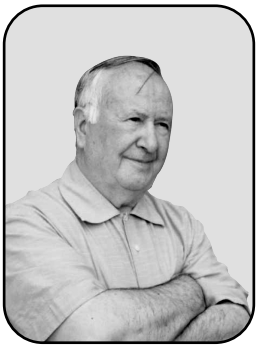
ST. JOHN CALABRIA

BIOGRAPHY



ST. JOHN CALABRIA

BIOGRAPHY



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PRESENTATION - I

With the passing of time, it is not easy to meet a saint; but one of the real ones!

Perhaps it was never easy.

We are taught to listen carefully for the "voices of holiness" and to look diligently for the saints. The search for injustice, dishonesty, violence, shortcomings, often seems to be tireless but if we look beyond this preoccupation with scandal and cynicism and direct our minds and hearts to finding them we will find that the saints are there.

With a theological and mystical insight, a necessary instrument for scrutinizing the mystery of Grace, Mario Gadili, author of this biography of St. John Calabria and of his Apostolic Opera, speaks of a man he has known, indeed with whom he lived, offering us with a precise historical reconstruction as a gift of light and hope.

We live in the age of long and short-term projects, which are found in every civil and even religious field. It seems almost a natural task to plan and plan pure holiness of others and ourselves. And this is where the root of the difficulty of becoming saints and to find a man of God remains. Self-planning is anti-holy. It costs to leave to God the task of fixing the project of life and the trouble to let His will burst into our life and to entrust oneself "to the surprizing Gospel". We are honest: as we are afraid that if we leave our free initiative to Him, He would send all the projects we cherish ending up in the air.

The "*Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you in addition. Do not worry about tomorrow* "(Mt 6:33-34), which St. John Calabria accepted as the norm of his conduct and which radiates his spirituality, is reduced to letting himself be designed by God, doing His holy will. Jesus himself declares: "*My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to do his work*" (Jn 4:34). The Father had sent him to make the Earth a city in which love reigns. For St. John Calabria in our earthly city, his apostolic works stand

and speak, as monuments of the Father's love: the two Congregations of the Poor Servants Brothers and Sisters; the hospitals, the schools, and the like missions. All living works that are still developing.

The saints form God in his Christ word-event. He forms them one by one, with a community, Trinitarian and Marian dimension. And God has no schemes. The Holy Spirit has not exhausted his ability to make new things (see Revelation 21.5).

To St. John Calabria, so willing to implore graces, we ask for the courage to throw ourselves into God's hands, He will take care of everything else.

P. FLAVIO ROBERTO CARRARO
Bishop of Verona
Verona 18 April 1999

PRESENTATION – II

The biography of San Giovanni Calabria, written by Mario Gadili, can be considered an example of a comparison to that "lived magisterium", which is the life of the saints. "It is the Fruit of personal reflection of a priest, who has dedicated his whole life to pastoral and social activities", breathing from childhood "the spirit that Fr. Calabria has transfused in the Opera". The book has the freshness of direct testimony, in which the commitment of objectivity is combined, in the search for the "scrupulous historicity of facts", and the passion for the subject, the living individual, "humble and grandiose", as Gadili writes, of the Founder through whom the Lord entered the life of the author and made it His own. From the pages that follow, emerge many traits of this "giant ... emerged in the history of the Church" of the twentieth century. On four of them, I would like to stop briefly, because it seems to me that most of these characterize the message of Fr. Calabria for the Church and the humanity of our time.

In the first place, faith: With simplicity and transparency, the Founder of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence Brothers and Sisters does not hesitate to affirm that to God i.e. "everything must be referred to Him, only to Him, always to Him". Because He is the Lord of life and history, who "chooses the poorest and the most incapable person to implement His plans of salvation, so that it may be known that He is the sole author and not another".

In relation to this profound experience of faith, the virtue of humility is placed in Fr. Calabria i.e. his consideration of "zero and misery", with a spontaneity that excluded any effort of any self-generating asceticism. He actually had the thought of considering God as his only Master. He was living docilely to lead the Opera of Providence at times on the impervious paths, sometimes into the obscurity of life, but with infinite confidence. "The Opera is truly a creature of the Lord. It cannot be the work of a priest so trivial like me. I

am only the simple guardian, the guard, the sentinel, the *'Casante'* [the custodian] of this Opera. I am a 'Poor Servant' under the orders of Divine Providence. My task is always to keep my gaze fixed on the signs of God's will and obey Him promptly".

The consequence of this radical abandonment to divine sovereignty is the determination of radicalness, the need to make every choice, small or big, with evangelical coherence. Fr. Calabria wants to love his Lord "without ifs and buts", and for this he gives himself to those who recognizes as brothers before the one heavenly Father. The sign he confessed, matured from the "discovery of the Gospel": "*After a bitter day* - he states to a friend priest *-, unable to sleep, I took the Gospel and read it all. So too the Acts of the Apostles, all in one night. And I had an unusual feeling. What a great thing the Gospel! ... I remained marvelled and stunned* ". And then he quotes step by step, focusing especially on the "sermon on the mount", and recognizes its paradoxical nature. He concluded with a phrase, that is the program of evangelical life: "The paradoxes of the Gospel: true paradoxes if they are compared with the way of thinking and acting of the world; so strange as to be considered sublime but unrealizable ideals. But the saints have won the world through them ".

Fr. Calabria takes literally the invitation of Jesus to 'seek first the Kingdom of God and his justice', in the firm certainty that all the rest will come in addition: and this conviction becomes for him a system of daily life. Gadili comments: "He bet on the Word of God and lived freely and serenely, despite the trials, the difficulties, the long delays".

In this light we can understand another characteristic motif of Fr. Calabria and the Opera: *the choice of the poor and of poverty*. This is not a pauperism of ideological flavour, but a firm and convinced will to assimilate to the Lord Jesus Christ, made poor for the sake of our love i.e. poverty is a consequence of the love for God who came among us and the smallest and most needy in whom he hides himself, as the Gospel page of the last judgment day reminds us. "*Sir, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we ever see you as a stranger and have welcomed you, or naked and dressed you?*

When did we ever see you sick or in prison and we came to visit you? And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, all that you have done to one of these least of my brothers, you did it to me "(Mt 25: 37-40). Love for the poor is love for Christ, who visits us; and those who love the poor share their life: "Lives poor, who loves the poor". Fr. Calabria is so sure that he affirms: "If we use human means, the Opera would immediately cease to be of God, it would become like man ... what flourishes today, fails tomorrow". In short, poverty becomes the paradoxical guarantee of the strength and fruitfulness of the service to the poor.

Finally, there is an aspect that emerges bright from the pages of this passionate and honest biography: *it is his love for the Church*. It is a great love, driven to the most absolute obedience, to the most endured fidelity. It is a passion for the unity of the Body of Christ, with sensitivities and gestures of ecumenical flavour, which anticipate the great spring of the Second Vatican Council. However, it is also the humble docility to the Pastors, the capacity to accept the trials imposed on them, submitting without resistance to the Lord's hand through the judgment of His ministers. In the interior agony of his last years, in a very special way, Fr. Calabria accepts everything and offers everything for the love of the Church, of which he sees the Opera entrusted to him humbly and faithfully: "I have new sufferings for these days" - he wrote on April 14, 1953 - that only the Lord knows. These sufferings, at times I feel it, and my spiritual father reassures me, they come from the Lord to accomplish the divine new designs he has on the Opera of the Poor Servants ... 'My Church - says Jesus - is prolonged with the Opera of the Poor Servants... ".

Another giant of twentieth century holiness, Card. Schuster, after a conversation with Fr. Calabria tried to the impact, said: *"It seems to me that in these sufferings of Fr. Calabria there is the hand of God. When he wants to use a soul, he crushes ...*" It is the law of the grain of wheat that gives fruit only if it falls to the ground, rots and dies. And the fruit is the golden spike for the table of the children of God, of the Church and of all humanity. The "lived magisterium", of which these pages can make a voice, calls to this humble, great, possible, impossible love: impossible

only for human forces, possible for the gift of grace, for the advantage of everyone's salvation, for the building up of the Church of the Lord.

MSGR. BRUNO FORTE
Archbishop of Chieti-Vasto

PREAMBLE

The present biography of St. John Calabria is the result of the personal reflection of a priest who has dedicated his whole life to pastoral and social activities. Since 56 years I am living in the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence. From childhood, I breathed the spirit that the Founder as transfused into the Opera.

The aspects of the life of the saint, on which I have focused and highlighted most, are those who have found a greater correspondence and resonance with my ideas and my personal experiences.

Nevertheless, the focus on some particular times has not affected the scrupulous historicity of the facts. Other works concerning the life and spirituality of Fr. Calabria have already been written. Anyone wishing to deepen these aspects can contact the Study Centre of the Calabrian Spirituality in Verona, Italy.

With sincerity I confess that I did not consider myself the most suitable and most prepared person to present the humble and grandiose figure of St. John Calabria. He, it is true, considered himself a "zero and misery" and did not say it for false humility. He was certain, without making efforts of ascetic self-conviction. But at the same time, he was a giant person emerged in the history of the Church of the twentieth century. Whoever had the opportunity to approach him described him as a great witness of the century, a masterpiece of that divine grace and wisdom, which uses the little and the humble to manifest his omnipotence and greatness.

For the conclusion of the biography, I tried to trace back to the sources, which I found abundant in the Archives of the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence in Verona. I examined the statements of the texts called for the cause of beatification, discarding all the news that did not have the support in the evidence of other documents.

By personal inclination, I am not prone to indulge in edifying and miraculous facts, not essential for tracing the profile of a person and of the Opera of St. John Calabria.

I tell readers not to dwell on the form, on the envelope, but to focus on the substance, on the essence. You will discover a wonderful creature of divine grace, a true masterpiece of God, which we cannot preserve in the basements of the history of a religious Congregation, but we must place prominently in the gallery of witnesses of the twentieth century of the Catholic Church, as an example of genuine faith, of boundless charity, of disconcerting evangelical coherence.

THE AUTHOR

Introduction

A COLLECTIVE VISION

The lazy Sun descends on the horizon, throwing tongues of fire on the terracotta rooftops of the ancient heart of Verona. The tower of the Lamberti, with its 90 meters of height, stands out proudly over a handful of artistic beauties, gathered beyond two thousand years of history.

To the east of the city, from the top of the hill of San Zeno in Monte, every evening a priest looks out from the loggia of an ancient monastery and blesses people and everything: it is Fr. John Calabria.

He lives up there almost in hermit life, but everyone in the city knows him and venerates him as "saint", the protector of the orphans and the abandoned.

This evening of late spring, Fr. Calabria is more than usual to contemplate the palette of bright colours that accompany the sunset of the day. A wave of nostalgic memories invests him.

Turning to the small group of religious around him, he points to some facts of the city below.

"*Do you see, on my right, those two majestic cypress trees that stand in front of the Casa S. Benedetto? There, under their thick shadow full of resinous scent, I often sat down to catch my breath, after having quickly devoured the steep I must have been ten or eleven years old. I had to deliver the weekly laundry washed and ironed by my poor mother to the family who lived in that villa.*

And here, right in front of us, the majestic building of the seminary is nodding. I began to attend the bishop's high school when I was just nineteen. You knew how far I had to do from home to school! Four times a day, for seven years. It was not a long journey, but because of that

hunger and thirst I always carried on, it seemed never ending. Sometimes I felt my strength failing and the sight clouded up i.e. the houses seemed to sway and my legs became heavy like those leaden trunks."

He extends beyond a little from the parapet and tries to identify an ancient Roman church of the fourth century, perched between the Stone Bridge and the Roman Theatre.

"And there, where the River Adige turns gracefully, there is my dear church of Santo Stefano, how many beautiful memories, I keep in my mind and in the heart, of my first seven years of priesthood!"

He remains a moment absorbed in silence, almost as if he were leafing through the pages of the imaginary diary of his youth. Then, with a slightly altered voice, he sighs:

"*Everyone loved me very much!*"

He takes off his dark glasses, rubs his eyes repeatedly and, muttering to himself, continues:

"*Oh, then, I did not think at all about this Opera! I could never have imagined that the Lord would choose just me to give birth to "His Work". I struggled in my studies and was considered inappropriate for priestly life. It is true that the Lord does not follow the human paths. What the world "discards" and considers as "nothing", He instead uses to do great things. In the ordinary way, the Lord chooses the poorest people. And incapable of carrying out his plans of salvation, because He wants us to know that He is the author and not we humans. Therefore, everything must be referred to Him, only to Him, always to Him. In the first years of this Opera, strong doubts assailed me, anguish gripped my chest. I felt I was suffocating and I could not get to sleep. I was tempted to abandon everything and retire to a convent. Providentially I met a saintly Carmelite, Fr. Natale of Jesus, who became for me spiritual director, friend and councillor. With his steadfast and fatherly character, he helped me to overcome the difficulties and to drive out the suggestions that were given to me as temptations of the devil. "Leave these boys alone - my former teachers and my brother priests told me -*

do not embark on such a great work, without material means and without a managerial capacity. Think of the scandal for the Church and that shame for the Veronese clergy if you had to fail miserably! "I, bewildered and confused, ran to my confessor and begged him to free me from such a heavy burden. Nevertheless, to my protests of incapacity and discouragement, he energetically invested me with enthusiasm: "Is the Opera your own? The Opera is of God! And if it is, therefore, the Opera of God, you want perhaps to escape from His will? Oh, yes, the Lord can also do his work without you; but if you feel so, can you assume the responsibility of not responding to His projects? "

The hard and sharp voice of Fr. Natale had the desired effect.

He knew well that with his spiritual son he had to use an energetic and hasty language to temper him like steel against the violent blows of discouragement inflicted by the devil.

In a letter of 30th January 1913, Father Natale exhorted him: *"For heaven's sake do not go away from the House of San Zeno in Monte, House of God ... If you absent yourself from this House, it is a victory for our enemy the Satan, who then would laugh rudely ".*

And on this nail, he was constantly beating, when Fr. John resorted to him for confession and advice for himself. Then if he realized that the crisis of his penitent was stronger than usual, with rough and hasty gestures, he gave him a quick blessing, he stood up suddenly and called the religious who was waiting in the courtyard of the convent and called out to him saying,

"Return him immediately to San Zeno in Monte!"

But while he was helping his anguished friend to get into the carriage, in a more affable tone he whispered:

"Your Calvary and your cross is up there, at San Zeno in Monte, where the Lord wants you".

"In the drowsiness of a tormented night, mixed with physical and moral suffering, - continues Fr. John, squinting and frowning to retrieve the memories of his past - I had a dream that was of great help to understand and accept God's will. A ray of light tore through the deep

darkness in which my soul touch. In the dream, I found myself near the door of the church of Santa Anastasia. A huge crowd obstructed the entrance. I sneaked among the people. To make my way through the crowd of people and reached the first banks.

In the pulpit, I saw Don Bosco preaching. When the sermon was over, he walked right to me and planted his sweet and penetrating gaze on me. I threw myself on my knees and tried to stutter: "*Oh, Don Bosco! I am zero and misery*" and he, with a good-natured smile, comforted me: "*Zero and misery? Good condition, good condition!"*

In truth, I was already well aware of being worth nothing, of being a "zero", even for the repeated negative judgments that had been given to me by the teachers of the bishop's seminary. Now I was beginning to understand why the Lord had chosen me precisely to carry out His Opera. "He looked at the humility of his servant", replied Mary the most holy to the greeting of her cousin Elisabeth. However, among so many good priests, educated and zealous of my class and, I would say, of the whole diocese of Verona, the Lord wanted to choose me, "poor in talent, sickly, doubtful vocation"! (the impolite judgments expressed by some of his superiors). The Opera is truly a creature of the Lord. It cannot be the work of a priest so petty like me. I am but the simple custodian, the guard, the sentinel, the "Casante" (the porter) of this Opera.

I am a "poor servant" under the orders of Divine Providence. My task is to always keep my gaze fixed on the signs of God's will and obey him promptly ".

"Like the eyes of the servant

they are fixed in the eyes of his mistress ". (Psalm)

To believe, for Fr. Calabria, means trusting God.

His faith did not end in irrational fanaticism, because, it was founded and rooted in the Word of God, Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church. An enlightened and living faith, therefore consequential.

"Either one believes or one does not believe; if you do not believe it, the Gospel is torn!" he concluded to dispel the doubts that arose in the face of decisions that seemed humanly speaking illogical or too risky.

The writings of Fr. Calabria was submitted to a famous graphologist. He did not know him. He studied the spelling and concluded: "This man has all the characteristics of the saint or the scoundrel".

And truly, Fr. Calabria was not a mediocre soul who was content with small compromises.

At the superficial glance of the hasty reader, his writings could manifest a naive, simplistic faith. Instead, it was a luminous, strong, profound, unassailable faith to which he clung stubbornly in moments of trial and spiritual obscurity. On this granite faith, he placed absolute trust in God. "God will provide," said the father of the believers Abraham, faced with the demand for an incomprehensible and humanly unacceptable sacrifice.

Even for Fr. Calabria, abandonment in the hands of Divine Providence was founded on the absolute certainty of the loving and attentive presence of God the Father. Listening to his words and reading his writings, we feel a breath of heaven, to see new horizons "from roof top", to contemplate that "new land" promised by the Holy Scriptures.

His iconic expression "Living Gospels" was not a guessed propaganda slogan to sell his merchandise to the public, but a serious, constant commitment to day-by-day fulfilment of the evangelical imperative "*Seek first of all the Kingdom of God and its' Justice".* One day he confessed to his friend Msgr. Chioti. I ask to have avidly read the whole Gospel in a particularly agitated night. A sparkle of divine light revealed to him all the beauty of the joyful proclamation of Jesus Christ*: "God is Father! He loves us!"*[1]

And since then, after this revelation, faith in God the Father became his breath, his light, his life, his mission. He said*: "The Gospel speaks to*

[1] Cfr. Jn. 16,27.

us of God who is Father, who takes care of us much more than the birds of the air and the flowers of the field! ... There is no mother who loves her creature so much as God. He loves every one of us. To all He arrives, even more and better than the sunlight reaches the blade of grass, the atom lost in space ... The Divine Providence is a tender Mother who orders everything for our good, even for our greater good; we must feel carried by his tender hands"

"The just man lives by faith", says the Scripture[2]

Fr. Calabria believed, trusted, abandoned himself to God the Father, and transfused this unshakable certainty to his Religious and in all the people who approached him.

Many institutions have arisen in the Church to meet specific needs of apostolate or charity. Fr. Calabria too had moved to meet the needs of the people next to him, but the realization of charitable activities was not the main or primary motive of his life and of the Opera. What moved him was the worry of "awakening in Christians the faith and trust in God the Father. God exists and provides for his children".

In the first "Holy Norms" of 1908, we read: "To welcome and help the abandoned children for free, to show the atheistic world of now, ... God exists and thinks of and provides for his creatures ... The Opera lives entirely and totally abandoned to Divine Providence ".

"Every word of God - Fr Calabria still used to say - is consecratory" (that is, it realizes what it says). "If you really and truly believed the Word of God, you would touch the miracles of divine intervention with your own hands, always trust in Him and do not resist, let yourself be manipulated like soft clay, use it as a rag and He will use you to perform his Divine plans."

To a soul that confided his misery and professed his unworthiness to exercise the priestly ministry, he said: "Even if you think you are a" zero and misery, " and a great sinner, you are sure that the Lord does not renounce you. He accepts you, as you are, and so be happy to let you

---

2 Cfr. Hab. 2,4; Gal. 3,11.

experience the joy of being forgiven, loved and chosen to carry out His plan of salvation for you and for the whole world."

PART ONE

Chapter One

THE YEAR OF THE LORD 1873

Political situation of Italy and Veneto in 1873

After painful tortures and infights, Italy reached a political and military national unity. It was more of a geographical than a political unity. The Italian catholic world was bitter on the event of annexing Rome. A focused anticlericalism has divided due to the reaffirmation motto.

In 1861 at Turin the kingdom of Italy was proclaimed and the soldiers marched towards Rome on 20 September 1870. Pope Pius IX was almost under house arrest; therefore, people protested the civil election and refused to be elected. The two ideologies viz. Free Church and Free State prevailed. A complete peace arrived by the pact of 11 Feb 1929, viz. *the Lateran Concordance*.

The human and social background of young Calabria. What was engraved in the young Calabria in his spiritual formation?

We are all sons and daughters of our parents and children of our culture and happenings.

To know the charism and the life of Calabria, one has to pay attention to books he read, people who stood next to him, and the friendship he built up. In other words, the socio-political and religious situations that had marked his life and above all the formation at home and in the seminary.

The increased growth of the priests where Calabria grew was a fertile soil of sanctity in Verona. A number of societies and institutions came up at that stage of 18th century. Verona had many solidly engraved Pious associations, foundations and educational institutions when Calabria lived.

After the requisition of religious institutions by Napoleon, the French revolution has marked many European countries. We see them in Spain, France and Italy. There arose more than 470 religious' institutions during that epoch.

Italy had the impact in northern side mainly in three regions viz. Piemonte, Lombardi, and Veneto. Historians conclude that the search for sanctity led many to begin charitable institutions and associations and thus transform the society.

When monasteries were taken over by State, people found a new way of expressing sanctity through Charity, forming men and women dedicated to charity. The liberal State made effort with laws and means to uplift many people who had been ignored the fragile, the sick, and children of war. The Christian conscience took to themselves the responsibility over this abandoned weak section.

Religious foundations in Verona in late 18th century prior to John Calabria

In spite of Napoleon's intervention and appropriation of religious institutions and structures, the Austrian presence and the Italian State, in the course of 30 years, 16 religious institutions came up in the territory of Verona. The Pioneers among them are Fr. Peter Lombardi 1768-1844, St. Gaspare Bertoni 1777-1853, Bl. Carlo Steeb 1773-1856, Fr. Camillo Bresciani 1783-1871, Fr. Antonio Provolo 1801-1842, Fr. Nicola Mazza 1790-1866, St. Daniel Comboni extended to African territory, and exceptional women like St. Magdalena of Canossa, Leopoldina Naudet and Teodora Campostrini. Many diocesan priests

like Bl. Agostini, Fr. Baldo, Msgr Giacomelli, Bl. Nascimbeni preceded St. John Calabria.

The religious formation of the religious founders of Verona

Generally, the theological formation was poor but marked with piety and devotions. However, the Jesuit model presented by St. Charles Borromeo influenced the public life a lot. There was a religious awakening by the early 19th century.

Calabria's Family

Oreste Giovanni Calabria was born at 11.30 am on Wednesday 8 of October 1873, in Verona at the topmost flat under the ceiling of an old house at *Vicolo Disciplina*, Lane No.8. His baptismal register of St. Stefano, records his name as Giovanni Oreste Maria, but the name John prevailed gradually.

His father Luigi was born in Verona on 13 July 1820 and was a cobbler. He worked for a long period at a company making shoes for military men, and at one time, he established in a small corner near the stairs of his own residence. He was a simple and gentle man who loved his work and family. His narrow and humid working place caused him fatal bronchitis.

His mother Angela Foschio, with singular Christian virtues was formed by the institute of Fr. Mazza. Angela was born in Verona on 7 August 1831. Her father Paolo Foschio of Spilimbergo (Pordenone), moved to Verona in search of work. He married Giovanna Tosi and had three children. Angela is the first and Teresa is the last. When Paolo is called back to military work in building the wall – for the Austrian force Giovanna was compelled to keep Angela at the age of six in the orphanage of Mazza. She remained there for 18 years. She taught in the same institute and was known as pious, modest, timid, decisive and

much committed to prayer. She gained a singular devotion to Divine Providence and Mary the sorrowful Mother.

She met Luigi and after some months, they got married in the Holy Apostle church on 6 April 1856. Angela was of 25 and Luigi of 36 years old. They found their residence on the 4th floor at Disciplina lane, no 8. She worked in a restaurant, linen washing, ironing and mending, to earn the needs of the family.

The Calabria couples had 7 children. The first four died in their early age and then Teresa, Gaetano, and the last is our John.

We know very little of his early age that he spent like any other child. He attended the church regularly, and loved to play out "*the altar performance*" at home. His brother and sister and the lady Barbara Ricca, who was his godmother and well-wisher, who at retirement, finally joined their family, had to attend seriously to the narration of the homily he had heard in the church.

Chapter Two

THE COBBLER'S SON

John was enrolled in the nursery at Santa Caterina, in Corso Porta Palio. His teacher was Giulia Botton. Calabria used to say, Giulia "*you are my great teacher, after my mother*". She, later, used to visit her dear Fr. Calabria for confession.

Calabria remembers a special act that Giulia did for him to encourage him in a moment when he overturned the inkpot on the copybook and cried aloud saying, '*I am good for nothing'*. "*Do not cry, you know I too before becoming your teacher had done similar mistakes, you will see, one day you too will learn to read and write*."

After five years of nursery and pre-primary, Calabria had to go to the Stigmatine's in the year 1881. He was already of 8 years. The school chronicle tells that Bro. Giovanni Battista Cavinato, was the teacher when John was in class 2. The following year he had the "*pious teacher"* Bro. Albano Clementi who became a priest in 1883. In his primary class 4, he had as teacher (1885-86) Fr. Luigi Nicola Tomasi.

We note that in 1884-85 John was seriously sick and could not attend the school. Added to this were the financial problems due to the sickness of his father, who asked Calabria to help in his cobbler's work. He was not promoted from class 4 due to the interruption from school and poverty.

Calabria learned "the permanent expression" and "devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus" from this primary school impression and in every important letter he writes "*at the foot of my Crucifix*" and this expression he carried all through his life. This experience leads him even to offer himself as a victim to God, for the salvation of souls. Certainly, the wonderful teachers of the primary school had imprinted the root of spiritual life in Calabria.

The Bishop of Verona Cardinal Luigi Canossa confirmed him on 29 May 1882. Calabria remembers and narrates a humiliating incident when his godparent could not offer him a gift – usually was a watch - and showed him the city tower clock of *Porta Lupi*: "l*ook up, that is your watch.*"

Calabria dreamed to become a priest, but his mother did not know how… and replied, "*let us entrust to the Providence of God*." This woman had very deep faith in God the provident Father and inculcated this spirit to her Calabria. She taught him the spirit of abandonment to God the Father.

Death of his Father Luigi

In November 1885 Luigi fell sick. He was hospitalized and after a month on 28 February, he died at the age of 65. The burden of arranging for the funeral rituals and paying the expenses of the hospitals, Calabria's family had to go to the pawn house setting aside the few things they had viz. family bed and a drawer table.

John resumed the school after few months, and could not even write all the examinations and therefore was detained. Calabria had to search for a job to support the daily bread of the family.

In via Cavour he found another owner who employed him. To fix the frames and transport them to clients. The few coins that he gained he entrusted to his mother every day.

Unfortunately, one day he dropped a frame while fixing the nails and damaged a diploma as well as the glass. The owner sacked him telling, "*You get out and become a priest, you are good for nothing else"*.

Head down with apron in hand he climbed the steps and reached home in tears. Angela was ironing the cloths and observed John returning. She silently listened to the meticulous narration and thought with deep breath and added,– *indeed, you are to become a priest*.

Angela shared his desire to her confessor Fr. Luigi Giacomelli[3] directed her to Fr. Pietro Scapini, the rector of San Lorenzo, and professor of literature and Maths in the seminary. He helped Calabria's family and many other needy families. When the church repair progressed, Fr. Scapini introduced Calabria's family to Earl Perez through Mr. Fabbro. They freed two storerooms in via Cavour 42, and offered it to Calabria's family.

[3] *Giacomelli Don Luigi* was an old student of "Don Mazza", became Parish priest of the Santi Apostoli few months after the death of Luigi. A famous teacher, good poet and very noble and zealous pastor. One day he found two young girls, both sisters. He tried much to set them in an institute, when all his effort failed, he kept them in his house and got support from the ladies of the parish. From this tiny seed sprouts the, "Giacomelli institute for the education of girls". During his stay in the parish, he helped much the Calabria family. Fr. Luigi supported and guided Calabria to study and he esteemed that generosity. One day Fr. Calabria went to meet this retired and sick priest and learned a phrase from his lips' *oho Fr. John, you are in San Zeno in Monte, holy and blessed soil*' Calabria later on repeats and narrates this event and borrowed this expression as his own in his writings to the religious.

Chapter Three

CHALLENGES ON THE WAY TO PRIESTHOOD

From 1889 to 1892, for three years, John attended as day scholar in the Grammar school of the seminary. Fr. Scapini was the real mediator for this step. Fr. P. Rossi and a cleric supplied necessary used books for John to study.

Many a day with empty stomach John attended his lessons and sometimes Fr. Scapini held him back to share a frugal meal in the presbytery. Finally, in 1892, John did the entrance exam, and he obtained for Italian 7 and Latin 5 marks; thus, became eligible to the Grammar School of the Seminary.

Until 1930 it was optional for seminarians to stay in the complex or outside with own family or in some presbytery. The noble seminary of Verona founded in 1440 and developed by Jesuits and Somascans, for long time, finally became one of the best diocesan institutes in Europe. It had the best professors and a climate of cultural and moral values.

Calabria began his Grammar school adventure at the age of 19 in 1892. He made four trips back and forth to the Seminary on every working day, practically on empty stomach. His class was of 31 students, and in the first year, he had to study Religion, Philosophy, Maths, Physics, Latin and Italian literature, Greek and History as well as the Gregorian Song. In his final mark sheet of the academic year he was promoted in Maths, not sufficient in Greek (5+), had 7 in History and Gregorian Song, 8 in Religion and sufficient in other subjects. He was one of the five last ones and all the other 26 were exceptionally good.

In spite of the remark that he was *less intelligent,* he was promoted, out of respect for Fr. Scapini the veteran and holy professor, to the

second year with a demand to repeat the weak subjects. We learn that Calabria had not completed primary school properly; he did it for name's sake, his preparation to grammar school, besides his very frugal food and weak health. Fr. Scapini took his beloved John, to the summer house to supplement him with proper food and enable him to be stronger to study. His giddiness and weak health indeed became a critical issue for priesthood. Fr. Scapini had even made a futile attempt requesting the Rector Msgr Bacilieri a free accommodation for Calabria in the seminary.

The inmates of the small house increased to seven when Gaetano his brother married Emilia, and the elderly widow Barbara, as well as Teresa with her daughter Elvira. John resumed his daily trip to seminary to study wearing shabby extra-large dress gifted by others, empty stomach and with countless humiliations on the way, in the classrooms along with innocent laughter of companions.

Angela after her night duty in the hotel had overslept at noon; John never bothered to awake her, and ate some cold food and returned to class.

In 1893, Calabria family had to vacate the house and they took on rent a single room number seven in the humid ground floor at the side of St. Lorenzo. One winter day when his companion visited him and proposed, to save him from the ice frozen site, "*Why don't you go to the public library to study*?" John took that suggestion and frequently went to the municipal library to study his own subjects.

At the end of the academic year, the result was not brilliant in Greek and Latin just 5, and other subjects minimum, but the insistence of Fr-Scapini and the absence of the Rector helped his promotion.

During this holiday mission in the parish with Fr. Scapini, Mrs Fabbro found the goodness of Calabria and requested him to teach her son in the grammar school. It was all the more, to offer him a plate of better food. During those days, he met Earl Francis Perez's family and the Lady Miss Lavinia and Maria. These in turn became special people of God's attention in the Opera.

Calabria was not less intelligent, Fr. Pedrollo, who lived next to him for forty-four years testifies, "*the spontaneous reflections, flow of words all of his own, showed his rich cultural patrimony, but was not smart to the systematic and rigorous studies of his time*".

Here is another observation of a close friend and co-founder of UMMI prof. Antonio Pittoni, on Fr. Calabria, "He *was so different from others; timid, and reserved. His scanty food and even empty stomach, even whole night caring for the sick, did not permit him to be brilliant. In addition, the absence of regular school life made him weak in studies, not less brilliant*".

Military Service

Calabria, being an external student, did not become eligible for a sum of 1200 Lire as tax exemption which was permitted every year for the resident seminarians from the seminary funds. And the same Rector Bacilieri, later became the Bishop and Cardinal of Verona. He thought that it would help him to prove and improve his vocation. Therefore, Calabria had to get enrolled in the military service at the age of 21.

On 10 December 1894 he went to the district office and after five days, thanks to the mediation of Francis Perez, Calabria was sent to work in the fifth Company of Health department of the military hospital of Verona.

Daily he attended the Mass in the military chapel, and he became an esteemed companion of the group. He had to undergo humiliations to attain credibility. Calabria was very agile in nursing as if he knew it for years.

'*Those were the wonderful days of my life'*, refers Calabria. *I was jack of all*. However, in the military exercise he was miserable, whereas in the hospital service, he excelled. Calabria remembers that the soldiers, because of his innocence, tricked him many a times by their absence from the dormitory at nights and by not taking orders from him during the distribution of duties.

The best time of my life

To the surprise of all who defined the call up in military as a waste of time, and the superiors who thought John's dream to be a priest will be tested or even may vanish.

John learned to serve with joy the sick people almost over the two years of service. He experienced a change in the hard attitude of people who, when in their physical pain, dropped their mask and came closer to God and to people.

His companions, soldiers and superiors were so pleased to be in John's presence, and they could count on him their every need. His stunning charity was laudable. With his affection, he conquered all and no one dared to utter a cruel word or indecent language in his presence.

Even the soldiers got surprised and exclaimed how one could remain innocent like Calabria, and the Major Darra replied, "*you all count on your personal strength while Calabria counts on God's blessings through his daily Communion and weekly confession*."

Sisters of Mercy

Besides the chaplain, the sisters of Mercy, a Congregation founded by Blessed Carlo Steeb[4] and Blessed Vicenza Maria Poloni, helped in the

[4] *Blessed Carlo Steeb (1733-1856),* a Lutheran who had his studies in Tubingen, Germany came to Verona for commercial purpose along with his family, and he embraced Catholic faith and became priest in 1796. The merciful Divine Love of God touched him, moved him to attend to the last ones, the wounded, and the sick. He joined the brotherhood of priests and laity for the hospitals. He worked in the parish of Lazzaretto for 18 years and matured his idea of establishing a congregation to care for the sick. The genuine enthusiastic young person Vincenza Maria Polina founded the institute

apostolate in the hospital. Calabria always esteemed and held high regards for them. Their maternal care impressed Calabria and kept in his mind the necessity of motherly care for the sick, the children and the old people. This prompted him to establish the Sisters' community of PSDP next to the Brothers' in the service of children and sick.

His friends from the officials

During those two years of military service, with his simplicity in service, Calabria became friend of many officials. Even when he failed to perform properly his prompt steps, they excused him knowing his simplicity. When he fell down on the stairs and broke the medicine and syringes, while reporting to the official instead of scolding he got consolation – *are you hurt*? Calabria even had some special food from the list of weak people and he tells, "*I enjoyed the plate of rice and a glass of wine*".

He kept respect and friendship with many doctors of the military hospital and preserved this friendship all through his life. Some became his close followers as external brothers and others even as religious. The Colonel Orlando Giovanni was a terror to most people but had a soft heart for Calabria. "*When I pray, I command, but when I order, I put in care*…." Calabria used to remember his words. The Hospital director Giovanni Orlandi, retired as General, became a practicing Christian and Calabria used to say about him, "*had it have taken place when he was in office*…"

Another landmark of military life was his meeting with Fr. Natale, the Carmelite priest, and this friendship and guidance. This guiding voice lasted for forty years of Calabria's life as his confessor and guide of the Opera, until the death of Fr. Natale. Without him, we would have had a saintly Parish priest of Verona, but not the great Founder of the

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"*Sorelle della Misericordia,*" sisters of mercy. Pope Paul vi beatified him in 1975, and *Vincenza Maria Polina* was Beatified on 21 September 2008.

Religious Congregations and a *Champion of Gospel Charity, attending to world's countless necessities*.

Military Service Completed

On September 2 of 1896 soldier Calabria received the relieving letter with a beautiful military document, "*lived with good character and served the nation with fidelity and honour*". The Colonel could not add anything more though he admired his faithful and good conduct. When the young cleric Calabria presented to the same medical authority, Colonel Giovanni had no resistance to grant special permit of "*free access*" to visit the patients of the military hospital.

Once freed from the military service Calabria spent few days at home and did not delay to present himself to Fr. Scapini. Immediately he instructed him to get the privilege of one-year exemption and to attempt at the third-year exam. Scapini told the teachers to be considerate to Calabria because of his two years military service.

He dusted the books and resumed the study with the help of Fr. Scapini and some friends. They all helped him to understand one-year course in two months. One day Calabria collapsed in the sacristy after the church service and Fr. Scapini got scared and called for doctors and after diagnosis concluded that the tension of studies, and all the more, lack of proper food. Because the family of Perez and Fabbro were on summer holidays, and could not provide the needed help to Calabria.

Finally Fr. Scapini kept Calabria with him and provided sufficient nutrients for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The preparation is over and early November he went for the examination and while preparing along the corridor there came the Rector Bacilieri and passed a statement: "*What do you look for, Calabria? Better, you attend the final year of the grammar school"*. Rector, and later on, the Bishop and Cardinal of Verona, was of opinion that those clerics who are weak in studies should be given no concession in the academic matters.

Remembering these events of humiliations, to return to the grammar school to do from scratch Latin and Greek, Calabria expressed, "*In spite of all trials I never had a minimum of doubt on my vocation*."

The academic year went very fast and Calabria performed much better in all his subjects. On the final examination day on Maths, his beloved Fr. Scapini recommended the young professor Fr. Trida, S*o "don't you give him six",* and the humorous priest replied, "*impossible*". Fr. Scapini retorted, *"try to understand, this student has done two years military service, and I guarantee, here is a real stuff for a good priest, I assure you he will do so well even without Maths and Greek"*, and the professor said, "*Impossible to give him six, he deserves a seven"*. In fact in the final of third year Calabria got seven for religion, Maths, Physics, Literature, History and 8 for Gregorian music and sufficient marks for all other subjects.

Chapter Four

MY SPIRITUAL FATHER

Fr. Natale of Jesus

Giuseppe Giacomo Fada born in Lavone, Brescia, on 27 May 1863, became a Discalced Carmelite and took the name Fr. Natale di Gesù. Calabria counted him as his *father* and the early religious affectionately called him the *Grandpa of the Opera*.

His family was rather well to do, had enough land, firewood for sale, besides animal farm. The members used to pray Rosary in the evenings, a usual custom of the villagers.

At the age of 12 when his Father died, Joseph had stopped his studies and helped his mother to carry out the farm work. At the age of 20, he joined the novitiate of Carmelites of Brescia and received the religious habit in 1883. And on 25 January he made the religious profession and resumed his studies for two years of philosophy and literature, necessary for entry to theological studies.

Transferred to Venice for theological studies and he did well in all his subjects. The Patriarch of Venice Cardinal Dominic Agostini ordained him on 16 March 1889. After ordination, he continued his studies in Moral Theology for three years. After two years, Fr. Natale is transferred to Verona, at the age of 29, to the Barocca church of St. Mary of Assumption. The convent was in the extreme corner of an old monastery transformed to juvenile prison for many years by the Italian State. They elected him as superior of the community for three years, re-elected for another term. Later on, he became the provincial councillor and held many other offices. His room remained the same for almost 58 years and at the age of 78 invoking the Virgin Mother of

Mount Carmel he prayed, "*Why don't you come and accompany me*?" On 21 October 1941 he breathed his last in peace.

Fr. Calabria and the personal doctor of Natale were in deep tears next to the bed of the Carmelite priest. Calabria repeated, "*Pray much for me, because I lost my father.*" In one of his letters in 1951 Fr. Calabria wrote to Cardinal Piazza, "*I feel very much bound to the Carmelite fathers to whom you too belong to, because the beloved father Natale gave life to the Opera of Poor Servants of Divine Providence, an Opera bound to the Carmelites in the heavenly family of God*."

We cannot divide the spirituality of the Opera from the spirituality of the Carmelite father Natale.

Let us look closely at the person of this Friar who guided Calabria with a firm and paternal hand to the peak of sanctity and enlightened with his discernment to interpret the *signs* God showed for the Opera.

A closer look at the person of Fr. Natale: A strong man with an above average height, lively eyes, shadowed with strong upper eyebrow, a tight crown of hair, gradually greying, usually covered with a black cap, and dressed very carelessly. The first impression is that this man never offered any sympathy, and his way of dealing with people were not very satisfactory, his language was essential and limited.

Those who could ignore the repulsive appearance and talk to him could immediately note the introspection he had, his understanding heart and open and intuitive nature to go to the substance of the matter. At spiritual direction and confession, he was patient to listen, not judgemental in decision. His language was sincere and cordial. His jokes to the cordial persons, at times impulsive to very familiar ones.

He was a classic highlander, fine brain, great heart, long silence and imposing signs. He could guide a number of people with these inherent talents. Among the many of his spiritual disciples in our context are Earl Perez, Lady Lavinia, Miss Maria Galbusera, all doubtlessly directed by him to join the Opera of Divine Providence Brothers and Sisters.

He lived poor in a very poor surrounding, though through his hand passed incredible quantities of money. Moreover, he spontaneously channelled that money to those who were in need of it and in particular to his "*Good Children*". He even begged money to provide something to the "*Good Children*" at the sisters' care. He advised the sick people of the hospital to sacrifice the sugar, which is harmful to them and give it to the "*Good Children*" of St. Benedict's house, where he goes to hear the confessions of the Poor Servants Sisters.

His rapport with Fr. Calabria was "two lives intimately in communion." The greatness of Natale is his constant support in the realisation of a saintly soul in Fr. John Calabria. In a brief spiritual testament, Natale expressed it in the following words, "*In my humble ministry to you, as everything is known to you, it was the Divine Son who had directed his true minister Fr. Calabria. You are His humble instrument in His hands to do great things for the glory of Catholic Church.*"

It is not an exaggeration to say that in Fr. Natale and Fr. Calabria there was a charismatic integration in the highest form both divine and human. Both lived for the other and both for the Opera of "*Good Children*". They met in the Military hospital of Verona when Calabria was only 21 and Fr. Natale in his 31, years.

With accuracy, Fr. Natale in a very precious but hidden way sculptured in that young soldier a docile, pious and flexible masterpiece of holiness.

They complimented each other with their nature in psychological, ascetic and charismatic fields. Fr. Natale with his resolute and good-natured energy, had reflexive and analytic intelligence, was effortlessly humorous, had solid theological base, sobriety of life and faith, all well combined. He was strict to self, but understanding towards everyone's frailty. He was unambiguous and unimposing. He knew to assume responsibility when he was advised, rather than being commanded.

Fr. Calabria found not only a confessor and spiritual director, but also a true father of his soul. Therefore, he abandoned ingenuously his

life into those hands to be guided in his steep journey of priestly and Christian perfection.

Fr. Calabria writes in his letter in the year 1911 to Fr. Natale, "*Father, remember that in everything I count on you, fully convinced that the will of God is expressed through you; therefore speak, speak in the Lord and I with Divine grace listen to you always. I tell you that I feel and it seems to me that God wants me to have me for Him, but the confirmation I await from you.*"

Fr. Natale advised, at times commanded Calabria. But the weight and responsibility of the action every time burdened the shoulders of Fr. Calabria. It is confusing to suspect that Fr. Calabria allowed his confessor and spiritual father to rip him psychologically. Calabria discussed, dialogued, and then elaborated the plan of action always with Fr. Natale.

Fr. Calabria could live a meaningful priestly life with pastoral care and service to the sick. However, the love of Christ compelled him to dedicate a way that was gradually becoming clear to him. Fr. Natale understood and interpreted this Divine plan to this exceptional person Fr. Calabria.

In doubtful situation and conflict of conscience both the internal and external order, Calabria ran to him to overcome every perplexity. The Charism Fr. Calabria received he placed meticulously for the scrutiny of Fr Natale before it was being implemented. Fr. Calabria could experience in the words of endorsement of Fr. Natale the voice of the Absolute Master of the Opera.

Chapter Five

AT THE SERVICE OF THE GREAT KING (1897-1901)

The uniform of the Great King

After the selection examination, the professors got together to express their view on each student to admit to theology.

Reaching at the 24th position of Calabria, there were hot discussions; the leading opinion was to reject him based on two facts: poor health and lack of proper intelligence. Fr. Scapini stood up and in a very touching tone spoke: "*I cannot deny the lack of intelligence and poor health of Calabria, but you do not consider the positive aspects, the spiritual and moral strength of this young man. Don't you consider his goodness, humility, obedience, sense of sacrifice, zeal for souls? If you count him unworthy, I refuse my responsibility before God*".

After saying his convictions on his candidate in one breath, Scapini remained standing for a while and no one dared to speak a word more on this candidate. This final card of Fr. Scapini was unchallengeable and they accepted John Calabria to theology.

As a symbol of radical difference, the students of theology had their cassock day in respective parishes by the parish priests. Fr. Scapini wanted to preside over the function and chose the most suitable date and place: on 10 August during the patron's feast of the church, St. Lawrence and inauguration of the renovation of the Church.

At the ceremony of vestition there were the entire family members of Calabria including the elderly Masina, the woman who took shelter in

their house, Fr. Natale, Earl Perez, Marchese Da Lisca, the family of Fabbro, and many Carmelite fathers.

Fr. Scapini blessed the vest and dressed John. The habit and at the service of the Great King! Says Fr. Calabria remembering the simple and touching event. With respect, he wore it kissing before wearing. In his memo, Calabria always remembered this date with gratitude to strip off the old man and put on the new.

Cleric Calabria

Glistening with emotion his mother rejoiced the sight of her little John and his early dreams. Twenty-four-year-old, lean Calabria, is underweight. His thin face, sweet features, chestnut coloured soft hair, clear eyes, wide ears, cheekbones projected, Greek nose, wide mouth and short hand with long thin fingers, does not have strong muscles.

With good and original intelligence, intuitive, prompt in catching the essentials, attentive to the human needs. He expressed great loving heart, tender, affable, generous, patient; even though unable to express it visibly; affectionate to people whom he counts trustworthy.

Calabria had a very delicate conscience, without the torments of scrupulosity. He has a strong will, tenacious, able to resist any assault of embarrassment of failures. Unshakeable to the convictions if he knows they are really genuine and Christian.

On this human foundation worked the grace he learned from his mother, teachers, Stigmatine priests and parish community, above all his frequency to the sacraments. Surprisingly the friends of the synagogue and co soldiers influenced him much positively. Calabria had a great spiritual equilibrium vibrating with solid faith made him sure and free.

Surprisingly the secular world praised Calabria and esteemed his virtues while the formation teams always found him weak and complex. The secular world looked for the concrete facts of solidarity, fidelity to the given promises, zeal towards the neighbour, and the social virtues

while others looked for the academic performance, health issues, adaptability with ingenuity and the like. His supernatural way of appraising things and unassuming living was not convincing to the formation team. Msgr. Zenati often discouraged him to proceed, due to his ill health while the wise Fr. Scapini insisted his part saying, "*He is not sick and I shall take care of his good health, and learning is not just the academic*".

The two inseparable values we note in Calabria are his innocent desire to be a minister of Christ, and a coherent life, always doing good to people. In the course of time, Fr. Calabria lived moments of doubts and lived concerned in the choice of means he made to reach goals and means, but we never see him doubting the final goal. Difficulties he overcame with advice of the faithful friends, and above all with the obedient attitude to the spiritual father. We note him saying in difficult moments, *"let us talk it over with the Bishop, or we shall listen to what the Apostolic Visitor would say, or let me listen to my spiritual father.*" In spite of His strong will, he had to consult his spiritual father in order to remain in the track of God's will which was expressed through the superiors.

Theological studies

Now began more suited subjects to his aspiration. But even here, there were hard moments to overcome. Dogmatic and Moral, theology; Sacred Scripture, Hebrew language, Church History, Canon Law, Liturgy, Homiletic, and Gregorian music.

They were not easy at all, especially he had to fret with the dogmatic. The young and brilliant professor Fr. Zenati had his systematic and logical exposition. He had to repeat almost every exam of Zenati, because John was very good in presentation but he was weak in explanation and significance. He was spared on the mediation of Fr. Scapini who commented to Fr. Zenati: "*you are only a beginner; there are many other ways to evaluate a student*."

Some professors like Fr. Trido and Fr. Agostino Vedovi saw the extraordinary goodness in Calabria and esteemed him. One day recollects Msgr. Vedovi, "I *had taken a famous book of an author and read his long list of degrees printed in the book. As soon as I finished reading, there comes a phrase from the back bench – et mortus est – and he died-, it was Calabria who uttered it and caused all to laughter including myself,*" as he closed the book.

Finally, these four years went on very fast and as Calabria improved the grades of examinations. In 1900-1901 the first semester of final year Calabria remembers an interesting event. The examination commission was presided over by Msgr. Bacilieri. The frightened Calabria goes to extract the topic. It was fortunately a very well-studied theme and Calabria began to explain fluently. With certainty, he moved from argument to argument. The same Msgr. Bacilieri was impressed and stopped at the third argument, saying, "*Sufficient*".

It was the Lord, comments Calabria, describing the event, *because the third argument was not so certain and could have failed the fluency in quoting the fathers of the church*. He thought of obtaining ten out of ten but got an eight.

Relief Opera for the sick and poor

Calabria with another group of seminarians and well-wishers founded an Opera to assist the sick and poor. Calabria made eight regulations for it:

1. *"In favour of sick and poor a pious Opera is begun in Verona.*
2. *Aim: weekly visit of sick and abandoned poor in shelter homes and hospitals.*
3. *The visits will be on Thursday on permitted hours and try to console the sick, to inspire in them the desire for*

heaven, and Christian surrender. Will also reach material help according to the permitted economic conditions.

