answered politely, took his leave. He reminded me to inform the driver to take the priest to the station.

The guest took advantage of the absence of the Father to confide to me, “Actually, I heard so many good things about the sanctity and charity of Canon Di Francia, but I did not believe it that much. Now I know he is a man of God. I must confess that in my life, I have never known

anyone who can match him. What struck me most is how he does things naturally. There is nothing artificial. It is a holy habit of animated faith and most heartfelt charity.”

149. A LESSON ON FRATERNAL LOVE

Speaking of Brother Giuseppe Antonio, we must say that he was incomparable when it came to work. He did not mind any sacrifice day or night. All wondered how he could withstand so much work. For him, school and discipline were secondary in comparison to work. He would ask others to do the same.

In the Community, however, I demanded the opposite, which is, first of all, discipline, then school, and then work. Perhaps, in doing so, I was exaggerating, and so at times, we had disagreements.

Father Palma probably reported the situation to the Father, who, to avert possible conflict, said to me, “For now, you will not take care of the boys. Brother Giuseppe Antonio will handle everything. You will be in charge of the other services of the House. There is so much to do.”

I felt terrible about this decision because it hurt my pride. I was sure, however, that the Father had not been informed correctly. It is true that he had a high regard for work. However, since they were boys, he used to give more importance to discipline and school.

The Father left and returned to Oria after about two months.

At that time, the boys left a lot to be desired, regarding both discipline and school. They were often left on their own since Brother Giuseppe had to deal with so many other things inside and outside the House.

I took note with some interest in the problems that were happening among the boys, to have my revenge.

When the Father returned, one evening, I reported the trouble to him. The Father, in a resolute tone, said to me, “Mind your own business,” and nothing else. At these words, so sharp, I was speechless.

After some time, however, the Father summoned me and said, “I answered you in that manner, not because I don’t want to hear reports about such incidents. Indeed, this is everyone’s duty, and those who don’t do it are listening to the mute devil. I answered you that way because I knew that you were not objective in your report. You reported with a feeling of resentment, almost a sort of revenge against Brother Giuseppe Antonio. In reporting what is not so good in the Community, you must do it solely with a spirit of charity, that is, to try to remedy the harm that may follow. And it is clear that we can and must bring the matter only to the Superiors. Mentioning it to others is against charity, and sows discord among the Brothers.”

He went on to say, “In reality, just as I arrived at the Institute, I noticed the problem with the boys because Brother Giuseppe is too busy with the work and is easily diverted from both the discipline and the school. Because of necessity, he has to go out of the House often, and the boys are left to fend for themselves. I have already thought of reappointing you to take care of the

boys. But I have to warn you that you are also exaggerated in the fields opposite those of Brother Giuseppe. You give too much importance to discipline and school and not enough to work. Work is also discipline and prayer when it is done as their duty. If the law of work for everyone is: ‘*you shall eat your bread by the sweat of your brow*’, and ‘*those who don’t work shall not eat*’, the more this must be said of the Orphans, who in the future will have to earn their bread through the fruits of their work. Therefore, they must be trained to work from boyhood, according to their ability and inclination.”

“Even the Aspirants to the religious life ought to love work, and they should practice it. It is not only because they are also subject to this common law, but also because it is required by the nature of our Institute, by the need of a good example, by the necessity to provide for our living and to help our works of charity with the fruits of our labor.”

“The offerings and contributions coming from the Anthonian Benefactors Office are to be considered as a partial subsidy for the maintenance of the Institute.”

“With ‘work’ of course, we don’t mean only labor in its strictest sense, but whatever occupation like study, various assignments, and others as they are given by obedience.”

150. A LETTER TO THE PROVINCIAL OF THE PASSIONISTS

During the early years of the House of Oria, the Father told Father Palma, “I think that now is the proper time to open a *Ginnasio*¹⁴¹ in this House. We must set it up in a regular way, so that in the end our students may take their exams in the government schools to attain the legal titles. However, the examination for admission to *Ginnasio* is required first. The most talented Aspirants can take it. Kindly take care of this and keep me informed.”

Father Palma replied, “Father, don’t worry, it’s very easy. We can present them to the *Liceo-Ginnasio* of Ostuni where the dean is a dear friend of mine who you also know, Professor Calamo. The Father answered, “Yes, I know him. He is good! He receives Holy Communion every morning. When you meet him, give him my highest regards.”

Only two candidates were chosen at that time for the entrance exam, namely Giuseppe Drago, who later became Brother Mansueto, and Agelindo Varotto, who later became Brother Stanislaus.

During the days of the exams, Father Palma asked the Passionists of Ceglie Messapico to host the two students in their House to facilitate their going to and from Ostuni. Their Superior entrusted them to one of the Fathers to take care of them.

Both Aspirants were exceptional, and soon they attracted the empathy of the Father, who lavished all his care on them, with some interest. He often spoke to them with enthusiasm about his Congregation and especially about the Blessed Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows. He went as far as to propose to them to apply to enter their Congregation, using all means to persuade them.

¹⁴¹ Cf. the footnote in Chapter 118.

To attract them, he told them that our Congregation had no stability; that it could not even put up a school for their benefit; that it could not form them well, and especially that at any moment the Congregation could vanish.

The boys were hurt by these dialogues and reacted strongly, arguing, “That will never happen! We absolutely want to be Rogationists, nothing but Rogationists. Our Congregation is beautiful from every angle. Can there be anything more beautiful than the goal of our Congregation to obey the Lord's command of praying to send good workers to the Holy Church? As well as the other goal of gathering and educating the poor and abandoned orphans? We also know that our Founder is a great saint, no less than Blessed Cottolengo and Don Bosco, and we are fortunate to live with him.”

The answer was sharp and resolute like a cold shower on the poor Father, who, perhaps ashamed, didn't dare to say another word, not even to apologize. From then on, he rarely dealt with them.

When they finished the exams, the two returned home resentful at the proposal and behavior of the Passionist Father. They recounted in detail how things went. This aroused anger because all the Aspirants felt very attached to our Congregation. The Father and Father Palma were absent.

Everyone was advising me to write a forceful letter to the Provincial of the Passionists. I was indignant myself, but I didn't know what to do. I waited three or four days and seeing that neither the Father nor Father Palma was back, I finally decided to write a rather angry letter to the Provincial.

First, I thanked him for the hospitality given to our two candidates, but at the same time I expressed my complaint about the behavior of the Father who had tried to take away from us the two vocations, and even more at the contempt he conveyed for our Congregation.

After a few days, the Provincial answered with a kind letter, in which he was sorry for what had happened, and asked pardon for the imprudence of that Father.

The Provincial added that he had scolded his Religious, who, recognizing his fault, said that he was carried away by the charm of the two boys, who seemed really two little Gabriels of our Lady of Sorrow.

The letter was addressed to me with the title of *Very Rev. Father*. It so happened, however, that the Father, who had already returned to Oria, received and opened it. After reading it, not understanding the contents, he called Father Palma and asked him for an explanation. Father Palma said that he was not aware of the matter, and added, “It is definitely the imprudence of Brother Carmelo. Who knows what he had written!”

The Father summoned me right away, and with Father Palma present, asked for an explanation about the letter. After telling what had happened to our two Aspirants in Ceglie, I told him also of the letter I sent to the Provincial.

Father Palma commented, “I wonder how you wrote that letter...”

The Father added, “Actually, judging by the response of the Provincial, we can presume that the letter of Brother Carmelo was properly written. The Provincial has given importance to the letter, and not only has shown no resentment but is rather satisfied finding it right. Of course, the way that good Father behaved with the two boys, is not acceptable. Maybe he did it to test their vocation.” I broke in, saying, “I don’t think so. Apologizing to his Provincial, he admits that he was persuading them to apply for the Passionists because he was fascinated by those two boys.”

The Father went on, “However, I must say that in this case, you have not acted well. You could have waited for Father Palma’s and my return. We should not be too hasty. We must pray and reflect. This incident should serve as an example for us not to fall into the same mistake. Our prayer and our zeal for vocations should not lock ourselves into selfishness, but open us to the universal, making us wish the same abundance of vocations for all Seminaries, Orders, and Congregations as we want for our own Congregation. Of course, we must strive to obtain vocations for our Institute. However, this is to be done only by prayer, sacrifices, and legitimate activity. May the spirit of unscrupulousness be far from us, and any attempt to detract vocations from other Institutions in any way to bring them to ours. It would be something very serious because it is in opposition to God’s will, who is the author of any specific call to one or another Institute.”

151. THE BENEFITED DOCTOR BECOMES A BENEFACTOR

One morning, during the Holy Mass for the Community of the House of Oria, the Father was coughing and sneezing so much that he was only able to continue and finish the celebration with difficulty.

In the end, however, as usual, he prayed his long thanksgiving, then, without taking breakfast, he went directly to his room and went to bed.

Father Palma and I went to see him and, after insisting, we were finally able to convince him to put the thermometer into his mouth. The fever was more than 39 degrees Celsius. A doctor was needed, but the Father opposed it, saying he could treat himself using the means suggested by Dr. Kneipp.

Father Palma, who also trusted the well-known therapies of that physician, rather than calling the doctor, gave him some concoctions and infusions of herbs and flowers, which they said worked wonders. But the cough became worse, the fever increased even more, and the poor Father had a severe headache, sore throat, and shoulder pains.

He spent the night suffering badly. The next morning, he wanted to get up and celebrate Mass. He tried to get out of bed, but he could not stand. He had to be satisfied with receiving Communion from Father Palma, who insisted that a physician should be called, but the Father answered with a sharp no!

It was then that I blurted out, “Father, I cannot understand why when one of us feels bad you want us to call the doctor right away, but now that you are very sick you absolutely refuse.”

The Father replied, "I am not a boy, I know when I need to call the doctor." Then Father Palma drew me aside and told me to call Dr. Oliva, who was the physician of the House, with the alibi that he had to continue the periodic check-up of the boys.

We could not find Dr. Oliva. So we had to resort to the young Arnaldo Scardapane, who had recently come in Oria and was still a novice in his profession.

Father Palma was able to present him to the Father with a set of invented excuses. Except that the sick man replied, "Yes! You have twisted things to be able to bring a doctor. Let him come." The young doctor came all elegant, polite, and kind.

After exchanging the usual pleasantries, he bombarded the Father with questions and then subjected him to an examination so careful and meticulous to tire him even more. He then wrote a long list of scientific-sounding terms, culminating in the diagnosis, "Epidemic flu of undetermined nature." With such seriousness, it almost looked like a ritual; he said, "And it is contagious, especially through sneezing and coughing." Finally, he wrote a prescription full of medicines. He added, "A good concoction of mulled wine taken in the evening will help you perspire." He asked the Father, "Are you used to wine?" "Yes," the Father replied. The doctor then said, "Boil half a liter of wine. When it is reduced to half, take it because it will do you good." The Father asked him how many days to consume the boiled wine. The doctor said, "All tonight." Surprised the Father replied, "This is impossible for me: I will definitely get drunk." "But you told me that you are used to wine," replied the doctor. "Yes," the Father said. "But no more than one finger and even that is mixed with water." The doctor then said, "But in this case, you are not drinking wine. I shall come back tomorrow."

The Father thanked him, and at the same time, gave him an envelope with money. Then he said, "How capable and kind is that doctor! When necessary, it is good to call him also for the Community. He has good religious principles, and is accurate in his visit." Turning to me, he said, "You heard the doctor. Is the flu contagious? So nobody should be here. When it is necessary, you will come alone, and with all the precautions to avoid being contaminated."

I commented, "What a discovery this young doctor made! Doctors always say that, but in practice, even they don't believe it. They are all talk."

The Father said, "As usual, you judge immediately. If the doctor told you that this disease is infectious, it means that it is so. A flu epidemic of undetermined cause! Anyway, as I told you, no one must come to my room! I don't want others to suffer because of me."

The fact was that, even though he was given all the medicines prescribed, there was no improvement. On the contrary, in the evening his temperature rose to 40. It was a bad night, also because, though very thirsty, the Father did not want to take anything to relieve it. He did not want to break the fasting required from midnight, in those times, to be able to receive Communion in the morning. At our insistence for him to drink because of the high fever, he replied firmly, "No, I will never skip Communion because of thirst. What is this in comparison

to the thirst of the Lord on the cross?” So, he remained without drinking until the early hours of the morning, when Father Palma brought him Communion.¹⁴²

When the doctor returned, he examined the Father thoroughly and found him improved. Then they had a pleasant conversation with the doctor saying that if it were necessary, he would come back again the next day. The Father nodded happily, giving him the usual envelope with money.

That same day, Dr. Scardapane met with our Doctor, Cosimo Oliva, and said to him, “You know, Cosimo, yesterday and today I went to visit the Superior of San Pasquale, a certain Canon Di Francia. I cannot describe the impression he made on me. I have never met a man like him in my entire life. I have found my paradise and my America in that Institute: my paradise because I met a saint, my America because he paid me an incredible amount for the two visits; I was surprised. He overpaid me.”

“Arnaldo, did you accept the money?”

Scardapane answered, “Yes, but really, I almost regretted it.”

Doctor Oliva, resumed seriously, “Do you know who Canon Di Francia is? He is a man of charity, another St. Vincent of Paul for orphans and the poor. For them, he has sold all his family possessions, and despite being the son of a Marquis, he was not ashamed to go around door to door, begging for alms to support the Orphans. Ever since I have been in touch with the Institute of San Pasquale, I have always worked without accepting anything, and I hope to continue doing this for the rest of my life. I am the ordinary physician of the Institute, and I feel honored to put my profession, free of charge, at the service of such humanitarian work of charity.”

The doctor added, “Tomorrow, I will go with you to visit the sick.”

Dr. Scardapane interjected, “I was about to ask you if I could put myself at your disposal to help you in this very praiseworthy work.”

Doctor Oliva said, “With pleasure, Arnaldo. Indeed, I wanted to ask you. The work of two, especially in our field, is always helpful.”

The next day, both of them came to San Pasquale. The Father was feeling better, but still very weak. After the usual greetings, they examined him carefully, and finding him improved, prescribed some tonics, urging him to eat well. Doctor Oliva teased him saying, “Reverend Father, for the meantime, forget mortification and penances. Remember that your life is the life of the Orphans and the poor. It is the life of the Institute. If you don’t cure yourself properly, it will be a sin so grave that even St. Peter cannot forgive it, and therefore, he will not allow you to enter paradise.”

The Father said, “With or without me, the works of charity will go on just as well, or even much better.”

¹⁴² Cf. the footnote in Chapters 47 and 189.

Dr. Scardapane interrupted, saying, “Father, I am pleased to say that my dear friend and colleague, Dr. Cosimo Oliva, has granted me the honor to help him in the work that he is doing for this Institute, and for free, as he does.”

The Father expressed his warmest thanks to the two doctors for the great help they were giving to our Institute. When they were leaving, Dr. Scardapane handed him an envelope, saying, “This is a small donation for the Orphans: remember me in your prayers.” In the envelope was the money that he had received from the Father, plus an extra amount as his donation. From that day on, Dr. Arnaldo Scardapane did all he could for the House of Oria until the end of his life, free of charge, as he had promised.

152. “THIS YOUNG MAN IS NOT SUITABLE FOR OUR CONGREGATION”

The Father used to say that the House of Oria was the first daughter of the Congregation and in the newsletter *God and Neighbor* he wrote taking pride in the town of Oria and considering it his second home.

He often stayed in that House, sometimes for long periods. He was aware of all the details, of everyone and everything: piety and discipline, school and work, health, and dealing with people. It must be said that in doing so, he was not at all pedantic but indeed accommodating and pleasant. He gave a lot of freedom of action to those who had responsibility. He wanted to be informed about everything, and with good reason, given the complexity of the problems, the precariousness of the situation, and the inexperience and the young age of the Religious.

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Among the Religious, there was one Angelindo Varotto whose religious name was Brother Stanislaus, as previously mentioned. The Father had a very negative concept of him. In truth, Angelindo had been a good young man, gifted with simplicity and natural amiability, until he went to the army during World War I in 1915-1918. When he came back from the front, he was radically changed, no longer resembling himself: zero spiritual life, irritability, stubbornness, obstinate of mind, and what was worse, he became easily violent with the boys.

The Father had said several times that Brother Stanislaus had to be dismissed from the Institute. To make his return to the family less traumatic, the Father made him study to acquire a teaching diploma. At the same time, it happened that a group of Orphans was temporarily entrusted to him.

He accepted the assignment reluctantly; thus, not only was he not committed, but he neglected it almost on purpose. For example, he often left the boys to themselves. Intolerant of little matters, he would lose his temper and pour down punishment without any regard. He often hit the boys with his hands.

The boys could not stand him, and because of so much abuse, they nicknamed him Brother Manasso [Brother Terrible Hands].

There was no doubt: he had to be removed from his assignment with the Orphans. While we were thinking of how to replace him, the following incident happened.

An Orphan, a certain Marcello Lafauci, suffered from inherent weakness, getting so easily soiled. One day, the careless Assistant, completely lost his head and heart, and to teach him (so he said!), he rubbed the boy's dirty linen on the boy's face. The violent Manasso was immediately removed from the assignment.

The Father was absent. At his return, in the report about the state of the House, he found relevance given to the Varotto's foul deed and the unhappy end of his behavior. The Father was startled, and said very seriously, "Unbelievable! It means that Brother Stanislaus has really lost his self-control. He can no longer stay in the Congregation. I wanted him to get the teaching diploma before dismissing him, but we cannot wait any longer. How long does it take for him to take the exams and acquire the title?"

I replied, "Three more months, hoping that he succeeds." The Father continued, "A person who behaves so oddly cannot be kept in the Institute. He could seriously jeopardize himself and the entire Institute. We cannot wait for a repeat of what happened in Francavilla Fontana, where Vizzari went to prison, the House was closed, and the Institute was in hot water. If this strange behavior worthy of blame would be known outside, people would rightly be outraged against the Institute. The newspapers would publish ruthless propaganda, and the authorities will take strict measures. For sure, even the boys have been bewildered by this. It is necessary, therefore, to dismiss him at once. We will help him and the family financially so that he may be able to obtain his diploma."

"I will call him now, reprimand him as he deserves, and then we will see what to do. But when you learned about it, how did you deal with Brother Stanislaus?"

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I replied, "I was so angry that I wanted to do to him what he had done to that boy... I removed him from his assignment as Assistant. I told him that he deserved to be expelled immediately, and that, as soon as you and Father Palma would return, I would give an appropriate report of the incident."

The Father replied, "I wonder what criteria you used to assign him as Assistant. Did Father Palma know?"

I answered, "No. Brother Stanislaus was given the office because it was only for a short substitution. After all, Brother Redento was sick."

The Father observed that an assignment like that was not to be given to an incompetent person, not even for a day. Education is a challenging and delicate art, and the responsibilities that educators assume are serious. Then, he pointed out, "St. John Chrysostom says that the task of educating boys is the most excellent and the most difficult. And if this is said of the boys in general, how much more it is to be said of the Orphans admitted to our Institute, who, for the most part, are deprived of both parents and are very poor and destitute. As a result, the Assistant of the Orphans, according to us, should replace the parents and must have for the Orphans all the care that parents have for their children. Hence, the greater difficulty for the Assistant in the education of these particular boys because while between parents and children there is a predisposition and natural affinity, this certainly does not exist between the Assistant and the

Orphans. The environment of the family is thus the ideal for education. Instead, the environment of Orphanage, no matter how positive, is always just a substitute.”

The Father continued with an almost meticulous analysis of the kind of boys present in our Institute, those with families in difficulty and therefore also with psychological and environmental problems, and minors wounded by lack of affection and who had negative experiences in their childhood. All these reasons and aspects converge to complicate the task of education. The Father concluded, “Staying with these boys requires keen natural abilities coupled with knowledge, the spirit of sacrifice, and a lot of grace to be implored with prayer.”

He also added, “I must even say a word about punishment. In general, they are not to be used. They are not educational, but a corrective means, very often caused by the lack of accurate surveillance, which means, failing to use Don Bosco’s Preventive System. If the boys are assisted as they ought to be, they rarely commit faults, and, therefore, there is no need to resort to punishment. However, if sometimes it may be necessary, punishment must seldom be, and meted out only after praying. Punishments must also be mild and are to be given with a lot of prudence and charity. Otherwise, instead of doing good, they will do harm to the Orphans, who are more easily led to see punishment not as a means of education, but as a consequence of their status as orphans.

This doesn’t mean at all that educating an Orphan means to pamper him. If it were so, it would surely bring serious harm because, in the words of the Holy Scripture, ‘Once a young man has taken his way, he will not forget it even when he grows old.’ The Scripture also says, ‘He who spares the rod, hates his son.’ And again, ‘You shall smite him with the rod of discipline, and free his soul’. Therefore, we can conclude that corrections, mortifications, and even punishments, when they are really needed and are correctly applied, constitute a constructive element of the character. The educator will consider them as a sacred duty and as an act of exquisite benevolence and charity”.

153. THE STRANGE CONFESSOR

The regular weekly confessor in our House of Oria was a certain Vincentian priest, Father Porzio, who was considered by all as an excellent, pious, prudent and learned priest, so that the local clergy and even the Bishop, Monsignor Di Tommaso, would go to him for confession and counseling.

Every week we would fetch him from his House, and he was constant in coming. He did much good, and we were contented with him. Both the Father and Father Palma chose him, and they considered it a great grace from the Lord that they found a confessor so appropriate for our Community amidst the shortage of priests that Oria was experiencing.

For about two years, everything went very well, and there was never anything to say or even remotely suspect.

Then, all of a sudden something so serious and strange happened. The Father himself could not help but characterize it as ‘a devilish suggestion’, a real attempt on the life of our Congregation.

We learned that Father Porzio was taking advantage of the confession in trying to destroy our Community in Oria. He was trying to dissuade our young Religious in every way from our Institute and to convince them to transfer to his Congregation or others.

It happened that during the confession of the young Religious, Father Porzio had begun to insinuate biased judgments against our Institute, while deliberately praising his own, with a strategy that appeared to have been planned in detail. His Congregation had been tested by the centuries, approved by the Holy See, rich with thousands of members and communities in all continents. Our Congregation, instead, was newly born, without any approval, with few essential features, unsure of its purpose and means. The confessor mercilessly insisted on revealing our ‘fault’ of being newly born Religious and reminding us that we were uneducated, lacking even a novitiate and with only two miserable Houses. The field of our work was just a handful of Orphans housed in any way we could, and, worse, guided by untrained personnel.

For painting such a bleak and totally negative picture, only one conclusion could be made: that the ineffable son of St. Vincent indicated in no uncertain terms to each of his penitents to leave the Congregation as soon as possible. In return, they could enter his Congregation or others. He had the nerve to distribute vocations with an incredible snobbery.

To Brother Michelino Lapelosa he promised that in his Congregation he would study music and painting, which he liked very much.

To Brother Tarcisio Massafra he said that, after becoming a priest among the Vincentian Fathers, he would have had all the means needed to study and to perfect the art of printing.

He suggested to Brother Luca Appi to enter the Congregation of the Passionists, known everywhere for the sacred missions and the numerous conversions obtained. At the same time, he pointed out that he was truly fit for that Congregation, so he would certainly be successful with the Passionists and convert, goodness knows, how many souls.

He advised Brother Redento Levi to transfer to his Congregation, where with his enthusiasm, excellent quality and a strong inclination to study languages, he could become a great linguist and thus become a great missionary and convert many souls.

To Brother Camillo Ruggeri he still suggested his Congregation, where he would certainly and splendidly succeed fully realizing his exceptional qualities.

Finally, always during confession, for me, he praised the Institute of the Salesians. While I was listening to him in between disbelief and confusion, I was wondering what all that had to do with the sacrament of confession. My confusion turned into rage when I felt our Congregation being humiliated and at the same time, my vocation debased. I was seething, I was on the verge of responding, but I restrained myself, thinking that on the other side of the grating there was a man out of himself. But when he declared flatly that I had all the qualities to be a Salesian and that it was prudent to leave the Congregation to enter the Institute of Don Bosco, I could no

longer control myself and I replied sharply, “What are you saying? This will never, never happen.”

But he insisted brazenly, “I say this for your own good. I am convinced that your Congregation cannot survive. In what conditions will you and the other Religious of this Institute be in a short while?” I said to him, “It makes me wonder the way you speak. It is you who want to destroy our Congregation.”

I was so angry that, by instinct, I got up and left without absolution. In that frame of mind, how could an absolution be valid?

I first met Brother Luca and told him what had happened. Then he confided to me what the confessor had told him several days before.

That whole day in our group of young Religious, there was no other topic except about the strange confessor and his proposals. We could not understand why a man, considered so good, could have done such a thing to us. And why, then, none of us had told others those insane bits of advice? Evidently, our respect for the seal of confession had prevailed, or everyone had considered it as a strictly personal and confidential problem.

On the same day, I reported everything to the Father, who was hurt and shocked. He was very distressed and exclaimed, “Poor man! He must have lost his mind! I think that we are facing a diabolical suggestion and insinuation against the life of our Congregation. You cannot explain it otherwise. It is not the first time that the devil with his snares tries to destroy this pious Work. It is a true miracle of the Divine Goodness that our Congregation still exists. This, however, is a sign that God wants our Congregation. Even though the entire hell may be unleashed against it, it will endure forever, and it will multiply just as it happened to the Church. By the way, in the last audience that he had granted me when I informed him of the great difficulties and hardships encountered by the Institute, the Holy Father Pius X replied: ‘Have no doubts, the Work you founded is God’s work, and God’s works, be assured, no matter how they are opposed, will never fail’. The devil is doing everything to destroy this pious Work of the interests of the Heart of Jesus because he foresees that with its continuous prayer for many holy workers to the Holy Church and the beautiful mission of the works of charity, our Congregation will definitely snatch many souls from him.”

“So, with the help of God’s grace, if we remain faithful to the divine call by truly living according to the spirit and purpose proper to our Institute, not only the Institute will continue to live, but like so many other Institutions, will shine in the Holy Church of God.”

“Perhaps Father Porzio forgot the history of religious Orders and Congregations, as they all began from nothing. They began as a tiny germ of life, but with the passing of years and centuries, they became huge trees in the Holy Church producing abundant fruits of goodness. This confessor must not come anymore. Let him be dismissed politely, saying that we no longer need him. He will certainly understand the lesson, especially as our young Religious, thank God, have reacted, showing themselves faithful to their vocation. I have to leave today, but when I come back, if it pleases God, I will say a few words to all.”

154. THE WORKERS' JUST WAGE

While taking care of the works for the reconstruction of the House in Rome (on Circonvallazione Appia Street), Father Palma once had to leave for a few weeks, and I was called to replace him.

In the building yard, there was a master mason, a certain Alfonso Carovigno from Francavilla Fontana, who was very active and tireless. Ordinarily, he worked nine or ten hours a day, sometimes more, and demanded the others do the same.

Among the workers, there was also a mason from the Abruzzo Region, who, unable to find a job elsewhere, had come to Rome looking for work to sustain his large family. After searching, he finally found a job with us not as a mason, but as an unskilled laborer. Compelled by necessity, he adjusted to that lower level. The work was strenuous, and the poor man. Despite the goodwill put into it, he could not perform as an ordinary laborer.

For this reason, the foreman would scold him, briskly and harshly. One day, the poor man, pressured by the demands of family, asked for a raise. In response, the foreman gave him a notice of dismissal. The worker begged to remain at work, even at starvation wages. The master mason did not give in. The poor man turned to me. Mortified, he told me in detail his story of a man with eight mouths to feed. He had accepted his lot of humiliation, but now the notice of dismissal would be the ruin for himself and his family.

I replied coldly, "Regarding the humiliating words that you have endured; I will scold the foreman; concerning the salary, you have no reason to complain because I am told that you receive more than what is commonly given to your category of workers in Rome. Of course, you cannot demand from us what is needed to support your large family, and we cannot give it to you. As for the dismissal, I cannot do anything. If the master mason has dismissed you, it means that he had reasons to do so."

The poor man replied pitifully, "I assure you that I am willing to make any sacrifice, I will strive to be more productive, and even endure humiliation and insults. I take back the request for a raise, and I will be happy with what you will give me: better this than nothing, as long as you don't lay me off, please."

I replied, "It is useless to insist with me. I cannot do anything for you. Speak to your boss."

The poor worker replied, "But he doesn't want to listen to me at all. I prayed to him as we do with the Saints."

Grieved and mortified, he went to continue his work. But the Father met him, and in seeing that he was drying his tears, he asked him what was wrong. The man grabbed the opportunity to explain what happened. The Father told him not to worry that he would take care of the situation.

He immediately summoned me to his room to hear the facts. Upon hearing that the situation was really as the worker had told him, he scolded me, "You did not behave properly with the poor laborer who is so desperately in need and who came to you with the hope of finding

understanding and comfort. You have been so insensitive. About his dismissal, you told him that you could not do anything and to deal with the foreman himself. It was your duty to determine and decide for yourself if there was a reasonable cause to fire him. In cases like this, you must examine all the circumstances and evaluate them not with the ordinary person's criteria but with the religious ones."

"We have to complain to Master Alfonso because he took the liberty of treating this worker in such a humiliating and even offensive way. Workers must be respected. They are men like us, our brothers, and children of God."

"When it comes to work, we should not demand more than what is just, nor more than one's strength allows him. It would be a serious mistake to take advantage of the needs of others to require them to put more effort and performance or to give a salary less than what is right. To have the workers work nine to ten hours a day is too much. I know that ordinarily, they must work only eight hours a day."

"You cannot expect more than what he does from this poor man who is a mason, and who out of necessity has to work as an unskilled laborer, a job that he feels is much heavier, according to what he told me. Again, you have to be understanding. The 15 Lira pay per day, seems too little. How can he support himself and his family in his village?"

I said, "Actually, this is what I have learned, which seemed too much to me. In Oria, laborers are paid 10 Lira and masons 12. Here, the laborers are given 15 Lira and the masons 20, taking into account the extraordinary work they do."

The Father replied, "You are comparing Oria to Rome, and do not realize how much more expensive life is here." I replied, "I asked for information, and they told me that in Rome, the ordinary pay is much lower than what we give." The Father went on, "Those who work for us are to be treated not only as salaried persons but as our collaborators. Our treatment should not only be as required by justice, that is, as established by law, but as charity requires, that is, according to the worker's needs and our possibilities. This system of charity is very effective to attract the people who work with us to respect us and our religion. It is also a gentle way of giving alms in the form of salary instead of almsgiving, which, especially for some, is humiliating. You instead have answered to that poor worker: 'Do you want us to give you not only what is sufficient for you but also your entire extended family?'"

He continued, "We should consider the needs of the family, according to the number of children when we give salary to a worker. This is only right, and it is also thought so by the civil and natural law. This is to be implemented much more by those who act in a spirit of charity."

"Because of this, even before the labor code was issued, we were already doing it for the workers. In Messina, before the 1908 earthquake, we used to give to Mr. Micalizzi and to all other employees who worked with us a salary according to the number of family members, and as the family members increased, we also increased the salary."

I replied, “But then, if this is the case, in order not to spend too much, before hiring a worker, we have to be well informed and choose only those who have no family yet, or have only a few children.”

The Father replied sarcastically, “What a smart way of thinking! This would be a lack of humanitarian spirit, and, worse, lack of a spirit of charity. Religious would become shopkeepers and sharp-eyed industrialists, looking only for their own interests. Instead, the generous spirit and even more that of charity in hiring workers will give preference to those who have a large family to provide for because these are most in need, and we must try to help them as best we can. In our Houses, we have to do it this way, and we have to do it in a spirit of justice and true charity. In this way, the Lord will bless the work and certainly will send greater Providence to the Institute.”

“Therefore, this man is not to be fired. Instead, try to help him, as much as you can, with a salary according to his needs. Keep me informed.”

Immediately after, the Father called the worker to his room. He consoled him and gave him an envelope with money. When the worker left the room of the Father, he was deeply touched, and I heard him exclaim, “Truly this priest must be a saint.”

155. DON'T BE STINGY WITH NECESSITIES

During our adventurous year-long stay in Francavilla Fontana (January 1909 - January 1910), my brother, Brother Concetto Drago, contracted a life-threatening illness.¹⁴³ Given the extremely precarious situation of the place, and also to give him a change of environment, the Father sent him back to our family to recover.

Having somewhat improved, after a few months, he came back to Oria, where we had opened the new House. But he had a relapse and got worse to the extent that we deemed it prudent to inform the family of the grave situation. My father rushed immediately to Oria and stayed until my brother was out of danger.