4. *Benefactors and promoters found the Opera.*
5. *The promoters diffuse the Opera seeking more benefactors, helps, and keep account in the register.*
6. *The benefactors will commit to contribute regularly.*
7. *The benefactors will enjoy spiritual benefits, prayers, and a Holy Mass to be offered in a particular place and date.*
8. *Every benefactor can verify at any time of the year the annual accountability of the pious association. 30 April 1898."*

The cleric Calabria presented these regulations to his then bishop Luigi Canossa for approval and blessing the initiative. The association had few members. It lasted for four years. Three clerics became priests and continued their mission in respective places. The lay associates each one in their places and offices kept up charitable activity. Earl Perez after some years as administrative councillor of Zevio, Verona, emptied all his properties and joined with Fr. Calabria becoming a model religious brother of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence.

A clear sign from God

One evening of November cleric Calabria was returning home after assisting a seriously sick man. Those days they were living at Piazzetta Scalette Rubiani 5, Verona. It was a cold and stuffy evening. The way was just seen by the gas lights of the homes along the way. While searching his key from the pocket he stumbled against a loose bundle-like object. He bent and noticed a child wrapped in swabs sleeping. He shook him gently, and heard him murmur some words crying, "*they are beating me, so often …. Therefore, I escaped!"*

Calabria recognized him. He used to sit along the road with a domesticated rat that used to draw some numbers and he collected them to play a lottery. And passer-by offered him something.

"*I don't want to go back there, you are good, and you cared for me and gave me often alms. I want to stay with you*"; he snuggled clearing his nose. "*Stand up and enter my home*".

In the light, he saw a poor child, lean, with two eyes of eagle all frightened. Now you sit and eat, told the seminarian Calabria offering him a chair and placing before him his own frugal dish of supper. Then putting three chairs together along the wall he placed a plank and over it his mattress, offered him a warm shelter to that frightened being. Calabria slept on the plank, telling, *tomorrow we shall think of tracing out your family, now you sleep peacefully*.

Seeing him curled up under the blanket he looked like a heap of motionless bones: *poor lad, he would really need the warm hug of a mother but instead the human exploitation and evil desire have malformed him and he has become a means of profit making*.

Early morning, he appeared peaceful but after a long cleaning by Lady Mesina, he became fresh but pale. His face showed him to be around six years of age.

Calabria ran to get the advice from Fr. Scapini; certainly, no more throwing him back to the street. One has to be prudent at the same time. "*for the time being you keep him with your family and we shall enquire of his family*" said Fr. Scapini. The child had no document, and could not explain in Italian. Probably left behind by some wanderers and fearing ill treatment, ran away at night.

Also Fr. Natale told him to keep the child and await a "sign" before deciding the destiny of the child. That same day a known Jewish man gifted the child new dress from top to bottom. And three days later during a feast at Machesi family of Da Lisca, organized a bingo game and offered the fund – sixty Lira, *a huge amount in those days*, to the child at "*the seminarian Calabria*".

They tried their best to find his where about, all in vain. Calabria family loved that child as their own. And, one day John obtained permission from bishop to baptize the child under condition. They named him Augusto Meneghini. After 10 years Fr. John presented Augusto at the registry office to enrol him in their records.

The four Fabbro brothers, Domenico, Antonio, Emilio, and Filippo, stood as witness of these records. After some consultancy, the office gave him residence certificate, assigning him the presumed age of 17 years, a conventional date of birth as 17 March 1890[5].

[5] Comune di Verona, Ufficio anagrafe, " *Civil ricognition of the Citizenship of Meneghini Augusto: The year 1902 May 2 at 15.30 in the municipality office in front of me – Veronesi Dr.Giovanni, secretary general on behalf of the mayor, with the deed of 2 January 1898 – office of the civil District of Verona- appeared Meneghini Augusto unknown, of about 18 years, book binder born in unknown place but here resident …asks enrolment in the office register….Present four witnesses: Fabro Domenico s/o Antonio, Fabro Antonio Domenico, Fabro Emilio Domenico, Golla Filippo of Federico all from Verona mature in ages, promise…"It is true and worth noting in our personal knowledge that in November 1897 the reverend Oreste Giovanii Calabria S/o Luigi returning on an evening at hour 23.00 after visiting a sick person, met at a public place a child, in appearance aged six years, asked him alms. After some days the same child was found sleeping at the door of Fr. Calabria. On being awakened, he asked for refuge saying, "I have no one and I do not know where to go. My people beat me and then I told them that I am going to the young priest…." These words touched Fr. Calabria and the child from that day stayed under his protection. That child is Augusto Meneghini, who had no relatives. After completing all the legal formalities through the police office, Fr. Calabria came to know that Augusto was bought by a certain man called Sestri Levante from the Zingary (nomads) who had abandoned him in Verona. This child had his stay in different places such as Bussolego, in Trento, with the Salesians and Carmelites for study. Now he lives with Fr. Calabria as a well- read, strong and motivated person.*

The diary of Seminarian Calabria

Calabria interprets this meeting with the child as a call from the Lord writes in his diary: "this activity of the Lord – *Good Children Home* – I felt in me as an young seminarian. And the Lord gave me a clear sign, when during the winter evenings when a child came to my door steps a poor child of about five years, abandoned by his own and I picked him and kept him in my room, sharing my bed for him."

The signs Calabria sought were not great miraculous events, connecting many unexpected events of life for him was a design of God. He looked for a higher sign to act according to the will of God. This attitude he received from the faith and love of God, and not the desire to "twist or tempt", God's way to his.

Fr. Luigi Pedrollo the Vicar and first successor of Fr. Calabria meticulously noted this attitude of Calabria in the disposition for the process of Canonization explains this theme: the "sign" that convinced Fr. Calabria to take some important decisions were the words of his confessor and his superiors. The sign in material support for the abandoned child; the sign of the healing of his mother to continue the charity for the abandoned children. The sign to receive the office as assistant in the parish of San Benedetto al Monte that made him free to carry on the activity in favour of "the Good Children." The sign of the medal of St. Benedetto buried in that land he wanted to acquire for the children, both at St Benedetto and Maguzzano. Not all these signs were so powerful to tempt the Lord, but a confirmation of the great filial faith he had in the Divine Providence and in the intercessions of the saints.

Sub deacon

At the end of the third-year theology, the superiors of the seminary had to present to the bishop the detailed curriculum of every student. It is all about the last word to accept them for priestly ordination of the

candidates. The bishop of Verona was Msgr. Bacilieri, successor of Cardinal Luigi Canossa who passed away in March 1900.

It was his responsibility to decide who is to become a priest, and whom to admit or not, to priesthood. The rector of the seminary and successor of Bacilieri was Msgr. Casella, professor of philosophy. He read a meticulous report on each cleric: way of life, assimilation of studies, piety, seriousness, maturity and the like. Reaching at the end of the candidates, he remained hesitant. "A*re there others*?" asked the bishop. "*There would be the cleric Calabria*". "*What is the opinion of the professors*? Pressed Bishop Bacilieri. "*Excellency, you know that the opinions are divided, especially for the inadequacy in studies*." "*Yah, I know well for human science we are flat on the ground. But for goodness*?" *Aha, for this no one has a word to differ, the cleric Calabria is the best for goodness and mercy. On this point, all are agreeing to say the cleric Calabria is excellent in goodness and compassion. Moreover, all approve on this point*. Then the Bishop Bacilieri pronounced – *if we have admitted many intelligent clerics let us admit one who excels in virtue and sanctity. In the house of the heavenly Father there are many mansions*."

A similar pronouncement concluded a pleasant wonder, because it came from the one who was always against the young Calabria being promoted to priest hood. The negative judgements on studies persist, but the goodness of life made way. His way of living is no more counted strange, but was fruit of deep faith and great love for the Lord and souls.

There is a science which cannot be learned from academic books but derived straight from God. And, the humble cleric Calabria labelled as "*poor*" by human science will become rich in that Divine Wisdom who has made him one day, an advisor sought for, by bishops and Cardinals, and even, consulted by his same professors of morals.

"*I thank you Father, that these things you have hidden from the wise and revealed them to the little ones."* (Mt. 11.25)

New Priest

After overcoming so many obstacles finally arrived the much-desired day. On 11 August 1901, Cardinal Bacilieri lays his hands and ordains 21 deacons for the Church of Verona. Among them fifth in the row is John Calabria. In his homily, Cardinal Bacilieri advises them to shine in "heavenly wisdom", to adorn them with "unharmed conducts" and "noble virtue".

And our new priest, during all the years of awaiting has already proved having divine wisdom and human Christian virtues in a heroic way.

"*Try to understand what you do; imitate what you accomplish*" continued the bishop in his ritual advises.

"Make them, O Lord, to believe what they proclaim, teach what they believe, and put in to practice what they teach."

At the conclusion of the long life of Fr. Calabria, the judgement of God is expressed in the unanimous assertion of the people: *"the Saint Expired!*" Also the Pope, Cardinals, bishops raise their coral acclamation of praising God for having gifted the Church of our times a great saint, "*a bright light house in the Church of God*."

First Holy Mass

During the holidays in August and the feast of Assumption, the beautiful Church of St. Lawrence was jam-packed by people in festive mood. At the altar a pale face, and the feast lead to a tempest of thoughts and recognition, humility and joy, remains the new Priest. At his side, the solemn and composed, betraying the nervous movement of footsteps a joy realized, enthroned Fr Scapini. In the front kneeler, surrounded by many friends and benefactors, remains meditative with her black veil, his mother Angela. From her eyes springs tears of joy.

Not yet reached the text of homily held by Fr. Scapini, but we can imagine the tune of speech and the essence of his message: a hymn of

thanksgiving to the Lord for having had the joy of welcoming and enjoy the fruit of his hard work. He had recognised the presence of a divine seed of vocation hidden in the young John Calabria. He remembers: many others had discarded him as a useless specimen. He had defended, protected, and worked for him with care. And, now here is the outcome sprout in its beauty and mystery, Fr. John Calabria.

His sturdy character and rigid training does not permit him to shout with joy and satisfaction and rejoice on the victory after sustaining hard battle. His student, his protege, his John is finally priest. Now I can gift to the Church of Verona without doubting he will soon become a gift to the entire Catholic Church. That time the new priest, insignificant in appearance; will be proclaimed by Pope Pius XII *"Champion of Gospel Charity", "A Gem of Italian clergy"*

Chapter Six

CURATE AT ST STEPHEN (1901-1907)

Universal curate

The new priest was invited to breathe some relaxing days at Zevio, in the villa of his friends Marchesi Da Lisca together with Earl Francis Perez. They spent one month of holiday for physical and spiritual benefit. That was his last summer holidays and thereafter Fr. Calabria renounced it to be with the *Good Children* of the oratory and the sick people stayed alone in families. Returning to Verona he found a letter from the Bishop's Curia, dated 24 September, that communicated to him the first pastoral task.

The Bishop has appointed him in *Santo Stefano* parish, the inhabitants are not much desirable people. Because there is a Parish priest who made unbearable and irritable reputation.

Msgr. Bacilieri thought of sending Fr. Calabria there knowing him well armoured in the virtue of humility and patience. After facing so many humiliations and overcoming obstacles to become a priest. He will surely be a different priest, because of his very zealous life. Being a lover of prayer, nothing would frighten him. The friends and colleagues, priests, hearing this appointment extend him compassion and warned him of the unbearable difficulties to endure. While Fr. John writes in one of his diary: "*many voiced me poor Fr. John! But, after six years of my life with this zealous parish priest, I declare that I am happy, and thank God who sent me right to St. Stephen's parish, in my first years of sacred ministry*."

In the parish they entrusted him with the responsibility of the youth of the oratory and confessions. With him there was another assistant who had the duty of caring for the sick people. After few months of mutual understanding and at the request of Fr. Calabria they exchanged

the tasks. And this exchange was pleasing to the personal aptitude of each one, for themselves and their apostolate.

On feast days, he goes to celebrate mass in the chapel of St Leonard, on the so called hills. Reaching at the chapel on foot was hard and the villagers of the place kept apart a donkey cart. Life in the parish goes on smoothly.

After doing the ordinary duties, he utilizes the free time to visit the sick people in the hospital. With his tactics and affection, he conquered even the most rebellious and resistant. Thus, he conquered the fame of a wonderful confessor. When someone in the hospital resist the sacraments, the sisters of the hospital or the same parish priests declare: "*here we need the curate of St. Stephen*!" the voice propagates and reaches the curia of the Bishop. Then the Cardinal, to ease him from the misunderstanding from the parish priests, gave him authorisation to minister the sacrament of the sick even outside his parish territory. And the friend priests gave him the title "*universal curate*".

The past two years of experience with the sick in the military hospital taught him not to sneak into houses if not looked-for. If a kind of indifference or hostility is found, he sought the intervention of other people to prepare the ground for him. And when he presents himself to the sick, he begins with a warm conversation using the many rich collections of pleasing sayings, jokes, and riddles. Then gradually with extraordinary tactics and holy prudence introduces the spiritual dialogues. He rarely meets anyone who refuses his invitation for confession. In the military hospital or in the civil hospital, a list of requests is usually ready, which the sisters have collected from the patients. He encounters rare human issues, poor devils, who out of pure ignorance had left the sacramental life, and even educated people, soaked in with mundane mentality and gone away from the Church. He manages to win them with goodness, patience and humility.

Msgr. Bacilieri understood the religious worth of his curate, wanted to entrust him the delicate responsibility of the confessor of the Grammar School young seminarians. Fr. John turned pale with the

thought of meeting his old professors. But he accepted under obedience.

One day while going towards the chapel of the seminary to hear the confession of the seminarians, he staggers a group of professors whispering at the portico. Fr. Calabria tried to evade them and pass by unobserved making himself smaller and smaller. He removed the cap and tried to gaze at wall. But those wolves observed him and gushed and flanked, and compelled him to pass through their midst. The distinguished Msgr. Michelangelo Grancelli, the learned man, journalist and known poet with loud and powerful voice stopped him: "*what for have you come here?*" "*I am called for confession*", Fr. Calabria confused and humbly replied. Msgr. Grancelli ruffles the lips to give a lavish smile and he always has the same tone of voice, sounds: "*Lapidem quem reprobaverunta edificantes, hic factus est in caput anguli"* (the stone rejected by the builders became the corner stone Ps. 117:22).

Moreover, they were plunged into a moment of silence of consensus in the midst of those academicians, while Calabria bagged in his black cassock moves away with red faced.

In the municipal voting for administrative roles of 1904, the Catholics were also invited to cast vote. Fr. Calabria has ways to affirm the affection and appreciation of those living away from the Church. Verona has a majority of Socialists and anticlericals. In the crowded zone of St. Stephen, they have the absolute majority. Fr. Calabria on the day of voting with his card in hand walked towards the booth to vote. On the way he met a group of youngsters with a rose coloured jacket, they stopped him and asked, "*Where do you go Fr. Calabria*?" "*I go to vote." "But you know Father that today it is dangerous to move around the roads?" "I do my duty as a citizen; I am not afraid of anything". "Well Fr. Calabria, it is better that we accompany you, to save you from any evil-minded people*". "*And the socialists escorted me to the booth"*– tells Fr. Calabria with laughter – *and they accompanied me back hom*e. Even though they knew well that I would not have voted for them!"

And the boys all knew well that Fr. Calabria loved all of them and helped all, irrespective of colour of the party or religion or social class.

Finally, a decent house

With the responsibility and remuneration of curate of the parish the economic situation of Calabrian family improved. The small amount the Parish priest gives him, contributions of holy mass, special gifts and contributions of people saved the family from terrifying misery. We cannot say they flourish in abundance, but they began to live with a certain decorum. There is still an inconvenience. The distance from home to the parish. His friends Fabbro began to search for a residence in the surroundings of St. Stephen parish. They found a free flat around hundreds of meters from the parish, in Vicolo fontanelle Duomo no.1. On November 5 they shifted to that location: Fr. Calabria, his mother, sister Teresa with her daughter, and later on the elderly woman Margerita Masina. The flat is with sufficient space three bed rooms, one for mother and the elderly Margarita, one for Teresa and daughter, one for himself. An office, a storeroom and a kitchen. It is the first time Calabria family lived in a spacious house. The company of Margret relieved his mother from her hard work. This woman has a special role for the children whom Fr. Calabria collects from the streets. She deserves a short memorial.

The lady Margherita Masina lived few meters from the house of Calabria. She worked in the house of counts Ballardo - Very fast she became friend of mother Angela. She was on her 65 and living alone. A simple woman, forthright, though bit grumbling natured, but is golden in her heart. Occasionally she unwinds saying "*what do you think Angela? Now Fr. Calabria is a priest we could be bit more at ease, but he goes in search of those nuisances, boys!*" Nevertheless, when she turns to Fr. Calabria the tone is different: "*if I get a raffle, I shall pay all your debts … but then enough boys*!"

Fr. Calabria knew how to face that apparent hostility tactfully, the fruit of not egoism but inability to hold a break to the frenzied urchins.

Presenting her new abandoned boys, he tells her, "*Masina, this child is orphan; someone abandoned him, what you say we take him?*" The clever woman, with tears in her eyes, melts in the effusion of maternal tenderness, and embraces the child with tender strokes. But then; "*go, away, don't you see that you are sucking the blood of Donn Calabria? Go away*".

"My boys"

The first duty of Fr. Calabria was the pastoral assistance to the boys of the oratory. In fact, during the working days very few boys attended the oratory, (those who do not go to school were committed to some work), but the presence of the priest was counted important and necessary.

St. Stephen oratory had a spacious courtyard, a theatre, and a multipurpose hall, both for children, choir, and parish meetings. In rainy and cold days, the hall was not available to the boys and they remained outside exposed to the bad weather. Fr. Calabria as a practical person felt the need to create a covered area for these children. He worked out a plan and presented to the Parish priest. *"Provided there is no expense from the parish!* – concluded the Parish priest – *you are authorized to work it out."* Fr. Calabria soon went to his friend and well-wisher Earl Perez, finding the great need of building a good space for the children, took interest in supplying necessary materials. For mounting the structure, some workers of the parish came forward. Fr. Calabria always used this method to involve many people for his social projects. In a short time sprang up a vast area, well covered, for the children. In his daily visits to the sick, Fr. Calabria used to meet many children abandoned and uncared. He used to approach them tactfully, make friendship with them, and invited them to attend the oratory. Day by day, the number of children increased and the courtyard became dynamic with uncontrolled shouts. The opening time of the oratory Fr. Calabria was always in their midst, entertaining them with fascinating

games, noble sayings, riddles, and so on. Occasionally he organized outings in the city or even treks up the hills.

In his diary, Fr. Calabria wrote: *"I was sent to St. Stephen, a poor and miserable parish…*"

If Calabria tells, who had swallowed for a long time the bitter bread of others charity and had undergone all forms of humiliations of poverty, we have to believe that the conditions of those people were indeed miserable. We keep in mind that Verona, a military city and famous stronghold of Austrian quadrilateral fort had neither cultivations nor factories around. In addition, the frequent requisitions of forage for animals of military made them poorer and crushed. In that city slum, we had the parish of St. Stephen, and the only activity of the zone worth mentioning was the deposit of silkworm cocoons. About fifty women were working there during the season. And the women of "Rigatta Zatta" used to engage about fifty washerwomen.

The wages were just nominal, with exorbitant contrasts. The girls and children were working in the firebreaks with long working hours almost 12-14 hours a day. For survival the parents had to commit even the small children to work depriving them of games, and even receiving cultural and religious formation.

Fr. Calabria, in this situation felt like doing something. Had the economic conditions allowed, he would have taken all these abandoned children to his house to look after and make them grow healthy, instructed, and upright. He continues in his diary: "from *the first years of my priesthood I started to collect in my house some abandoned poor children and kept them for some time and later tried to put them in some institutes."*

The problem of the poor youth, abandoned to exploitation is heart breaking to all sensible people. And the phenomena were so colossal to discourage any single-handed generous initiative. We have to pray and pray so that the society may change and realize economic systems and forge socio political formula more caring for the needy and poor. He like many other holy founders of Institutes did nothing to fight against the political structure. Did not wish to fight with any group of red or white

brands. Neither with the socialist, nor the popular neo-fascists. More than fight for social justice in the strict sense, he felt involved in concrete charity immediate and petty. To these children who were roaming and strolling through the roads of Verona he gave all, his paternal love, a bread, a book, and a profession.

There were and will be always prophets and preachers of a world of inequality, boiled with foolishness and sleepy palliatives these charitable activities, because, according to them these need to stand up and fight against the social system founded on injustice. But Fr. Calabria was born to be a priest and he lived it in a commendable way. He was interested in human being, to return him the dignity and social conscience. This was always his revolutionary action. The Opera and intervention were very little in front of the ocean of exploited children who are scorned and abandoned. A drop that is lost in the vast ocean of indifference and human egoism. But could not live inert in front of an unjust world. Fr. Calabria wanted to do something at the earliest. He asked advice of his confessor. He wanted to know if that uneasiness that he lived and wedged in his brain is from a philanthropic sensibility or was a call from God.

Fr. Natale encouraged him to do what was possible permitted him and then "*pray and wait for a sign from the Lord*".

His petty activity began in such a way: when he found a child that lived in misery and rejection, he approached him with sweetness and used to invite him to his house, where there was always a place in the dining table and a bed set up. Then he sought institutes that accepted him gratis or with least fees. He used to approach the Hospice of the Exhibits for the little ones in the institute of Daughter of Mary for the children and in the Institute of *Artigianelli* of Brescia, or at Don Bosco for the adults. For some he committed to pay the fees for the food expenses and when the amount went heavier for his pocket to bear, he solicited the generosity of his friends.

Having chosen the mission of Good Samaritan, Fr. Calabria did not enjoy some particular cases. Many tattered and suffering humanity was in front of his eyes.

Those who walk in this way develops a sharp vision and gains a special sensibility. He could thus find a submersed world that to others remained unknown.

Thus, Fr. Calabria unearthed with sadness, another strange withdrawn world: the small chimney cleaners who used to come down from the hilly villages to do a discredited and underpaid work. Those short breaks from work, they gather as roaming dog packs. These children roam through the city, filthy and dirty of smoke. Fr. Calabria tried to approach them to bring them to the oratory to spend their free time and he would have well accepted them. They listened to him shelling their eyes all red, sad and humbled. The filth they had cleaned made them look like lepers and people had kept them apart. Fr. Calabria guessed their bewilderment and humiliation and suffered a lot. He strove hard and by morning, he decided to provide them a place where these poor ones could take refuge and clean up. The following morning he went to his friend Perez and spoke to him with concern.

"Let us hire a place where these boys could gather and wash up"

The Earl Perez who is already the provider of materials for the projects of the young priest began to look for a house. He found a building of two stories in Vicolo Cigno and he took it on rent. The house could take care of around thirty boys. It had above all toilets and showers. Other benefactors took care of the furnishing and decorations. Every year during the Carnival, Fr. Calabria and Perez used to organize the feast for the chimney cleaners. Most of the families of the parish were taking part in the preparation. After eating a good lunch, the chimney cleaners used to end the day with a pleasure ride on a carriage through the city way, a touristic trip like great rich men!

It was touching to learn the attention of Fr. Calabria towards the young chimney cleaners. Only a sensible heart that had experienced the humiliations and segregations caused by poverty could understand that

the humans were not only in need of food and dress but also the decency of self-worth.

The space of chimney cleaners gradually became the property of the parish. In 1960 during the restructuring of the zone the house was demolished but the example of Fr. Calabria perpetuated in the world through the Poor Servant Brothers and Sisters of Divine Providence.

Verona was not a great city and the news spread fast, even without any other modern means of communication. They used to speak often of Fr. Calabria and his concern in favour of abandoned children, both in the healthy salons and popular slums.

Some friends advised Fr. Calabria to be prudent: "*but why taking the responsibility of much quarrels for these boys? Be satisfied with the good you can as assistant in the parish, and leave to the people in authority to take care of them*" But Fr. Calabria used to comment humbly: "*How could I leave those poor ones the Divine Providence placed on my door steps? They are the Lord's people, very needy ones!*"

The obstacles and grumbling were arising even in the family walls. Fr. Calabria as we have seen, was not able to find an immediate placement for the boys he used to bring home. And the poor children naturally are not different from other boys of normal families, instead, often are more rogues and rude.

Mother Angela, elderly as she was, had no strength to look after them, and Masina often lost her temper. But after that, bit grumbling and bit breathing, the two women tried to feed those stomachs, never satiated, and wash and repair their poor dress. Also, other generous people also availed to give short term shelter for some kids. Among them, we find Trevisan sisters and a carpenter, Mr. Trivellin, who became the first master of art in the house of San Zeno in Monte (Verona).

Difficulties to find a settlement in other institutes increased, Fr. Calabria tells with a smile the reply of a director of an institute, "*Oh listen a bit, I am tired,puff between the serious and humorous, also Rev. Fr. Calabria may hear some time a strong no*!" For a boy he could not

get any placement, because of his vivacity and stunts. But he did not feel to get rid of him, and throw him back to the street from where he was picked up. Fr. Calabria was forced to keep him at home.

Lord what shall I do?

Mother Angela and Masina were good and pious, but had lost their youthful energy and had never learned teaching technics to handle these mischievous ones accustomed to wandering life. The difficulties were real ones, besides Mother Angela was sickly and weak. During the winter, 1906 weather and humidity encountered to the maximum. The feeble winter sun did not even infiltrate the passage across the lane of Fontanelle, a narrow alley distancing just three meters. The poor could neither dream to have a heating system in the house. It was simply the luxury of the rich. Mother Angela was already sixty-six. The hard work has already torn her physique and strength. And simple influenza and bronchitis degenerated her health all of a sudden. The sickness really consumed her. She is almost going off like a small light.

In the evening of 13 December, the doctor who visited her shook sadly his head: "*this woman can go from one moment to another*"

Fr John remained petrified. Earl Perez, who was a regular guest in the house of Calabria, found him sitting at his reading desk with his head in his palm and the eyes reddish in tears. He was praying softly. Francis Perez tried to console and encourage him. The niece Marcellina who was there to care the grandmother Angela, was moving from the sick room to kitchen. Once in a while she was peeping into the study room of her uncle priest. Keeping the ears with curiosity, she got this phrase in flight: "*if the Lord wants me to continue this concern for the poor children, return my mother her health and let her live some years.*"

Against every human calculation, mother Angela improved. She resumed her work, and lived for another seventeen months. She died in fact on 8 May 1908. The request of Fr. Calabria had no taste of a magic box, but was an act of faith and an authentic abandonment in the hands

of Divine Providence. Fr. Calabria confessed to his spiritual father the "*pact"* that he had with God. And Fr. Natale interpreted the healing of his mother Angela as a *sign* of Divine will to resume the way already traced. One of the first boys admitted by Fr. Calabria has given this testimony: "*I, Noventa Alessandro, was admitted at Fr. Calabria on 15 November 1906, in the house of Vincolo Fontanelle. I found there two of my old hostel companions, Meneghini Augusto (the gypsy boy) and Tarossi Giuseppe. I was enrolled in the primary school, Tarossi was sent to the Institute of don Bosco, and Meneghini was welcomed at the Discalced Carmelite Friars. During the sickness of Mamma Angela I was in the house. I helped to do the marketing, and used to go to Earl Perez to stock me up on food. The brother Gaetano used to stop for night assistance. At 05.00 in the morning I used to get up to substitute him. He had to go and work at the paper mill of Fedrigoni. In the month of January 1907, a new boy of eleven years was accepted, Martini Oreste. Every morning we used to go to assist the Holy Mass in the church of St Stephen and then go to school. When Fr. Calabria was appointed as Rector of St. Benedict at the pawn mount, I alone was transferred with him. At mid-day, I used to take lunch in the restaurant "Massanti", the owner was a cousin of Fr. Calabria. In the evenings, we managed our best.*

After some time also the rest of the family came to San Benedetto at Monte. We were six all together: mamma Angela, the Lady Rosa (mother of the sacristan of St. Stephen Church), the Masina, Fr. John and we two boys. Mamma Angela started to improve her health. In the meantime, one more boy is admitted: Bei Enrico. We three were in a single room to sleep and in a corner of the house to study. Fr. Calabria gave us a timetable to live together. On Sundays, we used to take food together and often the brother Gaetano with one of his sons, and occasionally one seminarian called Gigio the future Fr. Luigi Adami came as guests. Our group increased again with the arrival of Micheletti Attilio. When we used to go for a stroll, we all lined up and prayed the Rosary to the surprise of the people.

On 26 November 1907, the group moved to the house at Vicolo Case Rotte (Verona). I remained some more time at St. Benedetto together with the Mamma and Fr. Calabria. I fell sick and was hospitalized. Every day Fr. Calabria came to visit me. When I got healed, had to abandon the school due to physical weakness, and so got transferred to Vincolo Case Rotte. Fr. Diodato Desenzani and another person named Negrini were taking care of us. Two friends of Fr. John Calabria established two small workshops: shoe making and tailoring centre, in the ground floor.

The shoemaker Garusi Giovanni Battista became very friendly with both of us. Every Sunday he used to offer us lunch prepared by his daughters".

Pastrengo, 09-12-1958, Noventa Alessandro.

PART TWO

Chapter Seven

FROM ST. BENEDICT TO SAN ZENO IN MONTE (1907-1911)

Vicar at St. Benedict al Monte

In the early February of 1907 Fr. Calabria received a note from the Bishop: "my dear Fr. Calabria, I wish to meet you quickly, because I need to tell you about a situation that concerns you, and me too."

Fr. Calabria went immediately to the Cardinal who proposed him to assume the Rectory of St. Benedetto al Monte[6].

Cardinal thinks of entrusting to Fr. Calabria because many people who attend it looked for a wise, prudent and pious confessor. How have changed the opinions and human esteem within few years!

Fr. Calabria tries to refrain from this responsibility, acknowledging his lack of experience in maintaining the accounts of the welfares: "but

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6 San Benedetto al Monte a very ancient Church. Managed by Benedictines from 1140 and then by the diocesan clergy. It is in a central position very close to Erbe Square, in the heart of the city and a quiet place. The first structure must be prior to 1100, transformed in 1617. The interior is quite simple with two classical side altars of 1850. The famous Maffei with his coat of arms builds the main altar. Until 1805 it was an autonomous parish, thereafter became substation of St. Anastasia parish. This is the only church of the diocese dedicated to St. Benedict. It has the relevance of pawn shop where the poor people used to go and mortgage gold, cloths, other materials for few coins.

Eminence, I don't understand these material things". The bishop cuts short, "you will also learn, you will get help".

Fr. Calabria remained bit stunned and runs to ask advice and solace from his spiritual father.

Fr. Natale sees in this office a greater sign of divine providence, because he tells, "*it will make you free in the realization of the Opera just begun in favour of children. You will have more free time and economic sources to help the children the Lord will send*". The rectory of St. Benedict looks forward to him with interest.

The sacristan, as a wise guy, whispers to the seminarian who assisted daily mass: "do you know who will come as Rector? People say may be a good priest who does a lot of charity. Must be quite rich, so to say that he took to his care at home few orphans, whom he maintains as if they are his children."

On 11 February 1907 that wonderful priest with a purse full of money reaches! Very less luggage and just essential household items. He is rich, yes, not of money and assets as the sacristan thought. However, of great faith and trust in the Divine Providence. The same day arrived the boy Alessandro Noventa and the woman Masina.

In the course of few months, the presbytery is filled with three, four and finally five boys. For the chronicle records them: Bei Enrico, Micheletti Attilio, Noventa Alessandro, Martini Oreste, and Carletti Giuseppe. The settings of the presbytery is poor and the income of the rectory is very scanty. "'Good Sign' means the Providence of God will think of caring", comments Fr. Calabria. Mamma and niece remained few more days in Vincolo fontanelle. Only the Lady Masina takes care of the needs of the house. To help the boys often two of them stay back; Earl Perez and the young seminarian Gigio[7], a assiduous faithful of the parish and lover of sacred music.

Fr. Calabria conquered him easily, extending to play the harmonium, he is encouraged to come and practice whenever he has time and

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7 M. Gadili, *don Luigi Adami, prete apostolico,* edizioni CCSC, Verona 2012.

willingness saying, “When you have some free hours from your studies, come to play. And if you need any instructor tell me and I shall get for you”.

The harmonium in the church does not belong to the church. Fr. Calabria presents to the people the matter to have a harmonium of their own. And necessary offerings came. Fr. Calabria goes together with the young seminarian to choose one and buy.

“I recommend you, he told the shop owner, give me a good concession, so that I do not have to come and pay many instalments.” The shop owner asked, "For which church you want to purchase?” Fr. Calabria replied, “For San Benedetto al Monte ..” The man said, “Aha where the new vicar is Fr. Calabria. I know him well. He is a good priest. You also will come to know him, I presume.”. Fr. Calabria replied, “Yes a bit…. .” The shop owner continued to speak, "No need to say zealous and full of charity; but... but…? Look at him, he does not even have a penny. And to share between us, (he approaches to whisper in the years of Fr. Calabria) he is a poor man. In spite of this, he has decided to collect all the poor boys he finds on the road. We have to see what he will do.” And he lifts the eyes, snorts and nods his head. Fr. Calabria replies with an inscrutable smile, and the wise Calabria did not know to answer it better.

The small family increases in number

With the arrival of other needy children, the expenses increased, but the help also increases accordingly. Fr. Calabria repeats to his religious, “*The Lord is doing everything in our Opera. When I was in San Benedetto al Monte and began to pick up the first boys, I had nothing with me. Besides, people used to comment, where and how would you keep these boys overnight*? *But remember, when the Lord sends a boy, He also used to send a bed”*.

He will set in the Constitutions of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence this norm; *“no good deed, no person is excluded for the*

simple reason we lack means, these will not miss if we in faith receive the people and with faith present this Opera"[8]

The fruit sellers of Erbe Square when came to know that Fr. Calabria has started to take needy children, began to make race to provide fruits and vegetables and what more necessary to feed them. Fr. Calabria saw in these small "*signs"* the intervention of Divine Providence. The number of children increased and the house became very small to accommodate them. We have to look for a spacious house.

Meanwhile occur new *"signs"* of Providence that interlace in the plan of God. Cardinal Bacilieri appointed one of his friend Fr. Giuseppe Bonometti as parish priest in the Rectory of San Giovanni in Valle, in Verona. He was uncertain to accept this responsibility and so approached Fr. Calabria for his advice: "*Accept Fr. Joseph. May be the providence has established in this way to do His plans*." Tells Fr. Calabria. And he accepts.

In fact, it is the rector of St. John in Valle in collaboration with Earl Francis Perez, who managed to find a new house for the children. In via Case Rotte, few meters from the church of San Giovanni in Valle, found a building belonging to the sisters of Holy Family, Congregation founded by Naudet.[9]

The administrator is Earl Francis Perez. It is easy to reach an agreement regarding the rent. The house is sufficiently spacious. We

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8 G.Calabria, *annotazioni autografe al progetto elle costituzioni: 23 luglio 1943*, ms., Archivio Generale PSDP Verona.

9 Leopolda Naudet (1773-1834), born in Florence from French parents, nobles of the Duchy Tuscan. She completed her studies in France. At the first French revolution, Leopoldina returned to Florence. From Florence she moved to Prague as titular of maid of honour of the Archduchess Maria Anna, the sister of Emperor Francis-1. She grew up in her vocation to dedicate and serve the poor. In 1807 with difficulties she arrives in Verona where with a small group of women, worked first with St. Magdalene of Canossa. At the advice of St. Gaspare Bertoni she started the Congregation called "Sisters of the Holy Family".

have to furnish it, to take care of twenty boys. Fr. Calabria entrusts his friend Fr. Emilio Fabbro 50 lire, to provide the furnishing. We are in 1907 therefore fifty lire count something, but insufficient to meet all the expenses.

Fr. Calabria with a disarmed smile joked with the friend: "*and give me the balance!*" Moreover, who know how, there is a balance, that is necessary to celebrate the arrival of five boys and two assistants.

The nativity of the "House of Good Children"

After praying the rosary and receiving the blessings of Fr. Calabria in the sacristy of St. Benedetto al Monte, a group of boys, cold and muffled, each one with his bundle of linen on shoulder, began walking towards the new centre. With simplicity, without inauguration and ribbon cutting begins the Opera of "*Good Children*". It was Tuesday evening of November 26, in 1907.

Fr. Calabria imitates the same style of another great Verona priest, St. Gaspare Bertoni, who used to say: "*Buseta e Taneta"*[10] – a small shelter and hole- that is to act in concealment and humility. Nevertheless, a great movement is in its foundation. It will expand to the whole world. The only public notice is what Fr. Calabria wrote in a note book and to his friend Fr. Vicentini, his school companion and friend in the apostolate among the sick: "*I give you an encouraging news… Yesterday at St. John in Valle, a small house is opened. So far, God had provided everything well. There we have seven boys and with*

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10 "*Buseta e taneta"* a familiar phrase of Fr. Gaspare Bertoni and very frequent and popular in the language of Fr. Calabria. Among the Verona saints of 1800 there were a wonderful exchange of divine inspirations that did not stop in the slogan repetition and make photo copies of action. The institutions of charity for the poor, which has committed about twenty saints, founders and foundress from Verona looked same and without repetitions. But all these men and women with wonderful shades placed together an orchestra symphony that can astound the historians.

them lives the Curate Fr. Diodato Desenzani. I request you, help me with prayer and then …. as the Lord inspires you. You are the only priest to whom I have confided formally. To the Lord I offered if he wants to accept my poor life….

Fr. Pius was united in the Lord. Bye, memento. Yours in Sacred Heart, Fr. Calabria. Pray so that I may love to suffer."

In these few lines of simplicity, we do not find bombastic programs, nor ambitious projects. Fr. Calabria follows with docility the Divine Will; abandons himself fully to the hands of Divine Providence, fully convinced of his nothingness. At the closure of the note it is surprising to note him remark that it was pounding all his life in the Divine Providence. Moreover, he encouraged others to live in the Opera of the Lord without worry and anxiety.

Moreover, to gain victory over the disgust towards suffering he asks for prayer help. This request of prayer he continues in almost all his letters to individuals and communities: "*pray that I may understand the gift of sufferance*".

It is nice to highlight in Fr. Calabria in these few lines the human sensibility and trust, the need to share joy and pain with friends. Fr. Calabria in these few lines reveals his human sensibility and trust, the need to share joy and pain with friends.

And what have you got in your head?

We can ask shortly; but what program Fr. Calabria had in his mind to begin those first steps? Many friends and familiar people used to ask him; "*but what does Fr. Calabria want to do?*"

He after seeking advice and praying, committed himself simply to assist the abandoned youth who otherwise are destined to evil ways; help them *"freely"*, up to a good training, to make of them "*good and smart men, good and capable parents, good and smart workers, capable to show with honest work with their own hands*". This in synthesis he repeated to all who asked him information about his

intentions. "*But how would you do this, with what means*?" they used to insist.

And here emerged another point of his program: *"the Providence of God will find it … we do not have to entrust ourselves to assets put in bank, nor public requests or subscription. Ask nothing, but also refuse nothing: let the Lord choose who is worthy of becoming his instrument and minister of Providence*".

It was a program humanly imprudent and risky. Many advised him that, if he really want to do good to these boys, then use some economic security; but on this point he remained uncompromising, moreover he conditioned all his charitable actions on an axiom: *"the Opera is willed by God, it is His making, and therefore the means will come from Him.*"

"No one pays". The boys who were accepted were poor and abandoned and therefore would not have had the possibility of paying any fee.

The heavenly Father, "*who feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the fields, for a greater reason will provide dress and food for His children*".

He did not exclude that the boys could benefit the subsidies of the State or from private societies, which the family members could support according to their capacities. He did not want that payment of a fixed amount becomes a condition; on the contrary if one had to make a choice should choose the one deprived of any subsidy. The recommendation, most convincing document a poor could present, was a certification of greater necessity and the state of abandonment. In those days there were no public assistance, the social sensibility gained in those days: the poor, unemployed, and orphaned were left to their destiny. Today in Europe there is the temporary layoff of, public subsidies, social pension and other benefits. Unfortunately, even now great chunks of people are "human waste" have to keep the wolf from the door with an insufficient subsidy. Fr. Calabria, when the State started to issue the first instalment for the orphaned boarders, would say, "*This too is providence!"* it would have been strange to refuse the

privileges of the boys. "*But woe if we seek the road of subsidies, or undertake an activity because there is the government subsidy,*" he strongly reiterated. It is a heroic principle, but basic and Charismatic for the Opera of Fr. Calabria. And he wanted to fix this charismatic code in the Constitutions:[11] "*The spirit of faith and abandonment to the Providence of God the Father exclude from our part:*

- The demanding of fees or remuneration for the hospitality of youngsters or any needy person or any service in their favour, when they cannot give anything. Instead, to such least ones should be given our preference.

- The doing of any type of publicity either in view of material advantages or for the growth of the fame of the Congregation.

- Promoting collections, seeking for benefits, lotteries and the like, public recognition and assuming any such attitude that can cast a shadow on the action of the Divine Providence. (const.9)

New times, new things

To help this program he chose one by one the collaborators. He was strict in the selection and sorting. From them he demanded the highest docility and generosity, in everything and for everything. He never craved to be surrounded by crowd and bands of followers: *"few but good, available to engage in whatever office however humble, because everything is great in the house of the Lord."*

In the beginning, probably, he did not think of establishing a religious Congregation in the traditional sense; probably did not have these intentions, but desired to have the help of some lay volunteers who had the religious spirit. Moreover, when he became aware that there is a need of permanently bound with the bond of vows, he

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[11] Constitutions and directory of the Congregations of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence 1992 chapter 2. (the spirit of the Poor Servants of divine Providence) No.9 a-c.

formed a group of generous and obedient laity ready to assume any assignment; and he called them "*friars of twentieth century*" without special uniforms, nor external frills, but endowed with mercy, full of the sense of sacrifice, humble and docile. He wanted them to cultivate a solid and essential inner life, and faithful to discreet practice of devotions. They had to take private vows of Chastity, Poverty, Obedience and Abandonment to the Divine Providence, but never in a perpetual form. He thought the present days would demand such freedom. "*New times, new things",* he used to say, "*but new things on old foundations."*

As a tenacious sculptor, day after day, Fr. Calabria went on chiselling the model of religious for this Opera wanted by the Lord. The religious "Poor Servant of Divine Providence" was supposed to be available to take up any function, first, in the order of time and importance, to the assistance and training of the youth.

"*You have to be pliable as clay in the hands of a potter, to be moulded and ready for whatever office or place or task"*

"Prepared to do anything," in fact, was another fundamental element we find in all the writings addressed to his religious. Both priests and brothers had to declare this availability.

San Zeno in Monte

The Good Children remained in the Vicolo Case Rotte for about one year. In the mornings they attend the town school and, in the afternoons, spent in study, recreation, and prayer. From May 1908, Fr. Desenzani shifted to stay permanently with them. He was freed from the parish service to assist the boys, who are already many.

Already 22 boys had already been in the house and many others were in the waiting list to join. Now the ambient was congested. They had to look for another house still bigger. They thought of a house with some land around for the boys to play and for the future expansion. An opportunity came to buy a great block of buildings near Porta Vittoria. It

was huge but without courtyard. Then they saw another dilapidated house, just few hundred meters from the Vicolo Case Rotte with a garden around. Fr. Calabria and Fr. Desenzani went to consult the owner. She, fearing a claim of a donation, sent them away so badly saying, "*Charity, if I want, I will do in my way.*" This rude refusal became providential, because that place and location would soon become very cramped for the future development of the Opera.

One evening Fr. Desenzani and the parish priest Fr. Bonometti sitting inside the courtyard of the Vicolo Case Rotte, were commenting the result of their search.

"*I am tired of searching* – Fr. Desenzani said – *may God inspire and show an easy way soon".* In front of them, on the hills on the east, towered a bell tower, silent witness of an old Somascan Monastery. "*What a nice place! If we could buy it! It would become a magnificent podium from where we can preach the activities and wonders of the Opera of Divine Providence!"*

Fr. Calabria in a note to Desenzani wrote, "*How many concerns are tormenting us! Now the unease of the house. My God, how many worries we have to face! Then, we want it beautiful, big etc. We shall be peaceful, abandoned to the Divine Providence and God will send us great, comfortable, beautiful; of the greatness, comfort and beauty that pleases Him."*

Meanwhile mamma Angela fell seriously sick. She was on death bead. She insisted to receive the sacrament of the sick from her son, and he did it for her. He sat next to her. He took her hands and pressed in his palm trying to transfuse his warmth of the keen son to that body getting the cold bite of death. Mother Angela breathed her last breath in a short while.

It was May 8 1908.

A week later, almost like a heavenly gift sent by Mamma Angela, the vast territory in San Zeno in Monte is made available for sale. Fr. Calabria wrote: "…. *Dear Fr. Diodato … I am told that at San Zeno in*

Monte there would be a beautiful house. Today itself I will go to see it. In the meanwhile, let us pray."

The owner of the building was Mr. Laschi, a Jew of Verona city. Fr. Calabria to handle the matter interposed the mediation through one of his Jewish friend Mr. Resignani. They reached the consensus very fast and made the acquisition agreement. Earl Francis Perez takes up the responsibility of the expenses. Thus, San Zeno in Monte became part of the story of the Opera and became the Mother House of the Congregation of the "*Poor Servants of Divine Providence"*. The position is charming: a balcony stretched out to the city. Look, how a historian of 1760 described it!.

"*Up there is ….. San Zeno in Monte…. Within the wall of Verona on a hill, separate from the crowd of people, where one breath a perfect healthy air as well as from there dominates widely the city divided by the river Adige, and the hills, mountains, vast valley, and most delightful country side. Cultivated garden is around it, stretches of long rows of vines, marked with olive trees, almond trees, cherries, apple, and figs, and every other fruit tree. Spread in that ocean of green, stands out the dark cypresses towards sky. It is a charm in spring.*

Those places give to the veterans of the Crusades the impression of a distant reminder of the Palestinian land. The veterans baptized those tophaceous hills transformed from grotto to cave, with the names of Bethlehem and the mount in front with the name Nazareth, where came up two shrines: one in honour of Mary the Most Holy, and up again, another small shrine in the name of the Archangel St. Gabriel. In the valley behind Nazareth is the 'Vallis Domini' (Valley of the Lord), now known as Valdonega."

In another document of 1256, the small church on the hill of Bethlehem is known as "St. Zeno in Monte". Diocesan clergy managed it. And when the parish was suppressed, the church is passed on to the Hermits of St. Jerome of Fiesole (known as Romiti Fiesolani or Gerolimini) These hermits remained in San Zen in Monte till 1668. During their stay the Church was reopened, built the cloister and the bell tower. Resetting the construction and building some parts brand

new, they built 22 rooms, small and dark. After them entered the Somascan fathers of St. Jerome Emiliani, who stayed there from 1670 until 1810.

These fathers transformed radically the building to use as hostel for the children of the Nobles of the Republic of Venice, generally known as "Academy of Nobles". It was of reputation "the best one in the whole of Italy for the education of the youth". After the suppression imposed by Napoleon the place remained abandoned and became the repository of the oppressed people. For some time, it became the Austrian infantry barrack and thereafter-Italian military barrack. Later on, it was acquired by a private party and adapted it for the residence of very poor people. Finally, on 6 November 1908 became the "Mother House of the Good Children."

Now a days we hear often "eh this is Fr. Calabria, what a clever man, he has the most beautiful place of Verona" And it is true. But they do not know or pretend not to know that when these structures were purchased were dilapidated, isolated and not at all desirable. The tenacious work of many hands made them into a lovely place and even many desired to convert it into a luxury place. But it remains reserved for the poor, disabled, and marginalized the true "Masters" of the Opera.

Costermano

In expectation of transfer to the new centre, it was urgent to clean up the area for the time being to house the boys. The actual centre had become too congested and hygienically inadequate to accommodate such a great group of children. The incumbent summer was threatening with contagious sickness. They sought a house in a rural area. They found a farmhouse near Costermano, in the rural area of Basso Verona. On August 20 in 1908, the joyful brand of boys and helpers got up early morning and started to walk towards Baesse. It was almost 20 km distance. A folly for the boys of those days. The household goods,

loaded over two carts, went ahead of the boys. With songs, races, somersaults on the grass the walkers reached in the late evening at Costermano. A place of fable for the boys who roamed the dirty roads and unhealthy lanes. The scenery is different, full of colours: the deep sky blue of Garda Lake, the green sweet farmlands mantled with vineyards, the Grey gradient of placid mountain Baldo, the hazelnut coloured Adige River. The frisky air that slips through the mountains, the low whispering of the river, the festal music of birds that relaxes the nerves, oxygenates the lungs and restores the soul. Those twenty boys were accommodated the best way in the farmhouse. The days passed serene in an atmosphere of continuous venture and joyful discovery. Fr. Diodato and the young Gigio were endless in the creative findings and organizing excursions in the surroundings or some boating.

The Holy Norms

One day they organized an outing to Ceriano: a village of very few houses that winds along the left side of River Adige. Having arrived there the boys removed their shoes and wallowed in dead pockets of Adige. They were searching flattened pebbles and were competing to throw water gliding, slapping the soggy and sleepy river. Fr. Calabria together with Earl Francis Perez arrived towards noon unexpectedly. They gathered to eat the solemn lunch packets. After the frugal meal, the boys swarmed spontaneously on the meadow. Fr. Calabria with a hand signal invited and retained Fr. Diodato and Gigio. He invited them to refresh with a beer under the veranda of a village pub.

A group of four with simple life, away from the city and its natter. After a first sip of beer, timidly Fr. Calabria tells: "*I wish to read to you some notes that I have written in these days. They are Holy Rules that we have to observe for our sanctification, the components of the small house of Good Children. These are few norms that I place in writing, after praying a lot and consulting my spiritual father.*" He pulled out from his pocket a school notebook. He opened and began to read in a quiet and

solemn tone. They were simple "Norms" which one day served as proposal for the future Constitutions of the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence. The reading acquired at times solemn tone. The words transcended from that humble place and distances away in times. The three present, listened to the reading of those few lines with emotion. They vibrate with harmony with that program of life proposed by Fr. John Calabria. They were a group of four persons: two priests, one lay person committed in the social field, and a seminarian. Those who had passed by near to them might have understood them as four friends who were whispering the most or less. Instead around that table of the pub, with a bush beer in front they were casting the foundation of a great Opera. Before erecting human institutions, normally, people search commissions, elaborate projects, and above all, track down funds. The Opera of God, instead, is born in simplicity, humility and humanly reckless way because they follow an indication and design of a wisdom that do not originate from human mind but from the Spirit of God. The beginning of the text opened with a leitmotiv that resounded in all the writings of Fr. Calabria: "*First of all count as brothers and as such, love each other mutually and help one another especially in spiritual life."*

Then he paused to specify the finality of their association: "*help one another for their sanctification, and dedicate for the well-being of the abandoned children who for the want of a helping hand go on the road of perdition" …*

The Opera will be founded on humility, on total concealment; will live entirely and fully abandoned to the Divine Providence….

The members of the House be secular without any distinctive religious dress, but have the virtue of an Apostle. There should be vocations for priesthood trained with the spirit of the Opera".

As we see Fr. Calabria even now did not think of establishing a Congregation, but an aggregation of laity who could live as religious, assisted by priests for the spiritual formation. These Rules were read but were not published. These were the first timid attempt to fix on paper a system of community life which they had already lived. For the

time being those simple and brief oral indications were sufficient. In the following years, Fr. Calabria will write new editions, with additions and specifications.

Regarding the means to sustain the expenses of the boys assisted, we find reiterating: *"This Opera lives fully and totally abandoned to the Divine Providence. None of the boys pay, every type of advertising is absolutely forbidden, no conferences, no lotteries, and no public thanksgiving. God does not need these things, and this Opera, which is fully His, He will take care… ."*

"If we use human means, the Opera soon would cease to be of God, it would become of Humans, and then it would go ahead like a Bank, as a commercial firm that flourishes today and fails tomorrow…. The Nature of this Opera is to possess nothing nor deposit money for interests; all that we have is what God sends from time to time and it must be spent and thus the opera should be sustained….."[12]

Fr. Calabria used to come to these radical conclusions more frequently. In the beginning when the boys were few in number, he tried to carry on the boat with the help of offerings from usual friends and from those wonderful people of the Rectory of St. Benedict al Monte.

When the number of the boys increased, he tried to use the means recommended by friends. The first initiative was to solicit affiliation from the parish people. We are in 1908. To his appeal three benefactors replied to commit to put aside a certain amount every month. The enrolment was of 30 cents per person. The initiative lasted for a few months and then abandoned. The second was to organize a round of begging in the province of Trent. The news was that people of Trent are very generous and sensible to help charitable activities. But the result was disappointing. Fr. Calabria did not even collect the travelling expenses and an implicating threat of abuses from the commissioner of State police for begging.

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12 G. Calabria, *Norme 1908*, Manuscript. General Archive PSDP Verona.

Then he went on maturing the conviction that "*if the Opera is of God and the Gospel is his unfailing words, He will have to maintain with extraordinary economic means his Opera*".

I have discovered the Gospel

"One day Msgr. Chiot[13] *revealed, "Fr. Calabria sent me a note, 'tomorrow wait for me around 10-00 AM, I want to talk to you."*

I went on the precise time and asked,

"Any disgrace happened; your note left me impatient"

"Anything but disgrace, I must tell you one thing very important".

"Great thing?!…"

"I read the whole gospel".

Not a great news, which priest has not read the Gospel?".

"I explained, even I have read and preached, but the other day after a bitter day, not able to sleep, I took the Gospel and read everything. Also, the Acts of the Apostles, all in one night. Moreover, I had an unusual sensation. What a great thing is the Gospel! I remained admired, wondered, listen…. listen…."

And, he was turning jumping pages, marked in the margin with pencil.

"Listen, do not be worried too much of eating and drinking that you need for living. The ravens that live in freedom, do not saw nor reap and gather in the barn … even then your Father feeds them! And for the dress, why to worry much? Look how the lilies of the field grow! They do not work and weave dress … even then no one can boast of having a dress so elegant and delicate as theirs!"

And, he continued showing all those expressions that highlighted faith and Trust in God the Father. He had impressed the paradoxes of

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13 *Msgr Giuseppe Chiot* (1879-1960), parish priest of St. Luke the Evangelist (*just few steps from the Arena*), and chaplain of the Verona prison.

the Gospel: true paradoxes if confronted with the way of thinking and acting of the world; so strange to be considered sublime ideals, but unrealizable. Nevertheless, the saints have worn the world with those."[14]

"Seek first of all the Kingdom and His Justice and all the rest will be given to you in addition". Fr. Calabria took literally this gospel invitation and made it a way of daily life. He made bet on the Word of God and lived freely and serenely, in spite of the trials, difficulties, and long awaiting.

"The Lord, to purify our faith, may permit some trials and critical days; then more than ever have faith, subsequently the Divine Providence will show itself greatly"[15]

Return to Verona

The building at San Zeno in Monte, already transferred to the property of Fr. Calabria, but was not yet ready for use because there resided about forty families. Fr. Calabria did not want to use cohesive means or solicit eviction orders by the authority. He decided to agree directly the time and ways with the concerned families. He entrusted the Parish priest to relax the attitude of the people. He made them know that the boys then residing at Costermano, had to return to Verona to resume the vocational training school. Some families vacated the space without creating problems. However, a good number did not want to hear any reason. *"If that priest wants to do something good, let him do it first to us and our children,*" they replied unanimously to the parish priest. Towards evening, the people organized a meeting, in the tavern that doubles as a dance hall. They made up their mind to form a delegation of four to go and tell that priest. They selected the most

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14 Concerns of the commemoration of the month of the death of Fr. John Calabria. General Archive PSDP., Verona 1955.

15 *Constitutions and directory, op cit.* P.43.

talkative and belligerent women. The next day the group of powerful quartets went out in the city. Entered in the church of San Benedetto al Monte and waited to get over the religious function. Then they reached the sacristy and explained their intention to be there.

Fr. Calabria listened silently their grievances. When they presented all the arguments, he replied with meekness and understanding. "*I understand your difficulties; in fact, I am praying that the Lord may help you to get a decent settlement. However, look, it is not my wish to begin this Opera for the abandoned children, it is the Lord and He knows that you are there; therefore, be sure he will not abandon you, rather He will help you to find a good settlement elsewhere. I extend to you all my possible support*."

The calm word, enchanting and sincere, quenched the fury of those over agitated women: "*listen father, if it is the Lord who wants this Opera for the abandoned children, we cannot stand against Him. However, give us a blessing so that we find a dwelling without delay"*.

"*Oh, that I give you with all my heart, be sure that the Lord knows to reward your generosity and availability. Tell this to all up there, that the Lord will help them*."

And, the delegation returned home, tamed and refreshed, that young priest did not use any bombastic words to deceive them nor used the legal horses to frighten them. They commented among themselves:

"*If there would be people like him to take care of the poor and the abandoned and take to heart their difficulties*!"

Fr. Calabria sought indeed to find out residence for those families: he asked help and solicited mediation from the side of the authority.

Within a month most of the families found another settlement. Thus, on 5 November 1908, the "Good Children" left Costermano to take their way back home. The journey was painful and tiresome, because the place they left was very good, and the people in the neighbourhood surrounded them with human warmth and maternal attention.

In the late afternoon, they reached Verona, but the cart with the luggage did not reach. They stuck in the mud on the pathway of the village. The parish priest Fr. Bonometti and Fr. Desenzani were forced to find an emergency settlement for those twenty boys, shivering and tired. Some stayed in the presbytery, others in different families of the parish. The next morning Fr. Desenzani gathered the little ones still stunned and numb, accompanied them along the way of *Scala Santa* to reach at San Zeno in Monte. Arrived at the summit they remained speechless at the entrance. They looked dumbfounded at those mammoth structures perched on the tophaceous hill; it looked like a giant balcony over Verona city.

It was November 6, 1908.

Chapter Eight

A NEST ON THE HILL

(1908-1911)

The available space on San Zeno in Monte is immense and the landscape position is wonderful. But walking inside the residents immediately found that everything has to be revised: Dilapidated walls, stinking rooms, and heaps of debris. Only some area could be used immediately. They chose a pair of rooms clean up and organize the bunks that finally reached from Costermano with carts. All worked joyfully the full day with brooms, shovels and wheelbarrows. They had only a short rest for dinner and supper. The meticulous Chronister records the menu: bread and cheese for dinner and polenta (*a Venetian dish with cornflour soft*) and cheese for supper together with plenty of water. At the end of the day all pounced heavily on their beds with their aching bones. Sleep crawled them frantically under those blankets, awaiting the new day of work: they felt as artisans and builders of their "House".

Already a House: the "House of Good Children" [16]

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[16] Fr. Diodato Desenzani, first helper and co-founder of the Institute, chose the name "Good Children". Fr. Diodato had in mind to establish a particular institute, "the White Lilies". It was a kind of formation and school for the Catholic Activists. A kind of Confident Association to defend from the enemies of the Church. The third Sunday of 1907, feast of the sorrowful Mother Mary, Fr. Diodato and Fr. John met in the church of St. John in Valle, on the invitation of Fr. Bonometti. After lunch, Fr. Diodato took apart Fr. Calabria and without preambles proposed: "*Fr. John, are you agreeing that the institute to be born we give the name Good Children Home?" Fr. John thought a while then told: Indeed, I like. It will be Good Children Home!*" (from the diary of Fr. Diodato Desenzani). Naturally, Fr. Diodato thought to transform

Fr. Calabria did not stomach the name Boarding, because it reminded him the memory of imposing discipline, anonymity of the children, and the lack of personal rapport between the instructors and the boys. In his "Houses", instead, must govern family atmosphere. The assistants are called "Brothers" and the women supporting the kitchen and linen room are called "Sisters". A numerous and different family, but always a *family*.

For the rehabilitation of the construction, they signed a contract agreement with a Verona firm. But the work of demolition of the superstructure, that was sedimentary in the course of time was entrusted to a team of voluntary youngsters, headed by Fr. Desenzani. The workers went in miniature teams, armed with pickaxes, shovels, and wheelbarrows to pull down, transfer, and accumulate heaps of rubbles. Day by day, they managed to recover some area as classrooms, or rooms. They had to do all very fast because the winter is at door and pokes hissing through the windows. The voice of the erection of this "House" for the needy children spreads in the city and around the province. Tens of pressing applications accumulates the table of Fr. Calabria. In the beginning of the new academic year, the children accepted in the house of "Good Children" are already eighty. And in the year 1910 they reach 111. The choice is made in a strange criterion for the ordinary people. The first in the list are the poorest, the abandoned, and the least commended. In the "Rules" of the first years this was the classification for admission of boys, "*We must take those without parents or parents without faith, without rules, in other words, those with all certainty will become wanderers and their soul on the edge of precipice. If a boy is abandoned, certainly should be accepted*".

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the institute that is about to come to life in his "White Lilies", while Fr. Calabria accepted that name because he disliked all other titles in common use in those days, as "orphanage, abandoned, outcasts, boarding school and the like". However, those who observed that the boys of his institute are not truly "*good"*, he told: *"if they are not good, they will become. We give always confidence to human redemption" ref. footnote on chapter. Ix p.152,* Fr. Diodato Desenzani,

One day in front of the Church of Santa Maria in Organo, his old professor of Dogma reminded him: "*What do you want to do? You open such a huge house without means. Think well what you are doing, because you will risk the danger of discrediting all the clergy of Verona. Keep quiet, and do your priestly task. Do not fantasy to do many things!*" However, Fr. Calabria responded very humbly, *"you professor, taught me the dogma. Remember that thesis on Divine Providence?" "Yes, I remember", "Well professor, I try to practice that beautiful thesis, and you kindly help me with your prayers".* The tone was not arrogant. However, deeply convinced; Yes.

Bishop of Verona Cardinal Bacilieri, observing the too fast growth of the Opera, warns. He called Calabria so that he may explain. "*Eminence", replied Fr. Calabria, "I wish to do God's will. If you desire, I shall clear all the boys, and place everything into your hands and I withdraw.*" Moreover, he knelt in front of his superior. The Cardinal remained thoughtful; looks at him, and with touching voice: "*But, No, No. you stay there and continue as the Lord inspires you. I give you my blessings, but I cannot officially assume the responsibility directly. I shall watch through the windows to see. In any case be prudent.*"

Prudence and apprehension of the Bishop are more than justified. Many pious activities began with fine intentions and failed to survive due to the lack of solid human and spiritual foundations. Here Fr. Calabria who already so let down in his human formation period and tested in all possible ways his vocation, the same bishop feels more serene. He realized that humble priest acts inspired by God and exceptionally obedient to the religious authorities. However, prudence and supervision are essential.

Prayer, Classes, and work

The trio of Fr. Calabria's formation pedagogy could be summarized in three places or moments: Church, School and work. The rehabilitation work of the church building they started instantly,

trusting in the Divine Providence. It was immediate. Going down from San Zeno in Monte towards the rectory of St. Benedict al Monte, crossing the bridge of Umberto he comes across a man he knows well: Francesco Baio. "*Good morning Fr. Calabria.! I was indeed coming towards you. Tonight, my wife did not sleep; nor let me sleep. Look, we have no children. We had planned and set aside a sum of money for your Opera, at our death. Nevertheless, tonight my wife is convinced that it is better to give you this cash straightaway. I had to promise her that I would entrust our savings to you today itself, else, she was not letting me sleep. Look you have saved my exertion to climb up on the hills of San Zeno in Monte."* And then he hands over a chequebook to the bearer the value of thirty thousand lire. *"It is rightly the Providence who has inspired you to give this cheque to me now! I was praying so that the Lord may send me a sign to accomplish the Church renovation work*," tells Fr. Calabria.

Thus, he could complete the Church renovation work, without luxury and waste, but decent and welcoming.

The second concern of Fr. Calabria was to set up the training centre with the school, and transmit cultural, civic and moral education. With the workshop, he could teach an art or craft. He followed the examples of the Salesians, of the Stigmatine father Fantozzi, who had established a support for the Civic College of artisans at via Cantarane in Verona. For the socio-economic period, one could not expect more. The boys came from extreme poverty and negligence. Save them from the street and vices, offer them a vocational training, and restore the dignity of a persons, was already a great step forward.

Some holy founders had travelled ahead of time applying most modern method. In Verona there was a notable priest: Fr. Nicola Mazza, who had the intuition of helping the poorest children gifted with intelligence to proceed in their studies supporting them in the university studies. And most of the educational institutes for the youth tried to introduce the earliest possible into the productive sector the orphan or children coming from very poor families to make them economically independent. The criticism we could make today is that

we might be binding a boy with a typical training at a very early age when they are superficial and they are not taking into consideration the social system so different from the modern. Those days the vocational training was meant to have a chance to live noble. For those young ones it was a victory and redemption from a state of misery, exploitation, and ignorance. And some of them gifted with special intelligence from this professional launch knew to emerge creating own business firms with hundreds of workers employed by them.

Shoemaking: the first elementary professional school, began in Vicolo Case Rotte, was the shoemaking. A friend of Fr. Calabria Mr Battisti, has kept the many "*Good children*" busy. He was a good cook and experienced shoemaker. He established a workshop in a room of the ground floor of the house and began to teach some boys to work Lesina. The work was restricted to repair resoling the footwear of the boys. When it was transferred to San Zeno in Monte the workshop began to function better. Two smart masters directed the art. Mr. Romagnoli, and Bro. Alessandro Padovani. The trainee students increased and the work became of good quality. They repaired the old and gradually began to produce new shoes.

Tailoring: This became the second professional training. This too began out of internal need to produce pants, pyjamas, aprons for the community. The candidate to tailoring were very few because of the shortage of materials. Hence after a short period they closed it down. After a long gap, it was reopened with modern machines, and well-qualified masters. From this school came out some genial tailors known all over the world branded industry.

Carpentry: during the restoration work of San Zeno in Monte, they established a carpentry. An old friend of Fr. Calabria Mr. Trivellin managed it. Restructuring damaged house required few years' commitment: doors, windows, tables, Almira etc.

Mr. Trivellin chose a group of boys and started to teach them how to use the sword, chisel and hammer. Some items made in those days lasted years, and the visitors admired their wonderful form and style. One of the many examples is the monumental cupboard and shelves

made; they are preserved in the present Sacristy of San Zeno in Monte. After Mr. Trivellini as masters of this art two workers specialized from the renowned industry Savani, were selected. They began works of great value for designs, perfection in inlaying and artistic engraving.

Printing press: To establish a printing press workshop was always the dream of Fr. Calabria. He knew the importance of the good press to propagate the Gospel and counter-stand the evil influence of defaming against the Church. We are in a period of excess anticlericalism and active atheism. Probably he dreamed to print a daily news or something similar. His dream became a fact for a happy combination. There was already the activity of diffusing good print in Verona. The founder was Fr. Giuseppe Zanetti[17].

He used to call it "the Small Opera". It was born in 1891. He used to print leaflets of Apologetics on burning issues, catechisms, especially the weekly: (*Il Redentore*) The Redeemer. Many priests and laity, who desired to challenge the campaign of atheism, supported him. The prints were freely distributed by a handful of volunteers. Unfortunately, the cost of the materials and the rent of the space were considerably huge. Fr. Zanetti an intimate friend of Fr. Calabria proposed to transfer his small press to San Zeno in Monte.

They both might have obtained a reciprocal advantage: "the little Opera" saved its rent expenses and Fr. Calabria could introduce some of his boys in the printing training activity.

0n 31 December 1909 arrived a Platinum machine *Marinoni* and some boxes of movable character. After one year, the printing school developed much. "Printing School of Good Children". And a well-qualified printer Mr. Appollonio, gifted two of his printing machines and

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[17] *Giuseppe Zanetti* (1864-1942). In 1891 he had founded the "Piccola Opera" for the diffusion of the good print. At first with a monthly leaflet, given freely out to many thousands of families. In 1910, this was transferred to San Zeno in Monte. Collaborated with Catholic weekly, almost like the Catholic workers (Operaio Cattolico) in Vicenza and Verona Fedele. He became an aggregate of the Opera living as a perfect Poor Servant of divine Providence.

some boxes of printing letters. In 1914, the Administrator of the house Fr. Giobatta Battisti tried to make an innovation in quality. He purchased two expensive flat machines, many new types of letters, and an abundant quantity of special paper. He had in mind the ardent desire to print the Roman Missal in Latin.

Unfortunately, with the explosion of war the special paper ran out. We have to add that work also turned quite challenging. They managed to print only some part of the Missal. The work remained unfinished. It would take at least ten years for paying off the great debt created by the acquisition of the machines.

However, the work of the printing did not stop even in the crucial war period of 1915-1918. Publications increased, Feast day Gospel, Post cards with message of Peace, leaflets with Pope's message etc. all distributed freely. It was an apostolate worth very less but well diffused. And, some prayers for peace, written on a post card caught the attention of military authority. Some silly people believed it to face a crime of defeatism, an attempt against the zeal for war. They called Fr. Calabria to the police headquarters. He with all simplicity and innocence defended: "*since two thousand years the Christians invoke for the gift of peace: Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world grant us peace!*" They left him without any consequence.

The Mechanical: Originally, they called this unit as workshop of the "*Fabbri*". In fact, it began as a simple work on the anvil and shaping. The early work was very simple: beds, frames, lock, key, grills, and so on. Much later the arrival of the early lathes began gave a mechanic direction to the laboratory. The Chronister of the days narrates that the enthusiastic students consumed tons of iron. Mr Pagan the shop owner supplied everything on credit.

Sometimes at the end of the year, he used to write off in his master credit book "paid" and expressed his good will to contribute his share to the development of the Opera of his friend Fr. Calabria. The experienced master of the mechanical workshop was Bro. Massimo Besozzi. He had a wonderful background in practical and theory; he had worked as a specialized head mechanic in the military arsenal and an

innate artistic genius. He left as sign of his art many small masterpieces that beautify the house of San Zeno in Monte. Generally, the work that he managed to do were house requirements. Only after the First World War, Fr. Calabria permitted to take up external orders. But, what all precautions, what cautions from Fr. Calabria: "*no question of business, no anxiety*". He knew the external work could become a permitted income to the house needs and above all, he observed that a quality training is good for the students and their tomorrow. However, he was always alert so that the school may not become a profit-making activity and art masters may not be taken up by the desire to work and retribution. Today he would have encouraged the voluntary service of the *non-profit* co-operatives where the industrial spirit could be imbibed with solidarity, respect for the person, and care for the most needy and the exploited.

Calabria and the press

Calabria understood the importance of the press to propagate the Word of God. From his press came out tens of thousands of booklets, some periodicals and books of religious touch, but always he was reluctant to print bulletins to broadcast his initiatives. The efforts of his collaborators to make an exclusive issue of L'Amico on the event of the 25thanniversary of the Opera had pained him a lot. And when they decided to begin the monthly bulletin *L'Amico dei Buoni Fanciulli* means for the ex-students and friends of the house, he imposed strict norms. In the preface of the first issue published on Tuesday 17 June 1930, he wrote. "*This is to keep you united to this House, that I present with a heart of a father this bulletin. I thought for a long time before deciding and now it seems to me, in the Lord, that time has come to begin the use of this new powerful means, that is, the press, to tell you often, every month, a good word… Fr. John Calabria"*

And the director Fr. Luigi Adami, who hasten to point out the focus of the bulletin. We let him narrate it fully. "*This bulletin has to be an*

effective and humble contribution to the seeking and expansion of the Kingdom of God in the souls and families.

We say two things to avoid the useless surprises:

In the first place every form of advertisements of the house itself; therefore, in it we should never publish the names of the benefactors, nor thanksgiving of any type. The names of the benefactors are written in heaven and known to the Lord. And, He will reward much more abundantly, when the people knows the least about the good works done.

In the second place, L'Amico shall not have any pounding for money seeking for the house. The care for the material things, necessary means for life, remains in the hands of Divine Providence, as in the past, according to our program.

'Publicity and requesting money for us' *would be land mines that will destroy the spirit of the House; and the L'Amico has to contribute to the consolidation, never to the ruin of the House, for which it is the messenger."*

To live in concealment

Fr. Calabria did not refuse the use of modern means to make known the word of God and expand exhortations and stimulus to do good (*and today, certainly, he would have encouraged the use of Radio, televisions and internet*). One thing that terrorized him was if the bulletin becomes a means of broadcasting and magnifying his initiatives and becomes a means to fund raising. From the beginning of the Opera, Fr. Calabria requested to the catholic journals in their editorials not to mention his Institute. And they respected his desire. Once an unexpected thing happened. One English journalist hoping to reach the basilica San Zeno Maggiore (*one of the most beautiful Roman art work evolved in Italy*) by mistake came to San Zeno in Monte. He happened to be there to contemplate the entire city of Verona, clicked some beautiful photos and took interest in the so-called "Casa Buoni Fanciulli". He saw

different workshops, informed more and took note of every item. Returning to his home land he wrote in the newspapers his impressions of the charitable institute and tells it is not mentioned in the tourist guide at all.

One catholic newspaper of Vicenza reported of this healthy plant the "a piece" of English news. And thus the redactions of Verona newspapers felt authorized to write occasionally to public notice the events and news of the activity of Fr. Calabria. Indeed, they did this very discretely not to offend the sensibility of Fr. Calabria. Also, the lay journalist began to do write up on that young priest who lived up on San Zeno in Monte. One day on *Verona del Popolo,* a radical socialist newsprint, came out an article, which in the intentions of the editor, wished to unmask the young priests. "*With his bend neck to twelve degree, exceptionally calm unlike his other companions … manages the industry of dispersed children on the way of San Zeno in Monte. He founded an establishment appropriating, demolishing, and rebuilding and so on, has acquired huge amount, without counting what is in mind for the entire future.*

The indifferent, curious and apathetic say that not everything has derived from the industrial ingenuity of Fr. Calabria. He did nothing but squander his whole for others. We always just and impartial, especially with opponents, claim that Fr. Calabria his merit. We affirm that he always was black as the cloak of the devil, [in popular jargon he indicated a poor] only to himself and to his ingenuity. His initiative must the industry of abandoned children has formed a strong and enviable economic position ... We know that Fr. Calabria has joined partnership with Besozzi. He is usually known for his fiery lectures at the socialist's circle. Also, from this fact he squirts out clearly the goal touch of Fr. Calabria. And, with this successful business combination promises to give this industry a growing development and impulse. And we are sure…[18]And because of this tone, gloating in his heart for the beautiful "piece of news", the person would have to demolish the castle of

[18] La industria della fede, in Verona del Popolo, 29 May 1909.

admiration and remove the halo from holy man of that sly little priest. The article made noise. Someone sneered approval, but most of Verona reacted indignantly. Many went to express to Fr. Calabria their regret.

Many influential people urged him to file a lawsuit for defamation. But, Fr. Calabria, although saddened, wanted to think about it calmly.

He enquired the author of the article and then examined what the best way to trim down the slanderous insinuation. He went to the newspaper office and asked to talk to that reporter.

"Are you the author of this article: The industry of the faith?*". "Yes,… but ... you know ... I did not want to offend; you must understand the needs to churn out every day for some news of interest to readers ...". "Oh, but do not worry, I did not come to give show cause notice nor even to scold; indeed, I would like to thank you ... Look, you did a precious service to me ... Until now I was not sure it was God's will that I take care of the poor youth. Your article gave me, however, endorsement that it is Lord's will. For this I have come to thank you for your service. Actually, some had advised me to go for a lawsuit. Nevertheless, a lawsuit would not bring anything good for your soul, pressing me as much as the work for abandoned children. Instead of the lawsuit, I decided to celebrate a Mass for you tomorrow. "*

The poor columnist, disarmed by so much sweetness and, above all, transparency of deep faith and sincerity, learned no way to excuse, so with just the babbling "*sorry ... thank you ... I did not mean to put you to shame ... etc*.". That newspaper did not publish any more malicious articles about the Opera. Moreover, that journalist became a friend and admirer of Fr. Calabria. Often, he used to climb up to San Zeno in Monte to spend time talking to him.

Chapter Nine

FIRST FOUR PILLARS OF THE OPERA

"Jesus went to the mountain to pray
and he continued all night in prayer. When it was
day, he gathered his disciples and chose
twelve and gave them the name of Apostles "
(Lk 6.12-13)

Luigi Adami

The first collaborator Fr. Calabria chose personally was Luigi Adami[19]. A young seminarian, informally known by the name Gigio, not to confuse it with the sacristan who was also Luigi (Borgo). Since the first meeting, he had in February 1907, Fr. Calabria understood that this transparent person could become a great educator and began to train him spiritually. He used to repeat to him: "*The Lord sent me to S. Benedetto particularly for you.*"

Luigi Adami was born in Verona, on 17 March 1891, from a genuinely Christian family, where grow compassion and generosity. His sister Teresa remained single and for many years she worked as a seamstress tailor for free for the clerics and priests of the Opera. His brother Giuseppe, reached the retirement age, volunteered to direct the renovation of San Zeno in Monte and Santa Toscana in Verona, the Mother Houses of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence (brothers and sisters). Gigio, completing elementary school, he fetched ten in all

19 M. Gadili, *Don Luigi Adami, prete apostolico,* CCSC, Verona 2012.

subjects, attended the grammar school in the seminary of Verona. He received his gradation in classical studies in the State High School "Scipione Maffei" and then took the training of a primary school teacher. The whole family coddled him being the youngest of the family. He deserved it, for his sweet character, always generous and mild. Every morning he did his pious practices in the church of San Benedetto al Monte. He also gladly returned after lunch to practice playing the harmonium. No one was surprised when he revealed his family the desire to become a priest; in fact, all expected that. He met Fr. Calabria on the very day of his induction as rector of the church of San Benedetto al Monte. Gigio was just sixteen. A bond of respect and affection was established spontaneously between the two.

"*When you have free time, come to play; come when and how much you want, I like much to hear you play, while I recite the breviary, or my prayers,"* said Fr. Calabria. Gigio spent all his free time in the church to pray and play the harmonium. Meanwhile, peering curiously at that priest so pious and good, had taken home at times some orphaned and abandoned kids. After a few months, Fr. Calabria, gently and cautiously, made him realize that he would be happy to have him as his assistant. On 25 May 1908, Fr. Johnwrote in his diary, "*And it is God's will that Gigio Adami is with Fr. Calabria and in every way we both grow as companions; I feel this, and perhaps this is why the Lord has sent me to St. Benedetto*."

The last Sunday of May, after the vespers, Fr. Calabria called Gigio and read that sentence he had written in his diary. Then he said: "*Think about it; the decision is up to you. If you believe, first seek advice of someone.*" Gigio, to that request, remained thoughtful for a moment and then replied with all simplicity: "*I will ask my mother*". At the statement of this proposal, the family was puzzled. They had great respect for Fr. Calabria, but that choice seemed challenging and with many uncertainties. Then, overcome with joy gushing from his face and his unusual determination, they gave their nod. Gigio was 17 years old and mature enough to take such a serious decision. In addition, the family was pleased.

On June 2, 1908, Gigio left his home and moved to San Giovanni in Valle, in the alley Case Rotte, where they had already assisted the five boys in the rectory of St. Benedetto al Monte. To those who questioned him on his choice saying: "*I'm going to lend a hand to Fr. Calabria*".

Earlier he had helped only during school holidays, now he will do full time. This transfer entailed a radical lifestyle choice, without religious vows, because it is totally put in the hands of Fr. Calabria, with docility and availability. After completing his high school studies, he did not immediately begin theology, it was logical for those wishing to become a priest. He remained at the disposal of Fr. Calabria. When asked to explain the interruption, he answered plainly, "*to do the will of God.*"

Fr. John Calabria longed him to become a priest, but he also wanted him to be formed with that special spirit which animated the community. The bishop of Verona, however, was not admitting day scholars as clerics residing outside the seminary.

"*Are you willing to wait?*" Fr. Calabria asked. "*I do what you to tell me,*" replied serenely brother Gigio. "*In my opinion, I prefer you to wait.*" *"But are you also willing to wait even eight or ten years?". "Yes, certainly."*

It took in fact ten years awaiting, for him to become a priest. Meanwhile in Europe triggered the fury of the First World War. Italy also got involved in the conflict. Calls to military service took away many collaborators of Fr. Calabria. Gigio, providentially, they spared and has absorbed all the work of everyone.

In 1919 the bishop of Belluno and Feltre, Monsignor Giosuè Cattarossi, came to preach the spiritual exercises at San Zeno in Monte.

Fr. Calabria confided his intentions regarding the formation of priests who wanted to dedicate themselves to the Opera and he pointed to that young man who was waiting for a long time. The bishop, who greatly admired Fr. Calabria, promised that he would have ordained a priest in his diocese incardinating him, while still studying at Fr. Calabria. Gigio prepared privately in all theological subjects with the help of valid priest friends. In early 1921, he moved to Feltre, where he

gave the exam in theology and received all the minor orders. And, finally, on August 24, 1921, he was ordained priest. He had turned thirty. He returned to Verona and took modestly the usual work among boys. Brother Gigio was educator, teacher, musician, composer, maintenance man of the house and technician of all electrical systems. Now, in addition to this his usual work, he took the priestly apostolate and its commitments. He really understood the spirit of the Opera, who recalled the guidelines of St. Benedict and St. Francis of Assisi, the two secular founders, who saw in priesthood a gift from God to the Church and not a distinguished title. The priest is equal in everything, as to the call to holiness and to the growing of the Kingdom of God, to the vocation of the simple consecrated laity.

He celebrated the first Mass at San Zeno in Monte. It was a memorable day. He is the first priest formed in the house, but certainly not homemade. The fulfilment of this event raised some grumbling in the Curia of Verona, who considered that ordination of "smuggling" one strategy hatched by the stubborn Fr. Calabria. Cardinal Bacilieri ignored the fact officially, but he communicated, "*That priest would never get incardinated in the Diocese of Verona*." Don Luigi Adami remained at San Zeno in Monte for life, always obedient even to the simple desires of Fr. Calabria: "*I'm always on the side of the Father!*" He repeated in times of tension and internal problems of the Institute.

Fr. Calabria cultivated boundless esteem and showed him a tender affection. It could not be otherwise against that frank and transparent soul, enthusiastic in doing good, inflamed with holy zeal for the Lord and for souls. Fr. Calabria said of him: "*He's like a crystal*." His predilection were the orphans, the children of nobody or those dented by misery and vice. He followed them, educating them and loved them without sentimentality, with infinite patience. He was obedient, but not a flatterer. A free man, who spoke very gently but with equal sincerity what he thought. Man righteous and trustworthy. To this Fr. Calabria, on 25 March 1914, wrote: *"Dear brother Gigio, I urge you in the name of Jesus to correspond to the great grace the Lord has made you free. Look to live always in the spirit of this great Opera, the spirit that the Lord has*

made you known even before this Opera began ... When you become a priest, see to be with the Apostolic Spirit; read, meditate and update your life to the Holy Gospel, and prepare to suffer, to endure.

Never leave this House, let the Lord guide you and express all that he inspires you to Rev. Fr. Natale who has the spirit and special gifts for the Opera. Gigio, I entrust you all in the name and will of Jesus. Be humble, like rags, willing to do anything ... On how to do, how to train and ensure this Opera, no apprehensions; Prayer, concealment, suffer and follow the will of God that will be drawn flawless ..."

Fr. Adami was also the diligent scribe of Fr. Calabria. At the beginning, Fr. Calabria personally replied to all the letters. Later, unable to discharge all correspondence, he solicited the help of Fr. Luigi Pedrollo and Fr. Adami. Fr. Calabria read all correspondence, was a choice of what he reserved for himself and all the rest he consigned to the two collaborators. Every day there was a package of letters waiting for a response. And if you Fr. Adami carried them to his cramped small room and wrote on behalf of Fr. Calabria. In the early days, Fr. Calabria wanted to read the text and sometimes asked to do again; then, he ended up in total trust and was content to put his signature or a few words of autograph. Moreover, he said with good-natured smile to the onlookers: "*You see, Fr. Luigi respond to people who write me with the same feelings and exact words of mine; he guesses in an instant."*

In the field of education, he had a didactic method of his own, acquired at the school of Fr. Calabria and Brother Francesco Perez. He preferred to follow the boys separately, with personal contact, friendly welcome, trust, a very short word just whispered. No twisted situation frightened him. He tried to understand, to defuse things, to calm tempers. He accepted the complaints and neatly managed to persuade rather than impose. And, the boys liked him very much. No fuss, no cajoling, but much love and dedication. In addition, to those who did observe that sometimes the discipline was less, he replied, "*The house is for boys. All other activities are secondary.*"

In the last years of his life, he said sadly: "*They tell me that the "Brothers", mostly young people have lost their enthusiasm for work*

among the abandoned children. Bad, very bad. The House was born for them. This is our main objective. I see a bad future for Opera if you cool the enthusiasm for this kind of apostolate ".

Fr. Luigi Adami was also a brilliant teacher. He knew to care with interest the school subjects also the most difficult student of the professional school. Nevertheless, above all, he was a respected and loved teacher in the seminary of Verona, from 1924 to 1952. He had no particular degrees, but a culture and intelligence discreet to disengage in all subjects. Many alumni retained affection and esteem for the good Don Luigi. The hours spent with him were expected and appreciated; he could arouse interest and give clarity in his teachings. He taught Religion, Geography and Mathematics.

Another commitment he had was the Sunday catechism, he did not get tired or weary. They were lessons that children listened spellbound to anecdotal richness and for the simple phrase book, full of jokes in the Venetian vernacular.

He was also a brilliant writer. He wrote several books: a biography of St. Luigi Gonzaga, a volume of catechesis, some volumes of missionary geography, and various books of Mathematics, two tomes on the commandments and another one on the Madonna.

But, the work that characterized him was the editorials of the publication, *L'Amico*, established in 1929 and the first issue came out in 1930. Fr. Calabria prepared the editorial, but for everything else, he thought of Fr. Adami. When Fr. Adami died in March 19, 1968 we read on "*Verona Fedele*" of March 31, 1968. The Archpriest of St. Anastasia, Msgr Giovanni Cappelletti, so taken after the image of Fr. Adami: "*For all the priests of the Diocese only the name of Fr. Luigi Adami was the magical power to create an environment and revive always good times of youth. Although the seminar and school hours, perfumed with chalk, mathematics and geography. He had clear ideas. A sincere love for the school. His vision of leaning looked beyond the walls of old Verona. Fr. Adami felt the school as one of the highest aims of his vocation and he has never been a ghetto, but an open window of the Church and the world. He educated to think, to act as a function of all humanity.*

Ecumenism, developed and proclaimed by Vatican II, this Verona priest had learned twenty, thirty, forty years ago, especially since he wore faithfully concerns and initiatives - then daring - Fr. Calabria. From him they learned to love the missions and to celebrate with enthusiasm the octave of prayer for Christian unity…..

He was a typical example of priest who loathes career, which is given to Christ without expecting to receive, which crumbles in joyful humility life for souls, which always gives and never question ...[20]*".*

Diodato Desenzani

Another associate of Fr. Calabria was the priest Diodato Desenzani.[21] His contribution to the beginnings of the Opera was very important. Diodato Desenzani was born in Verona on November 11, 1882. He attended the state high school and later the grammar school in the diocesan seminary. In the same seminary he studied theology.

His friend and confidant, don Luigi Perazzani, drew a detailed profile of his youth: "*Fr. Diodato was of lively nature, almost unstoppable. For this reason, he neglected his duties as a Christian and a student. Easy to*

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20 C. Sempreboni psdp, *Don Luigi Adami, in L'Amico dei buoni Fanciulli,* Giugno, 1985.pp.13ff.

21 Diodato Desenzani (1882-1960). The news on Desenzani we find in the archive of the PSDP in Verona. It is in a folder with 62 files that contains also the memories written by the same Desenzani, and handed over to his friend Fr. Luigi Perazzani, parish priest of Monzabrano (Mantova). The later added to the memories another three files tracing thus *a brief biography and an indication to the person of Fr. Desenzani*. Perazzani handed over everything to the Congregation of PSDP in 1956. Along with this files we find other six files written by Fr. Luigi Adami, witness from the beginning of the Opera, with a title: *some notes to the indications of Fr. Desenzani*. Fr. Adami nourished great affection and esteem for Desenzani. He felt the need to clarify and rectify some judgements of Fr. Desenzani in his rapport with Fr. Calabria, especially those issues far from the truth.

envisage and implement daring adventures that proportion beyond his age; later on through reflection, he realized that if he were held back by truly Christian upbringing his nature would have paid more to the good. So, it was very austere father, after trying unsuccessfully to enrol him Mariner School of Spezia, one day he came up with these words: "Diodato, you should become a priest, think and reflect." He hoped that the disciplined life of the seminary could handle him and tame a bit his indomitable vitality. Taken aback as well, without much reflection, Diodato replied: "Yes, I'll become a priest." It was not hypocrisy or shallow decision, but a true vocation, even though the way may seem strange. He chose to attend the seminary as a day scholar unable to endure the strict rules for the residents. Since then he also began attending assiduously the parish and enrolled himself at Catholic Associations.

After obtaining the baccalaureate, he began his theological studies and wore the clerical habit, the triviality of his family. He finally reached up to the priesthood.[22]"

Other news derive from the "*Memories*" of the same Desenzani, now preserved in the Archive of the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence.

During the third year of theology, in 1904, he developed a movement called "White Lily". What is it? He presents himself in a long document. So describing, *"This is not about creating a new religious institute, but work out a method of combat and activities. Gather, coordinate, and organize the cream of militant Catholics or at least practitioners of all levels of society, in a harmonious world nation, using the same methods of Masonry ".* But his project had few adherents and remained in the drawer as a dream.

On 13 August 1905, he was ordained a priest. In November of the same year, he was appointed assistant pastor in Santa Toscana, in the city of Verona. He chose as his confessor Fr. John Calabria . On January

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22 L. Perazzani, don Diodato Desenzani, Ms. Archivio Generale PSDP, Verona.

6, 1907, he was transferred to San Giovanni in Valle as assistant parish priest, where he found as a pastor friend of Fr. Calabria, the priest don Giuseppe Bonometti.

In the document of personal memories, Fr. Desenzani writes: "*January 6, 1907: curate at San Giovanni in Valle. After a few days, I met Fr. Calabria, on the occasion of a funeral. I explained to him about my project of "White Lily" and instead he proposed the idea to build a boarding school for orphans.*"

Fr. Desenzani wished in his heart to involve Fr. Calabria in his grand, even if unrealistic, project; Fr. Calabria instead offered him more humble but concrete action: he had at home already five orphans and thought to accept many others; for this he was searching a better premises and staff for this work. Fr. Desenzani got convinced to cooperate.

He became assistant director of the boys, from 1907 to 1911. Meanwhile, he suggested to Fr. Calabria to ascribe a name to the developing Opera: "Casa Buoni Fanciulli."[23]

After doing all the parish activities, he devoted the remaining free time for the boys. He even spent the night in Vincolo Case Rotte. Then, he moved with all the boys to San Zeno in Monte.

But, in his head constantly he contemplated the idea of the "White Lily". He thought he could realize his dream in Latin America.

In 1911 he sailed to Buenos Aires, as a chaplain of a group of Italian emigrants. He asked and obtained a meeting with the President of the Republic of Argentina. But his idea did not arouse enthusiasm. Back in Italy, he resumed his place among boys "Buoni Fanciulli." But new capable staff had aggregated to Fr. Calabria; and he began to feel uncomfortable. He resigned as director of the house San Zeno in Monte and offered to manage his own activity. He wanted to start a small "family home" for older boys who had completed their academic training in San Zeno in Monte. But, the bishop, wishing to anchor more

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[23] Casa Buoni Fanciulli, confr. Supra.cap. viii note 1.

firmly the parish apostolate, transferred him to the parish of St. Paul in Campo Marzio (Verona). He stayed there for about a year. Vibrant as he was, he felt trapped in the ordered and repetitive parish life. So he applied to the Bishop for permission to enter PIME missionary institute (Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions) in Milan. He obtained the permission and in 1914, we see him in India, in Hyderabad.

Though, very far he maintained regular correspondence with Fr. Calabria. Each time he returned to Italy he remained at San Zeno in Monte, where he was counted as a beloved brother.

In 1932 he returned to Italy to complete his Medical studies. During this period, he founded the UMMI (Italian medical missionary Union). After his graduation in Medicine he returned to India and requested Fr. Calabria to take care of the management of this new born Association. Fr. Calabria accepted and chose its office in the Sacred Heart Hospital, Negrar. There he appointed as director a holy religious brother, a true apostle of the missions, Brother Attilio Dr. Ricardi.[24]

He managed to convince his friend Fr. Calabria to send a religious community to India, where he had established two communities of "Casa Buoni Fanciulli" for the boys and girls. Insisting and convincing he managed to get a group of four brothers to set out to India on 9th November 1934.

In one of the portraits so powerful to say a lot is to quote the director of the monthly magazine outlined by Fr. Luigi Adami: "*you ring the calling bell of the house and there will come a tall priest, with a smiling face, at the first meeting you gain a great confidence with this priest. He through his spectacles shows the innocence of his soul, the flash of the perfect. Probably when you rung the bell he might be sweeping the floor, or setting the clothes in the wardrobe, if the hands are yet fresh with the detergent and water it is to hide from you a very humbler service. Things you do not guess then or now, because he does the father and mom of the boys, and some of very tender age…. Fr.*

[24] Cf. M.Gadili, Attilio Riccardi, Verona 1997, pp 133.

Diodato in his free time, does the work of a good cook, and knows to clean the sink".[25] Father Desenzani died in India on 16th June 1960.

Massimo Besozzi

The intent of Fr. Calabria in welcoming young people in need was not just to feed them and clothe them, but primarily to provide them with a culture and vocational training. He wanted to form them as free and self-sufficient individuals.

"For these children, we need to be fathers and mothers", - wrote Fr. Calabria in 1934 in his memoir - *"train, educate to a Christian life, by teaching them a profession and making them good family people ... Give them not only bread and work, but what is more important is the Christian and civic education."* To plan and carry out this type of school, he sought after capable and generous people. And he could not find anything better than Mr. Massimo Besozzi, Ex chief technician of Military Technical Arsenal, Municipal Councillor of the Catholic minority, President of the Labour Union, a collaborator of the weekly *Il Lavoro*, a known political and social journalist.

Massimo Besozzi, was born in Verona on January 14, 1866. Graduated from the Technical High schools, immediately found employment as a Mechanical professional and technical drawing teacher at the Institute Artigianelli (the first professional school in the city of Verona). After a few years of teaching, the Military posted him as head technician of Military Arsenal in Verona, where he continued until 1909, till he resigned it to enter as a religious in the "Casa Buoni Fanciulli." He was a prominent man in the Catholic popular movement; He was part of the inner circle of priests and lay people involved in the social field, especially in rural areas. There were very few experts, in comparison to members of the Catholic movement Opera Congress,

[25] L. Adami, *La casa nei suoi albori, in L'amico dei Buoni Fanciulli,* December 1935. Pp 149ff.

directed by the elite aristocrats viz. Canossa, Carlotti, Cartolari, Ravignani. Of this small group deserved special mention of some priests and lay people like: Fr. Giobatta Trida, Monsignor Michelangelo Grancelli, Fr. David de Massari, Fr. Giuseppe Chiot, Monsignor Giuseppe Manzini and Dr. Giobatta Percaccini and Massimo Besozzi. Each of these names require a lot of space, if not a book to introduce.

Giovanni Cappelletti, in a study on the activities of the Verona Catholics, summarizes the work of the Besozzi: "*The Technician Massimo Besozzi founded 21 rural banks, 20 self-help Societies, 15 Labour Unions; concluded 13 collective leaseholds, he opened 19 youth Clubs, 18 Social lounges, 4 professional Schools, 3 public Libraries and conducted in Verona about 600 conferences. And 'the expression of Catholic Action in the popular new background. He worked enthusiastically to the new weekly, Il Lavoro, along with the Director Fr. GiobattaTrida.*

The good will and the natural predisposition placed him among the workers of pen. He handled many actual problems that were concerns of the rural worker."

The Political and ideological basis of the Besozzi can be gathered from the articles he wrote in the weekly "*Il Lavoro*," which had as its subtitle *"popular Catholic Action, Christian Labour Organization."*

The steps taken by this small group of Catholics engaged in social work was amazing. In the city of Verona, in the local elections of 21 August 1907, there was a majority made up of 27 socialists, 24 radicals and 2 Republicans; the minority was formed by the 7 Catholic counsellors.

From this small group of men who walked slowly forming and maturing the organized Catholic movement Verona, which will result, then, in the People's Party.

Besozzi committed all his energy in the Catholic political Movement, but at the same time strongly felt the desire to give his action a strong spiritual foundation. He knew for a long time Fr. Calabria. He admired his humble and gentle action in favour of the abandoned children, and

was fascinated by his sermons full of fervour and faith. Slowly he felt a burning and growing desire to give himself completely and more effectively to the Gospel cause. Very probably that he saw in the action of that simple and bold priest the way to go for a successful political action with a social background. The words leave us indifferent, but concrete actions in favour of the side-lined are most convincing.

Fr. Calabria had already purchased the building San Zeno in Monte, but he was in great difficulty to make it habitable. He had to excavate mountains of rubbles, raising new walls, set up schools, dormitories, in short, do everything! Besozzi went up the hill and went to investigate. He saw the amount of work that is to be completed. He was impressed to contemplate the comings and goings of wheelbarrows pushed by the boys, directed and guided by the young Gigio, his godson of confirmation. He read the pleading eyes of Fr. Calabria, a tacit plea for help and convinced that in this place he could quench his concerns to social justice. He had to wait very less to retire from the military office as director, but did not wait for the date and he resigned to place himself to the service of Fr. Calabria. There was one obstacle to overcome. The consent of the Cardinal Bacilieri. Besozzi was a man of reference for the Catholic movement in the diocese of Verona, so it is not easily substitutable. Cardinal held over the request before giving his consent, but seeing the determination of Besozzi, he granted permission. Massimo Besozzi left his home and came to stay at San Zeno in Monte on 2 February 1909. Fr. Calabria and Fr. Diodato awaited for him in the entrance room. At his arrival, Fr. Calabria exclaimed: "*blessed is the one coming in the name of the Lord!"* Moreover, Besozzi answered: "*and blessed is the one who welcomes me in the name of the Lord!"* And, they embraced each other. The next day we see him in action.