During that time, my father ate with us in the refectory, treated as one of us. Once when the first course was a vegetable soup, turning to me, he said to me frankly, “Son, go to the kitchen, and pour some oil on these vegetables. Otherwise, like this, it reminds me of the grass eaten by sheep! What nutrients can vegetables give? They just clutter the stomach. If you don't have oil, I will send a barrel of the genuine oil we manufacture. And let me tell you quite frankly, since you are my son, that I see that the food of this good community is very poor. Since it seems that you are somehow in charge here, why don't you provide? Or are you just like those corporals, who are only concerned to let the troops toe the line in close ranks, and let the rest drop dead?”

“My surprise is to see how, notwithstanding this treatment, these young men are so happy, and they seem truly healthy. Are they perhaps living only on God's grace? Or maybe joy makes them healthy?”

¹⁴³ Cf. Chapter 144.

My father could not even imagine how many constraints we had at the opening of the new House. At breakfast, we had pure wheat bread, as much as we wanted, accompanied by a handful of olives or dry figs. At lunch, we always had the same soup, topped with a dash of seasoning. It was the main dish, after which dried figs and olives reappeared, or sometimes cooked vegetables, occasionally accompanied by a small piece of cheese. The meat was not even mentioned, except twice a month, or when exceptional circumstances happened to brighten the horizon. Dinner was more or less like lunch.

My father's remarks resulted in a more considerate treatment for him, including a bottle of oil placed in front of him. He immediately said, "Too much kindness! Why all this for me? Are you teasing me? When I made the observation, I did not do it for myself, but for all of you. I can eat stones and, thank God, digest them. Besides, I am leaving in a few days. Carmelo, you are not thinking smart.

That simpleton Brother Pasquale who was serving in the refectory overheard these remarks and began to laugh heartily. As soon as he had the opportunity, he told the Father everything, who confronted me at the proper time, "Bravo! You have given your father the occasion to reprimand you! He is right. He did well! You deserved it. I don't know why you wanted to treat him as one of the community. Guests deserve all our attention because they are guests. In our Houses, we have always done it this way. Since it was your father, however, you treated him like one of you. Even if he is your father, here, he is always a guest, and therefore you owed him special attention. How is it that the treatment of the Community is so inadequate?"

I answered, "Father, what can I do with these blessed Sisters? In the past few days, I don't know how many times I have told them to provide. They answered that they have nothing else, that this is what is sent from the Sisters' House."¹⁴⁴

The Father reacted, "Why did you give up so easily? Instead, you should have informed Father Palma or me. Come with me; let's go to the kitchen."

There he gave a paternal but sharp reprimand to the Sisters, with orders to improve the food.

Conversing, we walked toward his room. We met my father to whom the Father said, "Don Francesco,¹⁴⁵ you were right in scolding your son because he neglected his duty as a corporal, as you rightly qualified him. Make him put his head together."

My father replied, "Father, it's tough to straighten the mind of corporals, since ordinarily, the only quality they have is that of being stubborn, as he is. This son, I know him well. When he was at home; and I made him toe the line, I made him walk with two feet in a shoe as I do with the rest of my children. All I had to do was nod my head, and they would immediately become obedient and meek as lambs. Father, when you see that Brother Carmelo does not perform well

¹⁴⁴ For many years, the Daughters of Divine Zeal were staffing and managing the kitchen of San Pasquale Institute of the Rogationists in Oria. The San Benedetto Institute of the Daughters of Divine Zeal, which was not too far from San Pasquale, provided the food for the Rogationists Religious, Aspirants, and Orphans of San Pasquale.

¹⁴⁵ The title *Don* before one's name is often used until today among Sicilians to express profound respect for a person.

as corporal, as his general, put him in jail, fasting on bread and water and sleeping on a plank bed. He will then learn to do his duties properly. However, take into consideration that he is still very young, and he does not understand what life is.”

The Father, laughing, said, “Meanwhile, the poor children had to suffer! He had to inform me. But now, I have given orders to the kitchen to improve the food in all aspects.”

Once in the room, the Father addressed me, joking and smiling, “Sit down, Corporal! You have to know that poverty does not consist of skimping, especially when it comes to health. The main thing, after the health of one’s soul, is the body. Health is a precious inheritance not only for a Religious but also for the Congregation. If the food is not good and insufficient, health is compromised, especially for the boys. So skimping on food is not a spirit of poverty. It is also against the economy because if the boys are not healthy and they get sick, we have to spend on doctors and medicines. The real economy, therefore, is not to save money or things when they are needed or useful. It is in increasing the heritage of the Congregation by guarding it and using it. Patrimony increases with honest work, industries with agricultural products, and the use even of little things. And for us, we develop with the effective propagation of our Anthonian Benefactors Office. We must also seek, always honestly, for contributions from the Government. This interest in the endowment of the Congregation shall not be for ill-gotten gains, which would harm and not benefit the Institute. Instead, everything should aim for the sole purpose, which is the greater glory of God and the good of neighbor.”

“This spirit of economy and poverty also consists of safekeeping everything that belongs to the House and the Congregation: money, buildings, equipment, and furniture as if they really belonged to the Divine Providence and we are only custodians and humble administrators. It also consists of proper spending and sharing, in giving and holding and in providing for the just needs of persons and situations, taking into account equality and fairness and, above all, charity.”

156. THE ANTHONIAN BENEFACTORS OFFICE AND THE PERIODICAL ‘*GOD AND NEIGHBOR*’

The *St. Anthony’s Bread* devotion in favor of the Orphans of our Institute, as we know, began in 1887 in Messina¹⁴⁶, but the Anthonian Benefactors Office as understood today started in 1907 with the publication of the periodical *God and Neighbor*, which was printed in our small printing press in the Avignone District.

The periodical started with a monthly circulation of very few copies that gradually expanded according to the increase of the addresses as a result of its dissemination as well as of the diligent and effective work of Father Palma and Brother Giuseppe Antonio, with the generous collaboration of the Daughters of Divine Zeal.

¹⁴⁶ During the outbreak of cholera in Messina, Susana Consiglio made a vow to St. Anthony that if she and her family were spared from death, she would donate a sum of 60 Liras to the Orphans of the Anthonian Institutes of Canon Hannibal Mary Di Francia to buy bread. The grace was granted, she fulfilled her promise, and the devotion to the Bread of St. Anthony started. This was documented in a notarized declaration in 1906. Cf. Tusino, *The Father’s Soul*, p. 368.

The dispatch of the printed matter and the correspondence with the benefactors was entrusted to Mr. Micalizzi, an employee who was helped by others and hired by the Father out of charity.

This lasted until the 1908 earthquake when the small printing press of Messina was transferred to Oria. Accordingly, the publication of the magazine also moved to that House. In Oria mailing and work at the Anthonian Benefactors Office were entrusted to our Sisters.

The general set up, organization, and development of our various Anthonian Benefactors Offices were always presided over by Father Palma, also in Oria. The Father used to say of him, “We must acknowledge that the Anthonian Benefactors Office is a brilliant and wonderful organization developed by Father Palma. The Divine Providence has used him to solve the financial problem of the two Congregations.”

The editorial work was left entirely to the Father. *God and Neighbor* was a newsletter of four pages with a tabloid format. As the Anthonian Benefactors Offices were being organized, the number of benefactors rapidly increased. The circulations grew. The magazine reached a multitude of devotees and readers.

A big job rested on our interns [= Orphans and Seminarians], who had to operate the printing machines manually. In the beginning, when the newsletter had only a few thousand subscriptions, we didn’t feel the burden, but later the printing became an increasingly difficult problem. All of us had to work even during recreation and until late in the evening, alternating in turning the crank and competing to see who lasted longer.

One day the Father entered the printing press and, seeing that exhausting sight, asked how many copies we had to print that month. When he was given the figure, he said, “We can no longer continue this way.” Then turning to the boys, he continued, “I’m glad that you work so hard and are happy doing it. This is a good sign of your success. You are putting into practice the law of work: to eat bread by the sweat of one’s brow. When labor is done to accomplish one’s duty requested by obedience, it becomes a prayer, the more acceptable to God, the more sacrifice it entails. But we have to try, with God’s help, to provide the printing press with some motors to avoid operating the machines manually. Thus, there will be more time for study, for other works, and for you to have your regular hours of rest and recreation.”

When the Father left the printing press, I followed him to his room, where he continued to tell me, “It is so clear that the Lord astonishes us with his countless benefits. This Anthonian Benefactors Office, in just a few years, has had an extraordinary development. It is so evident that the Lord wants it and has chosen it as the sure path of the Divine Providence to solve the financial problem of our Institutes so generously. It also seems that He has chosen the great Wonder-Worker, St. Anthony of Padua, to be its *Provider*.”

“However, we must show our gratitude to the Lord, by working in this field with a true spirit of faith, holding all that comes to us through this Anthonian Benefactors Office as belonging to God, and using everything in strict accordance with the specific goals of the Institute.”

“Through this Anthonian Benefactors Office, we have also fulfilled a real mission among the people through good printed materials. The periodical *God and Neighbor* and indeed, all the other printed materials, as well as the correspondence, must be imbued with moral values and sound devotion.”

“With our Anthonian, we must also nourish the spirit of faith and unity with God in the faithful. This is the purpose of the prayers said by the devotees of St. Anthony, as well as by our little Orphans to beg for graces and gratitude for those already obtained.”

“Finally, through this Propagation, we offer the benefactors an effective means to help the Orphans through their acts of kindness and beneficence, mercy, and charity. Thus, the Anthonian Benefactors Office, when it’s done as it should, is also an apostolate.” Then he told me, “Go and look for Father Palma and come here, both of you.”

When we got to his room, the Father immediately started his talk, “A while ago I went to the printing shop, and I saw the work that all do for the manually-operated printing machines. It is a huge effort, now that printing has reached several tens of thousands of copies per month, and may increase more. This is not good for the study of the boys and their other activities. This can no longer continue. We have to provide a different way of using motors where we can save a lot of manpower. Father Palma, could you please take care of this matter, so that we can remedy it as soon as possible? I know that thanks to God and your goodwill when you commit yourself, you succeed even in difficult things. As you succeeded in such a brilliant way in setting up the Anthonian Benefactors Offices which are working so well and are much admired by those who visit them, I am sure that by God’s grace, you will also succeed in this.”

Father Palma started immediately, and after a few months, the machines were working initially through a generator, and later using an internal combustion engine of higher capacity, until a rotary machine was purchased and installed in Messina. This machine could print twenty-five thousand copies per hour using only half of its capacity, and fifty thousand when running at full speed. And the rotary machine could print, cut, and fold the magazines, with the supervision and work of just one person.

The Anthonian Benefactors Offices of the female Houses of Messina and Oria took care of mailing the periodical and other printed matter [to the benefactors]. They also handled the mailing for the two male Institutes. During its most flourishing period, the periodical *God and Neighbor* reached a circulation of 700.000 copies.

157. IT IS A SERIOUS FAULT NOT TO INSURE OUR WORKERS

When we started the extension of the House of Oria, we had to excavate the area where the construction was to be established. Since the ground was rocky, the constructor had to resort to the use of explosives. One day, the worker loading the explosives was using an iron bar. I warned him that it was very hazardous because, while pressing the explosive, the rod could cause a spark with disastrous results. I told him to replace the rod with a wooden stick, and I asked one of the carpenters to make it for him. The worker, however, continued to use the iron bar.

Unfortunately, a week later, what I was afraid of happened. The sudden explosion threw the worker more than ten meters away. He suffered multiple severe burns, as well as multiple abrasions all over the body, especially on his face. He was immediately brought home, and a doctor was called for the first aid.

Unfortunately, the worker was not insured, and the Institute had no permit for the use of explosives. We begged the doctor not to lodge a report about the accident. The doctor, who was our very close friend, did not report it, notwithstanding some fear of bringing on himself serious disciplinary and criminal sanctions.

In those days, the Father was in Oria. We tried in every way not to let him know about the accident, but, after a few days, he found out.

He summoned me and wanted to know the extent of the accident. I tried to minimize it, adding that it was the fault of the worker. I had even taken the trouble to give him a wooden stick, but he did not mind me and even joked about my initiative.

Then the Father asked, "Why did you not inform me of the accident?"

I replied that we did not want to give him unnecessary worries. Unfortunately, the worker got hurt, and he had no accident insurance.

The Father abruptly interrupted, saying, "What kind of thinking is this? What *a nice* charity! (= said in a sarcastically) You say that the fault is his because he didn't do as you told him. Unfortunately, no matter how it happened, that poor man is ruined. It is worse than what you told me because I have learned that most probably he will remain blind. And the responsibility is ours. I suppose the doctor has made the report, as it is required in these cases, and so most probably there will be serious consequences."

I answered, "No, Father. Since the doctor is a good friend of ours, we asked him not to report it because the worker is not insured and because we had no permit to use the explosives. To avoid a hefty fine and maybe severe penalties, and even jail, we convinced him not to report the incident."

The Father reacted, "This is terrible; very bad! We cover up our faults with deception and deceit. I cannot understand your decisions. You proceed without judgment and conscience. Did Father Palma know that the worker was not insured and that the explosives were used without the proper authorization?"

I answered, "The truth is that from the start of the construction, the foreman, Ciccio Carone, was assigned to follow up these requirements."

"And none of you took care of something so important to verify if everything was in order? It's incredible! Did you need a serious accident to open your eyes? And now you are trying to mend the damage by cheating. It is bad! Bad! The insurance for workers is appropriate. The social security law obliges seriously by virtue of equality and fairness, as well as because of Christian charity and social good. Working, the laborer produces not only for himself and his family but also for society. In case of injury, while at work, temporary or permanent, he and his

family shall be helped. This is the purpose of insurance. It is, therefore, a very just law, and must be observed by all. And the more it should be observed by us Religious who want to be perfect Christians. All this is said not only about insurance for accidents but about any insurance on welfare sanctioned by the laws. By the way, are the men who work with us properly insured?"

I said, "I think so, but I'm not sure."

The Father replied, "Such carelessness is unbelievable. Check and immediately provide if they are not insured, and let me know everything. In the meantime, while the poor man is unable to work, his medical treatment and support for the family shall be borne by the Institute. If he will become incapacitated (let's hope not!) he has to be fully compensated by us, not only according to the law but even more, according to charity, in everything he needs. I shall visit him."

The Father then scolded me for not getting a permit for the explosives and expressed strong disapproval of my request to the doctor not to report the accident. He said, "You have given a bad example! What a beautiful friendship: to save us from the punishment you put the doctor in danger of going to court! It would have been a lesser evil if the physician reported the accident, and the Institute facing all the consequences of paying damages, penalties and even imprisonment."

On the same day, the Father went to visit the injured man to see the gravity of the situation, to console the family, and to assure them that the Institute would pay all expenses.

The worker said to him, "Actually it's my fault. Brother Carmelo warned me not to use the iron rod because it was dangerous. Had I listened to him, this accident would never have happened."

The Father said to him, "Stop worrying about whose fault it was. Think about getting well. We hope that St. Anthony will grant you the grace to recover. We have to pray to the great Healer for this."

The family later said that, before leaving, the Father left them a good amount of money,

158. TOO MUCH GRACE, ST. ANTHONY!

The writing of the periodical *God and Neighbor*, which began in August 1907, was always done by the Father in all aspects, until the end of his life. The special issue of 1925, on the occasion of the inauguration of the House of Rome, was entirely and directly written by him.

Father Vitale began helping the Father only during the last few years, with some articles for the publication.

The Sisters of the Anthonian Benefactors Offices would gather the stories of graces obtained through the intercession of St. Anthony and send them to the Father for review, correction, and, if it was the case, publishing them, according to the will expressed by the devotees.

After his death, the editing of the magazine was taken up by Father Vitale who continued as the Father did up to World War II. By then the circulation had reached about 700,000 copies a month.

During that War (1940-1945), the publication of the magazine was suspended. Later, it was entrusted to the Daughters of Divine Zeal, who, though keeping the same name, changed its character.

The Father directed *God and Neighbor* with a master's touch and with that spiritual inspiration which was characteristic of him. It was a fact that the magazine was enthusiastically welcomed and appreciated by the clergy as well as the laity. When St. Pius X, through Cardinal Gennari, received one of the first issues, he expressed his congratulations and also sent a donation adding that he was waiting for special grace and was confident that, prompted by the prayers of the Orphans, St. Anthony would obtain it from God.

Many people from Italy and abroad not only requested and read *God and Neighbor* with much pleasure but even collected it, despite its simple typesetting format.

We wondered how the Father, alone, was able to follow up so excellently the preparation of the periodical as well as of the booklet *The Miraculous Secret*, despite his busy work for the two Institutes, and always without taking anything from the time that he devoted to his daily meditation, vocal prayers, and other special devotions.

One day in the House of Oria, I went to his room bringing the correspondence addressed to him. I found him reviewing, for publication in *God and Neighbor*, the stories of graces granted through the intercession of St. Anthony, which the devotees had sent to our Benefactors Office.

From a pile of letters, he took two and gave them to me saying, "Read these. They are masterpieces."

On the envelope, there was a note from the Secretary: *Miracle*, with three exclamation points. On the other envelope: *An amazing miracle*.

I read the first letter, and I enjoyed the following passage, "I am writing on behalf of my close friend, who after having waited anxiously for his first little child, had the agony of giving birth to a little monster without human features. Then, the whole family immersed in unspeakable pain, turned to the great Wonder-Worker of Padua with energetic faith, praying that he would deign to give regular features to the newly born baby or to have him die. And, oh! Miracle! Two days later, the baby died! Please publish this miracle in the periodical, *God and Neighbor*."

At this point, I could not help laughing. "Truly, there is something to laugh about," the Father said. "But that is not to say that we have to cry over such ignorance. What a wonder it is: to let him die! I do not think that we need St. Anthony's intervention to die. There is a natural law that takes care of this. We would have admired the wonder if St. Anthony had obtained from the Lord that the baby acquired all the regular human features. Then, it would have been fine to publish such an event."

The second letter was from another lady, who wrote, “One of my daughters, a 10-year old, suddenly fell seriously ill with bilateral pneumonia. She had a high fever up to 40 degrees, a dry cough, and shortness of breath. Despite all the medicines, after four days, her case seemed hopeless. The child was dying. I turned with great faith in St. Anthony to grant me the grace of healing my daughter. I promised an offering for the little Orphans, and I sent them a telegram to pray for me to the great Wonder-Worker of Padua. Unfortunately, the sick girl has fallen into a coma for three days. There was no longer any sign of life. But then, almost suddenly, the temperature dropped rapidly to less than 36 degrees. Within a few hours, the girl was completely healed. She began to eat with appetite, and today, after five days, thanks to the prayers to St. Anthony and the Orphans, she has left the bed, completely healed. I am sending the offering I have promised for the Orphans, asking to thank the Holy Wonder Worker for the amazing miracle that he has done and to have it published in the magazine.”

When I finished reading the letter, the Father told me, “This sudden recovery makes us think really of supernatural intervention, and it could really be such. But since the sickness here described is often resolved through a crisis, in the sense that the patient passes quickly to the state of healing or becoming worse, it must be said that even in this case it is not a grace, and much less an amazing miracle. It may even be a natural evolution of the sickness.”

“For a miracle to be truly such, it is necessary that there is an extraordinary intervention of God in the visible world, beyond the order of all created nature. It must also be reviewed and approved by the ecclesiastical authority.”

“When it comes to private judgment about graces or miracles, it is good to be optimistic. There can always be either a direct or indirect intervention of the Divine Providence in the natural or supernatural level.”

“However, if we are dealing with external manifestations, it is good to be rigorous. Believing easily in these miracles, ordinarily does more harm than good, especially to spiritually immature people. We have to be very careful and cautious about these phenomena, especially when it comes to making them known in publications that end up in the hands of readers of different mentality.”

I replied, “By the way, I don’t know if you remember that priest, Father Antolitano, who often came to our Institute before the earthquake. A few years ago, I met him at the train station in Taranto. He is still so enthusiastic and grateful for our Institute. He told me that he regularly receives our magazine and reads it with pleasure because it is beautiful, easy to read, and enjoyable. In this regard, however, he also made three observations.

The first was that sometimes our magazine reports graces granted by St. Anthony, which invites criticism.

The Second was that the increase of all those graces attributed to St. Anthony, may easily lead to a diminishing devotion to the Lord.

The third observation was that he would have liked the magazine to have a slightly higher level. He added ‘Because if Canon Di Francia wants, indeed he can do that.’”

The Father replied, “As I have said before about the publication of graces, we have to be very careful and cautious. In fact, among the extraordinary things which we consider as miracles or graces, there are some which are neither but are the effects of our imagination by which man is deceived to see what does not exist. Others are true facts but don’t have the nature of miracles because they are the result of natural causes. Superficiality in this field discredits religion.”

“It is obvious, however, that we are not going to be spared even from unreasonable criticism, which, unfortunately, has always existed and will always exist. A miracle is not based on reason, but on faith. So, it is useless to speak of miracles with people who don’t believe in the existence of God.”

As for the graces that are attributed to St. Anthony and the devotion to this Saint, I think that if you consider things rightly, not only do they not diminish at all adoration to the Lord, but instead they favor and increase it. Only God has the power to do miracles, and He communicates this power to some persons outstanding in holiness, when He wants and in the way He wants, according to what pleases Him, to demonstrate and confirm His power for the greater good of believers. In doing miracles, the Saints are nothing more than docile instruments in God’s hands. Even Our Lord, when He was still on earth, in sending the Apostles to preach the Gospel, gave them the power to perform miracles so that they could confirm His word. Therefore, the devotion to St. Anthony and the miracles done by him, not only do not decrease God’s glory but serve to increase it.”

“Now, about the stylistic level of *God and Neighbor*, let me say that in writing it, I never intended, even remotely, to give a literary level to my articles. On the contrary, I have always tried, as best I could, to make myself understood by all.”

“First. For the sake of souls. Good reading is, in fact, good spiritual food. The printed materials are a true apostolate for the people.”

“Second. For the spread of the prayer for good workers for the Holy Church and also for the Institute, especially by the Sacred Alliance and the Pious Union of the Evangelical Rogation.

“Third. For spreading the devotion to St. Anthony, which is a great means to attract souls to God and to receive the Providence for the material support of our Institutes.”

“Fourth. For knowledge and dissemination of our Work of charity in favor of the Orphans and destitute children. The works of charity maintained by Religious, are a practical and effective means to solicit acts of charity among people and also to attract to faith those who have little belief.”

“The literary style of our Anthonian publications shall be simple to be understood by all. Especially because the vast majority of our readers are ordinary people. They say that before publishing his *Catholic Readings*, Don Bosco used to read them to his Mother, Mamma Margherita, who was illiterate, to see if she understood them.”

159. AN ASPIRANT AND HIS MOTHER

A widow, Bellini by family name, from Minervino Murge wrote to our House in Oria saying that her son wanted to consecrate himself to the Lord, and she was willingly giving her consent. Indeed, she was so happy.

She also sent some documents with the recommendation of the parish priest.

We asked for some information about the boy and his family confidentially, and since they were very positive, I wrote that he could come, bringing the rest of the documents required and the clothes and items needed in the Institute. The mother herself accompanied him.

But when I saw the boy, I was disappointed. He was so small in stature with a big scar on the face and neck because of a burn when he was a child.

My reaction was such that very politely, I let the mother understand that I was not inclined to accept him

The poor woman was very hurt and, disconsolate. She wiped her tears, exclaiming, “I prayed so hard to the Lord to grant the grace of vocation at least to one of my two boys! I cannot tell you how glad I was when my little Mario spontaneously expressed the desire to become a priest in this Institute. He had heard people speaking so well about it.”

The woman gave the impression of exceptional kindness and spoke with such a spirit of faith that I was confused. Even the boy had started to cry and said, “I want to be a priest, I want to stay here.”

Despite all this, I was still negative. But because of their insistence, I decided to submit the case to Father Palma, who was coming back that afternoon.

When he arrived, I informed him about everything, including my negative feelings. He answered that my reason not to accept the boy did not seem reasonable, unless the young boy was really Lilliputian in stature, and the scar seriously affected his appearance. It was more important to go to the core of the candidate’s vocation: his excellent attitude; and also, to some extent, the goodness of the family. Then, he went down to the reception to personally check the case.

At first sight and then from the interview that followed, he received a good impression of the little boy and of the mother, whom he defined as a holy woman. As for the physical defect, he didn’t have the negative impression I had. He then summoned me and said, “I don’t think that the scar would compromise the candidate's acceptance. I have a very positive impression. Have his documents and belongings and have a place prepared for the boy.”

Somewhat resentful, I answered, “O Yes, thus we turn the Aspirantate into a kindergarten.” Father Palma replied, “Our Lord especially loves the little ones. He said: 'Let the little children come to me.' And he wanted to go to eat at the house of the short Zacchaeus. And before you bring the boy among the other little Aspirants, put a handkerchief around his neck to cover the scar.”

When the Father came to Oria, the little Mario with the big scar on his face did not escape his notice.

One day he called him in front of Father Palma and me, observed him carefully, asked him the cause of the scar, and whether it bothered him. When he received an entirely negative response, the Father patted him and sent him back to his games, saying, “Be good and much devoted to Our Lady whose sweet name you bear.”

Then he turned to us and said, “He looks like a dear little boy, so good and intelligent.” Father Palma added, “Even his mother is so good. She is a holy woman. She says that she has prayed so much for the vocation of her son. I am confident that he will succeed.” And he told the Father how I did not want to accept him because of his small stature and the scar that he bore. He even reported to the Father that, while allowing him, I said, “So we turn the Aspirant into a kindergarten.”

Turning to me, the Father said, “The physical defect doesn’t seem to be such that we cannot accept him. Would you measure the vocation by the meter of external features? In the boys who aspire to consecrate themselves to the Lord, we must look especially for good dispositions, the seed of the vocation, and the right intention, proportionate to the age. There were so many great men and Saints who were tiny in stature and looked ugly.”

“When we have to discern and judge a vocation, it is an extremely delicate moment. Both in admitting or rejecting a candidate, we assume responsibility. The premise must, therefore, be always a lot of prayers that the Lord may give us His holy light. Also, before accepting a candidate, as far as possible, we have to be aware of the requirements indispensable for religious life, always according to the age.”

“For the admission of an Aspirant, it is enough that he has good health, good dispositions, right intention, and a seed of a vocation. And in this matter, it is better to be optimistic rather than pessimistic because there will always be time later to eliminate defects.”

“The family of the Aspirant ordinarily offers a certain guarantee of vocation, as in the case of this small Aspirant whom you did not want to accept.”

“Do you realize that, by doing so, you may be seriously guilty before God and the Congregation, of losing a vocation?”

To my shame, but also to my great delight, the little Mario succeeded very well in all aspects, namely in virtue, knowledge, and especially in his Rogationist religious and priestly spirit.

I remember when our dearest Father Mario Bellini¹⁴⁷ was ordained a priest in the Cathedral of Messina and came to our Christ the King Institute, where his mother was waiting for him. Filled with emotion, she kissed him on the tonsure, saying, “You are a priest, the son of my prayer.”

Then she added, “From the time my Mario entered the Institute of Oria until now, every Saturday, I abstained from fruits, and often I fasted for the success of my dear son. I hope, with

¹⁴⁷ Father Umberto Mario Bellini was born in Minervino Murge (Bari) on May 7, 1914, and died in Messina on January 27, 1962. He was endowed with bright talent and inclination to the humanities, literature, and foreign languages. He became the Superior of some of our Houses and a General Councilor.

God's help, to continue doing it, first of all, to thank the Lord for this inestimable grace, and to obtain his sanctification.”

160. TRAUMATIZED BY FEAR

One evening, I finished my dinner ahead of the others, and I took the opportunity to pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament in the Church. In those days, we had this practice in Oria: upon entering and exiting the Church, if there were no one else, we would kiss the floor.

That evening, just as I knelt to kiss the floor, I heard a sudden noise. An altar candlestick fell on the ground along with several vases of flowers, while at the same time, I felt a furry animal pass on my neck and head, scratching me everywhere.

In the dim light of the lamp, I could not see very well, but something fell from a short distance with a mournful meow.

It was a cat crouched on the throne of the altar which got scared seeing me bend down to the ground.

I was more frightened than the cat. My fright was such that I froze for some time, paralyzed. Only later did I realize that it was a cat when I heard it loudly meow while trying to get out of the Church.

My trauma lasted for quite a while and made me as if dazed for a few days. I was incapable of reacting. I lost my appetite, and for several nights, I could not sleep. I walked around like a robot and reacted violently to any contradiction. I had become unbearable! Of course, somebody informed the Father, who immediately, with an excuse summoned me to Messina.¹⁴⁸

He asked me how I was and what had happened to me. After listening, he told me that I had to see a doctor, and, at least for a month, I had to remain far from Oria and follow all the medical prescriptions. I also had to help myself, eating and sleeping, without worrying about anything.

He also told me, “You can go anywhere you want, except to Oria. You may stay here for a while, for a while in Taormina, San Pier Niceto, or Galati. It would be good for you to go home to Galati, where you can stay as long as you want. The native air and the care of your mother will certainly benefit you.”

I remained for a few days in Messina, during which time the Father personally followed up the state of my health and the treatment that I was undergoing.

Then I went to Galati, where I stayed for four days. When I returned, the Father said to me, “Why are you back so soon?” I answered, “Father, I feel fine now. I eat and sleep regularly.”

It didn't even last for fifteen days. Seeing that I was in a better condition and that in Oria there was much need of personnel because Father Palma had to be absent, after informing me

¹⁴⁸ This kind of burnout due to fear is mentioned again in Chapter 188.

that I had to continue taking care of myself, the Father let me go. He asked me not to let eight days pass without informing him of my condition.

He also wrote a letter to Father Palma telling him not to keep me too busy with the Community and to take particular care of my health.

161. THE SISTERS' HEROIC SACRIFICES FOR THE ROGATIONISTS

For a long time, due to lack of personnel, the male Institute of Oria availed of the help of the Daughters of Divine Zeal. With a genuine and heroic sacrifice, they managed the Anthonian Benefactors Office of the male Institutes. They also supplied the food as well as its preparation in the kitchen. They were also assigned to do the cleaning and laundry services.

Besides, every day, the Sisters from San Benedetto came to San Pasquale to work in the garden. They hoed, planted, harvested, and with the proceeds, they helped the livelihood of the Communities of the two Institutes. They also took care of raising animals.

The Father admired the Sisters' many sacrifices and wanted us to be thankful to them. We never experienced the slightest inconvenience because of this fraternal collaboration.

However, when Father Vitale came to Oria, he began to be concerned about the presence of the Sisters in San Pasquale because he was afraid that our boys and Religious could meet with the Sisters. Besides, he could not accept the work that the Sisters were doing in the garden and even their domestic services in the House.

This conviction, which was wrong in his way of thinking, was fueled by some of our young Religious. Lacking in experience and nurtured by false zeal and preconceptions, they filled Father Vitale's head with scenarios of the danger that could happen. I was also involved, and because of this, as I will tell later, I was sharply reprimanded by the Father.

It was thus that Father Vitale, twice, convinced the Father to remove the Sisters from the male Institute. Both times, however, despite the objections of Father Vitale, the Father had to call them back to be the 'Marthas' of the San Pasquale Institute.

On this issue, the Father showed himself firm and resolute, suggesting to Father Vitale not to give weight to the surrounding chatter because it was the result of the imagination and biases of young people who were not aware of the Sisters' tremendous and necessary sacrifices for the life of the male Institute.

I also remember that once the Father called me and said, "I don't understand why you, too, have allowed yourself to be influenced by these young people. Tell me, have you noticed anything disturbing regarding the help the Sisters are giving to the men's House with many sacrifices? What did you see? What wrong did the Sisters do?"

"I don't understand your reasoning! Several times you told me about the sacrifices that the Sisters do for this House, and how without them, many things could not have been done because of a lack of personnel. Now all of a sudden, the Sisters in this House are unnecessary, unwanted, and considered unbearable! When they left, you thought you could claim a victory! They have

fed, clothed, and cleaned you, and now it seems that you dislike their name! All this is real ingratitude; it is a diabolical suggestion!”

“It is right, and good, that everything that can be done by us is done without the interference of the Sisters. Similarly, it is proper for the Sisters to do what has to be done by them without interference from the men. However, when a greater good can be achieved through mutual help between the two Institutes, I don’t see why, always with proper precautions, we should refuse collaboration. Moreover, helping each other seems to be a normal need for the Institutes of men and women who are born ordinarily together as from a twin delivery.”