Fr. Desenzani wrote in his diary, "*Besozzi started to feel the Opera with dedication. As he was an all-rounder, surpassed all the masters of our school; as headman, the workshop began to program in serious structures; in the construction he was engineer and architect. Every*

programming and idea had to pass through his brain for analysis, who was, thanks be to God, really wonderful."

Fr. Luigi Adami wrote: *"Brother Massimo Besozzi became the material handyman of the Opera, the model of a brother director, equal to a priest director. He was directing the work of plastering the walls and restoration of San Zeno in Monte. His credit is the first guidelines for the boys and the academic programming of the professional event. He used almost military style of methods and was able to form strong types and qualified workers."*

Before his arrival under the direction of Fr. Desenzani, there was no strict timetable, nor a clear-cut program. There prevailed a family spirit and all breathed a dignified atmosphere.

On the other side Fr. Diodato cherished his dream to transform the "*Casa Buoni Fanciulli*" into the "white lily group". When he became aware that things are taking a different turn, he preferred to abandon Fr. Calabria. Fr. Luigi Adami explains the decision of Fr. Desenzani: "*Fr. Diodato was a theoretical man, better say a poet, while bro. Massimo was very practical. Fr. Calabria gave white paper to Besozzi to organize the moral and material matters of the house. Thus Fr. Desenzani felt side-lined. But, it was not so. His Opera of priest remained very precious and necessary, even though others were managing the material side.*" If we have to find a fault with Besozzi it is his military manner of commanding. For everything else, Bro. Massimo was a model religious. Early morning, he used to get up and spend long hours in meditation, on his knees. For fifteen years, he lived this untiring life. In his direction the house "Casa Buoni Fanciulli" became a model of professional and moral elevation of the most disadvantaged boys, earning respect even from the adversaries of the house. To tie up with the industries for work people sought bro. Massimo and Fr. Calabria. They understood the excellence of the boys and competence of their training. The boys came out from San Zeno at the completion of their study as an expert worker. In 1920, we see him at Costozza. There was a need to build the Church. Bro. Massimo, taking the model of San Zeno in Monte, designed and

managed the work. The construction was completed by 9 December 1922.

In the meantime, in the heart of bro. Besozzi grew and matured another aspiration. He felt the need of a more contemplative and hidden life. He expressed his desire to join as a hermit in the Abby of Praglia (Padova). The Abby was in a state of absolute misery and abandoned situation. It became a heap of rubble when the Italian state took over for some time. The soldiery was the headquarters of the region and did spoil the walls, uprooted windows and doors and destroyed all the furniture.

In this extreme ambience joins the 68 years old Besozzi and remained there until his death. Here too he committed to the formation of youngsters both in the school and at work. One of his admirers and students notes, "*when the Besozzi joined as a monk the Abbey was in an economic and psychological collapse, due to the suppression, with raid of every type and even forced exile. Returned to the Benedictines, they formed it as a community of few old monks and handful of young students from the territory of Ciociaria.*

Francis Perez

Entering the Church of San Zeno in Monte, in the chapel on the left we find the remains of Brother Francesco Perez[26] alongside those of Fr. John Calabria : two inseparable friends, lived vying in loving God and serving others, with humility and in generosity.

The 31-year Earl and 19 years-old clerical student felt immediately drawn to the harmony of the same ideal, animated by the same charism: a poor student, who lived between the hardships and the grip of hunger and an Earl, lawyer, wealthy and well-educated.

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[26] M. Gadili, *Francesco Perez, Una storia di evangelica follia*, Edizioni CCSC, Verona 2010.

So strange to see emerging a familiarity and friendship amid the two. Instead, they met; they understood and joined their lives for the realization of a Divine Opera.

"Since I have four coins - said the Earl Perez*–can I not offer myself to the Lord, to serve Him and his poor children in the Opera?"*

It was the end of a story of many postponements and questions on the part by his friend Fr. Calabria. For several years Earl Perez used to attend Fr. Calabria. But Fr. Calabria did not yield to the temptation to accept him among his collaborators. An "obstacle" challenged Fr. Calabria concerning Earl Perez who was very rich and well educated. He holds an enviable social position and is the Deputy Magistrate of the Court of Verona. All these titles of Earl Perez did seem at odds with the style of poverty and Gospel radicality, which Fr. Calabria had chosen for himself and for his Opera. Welcoming into his circle a rich man seemed to Fr. Calabria as damaging the image of Divine Providence. But later that rich man became the sole support of this Opera. Finally, Father Natale, the confessor of both mediated specifying the solution: *"If you really want to serve God in Casa Buoni Fanciulli, sell everything you have, and give to the poor, and thus, poor among the poor, you will be accepted.*" And, that generous man spiritually already well prepared, sold all of his assets and the proceeds put at the disposal of Fr. Calabria for the purchase and renovation of the Casa San Zeno in Monte. Free from all material possessions, with insignificant and poor personal clothing, stood in front of his friend Fr. Calabria to "*beg to be accepted as a poor servant of abandoned children."*

There was no longer the wealthy landowner, nor the excellent lawyer. The Earl "*is dead,*" Francis used to reply those who called him again with that honorary title; only a modest and poor brother Francis exists now.

Earl Francis Perez was born in Verona July 9, 1861 in the Perez building in via Leoncino 11, in the heart of the old aristocratic Verona. Sixth of ten children, born from the blending of Earl Antonio Maria Nicolò Perez and Marquis Anna Da Lisca.

In this family people breathed a deep and sincere goodness. Nothing hypocritical, but sincere faith, right doctrine and lively cheerfulness.

After completing the first elementary studies at home, Francis was placed in the Real College Carlo Alberto in Moncalieri. The Barnabite Fathers, though secular, directed the college, with seriousness and wisdom. "Checchino", as Francis was called in the family, found himself well in school; but the studies were not going well because of his hyper liveliness. He had a restless and playful character. Therefore, once he completed the second gymnasium, his parents removed him from Moncalieri and put him under the protection of his uncle Fr. Paolo Perez, teacher of Rosminian College of Domodossola. This religious, very human and wise educator had a significant influence on his nephew. He was able to correct his hyper vivacity and guided him in the exercise of human and Christian virtues. Francis was able to adjust himself, to love his study, achieve brilliant academic results, especially in Greek and Italian.

It seemed that everything that proceeded very well, however, was about to fall within a small group of unpleasant bunch of hooligans. The confidence he had with his uncle saved him from an experience that could be harmful to his soul. Parents, seriously concerned about the moral integrity of their son, withdrew him from that college and enrolled him in the school of Verona Seminary, to resume his studies in the fourth grade of grammar school. It was the autumn of 1876.

Here, in a serene environment close to their family, he finished the grammar school, taking an average of eight and laudable remark.

He continued his studies at the public high school "Scipione Maffei."

In 1880, he attained classical education with good grades and enrolled at the Law Faculty at the University of Padua. He graduated in Law in 1885. He was just 24.

He returned to Verona and practiced for short-term as a lawyer. Then he devoted himself completely to the administration of the family land. In 1890, his father expired and the care of all the possessions fell

completely on his shoulders. The Perez possessed palaces in city and country, and fertile land in many municipalities of the province. For his recognized honesty and ability, some women Religious Congregations requested him to manage their administration. He did this freely and with diligence. The assets of the wealthy family Perez grew with the legacy left by Earl Antonio Pompei, the last descendant of the noble family. And, Francis and sisters moved from Via Leoncino to Via Cavour, in the Perez-Pompei Palace. On the other side of Corso Cavour opened the modest alley Disciplina, where, at no.7, housed the poor Calabria family. In mysterious ways, the Lord had approached the two future friends and protagonists of the Opera of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence. In 1896 the widow Perez Marchesa Anna Da Lisca, a holy mother of Francis died. From this moment, the life of Francis changed radically. The young man was 35 years old. He appeared in the eyes of the good society as a good match: rich, funny, lively and almost beautiful, tall, thin person, with a beautiful fashionable moustache, always elegant and noble. He was among the first in Verona to rove across on a bicycle, the special bicycle with the front wheel bigger than the rear, dressed in perfect sportswear. He does not scorn to attend worldly gatherings of noble families. Courteous, pleasant companion of conversation, but nothing more. The female nobility eyed him curiously, trying to find out as much of the mysterious and peculiar adjoining his person and his deeds.

People used to comment, and it was true, that almost every week, he would line up with the poor, with a bowl in hand, disguised as a beggar, begging for a bowl of soup in the door of religious community. He could not always manage to blend in poor and patched clothes. People say, in fact, he dressed as a beggar went begging in favour of Capuchin Fathers of Via Barana. His sisters, very pious and upright, got wild to hear that talk and made him know. Sometimes, he was surprised to sleep in the barns of his farms. It is easy to understand how these peculiarities around the district comment: "*That holy Earl! How strange"!*

In his bedroom, he built a kind of plank to sleep during the night. Moreover, his housekeeper Eugenia discovered the cilices, Earl Francis was using. The already admirable and extraordinary Christian life of the Earl: daily attendance to the sacraments, teaching catechism to children, passionate reader of Sacred Scripture, visits to patients in the hospital. Now, these other "oddities" created around the Earl Francis an aura of admiration, awe, bewilderment. His meeting with Fr. Calabria was unavoidable. They met for the first time, in the Rectory of St. Lawrence, where the young Calabria attended the Oratory boys. But more often they were able to see each other, both were penitents, in the Church of the Discalced, waiting at confessional of Father Natale. It is typical to think that Francis, a practical man, is informed of the economic conditions of the young Calabria, through Father Natale, to help his family. When John and his mother were housed in Pompeii Perez-building, meetings between these two future companions of religious life were more frequent.

The Seminarian Calabria felt his call to the work of mercy by visiting the sick. Indeed, he had founded an association with two of his fellow seminarians. Certainly, he also might have shared this to Earl Perez who became benefactors along with his cousin Marquis Da Lisca. But, Francis, inspired by the example of the young clerics, also began to beg to solicit the sick and especially visitors and comforter.

He saw misery very closely; learned to share, understand, and console. He fell in love with the suffering Christ in the sick and suffering.

By attending the Oratory of St. Stephan parish, he experienced painful situations of poor families and opened his wallet and heart to help and relieve.

The aspect of public life of Francis Perez deserves a brief comment. The Perez family owned in the town of Zevio almost 1087 hectares of fertile land. He was paying very high taxes. By the time his father Antonio Perez was Mayor of Zevio, he built at his own expense the bridge over the river Adige and did many other public works. Even the sons, Francis and John, were members of the City Council. Francis held different offices such as the public auditor, inspector of boys' schools,

president of Charity Congregation, a public body in charge of administering the resources of the poor. Even when the political colours changed in civic administration, Francis had their request to continue in office. And with utmost care he managed these assets of the poor, not letting to cajole anybody's endorsements. He opposed firmly to the easy prescriptions of doctors and pharmacists from every recipe for personal gains. The money for the medicines of the poor were less, so it had to go wisely and honestly.

He knew firmly to deny the fabricated assistance to the poor, fighting nepotism and pressures from political parties. His minutes are meticulous, clear, and exhaustive. An example and model of healthy and honest administration. Nevertheless, most of his time Francis spent in searching and finding out job for the unemployed. He proposed public works and, in his estates,, he created jobs for the cleaning of trenches. This was not just to help, pouring profusely his possessions to the poor, but he strongly felt the social problems of his time.

In the political and social struggles he did not back down. The decade between 1900 and 1910 was a particularly warm period. Socialism had spread like wildfire from 'Polesine *(marshy land*)' to "Lower" Verona, where the agricultural labourers were loaded with harassment and implausible injustice. It was not difficult for the red leagues to conquer these poor wretches. Even Perez were proprietors. Francis entered the political struggle, speaking at meetings, speaking not so much to defend his privileges, but to counter the village supporters of agitator. But at commissions he preferred negotiation with employees. It is true that everyone liked him because he was not arrogant, but for his tenant farmers he remained a master. There were two brave priests Mgr. Giuseppe Manzini and Msgr. De Mauro, beating the Venetian countryside, scowling rallies to publicize the social doctrine of the Church among those obstinate bosses who twisted their employees. Often their rally ended in scuffles or for libel instituted by the powerful landowners. The Perez felt party. He was master of the land. Perhaps, he too was a dictator of the workers? He took all the contracts between his family and the employees and gave them to the

inspection of Msgr. Manzini, asking him to report any injustices. Msgr. Manzini, an open minded, educated person, a lover of truth and justice, took it seriously. He was an expert in the field. After few days, he gave back the contracts to Francesco with this judgment: "*The contracts examined wisely reflect the social duties of a Christian and can serve as a model not only of perfect justice, but wide outpouring of charity*". But this is not enough for the delicate soul of Francis. He wanted to hear the opinion of his employees. They, in front of him, did not feel in surprise any suggestion to propose, because they sensed the sincerity of the intentions of their exceptional master. Wages of employees of Perez were always higher than all other land loads. To work for Perez was a real pleasure and privilege. And he lived near and was sensitive to their problems. This attitude was not pleasing to some landowners, who say nothing of naivety and branded him as a "useful idiot" for the propaganda of socialist ideas. But Francis knew to be on the side of truth and right and continued on his way.

His rapport with Fr. Calabria became closer when his friend priest was appointed as parish priest of Santo Stefano. The work with Chimney sweepers they realized together. And how many other small or large help slipped discreetly into the hands of Fr. Calabria to accommodate dramatic situations of poor families or to settle someone to institutions of poor abandoned children. Later when Fr. Calabria was appointed Rector of St Benedetto del Monte, we still find Francesco ready not only to open his wallet but also to roll up his sleeves to care them directly, washing, educating those ragged boys, dirty, rebellious to all discipline, Fr. Calabria had taken them to his home. In the transfer of those people into a spacious house in the alley Case Rotte, we still find Francis, who took on the burden of rehabilitation works. Finally, when he purchased San Zeno in Monte complex, we find Earl Perez ready to intervene. He sold to Bice, his sister, the share of his land of Zevio and, with the proceeds, he bought the building.

In September 1908, at Ceraino in Val d'Adige, Francis meet again around the tavern table, with Fr. Calabria, Don Desenzani and Gigio Adami. Fr. Calabria read the first *"Holy Rules"* for components of future

opera for the abandoned children. Francis was all overjoyed and animated by frantic ardour. He went home and feverishly tried to sell the land he owned at Cerea, Aselogna, and elsewhere. He will give priority to vacating tenant farmers, granting extensions and high discounts. He hurried to divest himself of everything. He thought of taking leave of his employees on the day November 11, the feast of St. Martin, the traditional date of surrender of accounts and closure of the agricultural year, which was sanctioned with a cheerful evening with chestnuts and wine. In the afternoon, he attached the buggy and made a round with his two sisters Maria and Lavinia. They had to take a trip to their farms to invite all employees to the villa of Zevio. The residents of Santa Maria had a bridge that spanned a discrete stream. The horse put a hoof; it lost the grip and slid to the ground. Then, suddenly, straightened and with a jerk broke free of the harness and flew away like the wind.

The bridge was narrow and without a parapet. The gig is not rushed into the water, but the three victims found themselves battered. The two sisters tumbled down into a hedge and Francesco came under the wheels of the carriage. People came for help and freed the poor Earl from the weight of the wheels. His right leg was fractured badly. His two sisters fortunately had only some minor bruises. Francis was recovered in the hospital.

The surgeon tried to pull the two bone stumps. After healing, the Earl Francis found himself with one leg shorter for two centimetres.

During the long convalescence, Francis matured the conviction that what had happened was a sure sign that the Lord wanted him totally and permanently in the Opera. He reflected, prayed and decided. But the obstacle was placed by the one he least expected: Fr. Calabria. Any Founder would welcome with open arms an educated, pious, generous and rich candidate. But Fr. Calabria feared that the presence of the Earl among his poor were a luxury and that Divine Providence would be obscured.

"It is easy to give into the hands of Providence - would people say - with an Earl who can ensure a good income with all his possessions."

And, Fr. Calabria had the courage to say this on his face. "B*ut, then*, - said Francis - *it is because of those my four Schei (coins) I cannot offer myself to the Lord*?" The two-bits, to be honest, there were hundreds of hectares of land, various houses and buildings. Francis remembered the words of Jesus to the young rich man: *"*Go*, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and come follow me.*"

Perhaps, at first, Francis thought to entrust his property to Fr. Calabria, to put a good secure base for the survival of the Opera in favour of boys. But the Gospel is different. Not from men should come the security, but from God. Surrender into his hands in every way, be poor in the most realistic sense, not having anything to rely on, reject all sources of income.

"*The special aim of the Congregation - are solemnly proclaimed in the Constitutions of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence. – it is to revive the world's faith and trust in God, Father of all men, by a total abandonment in his divine Providence for all regarding the necessities of life, according to the teaching of the Lord: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you* ..."[27].

The Earl was not at all attached to riches, but the complete stripping was hard to accept. He confessed it ten years later, in a letter to Fr. John: *"already ten years passed since I had the strength to devote myself of these abandoned children. How merciful the Lord was to me, because my life was not worthy of this great grace."* It took indeed an extraordinary "*fortitude*" to take this radical step. He managed it and never regretted on it.

He sold everything, gave up public office, broke off all his bridges of aristocracy with the past. He greeted his family members who remained stunned and horrified, and joined the house of the Lord, poor, but with a heart very rich and full of joy. It was August 20, 1909.

The news spread quickly in the aristocratic circles of Verona. Some judged it ridiculous, others imprudent. His brother John did not even want to hear his name. The sisters, Lavinia, and Maria Bice horrified at

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[27] Constitutions and directory of the congregation of the PSDP p.43 Art.8.

the thought that their beloved brother had gone to "*commit suicide*" among the spoiled brats of Fr. Calabria.

However, some were so edified said, *"You want to see the miracles of the Lord? Go to San Zeno in Monte, and you will find a rich man who has been able to get rid of everything to serve God through the poor. "*

Chapter Ten

BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF THE OPERA

Lay collaborators

A numerous crowd of boys, chosen not from the best and good mannered, *Fr. Diodato Desenzani* and the young *Gigio Adami alone could not manage.* Many other individuals gladly spared their time for the Opera. In 1909 we find *Mr. Massimo Besozzi*. He became an important presence for the "Good Children Home". We have already introduced him in the previous chapter. Soon after *Mr. Giovanni Marchi* joined them, he was a grown-up man on his forties, already employed in the insurance company of "La Cattolica" of Verona. He left his job to avail fully to Fr. Calabria. He became the smallest of the small, humbly accepting any type of work, never saved his energy and thus gained the title the "porter" of the house. He over worked a lot ignoring his health and thus fell ill. Fr. Calabria suggested him a less burdensome life and entrusted him the park of San Vittore di Colognola, where he died in 1933. In July 1908 joined *Alessandro Fenzi*, a glass artist and expert in any artisan work. He will work many years in the "Good Children Home" at Costozza, did his best in every field especially in the electrical installations, carpentry, and naturally in the glass artisan. There are two special stained glass works as his masterpieces in the chapel of Costozza. He was a man of deep faith, humble and jovial. Whenever Fr. Calabria went to Costozza loved to be in his company, with typical Venetian wordplay.

Always in the same year, after some months joined to the group *Earl Francesco Perez*. As we have already mentioned he preferred the humblest services and became indeed a model to all other

collaborators. "*If Bro. Francesco, who once was served and esteemed as Count, I too can do such humble services*" used to say the enthusiastic bro Pietro Carlini, who joined the house in 1910 after leaving his job as vine import-export sector between Italy and France.

After some time on 23 November requested the privilege of enrolling in the group of Good Children, *Mr. Alessandro Padovani*, an exceptional shoemaker. He has established the wonderful laboratory of shoe making in San Zeno in Monte. To this, again two youngsters united *Luigi Borgo*, who became a priest in the Church of San Benedetto al Monte, and *Angelo Faccioli*, who due to poor health, had to abandon the studies.

Luigi Borgo is an efficient bookbinder and Faccioli was an excellent teacher and music master. Dozens and dozens of other people came to help Fr. Calabria in his activity of training the boys. People came from every social strata and they all had only one goal: faith in God and love for the neighbour. All could not survive in their commitment but continued to be helpful even after leaving the group. They all kept good rapport with Fr. Calabria.

Priest collaborators

Prior to having priests formed in the Institute, Fr Calabria had to seek help from diocesan priests to provide the spiritual care of lay religious and children. We have already met our first collaborator, *Fr. Diodato Desenzani*. He stayed with Fr. Calabria for about four years, but never made private vows. His had in his mind his ideal, and in 1912, Fr. Desenzani left the diocese of Verona to join the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME). Fr. Calabria, therefore, remained for some time as the only priest of the House. However, on June 13, 1912, come forward a young and holy priest, *Don Giuseppe Ambrosini* native of Soave. He was a religious "more of commitment" than, in fact, because he spent only a few months in the House of Good Children.

From 1912 he had chosen Fr. Calabria as his spiritual father.[28] Fr. Calabria counted him as an effective member and first priest of the Opera.

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[28] *Don Giuseppe Ambrosini* (1889 -1913).*There is a moving correspondence between Fr. Calabria and Fr. Ambrosini, from January 1912 until the death of the Holy priest of Vicenza. We find affectionate phrases and learn of a father son relationship between them: "It's a long time I feel something special; Jesus tells me: "I want priests according to my Heart, who live available to everything and seek nothing but souls, and follow the Evangelical counsel. Oh, if I had these priests, how my Heart would enjoy, how many souls would come to me; what I would not do through them! "... Fr. Giuseppe, pray and be careful if you feel like joining this poor priest and being like a fool, available to everything ... Of course, being with this poor priest needs to suffer so much, But happy sufferings "(7 February 1912).* In March 1912, Fr Ambrosini expressed to Fr. Calabria the decision to join him. *"Dear Fr. Giuseppe"* replies Fr. Calabria, *but mindful let Jesus speak to you, do not speak to human beings but with Jesus"* Then, he sent him to take rest for a while to a mountain village*: "For holy obedience, remember to govern yourself, good wine, meat, and so on. Do not apply anything, breathe the air of Velo Veronese (about 1000 meters high), and occasionally some act of God's love, some jubilation ... and then faith, faith. Do not forget to recite that beautiful prayer "Fiat!" ... "*.Again: *"I recommend to be in good humour and living day by day, hour by hour, abandoned in everything in the hands of divine Providence"* (1 August 1912). The sickness of Fr. Giuseppe Ambrosini aggravated. He was admitted in a clinic: "*dear Fr Giuseppe, …. I tell you that you surrender in everything to the will of God, and it will be shown through the doctors and the medicine; this is the will of Jesus, and it is you dear loving Fr. Giuseppe unite fully to Him… I recommend you to remain happy … and this joy is sprouted from the readiness to do God's will..*"(23 Nov. 1912). Finally, *"dear Fr. Giuseppe I am very near you in my thoughts and prayers, in my heart. Oh how do I desire to see God's will is done, and matures the much desired longed for grace, that you come to us at San Zeno in Monte to do good; surely even now you do the same goodness to the House and the church, you know how much! Your patience, your surrender all pass through the treasure of Divine Providence and in the name of God I thank you…*" (18 Dec. 1912). The life of Fr. Ambrosini is brought to the attention of the sacred Congregation for Saints, and awaits the reply of beatification.

Fr. Ambrosini was fascinated by the talks that Fr. Calabria gave in the retreats in the seminary of Vicenza. He obtained permission from his bishop to spend some months in Good Children Home.

Unfortunately, very soon they diagnosed with a severe tuberculosis.

At the end of October, sickness forced him to return home due to the worsening of infection. He died as a model of holiness, on March 31, 1913, just at the age of 24. The process of beatification is under way. Fr. Calabria was fascinated by this young priest who had distinguished himself for virtue, availability and culture. "*I will not leave you alone*," said Don Ambrosini to Fr. Calabria at the point of death, "*someone else will take my place*." Indeed, on August 24, 1914, his fellow schoolmate, Fr Luigi Pedrollo asked his bishop the permission to consecrate himself to the Opera of "Good Children".

In his diary, on June 23, 1914, Fr. Calabria writes: "*I have been to His Eminence, I have shown how Divine Providence will send here Don Luigi Pedrollo. His Eminence proved to be pleasing. Oh, how nice to see Don Luigi in the office of Casante?* "

Once again, on August 24, 1914, Calabria writes: "*Divine Providence has sent here Fr. Luigi Pedrollo. God's designs are great for his servant. All the Brothers listen him in the name of God*." Don Pedrollo played a key role in leading and forming the religious of the Opera. He prepared the editorial of the Constitutions of 1932. We shall introduce him later.

Another Verona priest, Don Giobatta Battisti, joined them. Finally, since 1921, began the group of priests grown and formed in the House: Fr. Luigi Adami, Fr. Augusto Cogo, Fr. Stanislao Pellizer, Fr. Giovanni Franchini.

Friars of XX century

The lay collaborators who helped Fr. Calabria came mostly from the working world. They were good Christians, engaged in parish apostolate or Catholic social movements, but they did not have adequate

preparation to live a community life. Moreover, Calabria left them modelling according to a particular religious life style. The first place of importance was their prayer and meditation, then the exhortation and the weekly meetings. They had a very challenging and rigid timetable. Religious, priests and Lay brothers used to get up early in the morning at 4:30 during summer, and at 5:00 during the winter. Someone stayed in the boys' dormitories for helping, the others gathered in the chapel for half an hour of meditation. Then, they all went back to their rooms, woke up the children and helped them clean up and put in order their personal belongings and the rooms. Finally, all together: religious and youth gathered in the church for the Holy Mass. Upon completion of the religious function, there was one hour of school for the older boys, while for the younger ones an hour of study. At 7.40, breakfast. At 8 am, work for the seniors and classes for the elementary school, the youngest.

Their midday meal did not offer many choices. They had some soup and at times a sandwich. On holidays, however, we also had the fortune of a second dish and a glass of wine that did not give us a kick, because it was well diluted with water.

After lunch we were involved in the recreation of children until 2.00 pm; then attended to other activities proper for the day until 05.00 pm. We had another hour of recreation followed by the recitation of the Rosary in the Church. There was time for study for everyone after which had dinner with large slices of polenta (corn cake, a common dish of Veneto).

Whenever, convenient, according to the seasons, the day ended with evening prayers and a religious message, called the "maxim."

Finally, all go to sleep.

There is no doubt: these boys, so intensely engaged in work, study, prayer, and play, did not have time to bask in boredom. In addition, the religious, turning the lights of the dormitories, and the dazzling tiny whispers of the boys, still tenaciously awake, sneaked into the chapel to close the day with half an hour of adoration or to perform final practices of personal devotion.

A schedule of this type, which we are accustomed to, at other times of life, may seem weary and cruel. It was a system of life similar to all the boys and adults lived in the Venetian rural area at the early years of the past century. Most of them got up at three or four in the morning to "feed the animals" before going to school or going to fieldwork. The days were different, with great sweat and less entertainment. The boys grew up without the lethargic ideas that swirled in the head of today's youth, and all the problems of the several phases of adolescence. In the formation of the religious brothers, the "*friars of the twentieth century*", as per Fr. Calabria, aimed hard.

Fr. Calabria did not want individual disciplines, no night vigils, but virile virtues, great generosity, and untiring work.

As for their clothing, he did not impose distinctive uniforms such as the priests wore the cassock same as the diocesan priests, and the brothers dressed in civilian outfits, which were modest, nonetheless decent and clean.

The sisters

Each child needs the love and attention of a mother. Much more needed for the orphans and abandoned whom Fr. Calabria brought to the house. We see joy shining in the eyes of the little ones caressed and pampered by maternal affection. But there was no gleam in the sad face of children gathered by Fr. Calabria. Eyes that are lively, careful, muddled, but hard and worn out. The warmth of a mom’s touch was essential to turn on a smile in their faces. For the early Good Children, two maternal and generous hearts were available: Mama Angela and Margherita Masina. Two good women, full of care and accustomed to sacrifice but, by their age, forced them incapable to withstand the liveliness of the boys. Mama Angela had not pulled back in front of this demanding job. As a widow, with three children in charge, she had managed not only to make the household accounts, but also to share the little she had with other needy people. He took home that elderly

Barbara, her daughter Teresa, her granddaughter Marcellina and Mrs. Masina. And she opened the doors, therefore, also to the abandoned children his son picked up from the street.

She had received a solid religious education in the Institute of Don Nicola Mazza viz. love for God and neighbour, devotion to Mary Mother of Sorrows, faithful acceptance of Divine will, faith in divine Providence, openness and receptive to the humblest and understanding the weaknesses of others. She had passed on to her son John this way of perceiving and living Christian life.

Margherita Masina, had joined them at retirement age, and she devoted fully to the service of Calabria family. Her presence became more and more necessary, especially when Mom Angela was bedridden. She was, as already mentioned, a woman somewhat grumbling, like all the people of a certain age, but did not refuse any work, engaging with great generosity.

Interesting to note in the formation of young Calabria, presence of mature women with simplicity lived their Christian faith, inspired by the Gospel: Mama Angela, Godmother Barbara Ricca, Teacher Giulia Botteon and Mrs. Margherita Masina.

And, it is equally important to meet the Sisters of Mercy whom he met in the military hospital. In the early days, he turned to the superior of the Sisters of Mercy, Sister Lavinia Mondin, for the laundry and wardrobe of the children. These good and generous sisters, each week, went to the presbytery of San Benedetto to fetch the children's clothing to wash and tidy up.

When the group of Good Children moved to San Zeno in Monte, three Sisters of Mercy and a novice settled in a house near the parish of San Giovanni in Valle. They provided free service of clothing and nursing care to the numerous Good Children. They worked for some months, with generosity and heroism. But, Cardinal Bacilieri, informed of the matter, expressed his disapproval. Fr. Calabria did not object to the bishop, but asked for permission to "put together some good ladies, who would give all the services necessary to care for so many children." The bishop agreed, indeed, encouraged this solution. Hence, closing a

door, the Lord wide opened another door, and began the foundation of the future Congregation for the Poor Servants of Divine Providence Sisters.

The first noble woman who presents to Fr. Calabria is Angela De Battisti. She was employed therefore "*in the early morning at home to work on both laundry and clothes*." Her remaining free time she dedicated to the apostolate of charity. She knew Fr. Calabria and the Opera for the abandoned children. She realized the difficulties the holy priest was struggling with Good Children. Therefore, on April 17, 1910 at the age of 49, she decided to devote the rest of her life to the service of the Opera. She takes accommodation in a small house, made available by Fr. Bonometti, parish priest of the church of San Giovanni in Valle. During the night, one of his niece gave her company.

After a few months, Lady Lavinia Perez appears. She had strongly opposed the decision of her brother Francesco Perez. She even thought, in fact, that her brother, very religious and friend of Fr. Calabria, had been brainwashed or advised wrongly in choosing that hard life, not suited to his precarious state of health. That is why she had appeared at San Zeno in Monte, and decided to raise a formal protest on behalf of the entire Perez family. Fr. Calabria welcomed her kindly and listened to her silently. When she finally fell silent, he looked up to heaven and, as inspired, said, "*What do I see*?" "*What do you see, Fr. Calabria?*" The Lady Perez asked curiously. "*I see Lady Lavinia Perez following her Brother Francis in the service of the Lord!*". "*No, this will never happen!*" retorted the Countess; and greeting gently she left. She came to San Zeno with the intent to protest, but returns home much disturbed. She shared with her confessor Fr. Natale of her inner trouble. She fell into a strong depression. Fr. Natale suggested her to go and spend some days with Ms Angela De Battisti, seeking God's will. It was 14 October 1910. She had already completed 47. She tried to be helpful to the children. In contact with such a misery in them, she had no time to think of herself.

Regained peace she felt grateful. She felt gratified and well placed in that simple and poor environment. She informed her confessor of

having recovered peace and she confessed her desire to consecrate her life to the Lord, serving the needy people.

She made a formal request to Fr. Calabria. He distractedly said to her, "*Lady Lavina, I would need a charity." "Tell me, Father!" "We were without brooms. I would like that you go and buy one at Piazza Bra!* ". The Lady Lavina, even though dressed being still a woman of the Veronese aristocracy and well known in the saloon bars of the most refined square in Verona, resigned. After a moment of hesitation, with a pale face but clear and determined features, she replied, "*I'm going, Father*!"

And she went, found out the shop and brought home the broom under her arm. A heroic gesture that marked a turning point in the life of Lady Lavinia.

Fr. Calabria welcomed her to the collaborators' team. She lived in absolute poverty, without ever complaining of the discomforts and deprivations of all that he once possessed.

"One day," said Fr. Calabria, *"eating a slice of polenta and cheese with taste, she exclaimed with simplicity:" Father, I think I will not be in paradise because I'm enjoying here on earth". "And* yet*, "Fr. Calabria continued," there was not much comfort at all, and from the windows of their house came an embarrassing smell that made them shudder."*

The personal physician of the Perez family had warned that the Lady Lavina would not have survived even a week in that place. Instead, despite her delicate constitution, Sister Lavinia enjoyed her rather good health and lived for another ten years. Emulating the examples of Brother Francis, she preferred the humblest services. With simplicity and joy, she alternated between the kitchen and washing of the vessels.

Meanwhile, new challenges emerged in San Zeno in Monte. Some handicapped children were welcomed, who needed maternal and individual care. Fr. Calabria rented a cottage, a few steps from San Zeno in Monte, just above the *Giusti* Garden. The sisters shifted to that place on March 22, 1911, to care for this type of children.

In 1912 on Christmas, another collaborator, the noble woman *Maria Fannio,* joined the Opera of the Sisters. She also left comfort and riches to serve the Lord among the poor. She made herself available in the kitchen, in the wardrobe, in the laundry room. She wanted her to be privileged to wash handkerchiefs and socks, not paying attention to the jealousy that deformed her delicate hands. For a short time, she assumed the task of superior of the group. By order of Fr. Calabria, she began to draw a first sketch of the Rules for the Sisters. *Sister Fannio* was a humble humorous asset. She preferred the last places and most humble assignments. She was always gentle in her touch, delicate and caring for everyone. She was suffering from interior pain and scruples but went through everything with her great and firm faith.

Maria Galbusera was an exceptional sister who joined them. A woman of strong temper and vast learning who possessed the fabric of the true founder. Elementary teacher in Milan. At twenty-one, she moved to Verona to look after the four children of her widowed brother. Her zeal did not exhaust itself only in this service. They visited hospitals, prisons and "penitent", holding conferences and giving advice and comfort everywhere. She felt compassion for abandoned children and exploited girls. She gave them everything she owned. She was thinking of becoming a nun among the Daughters of Charity, but her confessor, Father Natale, proposed her to join among the Poor Servants of Divine Providence sisters. She applied for admission.

She, dressed in white, wore a hat and white sun umbrella, introduced herself to Fr. Calabria. And Fr. Calabria himself narrated it to the Sisters that after a short interview he told her, "*Miss, I need some wood. Take ten "coins" and go and get the firewood.*" And she obeyed with simplicity and naturalness. She returned home, carrying under the arm "two pieces of firewood".

And she joined the Sisters in 1913. But, the first impact with reality was traumatic. The Sisters lived in a poor home without any comfort. They dressed like the poor ordinary women and led a life of obscure sacrifice engaging in humble responsibilities.

She confessed in a letter addressed to her sister: *"It was a grace that the good Sisters did not read in my face and on my whole person the sense of aversion and repugnance but they just took me in."*

And, to a sick friend, she shared, "*You want me to talk sincerely about my new life. One must die! ... and on this death, conquers slowly but continues our journey, I sing my poor Magnificat bitterly enjoying, bitterly exulting.*"

She admired the other Sisters who *"loved, suffered, and patiently rejoiced, with a sweet hope, with silent faith! But what am I doing here? What do I do?*". She was drenched in her aridity, doubts, in the solitude of her heart; While others, especially the Sisters living next to her, found her serene and smiling, full of charity and understanding, deeply humble with everyone. In the church, she was crying softly, but outside she was cheerful. Then, slowly, she accepted the will of God. The spirit of family prevailing among the Sisters and the goodness they poured upon her charmed her. Fr. Calabria, perceiving the spiritual depth and great human talents, wanted her to be the superior of the sisters' wing. She completed and finalised under obedience the outline of rules drafted by Sr. Fannio. She handed over the sisters the stamp of her strong character and her healthy spirituality. She summed up her edifying system in this rule: "*To be good, only one thing is necessary: do well all you have to do*."

She was familiar with the spirituality of St. John of the Cross and of St. Therese of Child Jesus, but did not admit mysticism. She cut short with those who were basking in mysticism talk.

She dumped on her fragile health the constant tension in duty, prayer, work, patience in inner trials, application of charity etc. She was often suffering from stomach ache and insomnia. Then, a sudden attack distorted her face. Perhaps because of a contracted infection eating rotten meat, offered to the house through the division of soldiers, who were abruptly transferred from Verona. They tried to treat her in the hospital, but the infection led her to death in 1917. She was only 43. She left a memory of her thoughts and spirituality in her writings in a book: *Be perfect*. In subsequent editions, renamed with the title: *I chose*

the pain. But even this title, bitter and not completely open to Galbusera's soul, was definitively modified to the theme "*Why fear"?*[29]

In December 1912, seven Sisters took vows of total Abandonment to Divine Providence in the hands of the superior Fr. Calabria. These are their names: Angela De Battisti, joined on April 17, 1910; Lavinia Perez, entry 14 October 1910; Adele Carli, move in on March 25, 1911; Laura Fossati, entered on March 16, 1911; Angelina Dresden, entered on October 15, 1911; Maria Meneghetti, entered on August 25, 1912; Maria Olian Fannio, entered on December 25, 1912.

The daily timetable of this group of generous and heroic women spent amid prayer and work, in a peaceful gathering and in perfect joy. Every month Calabria held for them the recollection, preached in the church of San Zeno in Monte. The lodge where they lived was named "*Piccolissima Casa di Nazareth*" (petite Nazareth home) and under the protection of the Saintly Curie of Ars.

With the arrival of Sr. Galbusera, Fr Calabria established obedience (responsibilities) for each sister. He wrote: *"I strongly recommend that you go ahead in your sanctification. All work, with one heart and soul, to the greater glory of God, to receive His constant help. Be like clay, have mutual charity, have faith, faith, and abandonment in the hands of Divine Providence. God bless you and make you all holy. Pray for me*".

Fr. Calabria often went to visit the Sisters, to encourage them in their hard material and spiritual work. He wished that harmony and joy prevailed among them. Sometimes he came up with some curious petty news to test them with innocent jokes like this: "*Don't you know, Sisters, what happened to Don Antonio B…?" In the questioning look of the stupendous women, he continued: "Ah, poor man, he has left his cassock!*"

A sister who knew well and esteemed high that priest, dismayed and exclaimed, "*My God, even the saints are not safe*!" And Fr. Calabria, with ill-conceived smile: "*What you mean, just last night, before he*

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[29] M. Galbusera psdp, *Perché temere?*, Verona 1976.

went to bed for sleeping, he got off his gown!" And the general uneasiness was melted in laughter.

The fame of holiness surrounded Fr. Calabria and the reverential fear prevailed and deceived the good sisters when he came out with these wits. Other times he tested their humility and obedience with the so-called strange obedience. One day, he ordered two Sisters, Angelina Dresden and Lavinia Perez, to buy two cents of sugar and three cents of coffee. They put on the party dress and went to do this strange acquisition. Of course, the manager of the shop, rubbing his eyes for surprise, tried to make it clear that he did not have the balance to weigh so small portions of sugar or coffee.

They endorsed their giving to the Lord with the profession of four religious vows: Poverty, Chastity, Obedience, and Abandonment in Divine Providence. This formula remained in force until 1924, the year in which the Sisters had a reflection and revision of their Opera.

The daily timetable worked out by Sr. Galbusera was the following: 4:30 am rising and personal care; Meditation, Mass, Order of the House and Breakfast. Work until 11.45, and then in church for the recitation of the prayer of Providence, examination of conscience, Angelus, etc. At 12.00 lunch and recreation in common; resume work, after a pause for rest. Before dinner, an hour of adoration and Rosary. Dinner, evening prayers and rest in Domino at 8.30 pm.

The work was intense: there was for the wardrobe and laundry of the whole community, boys and brothers. They also had to attend and care for the younger children, who were separated from San Zeno in Monte and entrusted to their care. And they became "moms" for these little ones. Sister Galbusera, who had had a specific pedagogical training, formed her sisters to these small children in need of affection.

In 1917 the number of children grew to 45. They were aged four to ten. This activity at first was not perceived as good by the bishop. Later he accepted and blessed it. Indeed, the bishop himself asked them to accept a needy child. At the end of the war in 1919 the children had become 90 in number. They occupied all available spaces, filling the barn. He began to think of another more spacious place. Providence

offered the great house at Este, (Padua). And there, the number of children grew up to 100 - 130, aged two to eight years who were "orphans of war, sons of war." It was the Epiphany of 1920.

In the beginning, everything swaddled. The House became a point of reference for many souls who wanted to gather in prayer and stop in the chapel for Perpetual Adoration. But the parish priests, fearing that this activity would remove the faithful from the functions of their parish, made complaints to the bishop of Padua. Then there were doubts about the validity of the legacy left by Este's priest, Fr Angelo Pelà. An astonishing lawsuit was mounted and dragged to Rome. Fr. Calabria was saddened and preferred to return the house to the curia of Padua (more extensive news on the House of Este will be found in the next chapter).

At the end of Este's experience, there was also a group migration. Many of them swirled at other institutes or returned home. Only a small group continued. To them Fr. Calabria thought to entrust another field at San Michele Extra (Verona): a department of very younger children. The activity lasted until 1929.

Another interesting activity that the Sisters began at this time was to accommodate some "women in need of care and shelter." But Cardinal Msgr. Bacilieri, even on this occasion, expressed his opposition. Fr. Calabria, reluctantly, obeyed. But then the bishop himself asked the Sisters to welcome a couple of girls in need of assistance and protection. And he allowed to continue this apostolate, returning to the discretion of Fr. Calabria: "*you see bit, what you can do.*" The activity started in the spring of 1915, with a 15-year-old girl, kleptomaniac, and then with three other girls, two of whom were deaf and dumb. At first they were placed in the House of Nazareth (1917), then found a new space, the House of St. Benedict.

In 1918 he welcomed a former prostitute who wanted to change her life. This particular activity was always carried out, albeit in a small form: a small, heterogeneous group, united by mutual respect and mutual charitable acceptance. This activity also ended with the closure of the House of Este.

When the branch of the Sisters received the diocesan approval as a Congregation, Fr. Calabria wrote: "*Dear Sisters, live in the pure and genuine spirit of this Opera, which is a spirit of faith, of great faith, of abandonment in the loving arms of divine Providence, in the continuous exercise of the virtues of holy humility, charity, patience.*

You are God's servant ... keep that great dignity; Therefore, join God and serve Him in his creatures, in all offices that the charity of Christ demands help; Therefore, abandoned creatures, sick, inmates, repentant, fallen, pernicious, in a word, no branch of charity is excluded. Certainly, the first charity must be to help with prayer, work, life, the Opera of the Poor Servants Brothers (Verona, March 25, 1952) ".

Everything that Calabria said and planned for the Poor Servants of the Divine Providence, Priests, Brothers, also applies to the Sisters. The "*priests, brothers and sisters must form one single body, one soul, single spirit, embark in the same train or boat and all of us will meet in paradise*." (Verona, 12 March 1933)

Chapter Eleven

TOUGH GROWTH OF THE OPERA
(1915-1930)

The World Wars

In Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, experienced the obsessive assassination of Archduke Francesco Ferdinando, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Under the pretext to punish Serbia, Austria appeased its ambitions to expand political influence on most of Slavic territories. This crime lit fire and outburst conflict in many European countries and the United States of America.

A year later on May 24, 1915 Italy also dragged in the general riot, deluding itself in a quick solution to the conflict. Instead, was immersed in the trenches for three endless years. Life in the *"Good Children Home*" became difficult because of lack of food and shortage of staff.

Calabria encouraged them saying, "Come on, brothers, as long as you can. The Lord will provide." Humanly speaking one would have wished to close the Institute and send all the children home. But to Fr. Calabria it seemed cruel to abandon these poor children right at the moment of their greatest need. Thus, when the deployment was general, they deported people who were recruited previously. Fr. Calabria attempted to reform a couple of Brothers in order that they would not be forced to close the Institute. For Brother Luigi Adami, he personally went to talk to the military officer of the military hospital. He, a man of the right, impartial, and dutiful to responsibility, dismissed him frankly*: "Listen, Fr. Calabria; You know how much I esteem you and how I would be happy to meet your desires. But I will not do you injustice. So let's go. "Fr. Calabria, bowed his head, swallowed the*

bitterness of humiliation and rejection. That commander, though knowing that he had fulfilled his duty impartially, felt that he was restless on that day. He confided to his wife, "Today I made a big mistake. I sent away in humiliation that holy priest Fr. Calabria, who had come to recommend to me a collaborator he absolutely needed to be able to continue to attend to the boys who are in the Institute."

The family members advised him to remedy it indirectly, through a subordinate. The following day at the check-in visit the commander was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Pavia with the special mandate to contact *a certain Mr. Luigi Adami of "Casa Buoni Fanciulli" of Fr. Calabria. See if it is the case to please that holy man.* The lieutenant Colonel, of Jewish religion, knew the antiphon on the fly and was delighted to meet Fr. Calabria whom he knew and esteemed. Approximately thirty years later Calabria returned the favour by accepting and protecting the Colonel's daughter Professor Mafalda Pavia disguised as Sr. Beatrice. Thus, he had kept her out of the racial persecution of the Fascist government.

"You cost me much, you know!" Fr. Calabria told Bro. Gigio, "Alas, if you do not correspond!"

During this time, Fr. Calabria exercised another valid apostolate. Many seminarians and priests enrolled in the army went for confession to him. He continued the simple but so useful priestly service that he had already exercised at the Rectory of San Benedetto al Monte. He had kept a small room reserved for them where they could meet, write some letters, and refresh themselves with a drink. Even in San Zeno in Monte he prepared the same family welcome. Those who came for the first time immediately became aware of being well-received and treated as family members. Fr. Calabria kept up good and lasting friendship with many of them. They found a good and understanding father, an illuminated guide, a support for their priestly vocation. When the opportunity came, he offered them the opportunity to exercise priestly ministry: preaching, confessions, and catechesis.

In the three years of war, difficulties to feed the hundreds of people living in the House were enormous. Many a time they literally lacked

bread or polenta. With how much fervour and trepidation all the boys recited at noon the Coronet of Providence: *"Divine Providence, Provide us!"* A long litany that began with a plea of supplication and was gradually transforming into a cry of help. The soloist began with the invocation: "*Divine Providence!*" And a chorus of hundreds of hungry boys repeated: "*Provide us!*"

Providence came. Sometimes all sighed until the last moment, assuming the miraculous features. Although poor, food never failed.

In this period of war an exceptional event is always remembered. Fr. Calabria, in his charity toward all, had welcomed in the House a German; good mechanic for printing section. He had put him in the mechanics lab as instructor of boys. He was a good person but considered as an enemy in a nation he had chosen as his homeland. He was a Protestant, but never missed the religious functions. Respectful of the faith of others and respected in his belief.

The government authorities had issued an order requiring all such sitting ducks to be delivered and night-time black out. A malevolent person complained against Fr. Calabria. The Military force considered the allegations as grave accusations viz. that light signals are made at night time, dupes are raised in the niche of the bell tower and a German is kept hidden in the House. Trial was opened on Fr. Calabria. There could be serious consequences for the Institute. But the esteem Fr. Calabria enjoyed at the Military Authorities escaped any suspicion.

In the last year of the war, Fr. Calabria organized intense Eucharistic adoration, solemn triduum, atonement offices, and offices in the suffrage of the departed in war. A triduum of continuous worship reserved for the priests was famous: hundreds of priests of the diocese participated in an unbroken chorus of supplications in front of the Blessed Sacrament solemnly exposed.

On 4 November 1918 a peace agreement was signed between Austria and Italy. There was peace but no joy…Each nation, every city, every village lost counted their dead and erected in every square a monument to their young fallen in battle, whose mortal remains had been hastily crowded and buried in the common graves on the

mountains. And the nation inherited with many widows and a generation of orphaned children.

The crowds returned to re-embrace their loved ones, under the sad gaze of those who, instead, would no longer see their son or husband again. The Religious Brothers also returned to the House. A couple of them had decided to choose a different way, and one had died in the battle. Others resumed their jobs in schools and laboratories. Thus, life in the Institute slowly resumed its normal pace.

First filial community Costozza

Vicenza had given to Calabria two young priests. The first was the Servant of God Giuseppe Ambrosini, who remained with him very short period, a disease led him to very early death. Before his death he had promised to send a substitute from heaven. And the substitute arrived immediately, August 24, 1914. Was another holy priest, Fr Luigi Pedrollo. Therefore, Vicenza was privileged to have the first branch of Verona's Mother House. Fr. Calabria was well known in Vicenza. He regularly preached spiritual retreats to the clerics of the seminary. They called him not because he was a speaker of shouting, but because he was regarded as Don Bosco of Veneto. Some clerics of the Vicenza seminary chose him as their spiritual director.

The bishop of Vicenza, seeing so many orphaned warriors, abandoned to themselves in the streets and forced into laborious and badly paid jobs, wrote to Fr. Calabria: "Here the brats multiply. Is not Vicenza a possible shelter for them? " He used the word "refuge". Divine Providence played on the etymology of the name of the refuge. A benevolent benefactor, Mr Gaetano Rossi, son of the founder of the great textile industry of Schio, offered to bishop of Vicenza a villa in Costozza to use it for the orphans of war. The name "Costozza" comes from the Latin "custody, shelter". There are countless caves that have been excavated for a long time for the extraction of the tufa stone, which served to "guard and conserve" grains and wine or as a refuge for

the people, during the ravages of barbarian hordes or the continual battles between Padua and Vicenza. Now this is about to become a "shelter and home" for so many orphan children. The Great War had just ended. A victorious war for Italy, at the cost of millions of deaths and opened bleeding wounds in so many families. Pope Benedict XV (1854-1922), who had fought hard to avoid "*the useless slaughter*" (but will it ever be "useful to kill?"). Now the same Pope asked Christians to take charge of the innocent victims of the war: Widows or orphans. Many wealthy families listened to the word of the pontiff and donated their properties to Pious Institutions, to use them as homes for orphans.

The villa lying at the foot of the sweet and uberous hillsides, was well adapted to become a shelter and an oasis of peace for so many abandoned children. Fr. Calabria, after pondering and waiting for concrete signs of divine Providence, accepted the offer. To open the doors of this first branch of the Opera he sent Don Luigi Pedrollo, bro. Alessandro Fenzi and a young student Angelo Dal Savio. At the beginning, he entrusted the master book with this dedication: "August 5, 1919.

And as cash fund he had handed over 200 lire to the pioneers: "In Verona we started with 50 lire; To you two hundred! But do not be afraid! The Lord will send you millions, billions soon!" Indeed, these arrived at once: ten boys, poor and orphans, coming from Verona, Vicenza and Brescia: here are the billions of Fr. Calabria!

Thus began the heroic times of the House of Costozza. Few religious and some volunteers did all the necessary work: kitchen, laundry, school, workshop, recreation and dormitory assistance. This first branch was a tender plant that needed special care and attention. Every week a call, a letter or a personal visit from Fr. Calabria supported them.

The first training of boys was in agricultural field. A simple and immediate task. The land surrounding the villa was vast and fertile and the workmanship was not lacking. All he needed was a good technician who headed the job. Mrs Rossi had agreed with paying the agricultural expert, a certain Alessandro Vantini. After a couple of years, this person expressed the intention of abandoning the job. In his place a former

military officer, a graduate in agriculture, Professor Giuseppe Perin presented. This professor who at first came occasionally from Verona ended up stopping permanently and decided to consecrate his life as a religious brother.

Since the number of boys increased, it was necessary to multiply the professionalism. So grew the workshops of, mechanics, shoemakers, carpentry and, finally, the printing. To animate and enliven the inner life of the community, there are other activities: the “Schola Cantorum”, the music band, theatre Company, the gymnasium.

In 1950, Costozza had its maximum students. The environment was expanded, reaching the capacity of 140 indoor and 180 outdoor boys. The services were middle school, vocational training centre and state professional institute.

At the time of the great work of rebuilding the Italian social fabric, the economic boom took over. The standard of living of families changed considerably. State social services, relying on greater availability of modern means and methods, preferred to support families who had problems with their children rather than confining them into the Institute. Consequently, the internal structure of Costozza house embarked on a new way. The Middle School was entrusted to the state and the internship, reduced by number, broke into Family groups. Small groups, resident in a family environment, under the responsibility of a religious educator brother and consulting external collaborators: social workers, psychologists, doctors and volunteers. Thousands of skilled workers or small and medium-sized entrepreneurs have been formed in this House which was for them not only a professional learning school but above all was a gym of life.

"An open draft": Este

After Costozza, another house was offered at Este (Padua). Fr. Angelo Pelà, the archpriest at his death, named Fr. Calabria as the heir to the patronage of the Most Holy Redeemer of Este (Padua). It was in

February 1918. Informed of the legacy, Fr Calabria took time to reflect and ask for the advice to the Bishop of Padua, Msgr. Pellizzo, and of Verona. He also sought the opinion of a law firm. Everyone agreed and advised him to accept the inheritance. He accepted it, in fact, two years later, on January 4, 1920. Days later, some Sisters and four children took possession of the Patronage. And a month later all the premises were occupied by some twenty Sisters and one hundred children. Director of the House was Fr. Giobatta Battisti. The Sisters asked for permission from the bishop to begin, in the chapel of the Institute, the perpetual adoration. The inauguration was made solemnly, with the participation of the diocesan priests and numerous faithful.

Fr. Calabria returned to Este for the vestition of twenty-one Sisters. In truth, Calabria had never thought of imposing a particular outfit on religious men and women. "*Your uniform,*" he said, "*is the Gospel lived in its fullness*." But prudence and convenience had suggested to the Sisters of Este to put themselves in a uniform, so as not to create confusion among the people. There were some special girls (formerly prostitutes, mothers, or differently abled) in the house, who did not have cloistral attitudes. Fr. Battisti, with exuberant fantasy, designed for the Sisters an odd and showy dress. Fr. Calabria, when he saw it, was a little puzzled. He did not say anything, so as not to offend and blur the joy of the celebration, but disappointment came from his face. The activity for the children proceeded relatively well until the death of the dean of Este, Msgr. Dalla Valle, on June 11, 1921. The successor Msgr. Evaristo Sartori immediately complained even on behalf of the parishioners of the town. They were not in favour of continuing perpetual adoration in the Institute, because it distracted the faithful from parish functions. Then malicious insinuations began on the massive attendance of Sisters for the assistance of children and finally questioning the legitimacy of their heredity. Fr. Calabria, always to maintain harmony and peace, suspended perpetual adoration and withdrew the community of the Sisters, replacing it with a male religious community. He also promised to start a Professional Training Centre for Este Boys.

In 1923 the bishop of Padua Msgr. Pellizzo died. He was succeeded by Msgr Elia Dalla Costa. The dean of Este Sartori, returned to the office for justice of Patronage's legacy. In fact, he felt the need for patronage for the youth of Este. The reasons for the dean were valid. He said, "Patronage was created for the youth of Este. The construction had begun with Don Angelo Pelà's personal funds, but was redeemed by bankruptcy with a public subscription, made by the Catholics of Este. Don Angelo Pelà was 'only an apparent and not the real owner' of the place. In fact, the parish owned it. Finally, the legacy had been linked to the purpose of continuing the work for the young."

Msgr. Sartori "reluctantly" presented these instances to the bishop because, in his opinion, there was a holy priest and a beneficial institution. He tried to resolve the issue with an impartial arbitrage, entrusting the decision to Msgr. Giuseppe Manzini, a man of integrity, free, not influenced by anyone. After studying the case, he concluded that the legacy was legitimate.

Bishop Msgr. Dalla Costa asked Fr. Calabria if he would return the property at a reasonable price. Fr. Calabria declared that he was willing to accept any solution for the "best of souls". But meanwhile some Estonian parishioners appealed to the Congregation of the Council. And local complaint turned into a court case. Fr. Calabria was bitter. He hastened to make known that he was willing to give up everything "*for the love and honour of God*."

But the case went on. The verdict came the following year. The Congregation of the Council ruled that Fr. Angelo Pelà was only "a patron administrator and therefore could not have the property." Everyone supposedly had acted in good faith and with the best of intentions. But the way they did really pained Fr. Calabria who would never sue a person for anything, for Fr. Calabria always kept faith in the Gospel counsel, "*whosoever will ask you to take off the tunic, you leave the cloak as well ...*".

Fr. Calabria obeyed the provisions of Rome. He wrote to the bishop of Padua: "*The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord*!" But in his personal diary he expressed, "*With the*

grace of God I have always acted rightly in the affairs of Este. Hence I appeal to Divine justice. The matter is closed to men, but on my own it is opened in heaven ... There is an open bill in the evening. "

On January 31, 1928, the Patronage is handed over to the parish of Santa Tecla. It turned into a wonderful Youth Centre. Este's youth must thank the initiative and the spirit of the late Don Angelo Pelà, the truly evangelical charity and disinterested way of Fr. Calabria and the enthusiasm of their Dean Sartori.

The Sanctuary of Madonna di Campagna

The esteem and affection of the bishop of Verona to Fr. Calabria also manifested himself in the wish to entrust to him the direction of the sanctuary of Madonna di Campagna (Verona).

The sanctuary was known as the "*Madonna della Pace*". This title was given to it during the peace treaty between the Venetian Republic and the Pontifical State in 1607. Officially, the Shrine was under the responsibility of Fr. Calabria from March 5, 1925. The first rector was Fr. Giobatta Battisti and then Fr. Albano Bussinello. Under his direction, the Sanctuary seemed to take on new life: he had dynamic pastoral activities and became the seat of the Apostolate. Fr. Albano had exceptional talents.

He was director of San Zeno in Monte, where he started a section for the spiritual formation of the Religious Brothers, created and directed the musical band of the "Good Children", built the summer camp in Camposilvano; he was the spiritual director of the Sisters and Master of novices. Good speaker and discreet writer: he left several essays of ascetic and catechistic character, historical and poetic essays. All of his cultural baggage and natural talents invested them in renovating the Marian Shrine of ancient splendour.

With the demographic development of the area, the Sanctuary became a parish on July 16, 1947. Fr. Albano was the first parish priest. At his death on September 2, 1948, another zealous and exuberant

priest, Fr. Egidio Zardini, took over. The parish works, the choral and the sports centre attracted all the youth of the place. The parish was the only gathering place of the people. But, with displeasure of parishioners and, perhaps, with a nostalgia by many Poor Servants, the Congregation returned the parish to the diocese on September 18, 1970.

It was not an abandonment in difficulty, but an abiding choice with the spirit of the Founder who wanted *"a pastoral activity to be preferred in the most abandoned areas having a pastoral action that was to witness faith in the Paternal Divine Providence."*

The Apostolic Institute of Nazareth

The first purpose of Opera, instituted through Fr. Calabria, was to give human and Christian education to abandoned children, in order to become "*good parents of family*".

However, Calabria was interested in helping those young people who aspired to the priesthood but were prevented from having the means. The beginning of this Opera was gradual and humble. The first priestly seed was the young Gigio Adami, who followed Fr. Calabria as early as 1908. Subsequently other aspiring seminarians appeared to him. The group gradually increased in number. It was necessary to make space within the House of San Zeno for them, and to formulate a special schedule compatible with classical studies. They were entrusted with the service of the liturgical service and the cleanliness of the church. During the holidays, these students did not despise to become planners, foragers, gardeners etc.

Their life was tough and the time was very challenging. But there was no lack of cheerfulness and affection. The saddest and most difficult years were those of the 1915-1918 war period. The Great War brought food restrictions to the entire Italian population. Even in the Institutes, bread and polenta began to shrink. To make the situation even sharper, there were also particularly hard winter seasons. Lack of warm cloths, numb limbs and minds. Water in the bowls and ink in the

squid became ice blocks. The morning study turned into a concert of disarming noises: the sting of hands, the continuous breathing on the fingers, the feet beat on the floor. As an everyday diversion, the air alarm was scheduled. The Lamberti Tower's bell-sounding and the cannon hit the signal of the impending air raid. The boys were standing in accord and fired at a general escape to a cave. Everyone was amassed in a silent corner, waiting in a trepidation, following with the ear the approach of the rustling of enemy aircraft engines. When the raid was over, boys and assistants sneaked out of the shelter and lazily resumed their place and work.

On 17 February 1920 the student group left San Zeno in Monte and settled in the nearby San Benedetto House, which was free when the Sisters had moved to Este. They stayed at San Benedetto for about 10 years. Then, on the eve of Christmas of 1930, they went definitively to the House of Nazareth: a villa perched on the crest of the hill in front, to the west of San Zeno in Monte, at the Theodoric Castle. A nice place, airy, full of history. For a long period, it had been summer villa of the bishops of Verona and, prior to it the religious community of Theatines. A wealthy person had voluntarily offered to spend the money needed to buy the building. But at the time of the contract, the offer was withdrawn. There was a moment of confusion, and help came in from another benefactor who wanted to remain anonymous. The Apostolic Institute still exists, even though it is reshaping and adapting to the new demands of cultural and spiritual formation of young people.

By the will of Fr. Calabria, students shall remain free to choose their own path up to the beginning of theology. They may engage in their own diocese or move to other religious institutes, or go back to their families for access to a profession or stay in the Congregation as Religious Poor Servants of Divine Providence. In the annual meetings of the alumni, worth observing the joyfully united, professionals, diocesan priests, religious of various institutes and priests consecrated in the Opera of Fr. Calabria. The important thing for Fr. Calabria was that everyone sought the will of God and lived his vocation or the priestly mission according to the evangelical style that he had absorbed in the

years of formation in the House. "*The whole world is of God*," he repeated to those who were amazed at this great openness and full freedom that he imparted to his seminary students. He was an envious assertor of evangelical freedom, of universality, of catholicity. He had in mind only the Kingdom of God, souls, and only souls. Everything else was unimportant. He was glad to know that some had chosen to remain in the Opera but he did not seem bitter or disappointed when others chose another religious Congregation or diocese.

And he wanted this rule written down in the Constitutions. *"To increase and cultivate priestly and religious vocations, looking with open mind and heart to the needs of the universal Church, welcoming, according to our spirit, young people or adults who are called to Sacerdotal or religious life. And provide them with a solid spiritual formation, soaked with the spirit of the Opera. Those aspirants will be free to embrace religious life in our institute or in any other form, such as joining the diocesan clergy.* "[30]

Those who decided to stay in the Institute, needed generosity, availability, graciousness. "*Often, I read the words wrote in my diary thirty years ago about the future priests of the Opera; Then I was alone, and I felt the greatness and character of the priests of the Opera. They must form one with the Brothers. Here are the words: "The boat cannot go without oars, we need the paddles, and these will be the priests grown and formed with the spirit of the Opera. A priest, though holy, but without the spirit of the Opera, will be to the ruin of the Opera, if he remains. My God, what an obligation!* "[31] .

He wanted his clergy to live in a community rather than in a seminary. Along with science, they had to absorb the "*pure and genuine*" spirit of the Opera. And since his Institute had not yet been recognized by ecclesiastical authorities, he could not meet this desire.

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30 *Constitutions and Directory PSDP*, 2000, art. 99-100.

31 G. Calabria, *pro memoria di Fr. Calabria* (23-4-1934), ms., Archivio Generale psdp., Verona 5473.

"The priests of the Opera must succumb to the special spirit of the Opera. So, I believe, Jesus wants," he wrote, when bishop Bacilieri had refused to allow his clerics to attend the seminary as day scholars.

The diocesan practice did not allow day scholars clerics, though, exceptionally, the bishop could have derogated from canonical norms. Msgr. Bacilieri, while admiring and loving Fr. Calabria, showed himself unmoving on this point. And, Calabria, sternly determined, preferred to wait for times to mature in his support, rather than to yield. The first cleric Bro. Gigio Adami, waited ten years before being ordained a priest. But, Calabria got it. The bishop of Feltre and Belluno, offered to open the doors of his seminary to the first three clerics: they attended seminary courses but lived in the religious community.

Then in 1923, after Cardinal Bacilieri, materialized the dream of Fr. Calabria. The successor to the leadership of Veronese church was Msgr. Girolamo Cardinale, "a man of Providence", who allowed the clergy to attend theology as day scholars. The first clerics were Stanislao Pellizzer, Giovanni Franchini and Augusto Cogo.

"What a saint, but stubborn!" We may conclude.

With patience and tenacity, Fr. Calabria out did regulations and codes. Humble and obedient in an exceptional way, but when he was convinced that an idea came from the Lord, no difficulty could discourage or bend him.

"But the Lord does not want that!" He commented in the face of the impositions of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

On June 6, 1925, in the church of San Zeno in Monte, the bishop of Verona ordained the second priest of the Opera, Don Augusto Cogo.

The "door" to Rome opens

Rome before the annexation to Italy had about two hundred thousand inhabitants; almost all were locked behind the walls. Many priests, hundreds of parishes, rectories, institutes, convents offered religious assistances. In 1930 due to the migration the population of residents became almost a million.

The new "Romans" settlement exploded outside the walls, creating new neighbourhoods, bourgeois, and slums. The spiritual situation in these human clusters was dramatic due to abandoning of values ending up into greater social degradation.

The Roman Pontiff Pius XI thought of remedying this, he made the *"Pontifical Institute for the Preservation of Faith and the Construction of New Churches in Rome*". Cardinal Francesco Marchetti Selvaggiani took charge of the direction. In twenty years of effort, he built some fifty churches and hundreds of educational institutes. However, they needed priests and religious. He appealed to the Italian dioceses and religious congregations, in order to offer staff for the pastoral ministry in these new townships. Fr. Giulio Bevilacqua[32]a priest of Verona, from the

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32 *Giulio Bevilacqua* (1881-1965), born in Isola della Scala (Verona). He specialized in Social Science at Lovanio, became priest of the *Congregazione dei Filippini di Brescia*. During the First World War, he served as officer of the Alpini, and at Ortigara, became prisoner. On his return he was elected as the superior of the Famiglia Filippina and director of the Oratory of peace (Brescia). The best youth of Brescia were all in his Oratory. The Fascist group encroached his centre and space of the parish, burned his printing press of the Catholic Newspaper. On his vibrant protest the fascists left the place and Brescia. He went to Rome and Msgr. Montini received his old student and spiritual son. He supported the work of reconstruction of the structures of Rome through Cardinal Marchetti Selvaggiani.

He returned to Brescia, served as a bright writer for the youth. Pope Montini (Paul vi) nominated him as Cardinal. But on one condition Fr. Bevilacqua accepted the title. He wished to remain as priest of St. Antonio – one of the poorest sectors of Brescia suburb. Occasionally he used to come to Verona to

Congregation of Filippini, later Cardinal of the Church, knew well the Opera and Fr. Calabria, suggested to Cardinal to invite the priests of this holy priest of Verona.

Fr. Calabria interpreted this call as a "sign" of the providence of God: *"Rome, Rome! Everything you do in Rome is done all over the world. "*

With prophetic intuition, although aware of his poverty and personal insecurity, Fr. Calabria felt that God calls him to realize a project of new evangelization of the Christian world, through the "*Apostolic Priests*", "*a standby militia at the service of the Church* ".

Priests formed like the early Apostles to "*to be yeast for a new order, for the spiritual rebirth of the Church and the world.....He craved that God may multiply these priests and become a "flying team" at the service of the Holy Church.*"

Knowing these premises, one can easily understand the climate of spasmodic waiting and great responsibility that invested the Religious Poor Servants of Divine Providence before leaving for Rome.

Fr. Calabria accepted the invitation, but placed just one condition: they will go to Rome only after the canonical recognition of Good Children's Home from the bishop as a Congregation. The negotiations were quite difficult because of the irregularity concerning his charism and the Code of Canon Law.

In an almost dramatic and fast-paced way, the Bishop of Verona approved the new Congregation, through the decree on February 11, 1932.

On the morning of March 4, 1932, there were the first religious professions of priests. In the afternoon of the same day, three priests, one Brother, one student, and one aspirant left for Rome.[33] At Railway

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meet his old friends including Msgr. Mazzini, and Fr. Calabria. He used to say, "*I know where I go and do go willingly*". He died on 6 May 1965.

[33] The four religious are: Fr. Stanislao Pellizzer, Fr. Giovanni Bellarini, Fr. Isaia Filippi, Bro. Luigi Fiorato; a student Mario Merlin and an aspirant Tarcisio Roman. *Don Mario Merlin*, with the help of Fr. Calabria, founded the religious

station Porta Nuova station in Verona a large group of confreres along with Fr. Calabria greeted the brothers.

These priests lived in small and poor Venetian soil and had grown up in the Sacred Fence of the Institute, going to Rome was almost like going to the forefront of the world.

Don Luigi Pedrollo wrote in his diary: on *March 4, 1932. "The first Religious are leaving for Rome. They went* "*sine pear and sine sacculo*" (without purse and without bag). *Their travel expense was the Mass intentions to be celebrated. From Rome, Father Bevilacqua had written a forewarning that it was necessary to think a bit about the furnishings, because besides the house and beds the Cardinal Vicar would give nothing. Fr. Calabria wrote that they would go according to the evangelical advice and despite all human considerations; he had great confidence in the Lord and his Providence. "Oh yes or nothing!" And, in fact, this was how, we can read from their communication on the early days.*[34]

The apostolic inexperience and urge of the new Congregation did not allow them to evaluate the objective difficulties they would find in the Roman settlements. Common sense required deeper socio-environmental knowledge and slower and gradual acclimatization.

In everything, they overcame with great faith and trust in divine Providence. They left with very minimum things: some clothing, the breviary and a limited cash in their pockets. A popular song defines the Veronese "*all crazy*" because of their hilarious and playful character, but venturing into a similar enterprise has shaken the heads of many benevolent priests: "*But do they realize that if these things would work?*"

They went joyfully, without questioning or making too many human arguments. They obeyed their father Fr. John and that was sufficient for them.

Congregation *"Opus Mariae Reginae"* that occupied the apostolate of formation of women.

34 L. Pedrollo, *Diario personale*, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

Arriving in Rome, the Calasanzian sisters gave them refreshment and supplied them with some blankets. The same evening, before bedtime, they read the letter that Calabria had written for them on February 24, 1932. It was almost a spiritual testament*: "we can say that the whole world is watching you ... so definitely it is our responsibility somewhat more important than elsewhere, to be "living Gospels" ... to offer the world the expression of a renewed Christianity, replicating the lives of the Apostles and the early Christians. Your departure is, I would say, an extraordinary call, a fact, a touching event. What a great responsibility weighs on you who are leaving and on us that we are here. ... God has great projects to accomplish and these will be done as long as we are docile, humble instruments, as rags, without heads ... Certainly I did not even doubt that Providence wanted you in Rome, and so soon ... in Rome, the centre of Catholic Church. I did not think that after the erection of the Congregation, new designs would emerge in pain, in struggle, in suffering ... because, we should remember well, only in suffering and on the Cross; this Lord's plant will have its own sap to ripen flowers and fruits. Go as the Apostles went; with no thought for temporal things, no worries. Look, this is your uniform. God will never abandon you. You will be rich in your poverty ... I feel at this moment all I have to suffer, that you will have to suffer from Satan, in tremor, that I do not know up to where to touch ... Your trip to Rome is not a pleasure trip, but a trip to Calvary..."* [35].

Thus, began the mission of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence in the Roman countryside.

The Roman Epic

One day I was at table with the confreres of the parish of Santa Maria della Misericordia di Gordiani, (Rome). Msgr. Ettore Cunial was our guest and he came out with this praise: "*Look, forget not your first*

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35 *Ti chiamerai Stanislao. Lettere di don G. Calabria a don Stanislao Pellizzer*, a cura di Luigi Piovan, Verona 1997, pp. 369ss.

priests sent to the Roman settlements! They have written, with their lives, a wonderful epic in the history of your Congregation."

Indeed, the Poor Servants, pioneers to Rome, wrote an adventurous story full of sacrifices, tribulations, physical and moral suffering; and they left an inscrutable imprint on the social fabric of these areas. In the mind of thousands of poor people, they have found appreciation. Through their help arrived dignity and strength for a cultural, moral and spiritual redemption.

St. Filippo Neri, at Pineta Sacchetti, was the first parish entrusted to the Poor Servants, including the township of Primavalle. Later on added Tormarancia and Gordiani.

We should now stay on telling the story of every single parish, with thousands and thousands painful, dramatic, joyous and social redemptions. We should make a long list of various cultural, welfare, and training activities: nursery schools, elementary and middle schools; Vocational training centres; Sports and recreational activities; Cinema and theatre, Centres of charity and care.

A brief halt in the life and work of these first true heroes we can see by reading a piece of their diary: Fr. Alessandro Rosa, a young priest who sacrificed his life for these poor souls.

Fr. Alessandro was ordained in 1931. He practiced the first apostolate among the boys of the Istituto Buoni Fanciulli, and then for a couple of years in the Sanctuary of Madonna di Campagna (Verona). In July 1935, he reached the Parish of St. Philip Neri. From there, every day, he moved to Primavalle settlement. Here are his impressions, set in a letter addressed to his primary school teacher: *"I am in Rome since a week and have already began my tight work. The worst part of the parish is assigned to me ... If you had seen what a moral misery! They are in the midst of three thousand displaced. Many children dressed only with 10cm shorts. Two huge public dormitories care about a thousand people ... The residents live in small houses, almost eight to ten persons living almost like cattle ... My heart breaks ..."*

The poor young priest of 27, who lived in a Venetian village, soaked in the midlands of peasant Christian civilization and educated in the closed House of the Lord, where in every moment and every meeting, sounded the sweet greeting "*Praise be to Jesus Christ!*". He suddenly found himself beaten in the midst of human ant hills so dissimilar, piled up and set apart into barracks on the outskirts of the city. This primitive presence, according to the authorities of the time, shattered the grandeur and sparked the splendour of the City of Caesars, the driving force of the Empire and of the fascist regime. Many of these people once lived in ancient zones in Rome, wiped out to enhance the Via Conciliazione as well as the Via Dei Fori Imperiali. To these unlucky homeless, soon joined the emigrants from the South, and many political asylum seekers.

There were, indeed, people with criminal records, especially, so many vile, angry, stubborn, hostile to strangers who wished to enter there to rescue them from their degradation of the sacredness. It was dangerous and adventurous to go for those cabins and lodges, marked with "allocations" (one, two, three, etc.) or, better, piles. Some Lilliputian buildings were called the "rapids" because they were built quickly, in a few days: single storey houses, no floor, no running water for the house, no toilet. Everyone had to use the public fountain and toilets. During the winter muddy and dusty in summer. Some rare light poles lightly lit along the streets. The municipal administration had promised that in a few years the Duke Mussolini would build new palaces to keep the splendour of Rome. Patiently, indignantly, desperately, those evacuees waited for forty years before having a dignified home. And to obtain it, they had to fight, shout, and suffer.[36] But we leave the word to Fr. Alessandro Rosa. The clever Fr. Alexander, with the passing of days, began to realize the causes of that moral misery.

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[36] The author is from the vicinity and he knew personally the situation. He became priest of the Opera and worked in this country side for about 20 years as teacher, and animator of various social movements to redeem them.

And a month later, he wrote: *"The edge of earth that God has given me may be compared to the mission Land… Here what we need is just holiness."* And, later he said*, "The more I learn the situation of these people, the more I'm horrified. I think, before God they will have mercy. There is lack of help from the authorities and you know well that hunger is a bad counsellor. Every day I am in the midst of these people asking for clothes, shoes, cash, recommendations ..."*

Of course, we could not expect from him a political and social analysis of the situation. He was not trained to explore the causes. The well-off people attributed this misery to the indolence of individuals as if they were with the DNA of a damned race. Knowing the people better and accepting them without any prejudices, Fr. Rosa realized that he was different from their judgement. In fact, gradually through frequent visiting, he managed to establish with them a relationship of esteem and love, and the vision took on more healthy tenors.

"*The earlier I had explained,*" he writes again to his primary school teacher, *"the dark page of my parish. Now, however, I have to state the white pages, because we have this too, and thank God, it is day by day broader and radiant ... I see myself surrounded by a huge group of boys. I have chosen 40 of them as candidates. They are faithful to the Christian Doctrine and the Sacraments. I have regular Christian Doctrine classes with 150 boys. Every Saturday, about 15 teenage youth gather. Two times a week I collect teenage girls together with a good catechist. In addition, many men gather twice a month."*

After Pineta Sacchetti, and Primavalle, the Rectory of Tormarancia zone is entrusted to Poor Servants. The township, buried in a valley, is an isolated and unhealthy area. This place was practically the lump of moral and material misery, the "bubble" of Rome. The nearby residents did not dare to cross the prudential boundaries of security. In that area, they all knew it with a derogatory name "Shang-hai". One need real courage, and apostolic zeal, to go to that empire.

One day the Apostolic visitor of the congregation, Abbot Caronti, landed in San Filippo Neri parish managed by the Psdp religious. There was a jovial state among the diners such as Fr. Pellizzer and Fr. Rosa.

Abbot Caronti began to appreciate the work of the religious and in particular that of Primavalle. He began to introduce other very poor zone of Rome "where nothing promising is existing" to catch the attention of the disciples of Fr. Calabria.

Then he mentioned of a "*place forgotten by God; and the Church secluded for people, so one of you will have to go there at the earliest*". The silence of the religious and Abbot Caronti, as he had already agreed with Fr. Calabria, voiced slowly fixing the look gently: "*it is you dear Fr. Alessandro Rosa.*" Deep silence and gone the smile of Fr. Rosa while his face became pale.

We read the diary on the tragic entry of Rosa, to the Rectory of Tormarancia, on 1 May 1936. "*It is the first Friday of the Month, Fr. Stanislavo and two aspirants entered the church with the new priest. The square in front of the church, as well as the church, was packed with curious men, women and children. Most of them skinny and poorly dressed. Many with an indifferent face, others hostile and very few communicate friendliness, esteem, or love for their priest. When the four appear, hurtful, giggling, derision expressions to welcome them. Some of them screeched and some furious, among the most innocent: "crush those cockroaches (priests were despised and called pests)" How different would have been in his homeland the entry of a new pastor! Someone pelted and spitted at Fr. Rosa. And the uproar went on throughout the Mass. Fr. Alessandro prayed with his eyes wet in tears.*"

The young priest proved great though physically weak and very young, resisted and held strong in his commitments. He realized he was in the gutter; he lowered into it and faced the wave of misery fell on him every day. Examining his intentions of Mass register, we learn the hidden service and martyrdom of this young priest who become an angel for his people. "Annàmo da don Alessà! Solo lui ce pò aiutà!" It means (Let us go to Fr. Alessandro, only he can help us!). This was the slogan of the simple people in front of the pitfalls with injustice. Fr. Rosa emptied everything, never measured in gifting, some used to comment "*All heart and no head*!" In fact, he left open his presbytery to feed his poor. The expression "*take the bread out of one's mouth*"

literally happened with him. The last event of his life: no bread at home, not even the last pay. It was given to pay the rent of a poor family. "*At the age of 33 on 7 May 1942 soon after his last Eucharist while reciting a devotional prayer to Mother Mary he fell to the ground. Some women went to assist the last prayer and the news spread like a lightening. People ran to see him, while the neighbourhood priest anointed, the doctor reached, only to certify his death due to cerebral haemorrhage*".[37]

On the funeral day, that human anthill remained stunned. Everyone had to expose what he or she had from him. Men, women and children all were in grief. Civil and religious authorities remained stunned at the sincerity with which they expressed their great loss and pain in the zone. The driver of the funeral cart commented that "*never in his life had he seen such a touching event*" People unanimously said even in the passing line bus, "*indeed a holy priest, a father of all, he dressed my children…. he never sent away any one empty*".

Msgr. Luigi Traglia, the vice advisor of Rome who wanted to be present at the funeral rite commented with deep sentiment, "*I wish I could have a funeral of this kind".*

On 9th March 1942 Fr. Zeno Saltini, founder of Nomadelfia wrote in their newsletter "Piccolo Apostoli", "*I present to you a hero who left this world recently. He, Fr. Alesandro Rosa, was an intimate friend of me. In the last seven years he was confined to a poor zone of Rome, Tormarancia. Reward of his great soul trusting in God sustained with the humblest, delicate apostolic work is highly rewarded his great soul. His great intelligence, generous heart, his wonderful faith. I knew him well, having studied theology together for two years in Verona at Fr. Calabria. We were often together and spoke hours, even days on the about the miseries of the people. He expressed his strong desire to commit the maximum to improve the situation in the name of Christ… We deeply believed Christ as the only solution, the only love, the unique salvation and justice. But one day after seven years or so, he had gone there to*

[37] Extract from an eyewitness.

meet him and to preach a popular mission. Seeing him in that place with struggle and dedication, I felt in him the strong feeling of visiting a great saint. His house was invaded by barefooted, lean, restless and fluffy children. As if a rumble, an earthquake invasion every day, every week, all the seasons occur... There were moms to ask for help and assistances. Weddings had to be rectified. There were children to be settled and scandals to be mitigated, ruins to be repaired ... institutions to be established and supported. Lately he was building a home for the children of the displaced. Always in his house he had welcomed some abandoned and ... in short, he did more than what his possibilities permitted him. Fr. Rosa is a great pioneer of great civilization.

Dear Fr. Alessandro, you on earth were a voluntary on crucifix and the Lord did not want to leave you for more than seven years in so much suffering, lost in the sea of your generosity…"[38]

We have accounted long on this young martyr in Rome. He worked and sanctified his life in Rome. His memory too must live long in all of us. There are many more to enlist in this litany of missionaries in Roman suburban mission to redeem from the moral and spiritual misery of the emigrants to the Roman peripheral area. In my opinion, from my early childhood memories of this Roman suburban mission I feel like remembering many more who supported me and accompanied me in my journey to be a Poor Servant Priest. Many of their names will remain inscribed in letters of blood in the "*book of Roman Epic of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence*"

Negrar: A Citadel of Charity

In 1908 a young priest Angelo Sempreboni was appointed as Parish Priest of Negrar, Verona, a town of 4000 people.

Most of the residents were cultivators of vineyard and producers of wine. Many were sharecroppers or tenants, no one as paid workers because no great proprietors existed. The old and single were the

[38] *Zeno Saltini* (1900-1981), cfr. *infra* cap. XXII.

immediate concern of the zealous priest. He in 1920 bought the 'Villa Serena' owned by the Rural Bank. He repaired it and began to keep few elderly people, dedicating it to the Sacred Heart (*SacroCuore*).

The inmates increased and demanded better quality of service and care. He asked the help of his friend Giuseppe Nascimbeni[39] founder of the "Piccole Suore di Sacra Famiglia" (Little sisters of the Sacred Heart).

On 4th July 1932 at the age of 57 Fr. Angelo died, and his successor did not feel comfortable to carry on the medical care. He asked the sisters to leave, but trusting on Providence those sisters continued their service bearing all difficulties and poverty. The Centre went ahead with public donations.

In the meantime, the family members of Sempreboni made contact with Fr. Calabria and the PSDP Council. Some raise their eyebrow asking "*why to involve into medical service at all? We have never thought of it. And it is not even ours.*"

Fr. Calabria a friend of Sempreboni family convinced the religious to accept. Thus, on 21 December 1933, in the office of the Curia of the diocese executed the Sale deed from the side of the new parish priest to Fr. Calabria. And the Congregation acquired the structure from the Rural Housing.

The number of inmates grew to 60 and by the end of 1936 and they grew to 100. During the World War when the civil hospital was bombed the Municipality of Verona requested Fr. Calabria to open the hospital

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39 *Blessed Giuseppe Nascimbeni* (1851-1922): "A shepherd of souls connected to the pastoral and social issues, very close to customs and traditions to the people of Verona today. A singular witness of Christ for his loving, an intelligent solicitude, working toward the needs of his people. A pioneer in promoting social work and services, and in opening up to the demands through time-consuming" says St. John Paul ii. At Castelletto, Brescia, he served 45 years dedicating to the needs of people. When no religious institutes expressed readiness to work there the Bishop Baccilieri authorized him "*you establish one for the mission*" He gathered bright women, under the leadership of blessed Mother Maria Domenica Mantovani, the sisters opened nurseries, schools, hospice for old. They also supported the parish mission.

and transfer the sick from the government to Negrar Hospital. On 8 May 1944 the first surgery was done in the hospital. And gradually arose the need of a new structure to keep the chronically sick people away from the other patients. By 12 December 1958 the new wing with 400 beds was built and dedicated to Fr. Calabria. Thereafter a house for the mental patients with 130 beds, home for the retired clergy with 65 beds and long-term rehabilitation section etc. went on adding.

From a humble home for the aged grew the *citadel of charity* in the words of Fr. Calabria "*in the course of a decade 1932-1942, from the trunk emerged many other branches of the Opera. The dear House of the Sacred Heart of Negrar, a divine plan, destined to become great. To receive in His pavilions many sick brothers and sisters who would otherwise be ailing, lacking means to be admitted to other hospitals. With our brothers and sisters, nurses and doctors to improve the best way our Christian charity. The main means of offering our Lord Jesus Christ back to our present society so troubled and upset*"[40].

A shining beacon

Fr. Calabria's outlook on the hospital ministry we can trace from one of his letters dated 31 August 1953 to the then director of the hospital Dr. Bro. Antonio Consolaro.

"I have to write what I hear right now about the loving House of the 'Sacred Heart', a house Loved by Jesus. From the beginning, I have always felt that Providence had great designs to do. Plans that perhaps expressed the night before his death by beloved Fr. Angelo Sempreboni. He was unable to talk, but signalled to say something to me. … It is an articulated confirmation of the Providence of God, who does great things from nothing, for the sake of his beloved, who live in filial abandonment to his Providence.

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40 G. Calabria, *Lettere del Padre don Giovanni Calabria ai suoi Religiosi*, Ferrara 1956, pp. 107s.

This great difficult time, the Lord shines his bright rays, which remind us that God exists and is good Father with concern for his creation. Negrar has to be one of these shining lights, his care for human health, and wants to reach us comfort and joy of a Christian life.

May the Lord Jesus express his gaze of benevolence and singular favour on the House of Negrar and on those who work there.

Look, my dear brother Dr. Consolaro, let the pure and genuine spirit reign the Opera of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence. …

How fortunate are all those whom the Providence permits to work in his home. Fortunate today, blessed in future, who will continue your work. What a great honour to work and spend your life for the fulfilment of the divine designs. And what a beautiful reward they will receive in heaven. I never miss to pray for you, my dearest ones, and all you: Doctors, Nurses, and Collaborators in any way. May all you be included in the noble mission and feel the spiritual joy of spending your life so well.

Oh, what a meritorious good work is done in Negrar, only the Lord can multiply it. Every time I come to Negrar, I feel a particular spiritual joy to think of the good that Providence does, through you all...

Doctors, Nurses, Sisters, and all guided by true faith commit to your noble mission. You make others known that beyond the miseries of the body and its pain, there is a spiritual wealth, a future life. The Opera where you work is completely of the Lord. And, Calabria concludes*: "It seems to me that I have written these words and Lord wants you recall it from time to time."*[41]

[41] G. Calabria, *Lettera a fratel dott. Antonio Consolaro*, 31 agosto 1953, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

Chapter Twelve

THE PRIESTHOOD

"I think I was born to be a priest"

Thus Fr. Calabria used to tell the religious.[42] From early childhood, he dreamt to be a priest. Facing every sort of difficulties, discouragements from all around, poor health, poverty, discontinuing his studies many a times, and in spite of his being misunderstood by superiors, he proceeded with his dream. His mother Angela and the guardian angel Fr. Scapini, his neighbours, even though knew his conviction, but the employer with sarcasm threw him out on the street saying "*go and be a priest, get lost in that work*".

In addition, Fr. Calabria affirms, "*I never had a doubt of my priesthood*."

The nature wants that one becomes human, Christian, and finally make a choice of life and thus could become a priest. He knew his DNA was engraved with priesthood. Together with this conviction, he had his way of thinking, behaving, and living.

He recommended, to every priest of the Opera his convictions, which would look outdated today. But these very minute external matters, are of primary importance… if one cannot give up smoking, even if gifted with many talents, let him go and may do well elsewhere. .. it may look very silly but the use of bicycle should be limited to pastoral purposes. Avoid attending dinner on the occasions of marriage and baptisms. You may become pure beings, away from the worldly

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42 Cfr. Danilo Chiaffoni, *Il Sacerdote nel pensiero e nella vita di san Giovanni Calabria,* Ed. CCSC, Verona 2001.

celebrations.[43] Some of his suggestions may cause laughter for us. But we need to understand his environment. His concern remains crucial: a priest *alter Christus,* is the undeniable fact.

He wrote for the priests articles, leaflets, booklets, even courageous books rich in realism, sincerity, and well founded on the Gospel. He wrote very impressive books namely: *Apostolica Vivendi Forma, Amare, Instaurare Omnia in Christo, Perché non scende la notte sul mondo*. (*Apostolic way of living, to Love, restore everything in Christ, why the night does not fall on earth*) Every house of formation instantly incorporated the first book. [44]

A chain of priests avidly read and personally assimilated this book. Thus many priests carried on with his holy priest of Verona as their spiritual guide of their Charism.

Fr. Calabria was almost obsessed with the responsibility of the priest in the present society: "Humanity, with all its science, progress and great material views, is much reduced. Even in the so-called Christian countries, humanity became bankrupt; why? Because they have departed from God and His Christ, because they trusted in themselves, and perhaps because did not find in many of us, religious and priests, the light they needed. They did not find good example and holiness in those learned leaders taking right path. I often think that if many pagans, or Muslims or Buddhists wanted to come to us to see how our Lord Jesus Christ is known, loved, imitated by us, they would be scandalized and may be forced to say: We are better off with our belief, with our rituals. What a responsibility would be ours! Yet, we must admit: our difference between what the Gospel teaches and what we in fact do. We must remove this contrast"[45].

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43 *Lettere del Padre ai Religiosi,* a cura della Congregazione dei Poveri Servi della Divina Provvidenza, Ferrara, 1956, p. 31.

44 *Msgr. Giambattista Montini,* told don Ottorino Foffano psdp, who was the General Procurator of the Congregation, that Pope Pious XII had kept, for many months on his reading table, the book *Apostolica vivendi forma.*

45 *Lettere del Padre ai Religiosi,* cit., p. 167.

Fr. Calabria's favourite theme was, "*Live the Gospel, the whole Gospel*".

Very surprising to see how precisely and with inexplicable realism Fr. Calabria denounced the signs of painful discord between Gospel and life among the clergy. Their challenges were the worldliness that dazzled, their excessive use of human resources, and poor evaluation of supernatural. Thus, he proposed spiritual atonement to face such misery that overwhelmed the world and the souls. They lacked engagement in a true apostolate. Moreover, they lacked courage to offer the great truths of faith remembering the Word of God, "*seek first the whole Kingdom of God,*" and the urgent and absolute necessity of a return to the Gospel "*to save oneself and others*."

Fr. Calabria used to say this with conviction, "*If there were few priests, but really holy ones, the world would be better.*"

Fr. Calabria counted his priesthood not as a privilege but a gift. And through his fervour he wished to transmit this heavenly gift to all the priests. We have no intention to quote all that he said or wrote in the magazines, to the priests, and Church authorities.

He loved the Church profoundly; it is the Body of Christ. And he wanted her to be holy, immaculate, without imperfections. He often repeated, "*This holy Church, would become holy, immaculate and without imperfections only through the sanctification of priests and religious*".

Calabria wrote to the seminarian Pedrollo while the later was in Vicenza seminary, "*Dear, what a great need there is of holy, apostolic priests, and available to everything! Look, this is what Jesus is asking always, especially in our time, and you remember, this category of priests is must. You have to become a holy, I mean, an apostolic priest."*[46]

Holiness and apostolate must be a wonderful synthesis of priestly life. And with an explosion of Mystical wonder in March 1911, he used to exclaim: "*What a wonderful thing it is to be a priest! Each time I think of this, I feel something within me which I don't know to express".*

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[46] G. Calabria, *Lettera a don Luigi Pedrollo,* 11 novembre 1910, ms, Archivio Generale dei PSDP, Verona.

Here is the voice that always, but especially now, from the Holy Tabernacle Jesus tells me, "Holy priests, holy priests, holy priests!" This appeal every now and then becomes a bitter cry.

Calabria wrote to the seminarian Pedrollo who asked him for some clarification regarding the purpose of the Opera "of the Good Children", "It is certain that the Opera of the Good Children, which now seems to be the main activity, will become secondary, but this will happen when and as Jesus wants."

Since then, Calabria was thinking of starting a Priestly Opera. This thought we read in a confidential letter he wrote in 1911 to his confessor, Father Natale. "Since a long time, I feel that the Opera of the children, which was the starting point, was nothing but the first ring to which Jesus wanted to bind Other Opera. To do so, we need priests who feel what I feel and are informed as to how, by Jesus' mercy, I am aware of it. In other words, all of them must live abandoned to Divine Providence with the Apostolic life and spirit for Souls, "quod gratis accepistis, gratis date" (what you received free, give free)"[47].

Again, on 21 December 1911, he repeats to his confessor: "I do not feel bound to Verona alone, no, no. As I write, I feel a certain thought that tells me: Apostolic Priests, Priests according to My Heart, but all! My God, how we need them so much! If I could begin seriously! "He felt in his intimacy that this cry was from God, but for fear of falling into a misleading blunder, he shared it with his confessor. Then, he concluded: "I feel that Jesus wants it."

On the eve of the First World War, he wrote in his memoir, "I would like to die with these words on my lips, holy Priests, Living Gospels, the only remedy for the poor humanity to get back to God"[48].

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47 *Lettera a Padre Natale,* 21 dicembre 1911, ms, Archivio Generale dei PSDP, Verona.

48 *Dopo la mia morte a Padre Natale* 11 giugno 1920 [Diario 1919-1923], ms, Archivio Generale dei PSDP, Verona.

Progressively nurtured the concept of a priestly institution in his mind. An Opera to form Apostolic Priests serving the diocesan bishops and the Pope. "Flying Squad, ready to go like the Apostles wherever there is new need." He talked with many bishops viz. the Patriarch of Venice, La Fontaine, who got interested and offered him a home in his diocese; the Bishop of Belluno, Msgr. Giosuè Cattarossi who first hosted three clerics of Fr. Calabria; with Msgr. Adriano Bernareggi, the Bishop of Bergamo, who ultimately carried out this project on his own.

Already in the mission of the Poor Servants in Rome, which was begun in 1932, Fr. Calabria had seen a sign of God for the realization of this aspiration.

And Calabria felt strongly the problem of the reform of the clergy. With the permission of his bishop, he scanned the five plagues of the Church Rosmini[49]. It was a rapture. He did not care, and perhaps did not understand, the great philosopher's philosophical aspect of the great man of Roverto. Nevertheless, he was recognizing the positions of denunciation of certain evils that detracted the face of the Church, the bride of Christ. His thinking and acting was thus included in the vast renewal movement that prepared and laid the foundations for the Second Vatican Council. He confided with his intimate friends, "We would need a Council!"

He was intuitive, in countless ways, of what to do for the Church's reform and synthesized it in a motto: "Let's return to the Gospel of the First Christians; Live and work as the Apostles lived. He fixed these ideas in the said book, Apostolica Vivendi Forma, which triggered a positive jolt for the priests. Msgr Giovanni Battista Montini, future Pope Paul VI, after reading this book commented: "It is alarming!"

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[49] *S. E. msgr. Carlo De Ferrari* bishop of Trento, on his visit of the study circle of Rosminiano, expressed thus: *"…I associate fully, with assurance to be in good company of the venerable Fr. Calabria, who concerning holiness, intended a lot. "I wish and pray first of all that the Lord may also glorify his Servant with the supreme glorification here on earth."* Cfr. Una lettera di mons. Carlo De Ferrari, *in Charitas*, Stresa, 11(1954) 425-426.

In fact, the '*Apostolica Vivendi Forma*' is a master piece, even if the material writing is the fruit of the pen of Msgr. Venanzio Bini.[50]

Great passion for the Church and the priests was the content and not any theological or biblical clarification. The title and the substance of the book referred to the thoughts of so many saints of the Counter-Reformation. Fr. Calabria was deeply convinced that only souls could act on souls: only an ardent, apostolic, holy soul can shake, awaken, and transform other souls.

There is only one way to make people better, purer, more disinterested and safer viz. by ourselves being good, pure, and holy. His spiritual father, too, had repeated to him many times, "*Let us be holy and sanctify the whole Opera*."

In 1953, one year before his death, an article was published in the Magazine of Spiritual Life (of the Carmelites): "The priestly holiness which Calabria had read greedily, he has assimilated and inserted it into his spiritual testament. He had written in it, "The saint is a living sermon. The priest, if he is not inflamed with God's love, is but a sounding bell. .... Holiness, here is the "Magna Charta" of the Kingdom of God. "

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50 *Venanzio Bini* (1874-1958). As a seminarian he was in the Curia of the Bishop of Mantova, Msgr. Giuseppe Sarto, future Pope Pius X. He became a great preacher all over Italy and was a regular writer and the Director General of the Catholic Daily "*Cittadino*". When Pope Leo XIII through his encyclical "*Il fermo proposito*" of 1904, fixed the principles of Catholic Mission, Fr. Bini committed himself to the defence of the weak and poor. During the first World War the daily was closed and the Bishop of Mantova, appointed him as Parish Priest of Castiglione. But Msgr. Beni expressed his desire to withdraw from the public mission. On 16 July 1939 he asked Fr. Calabria to join the Congregation as an Aggregate. His meetings with Fr. Calabria developed the idea that incarnated in the four books we have mentioned earlier. Don Venanzio died on 9 July 1958. His mortal remains rests in the small cemetery of the Abbazia Maguzzano, Brescia. Cfr. Dante Bettoni – Ida Bozzini, *Venanzio Bini – sacerdote mantovano accanto a san Giovanni Calabria*, Editrice AVE, Roma 2000, pp. 358.

In those years a magic word was coined as the ecclesiastical phrase viz. "aggiornamneto - updating", and Calabria had concluded it saying, "Let us refresh ourselves, dear brothers, let me repeat again … But the first updating, essential and irreplaceable for the ' Apostolate, is that of holiness".

Fr. Calabria and Msgr. Adriano Bernareggi, Bishop of Bergamo

The project of "Apostolic Priests", writes Fr. Calabria in his diary on 11th June 1920, "It is for the youths of deep spirituality that the priesthood is meant for. Those who cannot attend the seminary and meet the expenses, must get formed in the spirit of the Gospel under the wings of Providence. After their studies of grammar school as day scholars in the diocesan seminary of Verona, they should go back to their own diocese to do the few years of theology. It would be a blessing for the Church of Veneto, and the Lord wants it to be implemented in the Opera"[51].