In this connection, here is a witticism of the Father. One day, I was with the Father and Father Palma in our property in Oria, on the hill called Monte S. Angelo, where the view included the beautiful panorama of the town, with its cathedral, the medieval castle and the Monastery of San Benedetto, the House of our Sisters.

Addressing the Father, Father Palma said, “How beautiful this place is with this magnificent view and fresh air! It would be nice if our Institute were here.” The Father immediately replied, “What are you saying, Father Palma? It will never be! Certainly, Father Vitale would propose to close it because from here you can see San Benedetto, where our Sisters are, or at least he would shut all the windows that look on their side!”

From this remark, we can see how the Father considered exaggerated Father Vitale’s fear about the help of the Sisters to the male community.

“It seems incredible how Father Vitale is so afraid of the Sisters. Despite being very obedient to my decisions, he seems stubborn about this, to the point that I had to use my authority to let the Sisters return to San Pasquale.”

This reluctance of Father Vitale is not to be understood as an aversion towards the Sisters because he had high esteem and veneration for them. Instead, it stemmed from a very delicate conscience on the one hand, while on the other nuns doing housework in male communities was not prevalent at that time. Father Vitale did not yet have any practical experience of the needs of community life because he had been living with his family until he entered the Rogationists.

Later on, he realized that he had exaggerated, and he too, when he was in need, resorted to the Sisters for help for our male Communities.

162. ADVICE OF FATHER MISTRETTA

While I was in the army stationed in Palermo, the Father came to visit me and told me that he would return with Brother Mauro, my brother, who was very sick, to be checked by an internationally renowned specialist.¹⁴⁹ He came back after twenty days. The results of the consultation were that there was nothing left to hope for.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Chapter 90. This visit of the Father to Palermo goes back to 1916.

That same evening, I told the Father that I had been transferred to Acireale, to serve in the [military] hospital. Upon hearing this, the Father replied, "Then it is good for Brother Mauro to go with you until Acireale. From there he will continue to Messina. So you have some time to spend together. In the meantime, I will go directly to Messina using the other railway line because I have to stop for a few days in Patti."

"Having learned that the hospital in Acireale occupied a large part of the Pennisi Jesuit College, he said, "There is also a good friend of mine there, a certain Father Mistretta. We have known each other for years. Whenever he could do a favor for me, he would always do it gladly. He is such a good Jesuit and enjoys much respect. I will write a note of introduction. He will help both of you spiritually as well as in all your other needs."

"I urge you not to neglect prayer, and, as far as you can, even the other practices of piety. Certainly, it will be easier to attend Mass there every day and receive the Sacraments. Try to have a spiritual director. With the many Jesuits who are in that place, I think that it will be pretty easy for you to find one."

"I am sure that being in direct contact with the sick, you will have the opportunity to take good care of them, not only to fulfill your military duty but much more as a religious duty. You can do much good materially by taking care of the health of the sick soldiers, and spiritually by caring for the health of their souls."

"As an example of the love of neighbor, Our Lord told us what the Samaritan did for the poor wretch who lay wounded on the roadside. The Lord likes what is done for the sick, deeming it as done to Him."

"To demonstrate this truth better, the Lord manifested it visibly several times in sick persons. Therefore, I exhort you to take the utmost care of them."

When I arrived in Acireale, it was very easy to bring the Father's note to Father Mistretta because the hospital was using a portion of the large building of the Jesuits, while the other part continued to operate as a College for students.

As I handed him the note, he exclaimed joyfully, "Oh, from dear Father Francia! I have not seen him in a long time, that holy man, that hero of charity! I know him very well. Because of his immense faith and charity, he was able to carry on the works which he founded. I know this because somehow in Messina, I followed him up for many years. I am very pleased that you belong to his Institute, the purpose of which is excellent from every point of view, both for the continuous prayer which the Institute do for the Lord's good priests in the Church, as well as for the works of charity for the Orphans and the poor."

Then he continued, "If you need anything, I am at your disposal. I come to the hospital often, and I have good relations with the Hospital Director and the other officers. If you need anything, give me a call or come to look for me in the boarding house. Come down to our Chapel for Mass. The celebration begins at 5:30."

"It would be good for you to pay your respects to the Bishop. He is very delightful and is very happy that he knows the priests and Religious serving in this hospital and that they maintain

good relations. It is better to visit him in the Seminary, where you can be given greater attention.”

I said, “How will I introduce myself?”

“You don’t need any introduction. The Bishop is very informal and affable. He receives everyone. Anyway, I will call the Rector of the Seminary to tell him that as soon as it is possible for you, you will go to pay your respects to His Excellency.”

163. MONSIGNOR ARISTA, BISHOP OF ACIREALE

A few days after my transfer from Palermo to Acireale¹⁵⁰ to serve at the military hospital, I was received by His Excellency, Bishop Arista¹⁵¹, the Bishop of the town.

When he heard that I belonged to the Institute of Canon Hannibal Mary Di Francia, the Bishop said, “I am very pleased. I am glad to have met your Founder personally. I had previously heard people speak of him as a priest full of outstanding goodness and sanctity, a man of God, devoured by the zeal for the glory of God and the good of souls. In particular, I heard of him as a fervent apostle of prayer for holy vocations to the Church and as a worker of charity. I had wanted to meet him. Several years ago, he visited me and invited me to enroll in the Sacred Alliance through the celebration of at least one Mass a year, and by uniting myself to the prayers done in his Institutes.”

“He spoke to me with so much competence and fervor about the excellence and the need for the prayer to obtain good laborers that - I must confess - I was stunned because I had never thought about it. So, not only did I gladly join the Sacred Alliance, but I asked him to set a day when I could gather the priests of my Diocese for them to listen to his lecture on this prayer, explaining the Pious Union for Priests. I also asked him to bring more printed matter and leaflets of prayers to introduce this prayer in the Diocese and the Seminary.”

“We agreed upon the date. He arrived punctually and spoke to the priests effectively with so much zeal that some of them said, “It’s a revelation for us.” A good number of priests enrolled in the Sacred Alliance that day.”

“He spoke highly of the Pious Union, the one called “of the Evangelical Rogation” for the faithful, so that, the parish priests especially, would introduce and nurture it in the local communities.”

Then, he said [to the Seminary staff], “This young man is a Religious member of the Institute of Canon Hannibal Mary Di Francia from Messina. When he comes to our Seminary, please treat him as one of ours. I think he will be a good example for our clerics. If he has

¹⁵⁰ Acireale is a city in the Province of Catania, more than 220 km from Palermo.

¹⁵¹ Venerable Giovanni Battista Arista (Palermo, April 2, 1862 – Acireale, September 27, 1920) was Bishop of Acireale and a member of the Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri. Pope Benedict XVI recognized his heroic virtues in 2007. In the Italian text, the name is presented as Aristide. It is an obvious misreading of the name by assonance.

pledged to pray the Lord to send good vocations, I think that he should feel more committed to preserve and develop the vocations that are already in the Seminary.”

I was given a place in the study hall of the seniors’ group. I would also go for a walk with them.

I learned right away how good, pious, zealous, truly easy-going and very friendly the Bishop was.

Except for the schedule required for the audiences at the Bishop’s Residence, when he was in town, the Bishop would stay in the Seminary. He was delighted to be always available for the clerics. He even ate with them in the refectory.

The clergy [of Acireale] at that time was really exemplary in every aspect. The Seminary was the perfect setting for the spiritual and cultural formation of the clerics. All the young clerics thought very highly of our Father and esteemed him truly as a man of God and dedication to the neighbor. Priests and Clerics listened about him and our Institute.

I do not remember any priest who refused when I invited him to join the Sacred Alliance. Almost all the seminarians and many others joined the Pious Union. The seminarians even promised that once ordained priests, they would enroll in the Sacred Alliance.

On Sundays, all the Theology students, and their number was rather significant, would go to the various parishes and Churches of the city and the suburbs, to teach catechism. I would go with the Assistant of the group of the elders, a certain Angelo Calabretta, who was truly good and though he had already finished his studies, he could not be ordained because he was too young. At times some of these clerics who were going to teach catechism would give me a list of new members of the Pious Union.

I enjoyed a very delightful friendship with the cleric Calabretta. He was very kind and smart. He promised that once he was ordained, he would enroll in the Sacred Alliance. Later, he became Rector of the same Seminary of Acireale.

Before his ordination to the priesthood, I had already left Acireale for the battlefield [of World War I]. When Calabretta learned that one of the Drago family had fallen on the battlefield, he thought that it was I. It was my brother, Brother Mansueto. Later, he told me that he immediately offered prayers for the repose of my soul in one of his first Masses. He learned of the misunderstanding only in 1933, when one of our former students entered the Seminary where he was the Rector.

Later, Father Calabretta was consecrated Bishop and assigned to the Diocese of Noto. Even as a Bishop, he maintained his friendship with me.

164. AT THE ACIREALE HOSPITAL

After I had been in Acireale for some time, undergoing my military service in that army hospital, I was assigned to accompany a patient to the hospital in Messina. I was granted two days off.

In Messina, I met the Father, who was very amiable and caring. He asked me how I was in the hospital. I answered that I was fine, both spiritually and materially; spiritually because I had every opportunity to fulfill my devotional practices; Materially because I did not lack anything. I told him that I liked the life in the hospital because I could do much good for the bodies and souls of the poor sick soldiers, who were so much in need, mainly because there were no Religious Sisters, and everything was entrusted to the military.

I reported to him about the welcome given to me by Father Mistretta after reading his letter of introduction and recommendation, and how he had made himself available for anything I needed. The Father nodded, "This Jesuit Father is very admirable. He is also influential. When he could help me, he did it very willingly, especially in the early days of our foundation."

I narrated how, upon the advice of Father Mistretta, I introduced myself to Bishop Arista. Learning that I belonged to our Institute, he welcomed me in a fatherly manner. He was enthusiastic about our mission and its highly religious and charitable purposes because no other purpose is more useful, good, and effective for the Kingdom of God as the prayer to obtain good priests for the Holy Church.

I also related to the Father that the Bishop told me he knew him and how he still remembered the enthusiasm for the lecture that the Father gave to the priests of his diocese about the prayer to obtain good workers, the Sacred Alliance, the Pious Union and the positive effects of that meeting.

The Father said, "One of the marvelous miracles that the Divine Providence works regarding our Institutes is that of not letting others see our miseries. What are we? Nothing. What is our Congregation? Just a little seed sprouting in the Holy Church. It is truly a small thing among the many glorious Institutions existing throughout the world. We are just a few Religious who are still in need of organization and stability. Yet, because of its goal of obtaining good workers for the Holy Church, our Congregation appears very precious in the eyes of others."

"What are the few the Orphans whom we gather, and who still need organization? Yet, the name of the Anthonian Orphanages is already well known."

I also said to the Father that at the hospital, I had much free time, which I spent in the Seminary, where I was treated as one of them. I had all the conveniences for reading and studying. Even the library was at my disposal. On Sundays, I would go with the seminarians to teach catechism, and they helped me with great zeal to spread the Sacred Alliance and the Pious Union of the Evangelical Rogation. I gave the Father the list of a good number of priests enrolled in the Sacred Alliance and other lists of faithful who had joined the Pious Union in various parishes and even hospitals.

The Father said, "When somebody is willing, it is possible to work for the Congregation and souls everywhere, both through good example and labor. If the Sacred Alliance and the Pious Union are nurtured as they should be, they are two very effective means of propagating the Divine Command of Jesus among the clergy and the faithful. We must try to keep them alive in the Congregation and propagate them as much as possible. Brother Giuseppe was very zealous in doing this."

Resuming the conversation about the help given to me by Father Mistretta, I told the Father that he had saved me from fifteen days of solitary confinement, and thirty days of usual punishment. This is the maximum given in the army, after that you are up for court-martial.

The Father asked me what I had done. I answered that one morning when I was on duty, a soldier showed up at the hospital with a rather vague diagnosis for his hospitalization. I called up the doctor on duty, and I read the diagnosis to him. He told me to accept the soldier and to give him a bed in the internal medicine ward, where I was on duty.

Before the general medical check-up, I gave him the thermometer to take his temperature. His temperature was 39 degrees. I wrote this in the records. However, it was not a fever! That cheat had rubbed the thermometer on the blanket!

Meanwhile, the hospital Director, Colonel Natale, received an anonymous letter saying that the soldier was not really sick but that he had bribed the nurses to agree he was ill so that he would not be sent to the war zone.

After half an hour, the Colonel came angrily into the ward and carefully checked the soldier. Not finding anything, he made him get up, take off his shirt, and personally applied the thermometer, which, of course, indicated there was no fever.

The Colonel immediately gave orders to take him out of the hospital and sent for punishment. Then, he wanted to know who had prepared the false report. He called me, and after swearing angrily at me, he imposed a severe penalty for me.

Those present, including the sick, were disappointed. My department head tried to defend me. Later on, even the Adjutant-Major did the same, but to no avail. The Colonel remained inflexible.

Father Mistretta was able to intercede because he had a particular influence on the angry Director. We then called Father Mistretta, who came to the Colonel who graciously told him that he had learned about my punishment, and begged him to suspend it, saying that he could not think of me as someone capable of cheating. He convinced the Colonel to send for me to see what had really happened. They called me and, in front of the Director and of Father Mistretta, I told my story. I noticed, however, that the Colonel was skeptical.

Then Father Mistretta, with good grace interjected, "I know Mr. Drago very well. All those who know him speak highly of him and the service that he does in the hospital. I am sure that he did not do wrong. Besides, he has been educated by Canon Di Francia, from Messina, my dear friend, with whom I have at times spoken, and who introduced him to me. I repeat, he is not capable of staining himself with such a fault. You will have painted a bad picture of me to my friend, Father Hannibal as if I had not taken care of Mr. Drago.

Then jokingly and brilliantly, he added, "Mr. Director if you cannot do anything, I will make myself available to spend some days in prison on his behalf so that I can rest a little. I don't want to be deprived of some of your short visits..."

The Colonel smiled and replied, "It would be something to hear that Father Mistretta is in prison, punished by Colonel Natale! People will lynch me!"

Father Mistretta had won. So he told me, "Thank Mr. Director and leave. Don't let yourself be fooled anymore by the soldiers! Be smart!" Joking, the Colonel added, "Don't thank me. Thank Father Mistretta, who was willing to go to jail for you."

After my story, the Father said, "I have to write a letter to thank Father Mistretta and to His Excellency, the Bishop, for the special attention they gave you."

165. ON LEAVE FROM THE CARSO BATTLEFRONT

After about six months of military service in Carso, I was granted a leave of twenty days, including the trip. I had to travel on a cattle train. The trip back and forth took more than five days.

In Messina, the Father welcomed me paternally. My first concern was to tell him that I needed a suitable bath because I was covered with fleas and lice, which I scattered everywhere I sat.

In the Institute, we did not have a facility for a thorough regenerating cleansing that I needed, so the Father had one of our manservants, Previti by name, accompany me to the public baths.

While I was preparing my clothes, Canon Celona was staring at me as if I were a plague-carrier. The Father told me not to worry so much, adding that in the early days of the foundation in the Avignone District, for several years these insects were for him, one of the plagues of Egypt so that in order to get rid of them he raised a series of special prayers to St. Joseph Labre.

Then he said to Previti, who was going to accompany me to the baths, to bring all the clothes that I had used to the Institute of the Sisters and to deliver them directly to the Superior. He called up the Sister, telling her that all those clothes had to be washed and boiled.

Returning from the baths, the Father personally saw to it that a good lunch had been prepared. Then, he asked why I had all those insects on me. I replied that for lack of facilities for cleanliness, all of us who were on the battlefield, including the officers and the General were infested. There were many; it seemed the wind was spreading them everywhere. The explanation is simple, especially in the Carso. There is no water at all. The water was delivered and only for drinking. It was transported, when it was possible, in tankers, in barrels or bottles loaded on mules. We would remain three or four days in the outposts without a drink of water. So, how could we clean ourselves?

We wore the same clothes for two or three months until we had a chance to rest for a few days behind the front line, or if we were lucky enough to find some streams or waterways. Then, we would wash those rags in the best way we could, trying to regain a semblance of dignity.

The Father asked me about my health.

I told him that it might not seem true, but my health is excellent. With many privations, shortages, hardship, and fears, exposed to the cold and frost in the open, for about six months, I

caught a cold only once. I cannot explain how one can be very healthy, also considering how and what we ate.

Then Father asked me about the dangers.

I answered that even though the fact that we who belonged to the medical corps did not go into the trenches when we were in the advance posts, we were not only under fire from cannons but also from rifles and machine guns.

At this point, the Father switched to more serene talk, “Go and rest now because you must certainly be tired. We will continue our conversation later. I will go with you to see how they prepared your room.”

At that moment, Canon Celona, Father Celeste, the vicar forane of Galati Mamertino, who was serving in the army in Messina, and Brother Placido¹⁵² entered. The Father asked Brother whether he had placed the wool mattress on the bed he had prepared. The Brother tried to explain that I had put a straw mattress. The Father ordered him to place a woolen one, the best that could be found in the House, removing it, if necessary, from the other confreres, starting with him.

I tried to refuse, saying the straw mattress was already a luxury, a dream, accustomed as I was to sleep on the bare ground under the open sky.

The Father insisted on the wool mattress. Canon Celona was contradicting him with subtle insinuations saying, “Since he is accustomed to sleeping on the ground there is no need to pamper him.” However, the Father, more decisively bent on charity, retorted, “Exactly because he got accustomed to that because of hardship, all the more does he deserves a woolen mattress. It is our duty to give it to him, even if we have to make a personal sacrifice.” Smiling, the vicar forane of Galati intervened sentencing, “The Reverend is right.” The issue closed with a decisive blow for Canon Celona.

After I rested, the Father sent for me and said, “Let’s continue our previous talk. How were your practices of piety? The Mass, Communion, Confession? Did you have the chance to attend to them?”

I said, “When we were on the battlefield, at times I had to stay a week or two, and even more without being able to receive Communion.”

The Father replied, “How come? Was there no chaplain in your detachment?”

I answered, “There was, and he was outstanding in every aspect. He was active, zealous, always moving around not only in the various first-aid posts spread over tens of kilometers but he also went to the trenches to comfort, to hear confessions and to distribute Communion to the soldiers in the front lines.”

“In our Department, consisting of more than 300 units, there are also ordinarily about fifteen priests, but they were not assigned to spiritual services. Like all the other soldiers, they were

¹⁵² Brother Placido Romeo was born in Messina on May 3, 1877, and died in Oria on February 26, 1940. Cf. Chapter 1.

assigned to the common services, like carrying the wounded day and night, and were exposed to all the dangers and deprivations. In practice, it could happen that in some places, there are several priests, and in other places none.”

“Where they are present, with some limitations, they could voluntarily practice their ministry. Where there were none, the injured died without religious comfort.”

“Mass was irregular. We would have it only when the chaplain would come with his portable altar. The priests celebrated Mass with difficulty under dangerous conditions.”

“I remember that after about fourteen days without Mass, an excellent priest from our section dug a ditch, covered it with canvass, and descended into it to celebrate, while I lay on the ground to serve as an altar boy. The cold, however, was such that the wine froze in the chalice, and to be able to drink it, he had to break it with a small knife.”

The Father asked me, “Was the wine in the chalice frozen before or after the Consecration?”

I answered, “I don’t know, but the celebrant noticed it only when he was about to drink it.”

Another priest who was celebrating Mass in the open was fatally hit by a cannon shot, while he was at the final ablution of the chalice.

The Father, shocked, said, “Thank God that he had taken the Most Holy Communion and Sacred Species. It was for him a Viaticum to go to Heaven. Did the priest die?”

“Yes, he did not make it to the hospital.”

Then, continuing our conversation, I told him what happened to me during that period.

I was in an advanced first aid post. We were eight soldiers and a corporal. Among the wounded who were dying, there was one that could not be transported because it would have hastened his death. The dying man, aware of his condition, asked insistently to have a confession. Knowing that there were two priests on duty in another first aid station, which was about three kilometers away, I asked the corporal if I could go to call one. The corporal told me that I could not abandon my post. If I wanted to go, it was at my own risk. If an inspection happened, he would reply that I had gone away for a short time and he did not know I went.

The inspector did come. The Sergeant-Major waited a bit, but when I did not appear, he wrote a report for the abandonment of the post. Maybe he also took the opportunity because he was known to be anti-clerical.

After a while, I arrived with the priest who was just on time to hear the confession of the dying man and to comfort and assist him in his agony.

The corporal informed me about the inspection and the report.

Two days later, I was informed of a fifteen days’ punishment, which meant that I had to be in the trenches for fifteen days, night and day out in the open and under enemy fire.

I tried to contact the Director, who was a Jewish Lieutenant Colonel, to give the reason for my absence, but I was refused.

The Providence, however, came to my rescue. After a few hours, a Chaplain who had been out for several days, always around for his ministry, arrived at the office of the Director.

The chaplain was a brave young man, a good lawyer coming from the aristocracy. He was said to be a Count. He had been ordained a priest a few years before the war. He enjoyed high esteem, both from the soldiers and from the officers for his qualities and his untiring zeal. The General of the Division, was especially fond of him, like a brother. However, the Colonel-Director of the section, as a faithful Jew, while outwardly supportive, actually had bitter sentiments toward the Chaplain.

I recounted everything to the Chaplain, who told me, “Pray and keep calm. I will take serious care of the matter.”

At first, he tried to convince the Colonel, using good reasons, to remove my punishment, but the official was adamant.

Then, he went to the General, who, after hearing the facts, well presented by the Chaplain, immediately wrote to the Colonel an order postponing the punishment until further examination on the case. After a few days, because of the unparalleled skill of the Chaplain, the case was solved positively. My action did not constitute abandonment of post but had to be considered, in its bigger context, as a continuation of the service because I had left to fulfill a legitimate need of the wounded. Thus, I was spared the punishment.

This incident had a positive effect on the priests in the military. There was also a practical effect. From then on, the ministry was given more serious consideration.

The Father sighed, “The war did much harm to souls and bodies! Destruction, sufferings, deaths, sins, corruption! In the meantime, people pray very little and are not doing penance to end this scourge.”

166. ROGATIONISTS AS FORMATORS AND ADMINISTRATORS OF SEMINARIES

Our Religious attending classes at the Episcopal Seminary in Oria soon enticed the admiration of all including the Bishop’s because of their kindness, dedication to study and seriousness, to the point that, since the Seminary did not have a Prefect of their Seminarians, the Bishop asked for one of our Religious for that sensitive position.

I dared to express some difficulties for several reasons.

When the Father learned about this, he told me instead that it was appropriate to grant the Bishop’s request.

A certain Brother Recuperato Segate, a native of the Veneto Region, was sent to the Seminary to be Prefect.

“We must be thankful to the Bishop,” the Father said, “for the trust, he shows us. For us, it is a further guarantee for our young people who attend classes at the Seminary because one of our Religious is there who somehow, can supervise the relations with the other seminarians.”

“The main reason, however, is that this is a task deeply inherent in the spirit and the purpose of our Congregation which has an obligation not only to pray to the Lord to send good vocations but also to help in their preservation, safekeeping, and formation. It would be a great grace for our Congregation to have staff available and prepared to be not only prefects but also spiritual fathers, professors, and deans in the diocesan seminaries.”

“These tasks are often given to Jesuits, to Missionaries of St. Vincent, and others. All the more reason we have the duty to assume these tasks since they are related to our fourth religious vow.”

“The Seminary is primarily the place where the sacred priestly vocation is to be developed and preserved. No other place is as suited as the Seminary and at the same time as effective, to instill in the youth the spirit of the Rogationist prayer.”

“If seminarians learn this spirit of prayer while they are young; when they leave the Seminary, they will bring it in their apostolate and communicate it to many others, thus becoming apostles of the Rogate. It would also be a great way to expand the Sacred Alliance and spread the Pious Union of the Evangelical Rogation.”

He added, “It would be an excellent opportunity to make our Congregation known because the priests formed by us, almost naturally, on various occasions would speak about us, of our Congregation. In the meantime, we must pray to the Lord, that this young man who goes to live with the seminarians may remain good and exemplary. Otherwise, the effect would be completely the opposite. It would greatly damage the seminarians and dishonor the Congregation.”

167. OUR INSTITUTION IS TRULY GOD’S WORK

The first “spiritual exercises”¹⁵³ in the proper sense of the word was preached in Oria, after World War I, by a certain Father Celebrano, SJ. He was a man totally of God, of high culture and experience, with a deep inner life, and had the reputation of having been the Pope's confessor.

That retreat was unforgettable and left sweet memories in all of us. We never tired of listening to him, though his instructions and meditations were rather long. We always heard him with great attention and interest. When he was speaking to the Religious, he adjusted perfectly to his audience, as well as when, for a few days, he talked to the Aspirants, and later even to the Orphans.

After our retreat, he wanted to stay another three days to go on retreat for himself. He was exemplary in his recollection and his spirit of devotion.

¹⁵³ This term is derived from *The Spiritual Exercises* written by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the Founder of the Jesuit Order. It is a set of meditations and prayers, divided into four thematic “weeks”, to help a person undergoing a retreat to discern the will of God in his life and to follow Jesus radically. The so-called *Ignatian Retreat* usually lasts for a month. In a broader meaning, *spiritual exercises* also refer to a week-long spiritual retreat.

Upon meeting this Jesuit, Canon Chirico, the Penitentiary of the Cathedral [of Oria] who was our guest, pointed out to him how the hand of God was supporting our House. He further said that much Divine Providence was received every day that it was enough not only for the sustenance of the two Communities but also for the many ongoing works, and for the charity, that daily, was given to the many poor and needy persons.

Father Celebrano replied, “For me, the greatest miracle is not so much the abundance of the Divine Providence, but to see how much discipline, harmony, and spirit of sacrifice can reign in the House without adequate religious personnel.

Father Celebrano replied, “For me, the greatest miracle is not so much the abundance of the Divine Providence, but to see how much discipline, harmony, and spirit of sacrifice can reign in the House without adequate religious personnel. This is a real miracle for me. We can see that this Work truly belongs to God who rewards in this way the great faith and charity of his servant Canon Di Francia.”

“I had the pleasure of meeting him personally, a long time ago in Rome, and I had the impression of being in front of one of the greatest apostles of the prayer to obtain holy and numerous priests to the Holy Church, as well as of an apostle of the charity for the Orphans and the poor.”

“Even my confreres who knew him always spoke with such enthusiasm of him. However, now that I have seen this Institute, I am all the more convinced that this Work must truly be God’s work and the Founder ought to be one of those extraordinary Saints who from time to time the Lord sends to his Church. I must confess that after many years of experience and apostolate, I have never found an Institute that can be compared to this for the religious spirit, and even for the morality of the boys.”

“I have seen how well they pray, and how all receive Holy Communion with such devotion.”

While telling me these things, the Canon Penitentiary wiped away his tears.

I had the chance to mention this to the Father, who declared, “We must thank the infinite goodness of God for this grace because he deigns to rule and govern our minimal Work. I have experienced this many times since the beginning of the foundation. This shows that the Work is His; not man’s doing but by the Lord Himself. You can see how the less human ability there is on our part, the clearer and more manifest is the hand of God.”

168. THEY CALLED HIM THE “GOOD FATHER”

In 1947, while staying in our Mother House in Messina, the Little Sisters of the Poor¹⁵⁴ often came to ask for help for the many poor hospitalized in their Institute, which they ran very well.

¹⁵⁴ A religious Congregation founded in Saint-Pern, France with the mission of caring for the destitute elderly who live in the streets of cities and towns. At the beginning of the Work in Avignone, Father Hannibal invited the Sisters to come to Messina to care for the poor. Our Founder had always sustained them spiritually and materially in their

Every time they came, we gave them money and even food, bedsheets, and clothes which, at that time, we received from America.

After a certain period, they stopped coming. We suspected that the porters¹⁵⁵ might have treated them badly. So we sent them what we usually gave them, together with a note addressed to the Superior. We said we could not understand why the Sisters had not been coming for a long time.

The next day two Sisters came with a letter from their Superior. In it, she thanked the generous charity and explained the situation. The Sisters stopped coming because they did not want to ask since the Providence had been generous to their poor.

The Sisters then added, “We hold the House of Father Francia as the reserve of the Providence. We come to this House when we are in dire need because we are sure to be helped.”

One of the Sisters was quite elderly and appeared to be so humble and exemplary. She was highly respected in the city where she served for many years, without minding any sacrifice.

It was rumored that she belonged to a family of the highest French aristocracy. Indeed, they said that she was truly a marquise. She was a woman of very few words. This time, however, she stayed with me for a long time and shared some precious words.

“I have been staying in Messina for many years, and I had the good fortune to meet your holy Founder personally. I will never forget the great help he gave to our Institute, so that as we called our Mother Superior *the “Good Mother”*, we called Father Hannibal *the “Good Father.”*”

“We had a great reverence for him. He loved us as his dear spiritual daughters in Jesus Christ. He had more than paternal solicitude for us, and even more for the old men and women we helped. It was obvious that what he did for them, he did it driven by faith and charity as if he did it for Jesus. His visits comforted and encouraged us in our tasks, more than a course of spiritual exercises.”

While she was telling me this, she dried her tears because she was deeply moved. She continued, “We did not have to ask for him to help us. He often sent us an abundance of groceries, other times clothing, and, even firewood, charcoal, and so many other things.”

“When he received confiscated or donated items, he would send a portion to our Institute. I remember one time he gave us half of a tuna that weighed more than one hundred kilos, and another time a whole swordfish.”

“When we would go to his Institute, if he were there, Father Hannibal would welcome us with a feast, ask what we needed, and gave so much generously.”

“He often brought old men, women, or abandoned poor to us, with indescribable kindness. When he brought these people and introduced them to us, we made sacrifices to shelter them.

mission in Messina, especially after the earthquake of 1908 because their financial situation deteriorated (cf. Vitale, *Father Mary Hannibal Di Francia. Life and Works* (1983), Chapter 10).

St. Jeanne Jugan (1792-1879), the Foundress of the Little Sisters of the Poor, was beatified in 1982 and canonized in 2009.

¹⁵⁵ A receptionist, attendant or caretaker, usually staying at the reception or the lobby of the Institute.

This was an excellent opportunity for him to return to our Institute to visit the new guests, bringing everything they needed.

169. DON STURZO'S ESTEEM FOR THE FATHER AND OUR INSTITUTION

In the early years of the male and female Institutes of Oria, the Sub-Prefecture of Brindisi dispatched a Committee to inspect the two Houses.

I was not able to welcome the Committee to the male Institute as befitting them. It was the first time, and I was alone on such an occasion.

San Benedetto, the Institute of the Sisters, did not fare any better. The Superior was absent and the Assistant, Sister M. Ines, who at that time, I don't know why held the title of Mother Vicar. The poor nun, though intelligent, a graduate and a certified teacher, was so intimidated by the meticulous questioning, that she became confused. So, at the question if the Orphanage was a non-profit organization, her reply was, "It has a very high morality."¹⁵⁶

When the Father told me this, he laughed and said, "Poor Sister! She was so confused that she did not know what she was saying."

Be said that Sister Ines had failed Don Sturzo, the brave and great statesman, who had sent her to Messina to become a Daughter of Divine Zeal. "In this regard," the Father continued, "do you know that Don Sturzo had high regard for our Work?"¹⁵⁷

"Though he was dedicated to politics, he remained an excellent priest and a staunch defender of the faith and Christian principles. As I said, though immersed in politics, he sent several female vocations to us, aside from Sister Ines. He would occasionally come to Messina to visit them, and to give them gifts. When they wrote to him, he answered them with beautiful letters and never failed to encourage them to be good Religious.

¹⁵⁶ A 'Non-profit organization' is called 'moral entity' in Italian; so the Sister answered that the Institution had 'very high' morality!

¹⁵⁷ Servant of God Luigi Sturzo (1871-1959) born in Caltagirone, Sicily, was a Catholic priest and prominent statesman, founder of a political party, and a member of the Senate of the Republic. He comes from a very religious family; among his siblings was a Bishop, two Jesuit priests, and a nun. The process of his beatification opened in 2002, under St. John Paul II.

Don Luigi Sturzo's esteem for Father Hannibal and his Work has a peculiar relevance. It comes from an eminent Sicilian statesman who had a profound knowledge of the problems of Italy and Southern Italy in particular. In prospecting the civil and moral renewal of the people in Southern Italy (and not only them), he also invoked the advent of new clergy, configured to the very person of Christ, detached from particular interests, incarnated in the social reality, which was primarily the situation of the last ones in society. Moreover, Don Sturzo attributed the southern underdevelopment to the lack of such reform of the clergy, so that people were deprived of spiritual leaders, especially since the time when Bernardo Tanucci, a follower of the Enlightenment, released, even more, the clergy from their ethical and religious commitments. Don Sturzo was joined by another great expert on the problems of Southern Italy, Msgr. Nicola Monterisi, Archbishop of Salerno, who was also a staunch promoter of the Sacred Alliance of Father Hannibal. For what we just stated, see Don Sturzo's speech on the issue of Southern Italy (Naples February 18, 1923), in G. De Rosa A. Cestari, *The Southern Issue. Anthology of writings and documents*, Ed. Ferraro, Naples, 1970, pp. 249-291.

Once he went to the Institute of the Holy Spirit, to visit the Sisters as usual. Because of a misunderstanding and confusion of languages, he was made to wait for almost two hours. As an outstanding statesman, he showed no signs of impatience at all, and when they apologized to him for what had happened unintentionally, he calmly replied, “Don’t worry. These are things that can happen to anyone. If the troubles of life were only these or similar to these, we would be happy!” He continued to send us vocations and to visit them whenever he could.

Don Sturzo had high esteem both for Father Hannibal and for his Works.

Even during his exile in the United States, during the period of Fascism,¹⁵⁸ he continued to appreciate and love our Works.

I remember that in 1957 a Minister of the Christian Democrats visited the Institute of the Daughters of Divine Zeal in Rome. I accompanied him along with the Mother Superior. The Minister expressed admiration for the Father and the Work and then added, “Even Don Sturzo was very enthusiastic. I remember that when he was still in America, I wrote a pamphlet on the most recent charitable works in Italy, and I sent him a copy. He replied thanking me, but pointed out that I had omitted two very important charitable works in Sicily: the one founded by Canon Hannibal Mary Di Francia in Messina, and that of Father Cusmano¹⁵⁹ in Palermo.”

After World War II, Don Sturzo used his influential connections to help us obtain a state subsidy for the construction of our Boys Village in Bari. He also solicited the full release of the funds for the second floor of the 'Christ the King' Orphanage in Messina.

Also, for several years he sent his articles to the newspapers of Messina, telling the editors to give his remuneration to our Institute of Christ the King

In 1951, on the occasion of the first centenary of the birth of the Father, we thought of opening in Messina an Orphanage for infants in his memory. For this purpose, we wanted to buy the building facing our St. Anthony Institute, between Aurelio Saffi and Ghibellina Streets. The price of the purchase was around thirty million Liras. An additional forty million, however, was needed for repairs, adaptations, and an additional floor.

The idea was referred to Don Sturzo, who found it very good, saying that it would have been another magnificent monument of charity, worthy of the heart of the great Servant of God. He would try his best to get the amount granted to us. He observed, however, that the children had to be cared for by the women Religious and not by the men Religious, and added other minor observations. To clarify the matter better, I went to talk to him in Rome.

He was so affable and spoke with such enthusiasm for Father Hannibal and his Work. He told me that he knew the Father very well because he heard him preach in Caltagirone, his town, and was convinced that Father Hannibal was a great servant of God, another St. Vincent De Paul or Don Bosco.

¹⁵⁸ Don Sturzo was exiled due to his steadfast opposition to Fascism which ruled Italy at his time.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. the footnote in Chapter 198.

Don Sturzo ended his praises with these words, “I cannot tell you the devotion that the people of Caltagirone have for Father Hannibal. My brother, the Bishop, has unlimited esteem for him. He is truly an honor not only for Sicily but also for Italy. Even in the United States, I heard great things about him as well as about his Orphanages, so that they sent donations from America. Several times I have also sent my modest contribution. My secretary often goes to your Sisters here in Rome, on Circonvallazione Appia Street, and is so edified by them. As for the amount needed for the Infants’ Orphanage in Messina, submit a formal request, enclosing a detailed quotation, signed by an engineer. I hope to be able to obtain everything. In the meantime, pray and let the Orphans pray for this.”

When everything was settled, and the donation seemed almost certain, someone indiscriminately told Don Sturzo that the project was a personal idea of the Superior which had not been approved by the Superior General. The project vanished completely.

When the Superior General, Father Tusino, learned about the unwise and untimely intrusion, he was disappointed, but he did not want to resume negotiations because too much time had passed and the situation was already compromised.

170. BROTHER CARMELO WAS RIGHT TO TELL US

Back in Oria after World War I, on a winter day, while going to the Seminary, I saw two Daughters of Divine Zeal coming out of the Church of St. Francis, walking ahead of me on the same road.

One of them had a persistent cough that seemed to me like whooping cough. That worried me.

So I hurried to overtake them. One was older, the other very young, but with a ghastly face, and a cough that wracked her chest.

Arriving at home, I found the Father and Father Palma talking in the hall. I gave them the answer that they had been waiting for from the Rector of the Seminary. Then, I reported my concern for that poor Sister, commenting, “Definitely the two Sisters came from teaching catechism to the children. I don’t understand how the Mother Superior, on such a cold day sends out a Sister with that physical condition. Either she was not thinking, or she is heartless.”

At this bold statement, Father Palma interjected, “You are always like this. It is none of your business. You immediately give judgments.”

I retorted, “If I see a dog suffering, can’t I say poor beast, how it suffers! So can’t I say how a person is suffering, and all the more when it is one of our Sisters?”

The Father intervened, “No, Father Palma, Brother Drago was not wrong. He has done well to tell us because we have to be aware, and, if necessary, to remedy.”

Turning to me, he asked if I knew the Sisters and their names. I said no, and he resumed, “However, you must not judge so hastily what the Superior does, saying that she is either not thinking or heartless. I know that she is quite maternal. Most probably, she was not aware that the Sister went out for the catechism.”

He took note and promised, “As soon as I go to San Benedetto, I will check.”

After two or three days, he told me, “I inquired about the Sister who was coughing badly. Her health condition is truly pitiful. For a long time, she has had a slight fever that does not go away. The Superior had her checked by Doctor Errico. He has prescribed a treatment but any improvement is still to be seen. I immediately told them to bring her to Brindisi or Bari or Taranto, and, if necessary, even to Rome to have her checked by a specialist. In the meantime, I advised them to keep her completely rested and to feed her well.”

“The Superior told me that she did not know about her going out for the catechism. It was the older Sister who, unable to find the one who usually accompanied her, called that little Sister who was always available for everything, and never said no to anyone.”

“Upon learning the facts, the Superior scolded the older nun severely and ordered the young one to keep herself protected at home until she got well. See how you have to be very careful in judging others? You were so sure that the Superior was either thoughtless or heartless. Instead, she has both a great mind and a good heart. It is you who lacks reflection and the sensibility of conscience in judging. Do you understand? You have to be careful!”

A few months later the Father had to give some kind of spiritual retreat to the Community of our Sisters in Oria. It was five days of a tiring apostolate, from morning to evening, giving at least four or more meditations and lectures. Because of time constraints, and because there was no means of transportation to fetch him, he remained at the female Institute. In order not to be left alone, he asked me to go there in the evening to keep him company.

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The table for dinner was set by a very young Sister, who was outstanding in goodness and kindness. Her name was Sister Longina.¹⁶⁰

The Father said, “Thank God, this Sister has recovered her health. The medicines that she took were effective. The specialist of Bari diagnosed her as a probable candidate for tuberculosis. At her last check-up, the doctor satisfied, said: ‘We saved her!’”

“She is an outstanding Sister: intelligent, humble, with a good religious spirit, and very attached to the Congregation. Although she is still very young, she has much common sense and loves any sacrifice. She is the Sister who was heavily coughing that you encountered that freezing day.”

I had the opportunity to get to know her better. She was as the Father had described her. Although still very young, she was the assistant to the Superior, who was very happy with her.

The Superior assigned her to provide what was needed for the House of the Rogationists, at the time when the Sisters were still taking care of providing food, clothing, and household assistance to the male Institutes.

¹⁶⁰ Sister Longina Casale had a prominent place among the Daughters of Divine Zeal and was their Superior General in the 1950s.

She performed this assignment with unsurpassed diligence and care. She was outstanding in reliability and confidentiality, for her common sense and esteem that she had for the male Institute, esteem that she always confirmed with facts during her whole life.

171. IT IS USEFUL TO HAVE AN AGRICULTURAL SCHOOL

Speaking about the training of the Orphans, the Father used to say that if the Institute kept the Orphans only up to the time that they needed help and did not train them to be able to live on their own, the training would have been lacking.

For this reason, from the beginning of the foundation, the Father was concerned that the boys and girls in our Institutions be trained for a lucrative job according to their abilities and possibilities.

He used to say, “Boys and girls have to be accustomed to work from their earliest age, so that, as they become older they will be able to live by the fruits of their labor. In an educational Institution, work is one of the first factors of morality. Work means order, discipline, life, and a guarantee of a good future for those who are taught. They have to learn to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow.¹⁶¹ The Father added, “We have to develop our workshops well and multiply them as much as possible so that our boys have the opportunity to choose according to their inclinations.”

“Therefore, besides tailoring, shoemaking, carpentry, printing, and mechanical workshops, I think it would also be useful to establish an efficient agricultural section to train good farmers. A farm would be very beneficial and desirable for several reasons:

“First, because farming is the most popular activity in Italy, so it will be easier to find a job in that sector.”

“Second, orphans coming from farming families can remain in their environment, where their family and friends live.”

The Father spoke that way because, during his time, especially in Italy, art and crafts had not yet been developed, and worse, there were no mechanics, industries, and social communications.

He went on, “It seems that this project of a training farm can be implemented right now, here in this beautiful garden.”

“The Sisters, who have sacrificed for many years¹⁶² can now withdraw so that we can organize a regular training-farm. We can start as soon as possible.”

I ventured to argue that the project didn't seem easy.

¹⁶¹ This Chapter repeats almost verbatim the concept about the work of the orphan boys and girls expressed by the Father in his speech on August 20, 1906, “*A Committee's Visit to a Female Anthonian Orphanage.*” The full text is in *Discorsi. Part 1. Eulogies*, Messina [no date], pages 438 - 468, with abundant explanatory notes.

¹⁶² The Daughters of Divine Zeal in Oria worked for the nascent male Institute, taking care, among other things, of the orchard and vegetable garden, as mentioned in Chapter 161.

The Father replied: “You react right away. Don’t be so pessimistic.” I answered, “I’m sorry, Father. If you don’t want me to say anything, I will keep quiet.”

The Father corrected, “Speak, speak! Tell me why this project doesn’t seem feasible to you?”

I said, “First, I think there is not enough land, although there is water from the well for the experimental farm.”

“Second, the boys who could be recruited for this activity are very few. The larger problem is that the boys intended for farming live with those engaged in art and crafts. They would feel inferior compared with the latter.”

The Father replied, “Somehow, I find your reasons convincing. However, maybe we could try nonetheless. This could serve as a preparation for the time when the Providence will give us a better chance for the farm in another place and on more favorable terms.”

The opportunity to do this soon materialized.

About two years before the outbreak of World War I, a rich young woman donated her large villa, in the vicinity of Gravina of Apulia (Bari), for the use of the Institute, with a promise of a deed of donation. It had a very substantial plot of land, and securely fenced,

The Father immediately started the training-farm. He had already formed a small group of Orphans that gradually increased. They cultivated the fields, under the guidance of Brother Maria Antonio, with the help of a farmer.

The Brother served as Director, or as Brother in-charge as the Father used to say. He did his best with a lot of goodwill and sacrifice, but he had no experience in how to run the project. Finance and even environmental resources were not favorable.

Prejudicial to any bolder project was the lack of water for irrigation. There was just enough for drinking and for the services of the House, drawn from the cisterns. Thus, there was no possibility for an experimental farm of vegetables because it was freezing in winter, and there was no water in summer.

The agricultural apprenticeship of the boys was reduced to rudimentary cultivation: tilling the soil, sowing seeds of wheat and cereals. They also planted potatoes, which because it was suited to the type of the soil, produced not only enough for the consumption of the House, but also for the female Institute of Altamura.

One day, when Brother Maria Antonio came to Oria, I inquired about the farm. When I heard what they were doing, I mentioned that one could not call it an agricultural enterprise. The boys just learned how to hoe, and when it was time for them to leave the Institute, they would not be able to do anything except to work as hired hands because they did not own any land and they would never become farmers.

The situation, for me, was almost an exploitation of the boys.

A real training-farm should have been put up in such a way to allow a person to acquire perhaps a specialized diploma as an expert in agriculture. In Italy, there were too many hired hands in agriculture, to the point that many of them were jobless and those employed in the fields were treated very badly. Skilled laborers were needed.

Brother Antonio Maria told this to the Father, who called me and said, “I am pleased that you show interest in what is done in the Institute. I am sure that what you say is said positively and not damaging criticism. Otherwise, it would be detrimental for the Congregation, and even more for your spirit.”

“I say this, not to scold you, but to teach you.”

1) You should have made these observations to me and not to the Brother because he might think the work he is doing with much sacrifice is not appreciated, and he could become discouraged;

2) Large trees, namely, the large Institutions, did not become such all at once. They started as an almost invisible, insignificant seed. Wanting things to be perfect at once is not logical. Remember that *the best is the enemy of the good*.¹⁶³ We have to start slowly and be contented with what we can do. If we don't start this way, nothing will ever be accomplished.”

“For me, an agricultural section would aim to train young people not only to become good farmers and gardeners but to become qualified, specialized, graduates, and experts. However, if we begin this way, it would be impossible; we would never accomplish anything.”

“I must confess that in the beginning, I never thought of educating orphans to a cultural and professional level higher than that of their family. This idea came to me because it seems that the Divine Providence who astonishes us so generously, desires it. To have orphans well-trained in the literary, scientific, and professional level, would be wonderful for their social position and a source of income. It could also rebound to the good of the Institute because in the various needs of the Work, instead of hiring personnel whom we do not know, we hire those we have trained ourselves, and it would be safer for us as well as for them. Moreover, they would be working in a healthier environment.”

The training-farm, which had begun in Gravina di Puglia had to close at the beginning of the war because most of the staff had to enlist in the military. However, the Father's plan was wise.

172. TANGERINES FOR THE POPE

One year in Oria, our orchard had produced an abundance of tangerines of exceptional quality. We had to prop up the branches so that they would not break. That extraordinary sight was a joy to see. Rightly, the Father continued to invite us to thank Divine Providence.

One day, while we were harvesting the tangerines in the garden, the Father said to us, “I have a beautiful idea. Let me see if you can guess it.”

¹⁶³ Cf. the footnote in Chapter 136.

Some answered, "To give a beautiful basket of tangerines to the poor."

The Father replied, "You have only guessed part of it. First of all, have you chosen the best?" "No, Father," we answered. "We gather them as they are and eat them."

"That is not correct," the Father replied, "because the poor represent the Lord; therefore, what you give to the poor is given to God. If you had to give them directly to Our Lord, would you not choose the best? We have to act with this spirit of faith."

"So now you have to get a nice basket and collect the best tangerines from the trees, to give them not only to the poor but to someone else. Let's see if you can guess who."

A small boy said, "To the Mayor." A grown-up said, "To the Pope!" The Father replied, "Bravo! Bravo! You guessed correctly. The Pope is the Vicar of Jesus Christ, who is Jesus Christ on earth. So we will send a crate of the best tangerines to the Pope, with a great spirit of faith as if we were sending them directly to Our Lord."

We went to get two baskets. The Father himself began picking the more eye-catching fruits with great care and diligence. We scattered around the garden as if taken by a holy enthusiasm recklessly climbing the trees, searching for the most beautiful tangerines. We brought them eagerly to the Father, who, in turn, made another careful selection.

He asked the carpenter to prepare a special beautiful wooden crate, well-crafted, with precise dimensions. Then, he made sure to find the special paper to wrap each tangerine. In the presence of the Community, with his own hands, he carefully arranged them in the crate, surrounding them with leaves so that they would not be damaged.

He recited the prayers for the Holy Father and used the occasion to exhort us to have great respect and reverence for the Holy Father. He then urged us to pray, to take the Pope's words as spoken directly by Our Lord, to encourage others to have love and devotion for the person of the Holy Father and to defend him in every way when it was necessary.

Then, he recommended us to display the image of the Pope on our premises, next to the crucifix. Looking at me and giving me some holy pictures of the Pope, he said, "If you need some more of these let me know, and I will send them to you."

When he received the tangerines, the Holy Father answered through his Secretary of State with a kind letter, thanking and blessing us.

173. OUR LORD'S BANK GIVES ONE HUNDRED PERCENT INTEREST

In the House of Oria, there was no electric power to operate the printing machines. We had to set up a small generator.

Once installed, the shoemaking workshop also required a more powerful engine. So it was planned to purchase an internal combustion engine from a company in Pontedera. The estimate, however, including the installation and adaptation of the facility, amounted to a very considerable expense.

After checking the accounts, we realized that the House did not have even one-fourth of the money needed. The difficulty was increased by the fact that the company did not intend to defer the payment. Half was to be paid upon ordering and the rest after the final testing. However, it was urgent to provide the amount because the machines of the shoe factory had already been ordered, and they could not work without the engine.

We brought the matter to the Father, who said, “You must have trust in the Divine Providence, who, since this is something necessary that we cannot do without, has to come to our aid.”

“Do you know what we shall do? We must immediately deposit all the money we have in the very safe *bank* of Our Lord, whose interest is a hundredfold, without any danger that He will fail. This bank is the hands of the poor.”

“With true faith then let us give all the money that we have in the House to the poor. We can be sure that we will obtain what we need. The Lord Himself has said, ‘Give one, and you will receive a hundredfold. (*Unum Datis et centum accipietis*). In another passage, He assured us that heaven and earth will pass away, but His words will never fail. Therefore, give all that we have to the poor, especially to priests and religious communities most in need, and order the engine and start the work required because for sure the Providence will grant us the amount needed.”

We did as the Father said.

Immediately large donations started to arrive. Before two weeks had passed, the amount we received was already three times greater than what we needed! And the Divine Providence still continued to be generous.

When we informed the Father about this, he answered, “We have to thank infinitely the Divine Providence! There is nothing to wonder about. The words of Our Lord cannot fail. Our minimal Work has been like this ever since, and if you continue with this spirit of faith, not only will we never lack what is necessary, but indeed we will have so much to become a channel of the Divine Providence for the good of the needy.”

“Alas, however, if our life will not keep the religious fervor if we do not administer the Providence as it befits, woe to us! It would be our ruin and the ruin of the Congregation. We must keep in mind, however, that the Lord desires that, together with this boundless faith in Him, we use all the correct human means to produce our work.”

174. THE ENGINE WOULD NOT START

Brother Mauro Drago was an intelligent young man, very pious and fond of sacrifice.

The Father wanted him to study for the priesthood, but he replied that he preferred to serve the Congregation as a simple Religious Coadjutor Brother.

He was inclined toward mechanics and, although still very young and self-taught, he could do wonders.

He was the one in charge of the printing press and the shoe-making machines. He was so valuable to the House, where he was the engineer, the electrician, and the jack of all trades for any technical emergency.

Though attracted by these things, he was impeccable in the practices of piety and all the common acts. He fulfilled them with great attention and was a model for the whole House.

Much hope was placed on him that in the future, the Congregation would have a valuable person who would develop its industrial and professional activities.

Unfortunately, an illness contracted during the 1915-18 war, brought his young life to its end when he was only 19 years old.¹⁶⁴

The Father, purifying his deep grief into faith, once said, "It is a great loss for the Congregation. However, let us accept God's plans." Father Vitale, who was then in charge of the House of Oria, exclaimed, "I lost my right arm!" because Brother Mauro had been available for all the services of the House.

After his death, we were left without an operator for the internal combustion engine which activated the printing press, the shoe-making workshop, and the electricity for the lights in the House.

The person who replaced Brother Mauro did not have any experience. He would fumble for days and days without being able to start the machine. So all the activities of the House remained paralyzed. That engine was vital for a variety of activities, and all of them very relevant. The Institute had commitments, contracts with other people. For example, we had to deliver to the government a certain number of military shoes every month. In case of failure to deliver, there was a hefty penalty, and even the exemption from military service of some of our Religious could be revoked. A grave sense of uneasiness pervaded everyone.

Father Palma told me that he too often tried his best to start the engine but to no avail. One day the Father happened to witness those attempts which by then had become funny. Father Palma, given the human powerlessness, or rather, his and the inexperience of others, turned to the Saints and started an endless series of Our Fathers.

The Father joined them in prayer but after a while said, "Father Palma, it is excellent to pray to the Saints, but we cannot expect them to command the Lord to work a miracle to start an engine."

"Let us not ask God for a miracle that we can do as humans. God will intervene with a miracle when there is no hope for a natural solution. If the engine is broken, call the mechanic, and everything is done."

Father Palma replied, "No, Father, the engine is not broken. It was working very well when Brother Mauro was here! It's just that none of us know how to start it." "The Father replied, "It is

¹⁶⁴ Brother Mauro Drago, brother of Father Carmelo, was born in Galati Mamertino, Messina on August 31, 1897, and died on December 3, 1916. Cf. Chapter 1.

so obvious: without wasting time and effort, call someone capable of operating it and everything will be settled. It will also prevent much damage.”

When Father Palma told me about this, he concluded, “The Father was right. If it is said by the Father who lived by faith and prayer and even called prayer *all-powerful*, then what he said must be true. This teaches us that we must try to do all we can though always hoping in the Lord. As the proverb goes: ‘Help yourself, and God will help you.’”

175. PROBLEM IN THE KITCHEN

When he was in the House, the Father often went to the kitchen to check everything personally. One day in Oria, while I was talking with him, to inform him of the progress of the House, at a certain point, he said, “Enough for now. We will continue after lunch. I have to go to the kitchen before lunch. By the way, when do you go to the kitchen to check everything?”

I answered, “I go there once in a while, but not so often.”

The Father reacted, “That is not good! Especially now that the kitchen is entrusted to men, and Vizzari is not an expert. You must check every day.”

“Don Bosco used to say that a good Superior must spend a convenient time each day to roam around the House to be personally aware of everything.”

I replied, “Yes, Father, the Superior should do that, but I am not the Superior; I am nothing.”

And the Father, “Oh! So, if there is no Superior in the House, shall we not eat? Shall we not drink or go to sleep? Are you going to wait for the Superior to check these? To take care of such necessary tasks would you like perhaps to be given the title of Superior? My blessed child, try to do everything you can and in the best way possible, especially when I am not here.”

“If in the kitchen there were Sisters, it would be different. The Sisters, especially when it comes to cooking, are more diligent and more practical than men. They are more particular about cleanliness. They care that nothing is wasted and everything is well conserved. In this case, our vigilance would be unnecessary. They deserve our confidence because they do better than us. We hope to be able to have Sisters as soon as possible so we can entrust the household care of the House to them.”

“Meanwhile, you need to be aware of everything, without waiting for Father Palma or me to do it. This is your office, even when we are here.”

“The kitchen is very important both for economic reasons and for the smooth running of the House. The health and reasonable contentment of the Community depends largely on this.”

I followed him into the kitchen. As we entered, there was an unpleasant smell of something burning, and I realized that the Father was not aware because we knew that he was not so sensitive to odors.

He noticed that there was some fish stock in a pan [dried cod], and potatoes in another. He said boldly, “So little fish stock? Certainly, this is not enough for everyone.”

Vizzari said, “This is just for the religious community. For the Orphans, there is cheese with potatoes.” Annoyed, the Father replied, “Why the difference? The Orphans must be treated not only like the Religious, but even better. The benefactors send donations mainly for them.”

I joined the conversation saying, “Father, I can explain. The Orphans don’t like the fish stock. They reject it. Every time we cook it for them, most of them they just make fun of it. They prefer cheese.”

The Father replied, “I don’t understand why. In Messina, even in the best restaurants, the fish stock is a popular dish, and is a very substantial food.” I admitted, “Yes, I heard that too. It means that we don’t know how to prepare it. The fact is that, for most of us, beginning with me, it is true penance. This is why most of the time, we serve it on Friday.”

The Father tasted it, but he did not continue. It was so salty and woody.

He said immediately, “It is clear that it is not edible. You have to cook it again for a long time, changing the water several times to remove all of this salt, and then season it well.”

“For today, since there is no more time to prepare anything else because it is already time for lunch, even for the Community of the Religious give cheese with whatever else is available.”

After this, he scolded Vizzari, who tried to apologize attributing it to the poor quality of the fish. I received a stern reprimand since I was responsible for the bad treatment of the Community.

At this point, Father Palma, hearing the Father, came to the kitchen. Upon entering, he said, “I smell something burning! Vizzari what have you burned? The poor man replied, “Maybe the soup, just a little bit. To be precise, it was pasta and beans.”

Then, we went to those who were placing the food into the dishes. It was dreadful to see, with all those black and yellowish burnt portions. At that sight, the Father became more indignant and said, “Poor children [*referring to the Orphans*], into whose hands have they fallen!”

Then, turning to Father Palma, he added, “It cannot continue like this. It's useless. We have to entrust the kitchen to the Sisters. They must sacrifice for the male Institute. And you must appreciate them.”

He then tasted the soup, which was still too salty, as usual. Seeing that he was so angry, it slipped out of my lips saying, “Patience! Today is First Friday. It will serve as a mortification.” “What great reasoning!” the Father retorted. “If the Community makes this mortification when it happens accidentally, it is all right, but those who impose it because of their negligence are very wrong. Do they thus sanctify the First Friday with their lack of charity and by doing their task badly?”

176. THE NEED FOR A CANONICAL NOVITIATE

The last time that the Father came to Oria was on the occasion of the publication of the special issue of the magazine *God and Neighbor* for the inauguration of the House of Rome.¹⁶⁵

Though very weak because of his age and the sickness he had suffered, the people marveled that the Father was still working so hard.

Since he had been gone from Oria for a long time, he was very interested first of all in being informed about everything concerning the life of the House. He wanted to know about the health of the Community; the spiritual, disciplinary, and academic aspects; the economy, and the number of Aspirants. When he heard that they were a good number, he said, “Let us thank the Divine Superiors. There are great hopes for the Congregation. We can see that the prayer you offer to St. Francis de Sales¹⁶⁶ in this House is truly effective. I recommend you never cease praying and working in the field of vocations as much as possible.”

“In particular, however, we must strive to safeguard vocations and to form them well. In this, we must be understanding on the one hand, but strict and inflexible with Aspirants who are not promising.”

I added that we could not accept more Aspirants due to the lack of room because even the Orphans were already numerous. The Father continued, “We have to strive to keep the Orphans in the best possible way because they attract the divine graces and the Providence supporting us and allowing us to do charitable activities. Try to rush the new building.”

While the Father was speaking, Father Palma came in. To him, the Father said, “Father Palma, I saw that, thank God, in this House, there is a relatively good number of Aspirants, and the same is the case in Messina. It seems, therefore, that we must start dealing with the issue that has always been a preoccupation for me, namely, the establishment of a real Canonical Novitiate. It is essential for a true religious formation.”

“Until now we have been going along in the best way we could, and the Divine Providence has come to our help because we had no choice. However, now it seems that there is a possibility, so we must try at all cost to put everything in order; otherwise, the Providence will not help us anymore.”

“Certainly this is not something that we can implement overnight. We have first to prepare and start thinking about the Novice Master, and where to establish the Novitiate.”

“As for the Master, I think that it is prudent to wait for the ordination of these five young clerics of Oria and some others in Messina, not only to have more possibilities to breathe but also to have a greater choice because the Novice Master should be the most qualified in all aspects. By then, I may no longer be alive because I feel that the time to give an account of my life to God is nearing. I am telling it to you, and I will say it to our dear Father Vitale, I beg both of you

¹⁶⁵ The opening of the House on Circonvallazione Appia Street in Rome was on May 24, 1925. The Father visited the Community of Oria for the last time on October 14, 1926. Cf. *Chronology* in *Positio* Vol. II.

¹⁶⁶ About the prayer to St. Francis de Sales for vocations, cf. Chapter 118.

to implement this idea of mine as soon as possible. Moreover, I am sure that you are as convinced of this need as I am.”

“Meanwhile, Father Palma, start thinking of where to establish the Novitiate. The ideal would be a setting different from that of the Community, a quiet, beautiful, sunny, and clean place that will foster health. Furthermore, it should be a place that offers the convenience of availing good confessors, and not far from human society, as monks and friars often do. Our Novices have to be used to living among men because we live an active life intended for charitable and educative works aside from doing apostolate.”

Father Palma interrupted him and suggested, “Father, I thought that for a beginning, just to start, we could adapt that building on Monte Sant’Angelo, by modifying it and if necessary, adding some small extensions.”

The Father replied, “Frankly, I don’t remember the size of the building. The idea is not bad. Let us go to see it.”

After a few days, we went with the Father and Father Palma to Monte S. Angelo, which is in the far end of the garden of the House of Oria.

Father Palma noticed that I was not enthusiastic about the place and told me to keep my mouth shut.

When we arrived at the spot and saw the building up close, the Father made his observations, and so did Father Palma. Noticing that I did not say a single word, the Father asked, “Why are you not saying anything? Why then did you bother to come? Speak! What do you think?”

Father Palma intervened immediately, “If he speaks, he will spoil everything. Ever since I sent him to see the best Institutes in Italy, he has returned with grandiose ideas of what is ideal and perfect. He returned with an air of arrogance.

The Father replied, “Father Palma, let him speak. What can you expect? He's still young. The idea of grandeur is needed, albeit moderated by reason and prudence, according to our possibilities and what we can afford. Brother Carmelo, I would like to hear your opinion.”

I said, “It seems the building is small and insufficient. The Novices would be as in a cage, especially when they cannot go outside: There is no room to move inside. There is no water, no toilets. If it is properly remodeled, it will house no more than eight, or, at most, ten Novices. To add to this, it overlooks the cemetery...”

The Father remarked, “When it comes to the capacity, at least for now, it would be nice if we could have even ten Novices per year! Then, when the Congregation develops and has other Houses, the Novitiate can be transferred elsewhere. For now, this would be enough. As to making the building more suitable and convenient, Father Palma says that it could be adapted. Regarding water, there is a deep well.” I said, “During summer the well is dry.” Father Palma added, “Precisely about the water we are lucky. The building can have as much water as it wants from the motor windmill. What is needed is just a little more than a hundred meters of pipes.”

The Father continued, “As for the fact that it is in front of the cemetery, it doesn’t matter. Indeed, it serves as a reminder that we die. To do the best meditation on death, the Saints kept a skull on their table, and in the choir of some religious communities, there was even the entire human skeleton!”

Here we would have the following advantages: although separated from the Community, the Novitiate is also very close, for mutual help. Since it is at a proper distance [*from the religious community*], all the home chores should be done by the Novices themselves. This is good because they have to become accustomed to doing everything.”

“Another advantage would be that while in the initial months they should focus solely on meditation and on the sacred instructions under the guidance of the Master who will explain the Sacred Scriptures, the Constitutions, the Regulations, the religious life, the spirit and purpose of the Congregation. Later on, after the Canonical Year, the Novices would have the convenience of practicing the Institute's works by helping and working in the nearby House.”

“This is important not only for the formation of the Novices, who must learn to do everything but also for the practical knowledge that the Master must have of each one to formulate a judgment on their suitability. The Master then should forewarn them, follow them up, instruct them, and, if necessary, correct them at the proper time.”

Father Palma added, “If we like, we could put a door so that the Novices can go directly to the grove to have fun, to harvest the fruits, and maybe, help in the vegetable garden.”

The Father concluded, “Meantime these are just ideas, wishful thinking which we will have to realize through time, reflection, and, more than anything else, through prayer. For sure, a well-organized and well-kept Novitiate according to the sacred canons, is something vital for the Congregation because its life depends mainly on the sound religious formation of its members.”

177. A SUPPOSEDLY WELL WRITTEN ESSAY

In 1908 when I went to Messina, I saw my brother Giuseppe, who had entered a few years ahead of me and later became Brother Mansueto, reading the Gospel of St. Matthew passionately. The book had been given to him by the Father, so he held it dear for a second reason. When we transferred to Oria, he had almost completely memorized it.

My brother had an exceptional reverence and devotion to the Father.

He was outstanding for his kind and gentle personality, to the point that when the Father gave him the religious habit, he was given the name Brother Mansueto. He was one of the first to attend the new internal *Ginnasio* school in 1910-1911 in Oria.¹⁶⁷ The Father has personally desired this school, and he followed it with great interest.

One day, the Father told Father Palma to suggest to the Professor of the Italian language, Canon Naccarato, to require the students to write often essays related to social, moral, and

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Chapter 121.

religious issues to arouse sympathy for the human miseries. The Father noted that these topics and exercises not only contributed to the writing skills and cultural enrichment, but also shaped the heart, nourished one's vocation, and fostered the spirit of the Congregation.