He had to write many letters, contact many bishops to realize this dream. And this dream finally takes its form in Bergamo due to the merit of Bishop Adriano. On 1st August in 1949, the Bishop by virtue of his letter makes the announcement regarding the institute of Apostolic Missionaries to all the people and bishops of Italy. "The world is facing fatal errors and violent passion. To this situation, our diocese is fortunate to have a better spiritual situation. My conscience came up with a problem... Should we not offer something to the Church, never guided by any pride, but being aware of the divine blessings, to offer the surplus vocations of our diocese to the rest of Italy and even religious Congregations?

We could do a service to the Church if we could offer priests prepared according to their needs.

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[51] G. Calabria, *Dopo la mia morte, a Padre Natale*, op. cit.

Fr. Lombardi encouraged me much on this project of preparing zealous priests for the needy dioceses of Italy. There are two-fold problems: number and quality: so we aim to prepare well and offer quality to a special apostolate.

We begin the institute under the invocation of the Sacred Heart. The basic characteristic is to be missionaries. Not just to go abroad but also to be in our Italy. We have places that needs evangelization, in fact missionary….. the students of theology will have special preparations of practical and theoretical applications. They will have the special vow of poverty besides the other canonical ones to their Bishops. They must be detached from their families and have to work in groups at least of two.

They will have their statutes under the consideration of the holy Sea. Moreover, the Holy Father has already given me approval to begin, and many eminent Cardinals and bishops judged it very providential. I acknowledge the warm complacency of Fr. Calabria and Fr. Lombardi"

Fr. Calabria had a long-term correspondence with the Bishop of Bergamo, Msgr Adriano Bernareggi. He had opened his deep-rooted desire to have "Apostolic Priests" to reform the Church, according to the Heart of Jesus. Hearing the news Fr. Calabria wrote in his diary on 19 August 1949 "*my heart rejoices with consolation ….in seeing the seed of the Opera sown in Bergamo, first in Italy and then the entire Church…He even expressed his desire to offer his sufferings and prayers for the growth of this institute*."

He also found reason for joy when the Bishop of Salto, Uruguai Msgr. Viola visited and contacted Calabria. He felt the beauty of such priests. .."[52].

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[52] *Mons. Alfredo Viola,* vescovo di salto (Uruguay). He was interested in the book *Apostolic Vivendi Forma*. He came to Italy to speak with Fr. Calabria and to make known the situation of the spiritual abandonment of his vast diocese. Fr. Calabria listened with interest. In the Register of the Holy Mass, on May 20, 1949, we find this phrase: "*Holy Mass and day of prayers, suffering for the Bishop of Uruguay, Msgr. Viola, may Jesus do his divine paternal designs, proper for the present times. (It seems to me that Jesus - and Jesus will give His sign - in order that the Congregation of the Poor Servants may have some*

In another post scriptum connected to this we find in his diary “I send you the project of dear Fr. Umberto Terezi parish priest of Divino Amore and pray that Holy Spirit may inspire your meeting...”[53]

link with his Excellency." Ten years later, in June 1959, the first missionaries left for Latin America.

53 *Don Umberto Terenzi*, Born in Lovenato, Rome in 1900, was parish priest of the Roman Sanctuary Madonna di Divino Amore. In 1934 he met Fr. Calabria for advice on establishing the Association of the "*Figlie della Madonna del Divino Amore*". Later he also founded the Pious Union of "*Sacedoti oblate della Madonna di Divino Amore*."

Chapter Thirteen

FROM THE HOLY RULES TO THE CONSTITUTION (1908-1932)

Attempts for regulations for community life

Fr. Calabria explained the first sketch of the Holy Rules in 1908. He organized an outing to Ceraino, (Verona) in order to read it out to his first three collaborators who were generous souls, varied by age and social condition. A heterogeneous group attracted and coexisted in the charismatic person of Fr. Calabria. They were simple and had no binding appeals.

Then, moving ahead later with a number of collaborators who were marked personalities, Calabria had to specify and fix the reason for their aggregation and divert their generous efforts into the right channel.

Thus, there was need for new formulas and more detailed Rules of Life or Regulations. To retrace those 24 years of history, from 1908 to 1932, which concluded with the diocesan approval of the Congregation, is interesting, especially, for the Religious Poor Servants of Divine Providence. This is the story of innocent and exciting childhood, turbulent adolescence and of the wise maturity of their mother, the Congregation[54].

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[54] For a detailed notion and study of the evolution and juridical approval of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence, please refer to the two volumes of G.Perazzolo. *Momenti di storia della Congregazione Religiosa dei Poveri Servi della Divina providenza, Vol.1, Evoluzione giuridica (dagli inizi al 1932), Verona 1994, e vol.ii, Evoluzione giuridica (1932-1949) Verona 1993.*

Let us briefly glance over the various drafts that led to the texts of the Constitutions approved in 1932:

- Holy Rules of 1 January 1909: This second draft of Norms is a simple trace used for the monthly community meetings. Nevertheless, new fields of apostolate are emerging beyond the simple relief work for abandoned boys. Moreover, the end of the Combination is twofold:

"*Our sanctification, and the sanctification of the youngsters and the direction to make them grow to the fullest sense of the word*."

- *Holy Norms of July 16, 1909*: is a copy of the previous text, with some additions. The shape and the language of the text is more explicit. The purpose of the Combination is now threefold:

"For own sanctification;

For the good of poor abandoned children;

To show to the world now so irreligious, so much immersed in the sludge, that God exists and thinks and provides for his creatures ... "

The lay members of the House is also echoed:

"House members are lay, do not wear any distinct religious costume, but have the virtue of the Apostles."

In the following years, we find new patterns of Holy Rules, that better reflect and elucidate the charism of the Institute

- *In the manuscript of 1916*, Fr. Calabria, man of faith, proposes to put some saints in the organigram of the House. These names are engraved in a tablet at the entrance to San Zeno in Monte. The text of the stone tablet is the following: "Perpetual office of the House of Good Children" S. Girolamo Emiliani ": " *The Absolute Master to whom everything must depend, is our Lord Jesus Christ. Mistress: His most holy Mother, the Virgin Mary. Treasurer: St. Girolamo Emiliani. Cashier: Blessed Joseph Cotolengo. Counsellors: St. Joseph, St. Vincent de Paul, St. Gaetano of Thiene, Venerable Giovanni Bosco. Secretary: St. Giuseppe Calassanzio. Home Components: The Poor Servants*. "

Reached at the first draft of the Holy Rules in 1920.

During annual retreat at the Combonian Fathers, Fr. Calabria came to contact with the Jesuit preacher Fr. Giuseppe Leonardi. He asked for

guidance for drafting the Rules. This father, renowned spiritual director and founder of the University hostel in Padua, suggested preparing a draft of the Rules to submit for the approval of the Sacred Congregation of Religious. He offered to go through them and make some formal change without affecting the substance. To help the writers of the draft, Father Leonardi provided a copy of the Constitutions, written by the late Carmelite Fr. Clemente. Meanwhile, he suggests submitting to the bishop of Verona the request for diocesan approval.

Fr. Calabria prepared the draft from the printing school of Casa Buoni Fanciulli, resuming as the basic text what Don Luigi Pedrollo had already written on 8 December 1918.

To obtain the diocesan approval, Fr. Calabria entrusts to Fr. Luigi Adami, the task of drafting a Statute. But this text did not become successful. The bishop, Bacilieri Cardinale, to whom he had sent to have a look, died shortly thereafter on February 14, 1923.

- *Short Holy Rules of 1924*: Fr. Calabria, finally, summoned Fr. Luigi Pedrollo to Verona and officially guided him to draft the text of the Constitutions. In the spirit of this text, we see a shift to a trend of clericalism in the Institute. On the other hand, the situation of religious has changed from former years. The Directors of houses are all priests, while in the earlier days, communities had only brothers. Unfortunately, Fr Calabria's thought about legal equality between Brothers and Priests cannot be translated into legal form. The innovativeness is challenging, indeed, impossible to reconcile, according to the current the Code of Canon Law.

Don Luigi Pedrollo

We wish to highlight a bit about this priest who had a fundamental importance in the history and legal evolution of the Casa "Buoni Fanciulli" Institute and the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence.

His influence and his role in Fr. Calabria's Institute, from 1914 to 1986, are second only to the founder. Fr. Pedrollo[55] born in San Gregorio di Veronella, Verona province and in the diocese of Vicenza, on 31 December 1888. After his primary schooling in San Gregorio and the first and second year of grammar schooling in Cologna Veneta, Verona, he entered the seminary of Vicenza, on 1 November, 1905.

In 1906, he received vestition at the age of 17.

In 1908, he began theological studies. In 1910, at the advice of his superiors, he attained the primary teachers' title at the Normal School "A. Manzoni "in Verona. On July 28, 1912, he became a priest. He won through the assessment and received the selection as school teacher on 28 October 1913.

For a long time he kept in touch with Fr. Calabria through letters. He wanted to join the Opera, but there were many difficulties to overcome. Finally, on August 24, 1914, he joined Casa Buoni Fanciulli. After a few months, on December 8, 1914, he made the private vows in the hands of Fr. Calabria. On August 5, 1919, he became the superior of Costozza community. There he stayed until October 31, 1929.

In 1930, Fr. Calabria entrusted to him the direction of Casa San Benedetto, which was reserved for the formation of the Brothers. At the same time, Calabria entrusted to him the task of completing the drafting of the Constitutions. He was the Vicar General, for 22 years.

His mediation was very remarkable in the disagreements that arose between priests and brothers. After the founder, he is elected as Superior General for twelve years. The Congregation grew in new missions out of Italy (Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, Nigeria, etc.) during his term.

He died at the age of 96, on February 16, 1986. The Church of Verona offered him a solemn funeral tribute in the presence of many bishops, one hundred and fifty priests and an impressive crowd of simple faithful.

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55 Fausto Rossi, *Don Luigi Pedrollo*, Ed. Roma, Vicenza 1990.

The diocesan approval of the Congregation

We now deal with the difficult path that led to the final drafting of the Constitutions. Fr. Luigi Pedrollo, worked on the text, from the previous work of Fr. Luigi Adami, adding the legal draft of the Discalced Carmelite Fr. Clement of St. Faustino and Giovita. The result is a compromise between Canon law and the charism of the Opera. The purpose of the Opera was expressed in a correct way but as far as relations between lay brothers and priests were concerned, the clerical character prevailed. No mention is made of the legal equality between Brothers and Priests. On the other hand, this was the maximum we could obtain.

Once the work was over, some typed copies were made. A copy was presented to the new bishop of Verona, Msgr. Girolamo Cardinale the successor of Cardinal Bacilieri. The Bishop Girolomo read the text carefully but declared dissents on certain concessions given to lay brothers. He wanted substantial modifications to comply with the Code of Canon Law. And, in practice, the text was rewritten almost completely.

In 1931, a new draft of Constitution was published. The text seemed to be definitive. Fr. Calabria made a dedication to it.

Unfortunately, the spirit of some articles did not correspond to the praxis. But we have to adjust and be content. In fact, we can find articles of this kind:

"- *Priests are the key element of the life of the Congregation.*

- *In the House, they are entrusted with the government of the Institute, the preservation of its spirit and the spiritual formation of its members.*

- *Outside the House they are engaged in the works of spiritual ministry at the request of the Ordinaries, with the aim of spreading in the world faith and trust in divine Providence.* "(Article 149).

Negotiations between the Congregation and the Curia of Verona continued. The work is long and exhausting. It called for much patience

and mutual understanding. But the events that followed made things collapse, and led to a somewhat embarrassing conclusion leaving almost everyone unhappy.

To follow the division of the events, we read the version of Fr. Calabria in his memo: "*I knew that the Brothers had a great mission to accomplish, a great apostolate, not only in the Opera but also in the world. They had to become vital centres, through whom pivot the external people, acquainted with the spirit of trust in God and of abandonment to his Divine Providence. So are the priests i.e. the Apostolic Priests, who steadily would adhere others to live an orderly priestly life. Therefore, we went on without the official approval of the Church. We desired this and, for this purpose, we prayed, suffered and lived while awaiting the opportune moment of Divine Providence. And this was almost unexpected. The Holy See asked from Rome whether we were willing to send some priests of the Opera to take up a parish of poor people who were almost completely abandoned. After prayers and council, we concluded that three priests and two brothers would be going, if the Diocesan Ordinary first approved the Opera. And behold, then, in hurry and fury the holy Rules or rather the Constitutions were worked out. Later by the order of Msgr. The Bishop, these constitutions were revised for the Opera by Msgr. Zenati on behalf of the Bishop and Fr Pedrollo*..." [56].

The Verona priest Giulio Bevilacqua called on by the Fascist authorities was restricted to Rome and so he served as Consultor of the Congregation of Religious, and as in charge of the *Pontifical Work for the Preservation of Faith and Provision of the New Churches*. He was a friend of Fr. Calabria and knew well the "Buoni Fanciulli" Opera. He suggested to the Vicar of Rome to call the priests of the “Casa Buoni Fanciulli” to take up a parish in the suburbs. Despite having them, he demanded the approval of the Institute and urged the Bishop of Verona to hasten the formalities.

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[56] G. Calabria, *Promemoria* 17 settembre 1933, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P. Verona (Fasc. 72, Doc. 5909).

Msgr. Girolamo Cardinale, sincerely wished to approve the Opera, but could not find the appropriate formula that agrees with the Code of Canon Law and the Charism of the founder.

We know that in matters of community life and the practice of management in "Buoni Fanciulli" Institute, the relationship between religious priests and lay religious were always marked by a climate of absolute parity in dealing. Equality at table, in accommodation, in the standard of living and in the readiness to do all kinds of services in the community. It is worth remembering that until then there were no external people in the House even for a humble service. On this point, Fr. Calabria's thought was always linear. Otherwise, how could this new religious witness that God is the Father of all, and we all are equals and so brothers? And what kind of equal dignity could it have been if rules had been codified placing some in a higher position, destined to command, and others, instead, intended only to obey?

Unfortunately, the urgent need to send priests to the Roman townships had hastened the whole thing. The daily shuttle between San Zeno in Monte and the Bishop's house did not lead to anything definitive. Besides, the days went frantic. Unfortunately, haste is never a good counsellor.

On 3 February 1932, Fr Calabria personally went to the Bishop to clarify his position regarding the Brothers in the future General Council. Fr. Calabria did not deviate from his ideas viz., there must be no distinction between Priests and Brothers, save the priestly rights and duties. The Bishop patiently explained to him that this could only happen if the congregation had been approved as "*mixed Congregation*"

Fr. Calabria replied: *"Excellency, I do not know what the Mixed Congregation means by Canon Law. But if it means that all brothers are equals, choose the one that seems best.*" The Bishop listened, took notes and asked for time to reflect.

Thus, came the 11 February 1932. In San Zeno in Monte, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes was solemnly celebrated. During the vespers, Msgr.

Cardinale took the opportunity to read the text of the Decree of the erection of the new Congregation.

Fr. Calabria recorded in his diary in the same evening: "*This is the day, the Lord has made. We rejoice and adore! Today, by the grace of God, the new Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence is erected. The Lord has set his divine seal. His Excellency the Bishop read solemnly the Decree of erection at 9pm. Deo Gratias, Deo Gratias, Deo Gratias "*.

All seemed right: smiling faces, affectionate hugs, great joy. Outside it was snowing. A white, feathery brush stroked hiding all the dullness under its candid veil.

The next day, on 12 February, after a restless night, the Bishop called on Fr. Luigi Pedrollo. He told him the need to review some articles concerning the Lay brothers because they were against the Sacred Canon. On the other hand, since the Decree of erection of the Congregation has already been made public, it seemed inappropriate to go back.

However, it is advisable to take time to reflect patiently on it: "*We will ask Msgr. Bevilacqua if it is possible to postpone the departure of the priests for a while. We would be able to deal more calmly with the thorny issue of legal equality.*"

However, a dry answer arrived from the Sacred Congregation of the Religious: "*If the Founder of the Congregation wants legal parity between Religious Priests and Religious Brothers, approve the Congregation in a mixed form.*"

On 28 February, the Bishop came up to the House of Nazareth where an annual retreat was going on for the priests. He asked to have a meeting with the main officials of the Opera: Fr. Calabria, Fr. Pedrollo, Fr. Cogo, Fr. Adami and Fr. Bussinello. He reaffirmed strongly that in his diocese he would never approve a "mixed" congregation. Therefore, "*if you want diocesan approval, you must accept this as a clerical Congregation.*" Therefore, all those articles that allow the Brothers a certain responsibility for the direction of the Congregation has to be

abolished. Fr. Calabria became pale in face, became uneasy and the meeting is suspended.

The next day, on 29 February, Fr. Pedrollo and Fr. Natale went to the Bishop. They found him very concerned and upset about the health of his friend Fr. Calabria.

He said with emphasis that he would approve the *"mixed Congregation,"* as Fr. Calabria wanted, but he felt it tough*: "I will approve it because I love Fr. Calabria and I do not want to create scandals in the diocese. Blame and deplore ".*

When Fr. Calabria, hearing that attitude and reply, became even more disappointed. He wrote in his diary; *"Never before and then never seems to have suffered, as I suffer now. Internal pains, physical suffering, moral agony ... What do you want Lord in these days?.... May the Lord grant me his light and peace ... "* And he concludes: *"I do not want the Opera to begin badly, rather I accept the Congregation as the Bishop desires and proposes."* [57]

Thus, on 4 March 1932 in the Study house of Nazareth the Bishop reads the Decree approving the Constitutions and receives the first triennial profession of 13 priests. On his authority, he appoints Fr. Calabria as the first Superior General of the new Clerical Congregation and chose Fr. Luigi Pedrollo, Fr. Luigi Adami, Fr. Albano Bussinello, Fr. Augusto Cogo, Fr. Giovanni Franchini as the members of the General Council.

On 19 March 1932 in San Zeno in Monte there were also twenty religious brothers for triennial vows.

The Congregation of the "Poor Servants of Divine Providence" was officially born, composed of 33 professed religious.

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[57] G. Calabria, *Rendiconto – Diario 27 febbraio 1932* [Diario 1930-1935], ms., Archivio Generale PSDP, Verona.

The Gospel and the Code of Canon Law

In the Good Children's Printing School, the text of the Constitutions was getting set to be printed. Everybody liked the first part. But when they reached the chapter on "Priests" some articles affected the sensitivity of the Religious Brothers and were in open contrast with the thought and praxis of Fr. Calabria.

In a secular view, the question could have the perception of a dispute of power, a struggle for the conquest of places of superiority and power. However, it is misleading to judge in this way those individuals who had abandoned everything such as profession, titles, luxuries of life to serve the Lord.

The spirit of the Congregation always turned around on the gospel principles of fraternal collaboration among all members, without distinction of any class. Among them reigned a spontaneous race of those *"who would place themselves at the service of the brothers*" or "*who made greater self-giving*." Fr. Calabria, rather than dwelling on the terms "clerical congregation" or "lay congregation", aimed at the substance of the Gospel message: "*Whoever wants to be the first among you be the last, and the one who wants to be the greatest, be the servant of all*". Again, "*Only one is your Father, and you are all brothers.*" This was the concern for him.

He wished to keep this thought very clear in the Constitutions. "*Our Congregation consists of priests and brothers, engaged in different tasks, but all united in the sweet bond of fraternal love and charity; Lead a perfectly common life so as to form a single heart and soul, only intended to love and serve God in the precise realisation of his duties* "(Article 8).

Again, *"Priests and Brothers, though they are two components of different conditions, must consider as "brothers" in everything and for everything. They help each other in their duties, in every field, as one person, one religious, and one family*" (Article 158).

Unfortunately, these clear indications of the Founder coexist with other articles, imposed by the Canon Law for the Clerical Congregations inserted directly by the Bishop. These articles, in fact, emptied the evangelical spirit, making visible only a legal and bureaucratic external skeleton. Here are some of those strange articles: art. 11, "*In every common acts the importance is given to the Priest ... the Brothers follow".* And art. 146*: "The ordinary direction of the aspirant Brothers will be entrusted to a Priest".* And, in art. 193*: "The Assistant and the General Councillors shall be Priests ...". In* art. 225*: "No one shall be elected to the office of the local superior unless he is a priest ..."* Moreover, in art. 226*, "The Vice-Rector will also be a priest."*

Consequently, there are two classes of Religious. And his revision has completely abolished the legal equality. The Religious Brothers are downgraded to inferior series, are not even eligible to occupy the office of a local superior or elect their representatives within the General Council.

With this approach, the Congregation becomes a part of the normal family like every other Clerical Congregation. Everything is well founded legally. But great disappointment was found in lay brothers, who felt betrayed and spoiled. The Congregation they had opted and served for so many years is not the one they see now becoming, and for which they had made their vows on 19 March.

Fr. Calabria withdrew in his pain: suffers, prays, hopes. He tries to establish calmness in the people and to invite them to unity, prayer and trust. He promises that everything will become smooth one day. But, in his diary, on 14 March he confides: "*I feel that the Opera is not precisely as Jesus wants it to be. Through suffering and trial, the Lord will mould it*." And later on, to affirm that as the will of God, he confronted his spiritual father. He tells that will of God is different from what the Bishop has expressed. Calabria wrote, "*I did not know what to say. The word of the spiritual Father for me is that of God. On the other hand, the Bishop's approval is also God's will. I was afraid and prayed. Of course, when I feel the greatness of the Apostolate of the Apostolic Priest, I also feel the greatness and apostolate of the religious Brother.* "

And on 22 July 1934 he wrote: "*For the good and the secure stability of this Opera, the Brothers must have an active role in the Governing Council. They are Religious, Special Religious*[58]*. Only in this manner the divine design will be done and guarantee this Opera of God. In the right time the Lord will, think about it. That my sins shall not obstruct what God wants. "*

In the small community of the Poor Servants, the discomfort and bad mood groaned slowly. Some Religious Brothers felt frustrated. Three Brothers viz. Bro Angelo Savietto, Bro Antonio Consolaro, Bro Oliviero Prospero openly expressed their opposition. All the others, though bitter, without protest resigned themselves to the will of their father, Fr. Calabria, hoping that, over time, things would change.

For priests, however, the affair triggered. Most of them, with the exception of Fr. Pedrollo, Fr. Adami and Fr. Bussinello, stood up for the Clerical Congregation in all respects. Fr. Calabria wanted to save everything both "letter" and "spirit", but could not. He realized that the "letter" was killing the "spirit".

In public and private, he strived to maintain unity and mutual charity. In order that the brothers must not feel the weight of their disappointment, he tried to engage them with confidence, listening willingly to everything about the workings of the labs and the House. These were attitudes moved with charity, if understood properly; did not affect the norms of the Constitutions. He delegated a Religious Brother to take over the leadership in Negrar, shelter and also admitted within the General Council some Brothers to seek their opinion on issues of their own competence.

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58 Fr. Calabria speaks of the Brothers as "Special Religious" referring to the fact that in his days the "Brothers" of the Orders or Clerical Congregations were generally regarded as second-class religious, who were in charge of housework and not with governing matters of external apostolate. His lay religious were to be equal to priests, for whatever matters of the direction and external apostolate, save the prerogatives of the Sacred Order.

Some young priests interpreted this way of acting as a loophole for not applying the Constitutions. They began to murmur, with an ironic smile, "*The Congregation is a clerical by regulation, but laity in fact."* The murmur, the suspicion, and mistrust went on spreading. They imitated the gestures; weighed the words, and even the gaze of the Superior General.

In fact, the environment of the priests at Nazareth reproached Fr. Calabria and his closest associates on five specific things viz.

A) Some Brothers took part in the General Council;

B) In Negrar community, the director is a brother;

C) The Mission House in India had only religious Friars as members;

D) During the summer holidays in Velo Veronese, the superior was a brother,

E) the spirit of abandonment to Divine Providence has been violated in the Houses of Negrar, Costozza, in running the laboratories.

In their circle less respect prevailed over the Founder i.e. "*Fr. Calabria was surrounded by people who made him do what he did not think.*" And he is almost a puppet in the hands of smart managers.

Fr. Calabria sought in all ways however, insignificant to pacify people and to clarify their attitudes. In the circular letter of 26 November 1932 on the jubilee of the Opera he writes, *"To all that I have written I add a warm exhortation. Let us all have great charity i.e. let priests and brothers be a unique body. We have to help one another in performing the will of God in this holy Congregation.*

In all the events and in trials we have always to perceive Jesus who wants or permits such things both for our good and that of this Congregation's and we have always to say "Dominus est" (it's the Lord).

We brothers, members of this holy Congregation, have to remember well that we have to be like many torches inflamed by the divine Providence, continuously fuelled by our very special spirit. I am absolutely certain that if we, with the divine grace, practically live with this spirit, the good we do will be really great. And also, the plans the divine Providence will perform through us will be innumerable. But it is

our task to keep alive and inflamed this lamp of God that will be so if we fuel it with the oil of the faith and the charity i.e. the love of God and neighbour.

My dear bothers, on bended knees and with my hands joined I beg, pray and implore you that this virtue always reigns supreme in our Congregation. May all criticisms, rumours and envies be banished!

Let us all remember that we are all workers and peasants of the same Master, who is God. He has put us all here to work in his field that is scattered in different places viz. Nazareth, San Zeno in Monte, Costozza, Aspirants, Madonna di Campagna, Rome. Each field is unique and each one has to do his part, but always considering that his part is a part of the whole field of God.

So, let us be happy when one part is better cultivated and richer and, on the contrary, help the poorer one and vice versa, always keeping in our minds that we are in one unique field.

Let us all ask the Lord this grace, this spirit and charity in our prayers, in our visits, in the Holy Communion because this is what is worth and, as I told you other times, nothing can destroy or stop this Institution. Only the lack of charity among us can make it stop or deviate together with the spirit of criticism, envy, rumours that are all part of our self-respect and of our pride.[59]"

But peace did not reign. In June 1933, the division of souls caused the diocesan pastoral visit, made by the Bishop's delegate Msgr Luigi Zenati. Fr. Calabria felt crumpled in the dilemma of a dilemma. He adds in his diary, *"The word of my spiritual Father, which is God's voice, asserts to me that the Congregation as it is now, is not good. But the Bishop's approval says otherwise as he is the representative of God."*

At the end of the pastoral visit, Msgr. Luigi Zenati closed his report with these drastic words, "The Congregation is tormented by a profound division of individuals, among the so-called young priests and almost all of the Brothers, backed by some senior priests."

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59 *Lettere del Padre ai Religiosi*, a cura della Congregazione dei Poveri Servi della Divina Provvidenza, Ferrara 1956, pp.5ss (*LETTER II 26 November 1932).

Fr. Calabria on 23 October 1933 convoked a special meeting at San Zeno in Monte. After a fraternal and clear discussion there seemed to have an understanding viz. the Constitutions no longer have to be discussed, but to be accepted and lived by interpreting them in the spirit of the Founder and Superior General. And Calabria repeats these ideas in a circular letter of 6 November 1933*, "My dearest sons in Jesus Christ,*

May the grace and the peace of Jesus be always with you.

I am always happy when I write to you or when I can address my poor words to you; even if they pass through this miserable channel, they are always words of God and you have to receive and to listen to them as they are. But this time I am particularly happy because I feel that these words will sink into your souls and into your hearts of religious people and will bring so much light, so much peace, so much love of God and new strength. They will descend into you to perform the great plans the divine Providence wants to do by means of this beloved Congregation of ours that is called Congregation of the "Poor Servants".

The Opera belongs to God, let us keep this in mind! He founded it, He leads it with a particular Providence, whoever be the instrument He uses.

He could do everything by himself, but he condescends to use us. Here let us remember that God needs humble instruments. He does not know what to do with proud people, on the contrary he rejects them far from Him, as history can attest. So, to be called into this Institution is more than one reason for us in order to keep ourselves humble.

My dearest, let us think of the great report we shall have to give to the Lord one day for the particular grace we received to belong to this Congregation of the Lord. Let each of us live in the Congregation according to the will of God being sure about that great report. So, we have to live like wax, like clay, without reasoning, completely abandoned to God and his will.

For this reason, I recommend to you to keep well in your minds that we are only able to ruin the plans of God. But if we are faithful to our

holy Rules and Constitutions and being united to the instrument whom God uses most strictly, we shall be able, despite we are nothing, and we shall acquire a superhuman, divine strength which no violence would be able to block.

I have told you many times: I do not fear the assaults and the trials that come from the outside: on the contrary, they are useful to consolidate the Institution and the whole Congregation to a greater extent. Only if we correspond badly, we can annihilate and destroy this work God has condescended to raise for his glory.

We have the Constitutions that are the expressions of the divine Will. Let us conform to them with all our souls. Let us be quiet and serene about this matter of capital importance and let us live with our whole heart and mind and the firm will to practise them. Let us not worry about the future, if necessary, the Lord alone will modify, widen and perfect our Institution because he is the only Master. But all these will be accomplished through "any" person who, even though may be miserable, but whom God puts as the Casante, of the Opera.

Everything is in the hands of God and He only knows what will be necessary for us in the future. So, at the right moment He will carefully suggest to the person who governs this Congregation in His name.

Meanwhile the Constitutions are his expressed will for the present times. So, we have to keep linked to them with the most generous stability by following them exactly. If you have some doubts or uncertainties remember that Father John is the only one who can give you some explanations about the problem you have, because he is the only one who is the genuine interpreter of the divine will showed in the Constitutions. Turn to him only and only to him expose every possible difficulty and conform to all that he will dispose in the name of God and with the approval of the Church.

My dear sons, I recommend to you the brotherly union with all the strength of my soul, an intimate, strict and indissoluble union in the charity of God. We are all one unique body, one unique person. So we are united in seeking the kingdom of God that is the purpose for which this Congregation was founded in these times. Let us be careful and

watchful on this point of the brotherly union because it is not too difficult to break it. We are human and so we can fail. I repeat to you: one unique body, one unique person.

The priest and the brother complete themselves mutually in the exercise of the apostolate……The devil who is the enemy of every good will make every effort to sow discord and to bring disunion; he knows well that a reign which is divided goes to ruin and desolation.

If any disagreement should begin, if some clouds should come and obscure the clear horizon of charity, let harmony and peace grow stronger. Do not ever let the sun go down under possible dissents. We are men among men, so some type of inconvenience may happen, but even here, let us be careful so that we don't have to complain, exaggerate or generalize. Let us see everything in the true light of God, in peace and tranquillity of our spirit.... Hold on to each other and, I assure you, you will do miracles ...

As far as I know and I can, I commend the full and cordial fusion between priests and brothers: we are one body. So, let's get in touch with each other. Invoke, therefore, those distinctions that love affirms. Don't say, "This does not touch me, this other does not conform to my dignity, and this is still too petty," because these are not religious words for they do not conform to the teachings and examples of Our Lord Jesus Christ ... He did not come to be served, but to serve ..." [60].

The young priests, many of them in good faith and victims of inexperience and valiant youth radicalism, sustained by their superior Fr Augusto Cogo, remain firm in the belief that the spirit of the Congregation has been misguided. One of them, who simply signed up as a "Poor Servant", sent a memorandum to Rome, including a copy of the final report of the diocesan pastoral visit.

Fr. Calabria bitterly comments in his diary: *"Besides accusing me to the Bishop of not respecting the Constitutions, they also had recourse to the Congregation of Religious in Rome, and falsely accused me of not being in the Constitutions. Rome wrote to the Bishop ... What I feel, and*

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60 *Ibidem.*, pp. 21ss.

they want to deceive me, that they reclaimed in Rome, consented with Episcopus ".

Fr. Calabria, believing to calm the troubled waters, changed the superior of the Nazareth Student House, and appointed Fr. Giovanni Franchini. But it became worse, because between the new superior and the young priests, there was an irremediable fracture.

Fr. Calabria invoked, then, the intervention of the Bishop for bringing serenity. But in the meantime, there came the message from Rome of the appointment of an apostolic Visitor, the Benedictine Father Emanuele Caronti.

Apostolic Visit

Fr. Calabria was going to live one of the most troublesome times of his life. He called it "*Passio Domini* N.J.C." i.e. Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ. In these painful trials, he did not point the accusing finger on others, but against himself and his sins. He was convinced that he himself was the cause of the ruin of the Congregation. In his Diary Fr. Calabria writes: *"This evening - 2 March 1935 –Bishop's secretary Msgr. Falzoni, called Fr. Luigi Pedrollo on the phone. He reported that the Sacred Congregation of Religious has designated Abbot Emanuele Caronti, as the apostolic visitor to the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence. The news made me say, "Lord, your holy and divine Will in this Opera, at any cost and sacrifice".* And the next day, he continued*, "At this time, at 20.30, comes the apostolic visitor, Father Caronti, true man of God; well noticed in his talk, his trait, all his person. He comes in the name of the Lord...."*[61].

The Apostolic Visitor, already knew the Opera, as he had used the printing press of the "Good Children" to print some liturgical editions.

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61 G. Calabria, Mio Diario, 2 marzo 1935 [Diario 1939 - 1942], ms., Archivio Generale PSDP, Verona.

The office he received from the Holy See gave him a supreme power over the Congregation, released by the diocesan bishop, the Superior General, and his Council. He has the right to question all the religious and to oblige them under oath to declare the truth about everything that concerns the apostolic visit. He may issue the provisions he deems appropriate and send reports to the Holy Congregation of Religious about the spiritual, disciplinary, economic and apostolic state of the Opera.

Abbot Caronti, did not waste time. He immediately began his mandate. On Monday 4th March 1935 he held a conference at San Zeno in Monte and Nazareth. Explained the reasons for his presence, it is not as a judge but a pacifier for the good of the Institute. In the following days, he briefed some of the religious separately. On 11 June 1935 he invited 13 religious to a plenary meeting. With them begins a fraternal dialogue on some points that he finds more unacceptable. He enumerated: "*While the Opera is esteemed outside, inside there are divisions, lack of charity, murmurings, false ideas about the activity of priests, which some would like to restrict only to priestly activity, in contrast to the vocation of the Poor Servant, willing to do everything.*

The priests, even though, according to the constitutions, are legitimate superiors of the Houses, do not have to aspire to such duties as privilege.

The disdain for the Superiors is expressed with malicious interpretations and attempts to catch them in contradiction.

The clerics and students of Nazareth came to know the reserved and minute things of the Congregation, and framed inexorable judgments about superiors.

The Apostolic Institute of Nazareth looked like a separate body from the Congregation, with its own motto "In Cruce Vita", and wanting to directly depend on the Bishop as its superior and father which marginalised the Constitutions and Canon law. The Diocesan Institute recognizes the superior as the final authority.

Avoiding the Superior and appealing to the Bishop is anarchy that offends the same Bishop. "

Two days were set aside for dialogue. All accusations placed against the Founder crumbled into dust. Adversaries could not present valid explanations. They looked for excuses, reduced allegations, reduced everything to gossip.

On 13 June 1935 the Visitor summoned Fr. Calabria, Fr. Pedrollo and twelve Brothers to praise their loyalty to the Founder and promised all his legal assistance.

The Clerics of Nazareth tried their last card, preparing an appeal to the Sacred Congregation of Religious. Of course, their letter went to waste box because of on-going Apostolic Visit.

Finally, on 20 July 1935 Abbot Caronti, by a letter to Fr Calabria, made known the measures he would take. He sent home all students who are not clerics. He suspended ordinations for all the clerics. He decided to transfer the dissidents from Nazareth House of formation to Madonna di Campagna. Everything with immediate implementation.

A thorn in the heart

"Today I had a great deal of pain from a brother who, without wanting to, thrusted me a thorn into my heart. May the Lord of mercy make him rich in his divine graces for eternal life" [62] .

Fr. John suffered from the humiliation of being in the mouth of the Veronese clergy who knew of the Apostolic visit. He clung firmly to God. He wrote in the diary, *"Oh, how Satan is right against the Opera and against this poor priest, I sense and recognise all my great misery, I entrust myself to the great goodness and mercy of the Lord"*[63].

His spiritual Father encouraged him, writing him these lines, *"Beloved Fr. Johnin Christ "Ego quos amo arguo et castigo" (those whom*

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62 *Ibid.,* 18 giugno 1935.

63 *Ibid.,* 2 luglio 1935.

I love I reprove and discipline), Rev.3:19. So too His servant Fr. John. The recent painful phase of the Opera of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence, causing an Apostolic Visitor, was a new clear, shining, brilliant and peremptory proof of being loved with a special love by Jesus towards his poor Founder of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence. And consequently, the Opera itself, because it is meant to do great things in the Catholic Church. But dear Fr. John in Christ: those whom I love I reprove and discipline, Therefore you must generously and consistently affirm with the Apostle Paul: Adimpleo ea quae desunt passionum Christi in carne mea usque ad mortem [I Complete in my flesh, what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, until death, Col. 1:24].

On Sunday, 8th September 1935 at the end of spiritual exercises held in Nazareth, Abbot Caronti celebrated Holy Mass and received the profession of vows of Fr. John Calabria. Then he put on him the holy vestments to receive the profession of the vows of the other Poor Servants as an external sign to signify the full exercise of his supreme authority and the confirmation of his dignity as the Founder. At the end of the second course of spiritual exercises held from 30 September to 7 October 1935, Abbot Caronti, convened a public assembly. He called some Poor Servants by name. He gave them the canonical admonition, and the prescribed punishments. Finally, he went to the Bishop to inform Msgr. Girolamo Cardinale about the provisions taken. The Bishop, on hearing the names of those punished, sobbed in surprise, reiterated that those priests were "all exemplary and he would receive them into the diocese with open arms, if they only would request him".

The suffering of Fr. Calabria did not cease, even though the Apostolic Visit was making clear order in the Opera. Of course, this was not his thought and desire. He would have preferred to burn for millennia in the flames of hell rather than at this point.

The situation oppressed him, made him suffer. He preferred to escape to take refuge in a hermitage, far from Verona, and to leave others to direct the Congregation. Father Natale was always beside him to comfort him saying, "Dear Fr. John, trust in the Lord and persevere in fatigue. Trust in God and be in your place. In order to remain where

Jesus has placed him, greater confidence is needed. Full, complete and stable confidence in Jesus is the daughter of deeper humility. Be always in front of his mind, his great misery, accompanied by humility ..." [64].

On 12 February 1936, the Apostolic Visitor, on the instructions of the Holy See, dismissed Fr. Augusto Cogo from the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence because he was considered to be chiefly responsible for the "rebellion" against the superiors and the "rebellion" created between the group of his followers and the other religious. Fr. Calabria invited the Bishop to intercede with the Apostolic Visitor to overturn and await the repentance of those responsible. But Abbot Caronti is immovable. Fr. Cogo remains for a few years in Bologna's "Good Children" home. Then he returns to Verona and is designated as a pastor at Campanella di Lonato (Brescia, Diocese of Verona). Fr. John always kept good contact with him. And Fr. Augusto compensated by becoming a tool of Providence for the purchase of the Abbey of Maguzzano. In fact, Fr. Augusto suggested to a pious lady to devolve a substantial sum to Fr. Calabria.

Another priest, FR. John Bellarini, who was also removed from the Congregation, after having exercised the pastoral ministry at Villa San Sebastiano, in the diocese of Avezzano, though he felt strongly the nostalgia for the House and asked Fr. Calabria to accept him back. Fr. Calabria welcomed him with the affection of a good father. He proves his confidence and puts him in parish activity, first in Madonna di Campagna and then in a parish of Verona, at Villaggio Dall'Oca Bianca, now Borgo Nuovo. The Apostolic Visit had accomplished its mission and could be said to be terminated with these resolutions, but because of the War and other inconveniences, it did not officially terminate until 1947. However, since 1936 Fr. Calabria was reinstated in his office of Superior General with full authority.

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64 *Ibid.,* 16 January 1936.

Chapter Fourteen

THE CONGREGATION EXPANDS (1935-1951)

House of San Pancrazio, (Verona)

In 1935 a well-known family gave Fr. Calabria a farm house with a fertile plot of land not far from Adige, in the San Pancrazio, Verona.

We were at the time of rebuilding communion among the Religious, after the confusion caused by the internal divisions and the drastic decisions of the Apostolic Visitor. Nazareth Student Home was virtually empty. Fr. Calabria took advantage of this providential offer to restructure and reorganize the entire student branch. For the moment, he thought of placing there a group of boys selected from among those at the Madonna di Campagna Sanctuary. They were considered the seed of the new Nazareth.

On 8th December 1935 the house was ready for the inauguration. Fr. Calabria presided over an exciting religious function, with singing, band set, and waving colourful flags.

In an atmosphere of enthusiasm and serenity, the activity began.

The day of this group of boys continued to rhythm from school hours, study, play, and prayer. The Second World War broke out. Verona became home to the Venetian Army Corps. The area where the House is located is near the Verona-Venezia railway station and the Porta Nuova station. Two strategic objectives targeted by enemy bombers.

Prudence wanted them to clear out of that place. The house became practically deserted. When the war ended, so many families were in the house in need of hospitality. Hence, the house was turned into a reception centre and a food and clothing dispensary. Then, without a well-defined project, some elderly people were welcomed. From one increased to five, then to twenty, and finally to fifty elderly poor people.

Of course, this service required extensions, restorations, sanitary facilities. Lifestyle resembled what normally reigned in other Houses of the Opera: a large family where each one works according to their own strengths and economic possibilities.

The engine and soul of everything is one Religious Brother, assisted by some volunteers and auxiliary staff. This created a new service within the Opera and added to the other activities of assistance for children and the sick. The gate of the House was always kept opened. Guests could go out and visit the village. The director's creative fantasy made for them leisure and job occupation, with no obligations or fixed schedules: garden, animal breeding, helping in the kitchen, and housekeeping.

A religious brother viz: Bro. Bruno Corridori, distinguished himself, in particular, for his charity and attention to the minimal needs of the guests. He was a short man in structure but big and giant in goodness.

Over the time, the House also welcomed physically or mentally disabled people. Anyone entering this big family had the impression of meeting an ancient patriarchal farmer's podium. There was nothing of the squalid shelter stereotype for seniors, where guests awaited in inertia and sad expectation of a final solution. Here reigned joy, hope and serenity.

Most of them still felt useful to others. They rejoiced to see the pickups of other Houses coming to pick up their vegetables from their garden or the eggs of their farm.

There the celebration of a daily religious service was proposed for those who were willing and intending to participate.

And there was an enviable breath of an instant air of serenity and peace.

This house was closed. The guests were relocated to Negrar, where a modern "Hospitality Home, named, Bro Francis Perez home" had been set up for them, with nursing, medical, gym and leisure facilities. But in elderly people, perhaps, there was a regret of the dear and old country farm, where they lived in contact with nature, in a modest, but more homily environment.

The Novitiate House of Roncà, Verona

Another gift from Divine Providence was the house of Roncà, Verona. The villa had already been offered to Fr. Calabria twenty years ago. The owner of the house lived in Lazise, at Garda Lake. While in sick bed, she sent for Fr. Calabria for her confession. But suddenly, she received the sacraments from the parish priest. Before she had her last breath, she called the notary to dictate her last will. There were two witnesses besides the parish priest. In the testamentary legacy, the lady appointed Fr. Calabria her sole heir to Roncà villa. The notary laid off the rogue. He began to read it to the lady, but before she could sign, she breathed her last breath. The woman's will was obvious, but there was no signature for validation. The relatives contested the document. Fr. Calabria did not dispute and was content with a small offering by family members.

Years passed by and finally on 13 August 1937 Fr. Calabria wrote to Abbate Caronti, "*A few days ago, we started Roncà home, and if I am not cheated, I trust in the Lord, we will begin the novitiate. We wish to implement the great work for priests who wish to rehabilitate themselves*."

And in a long circular letter of 1942 he wrote, *"Roncà our beloved house would had come to the Opera twenty years ago and instead was given to others. I let the Lord do the best. See how we must abandon*

ourselves to Him. If we correspond nothing can hinder the completion of divine designs."[65]

The Piccinali villa, situated on the edge of the village of Roncà, Verona was in a lovely setting, surrounded by greenery, a place of silence and peace. A place of fitting for Novitiate House. Fr. Calabria often went to Roncà to entertain the novices. He used to comment that he was willing to go among them to "recharge" in body and spirit. Being in the midst of young novices, he was happy to talk. He was joking, he talked about anecdotes of past life, inter weaved popular proverbs, tongue twister jokes. [66]

The novices, secretly, penned down the words and gestures, then later noted them into a diary. The reading of these notes was pleasing and revealed Father Calabria so paternal, affable and genuine, Verona man in every bit. The simplicity, geniality, and humour of Fr. Calabria was fabulous. In the midst of this future religious, they really felt father, a wise and good patriarch. Collecting all the rich sketchy, comes out the portrait of a simple, serene soul, full of life, on whose back, one day, the Lord wanted to load the burden of managing a great Opera.

Alongside the novitiate, a "Casa Buoni Fanciulli" began for children under the age of twelve. In 1955, the novitiate is shifted to Verona, in Casa San Giuseppe, called the Biondella.

The House continued to exist as a Middle School and a Professional Start-up School. But, in 1969, when the need decreased in the territory, it was closed down permanently. Many religious, who were formed during the twenty-year-old novitiate in Roncà, retained a nostalgic memory of that warm and protected nest, where they were guided to discover the Charism of the Opera and to imbibe it greedily like a mother's breast.

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65 *Lettere del Padre ai Religiosi,* 2 febbraio 1942, a cura della Congregazione dei PSDP, Ferrara, 1956, p.111.

66 *Il Servo di Dio don Giovanni Calabria e i suoi novizi,* a cura della Congregazione dei PSDP, Verona 1982, ms., Arch. Gen. Psdp, Verona.

The Abby of Maguzzano - Brescia

From the chronicle of the Maguzzano House we read: "On 24 September 1938, the Divine Providence arranged that the convent, under the name of "Abbazia di Maguzzano," passes on to the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence."

The contract was signed on 19 September 1938. Fr. John had visited the abbey many times and had stopped conversing with the Trappist monks. The friars' community was of mostly French origin. Due to the difficulty of integration and the impulse of the imminent war, they decided to leave the place and retire to their homeland at the Mother House in Aiguebelle.

The Abbey was put on sale. There was a danger that it would go to some private individuals. Fr. Calabria cherished to get it, but did not have the amount needed to purchase. He threw a medal of St. Benedict, secretly in the cloister garden. He had learned to use this practice from his confessor Fr. Natale. He used to cast a medal of Saint Benedict in the places he was going to buy. It was not a superstitious gesture, but an act of faith in the intercession of the saints. He prayed and hoped, but then he abandoned himself to the hands of Divine Providence. And Providence fulfilled it in a "wonderful way". Thus, expressed Fr. Calabria.

But what did Calabria want to make of this vast and ancient abbey? Certainly, he would have felt sorry for himself and for many Christians if it had been sold to private individuals after having been the seat of a thriving Benedictine community and then Trappist friars' community for many centuries. But this feeling was not decisive for getting him to buy that. For a long time, he had desired to get a suitable place to welcome priests who wished to renew themselves spiritually. He was thinking of priests who were in a vocation crisis or in a state of spiritual void. He wanted to offer them a quiet place to reflect and fortify in spirit.

He spoke to his friend and ex religious Fr. Augusto Cogo who, after his exclusion from the Congregation by the Apostolic Visitor, was the

rector of Campagna, a small fraction of Lonato, Brescia. Fr. Calabria and the first priest continued intact mutual esteem and affection.

Fr. Augusto, knowing a wealthy woman, who wanted to finance a substantial sum for a good cause, remembered the wishes of Fr. Calabria and advised her to become an instrument of Providence to realize the dream of Fr. Calabria.

Negotiations were long and laborious, because the monks who were of French nationality could not enter into contracts in Italy. Many other Institutions also had spotted at that haven of peace. Bureaucratic difficulties, political and fiscal complications, the Trappist uncertainties, all disturbed before the contract was established. The Abbot of Aiguebelle intervened providentially to answer the questions, by saying favourably for the sale of the Abbey to Fr. Calabria. [67]

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[67] G. Calabria, *letter to Abbot Caronti, 13 November 1935*, ms., Archivio Generale PSDP, Verona: "*many days back had come to Maguzzano, the Trappists, and I knew with great surprise that they had decided to close that House. It was a former Benedictine Abbey, with a parish church held by a diocesan priest. Father Abbot asked me if I could carry on the Opera, so also the Treasurer Father, whom I know very well, he invited me to buy. Indeed, I knew that they had decided not to sell it to any of the many applicants before offering us the choice. It is a beautiful building with 35 fields surrounded by a wall, near Lake Garda, half an hour from Desenzano. I think it would cost bare minimum, and it seems to me in Domino to have a beautiful cause of Providence of God.*

The Trappist will leave for Easter, and so we have to examine urgently and give an answer. I have thought of a lot, and I still am thinking about it, and it persuade me more and more; But as always, I do not want to trust my opinions. To you, Rev. Father, who are the instrument of Providence, and I count on you for the Opera, now place this matter to you. In the light of God I request you to evaluate the matter, and with your enlightened experience give me your opinion: in your word I will see the Will of the Lord.

Certainly it seems to me a need of the times, and even the Superior of the Trappist, to whom I spoke of this (to help the priests in distress), told me that it is an urgent need ... I believe that it is S. Benedict who traces the road. Also because it is a place sanctified by his children. I pray to the Lord to enlighten with your opinion the right word for me, according to the will of God."