The professor liked the suggestion and put it into practice. One day he assigned this essay, "State what you intend to do in your life."

My brother Giuseppe wrote, "I want to do in my life, what our Father Founder has done and is doing, that is, (in a nutshell) all that he has done and is doing for the Orphans, the poor, and the needy: to pray, celebrate Mass, preach, hear confessions, do good to all, and pray fervently to the Lord to obtain good workers for the Holy Church, as he did. I want to be very devout to the Most Holy Virgin like him, and be virtuous and holy as he is."

The professor truly liked the essay and praised Giuseppe in class, and after having made the necessary observations and corrections in spelling and grammar, he kept it to show to Father Palm, who, in turn, took the opportunity to speak about it during the spiritual reading.

He said that the thought was nice because we should strive to be true and good Rogationists, to do what the Father has done and is doing. The more we strive to imitate him, the more we will become Rogationists. This, however, is to be done not only in words, but most of all, and especially in deeds.

Then, turning to Giuseppe, he jokingly asked, "Do you want to be also a poet and man of letters like the Father? I don't think so because the essay is full of errors."

Giuseppe replied, "As for the errors, I hope to correct them. As to the Father, I definitely cannot be like him. I have heard that to be a poet, one must be born as such. The Father, even as a teenager wrote poems, such as 'The Little Butterfly'. However, a few days ago, I tried, but I was not even able to write down two verses."

Father Palma went on to say, "Would you also like to be a founder like the Father?" Giuseppe answered immediately, "I have never said and even thought of it. Our Congregation is very beautiful. I don't think that anyone can make a similar one. They say that the Founders are not made by themselves, but God makes them."

Then Father Palma said to me privately, "When the Father comes, show him this essay."

One day when the Father and Father Palma were together in the room, I entered to show him the essay. Father Palma spoke of it with enthusiasm to the Father, and read it to him.

As soon as the Father heard that Giuseppe wanted to do as he had done and was doing, at once, he said, "Poor son, how wrong he is! It means that he wants to make all the mistakes and blunders that I have made and am doing. He would be disappointed!"

When he also heard that Giuseppe wanted to be good and holy as he was, reacting the Father exclaimed, "Poor child, indeed how mistaken he is! If he only knew how much I did not correspond to the divine grace, how much ingratitude, and especially how many sins I have committed! However, who teaches this dear son to write such nonsense? You have to correct him."

I replied, “What's wrong with this? Didn't St. Paul say to the early Christians: Be my imitators, as I also am of Christ?”

The Father reacted, “Do me a favor, keep quiet. What is the connection with St. Paul? It shows that like your brother, you don't understand what you say.”

178. YOU DON'T HAVE A VOCATION IF YOU DON'T LOVE PRAYER

The last time that the Father came to Oria, he asked me for the usual report on the situation of the House. He was particularly interested in the conduct and good dispositions of our five Religious students in Philosophy. Among them was a certain Brother Tarcisio Massafra, about whom, though unwillingly, I had given a profile that was not favorable.

I told the Father that Brother Tarcisio dedicated himself totally to the activities, as if he were a maniac, even at the cost of great sacrifice, just to show off. He was working in the printing press, helping Mr. Chirico, the teacher of the musical band. While giving a good impression when working, his clothes were shabby and dirty. He even neglected his meals.

This excessive behavior made him careless, indolent, and slothful in his practices of piety and the observance of religious life. He looks for all kinds of alibis to absent himself from prayers and common acts, and when he has to participate and attend, he is listless, distracted, and often dozes off.

All the warnings, reprimands, and threats from me or Father Palma have been useless. He has made many promises but has not kept a single one.

Recently Father Palma scolded him severely and told him that he would write to the Father to dismiss him. It was effective for only a brief period.

The Father resolutely said, “I wonder why you still kept him. What can you expect from a person who does not have a spirit of prayer? He will never be a good Religious, more so a good priest. You should have dismissed him long ago. If you are lenient in this matter, you will ruin the Studentate¹⁶⁸, the House, and the Congregation.”

“Of course, we must be kind, patient, and fatherly but not with someone as stubborn.”

“Perhaps you allowed yourselves to be deceived by his work in the printing press, by what he produced, or perhaps it was because of the lack of personnel both in the printing press and in the band. If that is so, you have been careless in governing. It would have been a lesser evil for the Congregation to sacrifice the success of the printing press and the band than to tolerate someone like him.”

“The damage for having kept him so long is not only to the Congregation but also to the young man himself because the longer it takes for him to return to normal life outside the Institute, the more he will have difficulty in finding a place in society after he leaves. This is

¹⁶⁸ Studentate, *studentato* in Italian, refers to the formation House of professed Religious clerics who are studying for the priesthood. “Center of Studies”, “Study House”, “Study Center” and “Scholasticate” are its synonyms.

probably the reason why many former Religious and seminarians remain displaced in society. I will call him and inform him that he has been expelled. Perhaps, given that in recent days he has shown some improvement after the threat of expulsion, we may grant him one more chance. However, I am sure that he will be the same, and sooner or later, he will leave of his own accord, or you will be forced to dismiss him. Because when one is stubborn and hardened in his lack of piety, there is nothing to hope for.

The Father called him paternally, but firmly and resolutely told him what he had to say. The young man wept and begged the Father to give him the last chance. The Father encouraged him and urged him to mend and pray fervently, without being overcome by his activism because this was a snare of the devil to distract him from religious life.

Then he called me and said, "I will also speak to Father Palma. Be careful, watch him diligently, don't be fooled, and be resolute and firm in your decision. Keep me informed often, and, I repeat, you no longer need my permission to dismiss him."

As the Father had foreseen, Brother Tarcisio improved for a while, but later we were forced to make the extreme and painful decision.

Unfortunately, outside, he did not behave well, either. However, it must be said that he always remained affectionate to the Institute, and particularly to the Father whom he esteemed a great saint.

179. THE FATHER'S TALK AT THE ORATORY OF CEGLIE MESSAPICO

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Don Cosimo Spina, a scholarly priest and great animator of the youths, helped by other zealous confreres, was the passionate Director of the Oratory of St. Joachim which was a real model in Ceglie Messapico.

Hundreds of students from the age of First Communion, to teenagers and the youth, frequented the Oratory.

When Don Cosimo happened to come to Oria, he said to me, "Knowing the reputation of the holiness, the faith, and zeal of Father Di Francia, especially for the sanctification of the boys, one day, together with the vicar forane Father Carlucci, I invited him to speak at the Oratory of St. Joachim. He gladly accepted."

When the news spread in town, all the clergy of Ceglie, which was quite numerous, distinguished persons, people, and a crowd of boys rushed to the Oratory that the premises could not contain them.

The Father presented himself in a very humble manner, but at the same time beaming with joy at the sight of the audience eager to hear his words.

He began his talk expressing his congratulations for the excellent organization of the Oratory and a large number of boys.

He continued to say, “This is the best manifestation of the zeal with which the organizers of this magnificent oratory and the clergy work in this excellent town. This shows how families truly live the religious spirit and how good these dearest children are, how willing to love Jesus, and promising for success in life.”

At this point, there was an explosion, a loud and prolonged ovation and cheering.

The theme of his talk was, “The Most Holy Eucharist and the Most Holy Communion.”

The doctrinal exposition on the topic was so clear and easy to understand that, with great wonder, everyone could follow it with the greatest attention. Everyone was interested.

He spoke, quoting the most attractive and beautiful passages of the Gospel regarding the Divine Master’s tender love and preference for the children, considering as done to Him what is done to them out of love. He spoke with such gentleness and with such a spirit of faith that people were moved to tears.

Then, he spoke of the infinite gift of Holy Communion, how one who receives Communion with the proper disposition, receives the Lord, living and true, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity, and he remains in Jesus, while Jesus abides in him.

Then, the Father spoke of the most ardent desire of Jesus to give Himself to all men in Holy Communion, and of the degree of love that Jesus makes us experience daily from the Holy Tabernacle, “Let the children come to me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The talk was rather long, but it seemed short to us, and we wanted him to continue.

Those were wonderful moments. The effects of the conference were such that there had never been a similar enthusiasm in the Oratory before, and we never had so many general and lasting Communions.

The memory of that talk has remained indelible in the minds and hearts of Ceglie. Everyone said, “Truly this priest must be a great saint.”

Regarding Father’s conference, Don Cosimo Spina also remembered that a newly ordained priest had dared to give a criticism, “It seems that Canon Di Francia must be truly a man of God, but when it comes to doctrine, I was expecting something more. Actually, he didn’t say anything new. He said common things that everyone knows, even the children.” However, someone immediately answered back, “What novelty did you want him to say? If you want him to speak in such a way as not to be understood by the children, and perhaps even by us? What is most extraordinary is to be able to say the most difficult things understood in such a clear manner, and to make them penetrate the minds and hearts of even the smallest children! There lies the art of a real preacher.”

180. GOD WILL REWARD A HUNDREDFOLD

After the opening of the House of Oria, for several years there was a tradition to offer an excellent lunch to the poor of the town on the occasion of the feasts of St. Joseph, of St. Anthony of Padua and San Pasquale, to whom the convent was dedicated.

All the poor of Oria were invited, and anyone who showed up was admitted to the lunch, without any distinction. It happened that, besides those truly poor, simple needy and unemployed would pour in, so that the number of people ordinarily exceeded one hundred. Also because they knew that the feast would be great, and the setting would be of noble dining. The table was prepared in the best possible way. The best table cloths and silverware were used, also taken from the House of the Sisters. The lunch ordinarily consisted of appetizers, pasta, the first main course, the second main course with vegetables, cheese, several varieties of fruit, bread, dessert, two types of wine, and coffee. The food was given as much as each one wanted. Only the wine was controlled to avoid abuses.

The personnel of the Community served as waiters.

When he was in Oria, the Father was the animator of the feast. He wore an apron and would be busy trying to serve all.

His presence aroused an indescribable enthusiasm. During lunch, they exchanged toasts of all kinds which added to the fun because of their originality. There were songs in honor of the Saint, of Our Lord and the Most Holy Virgin.

At the end of the lunch, all the poor were given some money.

I remember a year in particular when on St. Joseph's feasts the Father was in Oria. Several days before the feast, with all due diligence, he took charge of the preparation of the meal for the poor. He wanted to check everything meticulously.

The Father said, "The first and most important preparation for the lunch for the poor is the living faith and ardent charity with which we do it. We have to accommodate and serve the poor better than if we welcomed great gentlemen, and serve them as if we welcomed and served the Lord Himself, personally and with His Holy Apostles. This should not be a mere pious imagination, but a reality because Our Lord Himself says: 'Whatever you do to the least of these out of love for Me, I hold it as done to Myself.' And again: 'I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink.'"

"As for the expense, do not worry. Those who give to the poor give to God, and God gives abundantly, both materially and spiritually. Our Lord himself said: 'If you give one, you will be given back a hundredfold and eternal life besides.'"

With this spirit of faith, he dedicated himself body and soul to prepare and serve lunch.

The Father told me to ask someone to prepare the opening remarks, a short message, something easy for the poor to understand. Brother Redento volunteered for this and scribbled with great care four small pages to read during lunch.

In speaking, and still more in writing, Brother Redento often used uncommon, sophisticated, high-sounding difficult words. It was not to show off because he was very simple and humble, but because he liked researching and choosing words.

When he finished writing the speech, Brother Redento wanted the Father to hear it, so he began to read with emphasis, "Among the many epithets that are given to the venerable white-

haired consort of the Virgin Mary and the apparent Father of the Nazarene Jesus, there is that suggestive of an administrator of the destitute.”

At these words, the Father interrupted him, saying, “Enough! Enough, son! Let's not waste more time and spoil this nice lunch. What kind of speech is this? When you speak or write, the most important thing is to let those to whom you speak or write understand what you mean.”

The participants to the feast that time were about 130. The lunch was a great success. The Father spoke to the people in his own way. They were enchanted.

At the end of the lunch, he told me to give them one Lira each. I ventured to say, “Isn't the lunch enough? What shall they do with the money? Maybe they will use it to get drunk.” The Father remarked, “See how you lack experience in life, and with the lives of the poor, whom every day lack everything. Do as I tell you, and don't worry about expenses! The Lord will give us a hundredfold of what we give them, ‘Give, and a hundredfold it will be given back to you.’”

The next day the Father went to the Sister's House of San Benedetto. When he came back, he called me and asked how much approximately we had spent the day of the lunch. After calculating I answered, about 15 Liras each, so the cost for 135 persons, was in all about 2,000 Liras. The Father then said, “See how generous the Divine Providence is with what we give to the poor! Yesterday, a money order of 225,000 (two-hundred-and-twenty-five-thousand) Liras arrived from America to our Anthonian Benefactors Office at San Benedetto! This is more than a hundredfold of what we spent yesterday for the poor!”

181. AN HONEST JOB IS ALWAYS AN HONOR

One day in Oria, while some Religious of the Community were busy unloading a cart of bricks, the Bishop, Monsignor Antonio Di Tommaso, came to visit the Father.

As soon as we saw him, we tried to stop our work to welcome and greet him. However, the Bishop said with a smile, “Don't stop, keep doing your job. I'm so pleased to find you at work. If I had a camera, I would have taken a picture while you were working.”

I said, “Yet, Your Excellency, when we saw you, some of us said that it is a shame to be seen in this situation by the Bishop.”

He answered, “You should never be ashamed of working. You must be ashamed of idleness instead. Working is always an honor.” While the Bishop was saying this, the Father who had been summoned arrived.

The next day, during the community spiritual reading, the Father took the cue from the words of the Bishop to talk about work. He began by telling us, “You heard what the Bishop told you yesterday and how happy he was to find you at work.” Later, he continued to talk to me about the importance and necessity of work, especially for an Institute of education and charity like ours. “For this reason, I often speak of it, and there is no set of rules in which I don't insist on this topic. I cannot tell you how much I enjoy that in our Institutes, we work really hard.”

“We have to work:

a) To fulfill the general law of labor. God said: ‘You shall eat your bread by the sweat of your brow’ which means, from the fruit of your labor. St. Paul says: ‘Let him not eat who does not work.’ Here, however, we must say that work is not only manual but any honest occupation: study, community chores, prayer, preaching, confession, assisting the boys, and any other task assigned by obedience.

b) We ought to work. This is required by the nature of our Institute, which is education and charities. There can be no real education where there is no love for work. Idleness is the mother of all vices. Aside from our duty for the sanctification of the little ones, we also have to educate them. As educators, we must also be the first to give them an example of working.

c) We must work to procure our livelihood and what is needed for the boys entrusted to us.

d) We have to work to atone for our failures. God imposed work as a punishment to Adam, and as a result of disobedience, we too perceive the penitential value of work.

e) We have to work for our sanctification, to gain merits for paradise.

f) We must work for the glory of God, for the good of souls and the growth of the Congregation.

g) Finally, we must remember that work is a key factor to maintain order, discipline, devotion, civility, and morality in our Institution. Our young men who love work will easily succeed and become very good Religious. The one who does not like work and is listless and lazy has little or no hope of success.

“Our Institute, since its foundation, has lived and developed not only because of the offerings of the benefactors but also through the fruits of manual labor, with activities like making paper flowers, tailoring, shoemaking, printing, mills, bakeries and pasta factories.”

“Manual labor also makes youngsters grow healthy and strong.”

182. A RECIPE FOR RASCALS: AFFECTION AND CATECHISM

In the early days of the House of Oria, we Seminarians were regularly the target of jokes and sneers of the boys of Oria whenever our paths crossed. They accompanied their mocking chorus with thumping shouts of “*Picuozzi! Picuozzi!*”¹⁶⁹ - a very derogatory term in the southern dialect.

It didn’t end there. We were often the target of their fruit-cores, stones, and rotten fruit. The Father was the only one spared.

One day, returning from the Sisters’ Institute, along the street some boys threw tomatoes at me. Among them, I saw one beautiful, pulpy, and big tomato rolling before me in the dust of the road. Without getting upset, I picked it up, and, after wiping off the dust, I put it in my pocket, saying to the boys, “Throw some more because they are good.”

¹⁶⁹ It is a word in Oria’s dialect for the friar who begs for alms from house to house. Here it is used in an offensive way like ‘scrounger’.

At those words, the boys stopped and said, “Poor starving *picuozzo*, do you like tomatoes?”

When I got home, the Community had already finished lunch, but the Father was still at the table. While slicing the tomato, I told him what happened, adding that the abuse and mistreatment of those brats were regular throughout the whole town.

The Father replied, “And how is it that they don’t say or do anything wrong to me? Maybe you irritate, react, or respond badly to them. Instead, you should keep quiet.”

“That can be, up to a certain point”, I said. “When the rascals throw stones, we cannot help but respond by throwing back stones, and when it happens that we can get hold of one of them, we give him the education that his parents did not give to him.”

The Father commented, “Bravo! Thus you want to educate the rascals by behaving like them? Therefore, it is you who allows them to misbehave by provoking them. You have to respond to the insults with acts of kindness. You have to get used to enduring them; you should approach them with good manners, or promise them some little present. Try properly to let them join the game of our boys. But most of all, with grace, try to instruct them in the Christian doctrine and to avail regularly of the holy Sacraments. If you do this, you will definitely see a big change. In a short time, you will have the children and youth of the town in your hands, and everyone will respect you.”

“Aside from spreading the prayer to obtain good priests, this is our mission: to sanctify and educate not only our interns but also adolescents and youth outside. We have to accustom and train our people in this mission from an early age.”

Later, while our boys were having recreation and were playing in the square in front of the Institute, some boys outside, from a distance, began to insult and throw stones. Our boys wanted to react the same way, but I prevented them. They continued to play.

Those rascals, seeing that no one reacted, gradually stopped the insults and lingered only to look at our boys playing. They were attracted by the acrobatics of Levi, who later became Father Redento, who, as an expert Neapolitan street urchin, was very good at tumbling.

One of the boys who wanted to see the game better came nearer little by little. I approached him, said a few kind words, and led him closer to our boys and invited him to join them. However, he was shy and refused.

His companions were watching from a distance, not daring to approach.

After recreation, we gave some beautiful holy pictures and tangerines to the little boy who had become our friend. We urged him to tell his companions that they could come too, that we would let them play with our boys.

The next day, a good group came and soon got on well with us, taking part in our recreation. At that time, we had unsophisticated games. We didn’t know any ball games, much less soccer.

The next day even more boys came, and so gradually their number increased to the point that there were not enough of us to assist them.

Levi especially reaped applauses. The boys were all cheering for him, as a playful acrobat and narrator of Neapolitan jokes.

After the game, we gradually introduced them to the catechism, to the preparation for First Holy Communion, to the frequency in the sacraments, to prayer.

After a few months, the youth of Oria seemed transformed. They were so attached to us that, wherever they would see us, even on the streets, they accompanied us with joy. However, in the opinion of some members of the local clergy, we trusted the boys too much, and that was tantamount to lack of decorum. Some even went to inform the Bishop. Msgr. Antonio Di Tommaso reacted strongly, saying, “The people of San Pasquale are doing a miraculous apostolate among the teenagers. I don’t know how to thank the Lord and the very dear Rogationists.”

He showed his gratitude on the occasion of the feast of St. Anthony, when, together with the Father, we went to greet him on his name day.¹⁷⁰

The Bishop could not find words to praise the catechetical work that we had done with the boys of the town. He said, “You are healing the youth of Oria. People speak well of this, even important people who are not so fervent in their Christian life.”

Back at the Institute, the Father referred to all the gratitude and the pleasure of the Bishop for the good that was done and encouraged us to continue and do our best.

However, seemingly unbelievable, this ideal situation was short-lived because animated by an indiscreet zeal, we wanted to bring the activity to a level of perfection that the premises, personnel, and resources could not support. We started to feel hopeless and became discouraged. Little by little, the beautiful activity faded away.

Unfortunately, what is often said came true, “The best is the enemy of the good.”

183. THE GOODS OF THE CONGREGATION BELONG TO THE PROVIDENCE

When we went to Rome with the Father for the purchase of the House on Circonvallazione Appia Street, we were hosted by the Dominican Sisters on ‘Salita del Grillo’ Street.

The Father had very good relations with those Sisters, especially because of the many spiritual and temporal aids which, in his time, he had given to Mother Lalia, their Foundress.¹⁷¹ So he was aware of the situation and life of their Institute.

¹⁷⁰ At that time, Catholics used to be named after Saints. Usually, the feast day of the Saint whose name a person takes at Baptism (thus, *name day*), was also celebrated as the feast for the person named after the Saint. The *name day* is regarded as more important than the birthday.

¹⁷¹ Venerable Mother Antonia Maria Lalia (1839-1914), born in Misilmeri (Palermo), was the Foundress of the Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of San Sisto Vecchio, in Rome. She was a great person, capable of indescribable heroism and suffering. The Father knew, appreciated, and helped the Work of Mo. Lalia. In the *Father’s Letters* (Vol. I, p. 487, Vol. II, p. 41ff), we can read some correspondence and useful information. The cause of her beatification was introduced in Rome. In 2015, Pope Francis declared she lived with heroic virtues.

While we were their guests, the Superior of that House received the news of the death of her sister; I think her name was Sister Tommasina, who was the Superior of the Dominican Sisters in Ceglie Messapico.

The Superior communicated the news to the Father, who replied, “I am very sorry, she was a great Religious, so exemplary and attached to the Congregation and the holy Foundress, and she suffered much. I will pray for her, and tomorrow morning, I will offer the Mass for her soul. Do you know if she had already settled the matters concerning the properties of the Congregation? That is, did she make a valid will?”

The Congregation was not constituted into a legal entity; therefore, it could not possess. Consequently, the ownership of the goods of the Institute had to be assigned to individuals. This was dangerous because if in due course, the owners would not make a legitimate will, the Congregation could lose those properties because everything would automatically be left to the natural heirs.

The Superior replied to the question of the Father with indifference, “I don’t know very Reverend Father. I am not interested in these things.”

The Father immediately reacted, “You don’t care? Don’t you care about the properties of your Congregation? Don’t you know that the goods of the Institute, are all goods of the Divine Providence, entrusted to the Congregation, so that its members may administer them, keeping them and using them according to the norms of the Canon Law and its Constitutions? Therefore, how can a Sister, and more so a Superior, say that she is not interested in the assets of the Institute? Don’t you know that if you don’t make a will in due time, the Congregation loses everything? I am sorry if I speak to you like this, but I do it for your own good and the Congregation, and all the more because you are the Superior and you have the duty to know these things and to teach them to the Religious of the House.”

When the Superior left, the Father continued to me, “Out of ignorance, some religious men and women are not interested in the properties of their respective Institute as a spirit of poverty. This is a serious mistake because the properties of the Institute are to be seen as something that belongs to God, and thus are to be kept and used as sacred items.”

“When it comes to personal use of goods, we have to be simple in clothing, in spending for one’s comfort, distancing oneself from material things and be ready to leave them when the superiors dispose of them. Likewise, we must always be ready to change House, office, everything. But at the same time, we must value and guard those goods as if they were one’s property, but in fact, they belong to God.”

“For our Institute, it is easier to recognize that all its goods are properties of the Divine Providence, who sends them to us like the manna from heaven he sent to the Israelites. Everything is the fruit of the Providence, who helps us through our benefactors with the graces they received or will receive through the intercession of St. Anthony.”

“Superiors are the main and direct administrators of these goods of the Congregation, or rather of the Divine Providence. They must guard and administer them as is fitting, that is,

according to the sacred canons and our Constitutions but all the confreres have the practical obligation to value and use them as such.”

It is truly very important to know and remember all these things in religious life. We have to start instructing our Religious regarding these issues according to their abilities, from the time of Postulancy.”

184. TOO SMALL FOR ST. ANTHONY

One day I saw the Father and Father Palma, standing in the courtyard of Oria, talking and looking with some interest at the wall above the door that leads to the main stairway of the House. Father Palma called me and said, “Listen to what the Father is saying. He would like to place a statue of St. Anthony over the door that leads to the staircase.”

The Father added, “Yes! That seems the best place where the statue will be visible even by those who enter the House. By this time the Divine Providence seems to have chosen this great Wonder-Worker as the heavenly Provider of our Institutes. In a way, our Institution owes its material and spiritual existence to the help of this glorious Saint. To him our Orphanages are dedicated, they are named Anthonian Orphanages after him, and under his name, they are now known all over the world because the Providence comes to us from every part of the world.”

“The devotion to this great Wonder-Worker shall always be alive in our Institutes. We have to cultivate it and show it significantly with external signs, such as celebrations, feasts, processions, Holy Masses, and by exposing the sacred image which should always be present in our Houses for veneration.”

When the Father had finished speaking, I blurted, “Frankly it seems that it is not worth putting a statue up there because it cannot be bigger than one meter. The niche cannot be higher than that. The statue should at least be of the regular height, about 1.7 meters.”

The Father immediately interrupted, “Don’t you know that *‘the best is the enemy of the good’*? According to you, since we cannot put a life-size statue, it is better not to put it at all? Bravo! What a great argument!” Turning to Father Palma, he said, “Father Palma, don’t pay attention to him. Carve out the niche as best as you can and order a statue that fits in. When everything is ready, let me know, so that, the Lord willing, I want to be present and have a nice feast, to raise good sentiments in the Community. The moment when we expose a sacred image for veneration is a significant event. People have big celebrations for the inauguration of a monument in honor of a worthy person, shall we not do the same when we expose the image of a saintly man or woman, who was able to imitate Jesus Christ so well and became deserving among humankind?”

After a few months, we informed the Father that everything was ready and asked him to set a date for the simple feast.

He arrived the night before the scheduled date. He immediately checked the statue and the niche, and congratulated us, “Very good! It is truly fitting! The statue is not as small, as Brother Carmelo implied.”

After saying this, he went to the refectory for dinner. Father Palma followed him, saying, “Father, it would truly be great if, for this occasion, we could sing a new song to St. Anthony.” “Certainly!” replied the Father. “But there is no more time.”

Father Palma said, “If you write the verses, I will take care of adjusting them to another song. In fact, I have one ready. If you want, I will let you listen to it, so that you can adjust the words to the music. It would be enough to have a single stanza in the meantime for practice. The other verses could be done later.

While eating, in the refectory, with a pencil, the Father wrote the first stanza of the hymn:

*O Anthony, we address
Our ardent love to you
Because a heavenly Angel
You are for all peoples.*

He handed the text immediately to Father Palma for the singing practice. Later, that same evening, he gave six more stanzas. The next morning the Father blessed the statue, which, with prayers, songs, and shouts of ‘Long live the Saint’, was carried in procession throughout the House and the garden paths.

At the end, when the statue was placed in the niche, the Father said vibrant words, urging all to a heartfelt devotion to St. Anthony, and suggesting to greet him with the recitation of the “Glory to the Father...” every time we passed in front of the image. He concluded by recalling that exposing sacred images, which appeals to the senses, is intended to enkindle one’s devotion.

185. IT IS DIFFICULT TO DISCERN TRUE SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA

Once I was at the Sisters’ House in Trani to meet the Father and Father Palma, who grabbed the opportunity to urge me to go to Corato to visit Luisa Piccarreta¹⁷², the woman believed to be adorned with particular virtues and with extraordinary and supernatural gifts, such as ecstasies and revelations. Father Palma was enthusiastic about her, and the Father was also impressed having spoken several times to me about her. However, I was not only indifferent but skeptical.

¹⁷² Servant of God Luisa Piccarreta (1865-1947), a Tertiary of the Dominican Order, was born and died in Corato, Bari, Italy. She enjoyed a wide reputation for mystical phenomena and revelations at the time of the Father. Among other works, she wrote, “*The Hours of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

Father Hannibal was her extraordinary confessor from 1910 to 1927. A rich correspondence was exchanged between the two, the last one dated May 5, 1927, 26 days before the death of Father Hannibal (cf. *The Father’s Letters*). In 1926, the Archbishop of Trani appointed the Father as the Examiner of the writings of the mystic of Corato and ecclesiastical Censor for their publication.

In 2006, the diocesan process of her cause for canonization was concluded and submitted to the Holy See.

Father Palma insisted that it was enough to talk a while with her to be convinced of the truth. He not only advised me but was practically forcing me to go and meet her.

Despite his insistence, I definitely said no because I was not interested in such a phenomenon.

I admitted that certain facts might be true because the Lord gives His gifts to whom He wills. But because of my ignorance, I did not believe them and considered them as fruits of fantasy or hysteria.

This was my belief and judgment whenever I spoke about Luisa Piccarreta and similar persons. So to prevent mistakes, I tried to avoid occasions to know and to talk about these issues.

Father Palma tried very hard to convince me about the extraordinary and supernatural gifts of the pious woman. To persuade me to visit her, he would speak of the esteem that the Father had for her, and that he was printing her writings on the *Divine Will*. He added, “You know that the Father is an expert about revelations and how rigorous he is in judging them.”

I replied, “The Father is the Father! He knows how to distinguish supernatural gifts from natural infirmities¹⁷³ and how to draw spiritual benefit for his soul. It is quite the opposite with me.”

Father Palma did not give up. One day, in my presence, he said to the Father that he had not been able to convince me to visit Luisa Piccarreta because of my skepticism regarding private revelations and that it had been useless to remind me about the esteem that the Father himself had for her.

The Father replied, “Father Palma, leave him alone. Don’t insist! He says that he doesn’t feel and doesn’t understand these things because he has no preparation. He is right in this! The understanding of private revelations requires much study and much specific training. It is a complicated field. Often it happens that certain effects that seem extraordinary, and therefore supernatural, are effects of mental and physical illness. Indeed, it may happen that in the same person, the natural and supernatural effects may be found together. It requires careful preparation to discern this, and it is dangerous. It has happened that even eminent people have made mistakes about this, which harmed them and others.”

“Therefore, it is not advisable for those who are not interested, much less not prepared to get involved in this matter. I would also say that in these cases, a kind of specific vocation from the Lord is necessary. It is good that our Religious do not take this path because they may compromise themselves.”

Turning to me, he said, “However, while you are right in saying that on the one hand, you are not an expert and don’t know how to discern these phenomena; on the other hand, you claim that they are almost all phenomena of hysteria and mental illness. You exaggerate! Many are really gifts of God and true revelations. However, even if the Church approves them, they always

¹⁷³ At the age of 17, Luisa Piccarreta is believed to have experienced a mystical ecstasy, after which she remained bedridden for 64 years until her death, not eating anything except the daily Holy Communion.

remain private phenomena and require nothing more than mere human faith, according to one's prudence."

"Therefore, when I am given a chance to encounter persons like Luisa Piccarreta who is said to enjoy extraordinary and supernatural gifts, it doesn't mean that I believe everything that they say. Even in the things that I believe in, I always try to be guided by the prudence required by the Holy Church."

"I associate with these people, to get some profit for my soul because they ordinarily have real and sound personal virtues. I don't mean that our Religious ought to do the same. This is not like the spirit of the Congregation that we must all try to assimilate. These are strictly personal ways of seeing and judging."

Despite all this, however, on another occasion, with the excuse of letting me see the progress of the work at the Sisters' House in Corato, without letting me know, Father Palma led me to the apartment of Luisa Piccarreta, and with an excuse, he left me alone.

The simple woman was very courteous and did not exude the aura of an exceptional religious woman. She was very humble and ordinary and did not mention at all any spiritual topics. Of course, I was careful not to provoke a similar conversation. After a few words, I left.

Father Palma immediately said to me, "Why did you come out so soon? What impression did you get?"

I answered, "None. She is a good woman. A good woman like many other good women." Father Palma countered, "How did you expect to find her, in a corner with lighted candles? You are so skeptical, that even if she had been in ecstasy like St. Joseph of Cupertino, you would have said that it was a natural phenomenon. Such is your stubbornness!"

I replied, "Don't you remember what the Father said recently about this some time ago in Trani? He said to leave me alone and do not insist!"

Later, having an opportunity to talk with the Father, I told him what Father Palma had done to make me speak to Luisa Piccarreta. The Father replied, "I am sure Father Palma did it for your good. According to him, he would like to straighten out your ideas. But it does no good! I have to tell him. I also told the Sisters not to read some books about ecstasies, revelations, and those of St. Bridget and Gemma Galgani¹⁷⁴ because they can be used to swell their imagination and to do more harm than good."

186. THE ASPIRANT WAS TOLD TO HATE HIS PARENTS!

In 1908, before the earthquake, returning from Apulia where he had been preaching, the Father brought a boy from Grottaglie to Avignone Houses. The youngster, Nisi, was about 12 years old and desired to enter.