The first pastoral service of the religious community that settled in Maguzzano was to plan monthly spiritual recollections for priests in the zone. Msgr. Giuseppe Manzini, Fr. Giulio Bevilacqua (who later became Cardinal), Msgr Enrico Bovo, Msgr Borromini (the future bishop of Terni and Narni), were invited to be preachers of great culture and apostolic zeal.

Yet, he was not comfortable with this service. He wanted to institute in the House, a Priestly Eucharistic Adoration: "*Laus perennis sacerdotalis*".

In 1940 another dream of Fr. Calabria was realized viz: to welcome young people from the lower middle school and thus they could know their "vocation" during their study and in prayer. On 9 October 1940 the first group of twenty-four boys arrived, who were formed into the first two middle classes under the direction of Fr Pietro Giacomini.

On their first day in the school, the boys found on the notice board a message of Fr. Calabria: "*My dear children of the loved House of Maguzzano, I recommend that you be good, so that the Lord may bless you and fulfil his divine plans. Pray for your Father Don Giovanni, and I bless you whole-heartedly.* "

Fr. Calabria spoke of "divine designs" for this House. And here one day he revealed the first of these "plans": "*at Maguzzano I long for a great priestly activity. But there is a great need to pray and to pray very much, for the fulfilment of this great intention, to glorify God and for the good of the Church*"[68].

And then: "For over twenty years, I contemplated a project to bring together all the religious leaders of Christian faith into a common place for reflection and prayer, for an exchange of views, to know, without any discussion, and above all to invoke the Holy Spirit as they did in the

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68 *Lettere del Padre ai Religiosi*, a cura della Congregazione dei PSDP, Ferrara 1956, p.112.

cenacle. Maguzzano would be an appropriate environment, and I would have been happy if Providence allowed us to realize this good cause"[69].

For many years, this House welcomed priests who needed a period of reflection and revision of their pastoral life. Many recovered physical and spiritual strength and resumed their apostolate with greater zeal. The activities for the "Catholica Unio", the solemnization of the "Unity Octave", the fraternal encounters between Catholic bishops and the Metropolitan of the Romanian Orthodox Church Vissarion Puiu, were many supportive and hopeful situations. But these did not make continuity for various petty reasons. Today the House is a centre of spirituality for priests, religious and lay people, and a house for an auspicious "Ecumenical Centre".

"The boarding School" in Primavalle, (Rome)

While the first priests were leaving for the Roman parishes, Fr Calabria recommended that he also would be interested in the education and training of youth[70].

In the Holy Year of 1933, Fr. John Calabria went to Rome to visit the religious communities and began negotiations for the opening of an Apostolic Institute to form missionary priests for the Church.

Fr. Calabria visited devotionally the holy places, but also learned with anguish the misery that stagnated in the Roman suburbs, where his Religious were working. He found hundreds of children abandoned wandering in the streets. He wanted to do something for them right away. Due to the shortage of staff, for the time being he put off the project. His Religious, understanding his concern, began to take care of

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69 *Ibid.,* p.21.

70 G. Calabria, *Lettera a don Stanislao Pellizzer, 5 giugno 1934*, ms., Archivio Generale PSDP, Verona. "*If next to the parish could come up a section like San Zeno in Monte for our abandoned children with schools and art and craft centres…*"

some very urgent cases. In 1939, they welcomed the first needy boy in the presbytery of St. Philp Neri (Rome). Of course, Fr. Calabria did not want to be content with this remedy. In addition, the setting of the presbytery was not suitable to contain the lively boys. He thought of a great welcoming home. Nevertheless, the money? The priests of the parish daily walked from St. Philip Neri to St. Peter to save the bus fare. And, the neighbourhoods' needs were enormous. Yet a House was opened.

A penitent of Fr. Stanislao Pellizzer, Adv. Carlo Morelli, became the instrument of Providence. He sold his land he owned along the Roman coast and offered the proceeds to Fr. Stanislao: a million lire. A huge amount for that time (we are in 1940). Fr. Stanislao said: "*I got scared and did not want to accept that huge sum. I told him to go to Verona to listen to Fr. Calabria. "*

They went to Verona. Fr. Calabria was perplexed. He wondered in his heart what the Lord wanted. "*Let us pray together and wait,*" he told the generous benefactor. Before accepting a considerable sum, Fr. Calabria wanted to know if the offer was pleasing to the Lord, and whether the donor was driven by true Gospel charity.

The pause was not long. Fr. Calabria realized that this was the sign he expected of the Lord. Mr. Morelli was impressed by this disinterested attitude. Returning to Rome, they searched for land for sale near Primavalle Settlement. A beautiful highland, about 40,000 square meters, set on the top of a hill. A large green lawn, airy and healthy. The initial project was ambitious. They intended to build a small village for about a thousand boys. But they were content with a more modest thing. The land was bound to an agricultural area and, furthermore, there was a prohibition on building large structures during the war period. To overcome the bureaucratic obstacle, a project for the construction of a country farm was presented. The church was designed to be a stable.

Thus, a small rustic building was built. On 10 January 1943 the house was completed. Humble and simple way Abbot Caronti blessed it. They named "Casa Buoni Fanciulli - St. Pius V". The people of the

settlement, on the other hand, chose to call "Boarding of Father Isaiah". On 24 February 1943 the first Brothers as Assistants came from Verona viz. Bro Gino Salgarollo, Bro Ermenegildo Berto, Mr Sergio Cardinali and Mr. Bruno Mantoan.

On 30 March of the same year, the first group of boys occupied the house. Heroic times, rhythmic by the miraculous signs of divine Providence. In October, the House immediately animated with the presence of a small internship and a large number of externals for primary school. Many of the townships were enrolled in this free school, run by the "priests" because, in addition to the study, a light snack was served as breakfast, (in the popular Roman jargon, the cake is a form of tasty bread) gift from P.O.A. (Pontifical Work Assistance).

Here is a personal remembrance: at noon, the teacher ordered the pupils (including the author of this work) to put their arms around and stay silent. Those who could stand still, immobile, unmistakable for a good time, were rewarded with another half-snack: the half way conquest was well worth the sacrifice of a quarter of an hour of silence and forced stillness.

The last years of war were heroic. On the day of the liberation of Rome by the Allies on 5 June 1944 was saddened by a tragic fact.

The bulk of the German army had evacuated the city without resistance. Only a scattered group of rescuers resisted assassinated in the Villa Focaccia. The allies placed themselves in the valley (now via Battistini) to crush the Germans. The House, located above the hill, was an easy target for the cross-machine guns and cannons.

A grenade struck the little lodge where some boys had fled. And some got injured. The worst was Claudio Amati, who died shortly afterwards. A boy everyone loved for his sweetness and goodness. No one suspected that he had fled to institution because he was a Jew. That day must have been a day of liberation for him and the end of a nightmare, but unfortunately, he met with death.

The allies finally liberated Rome. A triumph of people in the party welcomed the liberators who came into the city of Caesars and Popes,

peaceful, smiling, and munching a gum. But the traces of war remained long, with all inescapable consequences viz. orphans, children abandoned to themselves, hungry mouths, illiterates, homeless boys. The *Casa Buoni Fanciulli* is weapon of all possible energy and, with the personal help of Pius XII, quickly built some sheds to set up craft workshops and a spacious two-storied house with dormitories and many classrooms.

The boys assisted both the residents and semi-residents, reached six hundred in number. After the war throughout Europe, all tried for a gradual, slow, and hard return to normalcy. The momentary and the escapees must leave their place in a stable and steady manner. Some modern laboratories were also built to provide vocational education for the youths viz. the divisions of carpentry, mechanics, tailoring, composition and printing. Finally, a large, four-storey 65 meters long building was built. From the terrace of the house, you could occupy over a vast panorama. The view extended far-off to three hundred and sixty degrees. Towards the east, above the dark green strip of Pineta Sacchetti, and the cupola of St. Peter emerges majestically.

All around the house there are playgrounds and eucalyptus spots. The "boarding", together with the parish of Santa Maria Assunta and San Giuseppe, became not only the moral and spiritual point of reference of the community, but also the cultural, social and sports centre of the populous Primavalle locality.

Patronage (Verona)

After the war, besides removing the rubbles and set up the houses to start the production activities. It was necessary to reconstruct human being, to restore order and law, to encourage the pacification of the humankind, and to educate them for solidarity. A world, as Pius XII said, "*to redo from wild to human, and from human to Christian*." Even in Verona, as in all Italy, people felt this need strongly.

The Opera of the Poor Servants moved committed, with all the other religious institutes in the city, in the education of disoriented

youth, with no brake, and confused. The old method was no longer thinkable to propose. Those anachronistic and so accustomed to free and busy life was almost challenging to handle in a boarding school. In Italy, several experiences of mediation grew as Boys Towns, Boys Villages, and Boys Republics. New Methods to Encourage Responsibility and Democratic Participation in Young Generations.

Fr. Calabria opened the doors of San Zeno in Monte to welcome day scholars. It was an important time to try an educational method other than boarding. The House of San Zeno in Monte was filled with hundreds of day scholars: they received training, teaching, a hot meal.

The environment, however, turned out to be too narrow, for the many requests and the difficulty to access because of the distance from the public transport service.

Finally, with the help of some very selfless officers, he took the opportunity to use a larger building, once a home to the GIL (Italian Youth Shore), partly damaged by bombs. It was in one of the most beautiful areas of Verona, at the entrance of the Porta Nuova. Fr. Calabria wrote to his religious, "*I recommend to you do not duplicate San Zeno in Monte*", encouraging them to try new methods of teaching and training.

He realized that the residential boarding school, except for extreme cases, had had its part. Social costumes and educational methods had been evolving. As far as possible do not take apart the boys from their family and social reality.

With the help of many volunteers in humble form started a post school activity. Then began a centre of job-oriented activity. The disciplinary organization and the educational method in force coincided in part with the experience of the Boys Town, already in force in the United States.

The House was closed transferring of all activities to another location at via Roveggia. It became the largest Professional Centre of the Opera Fr. Calabria, with the inclusion of disabled children, medical centre, gym, swimming pool. Now this centre is shifted to an impressive

modern structure, attending to the needy thousands of people, in Via San Marco.

Technical Training Centre at Milan

With the dawn of industrialization, Milan underwent an accelerated population growth process. A river of young people from all over Italy and, above all, from the south came to Milan station in search of job. The mass of immigrants fled beyond the precincts of the populous centre. Houses multiplied in the suburbs, cottages, shelters. Before the municipal administration could intervene to urbanize these human clusters, the ecclesial community tried to enter offering a national and Christian soul among them. By Cardinal Schuster's initiative, the "New Temples Committee" arose, which provided for the construction of fourteen new churches. The first of the series came to the edge of Parco Lambro, at the borders of Crescenzago.

They dedicated it to St. Joseph of happy death. We are in 1941, full of the after effects of war, with hundreds of thousands of wounded lying in the military hospitals. This first church was to remind Christians of the suffering and agony of the victims of war.

Within this parish, at the borders of Lambro Park, Cimiano, there was an ancient 16th-century church, with its annex building. It was once a home for the Spiritual Exercises held by the Jesuits. When the property went to the municipality of Milan, they transformed it as a Women's Agricultural School. In 1943 when the school ceased to be, many displaced families occupied the building. Around the Church clustered workers and peasants. The area was far from the parish and abandoned to itself. The parish priest Fr. Giuseppe Dal Corno urged the Archbishop of Milan to provide the spiritual and social assistance to those poor people.

Moreover, Cardinal Schuster thought of Fr. Calabria, with whom he had begun a lot of correspondence, friendship and mutual esteem. Torn by the promise of the presence of some Religious of Fr Calabria, the

priest Fr. Dal Corno began the procedures to have a church, an agricultural school along with the adjacent land from the commune.

The Mayor of Milan, council session, proposed to rent the property to the Institute of Fr. Calabria. Unanimously, all the councillors favourably consented. The Card. Schuster exulted and sent to Fr. Calabria that something great had to happen at Milan. A hospital? A Home for Senior Citizens? A training centre for youth at risk?

Fr. Calabria, on 1 February 1950 wrote to Cardinal, "*I do not know so far what the Lord wants us to do in Milan. But will certainly make it obvious through this trivial Custodian and Casante of the Opera; and will be born and grow in hiddenness, according to the pure and genuine spirit that the Divine Master has set from the beginning*"[71].

Fr. Calabria was always attentive to the invitations coming from the church authorities, but always refused to do great and ostensibly. To the request of Carinal after prayer and reflection replied: "*let us do something in Milan but always in tune with our Spirit"*[72].

The parish priest Fr. Dal Corno was inclined to construct a hospital on the model of Negrar, Verona. Fr. Calabria to hear the word hospital "*jumped out and said, wonderful idea. Just so, just so does Jesus*!" But he said, "*Do not talk to anyone now!*"

For a long time, Fr. Calabria was in contact with Fr. Augostino Gemelli to erect a Faculty of Medicine as a Catholic University[73].

By mysterious ways of divine providence, in Milan, realized both the activities, that Fr Calabria dreamed. A large hospital, San Raffaele, by Don Luigi Verzé and a large youth centre in via Pusiano [74].

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71 L. Pedrollo, (on behalf of Fr. Calabria) *al card. Ildefonso Schuster, 28 dicembre 1949,* ms., Archivio Generale PSDP, Verona:

72 Luigi Pedrollo, *Cronaca della Casa, 5 gennaio 1950*, ms., Arch. Gen. PSDP, Verona.

73 Cfr. supra. Cap. XXII, p.346.

74 Il primo direttore fu lo stesso don Luigi Verzé e poi, tra gli altri, anche don Antonio Mazzi, fondatore del Gruppo Exodus per ricupero di tossicodipendenti.

On 11 February 1950 Fr. Gino Grigolato and Bro. Giovanni Corradin took their accommodation in Cimiano. They began, in humility and poverty, with an elementary school, a technical training centre and, of course, pastoral assistance in the church of San Girolamo Emiliani. Fr. Calabria, driven by his usual prudence, confided to the Cardinal: "*Humble and hidden work goes on slowly, but apparent delays and slowness are indications of the workings of God, which, in addition, they are born and grow in the Sufferings: great opera, greater sufferings"* [75].

From 1949 - 1951 were the most suffered days of Fr. Calabria, as we shall see later. In addition, a severe eye condition made him almost blind: "*I am at the extreme of suffering; it seems to me that I cannot, but say fiat, fiat, always fiat! (thy will be done). And I hope these sufferings are useful and fruitful for our humble Opera, as for the Holy Church, to console the lament of Jesus: My Church! "* He was not in a hurry to define the project for the House of Cimiano*: "The richer it will be if stays poorer, the greater it becomes, if it will be smaller, it will have greater divine protection when seeks lesser human protection.*"

Eventually, the Opera consolidated and grew with the interest of Card. Schuster and the civil authorities.

In 1956, some modern hexagonal cabins were set up to accommodate printing training, mechanics, and carpentry labs and thus started the Professional Training Centre. Thousands of young people completed their internships, gaining professional skills and civil and moral training. The Centre paid special attention to handicapped people, using the most modern programs and techniques. In 1965, the construction of the new parish church was completed. The formative and religious complex had all the regular papers to continue its journey in peace. Instead, the Superiors of the Institute decided to move its direction to another Congregation. Because other more needy regions required the greater presence of the Opera.

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75 L. Pedrollo (letter dictated by Fr. Calabria), *al card. Ildefonso Schuster, 2 luglio 1950*, ms., Archivio generale PSDP, Verona.

San Giacomo, of Vago, Verona

On Venice to Milan high way at a small hill, there is a charming villa and a majestic church alongside an agile bell tower.

The hill, just slightly elevated on the plain, is called pompously Monte Grigliano. And the church is nothing more than an apse, a prelude to a majestic, unfinished building dedicated to St. James the Apostle. The well-known Milani family built the archaic style villa with Gothic-Moorish veins.

Once the site was home to various religious institutions viz. Benedictines, regular Canonists, Olivetani fathers and Filippini fathers. In 1810 the iconoclastic military troops of Napoleon defiled the Church and expelled the Filippini fathers. Thereafter "Grigliano" went into private hands. The last owners, the brothers Luigi and Bartolo Battiato, thought to offer the whole estate to Fr. Calabria for transforming it into a local hospital. Fr. Calabria first rejected the offer, later on accepted, seeing a divine sign for the implementation of a project that had long been in his mind. To set up a House for "convention", religious and lay people, in view of a Religious and social revival in Italy, the victims of war and those physically and spiritually down. Fr. Calabria took possession of the villa on the feast of St. James on 25 July 1951. He did not waste time. He made contact with all those personalities' viz. cardinals and bishops, priests and laity who seemed more sensitive to the problem. To preside at meetings, he thought of the bishop of Bergamo. Monsignor Adriano Bernareggi, who liked the idea. He wrote to Fr. Calabria, "*Action cannot be born out of the general context of the Church's bodies (see Italian Catholic Action). Finally, what concrete conclusions could be drawn from these meetings?*" Bernareggi expressed the same perplexity in a letter of 4 September 1951 to Msgr. G. Urbani, Assistant General of the Catholic Action of Italy and the future bishop of Verona. Indeed, he suggested that he is also interested in Msgr. Montini, then deputy to the Vatican's State Secretariat. Fr.

Calabria, by means of mail, explained that his project had no imposing and superficial ambitions. It was enough for him to work in silence and humility to prepare the ground for major events, which would be too early to predict.

For the House of St. Giacomo – he wrote to Msgr. Bernareggi on 8 October 1951 – "*You know and identify well our Spirit. Whatever we do, everything must happen in silence and humble concealment. The noise never does well. Jesus's interests, here is what I'm just pushing for! And this without hesitation, not anticipating, but following the signs of divine Providence. You know the Spirit of the Opera and I consider you as a member of the House. That's why I wanted to offer you the role of guiding these meetings.*" Other distinguished people, such as Cardinal La Fontaine of Venice, Cardinal Ildefonso Schuster of Milan and Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro of Bologna, had shown interest in the project and had suggested that it was "*the Opera of the Poor Servants to keep the threads of any meeting of people. And this is my thought. The situation, Excellency, seems to me increasingly obscure and threatening. One has to hurry. All Christians must mobilize to prepare for a better world.*" Now the House has an enriched Spirituality Centre, the Oasis of San Giacomo. It is a meeting point of thousands of people of all ages, forming a large family, the Family of Marian blooming space[76].

The Boys Town, at Ferrara

The city of Ferrara in 1598 was absorbed into the Pontifical State and remained so practically until the composition of Italy. The communion between the sacred and the profane, the dangerous and ambiguous union between political power and pastoral work left in the

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76 The Founder and animator of Oasis was Bro. *Vittorino Faccia* (1917-1997), who remained in San Giacomo di Vago from 1963 until his death. A simple soul, a man of deep faith and prayer. Beloved of the Eucharist. Thousands of people followed his prayer meetings. Now his tomb is a place of pilgrims who count him as a saint.

population. In the countryside, a profound repulse towards all that recalls slavery and exploitation, a contrast between the preaching of poverty and humility with display of wealth and power. The naturally gentle, generous and sensitive character of the people makes the minds available to those who sincerely and altruistically use to improve the conditions of poverty and abandonment of the population. Certainly, like many other cities in Emilia and Romagna, the city of Ferrara has been with a deafening anti-clericalism and a repudiation towards religion as the legacy of that long-term enslavement. The recent Archbishops, with the simplicity of means and humility of service, increased to scrap those hostile settlements and shine the genuine Christian spirit. Their commitment turned especially towards new generations, towards children and young people. Many activities for the youth began to grow.

Already in 1927, Archbishop Msgr. Francesco Rossi, requested Fr. Calabria to open a House for Youth in Ferrara. Negotiations lasted a few months, but for lack of staff, reluctantly, the project was shelved. "*Excellency ... we are still a few to be able to safely assume a new burden of expansion, we need more knowledgeable people with the evangelical spirit ... we hope in the near future we will have brothers and priests properly formed for the apostolate of humanities*"[77].

In 1930 Archbishop Francesco Rossi, had his successor Msgr. Ruggero Bovelli [78]. His greatest pastoral concern was the Seminary and religious education of youth. His friendship with Pope Pius XII and his

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77 G. Calabria, *all'Arcivescovo mons. Francesco Rossi*, *29 settembre 1927,* ms., Archivio Generale PSDP, Verona.

78 *Ruggero Bovelli* (1875-1954) born in Pantalla diocese of Todi, Perugia. Was ordained Priest in 1897. Had his Masters in in Theology and Canon Law in Rome. He was for 7 years the Parish Priest of Duomo di Todi and professor in the Seminary. He was consecrated Bishop Modigliana at the age of just 40 years (was the youngest bishop of Italy). In 1924 he was transferred to be the bishop of Faenza e Modigliana and in 1930 Archbishop of Ferrara. His main concern was the Seminary and Christian formation for the youth. Among his many activities, the Boys town of Ferrara was his explicit wish.

concerns to the Pontifical University favoured the financial support to start a work for youth.

After several attempts at purchasing buildings in the city, he desired to renovate the spacious Summer Villa of the Seminary, in Aguscello. We are in 1948, in the centenary of the proclamation of the patron saint of the city and of the Archdiocese. The renovation work started immediately, but the animators needed this work in favour of youth. Archbishop Bovelli again thought of Fr. Calabria. He went to Verona. He requested Fr. Calabria, who promised to make every effort to satisfy him. The General Council of the Poor Servants was undecided, but then, even in the direct interest of Pope Pius XII, on 10 August 1950 Fr. Calabria was morally obliged to consent to the wishes of the Archbishop. Fr. Calabria wrote to Bishop Bovelli, "*The House of Ferrara will be like a burning lamp that will brighten so many souls. And it will offer to the Ferrara society good workers who will one day form Christian families"* [79].

Again, "*the work of Ferrara is not just like any activity, but special. ... An Opera born of God, in such difficult times, is aimed to call men to the thought of a God who is Father. And his loving providence reaches all, if we first seek the holy Kingdom of God. ... It seems to me that the Lord would be glorified if you would know this program for His people in Ferrara. Because it would serve to warn and inform many who are unfortunately indulged in earthly things and do not put their trust except in riches…"* [80].

The House of Ferrara officially began to function from August 1951, with a petite activity for youth. But an imminent natural disaster struck the plans and forced the diocese of Ferrara and the Poor Servants to face an unexpected emergency caused by the flood of the River Po in November 1951. The River waters submerged much of the Padania

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79 G. Calabria, *a mons. Ruggero Bovelli,* 27 giugno 1951, ms., Archivio Generale PSDP, Verona.

80 G. Calabria, *a mons. Ruggero Bovelli,* 1 settembre 1951 ms., Archivio Generale PSDP, Verona.

plain. Towns and villages, farms and fields were flooded and made uninhabitable and unproductive. A tidal wave of poor victims of floods fled in search of shelter. Every building available in the city was used for this purpose. The new House of Fr. Calabria, recently opened, was filled with hundreds of young people. The Archbishop also entrusted the Poor Servants with the direction of the Santa Monica, an Assistance Centre at Ferrara where many children were sheltered who were waiting for the reflux of the waters and their reintegration into the family.

The work of the Religious Poor Servants engaged in this apostolate of solidarity was heroic and left a grateful and admired memory in all the Catholics and non-Catholics of every political colour because charity, generosity and disinterested actions overcome every barrier and defeated every hostility. After the days of emergency, started the normal vocational training activities. The educational method resembled the style of the Boys Town. This stimulated the responsibility and got involved in the life of the community. The place was called, through the special desire of Msgr. Bovelli, *Boy Town*; Ferrara's Pride, Archbishop's favoured, life gymnasium for thousands of boys.

Grottaferrata , Rome

The priests who worked among the poor peripheral parishes of Rome suffered seeing hundreds of abandoned children and little girls abandoned in the streets during the summer. They did their best to keep them busy in the summer holidays through tournaments in dusty fields, film show, after-school classes, etc. They however wished a better place for a few months to stay in fresh and healthy places! Finally found the villa of Grottaferrata, located on the Castelli Romani, in the middle of the greenery and famous vineyards.

The villa was donated by a benevolent generous lady for the boys of the Gordian township parish. Besides they built a large structure with an adjoining beautiful church. In 1953, the House became a vocational institute for young people from southern Italy. Many "*priests for the*

Church" came out of this vocation centre, according to the apostolic spirit of the Opera Calabria. When the social needs changed, this house was closed in 1975 and the Church was given to the diocese.

PART THREE

Chapter Fifteen

THE MAN WHO KNEW PAIN

Calabrian Apostolate for the Sick

The experience in the military hospital had revealed in Fr. Calabria a congenial predisposition for the care for the sick. *"It was the most beautiful time of my life!"* He repeated often when he spoke of his two years of service in the military hospital. And certainly not for showing off the uniform nor for liking for drills, in fact were boring, inconclusive, and humiliating, but for the opportunity to devote his time to helping the sick, whom he called *"the living images of suffering Jesus".*

It seems that, at this time, he has expressed his desire to join the Order of the Ministers of Sick i.e. the Camillian religious.

We find this testimony in an article appeared in the Bulletin of the Camillians: Father Valente writes, *"I know that the holy priest Fr. Calabria lived our spirit of caring for the sick ... He was inclined to join our Order due to his vocation to religious life. In fact, I have heard that Calabria wanted and asked to become a Camillian. It was Father Sommavilla, who advised him to wait because he had to attend to his old widowed mother who lives now alone. Meanwhile, another vocation matured in him. However, Fr. Calabria always retained an attachment and a deferred esteem for the Camillians. Of this, I testify to all the meetings I had with this holy priest.*"[81]

Fr. Calabria always maintained good relations with the Camillian Religious of San Giuliano in Verona. He went to hear confessions of the younger religious aspirants and often stopped for lunch, conversed

[81] A. Lombardi m.i . *Domesticum*, Bolletino Ministri degli Infermi, n. 1 del 1965.

lovingly and shared intents and concerns, feeling completely at ease. We can conclude that in their midst he felt at home. Particularly he felt spiritually united to Father Berri, who often offered to replace him during his moments of agony and torment. Fr. Calabria took advantage of it to take refuge in the convent of Santa Teresa of the Discalced at his spiritual father. He kept informed of the student, of the vocations and even of the studies that took place in Camillian religious community. Sometimes Camillian students went to confess to him directly in the house of San Zeno in Monte. They were almost family members, and then were accompanied to visit the "Good Children" workshop. To some boys, Fr Calabria asked, *"Do you want to make Camillian like these clerics?"* If the boy answered no, Fr. Calabria corrected him lovingly: "*We do not say no, but if God calls me, I am ready. It's a good mission to be a Camillian; They serve Jesus in the sick, think about it. "*And to another he said, *"Do not you know that we are going to heaven by crossing the Adige river swimming, while the Camillians' would walk across it through the bridge?"* Words that manifest a knowledge of the Camillian spirit and echo the same style as San Camillo de'Lellis.

To the nurse sisters at Negrar Hospital, Fr. Calabria said, *"Whoever goes to assist at the hospital does not need to go to church; At the hospital, in the bed of the sick, you find the suffering Jesus."*

To the doctors and nurses of Negrar he said, "*I do not doubt that after the divine mission of the priest, medical doctor is the noblest profession that the Creator can entrust to a human being on earth. The doctor is a collaborator of God, author and protector of life ... is called by God to cure illnesses, or at least soothe pain, make one less susceptible to suffering, and to provide serene death ... Save a life, prolong one's lifespan! ... A person, who lives, is nothing but a few minutes more, can do good. Moreover, with goodness, one glorifies God more than all the senseless creatures over the centuries. We consider the merit of a doctor when he can prolong and multiply human lives.* "*Come blessed, for I was sick and you came to visit me," said Jesus.*

These words are just for you, and they will be the worthy reward of your mortal career. Fr. John Calabria".[82]

He paid precise attention to the mental patients, who suffer more due to the abandonment and seclusion. For such he had given special care and sensitivity. In the Historical Archive of the Congregation, many letters are available; some very long ones, to those sick people. We find expressions of special love, compassion, and fondness. Always inspired words by faith and acceptance that their reality is an unfathomable mystery. Only in God, we can one day understand and value, its proper place in the mystery of Redemption, and the usefulness of their precious suffering.

He used to visit them in nursing homes despite his precarious health. He always approached them with delicacy and discretion, not to humiliate the sick themselves.

My beloved sick people

"*Since my youth, the sick had always been the focus of my eyes and the beautiful providential work of the Apostle of Sick has always occupied a place of privilege in my heart.* "Fr. Calabria always cultivated this special vocation for the apostolate among the infirm.

Mr. Antonio Fabbro, who knew him as a child, says, "*Since childhood, Calabria proved this special inclination for the sick. Especially for the rescue of their souls. When he could not visit them, he prayed and requested prayers so that they may receive the holy sacraments.*"[83]

As a young high school student, he continued this apostolate, especially when the boys of the oratory were sick. Some professors scolded this zeal and charity to the sick as spoiling his study.

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82 G. Calabria, *Messaggio ai medici*, on the occasion of world day of doctors held in Verona on July 1949, ms. Archivio Generale PSDP, Verona.

83 Sacra Congregatio pro causis Sanctorum, Veronen, ….. positio super virtutibus, roma 1984, co.cit., p.125.

As a seminarian, he founded the "*Pious Union for the Assistance to Poor Sick*".

Becoming a priest, his apostolate for the sick did not know the limits. Each day he devoted hours to visit the sick, both in families and in the hospital.

When he had to leave the parish ministry to direct the Opera of the "Good Children", visits outside San Zeno in Monte were almost exclusively to bring comfort to the sufferers.

On a day in 1925, he was able to read a passage on the *L'Oservatore Romano* that caught his attention. Recently in Holand, in the parish priest of Bloemendaal, diocese of Haarlemtalk of an International Centre for the Apostolate of Sick just began. It seemed to him a nice and useful initiative. He contacted the Dutch Centre and received the necessary ecclesiastical authorizations to propagate it in Italy. Thus, on May 24, 1930, at the Sanctuary of *Madonna della Campagna*, established the Italian Section of the *Apostolato Infermi*. The Catholic newspaper, *L'Avvenire d'Italia*, took note of it and wrote an article: *"Una nuova iniziativa: L'apostolato dei malati i.e. a new initiative: Apostolate for the sick."* And it explained the mode and purpose of the initiative "*No money or wealth is needed, but only three things worth more than gold of the world* viz.

1) to accept from the hand of God the sufferings and illness;

2) to endure them with a Christian attitude in union with the pain our Lord Jesus Christ suffered on the cross.

3) Offer them to God for the coming of his Kingdom ...

This is truly a Christian work, because the sick person feels he/she is not useless, understands that one can do more, though motionless in a bed, than others in their active and febrile life, and that one's pains and suffering in union with Jesus Christ on the Cross, are the ones that saved the world. You do not have merit without pain. It is the law endorsed on Calvary ... So, here is the Apostolate of the sick, which becomes the first among all the apostolates."

The developments of this association were rapid. In 1938 there were about ten thousand members. Then the war broke out. Numerous difficulties for printing began, and finally the press was bombarded. The matrices and registers with the addresses of the members went astray. After the World War they had to restart anew the Association but it grew fast.

This humble and precious activity is still active. The Italian Headquarter of it is in Via San Zeno in Monte 23, Verona.

"The mission of Jesus must be our mission:" Evangelizzare pauperibus i.e. convey good news to the poor. Abandoned persons, poor, old, sick, these are our gems, and the gems of the Opera. Souls, souls, dear ones! Everything else is nothing, " repeated Fr. Calabria.

Jesus' mission was to heal the disorders of both soul and body:

"Jesus stopped in a level place. There was a great crowd of his disciples and a multitude of people ... who had come to hear him and be healed of their illnesses ... The whole crowd was trying to touch him, because there came out from him a power that healed everyone"[84].

And when he sent his disciples to proclaim in the villages of Galilee, to prepare the way for the proclamation of the kingdom, he recommended them viz. "heal the sick and tell them, the kingdom of God is at hand"[85]

Jesus' command was to the Apostles, and today to all Christians. Some saints, however, felt principally to respond. Among these, we can include Fr. Calabria. He wanted to add into the Constitutions of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence, this goal, *"The Congregation ... houses and care for old, sick, poor and needy, providing them through more loving and delicate bodily and material assistance…. The Poor Servant sees in them "Jesus"; Therefore, his assistance and his giving must be filled with human and evangelical love"*[86].

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84 Lc 6,17-19.

85 Lc 10,8-9.

86 *Costituzioni e Direttorio della Congregazione dei Poveri Servi della Divina Provvidenza (1988),* Verona 1992, p. 5. (Constitution and directory of PSDP)

"*The Opera must prefer old and sick, poor and needy,*" insisted Fr. Calabria. Naturally, the sick person, regardless of his wealth, is always in need and it would be unfair to discriminate between people. But the "poor patient" is in a state of greater abandonment and is the clearest picture of *"suffering Jesus.*"

Jesus says, "*What you did to one of these my" poorest comrades " you did it to me."*

Saints are driven to action for the needy not with a philanthropic spirit, but by Christian love and faith. So, they treat the sick with attractive charity, help them with professionally trained staff, welcome them to comfortable environments and respect them in their personal dignity.

Interesting to note the wish expressed by Fr. Calabria, in his time seemed revolutionary and scandalous. In the project of the construction of the Great Geriatric section of Negrar, he wanted the rooms for the elderly to look like mini-apartments, so that the elderly couples could live together. No separation. "*Indeed at the time of old age,"* he said*, "it is a necessity to lend their mutual service promised and sworn on the day of marriage.*" Delicacies of saints are viz. to be austere with oneself and benevolent with others.

But all these material and psychological attentions are not enough. Those who act by faith are also worried about moral and spiritual assistance. Because the suffering person can understand and value the immense supernatural riches enclosed in the Christian suffering accepted and endured. Fr. Calabria wrote: "*Never in this time of great suffering I have meditated on the value of sorrow, when it is accepted from the hands of the heavenly Father with serene confidence. In that inactive material to which the disease is affected, how profitable work can be done in the Lord's vineyard, for the growth of the holy Kingdom of God in souls!*

With patience, with resignation, with prayer, the sick exercises an operative influence, a working apostolate for the benefit of the Church and of the soul. The Lord comes and stands near him, invisibly, to that

priest, missionary, Master, and community so that one's sufferings will make the Opera blessed and fruitful[87].

Fr. Calabria knew well sufferings, how it touched the intimate cords of human heart because he too had tasted the bitterness of physical and moral pain since early stages. Physical and moral suffering had deeply marked all the stages of his life. These sufferings intensified his particular sensitivity of mind, which immediately put him in vibration, at any misfortune and calamity that struck his neighbour such as: wars, political struggles, religious or racial persecution, ecological disasters, and so on.

He repeated often: "*I am a sensitive plant*," that is, a soul much sensitive, made to suffer. His own and other sufferings were loaded over his shoulders until he got crushed beneath their weight.

A letter written to Fr. Luigi Pedrollo, on 30 December 1935 in a moment of physical suffering and, above all, moral, because of the serious divisions in the Congregation, revealed the bitterness of his heart. He wrote, "*My dear Fr. Luigi ... Dear and beloved Fr. Luigi. I suffer, I suffer, as I have suffered. Spiritual and intimate trials deprive me of faith. "*

Someone defined Fr. Calabria "*the Veteran in pain*". He experienced and went through with it personally, every day, he could find the right words to console and touch the soul of the sufferer.

Fr. Calabria was not a masochist, nor an ascetic seeking to undertake pain or lover of body macerations: "*health is a gift of God and we must safeguard it.*" He did not want his religious to make great penances or mortifications that are harmful to health: "*Community life, happily lived, and daily work and commitment joyfully done are sufficient and effective mortification against inclinations to evil."*

Personally, he did not refuse to consult with the doctor and to follow with simplicity the prescribed direction and care, even the most repugnant and humiliating ones.

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87 *Lettere del padre ai Religiosi,* a cura della Congregazione dei Poveri Servi della Divina Provvidenza, Ferrara 1956, p. 77.

In the last letter to his religious, written two months before his death, he said, "*Pray, pray so much for this your old Father, so close to the great call, that he may understand the great gift of suffering and treasure it first for my poor soul and then for this humble and great Opera inspired by the Lord*" [88].

"Pray for me to understand the gift of suffering"

The most common phrases that can be found in the letters and diary of Fr. Calabria are these:

-Pray for me to understand the gift of suffering.

- Jesus, let me know the fruitfulness of suffering.

- Suffering is the coin of God.

Pain is always a great mystery and, in many verses, a scandal for men, a stumbling stone in the search for God. Faced with the suffering of the innocent, the great natural disasters, the tragedies created by human cruelty, it is difficult to understand the "silence" of God, his imperturbable presence, his apparent helplessness.

How many are those who asked me in situations of trials, "*Why God tolerates? Why He does not intervene? Where is God in the tragedies, in massacres, in brutality?*" Maintaining trust in God the good and provident Father, in these moments, remaining firm in the faith is really challenging.

In the Old Testament, among the Wisdom Books we find a literary masterpiece: the innocent Job, crushed by pain, abandoned by all, judged as guilty, and haunted by doubts. The problem of the innocent suffering is treated as narration and dialogue. For the person of the Bible, sufferings of the guilty or the wicked, was understandable or at least acceptable. But, why should the innocent person suffer? Job rebelled. Fought to find the hidden God, the good and just God, even in his atrocious sufferings. And finds some peace considering his limited

88 *Ibid*. p.425.

knowledge and the infinite wisdom of God. His mind stops at the limit of infinity. And, it was a satisfactory answer to his time.

Only the revelation of Jesus Christ will bring some light. Suffering acquires a redemptive value and it is a seed wrapped, in it sprouts resurrection and life.

"*The sufferings of the present time are not comparable to the glory that must be revealed,"* says Saint Paul *in Rm 8:18.* Again*, "I complete in my troubled flesh what is lacking in the trials of Christ, for His body which is the Church*" (Col. 1:24).

Fr. Calabria, at the end of his life, came to this understanding.

We find no proper and complete human explanation in the cross and the suffering of the individual or of humanity. It remains a mystery and a scandal without Christ Jesus. He, became man, accepted *"offered himself to the end, until the last drop of His blood,"* to do the will of the Father. He did not come down from the cross, nor deny the bitter chalice, even though he could dodge it, to get closer to people who suffer.

Fr. Calabria entered the same wave length of Christ: a long Calvary, long agony, culminating with the Spiritual Night. Christ also felt all the anguish of desertion, silence, powerlessness: *"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mt 27:46). "There was darkness over the whole land…*" (Mk 15.33).

Fr. Calabria also suffered mysteriously, especially in his last years. We shall be coming back to this topic.

He felt abandoned by God, damned forever, cut off, separated from the light of faith and hope from an enduring wall, but then, tenaciously and desperately, cried, *"Jesus, Jesus, be my Jesus,* Saviour!".

I have made a small collection of the expressions of Fr Calabria on sorrow and suffering. If a healthy and young man uses these expressions, we would smile with empathy. But when a man who knew what pain means, he speaks out what he had tasted until the last drop. Nevertheless, he had discovered the precious value of suffering for salvation and for redemption.

- Suffering is a mystery of faith and love.

- Blessed are those who have the spirit of faith, because they can sanctify the trials of life.

- Suffering and illness are not punishments inflicted by cruel fate, but a means of apostolic work for the benefit of the Church and souls.

- The souls and the works of God cost.

- Oh, the pain! Only our holy religion can answer the cause of suffering. Only this can brighten and place us our pains and our sorrows in the true light of the suffering of Jesus the Redeemer.

How lucky we are to have the spirit of faith, to be able to sanctify the trials of all our lives. We will understand in heaven how precious the sufferings are, when accepted and lived in union with the Crucified Jesus and the Sorrowful Mother.

- What comfort and peace, even in the trials, when we know that everything is desired and permitted by our Heavenly Father, and that we all can reason, even in our trials, to be good in spirit, because the good Father loves, favours, supports, and prepares us for the prize in His eternal bliss.

- The sacrifice, when blessed by the Lord, is united with prayer and charity. It is the most precious energy that a Christian can offer to God and the Church. No matter whether we are poor and weak persons the Lord does not act after the manner of humans. People look for the use of powerful means, but God uses often what the world despises and rejects.

- Suffering, if accepted with the spirit of faith, is a precious coin with which we can obtain grace for others and ourselves.

A Christian who lives his suffering with serenity, accepting it willingly as Providence, is a lightning rod that keeps scourges away from humanity.

It is a shower of grace for all, a treasure of heavenly riches, and an angel who sings the grandeur of Divine Mercy.

Oh, let us also, revivified by faith, understand not only in theory, but also in practice the value and merit of suffering! If we could understand how boundless champions are all those who suffer with Christ!

- Suffering makes us close to Jesus Crucified.

-Trials and suffering, united to the sufferings of Jesus, enrich our souls and make alive God's actions.

- The Cross is the seal of God's works.

- The souls and actions of God cost so much and often they drip blood.

- In trials, sufferings, interior and exterior discomforts, always say, "It is the Lord!" We have to synchronise the present life with the future one, and then, it will be like a happy eve of a great celebration.

In difficult times, various eventualities of life, and unavoidable crosses and sufferings, let us look at Jesus crucified and say, what is good for you Jesus is good for me too.

We must attest with generosity in trials. This attitude honours the Lord very much and compels him to come to our support.

That Jesus may always fulfil in us his divine will, when we live as He wants, available to everything, even to be crumpled by the force of his love that is the cross and suffering while doing His will.

- Let us trust the Lord, I repeat: believe in the Lord, with firm, steadfast, simple faith. I think of a lovely episode I read years ago. A ship was caught in a storm, all the passengers were in anxiety and trepidation for the imminent danger of wrecking. Yet amongst all the terrified, there was a child in a corner of the ship playing with no fear. "What? How can you play? Are you not scared?". Look, my daddy is the captain! Why should I fear? "

Dear and beloved brothers, our heavenly Father is at the helm of the ship. What are you afraid of? Storms and difficulties will come. Fear not! The helmsman will not fail and we will be safe at the harbour of eternal life.

Chapter Sixteen

THE ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY

Fr. Calabria obeyed the Church authorities without fiction and false reverence. He interpreted their orders as God's will. The only suffering which at times tormented him was the dilemma between the inspirations, "Lights" which he felt were coming from God, and a contrary decision coming from authorities, but this too he interpreted as expressions of God's will.

In several cases such as the definition of the legal parity between priests and brothers, the ways in which the apostolic priests were formed and the choice of the apostolate for the Sisters towards the unwed mothers or differently abled people, new ways of ecumenism etc., he found opposition of the Church authorities. In such situations, he would not pant, opposing pressures, or boasting of the Charism, on the contrary he would suffer in his pain, relied on prayer and abandoned himself into God's hands.

When he had to mediate defending truth, he did so with freedom, fairness and compassion. But he always ended up with a conclusion accepting his transgression, as if the contraries were providential remarks of God for greater sanctity of life and for total abandonment into the hands of Divine Providence.

The Roman Curia

Fr. Calabria had a great reverence for the Bishop of Rome, even though he had very few contacts with him. Only one audience he had with Pope Pius XI.

He always payed attention to Pope's words. He collected every invitation and made them known through various publications and preaching.

Whenever a sad news reported about the health of the pontiffs or was known to offend their noble person, he suffered greatly.

He prayed for the Supreme Pontiffs. In the Pope, he saw the Vicar of Christ and in the Church the mystical Body of Christ, the celestial and terrestrial reality together. He certainly did not appreciate the folly of the Roman Curia, nor did he accept the bourgeoisie of certain curia. In fact, he hoped for a radical reform and a net rejection of regal display.

But, when the decisions of the Roman Congregations came to him, he obeyed without recriminations, even though some were not always in tune with his conscience.

For example, in the story of Este house, he accepted the verdict of the Congregation of the Council that declared him loser, but vigorously reaffirmed the truth: "God is true and knows how to deal with the Opera... I have always acted rightly…. Jesus will mediate. "

Even in the sad period of the Apostolic Visit, he bowed his head and accepted the Visitor, Abbot Emanuele Caronti, as the angel of the Lord, sent by the Congregation of the Religious. He accepted and went back to the will of God: "Lord, your holy and divine will in this Opera, may cost any sacrifice."

"My Bishop"

Fr. Calabria loved all the bishops of the diocese of Verona. He remembers their patron's day and the anniversaries of their episcopal consecration. Often in the register of the Holy Mass, we find the intention to pray for the Bishop. He never allowed public criticisms or complaints on their actions.

To him, *sentire cum Ecclesia* (to stay united to the Church) translated concretely with the feeling of cum Episcopo (to be united with the bishop).

He had great difficulty in meeting with Cardinal Bacilieri*: "To tell the truth I feel a great repulsion to present myself to His Eminence, because I do not feel that confidence which a son has to have towards his father; Anyway I will strive and hope that good Jesus will help me ..."*[89].

The reason was clear: Cardinal did not openly support Calabria. He feared that his too good a heart would bring Calabria to great initiatives which would envelop him in tedious business or inexorable debt. The thought that his bishop did not approve of his Opera "*tasted Him. On the other hand, I hear the voice of Jesus telling me to go ahead, that's fine*"[90].

Likewise, when he was training apostolic priests at Home, he did not make great controversy with the Bishop, who did not allow day scholars in the seminary. He, though it was surely the will of God and preferred to wait for the clerics to be ordained, rather than watering down that charism which he knew is from God. *"His Eminence so far does not see this. This Opera entrusted to this poor priest sees it well, but with the human eye it is impossible, and instead must always look with the eye of faith"*[91].

The same thing happened when he took back a 15-year-old girl away from the street because the Sisters (the Future Poor Servants) had welcomed her from the street. The Bishop, ill informed, had reproved him, *"What are you doing with the Sisters?*

I replied, "What the Divine Providence wants. Right now, they work for the House, and now they have taken from the street a girl, rejected by everyone.

His Eminence told me: No, no, it's best to send her home.

I pointed out that there was a great need to save these souls.

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89 *G. Calabria,* Lettera a padre Natale*, 5 luglio 1911, Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.*

90 Id., *Lettera a padre Natale,* 10 gennaio 1912, Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

91 Id., *Laus Deo*, 23 dicembre 1911, [Diario 1911-1916], ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

But he again repeated me, "No!

And, I immediately obeyed, being persuaded that obedience brings relief, and that we are all instruments in the hands of Divine Providence. I believe His Eminence is a means, and from an undesirable one will arrive an affirmative, so that many such poor souls could be saved" [92].

So even when the Cardinal forbade some Sisters of Mercy to live in the House in San Giovanni in Valle to care for the wardrobe and infirmary services of the "Good Children", Fr. Calabria accepted. But he immediately asked permission to receive some pious women who intended to consecrate their life to the mission of the Opera. And the Cardinal gave him approval.

Bishop Bacilieri fired and controlled the initiatives of this humble priest. But, did not want to dowse his enthusiasm, despite the rumours and pressures of some Monsignors and Seminary Professors. Indeed, he privately told them, "*You do not have to go to Lourdes to see miracles, just look at San Zeno in Monte. It's a continuous miracle!* "

In his last Will, the bishop Bacilieri did not forget to leave something to "Casa Buoni Fanciulli". It was a sign of his benevolence and love for the Opera that he saw born with trepidation, but ended up tolerant and accepting as God's work.

After the death of Cardinal Bacilieri, difficulties with the new bishop, Msgr. Girolamo Cardinale, did not cease, but Fr. Calabria overcame with friendship and fraternal help.

With the new bishop, Fr. Calabria built up an intimate friendship. He met often his "Bishop". The road leading from San Zeno in Monte to the Bishop's house is short. Courtesy visits were many. However, in the archive we find 87 letters written by the bishop to Fr. Calabria and 29 letters from Fr. Calabria to the bishop[93]. Familiar letters, with no

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92 *Ibid.,* 5 maggio 1915

93 G. Cardinale, *Lettere a Fr. Calabria*, Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona; raccolta di 87 lettere del vescovo di Verona to Fr. Calabria; G. Calabria, *Lettere to Msgr. G. Cardinale*, Archivio Generale P.S.D.P.., Verona; raccolta di 29 lettere di Fr. Calabria al vescovo di Verona.

bureaucratic artefact, showing a high degree of intimacy. Mostly they are letters that deal with spiritual themes, are requests of prayer, or thanks giving. On every Saturday, the bishop celebrated the Holy Mass for his "Fr. Calabria" and Fr. John did likewise for his "Bishop."

Msgr. Cardinale communicated to his friend his joys and sorrows, concerns and satisfactions in his family life, knowing well to distinguish news concerning the pastor's office from what he personally impressed upon. But in the private conversations he also confided scathing and delicate problems, to be resolved in charity. Fr. Calabria on his part, also communicated to his Bishop the minimal things and spiritual initiatives that took place in the House. He presented the innovations of the Opera, asking for advice and blessing. He was willing to offer the Bishop the House of Maguzzano for organizing a novitiate for the diocesan clerics. He had to serve the house for a period of intense spirituality before priestly ordination. Not a refresher course or special studies, but a time of silence and prayer.

When talking about the need to set up this kind of novitiate for diocesan priests, the two friends realized, by experience and knowledge of souls, that simple preparation in theological studies did not leave enough time for deep spiritual formation and adequate knowledge and personality.

As soon as he arrived in the diocese, Msgr. G. Cardinale went to meet Fr. Calabria. He had heard of him as a saint. He just wanted to get in touch with him. He agreed to admit the Clerics of Fr. Calabria as day scholars in the Seminary.

And Fr. Calabria out of great joy did not know how to acknowledge. He allowed one of his religious to serve as secretary and offered him another brother as a personal driver for the Bishop.