¹⁷⁴ Both were mystic Saints who had ecstatic unions with Lord and received private revelations. However, Gemma Galgani, to whom the Father was greatly devoted, was not yet a Saint at his time. She was beatified in 1933 and canonized in 1940.

I remember that he was so cheerful and happy to see so many new things in the city. After a few days, however, he began to miss his home and his family; homesickness, unfortunately, was growing.

One day, when in the courtyard, he did not join the games, and he was crying. The good, dear, devotee of St. Joseph (too much, to be frank!) and simpleton Brother Placido was temporarily replacing Brother Francesco Maria of the Child Jesus, who was sick. Brother Placido tried to comfort the homesick boy.

He brought the boy in front of a statue of St. Joseph, in a small kiosk in the courtyard, and said to him, "Listen, my son, don't cry anymore. Let us say a prayer to the Saint so that he may help you forget your village and your family, and hate them instead."

The boy reacted angrily, shouting, "No! No! I can never forget them! And I will never hate my father, my mother, my brothers, and sisters."

And Brother Placido, "Son, if you don't hate your relatives who are your enemies, you cannot become a Religious. Our Lord says it."

Those of us who were present laughed heartily. However, Salvatore Drago, who later became Brother Mariano, said to the boy, "Don't listen to Brother Placido. It is not true that you have to hate your relatives."

Angrily, Brother Placido said to Salvatore, "Shut up, you are rude! You don't understand anything; mind your own business and go away! It is not I saying this, but Our Lord, and I will show you that it is true."

He went to get the Bible and let someone read St. Luke's words, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers, and sisters - yes, even their own life - such a person cannot be my disciple." Then, he read also in St. Matthew the words of Our Lord, "One's enemies will be those of his household."

"See how what I said is true?"

However, more inconsolable than ever, the boy countered logically, "Given that things are like this, I still want to return immediately to my parents. I cannot hate my father, my mother, my brothers, and sisters. As to the wife and children, since I don't have any, all right, I can hate them. As for hating my soul, I will not do it. The priest who brought me here told me that I have to love my soul, and I have to become holy. This is why I came here. How can my parents be my enemies when they love me so much? When I left to come here, everyone was crying. No! I will not stay here anymore. I want to go home immediately."

As soon as he saw the Father, he went to him crying; he told him that he absolutely wanted to go back to Grottaglie because he could not and did not want to hate his relatives.

Puzzled, the Father replied, "I don't understand. What do you mean, son? Who told you these things?"

"The *picuozzo* told me", the boy replied.

The Father continued, “What does *picuozzo*¹⁷⁵ mean?”

“That kind of friar with the tobacco-colored robe who is with us. He let me read the words in the Gospel.”

The Father realized that it was Brother Placido. He patiently explained the true meaning of the words to the boy. He said that parents are not to be hated, but, being in the Institute, you must love more than when you are with your family. He comforted him. Then he gave the boy some chocolates and sent him back to us.

Consoled, the boy returned, and upon arriving, he said, “Brother Salvatore was right in saying that what Brother Placido said was not true. The Father told me that being here, the parents not only are not to be hated but to be loved more.”

The same day the Father took the opportunity during the spiritual reading to explain the true meaning of the words of the Gospel.

Brother Placido got a deserved scolding.

187. “DO YOU STILL KEEP THIS BOY IN THE SEMINARY?”

In the House of Oria, on the Ember and Rogation days, we would have the procession in the premises of the House and along the pathways of the garden. We prayed and recited the prescribed litanies.

When the Father was around, he always joined, and without fail, he would give an exhortation for the occasion, which, at times, became real sermons, which was appreciated and aroused enthusiasm.

During the procession, the Father saw an Aspirant who not only was not praying but was even joking and teasing his companions, despite being repeatedly corrected by the overseer.

After the procession, the Father asked me about that boy. When he heard that he was an Aspirant, he exclaimed, “What kind of Seminarian is this! He was not responding to the prayers, and he was joking and teasing his companions during the procession! Why do you keep him? How is his behavior?”

“There is a lot to be desired about his piety, as well as his conduct and studies,” I answered.

“And you still keep him? Why didn’t you dismiss him? What are you waiting for, that he may influence the other Seminarists?”

I added, “To tell you the truth, Father I have written twice to the family to come and fetch him, but they haven’t answered. We also wrote to the parish priest of St. Vito dei Normanni, the place of the boy, who presented him to us, and even he has not replied. This priest is so eager and zealous for vocations. He has sent us several boys, but we realize that he does not select. He

¹⁷⁵ Cf. the footnote in Chapter 182.

accepts anyone.¹⁷⁶ It's enough for a boy to say that he wants to come to us, that the parish priest considers him suited, without taking into account the right intention, the conduct, the physical, moral, religious, and intellectual requirements." The Father replied, "And what about you? You just follow passively? Do you lend yourself to this? As you thank him for his zeal, with kindness, you have to make it clear to him that this kind of zeal is indiscreet. In doing so, he does not favor vocations nor the Institute; indeed, he severely damages both of them."

"It might be good to visit him. Or you can invite him here to Oria to let him understand these things. Let him know the clear distinction between the Seminary and the Orphanage. Many people believe that it is the same thing, perhaps because we keep the two categories of boys [= Orphans and Seminarians] together in the same House."

"Meanwhile, this boy does not deserve any trust and is a bad example to the others by his behavior. Since you have already written to the parish priest and his parents, you can accompany him to San Vito. Don't waste any more time."

"It is of paramount importance to keep the environment of a community. Even just one or two unfit subjects can spoil everything."

"You have to know the Seminarians by reflecting and thinking, and, more than anything else, by praying hard to the Lord. Once this is done, we should be strict. It is a lesser evil for the Institute to dismiss a good vocation, rather than keep a false one who would be a bad example. This problem should shake those in charge of the formation and selection for it is a very serious letting someone lose his vocation because of one's fault, and it is just as grave for the Institute to keep a person who does not have a vocation. This would be detrimental to the vocation and the spirit of the others."

188. PRAISING A TRUE DAUGHTER OF DIVINE ZEAL

The Superior of the House of San Pier Niceto, Sister Ma. Paraclata Antonucci, was very enthusiastic in getting vocations for us before and after the death of the Father. This Daughter of Divine Zeal worked in a wide range, reaching beyond San Pier Niceto and also in the neighboring towns, either directly or through cooperators. The vocations of Father Camillo Ruggeri, Father Giuseppe Pitrone, and Brother Giuseppe Bongiovanni are attributed to her careful and fervent pastoral care. The House of Oria could only bless this Sister and be grateful to her.

She was commendable not only for her zeal but also for her spirit, for her consistency, for her courage and patience. She was never resentful, nor did she complain when, in the screening process, we dismissed some of the boys. From these events, she seized the opportunity to work with more commitment.

¹⁷⁶ The original text uses the Latin expression "oves et boves", meaning literally "sheep and cattle".

Consequently, I wanted to thank her personally for her tenacious dedication. The favorable occasion came when the Father called me to Messina, after my burnout caused by a sudden fear.¹⁷⁷

When I arrived in Messina, the Father said to me, “For one month, until you recover your health properly, you shall not return to Apulia. You'll be in Messina, or Galati with your family, or Taormina, or San Pier Niceto, wherever you prefer. In fact, in a few days, I have to go to San Pier Niceto. If you want, come with me. It might be good for you to become distracted for a while.”

There was no better opportunity, so I went. I remained there for two days with the Father. However, I could not speak with the Superior because she was always busy with the Father. However, I had time to hear from the interns and the people outside, the praises for the Mother Superior, for her practice of the holy virtues, her religious spirit, and the apostolate that she carried out in the Institute and the town.

Finally, while the Father was busy writing, I managed to have a conversation with the Mother Superior. I thanked her for the vocations and asked pardon for those who were dismissed because they were not suitable.

Mother Paracleta kindly replied, “No need to thank me because I am only doing my duty. In fact, I don't know how to thank those who allow me to do some good for the male Congregation, which is as close to my heart as that of the Sisters. I wanted very much to become a priest and especially a Rogationist priest, to spread the divine Rogate more effectively and become more useful for charity. But since I cannot, I compensate with prayer and work, so that those who can, may become priests. Let priests do what I myself cannot do. I hope to have a little merit for all the good that they will do.”

“Therefore, it is I who must thank you. In the same way, I have to apologize for the trouble I caused because of my inexperience, by sending boys not suitable for religious life. However, this does not happen with my will and intention. At first glance, they seem good candidates. I assure you that when I see some of the boys coming back, on the one hand, I am displeased, but on the other, I am delighted because I understand that you make proper and fair selections.”

“Obviously, I also look after our Sisters, and I feel Daughter of Divine Zeal many times over in the measure in which I obtain vocations. This is my joy! This is the best service that I can offer my beloved Congregation.”

When I met the Father, I told him about the excellent impression I had of the Superior, of the enthusiasm that she expressed for the two Congregations, especially in providing vocations for them, and how often she sent them to Oria.

¹⁷⁷ Father Carmelo alludes to the episode of the cat, which caused him burnout and psychological trauma, as described in Chapter 160.

The Father replied, “The Rogationists should do the same for the Daughters of Divine Zeal: provide as many vocations as possible because their purpose and their spirit is the same as if the two Institutes were one.”

“This Sister is a true Daughter of Divine Zeal! She has given herself totally to God and the neighbor for His sake. She follows the spirit and purpose of our Institute perfectly. She has given to the Institute all the goods of her family, which was quite large. She has given herself body and soul to the Congregation; she nurtures our spirit and strives to spread it, and she does a praiseworthy apostolate in the town where all appreciate her, without neglecting her duties as a Religious and as Superior of the House. She has a harmonious fervor because she deals with the external apostolate, without neglecting the rest. She is not like others, who lock themselves inside their Houses to take care only of the internal things, or, conversely, deal only with external matters, neglecting their religious duties and those of the House. This is indiscreet zeal. As I said, Mother Paracleta is very balanced.”

I remember that when she had a leg amputated in Messina because of gangrene, suffering excruciating pain, she said, “I am praying to the Lord to give me the grace to be able to accept the pain for the greater good of our two Congregations. I never felt so Daughter of Divine Zeal, as in this state of no longer being able to make myself useful to the Work, I offer my sufferings to the Lord, so that the Work may always be enriched with excellent vocations, religious spirit and that mutual brotherly love may always be kept alive.”

189. THE FATHER’S BRILLIANT PREACHING

One year, the preacher for the thirteen-day novena¹⁷⁸ to St. Anthony in Oria could not come. After much researching for a replacement, we found the Superior of the Jesuits of Taranto, who accepted but could only come to the Triduum and give the solemn sermon on the day of the Feast.

Luckily that year the Father was in Oria. He said, “Since I am here, I will give a short reflection every evening during the other days of the preparation so that the tradition is not broken.”

The first evening, the faithful were not that many. In the beginning, the Father announced that he would say a few words, but the sermon lasted about forty-five minutes, and he did the same on the other evenings. The sermons were so beautiful that people did not notice the time.

The talk was clear and attractive. With devout and poetic grace, he would begin by narrating the life of St. Anthony, followed by a moral application, and then give a few ideas about the devotion to the Saint in our Orphanages, mentioning some special graces obtained by the prayers of the Orphans, and finally concluding with a warm prayer to the Saint.

The faithful attending the first evening affected the whole town with their enthusiasm, so the second evening the Church was full, and on the third, the Church overflowed with people who had to stay outside by the door. Never had there been such a crowd that big in Oria, especially of

¹⁷⁸ Cf. the footnote in Chapter 133.

men, including the non-practicing. There was a continuous flow for confessions. Some could no longer remember the last time they had been to confession.

We had to resort to reinforcements, calling the Capuchins urgently from Francavilla and the Passionists from Manduria. One of these confessors exclaimed, “This year, with the preaching of Canon Di Francia we are having the effect of a mission!”¹⁷⁹

So the good Jesuit had a difficult Triduum! Though he was a good preacher, he unwillingly provoked a general discontent. Some wanted to make a public demonstration to force the Father to resume his preaching.

Brother Redento hinted this to the Father, who reacted immediately, saying, “I will never let that happen.” He immediately called some of the most fervent protesters and rebuked them vigorously.

During the thirteen days’ preparation, there were already many Communion, but on the day of the Feast, it was a continuous distribution from early morning until beyond noon.¹⁸⁰

On St. Anthony’s Feast, the traditional lunch for the poor was meticulously prepared. The Father roamed among the guests, in whom he saw the face of Christ.

Here we need a note. The name of the Bishop of Oria, Msgr. Di Tommaso was Antonio, and on the day of his feast, he would send goods and food for a hearty lunch for the Communities of the Father and the Sisters. That year he sent more than double, saying that once in a while he also intended to contribute for the lunch for the poor.

The lunch was prepared, as we mentioned, with meticulous care and solemnity. Our Religious were the waiters. The Father, with his small apron, did his best to manage and attend to the guests, keeping them cheerful.

During the lunch, the poor cheered, prayed, and sang. The Father also told everyone about the generosity of the Bishop, who wanted so kindly to contribute to the lunch. The Father used this opportunity to say that we all had an obligation to pray for the Bishop and respect him because Bishops are the successors of the Apostles, and as such, we must esteem and revere them.

Then, he spoke of the devotion to St. Anthony in a unique way because what we do for the needy, is done through the Providence that this great Saint sends us. “The true devotion to St. Anthony”, he said, “is to sin no more, to live a Christian life, to attend Holy Mass on Sunday and Holy days, to pray and to receive the sacraments.”

¹⁷⁹ This is also known as “popular missions” or “parochial missions”. Differentiated from “mission ad gentes” which is addressed to non-believers, the popular missions are primarily intended for faithful Catholics, especially in the countryside and far-flung areas, to instruct them fully in the truths of the religion, convert sinners, arouse the indifferent, and lift the good to a still higher plane of spiritual effort. Such missions usually consist of a systematic course of preaching, instruction, and the Sacraments, extending over several days, performed by authorized missionaries.

¹⁸⁰ Before the liturgical renewal of the Vatican Council II, Communion was easily distributed outside the Eucharistic celebration, generally in the morning because it required fasting beginning from the previous midnight.

The confessors and the preacher who attended the lunch were touched by how the Father acted with the spirit of faith and love.

The Jesuit said, “I had heard so much from some of my confreres about the heroic virtue of Canon Di Francia, but if one does not see him personally, he cannot believe. This man is truly one of those great saints of charity that occasionally brighten up the Church of God.”

190. ‘TRIPOD’ IS THE HORSE SUITED FOR US

In Oria, there were always some animals available for the convenience and practical needs of the House. It did not matter if they were mules, horses, or donkeys.

In the early years, there was a horse that was worn out by the years of labor and had become incapacitated. We were forced to buy another. The occasion came when a rich man, a good friend of Father Palma and a benefactor of the Institute, decided to sell his mare because by then he had a car.

It was indeed a nice mare, one of those rarely seen around. The master was so fond of her; he felt terrible about selling her.

Learning that Father Palma was looking for a good horse, he offered his mare at a ridiculously low price, glad that the animal would be in good hands, and happy to do an act of charity for the Orphanage.

Father Palma willingly bought the mare, knowing he had a good deal. At that price, he could hardly have bought a wretched nag.

All who looked at the horse with admiration, and she was very powerful. The carriage and cart were like straws for her, and she could start to trot immediately.

When the Father came to Oria, he saw her and asked who owned the beautiful mare?

Upon hearing that it was ours and that it had been bought recently, amazed and almost angry, he said, “This is not proper for us, it is not befitting for our Institute. It is for rich persons.” Then he called me and said, “I don’t know how you can make this mistake to buy an animal like this! I wonder how much it cost and what impression it gives in town! Farewell, holy poverty! This is a scandal. What will they say in Oria? Tell me how much it costs?”

I answered, “I really don’t know the exact amount. Father Palma bought it. I just know that it was practically donated.”

“Blessed Father Palma! When he comes back, we have to tell him that this mare is to be sold, and we have to buy another one less showy and more suitable for us.”

When Father Palma returned, the Father approached him and said thoughtfully, “It makes me wonder how you, who has so much common sense, make such a mistake as to buy a luxury mare fit only for wealthy people. We cannot keep it. You have to sell it and buy another animal suitable for us who have taken a vow of poverty. This is a contempt of the Divine Providence, a scandal for the town and our communities.”

Father Palma replied, “Father, you are probably right, it means that I judged things wrong, but the matter was like this.” And he explained everything.

The Father continued, “Father Palma, you teach me that poverty does not always get along with the economy. Poverty is to be also seen in comparison to how others may see it. At times it may even happen that we have to sacrifice the economy for poverty. As in this case. People don’t know how much was spent on buying this mare, but considering how much the animal is worth, according to them, it is a luxury.”

“To avoid scandal, we must sell it. With the proceeds, perhaps we can even buy two more suited to the poverty of our Institute.”

Father Palma resumed, “The reason why the owner of the mare sold her to us at a giveaway amount, was because he knew that the animal would be in good hands. He has asked us to treat him very well. He was very fond of this animal that he has come several times to see her. If we sell her, he will definitely be hurt, thinking I had deceived him. They are laypeople and don’t understand religious principles. I will try to persuade him; otherwise, we will return the mare to him, and he will return the money that I paid him. I cannot do more than this.”

The Father added, “It’s all right. It is a good example of poverty that we give to our people and those outside. As long as we observe holy poverty in our Institute, surely the Lord will bless it and will make it prosper. However, if we fail in this beautiful virtue, we will perish as so many other Institutions have perished.”

The day after the Father left and Father Palma set out to persuade the owner of the mare to let us sell her or to take her back.

However, things went somewhat differently. One day, while Brother Giuseppe was going with the fully loaded mare to San Benedetto, on the steep slope of a hill, she slid on the pavement and fell in such a way that the shafts of the cart broke. The cart toppled against the corner of the wall and fell on top of the mare. The poor animal was crushed and died.

Brother Giuseppe, who was driving, was miraculously alive but severely wounded. News of the accident spread throughout the town.

Miss Martinelli, a benefactor of the Institute, learned about the event and said to Father Palma that she was willing to give him a horse which was in her barn, but it was lame because of a fall.

After taking a look, Father Palma accepted it and said to himself: “This is better than nothing, and I am sure that the Father will be pleased because it is truly suitable for our Institute.”

When the Father learned about the accident, he said, “It means that the Providence did not want this scandal and has allowed this. I am very sorry for the Brother who was hurt.”

Meanwhile, it happened that when the Father had to leave, Father Palma prepared to accompany him to the train station with the horse that we had teasingly named *Tripod* (=Three-feet).

When the Father saw the poor horse, he joyfully exclaimed, “This is really the one for us. With this majestic horse, we will make a good impression wherever we go.”

The horse did not want to move, so Father Palma gave him two intense lashes. After a few steps, the horse stopped again, and the religious coachman gave it more lashes to make it go. After a short while, it happened again. Finally, the Father asked Father Palma to be more humane.

“We have to be compassionate with animals. They feel the beating like us! Please don’t do it to this poor animal, Father Palma. Don’t you see that it is lame? What can you do?”

Meanwhile, *Tripod*, who seemed to understand that he had a defender, took courage to move and stop every four steps. The Father said to Father Palma, “Why does it stop? Maybe because it is lame, and it cannot do it?”

Father Palma said, “No, Father, it stops because it is pampered, I know it.”

Father Palma put the whip down and, with folded arms, tried to get the horse to move with his voice. In vain. The beast remained rooted to the pavement.

At one point, the Father said, “I am going to miss the train. I will have to walk.”

Father Palma replied, “No, Father, if you let me do it my way, I am sure that the horse will not stop anymore, and I will show you how it trots.”

The Father replied, “Do whatever you have to do; just don’t let me miss the train.”

Father Palma went down from the cart and gave the horse four blows with a cudgel in the proper place. The horse jumped and without stopping anymore, galloped lightly until the train station.

The moral is easy, and the Father did not miss it. He observed, “With animals, it is sometimes necessary to hit them to keep them moving.”

191. VOCATIONS COME FROM PRAYER

The last time that the Father stayed in Oria, seeing a large number of Seminarians, he was delighted, and said, “We have to thank the Divine Superiors for this great grace that they grant to the Congregation. This is an inestimable grace because the life and the progress of the Institute are contained in the fervor of the love of God and neighbor, and the number and quality of its members. This should be our greatest interest, preferable to any other: to obtain, nurture, guard and form in a holy way sound vocations, according to the spirit and the religious goals of our Institute.”

“The first thing that we have to do to obtain good vocations is to pray without ceasing to the Most Holy Heart of Jesus to send them to us. Vocations are the fruit of prayer. To our prayer, we must add our cooperation. It is important to make the Work known, its religious and charitable goals, which are certainly the best that anyone could wish for. If the Work is not known, certainly vocations won’t come because they are not directed to it. Our Institute does not yet

have a reputation, like many others, which are famous everywhere. It is mainly known by the name of *Anthonian Orphanage*.”

“To have vocations, however, we must make it known preferably as a religious Congregation. For this, we have to advertise it through words, printed materials, and works. We have to do much advertising through the booklet *The Miraculous Secret* where, though briefly, the concept of the double finality¹⁸¹ of the Institute is clearly and distinctly described. But most of all, the goodness of its members’ lives, the faithful observance of religious life, and the good example are necessary to attract vocations to the Institute. The latter is the most powerful magnet to obtain vocations from the Lord and to attract them to our Congregation.”

“However, the desire and zeal to have many vocations should not be a pretext for easily accepting and admitting young persons who do not have the indispensable requirements for religious life. It could do serious damage to vocations because there would be a danger of losing genuine ones.”

“But it is not enough to acquire vocations. They have to be properly safeguarded and formed. Failing to do this would be more dangerous than not looking for them because, through our fault, we have ruined one’s vocation to which is the most precious gift that God can give to man. We must, therefore, guard those who are called as the apple of our eyes, as the life of the Congregation.”

“The first thing that we have to do is to nourish vocation so that it may live and grow in perfection. This is achieved mainly by supernatural means, namely: constant prayer, sacraments, and genuine piety, by reading good books, by practicing the holy virtues, and by a very tender devotion to the Most Holy Virgin Mary. Without this environment, vocations will surely get lost.”

“Through these supernatural means, we must add the natural ones to get and develop the holy vocation.”

“As much as possible, let the Aspirants learn the spirit and goals of the Congregation, so that they see how precious it is, love the life of the Institute and live it. We have to train them in this from their early youth, according to their abilities. Good examples are needed to achieve this. Education persuades, but example moves. It is written about Our Lord that first He did, and then He taught.”

“Discipline is vital. Discipline creates proper order, and its regularity, according to the words of St. Augustine, produces peace in the heart and in the Community. A sound discipline is essential especially for Aspirants, as the Holy Spirit says: ‘The young man who has started walking on his way, will not forget it even when he gets old.’”

“To maintain good discipline requires constant and continuous vigilance, according to the Preventive System which lets the pupil know what is good and lovingly leads him to achieve it. A police-style or only external supervision would be against the formation. Formation aims at bending one’s will in front of the truth.”

¹⁸¹ Referring to the prayer for vocations on the one hand, and the apostolate of charity on the other.

“For the preservation and proper development of any vocation, it is necessary also to maintain a healthy environment conducive to religious life. For this reason, we shall not admit to the Seminary candidates who do not have, as I said, at least the essential requirements for admission. In the same way, in due course, those unpromising are to be dismissed, and even more so, those who give bad examples.”

“For this reason, it is necessary to pray to the Divine Superiors both for the admission and for the selection. Those assigned to formation need the light of God’s grace to know how to handle such a delicate matter.”

“One of the preliminary precautions is knowledge regarding the persons introducing the Aspirant. This means those who give information for the entrance of a Seminarian. There are those who, without knowing the requirements, present a boy and give positive information out of charity, especially to us who also run the Orphanage.”

I added, “It is really like that. The parish priests of San Vito dei Normanni and those of Ostuni presents many boys to us and give information without any criteria.”

The Father continued, “You have to meet them, and, make them understand, with gentleness, the dispositions we require for the admission of our Aspirants.”

I continued, “There is Sister Paracleta, the Superior of San Pier Niceto, who is very zealous in recruiting Aspirants for us. She has good criteria in choosing, and when we make the selection, and she sees some of them dismissed, she does not resent it or gets discouraged, but works even with greater zeal.”

Also, Sister Antonietta¹⁸² of the Daughters of the Sacro Costato¹⁸³ does the same. She speaks with such veneration and much esteem of our Institute. She gives the body and soul to find vocations for us. She follows excellent criteria in choosing, though it sometimes happens that some Aspirants are accepted and some are dismissed. Nevertheless, she does not get discouraged but keeps working with greater vigor.”

The Father added, “She is an outstanding Sister. She has an extraordinary attitude in looking for vocations. It seems that the Lord has given her a special gift for this task. They say that she has filled the Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacro Costato with good vocations.”

I replied, just to finish, “About that small boy, Bellini, whom I did not want to accept because he was so tiny, you told me ‘Do you measure the qualities for religious life with the meter?’ He is so good and was brought by Sister Antonietta. Among others, she has sent us was another boy, a certain Mario Labarbuta¹⁸⁴, who is also so gifted. She accompanied him to Trani, to our Sisters’ House, so that they could bring him to Oria. The boy himself told us the story,

¹⁸² Sister Antonietta Galetta of the Daughters of Sacro Costato was familiar to the Father, who for years supported that religious Institution by any means. For the Father’s correspondence with this sister, cf. *The Father’s Letters*.

¹⁸³ Cf. the footnote in Chapter 25.

¹⁸⁴ Father Mario Labarbuta (1924-1983) was born in Minervino Murge (Bari). In 1946, he founded the “Boys Village” in Bari for the orphans of World War II. In 1950, he headed the pioneer Rogationist missionaries who opened the mission in Brazil.

how in Trani the Sisters, for his lunch, gave him a good portion of pasta that he was not able to finish. Upon seeing it, as a sort of light reproach, the Sister said: ‘Now, what shall we do with the pasta you have leftover?’ The boy was mortified. Then the Sister brought him a dish of meatballs, and he could not eat them all either, but this time, in order not to be rebuked, he put the remaining meatballs in his pocket. Understandably they became mushed! However, on the train to Oria, accompanied by the Sisters, he felt hungry. He remembered that he had meatballs in his pocket, but he was ashamed to eat it in front of others. So he went to the door of the train and fished for them in his pocket. He found only mush, but it was better than nothing, now that his appetite had returned...”

192. IF YOU ARE GOING TO SAY MASS, CELEBRATE IT PROPERLY

A certain Father Spanó, from the Province of Messina who was a parish priest in a small town in Calabria, was a wonderful person, but at times his behavior seemed somewhat eccentric, with excessive zeal in particular ways.

Even in the celebration of the Mass, he had his own way. The rubrics and ceremonies had to be those inspired by the heart, he used to say because Our Lord did not want ceremonies, but deeds.

When going and coming from Calabria, very often we would stop by the Avignone District to celebrate Mass, which ordinarily did not last more than ten minutes. (In those days, the celebration was much longer than now).

Seeing how Father Spanó was galloping in celebrating the Mass, the Father, politely, tried several times to present to him the due observations. Not only did Father Spanó not take offense, but he also thanked the Father and promised to reform. However, the habit was stronger than his will, and there was no improvement.

He admitted, “I am ashamed of myself. What Canon Di Francia says is absolutely correct, and the way he makes his observations is enchanting. I esteem him, like nobody else. For me, Canon Di Francia is a great saint. He is all for God and neighbor.”

Although Father Spanó was a little ‘strange’, you should have seen how much solicitude the Father treated him when he would pass by our House or stay with us.

When the earthquake on December 28, 1908, destroyed Messina, Father Spanó ran immediately to the city and threw himself among the rubble heroically, digging up wounded people and corpses.

We do not know where or how he picked up a military coat that he wore over his cassock. He threw on his head an ordinary beret, and wore a tricolor sash¹⁸⁵ on his shoulder, like an officer on duty.

¹⁸⁵ Tricolor sash: a green, white and red (the colors of the Italian flag) sash worn by government officials during ceremonial functions.

Thus decked (in that confusion we didn't understand everything and anything was possible!), for several days he led a team of soldiers, and with them, he did all he could in rescue work.

Several times Brother Giuseppe met him but hardly recognized him.

After some weeks, Father Spanó came to us, still clothed in his strange attire, with a soldier carrying half a sack of carobs. At that moment the Father was returning from the Sisters' Institute. As soon as Father Spanó saw him, he said many compliments and greetings and said that he would be at the Father's disposal with his entire team if he needed help. The Father thanked him for the offer and told him to continue his relief work, praising his courage, and his enthusiasm for the job he was doing during those terrible times.

Father Spanó asked if there was a small altar to celebrate because he had not been able to say Mass in those days.

We directed him to the middle of a half-destroyed large room, where Canon Vitale used to celebrate in the morning. In an instant, he put on the vestments, and in less than ten minutes, the Mass was over. We saw him coming out with a piece of bread that he was biting with the determination of a wolf. He said that he had not eaten for 24 hours.

The Father, not believing that he had already celebrated Mass, said, "Aren't you going to celebrate Mass?" Father Spanó answered, "Done already!" Then the Father, respectfully, reminded him that the time of the Mass is the most precious time, provided that it is properly celebrated. If it is not celebrated well, it would be better not to celebrate it at all. In fact, there is no obligation to celebrate it,¹⁸⁶ but when one does, there is an obligation to celebrate it properly."

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Father Spanó, as usual, thanked him and promised to do it.

So, the Father looked for some clothes to dress him appropriately and tried to feed him. The Father told him to go with him to the House of the Sisters, where they would help him better. When the Father excused himself for a moment, that weird yet generous priest exclaimed, "Truly Canon Di Francia is a saint, indeed a great saint! When I am with him, I feel something divine that I cannot explain."

The Father then tried to make excuses for Father Spanó's behaviors, saying that in those moments, he was taken by the grave and urgent concern to help many unhappy wretched.

193. HAVE COURAGE AND GO ON IN THE LORD

I had been in Palermo in the military for about twenty days when the Father was informed that I was under observation, and therefore there was some hope of being dismissed or at least being granted a long convalescence. He came from Apulia, on purpose, to visit me.

¹⁸⁶ On the obligation of priests to say Mass, cf. the footnote in Chapter 146.

Father Hannibal, knowing that a certain Father Messina¹⁸⁷, his close friend, enjoyed high esteem in Palermo for his works of charity, turned to him for a warm recommendation.

However, given the great need of men because of the war, when I went for a check-up I was told, “As long as you have the strength to carry a cup of milk to the sick (I was in the medical corps), you must continue to stay in the army.”

The Father said to me, “We have to accept and adore God’s designs. We did everything we could.”

After the usual reminders about being faithful to prayer, receiving the sacraments as often as possible, and avoiding dangerous occasions, he added, “Patience. I will ask Father Messina to help you as much as he can while you are in the army. Go to him when you are in need and be guided by him. This will be easy because his Institute is just a stone's throw from your barracks.”

And true enough, during my service in Palermo, Father Messina greatly helped me spiritually and materially. He cared for me as if I belonged to his Institute. He obtained permission for me when I was in the barracks, to leave early every morning, to attend Mass and receive Communion. He made available for me a small room, adjacent to the Church, where I could stay quietly to read, write, and keep what I could not keep in the barracks. He often left me something to eat in the room.

Some nights, even though he was dead tired because he was swamped in his works of charity, he would come to me to talk about spiritual things and about the apostolate of the Father, whose heroic virtues, faith, and ardent love he greatly admired. He used to say, “He’s another Don Bosco, a St. Vincent de Paul of today. I say ‘of today’ because he can deal so wonderfully with all.”

“I have heard people from all sides say good things about him and even from unbelievers and Masons.” He added, “Our Archbishop, Cardinal Lualdi, speaks highly of him.”

He was so enthusiastic about Father Hannibal’s charity, his deeply religious spirit, the very beautiful goal of his Congregation, not only for the works of charity but especially for the unceasing prayer for holy vocations, to the point that both male and female Communities make a fourth religious vow for this purpose.

Father Messina kept telling me, “When I was discouraged by the difficulties encountered in my Work because of my inexperience, His Eminence urged me to have the courage and advised me to do like Canon Di Francia who, when he started his Institute, encountered much trouble. Once I told the Cardinal that I had decided to retire completely from the small Work that I had started and I was hoping, with his consent, to entrust it completely to Canon Di Francia. His

¹⁸⁷ Servant of God Giovanni Messina (1871-1949) was a priest of high profile. He founded the “*Pious House of Charity, Work, and Prayer*” for the poor children in a district of poor and marginalized, which he jokingly called the ‘Africa’ of Palermo, a kind of Avignone District. To ensure a future for his Work, he established the Congregated Ursulines (*Orsoline Congregate*), which, after various difficulties, were aggregated to the Little Sisters of Blessed Don Luigi Orione in 1967. The diocesan process of his cause for canonization was concluded in 1991 and submitted to the Holy See.

Eminence urged me to continue the Work and to pray hard. Seeing my insistence, which was not just once, he said, ‘Let us reflect again and pray more. It is a grave matter. If the Lord sets things this way, I believe that no one can be as suitable as Canon Di Francia, whose Work is very similar to yours. He, too, has orphans whom he cares for as you do for yours.’”

“Your Sisters would not find it difficult to be joined to the Daughters of Divine Zeal because the mission is the same. The difference lies only in the fact that the Daughters of Divine Zeal have as a specific goal to pray for holy priests to the Holy Church. This goal is really beautiful. It is the best service that one can render to the Church. I pray a lot for the same purpose. Because of this, I pledged to join the Work of Father Di Francia in this prayer, by celebrating, a Mass every month. Meantime, we shall not speak of this merger. We just need to pray and have courage.””

The Superior of Father Messina’s Sisters, given the reverence that her founder had for our Father, confidentially asked Father Hannibal to suggest to Father Messina to found also a male Congregation, so that the Sisters could always have the spiritual support of their priests. The Father answered her to pray and that when the time came, he hoped she would tell him.

The Superior had made the same request to me. When I found a favorable time, I mentioned this to Father Messina.

He said, “Your beloved Founder made the same proposal to me, encouraging me and giving me so many good reasons, but I told him that because of my lack of experience, not only do I feel uneasy about starting a men’s foundation, I have decided to leave completely even the female Congregation. I asked Father Hannibal if he wanted to merge his Congregation, which is so promising with mine. I also told him that I had already spoken with His Eminence, the Cardinal, who would have been pleased with this.”

“Father Hannibal responded though, ‘Dearest Father Messina, don’t even mention this to me! Don’t even say it! What skills do I have? Me? You don’t know how many times I also asked Father Cusmano¹⁸⁸ of the Morsel of the Poor, to merge the two Communities that I started with his Congregations. He did not want it. He told me to let them continue each on its own so that there would be in the Holy Church two Institutions working for the glory of God and the good of souls. So I say the same to you. Take courage and continue in the Lord.’”

While telling me this, Father Messina’s face had become red, and tears were flowing.

Among the help that Father Messina gave me in Palermo was an exceptional permanent permit so that I could go back to the barracks at 10.30 in the evening. This made it possible for me to attend the classes that were held at the Popular University five times a week from 8:00 to 10:00 pm.

Later, when I was transferred to another barracks, and there was no possibility to receive Communion in the morning, he obtained for me the permission to be exempted from the food ration. With this excuse, at times, I could manage and run to a Church for Communion.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. the footnote in Chapter 198.

194. GOD'S SEVENTH COMMANDMENT IS VERY CLEAR

After several months in the army, the Father came to revisit me in Palermo. I was able to get a 24-hour leave, so we were able to be together and talk comfortably.

The Father brought a generous supply of food, which I chose to keep in the room that Father Messina had allowed me to use in his Institute. I told the Father how Father Messina had always treated me as if I were one of his confreres. The Father replied that he wanted to thank him immediately. He added, "Indeed, since you are going to bring this stuff, let us go together now."

We did not find him because he was not in Palermo. The Father asked the Mother Superior of the Institute to thank Father Messina on his behalf. Once we reached the small room I was using - a beautiful, isolated place with all the conveniences - the Father said joyfully, "May the Divine Goodness and the exquisite charity of this holy priest be infinitely thanked. Let us stay here to talk." And we spoke together at length.

He inquired about everything concerning me, the physical as well as the moral and spiritual aspects. He told me of the problems of our Houses and of our confreres who were in the army.

Seeing two pairs of military boots that looked like boats in the corner of the room next to him, he asked if they were mine.

I replied, "They are and are not. The government gives each of us two pairs. One to be used and one to be kept as a replacement, and woe to us if we don't keep them, there are stiff penalties and an obligation to pay for them. Some time ago, my replacement boots disappeared, which is an ordinary thing in the army. To avoid the consequences, I was on my way to the quartermaster's office to get the ticket for getting another pair, after paying for it, when a companion said to me, "Idiot! Where are you going? Do you think you are still in a convent? I have plenty, and I can give you as many you want. Don't go anywhere. Keep quiet, and I will provide." After a while, I saw him coming with a large pair of shoes.

I asked him how he got them and who had given them to him. He replied, "You ask me? I stole them in the same way as they stole yours." I insisted that I did not want them and that he should put them back where he had taken them. However, he quickly said, "I will leave them here, and if you don't want them, return them. I guarantee you that the person I stole them from, by this time is better equipped than before."

The Father then replied, "In short, these shoes are stolen. Don't you know that stolen properties cannot be kept, and there is an obligation to return them as soon as possible? You have been keeping them here for so long? It makes me wonder. You must return them immediately."

The Father added, "You will surrender them to your Superiors."

"Yes! But it's not as easy as you say! I would go on trial with the one who has stolen them."

"Anyway, you cannot keep them. If you cannot do anything, it means that you will sell them and give the proceeds to the poor. I will give you the money needed to get the pair of shoes that are missing, in a proper way, and you will keep them as a replacement. And let me remind you to

keep your own as best as you can. But if the shoes will be missing, don't you dare take from others. Obtain it in a legitimately from the competent office and pay for everything. We will take care of sending you the money. Can't one go to the commanders to say that such a thing was stolen from him?"

"Yes, but the answer is always the same: 'It's your problem!' Meaning 'Take it from someone else or pay.' However, for those who are caught stealing, there are severe penalties."

The Father reacted, "It's illogical!" I said, "This is ordinary. It surprises no one." The Father concluded, "For the formation of one's conscience, this is more harmful because gradually people lose respect for the goods of others. But God's seventh commandment is very clear: 'Thou shalt not steal.'"

195. GOOD AND BAD BOOKS

As I just mentioned above, the Father and I were chatting in my room at the Institute of Father Messina. The Father noticed a small shelf with a fair number of books and said, "If Father Messina has left these books here, it means that they are all good."

I clarified, "These books do not belong to Father Messina, I bought them in some bookstores, and most of them at meager prices from the stalls. Some were given to me as a gift."

"And what are you doing with all of them? Do you have the time to read them?"

"There are weeks when we don't do anything in the barracks. I bring them there and read, just to occupy my time in a useful way. I spend almost all of my time here when I'm off duty. After adoration of the Blessed Sacrament that is exposed in the Church during the day, I come back to my room to read. At least I am doing something useful. There is so much to learn. I love to read. I realized that I am ignorant in many fields. Unfortunately, having no preparation, I hardly understand some things, others I don't understand at all. At times, I mistake one thing for another, and quite a few times, my ideas are confused."

The Father interrupted and said, "You should blame only yourself for your lack of preparation. Remember how many times have I insisted for you to take the regular studies for the priesthood, and you refused it with many excuses. Serious preparation is required not only for the priesthood but even simply to be an educator because, as a great educator says, you have to be a great philosopher, a great saint, and a great pedagogue to be a good educator. I hope that when you finish the military service if the Lord wills, you may be convinced to undertake regular studies so that you can become more useful to the Congregation."

"In the meantime, read. Read because it is very useful, but without straining yourself. Read what you can understand, and learn how to choose the books. Try to choose those which are related to the goal of our Institute. I have always thought that, when the Institution will develop, of equipping our Houses with excellent libraries with texts of general culture, and specially enriched with books that highlight our mission, the prayer to obtain good workers for the Holy Church and the education of the poor and destitute children."

“Which books are these? Be careful in selecting them. Choose good ones. Reading is food for the mind and the heart. If it is good, it produces good effects; if it is bad, the effects could be terrible. By reading bad books, the youth who are uninformed bloats the head with false ideas. They learn principles opposite to truth and goodness, up to the point of persecuting religion, denying God and becoming a leaven of sin in society.”

“These are my books, Father. Here is the Holy Bible and the *Imitation of Christ*. The Father intervened, “These books should be like the daily bread. The same must be said of the Venerable Thomas meditation book.”

“As you can see, other books are the lives and writings of the Saints. St. Augustine, St. John Chrysostom, St. Joseph Calasanz, St. John Baptist de la Salle, St. Anthony M. Zaccaria, St. Jerome Emiliani, St. Alphonsus, Cottolengo, Don Bosco, and similar ones.”

The Father added still, “These are excellent, both for spiritual and cultural formation regarding education, in particular, according to the spirit of our Institute.”

“Other books are by different authors: Bonomelli, Manzoni, Stoppani, Cardinal Maffi, Silvio Pellico and some of D'Annunzio.¹⁸⁹

“D'Annunzio? Don't you know that all his works are banned?”

“Actually, when I read the first few pages, I realized that he was a dirty person, and I put the book in a visible place to destroy it, especially since Father Messina already told me that it was forbidden. There are also books on philosophy, and pedagogy, a volume of the *Summa* of St. Thomas translated into Italian, the *Logic* by Liberatore, books of Zigaglia, Enrico Pestalozzi, *Of the Five Wounds of the Holy Church* by Rosmini.

The Father remarked, “You cannot keep this; it is forbidden.” I said, “Actually, I've read it, and I have not found anything wrong. Perhaps the ideas are advanced, but it is easy to understand. I understood nothing of the *New Essay on the Origin of Ideas*.”

“You must not read the first one,” the Father continued. “And the second is not for you. It would be a waste of time, and it will confuse you. It requires much preparation.”

I said that I also had some works of Lambruschini and even of Rousseau.

The Father immediately remarked, “Especially the latter, it hard to comprehend, and its principles are contrary to correct reasoning and morality.”

He concluded, “I am pleased that you are dedicated to these instructive readings. However, I recommend that you always reliable authors. I have always been attracted to read and study not only the Holy Scriptures, the Sacred Sciences, the Holy Fathers, but also literature, philosophy, and pedagogy. But as much as I had the goodwill, I was not able to fulfill my intention because I was busy with the Rogate and the works of charity.”

¹⁸⁹ These are some of the prominent writers of the 19th and 20th-century Italian literature.

I said to him, “Father Messina also told me the same thing when he saw that I was reading. Now I regret that when I leave Palermo, I will have to leave these books. I will bring with me only the most indispensable.”

The Father asked me again, “And what are all these booklets about?”

I replied, “It is a collection of easy-to-read summarized popular general knowledge about literature, history, geography, philosophy, pedagogy, sociology, and natural sciences. They are very helpful because they help me to remember some of the topics which are offered at the Popular University, I am attending.”

“I owe this to Father Messina, who, some time ago, obtained for me the permanent permission to be outside the barracks until 10.30 p.m., five times a week, from the 8:00 to 10:00 p.m., I can go to the University to attend the lectures on various topics. Many attend, mostly seniors. There are also some ladies and a few militaries.”

The Father said to me, “On one hand I am glad that you attend these courses, for general culture, to use your time profitably and also as a distraction from military life. On the other hand, however, I am afraid that it may be dangerous for you because you don’t have enough basic education, and often, in the public schools some teachers teach philosophical, pedagogical and theological errors, and hurl abuses at morality, religion, Church and the Pope.”

I said, “So far, in the classes that I have followed, I have met good and bad teachers. There is a quite elderly professor, who has treated wonderfully interesting topics such as *Christianity and pedagogy, Pedagogy of the Gospel, The Church and Educator of Humanity, Family and School, The Clergy, and School*. He looks like a Holy Father when he speaks.”

“In contrast, there is one, who is like a demon escaped from hell. A complete atheist, he spits venom against morality, religion, the Church, and the Pope. Luckily, he has not been coming for a month after a sensational episode.”

One evening the professor was speaking of Silvio Pellico¹⁹⁰ as a patriot. He was praising him to the stars, but when it came to Pellico’s religious feelings, the professor portrayed him as a poor, sick, wretched, maniac. Then, generalizing, he dared to say that religious sentiment is nothing else but a serious mental abnormality depending on how much of that sentiment is evident. According to him, the more the so-called Saints are considered as such, the more they are maniacs.

That evening, among the soldiers who were present, there was a fifth-year medical student, a certain Pennisi, a brilliant, cultured, and gentle young person with deep religious feelings. He was from Acireale and had been educated by the Jesuits.

Very politely he asked to speak and began to dispute in scientific terms arguments that were so proper, clear, and intelligent. The poor professor was shocked. He tried to reply, but when he saw himself reduced to silence, not knowing anymore what to say, he flew into a rage. He stood

¹⁹⁰ Silvio Pellico (1789-1854) Italian writer, poet, dramatist and patriot active in the Italian Unification.

up and began to shout using offensive words and humiliating insults at the student. He said, “You too are a furious maniac! And that Christ, who is the fool of fools and who has ruined the world, has infected you as well.”

At these blasphemous words, a storm broke out: whistles, loud noises, shouts from the benches, “We don’t want you! We don’t want you! Get out, out!”

The classroom was emotional, and some followers of the professor reacted violently. Since then, thank God, that professor was never seen again.

The Father, upon hearing the blasphemy against Christ was horrified, put his hand over his head, and said some short invocations of reparation. However, he was comforted by the forceful rebuttal of the young military and the public reaction and protest, and said, “That was necessary. It was a real reparation. That is how the poor youth in public schools are poisoned. Because of this, we must try, when the Lord wills, to train our confreres to fight evil in society and to make good triumph, and at the same time prepare them for our private schools, duly authorized.”

“Of course, for higher studies we have to enroll our boys in the Universities, for general education, primarily to get the legal titles for teaching. But the environment in Universities is dangerous because, as you saw, some professors are often immoral atheists. Because of this, the confreres assigned by obedience to attend the Universities, have to be spiritually and intellectually well prepared, intelligent, humble, and strongly attached to the spirit and the Works of the Congregation. Without this, it can seriously damage the Institute, and we could lose them. Meanwhile, if you see that going to these lectures may harm you, stop attending them.”

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I answered, “According to me, I have already heard many of such rubbish nonsense in the barracks.”

196. THE DAUGHTERS OF DIVINE ZEAL ASSIGNED TO THE MILITARY HOSPITAL OF PADUA

A few months before the Retreat of Caporetto¹⁹¹, the Father wrote me a letter, with the news that the Daughters of Divine Zeal had gone to serve in the military hospital of Padua. He sent me the exact address of the Sisters telling me that they would be pleased if I would visit them. It was known that from the Carso battleground¹⁹² I often accompanied the wounded in the ambulance to the military hospitals of the Veneto Region [where Padua is].

The Father urged me to visit them. It would have been a pleasure, and I had intended to do it the first chance I had.

However, seeing that the opportunity was not materializing, I decided to write them a long letter, in which I gave them my congratulations and best wishes for their new mission.

¹⁹¹ The World War I Battle of Caporetto, between Italian and Austro-Hungarian forces, ended in November 1917. Italy lost the territory, which is present-day Slovenia.

¹⁹² Cf. Chapters 140 and 165.

In the letter, I tried to show the importance of the mission of the Sisters in the hospital, especially in a military hospital in time of war, where the patients cannot have the comfort of their loved ones because ordinarily, they are far away. We know by experience that the Sister who lives up to her significant mission in military hospitals is a nurse, a mother, a sister, often a substitute for the priest, and the consoling angel of the sick and the dying, who she often leads to pronounce the Most Holy Names of Jesus and Mary for the last time.

I also suggested to the Sisters what they should do to win the mind of the sick and the respect of their superiors because when Sisters do this, they become the masters of the hospitals.

But to achieve this, they need an exemplary religious life, reliability, and heroic sacrifice. Otherwise, Sisters in the hospital are a disaster. I also pointed out the dangers, especially connected with military hospitals.

The letter did not mention the name of the sender and where it came from. From the context and the details, it was evident that the writer was someone who belonged to their Institution, but could not be identified.

The Sisters wracked their brains to try and figure out who could have written the letter until the Father and Father Palma went to Padua. As soon as they saw the penmanship, they immediately knew who had written it.

The Father wrote to let me know how pleased he was about the letter I had written. He said he could not understand why I did not sign it or mention where it came from. At the same time, he told me how happy the Sisters were for the letter that indicated the good they were doing in the hospital.

He repeated that the Sisters wanted me to visit them, and he urged me again to please them if I could.

Even the Sisters wrote a long letter to me, saying the same thing. Unfortunately, the occasion for a visit never came.

After the Armistice, while on duty in the military hospital of Udine, I met with a medical Major, a doctor with good Christian values. We often attended Mass at the chapel of the Sisters and especially on Sundays, he received Holy Communion with great devotion.

He was not assigned to my section, but he was friendly with me.

One day, I was talking about the Sisters in the hospital of Udine, praising their religious spirit and the heroic sacrifices they were making for the sick. He agreed. It was while we were talking that he mentioned that until the Armistice he had served at a hospital in Padua, where there were some Sisters from Sicily, and even though they had no medical experience, they were unsurpassed in goodness, religious spirit, mutual love for each other and for the sacrifices they made for the sick.

He added, "I had the pleasure and good fortune to meet their Founder, who left me with a positive impression. He must really be a great servant of God. The Sisters respect him as they would a saint. I heard that he is a certain Canon Di Francia from Messina."

When I told him that I belonged to the Work founded by Father Hannibal, he became all the more attached to me and was happy to hear about the Father and our Works.

197. CANON CELONA AND THE HONOR OF THE INSTITUTE

Canon Celona¹⁹³ used to come to spend his summer vacations in Oria, and, when the Father and Father Palma were there, he wanted to know everything and interfered in everything as if he were the Superior of the House. This created much confusion because he was not aware of the situation, and though he was kind and educated, he was a theorist. He had different ideas from the Father and Father Palma.

According to him, our Congregation was too unbalanced towards external activities, lacked interior life, and was still at the same level it was during the early days of the Avignone District. (It should be pointed out that later when he founded the Institute of the Reparatrix Handmaids Sisters, one of the first things that he did was to buy a printing press to make the Sisters work!).

Sometimes he would tease us saying, “Rogationists, *confusionists!*”

He definitely had a low concept of the Daughters of Divine Zeal. He said that they were pious, crude, and ignorant women and that they had nothing substantial regarding the Institute. For him, the only redeeming feature was the Father. He always spoke with respect and reverence about the Founder.

On several occasions, and politely, I tried to make Father Celona understand that I did not like his disrespectful statements about the Institute of the Rogationists and of Daughters of Divine Zeal. It cut me to the quick. It was useless. Either he did not understand, or he refused to understand. So whenever I happened to meet him, he would make harsh judgments about the Rogationist Institution. It seemed he was doing it on purpose to annoy me.

One day there was just the two of us in the grove, and, as usual, he started his chatter and swept into his rather radical judgments on this and that regarding our Institute.

Taking advantage of the fact that we were alone, I replied in kind, with no regard, without mincing words. I told him that I was amazed that such a wise and learned man could speak with so little respect of the Institute, which for many years had benefited him, treating him as one of its members. I was also surprised that, after the Father had trusted him completely and after the length of time that he had been in the Institute, he was not yet aware of the merits of the Work.

¹⁹³ Venerable Antonino Celona was born in Ganzirri (Messina) on April 13, 1873. He was a diocesan priest, and later on Canon Dean of the Cathedral of Messina and founder of the Reparatrix Handmaids of the Most Holy Heart of Jesus. He knew Father Hannibal Di Francia since 1888, lived for some time at the Avignone District, and collaborated with him for several years, with ups and downs, and with a certain ambiguity, due to his unclear position regarding the Rogationist Institution. He died in 1952. A year before, he gave his testimony to the diocesan informative process for the canonization of Father Hannibal. The episode narrated here by Father Drago reflects, albeit with the coloring of a story, the not so clear relationship of Canon Celona with the Rogationist reality of those times. (Cf. *Positio*, vol. II, p. 383 - 393, in particular, the footnote 3). On June 5, 2015, Pope Francis declared that he lived with heroic virtues.

On the one hand, he would say that he wanted to belong to the Work; but on the other, he would belittle it to justify his hesitation.

I added, "If I were in the place of the Father, I would end it once and for all. Are you in or out of the Congregation?"

At these words of mine Canon Celona became furious. He told me that I was proud, stupid, ignorant, evil, rude, and other insults. He was upset and offended so much so that he wanted to leave Oria the next day, and would never return.

That same evening Father Palma returned. Canon Celona told him what had happened, but he made it look much worse than it had actually been.

Father Palma was very displeased. He summoned me immediately and rebuked me, telling me to immediately apologize to the Canon who, with good reason, felt very offended.

I did not feel like apologizing, saying that I believe I had not done wrong. I just told him what he deserved.

Father Palma went into a full rage, saying everything he could about me.

Very displeased Canon Celona left for Messina after two days.

A few days later, the Father arrived from Altamura. Father Palma informed him immediately about what had happened between Canon Celona and me.

The next day the Father summoned me and asked, calmly, what happened. After hearing everything, he said, "You were wrong. You behaved badly. First of all, I cannot imagine that Canon Celona spoke with so little regard for the Institute. I think there must have been some misunderstanding. You might not have understood him. However, even supposing that there was a grain of truth on what you then he would have been wrong, but you should not have shamed him. And why did you not want to apologize?"

"Father, because I don't think I had done anything wrong. I felt it was my obligation to defend the honor of the Institute. For me, it would have been an act of hypocrisy to ask for pardon, almost like telling Canon Celona that he was not wrong in talking without respect for the Work."

The Father tried again to excuse Canon Celona and to scold me for the way I had behaved.

However, I believe that in his mind, he must have thought, "You did well." I feel that way so because after about two years the Father dictated to me a long letter addressed to Canon Celona, in which though kindly and with so much charity, he told him much more than I had been able to say. Then, I thought to myself, "It means that I was right in telling Canon Celona what I told him: I should have said much more."

198. THE FATHER COMES TO PALERMO

Having some business to attend to, the Father came to visit me again in Palermo while I was still in the army. He was hosted by the *Boccone del Povero* (Morsel of the Poor)¹⁹⁴ Institute.

The Father came to the barracks to look for me, but they told him that I was not there, and they did not let him speak to the officer on duty. So, he went to ask for a note of recommendation from Father Messina to be able to talk with the commander of the barracks, to ask where I was and to request for a leave for me a second time.

Father Messina volunteered to accompany the Father to make sure that he could get what he wanted.

They were received immediately by the Captain, who said that I was at the isolation hospital for 48-hour voluntary service and that I would return to the barracks after 10:30 that evening. The Father expressed his willingness to visit me at the hospital where I was, but the official said that no one was allowed to enter the isolation hospital, and those who were on duty were not allowed to leave.

The Captain said, “I will issue a permit for a 48-hour leave starting tomorrow. So when Drago returns this evening, the officer on duty will give him the permit. By tomorrow, he will be free for two days.”

The Father thanked him and asked if his note could be delivered to me. In the note, he told me that he was in Palermo, staying at the Morsel of the Poor Institute.

The Institute was very far from the barracks, and when I arrived there, I learned that the Father had already celebrated the Mass.

I stayed with the Father, and we spoke for some time. Showing great interest, he asked about my health, how I was in the army, about the practices of piety, if I needed anything, and he wanted to give me some money, not only for some personal items but also to help the poor and needy. He told me what might be of interest to me about our Houses and the situation of our confreres who were in the army.

He also spoke with much interest about the beautiful mission of the Morsel of the Poor Institute, of the high concept of the sanctity of its Founder, Father Giacomo Cusmano, whom he had not only personally met, but with whom he had an intimate and exceptional relationship, also regarding our Institute.

¹⁹⁴ *Opera del Boccone del Povero* (The Work of the Morsel of the Poor) is the Institute founded by Blessed Giacomo Cusmano (1834-1888, Palermo, Italy), who also founded two Religious Congregations: the Missionaries of the Servants of the Poor and the Sisters Servants of the Poor. Pope John Paul II beatified him in 1983.

Father Hannibal and Blessed Cusmano were linked by holy friendship and mutual esteem, documented by a rich exchange of letters (cf. *The Father's Letters*). Upon the invitation of Father Hannibal, Blessed Cusmano came to visit the nascent Works in the Avignone District in 1885. In the abundant correspondence between the two, the Father had proposed to Blessed Cusmano the idea of merging the Works, but the Blessed refused, saying he was confident that the Lord intends to have two distinct Congregations for the good of the Church.

Then he wanted to know why I was not in the barracks the day before, and what this isolation hospital was.

I told him that it was a hospital for soldiers suffering from serious infectious diseases. I was not assigned there, but at times, I would volunteer because I noticed the great need for assistance to the sick who were confined in the hospital. This was because the nurses were soldiers routinely forced by military discipline to serve at the hospital and they were reluctant, either for fear of becoming contaminated or because it required much patience and hard work to deal with those patients. Besides, they could not leave the hospital for weeks. The real heroes are the Sisters of St. Vincent, but, unfortunately, they were very few compared to the patients.

Because of this, the soldiers from the health section were often asked to volunteer for 48 hours for those unfortunate soldiers. So when I could, I went there willingly because I experienced that I could do much good, both for the body and the soul.

The danger of contagion was real. Not a few militaries had been infected and were hospitalized.

The Father said to me, "I am so delighted that you are available for this beautiful act of charity. We must be generous toward our neighbor, even at the cost of sacrificing one's health, and, if necessary, one's life, as so many good persons do for the Lord's sake, as so many Saints did, and, most of all, as Our Lord Himself did by dying on the cross, for the love of mankind."

"But in this service at the isolation hospital, you must be cautious and use all means to avoid getting contaminated. First of all, you have to pray very hard and then follow all the hygienic means suggested."

We are really very careful about this. As one enters the hospital, before having any contact with the sick, the doctor checks to see if there is a predisposition to any of the diseases. Then the volunteer removes all his clothes to use only thoroughly sterilized hospital gowns. At the end of the 48 hours of duty, before leaving the place, the volunteer is once again checked carefully by the doctor. He has to bathe and then go through complete disinfection in the presence of a medical officer. After that, his clothes are returned to him, and for several days, every morning, the medical officer will recheck him.

The Director of the Institute came and said that at the Father's convenience, he wished to speak with him. The Father replied that he was available immediately.

The Director then called one of the priests to accompany me to the room assigned to me.

There was not much to see in the House. It was practically empty. The Religious were few.

The priest who accompanied me stayed to talk with me about the progress and the beautiful goal of our Congregation and was eager to learn about its growth. He spoke of the high esteem and veneration they had in their Institute for our Founder. Feeling great pain, he told me of the enormous difficulties their Institute was experiencing. It was known that some Coadjutor Brothers, unfaithful to their vocation, had taken advantage of the fact that some of the properties of the Institute were registered under their name.

The scandal had spread throughout Palermo. It was even published, and because of this, the Morsel of the Poor Institute had lost much of its aura of respect.

The Father told me that the Director, in his goodness, had insisted that we join the community for lunch.

I cannot describe what a feast that meal was. The affection they showed towards the Father seemed a repetition of what happened when the Father, after a long time, was back in our Communities. Unfortunately, that community was very scant!

They exchanged toasts. The Father, with poetic inspiration, surprised them by praising their Founder and his holy Work. He thanked them for the warm hospitality, wishing prosperity for such a beautiful Institution so dear to him.

They insisted that I spend the night with them. The Father told me to accept this act of charity so that we could have more time to be together.

The next morning, I went with the Father to attend the business for which he had also come to Palermo. One of the places we went to was a clinic to make an appointment with a famous Tuberculosis specialist for the check-up of Brother Mauro. The doctor was abroad. The Father left a note stating the reason he had come and the return address. Looking at me, he said, "When I have the answer, I will come to accompany that dear son. I am so sad about his sickness. He is a little angel. He has dedicated himself to the Congregation in all aspects. I am praying much and celebrating several Masses. We are also using all human means. But we are resigned. We pray that the Divine Will be done in this."

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After the Father had accomplished what he had to do in Palermo, we returned to the Morsel of the Poor Institute to thank the Director for his hospitality.

He not only called all the Religious to pay their respects to the Father but also the persons who were assisted and employed in the Institute. Everyone greeted the Father warmly. Then, I accompanied him to the station. While waiting for the train, he told me that he was very saddened to see the beautiful Work of the Morsel of the Poor reduced to those pitiful conditions because of some unworthy elements that had sneaked in. Thus, the Institute gradually lost the religious spirit of the holy Founder, who had brought the Work to such a degree that it enjoyed esteem not only in Sicily but also in Italy and abroad. Then the Father concluded, "This should serve us as an experience to keep us always in the religious spirit proper for our Congregation, by incessantly praying that the Lord may give us holy perseverance."

199. THE FATHER IS NOT WELL

After touring the best educational Institutes of Italy before starting the new building in Oria, I learned that the Father was in Trani with Father Palma. He had left word in Oria that, upon arriving, I was to go and see him because he wanted to talk to me.

So I went to Trani and told him what I had learned. The Father said to me, "We have to go to Rome to settle the purchase of a house. Negotiations are well underway. I said, "If we don't

have to leave right away, I would like to go to Oria. I have been away for twenty days, and I have to prepare for the new school year. At the appointed time, we can meet at the station of Trani.”

The Father agreed. Father Palma added, “The Father is not well, and the doctor advised against taking this journey. Although the Father is determined to leave at all costs, it is good to wait for the doctor who is coming.”

The doctor arrived and checked the Father thoroughly. He strongly advised him not to travel. He said, “His heart is not good, his legs are already quite swollen. Having to sit for a long time on the train, they will become more swollen, and the result can be quite severe.”

The Father, however, insisted, saying that he had already set an appointment, a commitment, and he did not want to miss it. If we did not go to Rome, the deal could fail.

Seeing his determination, the doctor said to him, “At least travel in a sleeping car, and lie down most of the time.”

As soon as he heard “sleeping car”, with a notable gesture, the Father exclaimed, “What are you saying? When did I ever use a sleeping car? The gentlemen, the rich can use it, but not the Religious who have taken a vow of poverty. I have always traveled in third class and a few times in the second for reasons of health.”

At this, the doctor said vigorously, “Very Reverend Father, in my opinion, you cannot leave in your condition. If you insist, please write a waiver that you are leaving contrary to my prescription, so that I can be relieved of any responsibility.”

I dared to intervene, “When it comes to our health, and we have to follow the treatment prescribed by the doctor; you, Father, keep repeating to us the words of the Holy Spirit ‘Honor your doctor’.”

The Father replied, “Do me a favor, keep quiet! Look who is talking!”

After all this, however reluctantly, the Father was forced to accept to travel in a sleeping car. I left Oria, and at the proper time, we met at the station of Trani, as agreed.

On the train, the Father had a relatively quiet night, lying in bed. When he realized that from time to time I was checking to see if he needed anything, he said, “Don’t come anymore. Thank God, I don’t need anything. Try to rest.”

Though the Father used the sleeping car, his health still suffered greatly.

Once in Rome, we stayed at the House of the Dominican Sisters at Salita del Grillo Street.¹⁹⁵ We slept in a kind of platform of the adjacent Church building, separated by a canopy. It was very uncomfortable, but the Father was greatly delighted because he said that even while sleeping, he could keep company with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Our lunch and dinner was just soup and bread.

¹⁹⁵ About the Dominican Sisters see Chapter 183, and the footnote.

I mentioned to the Mother Superior that the Father was sick and needed something more substantial. What was given to us was fine for me.

When the Father became aware of this change, he called the Superior and asked why they had not given the same thing to me.

The Superior replied that that was what I had said to her. The Father objected, “No, no. Treat both of us the same. Soup and bread are enough. We thank the Providence and your charity for us.”

When the Superior left, the Father scolded me. He pointed out to me that the Sisters’ community was living in extreme poverty. I replied that we would compensate them for their expenses. The Father said that all he had was a thousand Liras that a gentleman had given to him on the train. I replied that I had already written to Father Palma saying that we needed money because I had not taken any with me, presuming that the House of Trani would have provided.

200. NEGOTIATIONS TO PURCHASE THE HOUSE IN ROME

The day after we arrived in Rome, the Father and I went to the house to be purchased. The broker and another gentleman, who introduced himself as an engineer, were waiting for us.

We visited the site, looked at the extension of the land on sale, and set an appointment for the next day at the same place.

At the appointed hour the following day, there was a meeting with the legal representative of the *Società Romana Immobili* [Roman Real Estate Company], with the trustee, the broker, the engineer who had introduced himself as such and another gentleman who was introduced as a lawyer.

There was a discussion on various issues about the amount and the manner of payment. An appointment was set for the next day at the office of the administrator to examine everything better.

I remained at the place alone to inspect the whole building with more freedom.

Later, when I met with the Father, I tried to tell him my hesitation about the reasonableness of the price, and my doubts about the choice of the engineer and lawyer who were supposed to take care of our interests.

After listening to me, the Father resolutely replied, “If you have been instructed to stop me from buying the building, it would be better for you to return immediately to Oria. If the Lord wills, we will make this purchase. I have prayed and let others pray a lot for this, and I believe that the time has come to set our foothold in Rome. Maybe you still have in your head those grand Institutes you have visited, and you would like something similar to those. You have to think instead of our origin, that is, the Avignone District.”

“For too long, we have delayed our coming to Rome, and important people have told me that for the good of our Work we have to come as soon as possible.”

The Father answered this way because, for such a purchase, both Father Vitale and Father Palma were not in favor. (I realized this later from a letter which the Father himself dictated to me, addressed to the two).

The Father saw that I felt humiliated. The next day he said to me in a friendly tone, "I don't mean that you should refrain from making comments that you think are right. That is why I wanted you to come with me. However, you must not pass judgment at first sight. Keep in mind that as of today, we cannot buy an ideal House, and regarding the price, remember that we are in Rome and not in Oria."

At the appointed time, we met at the office of the trustee. The broker always flaunted an exaggerated religiosity and a special love for the works of charity. To avoid high costs, he advised us to get help from the previously mentioned engineer and lawyer, praising their honesty and expertise.

There was a keen desire in everyone to close the negotiations and make a compromise. However, the Father asked for two days to think better before deciding. I saw that the Father looked thoughtful, so when we reached the House, I took courage and said, "I am under the impression that the broker, the engineer and the lawyer agree with each other. It's a kind of clique that doesn't deserve trust. I think it would be good for us to choose an engineer and a lawyer we trust. We could ask for advice from the Salesians." The Father replied, "Behold, as usual, you speak ill. Let me think."

A Dominican would come in the morning to celebrate the Mass for the Sisters where we were staying. The Father told him the situation, including my judgment on those people. The Dominican answered that in Rome, we had to be very cautious and even suspicious regarding these matters because there were groups that cheated especially Religious men and women. He also told us examples of such serious incidents. He suggested a trusted lawyer. Regarding the engineer, we went to the Salesians on Marsala Street.

The Director welcomed us in a more than fraternal manner and expressed heartfelt words of veneration for the Father. When the Father told him that the intention in purchasing the house was the foundation of a male Orphanage, he replied, "Thanks be to God! It is not true that similar Institutions are lacking very much in Rome." But when he heard that for the meantime, due to the lack of personnel, the Orphans would have to be entrusted to the Sisters, he said, "Too bad! In Rome, there are so many Sisters that nobody knows what to do with them."

When he realized the purpose for which we had gone to him, he replied, "I suggest you avail of the engineer whom we commissioned. We have tried him, and he can be trusted in everything."

He also confirmed what the Dominican Father told us about the cheating that often happened in similar transactions in Rome.

Later we learned that the engineer and the lawyer suggested by the broker were his close relatives, who did business with him, and they should not be trusted.

With this information, at the meeting we had agreed upon, the Father said to those concerned that he had thought it over and he believed it would be more appropriate to have the

building surveyed first by an engineer familiar with Institutions akin to ours. So he chose the engineer of the Salesians, whose work was very much like ours. That engineer would be willing to put himself at our disposal in two days. The broker resented what the Father had said and remarked, "This is an insult to the engineer who is a real gentleman, and to me also. It is a lack of trust."

The Father replied calmly, "I gave you the reason for this. I want an engineer who is familiar with the nature of our Work." We said that we would meet again at the site on the appointed day.

201. YOU GUESSED IT BY CHANCE

That day, on the site of the property to be purchased, the broker's engineer and ours were arguing about the durability of the building, due to a crack that they noticed on the perimeter wall.

I listened in silence, but in the end, I said, "It seems that the cause of the crack is the sinking of the central pillar," and I gave the reason. (Previously, I had the time and opportunity to go down to the basement where even a simple person could see that sinking of the ground caused the crack).

The engineers looked at each other and said, "Reverend, you're right! What you say is true. Are you an engineer?" I replied, "Not at all." The Father immediately added, "He is not an engineer nor a priest. He is studying to be a priest if the Lord wills. However, in the domain of construction, he has good decisions and some experience because he has to work often with engineers. He also supervises our construction projects. When we see that our young people have good dispositions, we help and encourage them as best as we can."

The engineer of the Salesians went on to say, "It's a good thing that Institutions similar to those of the Salesians have engineers in their own religious family. I see in the Salesians how useful it is."

When we were alone, the Father said to me, "It was truly providential that we found this other engineer. From the discussion, we noticed that he was an accomplished person. Regarding you, however, do not think that you are truly competent in the field of construction. I don't think you really believe that you are an engineer! I am sure you guessed by chance the cause of the crack. I have praised you for the prestige of the Institute. Certainly, it would be advantageous for the Congregation to have its own engineers! It would be a great benefit not only for the name of the Institute but mainly to have houses and buildings more in keeping with the nature of our Works and to save many expenses. The specific nature of the Institute does not easily inspire engineers and, at times they don't follow the proper limits of stability and aesthetics, but show off their art at the expense of the economy, choosing a design at the expense of the spirit of poverty."

202. THE FATHER PRAYS AND REFLECTS

After our engineer had reached a precise idea of the situation and value of the building, we met with our lawyer (the one suggested to us by the Dominican Father), who took time to get other documents and to study the legal aspect better.

At the appointed time, we had a meeting in the office of the broker, who had wanted to hasten the conclusion of the negotiations. The Father said instead, "Before closing the deal, I still need time to reflect and to study the matter better. So, I entrusted the documents to a lawyer to assist me."

At these words, the broker became angry and said to the Father, "It is characteristic for priests to be distrustful. You have offended the engineer and the lawyer. These two gems have worked for your interests as well as they could have done. If you don't want to conclude the deal, why do you waste our time? You keep postponing day to day, always finding new excuses, always undecided. I did not think I was in front of an idiot."

The Father listened patiently, but I could not take it anymore, and, standing up, I said, "Mind what you say, idiot! You are rude! You don't even know who Canon Di Francia is. His mind is much better than yours, and he enjoys universal esteem."

At these words, the Father intervened saying, "Sit down and keep quiet Carmelo! You must not offend people in this way." Turning to the broker, he said, "Sir, kindly excuse him, he is still young and does not know how to weigh his words and master his nerves. Please don't pay attention to him. If the Lord wills, we will continue our negotiations, and, with goodwill on both sides, will conclude the deal. Kindly be patient and wait a little more. We will set another day for a meeting, and we hope to conclude the deal by then."

Turning to me, the Father said, "Apologize to this gentleman." I answered, "Me? He was the one who offended you!" The Father added, "I am not offended. He spoke the truth. I am senile."

These words were said with such calm that the broker interrupted, saying, "The Reverend [Brother] is right. It is I who should apologize." Then he stood up to shake hands with the Father, saying, "Excuse me, very Reverend Father." Then, I too, spoke to him, "I am sorry, sir!" shaking his hand.

When we left the office, the Father deplored my behavior and scolded me telling me that it is not Christian, much less for Religious, to render evil for evil. Instead, we must control our temper and put into practice the words of Our Lord: 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.'

After several days and long discussions, we finally closed the deal for about 900,000 Liras.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ The Father signed the contract on October 12, 1924; cf. Chapter 154.

203. “PREPARE THREE HUNDRED. CARMELO COMES TOMORROW”

While we were in Piazza Venezia, in Rome, one day, from a distance, we saw Archbishop Paino, without any bishop’s insignia, staring at us. We hurried to reach him and to pay him homage. The Father, however, told me not to mention the negotiations for purchasing the House because the Archbishop was looking for millions to get loans for earthquake victims, and for the construction and reconstruction of Churches and Institutions. He had even promised some to us. However, the Archbishop wanted money, money, indeed large amounts of money. Had he known that we were in Rome to buy a house, he would have requested some from us.

The following day the Father sent the following telegram to Father Vitale, “Prepare three hundred, tomorrow Carmelo comes.” That same evening, I left, and according to the Father’s instructions, I collected the three hundred thousand Liras in Messina and went to Oria. There Brother Antonio Maria had received instructions from the Father to bring to Rome the amount withdrawn in Messina and all that could be collected in Oria and Trani.

204. SUMMONED TO ROME TO ATTEND TO THE FATHER

In Oria, I received a telegram from Father Palma, which stated, “Settle the matters of the House properly, and come to Rome to attend to the sick Father. Bring three San Pier Niceto” (He meant: bring three liters of wine from San Pier Niceto).

Once in Rome, I found the Father extremely exhausted, so lacking in strength, which gave rise to serious concern. He had a high fever, shortness of breath, and total loss of appetite. He could not rest day or night. He was resigned [to the Lord’s will], and, talking about his suffering he often said, “What are my pains compared with the suffering and pains of Our Lord, especially those He suffered during his passion?”¹⁹⁷

When some complaints slipped inadvertently from his lips, he would say, “How poor and imperfect I am. I am incapable of suffering for Our Lord and of making up for my sins.” When he felt faint, he would remark, “Why don’t you give me the Anointing of the Sick? Why do you wait until the sick person is no longer aware of anything?” Often, at night, he was concerned about me, “I am so sorry that you have to miss your rest. At your age, you need much sleep. Go to bed, and if I need anything, I will ring the bell.”

He would recite many prayers both during the day and at night. I would get very tired and would often invent the answers.

205. ATTENDING TO THE SICK FATHER IN ROME

In the acute phase of his illness in Rome, the Father could not make the slightest movement without help. He needed continuous help day and night.

¹⁹⁷ During his stay in Rome for the opening of the House on Circonvallazione Appia Street, the Father was hit by severe flu with pleurisy and stayed in bed for approximately 40 days. It was at the beginning of November 1924.

Since the assistance of Brother Maria Antonio, who was in Rome with the Father, was not enough, Father Palma called me from Oria. The two of us took turns taking care of the Father. His suffering was indescribable. Sometimes his face would become purple because of the excruciating pain. However, he was resigned to God's will. We would notice his effort not to complain.

He would say, "What are these pains compared to those suffered by our adorable Lord Jesus Christ in His scourging, crowning with thorns and death on the cross?"

When forced to ask for our help, he would humble himself and thank us very much. This was real mortification for us.

Despite suffering so many terrible pains, he never stopped paying thoughtful attention to the Work and to people. He would say, "While you are here for me, there is much need for personnel in Oria. I wonder how many sacrifices those dear little children have to make! If you have not done so yet, write them to be patient, to pray to the Lord for me, that He may grant me the grace to conform myself always to the Divine Will, and tell them that I bless them with all my heart. Meantime, you are suffering so much for me."

It was useless to assure him that what we did there was not heavy work at all and that we were doing it willingly.

Once, turning to me, he said, "I saw Mr. Pietro Palma fatigued. He told me he does not sleep at all, day or night. Set an appointment with the renowned Professor Marchiafave, the physician of the Pope, to have a check-up with him. Accompany him personally and then let me know the result."

After a few days, I accompanied Mr. Pietro to the doctor. As soon as we introduced ourselves, even before telling our situation the doctor, without preamble, he turned to me and said, "Well, how are you?"

"Excuse me, Professor," I replied, "I am not the one to be checked, but this gentleman who is very exhausted and cannot sleep at all. I am fine."

The physician said, "You say that you are fine? You need more care than this gentleman. You have an absolute need to rest more than him."

Then he peppered Don Pietro with questions, writing down the answers.

When Don Pietro said to him that he was the director of the shoemaking shop of the Anthonian Orphanage, the doctor said, "Oh, that! An exhausted person! This means that the boys are crosses for you, and you are a cross for the boys."

He checked Mr. Pietro carefully, prescribed a treatment, and told him not to worry. In the end, he asked 400 Liras as his fee, a clearly exorbitant amount.

Returning to the Father, when he heard that he was told not to worry and that the fee was so high, he said to Mr. Pietro, "You could have answered: 'Doctor, how can I feel comfortable when you charge 400 Liras for this check-up?'" Then he corrected himself, "They are professionals, they have many expenses, and they charge so much to live with dignity."

Even though I had told him not to say anything, Mr. Pietro reported to the Father what the Doctor had said about my health.

The Father immediately became worried and said, "I told you that you were not healthy. Because of me, you lacked rest. Did he check you up? What did he say?"

I answered, "Father, why should I have been checked? I'm okay; I am fine. So he can get another 400 Liras from me?"

"Set an appointment right away," the Father said. "Go for your check-up, and do not think about the 400 Liras. When it comes to one's health, we should not look at the cost."

I said again, "But I do not need it at all! It is completely useless to go to the doctor."

Mr. Pietro added, "Actually the doctor prescribed complete rest for him."

"Good!" the Father said. "From now on you should not come here to assist me anymore. Mr. Pietro, inform the Mother Superior. And you, Carmelo, must go out and get some relaxation. Besides, thank God, I feel better now, and I no longer need full and constant assistance like before."

I answered, "Father, it would be a real sickness for me to be idle. For me to come here to keep you company is a distraction."

The Father went on, "So this means that after a few days of rest here, you will go back to Oria, and I will make do with Brother Maria Antonio and with the help of Father Palma."

I stayed in Rome for three more days, as the Father said. But during that time, I went to help him often because I realized that, though he tried to prove the opposite, he really needed help.

He could hardly count on the assistance of Brother Antonio Maria because he too was sickly, beset by continuous sleepiness. As soon as he sat down, day or night, he would fall asleep immediately and snore loudly. It was unbearable even to those in good health. So, I tried to postpone my return to Oria, citing many excuses.

However, when the Father forced me to leave, I said to him, "Excuse me, Father, there are so many of our Sisters here who would be happy to help Brother in assisting you. They told me. They are hurt that you have not requested them to help. I don't understand why we cannot ask them. I have seen the Sisters assisting the sick in the hospitals. In surgical operations, there is no distinction between women or men. When our Sisters served in the military hospital of Padua, did they not have to attend to the sick soldiers?"

The Father replied, "In our Houses, this shall never be allowed. In the hospitals yes, and even in public clinics, but we shall not allow it, not even in the infirmary of our Houses, nor for the Orphans, nor for the Religious. And I have to be the first to set the example so that this abuse will not be introduced."

I had to leave for Oria. He urged me to treat myself, to rest well, and even to inform him afterward about my health. Finally, he reminded me to take care of the spiritual as well as of the material aspects of the two Communities.

206. THE FATHER'S LAST VISIT TO ORIA

After the Father recovered a little from his long sickness, he came to Oria to take care of the printing of the special issue about the House of Rome.

He was visibly exhausted, but he continued to pray and to work tirelessly. We asked Doctor Scardapane to come and check him, pretending that the young doctor happened to come by chance and had asked to pay him homage. After the pleasantries, the doctor told him that he looked exhausted and should not work. Then, he asked the Father to let him check him. The Father politely thanked him and said that he felt much better than before.

Also, Bishop Di Tommaso came to pay a visit. He, too, urged the Father to take care of his health. The Father spoke to him enthusiastically about the House in Rome, "Excellency, I had a desire to have a House in Rome, close to the Pope. Now, thank God, before dying, the Divine Providence heard our prayers. Your Excellency, please bless the new House and me too. I foresee that this will be your Excellency's last blessing for me because the hour of my death is near. I take the opportunity of your visit to thank you for all the good that in a fatherly way you have always done and continue to do for our Institutes. Please, when you hear the news of my death, pray for my soul because I need it very much." The Bishop was moved.

207. UNUSUAL STRICTNESS OF THE FATHER

In his last presence at Oria, the Father displayed an unusual attitude of strictness regarding some Aspirants.

During the spiritual reading, after speaking rather harshly, almost scolding, about piety, religious life, discipline, study, and work, the Father began asking each Aspirant's name, age, place of origin, and the reason for choosing our Institute.

The boys were so rattled; their answers were confused, saying one thing for another. Then, turning to me, the Father said, "It seems that these boys don't understand anything, especially about religious life. Don't you see that they cannot answer? Why should we keep them? Why don't you send them back to their families?"

The boys had awful impressions, especially those who hardly knew the Father. I was also upset because his attitude was very unusual. The Father realized it, and as he finished the spiritual reading, he said, "Come to me later. I need to talk to you."

When I went to him, he said, "I assumed that attitude during the spiritual reading because I knew that these boys leave a lot to be desired in their piety, discipline, study, and work. Actually, I should have asked for information from you first regarding this. I noticed that the poor boys were so shocked they did not know what they were answering. They felt bad. I am sorry about that. What is true in this? How do they behave?"

I said, "For me, there is nothing extraordinary. I am happy with them. They are boys, and all of us, at that age, more or less did the same." Then the Father said paternally, "Truly at times we forget that we were children too, and we expect more than we should. Tell the boys that you have

spoken with me, that you have given a good evaluation and that I was pleased with them. Try to encourage them.”

I later learned that the Father had been wrongly informed concerning the Aspirants.

208. A BLESSING FROM PIUS XI FOR THE GRAVELY ILL FATHER

While the Father was seriously ill in Messina some of us were in the Vatican with Father Palma for an audience with Pope Pius XI. It was strictly forbidden to speak to the Pope because it was an audience with many people. However, when Pius XI came near us for the kissing of his hand, Father Palma, shouted, “Your Holiness, I ask a special blessing for Canon Di Francia, who is seriously ill.” Pius XI replied, “All the blessings.” Then, after moving a bit farther, the Pope turned towards us, and asked, “You mean Canon Di Francia from Messina, right?”

“Yes, Your Holiness!” Then the Pope added, “Yes, yes! All my heartfelt blessings, with the wish for him to recover his health and to continue his precious apostolate.”

209. ATTENDING TO THE SEVERELY SICK FATHER IN MESSINA

In Messina, the Father was becoming worse. He required constant assistance day and night. At times he was in such crises that it seemed he could die in a short while. We felt all the more that the Father needed assistance from some of us Rogationists since he was staying at the Sisters’ Church. I received a telegram in Oria from Father Palma, which stated, “Let Carmelo come to Messina to assist the Father who is seriously ill.”

Though the Father was utterly exhausted, he never complained. When a complaint slipped out, he considered himself faint-hearted. He tried to do as much as he could to lessen our services. He remained humble and grateful. He always tried to pray, often reciting short invocations. Frequently he asked for the Holy Viaticum and the Extreme Unction¹⁹⁸, repeating that this sacrament is to be received, not when a person is unconscious, but when he is still fully aware.

Unknown to him, we summoned a specialist from Rome for consultation. When the Father realized it, he was displeased and disapproved of it. The doctor, after the consultation, carelessly told him that Leo XIII had died of the same sickness. The Father jokingly replied, “It is an honor to die of the same sickness by which a great Pope died.”

After about two weeks that I was in Messina, the Father told me, “You have to go back to Oria because the House needs personnel, and besides, you must also study. Let Brother Michelino¹⁹⁹ come here to assist me. Thank you for your services. I ask your forgiveness for the shortcomings you have seen in me. I recommend you to progress more and more in holy

¹⁹⁸ *Extreme Unction* was the way the sacrament of the *Anointing of the Sick* was called at that time. *Viaticum* in Latin literally means *provisions for the journey*, which refers to the Holy Communion given to a person near death or in danger of death.

¹⁹⁹ Brother Michelino Lapelosa (1898-1979) assisted the Father until the end of his life and witnessed the apparition of the Child Mary to the dying Founder.

perfection and to take the utmost care of our dear Aspirants and Orphans. I bless you cordially, certain that this is the last blessing that I give you. I urge you, after my death, to offer many prayers for my soul.”

210. THE ANNUAL AWARDING CEREMONY AND EXHIBITION OF ARTIFACTS

Several times the Father had been advocating for the House of Oria an action that he loved very much: the annual awarding of the students, especially Orphans, and the exhibit of handicraft made by them.

The aim was to encourage the boys to improve their conduct and academics. At the same time, the Institute would receive honor and prestige in the public’s eye, by showing the validity of its educational methods and the seriousness of its school organization through the awardees.

The winners were given a certificate of merit, together with a fair amount of money, a small deposit that they could use on leaving the Institute, and for a smooth transition into regular society.

He used to say also that in planning the construction of future Institutes, we had to envisage a hall for the permanent exhibit of artifacts.

While assisting him in Messina during his last illness, he insisted so much to me about his fixation on the awards. I formally promised him that the year 1927 would not pass without having implemented the initiative. Father Palma agreed.

Just as we promised the Father, before the beginning of the school year 1927-28 in Oria, we began to organize the awarding as best as we could since it was the first time. The official speech was given by the parish priest of Ceglie Messapico, Father Carincci, and by an Orphan since it was also a commemoration of the death of the Father, which happened that same year.

The following year, the preparation was done with greater diligence, and the awarding ceremony became such a solemn celebration, that the regional newspapers of the Apulia Region provided much information about the event in their news. They especially praised the exhibit, so that the Artisans Provincial Committee of Brindisi asked us to show it to the general public in the provincial capital. Our pavilion was judged the most interesting and the most important and was awarded a gold medal.

211. “MOTHER NAZARENA IS TRULY A BEAUTIFUL SOUL”

When I was with the Father during the last weeks of his illness, in Messina, I was a direct witness of so many moving moments, which I will never forget. Everyone was concerned about the Father's health, but it was devastating for Mother M. Nazarena Majone,²⁰⁰ the Superior

²⁰⁰ Venerable Mother Maria Nazarena Majone whose baptismal name is Carmela was born in Graniti (Catania) on June 21, 1869, and went to heaven on January 25, 1939. In the fall of 1889, along with her companion of childhood, who later became Sister Carmela D'Amore, she entered the nascent Work of Father Hannibal at Avignone District in Messina. Her life was a gift without regret, heroism of charity in perfect tune with the charism of the Father, who

General of the Daughters of Divine Zeal, the generous disciple of the Founder and authentic heroine of charity from the time of the Avignone District.

She had to control herself whenever she entered his room because she was afraid she would burst into tears, and the Father would be displeased.

She did all she could to provide what was needed. She would often ask me, with genuine concern, how the Father had passed the night if he had taken some food and drink, whether he expressed some desire.

One day she asked me how many Religious are in Theology, and how many other Religious and Aspirants were studying for the priesthood in Oria. As soon as she heard the number, she rejoiced and said, "Now I can die happy after seeing that, thank God, the Congregation is starting to have priests and has great hopes for the future. This has always been the object of my concerns, prayers, and sacrifices. I esteem the male Congregation just as I do for the Sisters'. I am afraid that the Father will not see the fruits of his fervent prayers and heroic sacrifices."

I told her, "The last time that he was in Oria, the Father asked me which year were we in Theology." After my answer, he said, "Let the Divine Superiors be infinitely blessed. Of course, I will not have the grace to see you become priests. It does not matter. I will see you from heaven. What is important is that the Congregation progresses. I beg you to remember me at Mass and to offer your prayers for me."

At this point, Mother Nazarene began to cry and walked away.

I mentioned to the Father the joy of Mother Majone upon hearing the good news of the progress of vocations and the studies of our Religious in the House of Oria. The Father said to me, "Mother Nazarena is truly a beautiful soul. She is as simple as a dove. She does not know what falsehood, duplicity, or politicking are. Her talk is evangelical: 'Yes is yes, and no, is no.' She is very faithful, one hundred percent attached to the Congregation, observant and formed according to the spirit of the male as well as of the female Institutes."

When Mother Nazarene knew that I had to leave for Oria, she wanted me to stay and continue to assist the Father. However, when I told her that it was an order from the Father for the needs of the House, and another Religious would come from Oria to attend to him, she accepted it.

had the highest esteem for her and entrusted her with vital tasks among the Daughters of Divine Zeal. She can be considered their "Foundress" according to the thinking of the Founder himself. On June 2, 1993, the initial process for her beatification was concluded in Rome, with a solemn ceremony presided by Card. Camillo Ruini, President of the Italian Bishops Conference and Vicar of the Pope. The recognition of her heroic virtues in 2003 by Pope John Paul II is also an indirect validation of the sacrifices that all the sons and daughters of Father Hannibal had to bear in those heroic times of our foundations. This group of brave people, who were a family with the Father, stands out in bright colors, in the light and shadows of their human condition through the stories that are recounted in this book.

212. THE NEWS OF THE FATHER'S DEATH

The first news of the Father's death reached us in Oria through the Bishop, Monsignor Di Tommaso, who hurried to the Institute to express his condolences and to encourage us.

The effect of the news on the Community was indescribable.

The Bishop said, "I understand that for you, the death of the Founder is an unbearable pain, and you are right to feel that way. However, you have to look at it with the eyes of faith. It is certain that Canon Di Francia is a man totally of God, and we have no doubts that he is a saint. I had many occasions to experience it. So now you have a Saint in heaven praying for you and the Congregation. Therefore, take courage."

That same evening, I left for Messina. The next morning by train I reached the shores of Calabria. The newspapers of Sicily and Calabria had whole pages on the life and Works of the Father. I heard numerous comments. Some said that the Father was Saint, others called him the Father of the Fatherless, while some compared him to St. Vincent of Paul, or Cottolengo and Don Bosco. Many said that they were heading to Messina to attend the funeral or at least to touch his remains.

When I reached Messina, the city was mourning and was covered with various posters.

At the Shrine of St. Anthony, where the Father's remains were displayed, a crowd of people was pressing wanting to go in, wishing to touch his remains. I had to struggle to be able to enter through the side of the Institute. The remains were surrounded by a double row of guards to maintain order and to prevent anyone from taking a fragment of the clothes as a relic.

The crowd which lined up to see the Father was indescribable. At night it took much effort for the guards to close the Church, and in the morning, even very early, many people were already waiting for the opening of the Shrine.

Regarding the funeral, as Father Vitale has described it very well in the Father's Biography, it was a real glorification. Never had Messina seen anything like this. People came to the city from all the towns of Sicily and Calabria.

213. THE FATHER'S REMAINS DURING AND AFTER WORLD WAR II

During World War II, we were seriously worried that the Shrine of St. Anthony could be hit by bombs and the Father's remains would be dispersed. We thought of bringing it to a safe place, but we didn't know where. So we kept delaying.

The air raids became more frequent and devastating. The Cathedral was hit and set on fire. Even our Institute and the Shrine of St. Anthony had been hit by shrapnel and blasts; bombs that fell in the vicinity had shattered all the stained glass and severely damaged the frescoes of the Church.

It was then that we resolved to carry the body of Father to the Sisters' Institute of the Holy Spirit, where a safe shelter carved into the rock had been completed.

However, while the transfer was urgent, the legal and bureaucratic paperwork would have required months, especially in confusion under the bombardment.

Fortunately, however, at that time the Extraordinary Commissioner in Messina was the Federal [Provincial Party Secretary] who, though not religious, could adapt to the situation. We presented the case to him and asked for his advice. He told us that if the paperwork were to be done regularly, it would take months.

However, he added, "Let me think about it. Come back in two days so that I have time to study how to solve the issue as soon as possible. If the body of Father Di Francia were scattered because of a lack of authorization, the people of Messina would stone us."

After two days, we went back to the Commissioner who had the papers prepared for the immediate transferring of the body. Then, we informed His Eminence Monsignor Paino who wanted to preside. As the tomb was opened, he immediately went down on his knees. All this happened secretly. There were only ten of us.

The body had not yet fully decomposed. The outer casing, however, was rotten, so we had to put it as it was into another casing adapted with fir planks since we could not find more durable wood in those circumstances.

Always in complete secrecy, his body was transferred to the Institute of the Holy Spirit, where a good number of Sisters were waiting. It was placed in the prepared shelter, where lamps burned day and night.

The Sisters, as well as we, the Rogationists, often went to pray in front of that blessed body.

When the war was over, we informed the Archbishop Monsignor Paino, and, as usual, in complete secrecy, the remains were brought back to the Shrine of St. Anthony and placed where they were before. Even during this procedure, the Archbishop wanted to be present.

Given the secrecy of the transfer of the Father's remains, it happened that some people in Messina believed that the Father's body had not been returned to the Sanctuary where it was before. They did not want to believe us. Although the rumor lasted for some years, the popular suppositions, little by little faded away.

214. THE VIRTUE AND SPIRITUALITY OF CANON DI FRANCIA ARE DIFFICULT TO FATHOM...

Once, when I was in Rome, I went to the All Saints Church,²⁰¹ intending to go to confession, with the hope of meeting Don Orione.²⁰² He was there.

²⁰¹ All Saints is a Parish Church with the adjoining Don Orione Institute, on Appia Street in Rome.

²⁰² St. Luigi Orione (1872-1940) was born in the Piedmont Region in Italy and a student of Don Bosco for three years. He founded the male Religious Congregations of the Sons of Divine Providence and the Hermits of the Divine Providence; and the female Congregations of the Little Sisters Missionaries of Charity and Sacramentine Sisters. At the beginning of 1909, he went to Reggio Calabria and Messina to bring urgent aid to the victims of the earthquake. Appointed by Pope Pius X, he was Vicar General of the Diocese of Messina in 1909-1912. Father

He received me with great kindness in his cheerful and witty ways. He asked me about the progress of our Congregation with much interest as if it were his own. Then he told me that he had read carefully the biography of the Father, written by Father Vitale, and added, "I did not like it that much. When I finished reading it, I sent a long telegram to Canon Vitale expressing my opinion.

That biography outlines the figure of the Servant of God, but very little of his spirit. We cannot really blame Canon Vitale for this because the virtues and spirituality of Canon Di Francia are so sublime that it is very difficult to understand them, and certainly impossible to describe. They are beyond the ordinary, in such a way that often what seems a defect, is, in reality, an exquisite spirit of faith and charity. These two virtues of his are boundless. They come out so forcefully in his actions searching for God's greater glory and his neighbor's greater good. He was somehow consumed by the zeal for the Kingdom of God!"

"Only after having become acquainted with him intimately and frequently could I, in some way, fathom the excellence of his virtues and the sublime spirituality. Appearances can be deceiving!"

"To somehow have an idea of his sanctity, you had to see his actions and hear him speak. You have been for so long with the Servant of God. What do you think? Am I correct?"

I answered, "Don Orione, I totally agree with you. That is exactly the same opinion I have after the good fortune of having been close to him for eighteen years."

When I had the chance, I told Father Vitale the opinion of Don Orione after reading his biography of the Father. Father Vitale immediately replied, "Don Orione is correct. I agree with him on everything. Frankly, I confess that the greatest difficulty I had in writing the biography of the Father was that I did not succeed at all to describe and praise truthfully his heroic virtues and his interior and totally exceptional spirituality, despite all my efforts. The more I think of it, the more I am convinced of this idea, to my embarrassment. Don Orione rightly says that it is very difficult to understand the spirituality of the Father, and it is truly impossible to describe it."

The main reason is that some words of the Father and some of his actions cannot be judged from the outside because externally they may appear unnecessary, childish, sentimental, or inadequate, and some even seem faults of a certain significance. On the contrary, when heard directly from the Father, the words assume such a high spiritual sense so that they appear to be the purest, most beautiful, intimate and holy expression of his heart devoured by the love of God and neighbor, and always guided by the light of faith that made him live constantly united with God.

I confess that in reading the biographies of the Father, especially in those stories where I have personally seen him and heard him, they look like simple pictures, but lifeless-

Hannibal and Don Orione were connected with deep and mutual holy friendship. Don Orione was often a guest in the Avignone District. He was present at the entrance to the novitiate of Father Vitale in 1909.

Pope John Paul II canonized Don Orione and Father Hannibal on the same ceremony on May 16, 2004, a testimony of the holy friendship between the two great Saints of charity.

This applies much more to these short and insignificant fragments collected in this book. On the surface, they might diminish the figure of the Father. They may easily reveal him as having a small mind, dominated by sentimentality and almost obsessive piety. However, those who have seen the way and the supernatural spirit in how the Father acted, know that everything was an effect of that intimate union with God, which can hardly be fathomed.

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- *The numbers next to the entries refer to the Chapters. For the more important topics or those more emphasized by the teaching of the Father, we offer an articulated index to clarify concepts and distinctions. The entries do not exhaust the names of people, the places, and the contents, whose richness and complexity require the integral reading of the book.*
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WORK / WORKS: In the original language of the Founder and of the first collaborators of the Congregation the term OPERA / OPERE, (the WORK / the WORKS) was used to indicate the complex reality of the Institutions of the Rogationists and Daughters of Divine Zeal, the two Congregations, the male and female Anthonian Orphanages, the activities for the poor, for the Rogate, the formation houses. Usually, the word Work is capitalized when it refers to this reality.

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