They gladly exchanged small gifts, a sign of affection and gracefulness.

But the most beautiful gift Fr. Calabria received from his bishop was the diocesan approval of the Religious Congregation by the name of Poor Servants of Divine Providence.

And fraternal love and friendship did not flicker even when they came to a standstill due to the problem of legal equality between Religious Priests and Religious Brothers. The bishop did not have the authority to derogate from a law of the rules of the Code of Canon Law. On the other hand, he did not feel that he should approve a lay or mixed Congregation because of his certain precaution against this form of religious life. Fr. John suffered a lot, but he obeyed and waited with confidence that Providence would complete divine plan.

When in 1949 the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence obtained the "*Decretumlaudis*" from the Sacred Congregation of Religious, which had welcomed and codified the wishes of his dearest friend Fr. Calabria, he himself wanted to go to St. Zeno in Monte to read it Solemnly and publicly to manifest all his joy.

Fr. Calabria called Msgr. Cardinale *"the Bishop of Providence".*

He wrote on 24 June 193, *"He was and is the Bishop of Divine Providence for this great Opera of the Lord, of which I am nothing but a miserable Casante, and I will never be able to thank you adequately."*

And in another letter: "To you ... who understood the Spirit and program of this Opera, may God give all the necessary lights to give us precise orientation, the wise rule that is worth bringing to attain its definite purpose. We are in your hands Most Rev. Bishop, as children who hear from the father's lips a clear and definite expression of God's holy will in our regard. "

The trust and the esteem of that the Bishop had for Fr. Calabria he has also manifested it by entrusting the Poor Servants, the Sanctuary of Madonna di Campagna and the parish of the Villaggio Dall'Oca Bianca, today known as Borgo Nuovo.

In the mind set of Fr. Calabria the Opera had no parish ministry, even though he had almost been obliged to accept some parishes in Rome and one in Abruzzo.

He accepted the two parishes of Verona on a condition viz. to have the "*privilege of gratuity:* totally free service in the ministry". For him this free service in the sacramental actions of the priest, religious or

diocesan, was a problem of evangelical consistency. A recurring theme which he later on he shared with Cardinal Schuster and Father Lombardi. The Cardinal of Milan declared himself fully in agreement with Calabria, but he felt that the time for the complete abolition of the so-called charges had not yet matured.

The Bishop of Verona granted him the faculty of free priestly ministry, with some prudent limit, in order not to create unpleasant comparisons between the faithful of the various parishes. For Fr. Calabria the priestly service done freely was a testimony of faith and trust in Divine Providence.

Msgr. Girolamo Cardinale often went to Fr. Calabria to entrust to him some clerics or priests in crisis. And Fr. Calabria generously opened his houses for their long stay.

Knowing the well-balanced intuitions of Fr Calabria, his intuition, doctrinal security, and unquestioned fidelity to the Hierarchy, the bishop asked if he would accept the task of screening some cases of doubtful possessions of evil. "*I am constantly pressed for and allow the exorcisms to ... I have ended up responding to this: for my own sake I judge the most natural phenomena. But, seeing your insistence, I will put the thing on a priest who has the spirit of the Lord, and if he will believe good let him do the exorcisms. I will grant the necessary permission. This priest in whom I place all my confidence is you. Examine the following matter and if the Lord gives you light, do the exorcisms, I grant you the permission, excuse me for doing this.* Bishop Girolomo.[94].

On the evening of 3 December 1954 Fr. Calabria entered into agony. They informed the Bishop. He got up quickly from the dinner table and despite his ill health, went to San Zeno in Monte. Remember Msgr. Falzoni, his secretary: *"I remember the phone call at 19.33 of December 1954. His Excellency was about to begin his dinner. As soon as I mentioned that Fr. Calabria was ill, he said, "We must go immediately."*

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94 G. Cardinale, *letter to Fr. J . Calabria, 10 August 1943*, ms., Archivio generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

It was very cold and he was suffering very much from stomach ulcer. As soon as the car was ready, he went to San Zeno in Monte. He paused for a long time to pray in the bedroom silently. The room and office were packed with young people and priests who were crying softly. The Bishop too was visibly moved. He no longer wanted to get away from his friend Fr. John. On the day of the solemn funeral, he desired to preside over the funeral function, leaving to his coadjutor, Msgr. Andrea Pangrazio the task of recalling the person and the life of dear friend Fr. John Calabria.

Nineteen days later, on 26 December 1954 he too died. And he re-joined to embrace his dear friend in the glory and love of God the Father[95]*.*

The Apostolic Visitor: Don Emanuele Caronti

In the troubled situation of the approval of the Constitutions and of the Apostolic Visit, the great faith and respect of Fr. Calabria in the authority of the Sacred Congregation of Religious life is remarkable. Rev. Emanuele Caronti (1882-1966), a Benedictine abbot, received the appointment as a visitor on 26 February 1935. The news came to Calabria on 2 March 1935. At the announcement of the Apostolic Visit, he confided in his diary: "*The news made me say, Lord, "your holy and divine will be done "in this Opera, come whatever be the cost."*

Abbot Caronti arrived in Verona on March 2, at 20.30. Fr. Calabria noted in his diary: "*At this time, at 20.30, comes the Apostolic Visitor, Abbot Caronti, true man of God, viewing him, his talk, his trait, his whole person; Comes in the name of the Lord.* "

And again, Calabria noted in his diary on 16 June 1935,"*The Apostolic Visit is precisely a gift of God*".

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95 *Sacra Congregatio pro causis Sanctorum, Veronen.* Op. cit. pp 75-85.

And the following year on 4 April 1936, "*Oh, how should we thank the Lord who gave us in the Rev. Apostolic Visitor the Abbot Caronti, the Angel of Resurrection" [96]*.

Fr. Calabria put himself at the disposal of the Visitor.

When he received the Visitor's letters, he kissed and read them at the foot of his crucifix. He considered it to be an expression of God's holy will.

For his part, Abbot Caronti immediately became aware of the validity of the charism of the founder.

"Today, more than ever, he wrote, he feels the need for the apostolate of holiness and charity: The Opera has this feature and is therefore the work that corresponds to the Church's current needs*" [97]*.

By intervening to dissolve the misunderstandings produced within the institute, he defended the founder's genuine spirit. He invited those who did not share the ideal of Fr. Calabria to retreat to elsewhere or to review their ideas. On the other hand, Fr. Calabria likewise thought of it when he wrote: *"For my part, there are some who would do better to go elsewhere, to other field.*[98]

And Calabria, with gratitude, wrote to Father Caronti: "I always understand that the sacred Apostolic Visit, in the plan of God, was only the means to call on you to infuse the Genuine Spirit in this great Opera that will be light and good for so many souls. And you, Rev. dear Father, remember that it seems to me that it is divine will that we must no longer leave, but together we breathe and breathe the Lord's air" [99].

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96 G. Calabria, *Mio Diario,* 4 aprile 1936 [Diario 1935-1936], ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

97 E. Caronti, *Lettera a Fr. Calabria,* 2 giugno 1942, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P. Verona.

98 G. Calabria*, Promemoria,* 8 novembre 1934, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

99 G. Calabria*, Lettera all'abate Caronti,* 11 luglio 1936*,* ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

The task of the Apostolic Visitor could be said to have been concluded in no time. But in August 1937, Abbot wrote from Rome about the possibility of revising the Constitutions, abandoning those already approved in 1932. By now, more than Apostolic Visitor, he became a friend and adviser. This seemed more apparent as Fr. Calabria was advancing more and more on the path of his Calvary, both physical and moral.

Finally, the Apostolic Visit was closed in 1947. Legal ties ended, but those of friendship continued. Fr. Calabria insisted that the Abbot should continue to be close to him with his help and assistance: "*You cannot, you must not abandon this poor old priest whom the Lord has joined in all his ways, giving the grace of understanding the pure and genuine spirit of this small and great Opera of the Poor Servants*."

The last note written by Fr. Calabria, a few days before his death in November 1954, said:

"With my suffering, I remember. Bless me."

Caronti admired in Fr. Calabria the man of God, a holy priest.

His action as visitor became a friendly presence, presence of father and protector. It was understood that the situation that had arisen in the Congregation had arisen for misunderstandings and growth crises. It did not affect the essence and the spirit. His action served to clarify and deepen the Founder's thinking and prepare the ground for the final approval of the Opera.

Rev. Abbot Caronti was an energetic and decisive man who knew at an appropriate time to take serious and drastic disciplinary measures, but contemplated severity with charity. Faced with the humility and docility of Fr. Calabria, he softened his legal rigidity and changed his thoughts. Upon completion of his Apostolic Visitor's mandate, he continued to maintain contacts with the Opera and Fr. Calabria. He

maintained this friendship until his death, in the Noci Monastery, (Bari, Italy) on 22 July 1966. He was eighty-four years old[100].

[100] G. Lunardi osb, *Emanuele Caronti. Uomo di Dio e della Chiesa*, Noci (Bari) 1982.

Chapter Seventeen

FR. CALABRIA AND THE SEPARATED BROTHERS

Headed for the House of the Father

"*Our purpose, as Poor Servants, must also be this: to co-operate with Christian unity ... Even if it is humanly difficult, nothing is impossible for God. And every grace is linked to our never-ending ardent prayer ...*"[101]

Fr. Calabria did not use, nor even knew, the word now prevalent, "*ecumenism*". The term *ecumene*, used by Greek geographers to indicate the part of the earth, which has emerged from water, and known and lived by people, and the terminology, is used in ecclesiastical language to indicate a *universal council*. Emperor Constantine called the first Ecumenical Council in 325. It was so named because it represented not only one province but all the empire, and acquired legal value also in the civil field.

In principle, we can say that until the Second Vatican Council, the Catholics used the term ecumenical with reserve and suspicion. In the Catholic Encyclopaedia of 1950, in the voice of ecumenism, we find: "*In the very sense, 'ecumenism' is the most recent theory devised by inter-religious, especially Protestant movements, to reach a union of the Churches ... for Catholics are excluded from the ways of ecumenism, in the original sense of the term*"[102].

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101 G. Calabria, *La parola del Padre*, a cura di don Pietro Murari, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona 1963.

102 C. Criveri, in *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, Firenze 1950, vol. V., col. 63.

Today, the terminology ecumenical and ecumenism resound in all Catholic settings: words and attitudes that, only half a century ago, would seem inconceivable, are part of the vocabulary and action of the Church.

The efforts and determinations of the anti-designers and pioneers of Catholic ecumenism should not be judged with the present parameters. We must bring back to the climate and mentality that prevailed before the Ecumenical, Vatican Council ll. Therefore, even in assessing the originality of Fr. Calabria and ecumenism, we must keep in mind the Italian situation of his time and, in particular, the Venetian environment, rightly considered as the Vendee of Italy.

In Italy, for its historical-geographical situation, very different from the nations with a strong Protestant presence, the ecumenical problem was less felt. There was no painful and scandalous experience of Christians who professed as followers of the same Master Jesus Christ and deployed each other armed, brandishing each one the flag of their own truth. In Italy, the problem grew late and remained limited to the cultural sphere, debated within a small circle of intellectuals and theologians. Fr. Calabria's ecumenical anxiety, on the other hand, was a logical derivation of his great love for Jesus Christ and his Church. His benevolent practice toward non-Catholics was an obvious extension of his charitable exercise.

He said: *"Charity prepares unity; the cement of unity is love. The mistake must always be fought with, but men have to love and pray for them. Turks, Jews, Protestants are all sons of the good God. They were all redeemed by the blood of Christ. We have to meet everyone."*

So, he did not tolerate irony or tone of superiority over the believers of other religious confessions. He did not admit that they were called heretics or schismatics. And he did not want them to exert any psychological pressure to proselytize, and much less to take advantage of their condition of illness or their material needs. For his time these were breakaway attitudes with the current method and mentality. He also used the usual formulas, as "*separated brothers,*" and retained more emphasis on fraternity than on separation.

"Read in my heart what I would like to say. The charity of Christ that binds us, " he wrote to his Anglican friend C. S. Lewis*.*

He felt a tension, almost an anguish, thinking about divisions among Christians. He lived suffering because of them, as lesions in the Church of Christ physically engraved on his flesh. And it is amazing to discover in this humble priest who is devoted to charitable activities, overwhelmed by commitments for the direction of two religious congregations having so many forms of apostolate cultivate such a vivid interest in the unity of Christians*. "It is a dream of my poor life, which I have longed for, to see the day of union between Christians."*

The Episcopal Conference of Triveneto, in the petition addressed to Pope John Paul II for the beatification of Fr. Calabria, writes*: "The reconciliation of separated brothers, even when it was seen with prudent caution, was an eager aspiration of his heart. Entertaining fraternal relationships with Protestants and Orthodox, he wrote, talked, loved, never discussed. He conquered with love"* [103].

The ecumenical action of Fr. Calabria was in the spiritual field: to pray, to talk, to love, rather than to discuss. He did not consider useless or unimportant the doctrinal aspect, but he understood that to pave the way for doctrinal research, it was necessary to first break down the wall of the distrust and hostility that had been created for centuries of mutual accusations.

Fr. Calabria said that in 1909 he was called to assist a Protestant man on his death bed. *"I was hoping," that the dying man would tell me, "to have my pastor close; But God's will is done. "And he invited me to read the passages of St. John:" I am the resurrection and the life ... "He died later, saying," I come to you, Lord, I come. " He said, "Many are in good faith and will confuse us Catholics ... who are traveling in first class*."

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[103] Sacra Congregatio pro causis Sanctorum, *Veronen, beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Joannis Calabria sacerdotis fundatoris Congregationum Pauperum Servorum et Pauperum Servarum Divinae Provvidentiae, Positio super virtutibus*, Roma 1984, p. 616.

In 1945 a Catholic priest introduced him to a Protestant pastor. Fr. Calabria, after the usual conventions, immediately began to talk about God's fatherhood and concluded, "*We are all brothers, because we are all children of God who is our Father.*"

The Protestant pastor, taking his leave, commented: "*If everyone spoke so, there would be no more divisions and there would not be much time left in sterile attacks*."

This *"spiritual*" ecumenism is an important step towards unity; One can say that it is ecumenism "*in blazing*" and, in part, already realized. There is, of course, a need for a "*theological, doctrinal*" ecumenism, which compares the various professions of faith, to see what are the meeting points and what, instead, the antitheses and seek together the composition and the truth. And there is finally "*practical*" ecumenism, which promotes a common action between the different Churches, in fields where one can and must act together, to establish peace, to the defence of the weak, the right to life, respect for peoples, races, cultures, etc. The ecumenical path must cover all these aspects, for it can lead to the fullness of unity.

Fr. Calabria is among the pioneers of spiritual and practical ecumenism. His message is a cautious and strong appeal to the practice of the Gospel, "*open and raw, 'sine glossa', lived in full with absolute consistency, returning to pure sources of the Gospel, to the life of the Apostles and early Christians*". "*Let's all go back to the source,*" he repeated, "*releasing us of the weight that we have loaded on our shoulders for many centuries, separated from each other. If we go to drink the pure springs of the Gospel, we would find so many whom we believed to be distant and far.*"

Fr. Calabria was fully convinced that the Catholic ecumenism must commit to live the Gospel and get purified from the worldly inconsistencies. For this reason, he attributed personal sanctification and conversion of hearts as necessary steps towards true ecumenism. To know him more it is sufficient to read his book *"Apostolica vivendi forma*" a book that denounced and caused much attention in his times. He began the personalized way of living the unity i.e. he maintained

rapports with many individuals of different confessions. He thus broke the ice among Christians whose attitudes were of difference and diffidence. He too shook with his sword of action the walls of separations among believers in Jesus Christ.

Unity octave "Catholica Unio"

Already in 1920, Fr. Calabria became aware of the existence of the Octave of Prayer for the Unity of the Church, promoted by Father Lewis Thomas Wattson[104]. It is celebrated every year, from 18 to 25 January. He enthusiastically welcomed this initiative and urged the competent ecclesiastical authorities of Rome to extend it to the entire Catholic Church.

Being not a theologian or an apologist, he did not follow the wake of those who faced the topic in doctrinal terms. For his natural propensity, he did not even feel fit and prepared for this.

In the early 1940s, he wrote to his religious: "*I recommend two things that are so much to my heart: First of all, I remember that the "Unity Octave" that you all know is approaching soon, and that this year, and then always in the future, I wish it is done in every House, with particular commitment and solemnity. May the Holy Kingdom of God extend across the earth...*

The second thing I want to recommend is this. An international opera called "Catholica Unio" was born in Switzerland in order to cooperate with the return of the Eastern Churches to the Mother Church. I enclose to you the paper that will better clarify the purpose, means and spiritual benefits of the Opera. I have faithfully believed that

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104 L.T Wattson (1863-1940), a son of an episcopal church and became priest and founder of two religious communities of men and women, turned to the Franciscan ideals of "*reconciliation*". In 1890 he established the Opera *Pro Union* and *instituted the* Octave prayer for communion. After two years, the two communities moved to Catholic Church and are recognized as religious institutes.

we Poor Servants are members of the "Catholica Union" and I wish the local superiors to speak to the confreres and that in the weekly Hour of Adoration, at every decade of the Rosary add an appeal for the unity of Christians"[105].

In the prayer week solemnly held in the Abbey of Maguzzano, he invited many Catholic bishops and eminent non-Catholic personalities.

Known as the "*Catholica Unio*", he immediately came into contact with this Association and offered the ancient Abbey of Maguzzano as a Power Station for Italy. The bishop of Lausanne, Geneva and Freiburg, Monsignor Mario Besson (1876-1945), general president of the "*Catholica Unio*" proposed to Fr. Calabria to assume the presidency of the Italian headquarters. He, by nature, shy to show himself, accepted the assignment for the glory of God and the good of souls. On January 31, 1941, Fr. Calabria was officially appointed National President for Italy. But the Sacred Oriental Congregation, despite having no objection to the choice of the person, ordered to suspend all activities of this Association for "serious practical reasons". Fr. Calabria obeyed the provisions with humility and, together, with a presentation that "*a special plan from God was maturing*."

His apostolic candour did not make him suspect delicate games and diplomatic subtleties. We are in the full swirling of the war, with all the horrors and disagreements that dilate the world, and, of course, the moment was not considered appropriate to launch certain Unionistic initiatives that could be misunderstood and perhaps even exploited by politics.

Cenacles of memorial

In 1944, still in the disturbance of war, he prepared through Msgr. Giovanni Ongaro (1902-1971), professor of Sacred Scripture at the

105 G. Calabria, *Lettere del Padre ai Religiosi,* a cura della congregazione dei PSDP Ferrara, 1956, p.97.

seminary in Verona, an article titled 'Utunum Sint', *that they be one*. He wanted the article to be published in the Osservatore Romano. Before, however, he sent a draft to Msgr. Renato Ausiello, a staff of the Vatican's Secretariat[106], for sending it to Msgr. Giovanni Battista Montini, deputy to the Secretary of State and future Pope Paul VI. They told him that the innovative idea of the script was beautiful, evangelical, but premature and not easy to implement. The opportunity, given the delicacy of the subject, was not to be seen, to deal with and propose the Cenacles of Memorial to Maguzzano, through the Roman Observer, the organ of the Holy See. It would have been preferable to use in a specialized journal. In addition, to initiate these prayer meetings between leaders of different religious confessions, people needed to be well-informed, balanced, authoritative and authorized.

"It takes the bond of couples and saints," informed him by Vatican's State Secretariat. The initiative, therefore, did not achieve its purpose, but the text was read by both Msgr. Montini and Pius XII. The two eminent personalities will have a smile of benevolence and hope in reading the pressing invitation to unity, addressed by the candid Veronese Saint. But Fr. Calabria did not lose courage:

he also introduced this idea to Father Paolo Manna (1872-1952), founder of the Missionary Union of the Clergy and Cardinal Lavitrano, in vain.

"I would not have felt comfortable on my death bed if I had been silent," concludes Fr. Calabria. *The project fell, but the spiritual tension remained.*

"We must get to know each other, talk about it, begin to love each other and share with each other," in Christian agape, *charitate Christi*, "and above all pray together, the Holy Spirit."

This invitation was collected by the International Fellowship, International Friendship, an initiative of spiritual ecumenism.

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106 *Msgr. Renato Ausiello Lanteri* (1911-1983). In the Vatican Secretary of the State. He was connected with the Opera as "External brother". He lived in the institute of 'Casa Buoni Fanciulli' of Primavalle (Rome).

"Pray because, if it pleases God, hasten a desire for more than twenty years old desire, that is, that all the religious leaders in good faith, for an exchange of views be gathered in a place of gathering and prayer to know, without discussion, and above all, as in the Cenacle, invoke the Holy Spirit " [107].

It was a prophetic desire that became a reality in October 1986, when John Paul II, with all the religious leaders in the world, met in Assisi to pray together for peace among peoples.

Pioneer of Catholic Spiritual ecumenism in Italy

Catholic Ecumenism, which down to the Second Vatican Council reduced to prayer, apologetics, historical studies, and current information, was undoubtedly enriched by the soul of the humble priest of Verona. This is all the more significant considering the Italian context in which he had to operate.

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council left a brief document on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*. If we could make a consolidated synopsis of the conciliar decree and Fr. Calabria's ecumenical statements, we would be surprised by the harmonious consonance of motives.

The Council thus expressed, "*It goes against the explicit will of Christ of the scandalous division among Christians. The Church by its nature is unique, because it is founded in the unity of the Holy Trinity. In this Church of God, from the very beginning, divisions and disunions have arisen. Those who are now in such communities cannot be accused of the sin of separation. And, if they have received the baptism properly, they are constituted in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with the Catholic Church. Many goods of the true Church of Christ also exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church. All Catholics, recognizing the signs of the times, must take an active part in this*

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[107] G. Calabria, *Lettere del Padre ai suoi Religiosi*, cit., p. 219.

ecumenical work, first by eliminating the prejudices, praying together, examining one's fidelity to Christ, with inner renewal. Catholics must make the first steps towards them. And above all, with sincerity and diligence must be renewed internally. There can be no true ecumenism without an inner conversion, without complete conformity to the gospel."

Fr. Calabria would repeat, "*Being Living Gospels*". And he would rejoice in seeing that progress, though patiently and laboriously, the pathway to the sighing of unity among the disciples of Christ.

In 2001, from 17 to 22 April, at Strasbourg the *European Charter of European Evangelical conference* (KeK) and the Council of Catholic Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) has published a document in Strasbourg. The document was delivered to the new generations represented by 100 young people from different Christian denominations. The ideas are in tune with what Fr Calabria wished half a century ago i.e. recognize the past sins and the present infidelities, for which everyone stands ready for a common path of conversion to "*clear the shadows that obscure the face of the church of Jesus Christ and created misunderstanding and bitterness in the world.*" All this to witness the salvific work of Christ as the hope of humanity, to recognize the spiritual riches of different Christian traditions and to exchange the gifts of each other's differences.

It is poignant to find how Fr. Calabria's ecumenism is also recognized by the non-Catholic world. Father Sune Wiman, Swedish Lutheran Pastor, on March 4, 1964, asked Paul VI to promote the cause of beatification of Fr. Calabria, pointing to it as *"a valid bridge of union between Christians and a point of reference for unity."*

Fr. Calabria repeatedly talked about a dialogue with a Jesuit priest. The argument was true of Protestants. Fr. Calabria argued that *"we had to do everything we could meet as well as pray. The Jesuit father disagreed, arguing that, since they were out of the Church, they had to return."*

The word *"return"* was often used in the official documents of the Church of Rome. But there was a way and a way to understand this word. It could be understood in a static way, immobilized: touches them to

move; Or, in a dynamic, impatient and industrious way, as Fr. Calabria intended. He said*, "We must do everything we can to meet them."*

And this method he tried to put into practice, from his small and humble laboratory. After having abandoned efforts for a true ecumenism, he launched into single and personal action*.*

The article "*Ut omnes unum sint*" he made a re editing through a friend priest and reprinted it in 1948 in *Fides* magazine. Then he made it spread by extracts.

Although he was always closed in his small world, within the circle of the Verona Walls, he spaced with his heart and mind beyond the borders of his homeland, intertwining relationships of esteem and friendship with many non-Catholics. After his death, they found a large envelope containing a series of letters in the drawer of his desk. He had written in his clutches: "*Very important letters of dear separated brothers, but who say how close they are to us with charity, with prayer. Do everything with the holiness of our lives, so that they may return to the Father. Ut omnes unum sint: Continuous voice of Jesus".*

Many of these letters were provoked by the *Ut omnes unum sint* extract, which he had sent to many Christian brothers in the separate Churches of the East, Germany, England, and so on.

The point on which he was battling was always the same*: "Let us make contacts in charity, to pave the way for truth."*

We find letters from well-known British writer Clives Staples Lewis, Swedish Shepherd Sune Wiman, Anglican Bishops of Chichester and Southwark, Archbishop of Canterbury, Orthodox Bishop of New York, Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan Vissarion Puiu, and many Italian Catholic personalities. From these epistolary relations Fr. Calabria had obtained a certainty i.e. in all Christians there is the same passion for Christ and for his Church, the same momentum for a life lived in the spirit of the Gospel.

In 1945 he received the Metropolitan Vissarion Puiu of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the Abbey of Maguzzano, when he fled from the country after the advent of communist rule. Calabria

welcomed him as a gift from God. He often met with him in fraternal talks and in long prayer times. In the same Abbey, during the war, he had welcomed a German Protestant, Baron. When he returned to Germany, he felt strongly the desire to become a Catholic. He returned to Italy and received baptism, confirmation and communion from the bishop of Verona.

Fr. Calabria confided to the writer of Catholic Civilization Father Domenico Mondrone, *"This is the hour of Jesus; We are at a great turn, everyone must realize those who need to guide others, and align themselves with the times ... We must pray for the Holy Father, for the Holy Spirit would give him light and special grace"* [108].

Fr. Calabria and Clives Staples Lewis

In March 1947, the publisher Mondadori introduced the book in Italy *Le Lettere di Berlicche* of Clives Staples Lewis (1898-1963)[109].

The edition was a great success, and it attracted the attention and sympathy of many priests. Fr. Calabria read the book. He was excited about it. He wrote to the author, thanking him for the good he had done with his book and encouraged him to continue. A wonderful and fraternal epistolary relationship began between them.

The language they used to communicate was Latin. A lovely, fluent Latin, musical that of the brilliant Oxford professor; Scholastic and simple one of the humble priest of Verona. Lewis was a convert from atheism to the Anglicanism. He was not a theologian, but a fervent neophyte influenced by the discovery that "*God is love*" i.e. an easy and

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108 D. Mondrone sj, *Don Giovanni Calabria e i fratelli separati*, in Civiltà Cattolica, 1964, quaderno 2746 (1964) 334-353.

109 *Una gioia insolita. Fr. Calabria -- C. S. Lewis*, a cura di Luciano Squizzato Psdp, Jaca Book, 1995. Beautiful Latin letters are reported, with relative translation, and a long introduction. In the Archives of the Congregation, there are 20 letters from Lewis to Fr. Calabria and, unfortunately, only three of Fr. Calabria to Lewis.

propitious ground for a spiritual encounter with Fr. Calabria who had also discovered "*the Love of God the Father*".

They did not have the opportunity to meet in person or even see themselves in photography, but they had cherished for each other a deep esteem and affection proper for a father and a son. Outwardly, they were very dissimilar: one, very brilliant student and professor of Oxford, a wealthy, secular and confessional Anglican family; the other, considered a donkey at school, from a poor family, a priest and a Catholic. There are so many reasons that usually cause occasions for divisions, raising social barriers, creating misunderstandings. But, for them, who had discovered the love of God in the person of Christ, there was no barrier.

"*Do not forget, I say, that you were at that time separate from Christ and excluded from membership of Israel, aliens with no part in the covenants of the Promise, limited to this world, without hope and without God. For He is the peace between us, and has made the two into one entity and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, by destroying in His own person the hostility, that is, the law of commandments with its decrees. His purpose in this was, by restoring peace, to create a single new race out of the two of them, and through the cross, to reconcile them both to God in one Body; in his own person he killed the hostility.*"(Eph 2: 11-22).

The Anglican Lewis let out a cry of joy, by writing to the Catholic priest namely. "*It is 'something extraordinary and a strengthening of our faith that two different souls belonging to different places, countries, languages, faiths and ages have been combined into a very sweet Familiarity i.e. very much in the spiritual order that goes beyond the material one.* "

And naturally, both of them felt like a laceration and a scandal among Christians: "*Know, my delightful Father that even the laceration produced in the Body of the Lord is a cause of sorrow and reason for prayer. It is a serious scandal for those who enter and makes the faithful much weaker in facing the common enemy. However, I, a layman, indeed very secular, and not at all done in high matters of sacred*

theology, have tried to do the best I can. I leave the subtleties that divide the Roman Church and the Protestants to the treatises of bishops and scholars, and with my books to expose what, by the grace of God and despite our sins and mistakes, there are still common truths. Nor is this an unnecessary work i.e. the people ignore the many things we agree on and even meet those who believe that you Catholics uphold the Trinity. Beyond that, they are persuading that we should start fraternal conversation among all Christians. If this happens, we would anticipate by many years the union in love and work, and this would benefit greatly to a serious restoration of doctrines. Third, I believe that the most effective means is prayer."

It is touching to read Lewis's letters, saying such expressions: "*I cordially recommend to your brotherly charity in the Lord*"; "*Again, my dear father, I request your prayers"*; "*Keep me always present in your prayers"; "Good-bye, dear father, and always remember me, in your defence in the Lord.*"

Fr. Calabria had sent the extract of the article on the unity of Christians, which opened with the invocation of Christ *Ut omnes unum sint*. Lewis read it carefully; however, due to mutual esteem and trust, he expressed some perplexity and criticism of the subject matter. And, in particular, he refused to accept that the meeting point between Christians of different confessions should be the Pope.

But in spite of these doctrinal perplexities, Lewis turned out to be a pious Christian who continually nurtured on the sources of the Gospel and the Imitation of Christ. The soul of the whole letter is fraternal warmth, reciprocal disposition, and spiritual intimacy. Fr. Calabria writes: "D*ivine Providence encircles us with gentle bonds of charity, even though we have never known ourselves personally. But in charity, in mutual prayer we know each other well, indeed very well. " Their degree of confidence came to the point that the English writer is even allowed to call Fr. Calabria with a gentle rebuke: "You write a lot about your sins. Be careful; Let me, my beloved Father [dilectissime Pater], warn you that humility does not turn into anxiety or sadness. The Lord's teaching is to rejoice.*

In April 1952, he wrote, *"Pray for me, father, especially now that I feel a poor orphan for the recent loss of my confessor and my dear father in Christ. As he was at the altar to celebrate, he suddenly got a shock and spun out of words. "I come, Lord, Jesus." He was a man of mature spiritual wisdom; with the innocence and goodness of a child. A "good boy" so to speak ... In my prayers I never missed the "ut unum sint" invocation. While there is no union in doctrine, the more we must strive to have that of charity. "*

A letter from Lewis is particularly beautiful and deserves to be reported in full. Fr. Calabria had written to him expressing his constant concern about the situation in which the world of his time came. Lewis replied on the Holy Saturday of Spring 1948,*"Dearest Father, With grateful heart I received your letter, as you are, filled with charity. Everything is heavy and unstable - war wars and echoes - maybe they are not the last times, but they are very bad times. However, the Apostle repeatedly insists: "Rejoice." The same material face of the world, already renewed by the new spring, by its very nature commands the same thing. I believe that the men of this age (and between them and myself) are too concerned about the conditions of the peoples, for the whole of earthly things. Does not the author of the Imitation of Christ perhaps warn us of not encompassing such things? We are neither king nor senator. We are aware that while we are in vain for the fate of Europe we forget about Verona or Oxford. In the poor man who knocks at my door, in the sick mother, in the young man who asks for advice, the Lord is present in person: therefore, we wash his feet. I have always believed that Voltaire's uncle was right when he says, "Work your garden"; And also William Dunbar (Scottish poet of the fifteenth century) when he says: "Man, seek to please your Creator, and is in good spirits: esteem the whole world at the price of a penny ...*

Tomorrow we celebrate the glorious resurrection of Christ: I will remember you in the Holy Communion. Keep away tears, fears, malice! Our nature united with an eternal bond to the same divinity ascends in the highest of the heavens. Therefore, hesitating to call us miserable would sound wicked. In fact, MAN is the creature who the angels envy, if

they can envy. Up the hearts! Perhaps sometimes it is worth remembering these things as well.

It is always irreverent to sneak into the secret of hearts. The two holy friends will forgive us. They are both in the glory of the Lord. Nothing can bother them. They will smile from there, and they will say, *"How easy would be the unity and union among Christians, if there really stayed in Christ's love!"*

Friendship with the Lutheran Pastor Sune Wiman

The beautiful and affectionate friendship grew between Calabria and the Lutheran Protestant Pastor Sune Wiman[110].

Wiman writes to Calabria: "*If Christ's last will is union among Christians, the split was a great sin, to go out of which there are especially two means: prayer and the Eucharist*".

In the community of the Pastor Sune in Eskilstuna they pray for the unity of Christians. Fr. Calabria joins in spirit with them. And in a long letter he writes, "*Rightly, you have written that the periodic Christian study meetings are not beneficial: for there is no Holy Spirit there. But how will we receive the grace of the Holy Spirit in our meetings, except with prayer and charity? By these means, the Apostles had the fullness of the Holy Spirit in the Cenacle. If we are persevering in prayer, in right intention, in sincere desire for union with Christ, we will not pray in vain; The Spirit of Christ will come and fill all of us with his light, his divine warmth. Then we will be witnesses of Christ all over the world."*

In these few lines, we find the ecumenical spirit of Fr. Calabria and the figure of an ardent supporter of the ecumenical spirit among the lines of Protestants is revealed. Here's an answer from Pastor of Eskilstuna: "*Dear Father and Brother in Christ, the Peace of God the Father and Jesus our Saviour. Thank you for your great friendship. I*

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110 S. Wiman, *Lettere a Fr. Calabria*; we have a packet of about 40 letters written in Latin, Ms., Archivio generale Psdp, Verona.

received your letter with joy and immediately I knelt in front of the Lord's altar in my Church and prayed for you and the House of Good Children. At this time, it is necessary for all those who believe in Christ and in His holy Name to be One ... On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord beseeched: " that they all be one" His supreme will was the unity of Christians ... Who separated the Holy Church into various confessions? The ancient serpent. This separation is a great sin, because we have amputated the mystical Body of Christ ... In my city, some young people Gathering around the altar of the Lord every day for prayer ... We always have the unity of all Christians in our prayers ... Each day we receive the Body of Christ in Communion. The Lord's Supper can unite the faithful."

It is clear that the Swedish Pastor is a fervent apostle of unity. He is a touching soul that vibrates in harmony with Fr. Calabria's apostolic heart. In another letter of June 24, 1947, he wrote: "*We have heard in our hearts the effectiveness of your prayers, as a force that descended on us from above. The prayers of the faithful are drops in an invisible river flowing through the Mystical Body of Christ."*

And in another letter, we find this beautiful image: "*Let us pray every day and night for unity. The Churches are separated by tall walls, the dove of prayer can fly over all the walls.*"

Fr. Calabria realized that Wiman knew Italian well enough, he sent out two books, *Amare* and *Apostolica Vivendi Forma* and makes him a subscription to The *L'amico dei Buoni Fanciulli*. And Wiman from time to time sends to those "good Italian children", packs of gifts viz. sugar, coffee, chocolate, candy, and asks for prayers in exchange. Fr. Calabria reveals to him why he feels particularly fond of Sweden. "*I pray for the prosperity of your country and its inhabitants since many years. In fact, in April 1939, Msgr. John Muller, the Apostolic vicar of your very happy land, was keen to visit us and prayed for Sweden, writing in his own hand in the Mass Register: "Orate pro me et pro Suecia". From that day, I have never ceased to pray for your country.* "

Wiman, describes a squabble picture of Sweden's religious conditions: "*The people live far from God and the churches are deserted.*

At least once I would like to see my friend of Verona, but times are bad; Italy is far away and the journey is dear."

At the death of Fr. Calabria, he asked for a portrait of his Verona friend priest and put him next to the altar. And he continued to maintain a friendly relationship with Fr. Calabria's successor.

Many "important letters" were written to other personalities of various Christian confessions which Fr. Calabria always kept jealously and manifested the same feelings, although they were less confidential. Of course, in reading all these letters in a breath, which concerns so many different people in age, culture, language, and social status, one is astonished by thinking that the one who was considered a "poor priest" was a "zero and miserable", has had the courage to take so new and bold initiatives.

Fr. Calabria did not forget his human limits, but let himself be guided by a supernatural inner force. He pushed the very anxiety of Christ, and said that one day, during the Holy Mass, he felt him cry out: "*My Church, My Church!".*

What today, after the Vatican II, has become actual and normal in relations with the brothers of other religious confessions, Fr. Calabria had made long ago, in concealment, humility, simplicity. He would have liked to see it implemented at once, on a large scale and at an ever higher level, but was content to move a little stagnant water, animated by that evangelical faith of the "*mustard seed, which moves the mountains.*"

Meeting with the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan Vissarion Puiu

On 29 March 1950 the radio station "Radio Romania" pronounced with martial voice this communication: "The great Synod of the Patriarchate of the Autonomous Church of Romania met this morning and examined the case of Metropolitan Visarion Puiu who is conducting abroad a harmful act to orthodoxy and the People's Republic of Romania. The Synod noted that the Metropolitan had plotted against the Orthodox

Church for having written an article on the *Unirea* newspaper, an organ of the Greek Catholic Church, that was favourable to the Pope and the Catholic Church, proving to be an agent of the Imperialism, beginning in 1925. In addition, the Metropolitan left Romania without permission and is building a conspiracy to pay the imperialists and the Vatican ... ".

Who was this dangerous "agent of imperialism", wandering around Europe seeking refuge as an exile?

In 1944, Romania was occupied by Soviet troops. The Metropolitan Vissarion Puiu was in Yugoslavia for pastoral reasons. Unable to return home, he took shelter in Vienna. There reached the invitation of Pius XII to enjoy the hospitality of the Holy See. The Metropolitan agreed to come to Italy and was welcomed by the Benedictines of Praglia (Padua).

In Rome, though, they knew that Fr. Calabria had offered Maguzzano Abbey as a place of meetings with the separated Brothers. So, they offered the Metropolitan the chance to move to Maguzzano. He accepted this. And so on 3 December 1945 accompanied by Cardinal Lercaro of Bologna, he came to settle in Maguzzano. On the same day, the Metropolitan wrote a short letter to Fr. Calabria to thank him for the hospitality:

"*Very Reverend Father,*

I announce that today, with the help of God, I have reached in your house of Maguzzano where you in the church, in which you continue to pray for the union of all Christian Churches. I want to stay here for some time with great pleasure and for this I ask your consent. I already have the authorization of His Eminence Cardinal Tisserant ...

+ MetropolitanVisarion "

The Metropolitan was welcomed and treated as a dearest brother in Christ. And he immediately felt surrounded by a warmth of esteem and affection:

"*The manner in which you received and treated me shows the great charity by which you are animated by the charity that alone is the salvation of the tormented world of today.*

Everything impressed me and gave me a great deal of satisfaction. For this, I thank you very much and I pray to God that your beneficial institution spreads all over the world for the good of all souls. I send you wishes for your work, which is at the same time the Church's Unity. I bless you and everyone and I assure you of prayers.

+ Metropolitan Visarion, Romania "

Fr. Calabria often went to Maguzzano to find the Metropolitan. He willingly stayed on to talk to him in fraternal friendship, dealing with the great and serious problems that afflicted mankind and the Church. They both genuinely loved Christ and his Church. Both felt the call of Christ to the unity of Christians: "*Ut unum sint*". The two souls shared anxieties and sorrows, hopes and expectations, participating and living in a symbiosis of charity.

In all the houses of the Opera, and especially in Maguzzano, the "Unity Octave" was solemnized since many years. With the presence of Metropolitan Puiu, the celebration gained greater solemnity. At these celebrations Mgr. Cardinal Girolamo, Bishop of Verona and Mgr. Giacinto Tredici, bishop of Brescia were present.

Thinking that it was time to realize the old dream of the "Ecumenical Centre" at Maguzzano, Fr. Calabria looked for the person who could do his best to direct it. He knew through the writings and an epistle report about Father Paul Manna, PIME missionary and director of the magazine "*Clergy and Mission*". He asked the missionary to accept the task of directing the Maguzzano Ecumenical Centre [111].

Fr. Manna, at the solicitations of Fr. Calabria, replied that he reluctantly declined the invitation, finding himself ill and lack of strength, but he encouraged Calabria to continue in this ecumenical

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111 *Beato padre Paolo Manna* (Avellino 1872 - Napoli 1952). Missionary in east Burma. Due to his sickness he returned to Italy, established the *Unione Missionaria del Clero*. He became the General Superior of the PIME (Pontifical Institute of Foreign Mission) from 1924 to 1934 and the first regional Superior of P.I.M.E for south Italy from 1943 to 1952.

and, at the same time, a missionary work. Indeed, the work of evangelization among the pagans was strongly slowed down and hampered, by the divisions amongst the various Christian denominations, operative in mission countries.

The presence of the Metropolitan at Maguzzano lasted for just over a year. The Metropolitan, afraid of being deceived and spied on by agents from Romania, decided to leave Maguzzano and take refuge first in Switzerland and then in France.

The attentions and respect that Fr. Calabria and the Poor Servants reserved for the Metropolitan left an indelible imprint on the enthusiastic souls.

Metropolitan, on 10 June 1947 wrote to Fr. Calabria:

"I do not know how to thank you for your goodness and open heartedness, which, I think, will be remembered in the history of the Romanian Church."

And in fact, the memory of the permanent and the delicate attentions reserved for the Metropolitan and his pleasant stay at Maguzzano, are the subject of attention and wonder by Romanian scholars and orthodox theologians who, in re-evaluating the great figure of Metropolitan Visarion Puiu, discover a unity in charity. It was well understood among Catholics and Orthodox, even before the story of the Church of Christ exploded the Holy Spirit with the Second Vatican Council[112].

[112] On 26-28 February 2009, A symposium was conducted in Roman, Romania, on the "Mitropolitan Visarion Puiu"on the occasion of the 130th anniversary of his birth and 45th anniversary of his death. At this gathering Fr. Manuel Oliveira PSDP participated. And he attested a great desire for unity reigned among the theologians and intellectuals of Rumania. Surely the Holy Spirit guides the Churches through the persons of Fr. Calabria and Metropolitan Puiu. They could hold an important role in creating a climate of reciprocal respect and friendly approach among the Christians of Catholic and Orthodox churches.

St. John Calabria and St. Leopoldo Mandić

St. Leopoldo,[113] since his youth, felt called to promote the union of Eastern Christians separated with the Catholic Church. But because of the weak physical constitution and a lack of good pronunciation, he could not devote himself to preaching. The superiors therefore charged him to fulfil the delicate service of reconciliation. He practised this apostolate in various Italian cities and since October 1909 he was stationed in Padua.

During the frosty winter and the misty summer, without holidays, though tormented by various diseases, until the last day of his life he remained at the service of souls, becoming a true martyr of the confessional.

But all this, he did so by keeping in mind what he himself regarded as the primary mission of his life i.e. to be useful for his people and to the union of the Churches.

Such a soul with burning love for the church and the unity of all Christians could not escape the eye of Fr. Calabria.

The letters that Fr. Calabria sent to Father Leopoldo Mandić are not many. Very short; almost telegraphic. They were written from October 25, 1916 to June 27, 1942, on the eve of the death of the Capuchin.

The purpose of these letters was to calm and encourage the Capuchin, at certain moments of discouragement, for the always-delayed departure to those ecumenically more interesting territories than those in which he was forced to live. Fr. Calabria wrote in 1916:

"*In my extreme poverty, so gladly I pray and I will pray to blessed Jesus, so that if He likes it, He will hear it; have faith, so much faith.* "

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[113] Leopoldo Mandić (1866-1942) born at Castelnovo I (Herceg-Novi) of Bocche di Cattaro (Kotor), eleventh of the twelve children of the pious and hardworking family of Croatia of Pietro Mandić and the countess Carolina Zarević. Cf.., *SUO UMILE SERVO IN CRISTO, Scritti di San Leopoldo Mandić*, a cura di Paolo Tieto, Tipografia Asterisco , Sirmione (Brescia)1992.

The invitation to "have faith" will become the dominant note of all the other letters. They felt the anxiety and tension of the Capuchin priest, who had confided to Fr. Calabria his secret, his ecumenical dreams. "*If He likes let Him hear it*," consoled Fr. Calabria.

And on 13 February 1917 he wrote, "*As I already said, in my misery, I always remember and recommend to Jesus the blessings of your intentions. Jesus is also happy with the good wishes, be sure. Rev. Father, that divine Providence, which holds and rules everything, takes account of everything. On the last day what a reward, He will give you.* "

During the First World War, every Austrian foreigner, resident in Italy was jailed. Father Leopoldo, against the advice of the confreres and the superiors themselves, had decided not to take the Italian citizenship, so as not to break any hope of returning one day, equal to equal, among his conquered Slavs. And Fr. Leopold accepted that he would be imprisoned for a period of two years in a detention camp for foreigners.

At the end of the war, the Capuchin returned to Padua.

Fr. Calabria rejoiced: "*Always in the Lord. I always remembered you and remember you. May Lord grant us to do always and in everything His Divine Will?*"

Father Leopold's letters addressed to Fr. Calabria intrigued by respect and conviction of being in front of a saint. He was not afraid to ask for his intercession with God for the healing of sick people and help for himself. About a severely ill young man, Father Leopold wrote:

"*Perhaps the presence of your goodness can hasten the healing. Of course, he wants this visit and wants the humble writer to intervene. But now let me, Friar Leopold, speak to you. I know that in your prayers you see so many things before God, he can understand well my mind. So, I ask for a great blessing and then your prayers. Thus, in front of our Master God I have full confidence in that deep sense of friendship you keep towards me.*"

The ecumenical ideal of the Croatian Capuchin was extended to the entire world. Unity among Christians and unity of humans in Christ.

Winding up a letter Fr. Leopoldo wrote: *"Our Lord who has deigned to choose us, gives us all the good desire because He wants, with the harmony of our heart, that we present in some way His infinite charity that wants all people be saved. Let us pray together, as the Scripture tells us, for the salvation of all "*.

The last years of his earthly life, Father Leopoldo spent them in suffering. He never complained. He continued to work tenaciously because he wanted to "die in the breach", fulfilling his duty for the love of the Lord and for the salvation of his brothers.

The last letter of Father Leopoldo to Fr. Calabria brings the date of 23 June 1942 the eve of the feast of St. John the Baptist, "Tomorrow is your heavenly Patrons day. I hasten to present you my wishes and my respects. Tomorrow I will celebrate from the depth of my heart. Let me open my whole soul ... ".

For the friendship lived between him and Fr. Calabria, Father Leopold confided the seriousness of his illness:

"You know that I was sick to death and that I had the supreme comfort of faith: the holy oils and the Viaticum. But it pleased the Lord to give me back my life. Now again, another sickness concerns me. The arthritis takes me for several months in the chest and also the internal limbs i.e. the throat, so it is difficult to pass food at all, and sometimes I cut the canal. This inconvenience is very serious. Now I go back to you with all my faith and I ask your blessing." Fr. Calabria answered to Father Leopoldo, a few weeks before the death of the Capuchin saint:

"I prayed and prayed that the Divine Master, if he likes it, give you appropriate health to continue doing good to the souls who cost the Divine Blood. I celebrate the Holy Mass for this purpose". [114]

Fr. Calabria's concern for the unity of Christians emanated from the Gospel, from the sigh of Christ i.e. "Father, that they may be one, as I am in You and You in me." Friendship with Father Leopold, another

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[114] Tratto da *Portavoce di s. Leopoldo Mandic*, Anno 44, n.) Dicembre 2004. Mensile di cultura religiosa dell'Opera s. Leopoldo Mandic, Piazza santa Croce, n. 44 - 35123 Padova.

ardent apostle of the unity of all Christians, reconfirmed and increased in Calabria his passion for the unity of Christians[115].

The Jewish friends

The old Jewish ghetto of Verona was near the home of Fr. Calabria. He easily met boys and adults of Jewish religion, with them he established good associations. The Jewish community in Verona were about five hundred people, of every category and social condition, excellent citizens. The first meeting with Jews was due to the work of Mama Angela who received contracts from some Jewish families. He himself told that he was carrying the washed and ironed linen to the family who lived in a villa, located just below San Zeno in Monte, the same villa that one day he would buy to accommodate the very small children. His sister Teresa, who was a skilled tailor, worked for the Camis-Colamano of Via Nuova, run by two Jewish sisters, Rebecca and Sara. John often went to pick up clothes to standardize or enhance with studs and laces and take them packaged to the store. He was willing to make small commissions for them. These two Jewish ladies wanted to be very good to that child who was so good. John remembered the great devotion of the two sisters to the Holy Bible. Once the Sacred Book slipped from their hands and fell to the ground. They picked it up with respect and kissed it. Turning to the child who watched carefully, "*Contains the word of God!*" They said with conviction.

"Every Sabbath day," said Fr. John, "*these two pious women went out of Bishop's Gate to the east to see if the Messiah had come*." And the child, strong in his faith, said with conviction: "*But the Messiah has already come. It is Jesus!* "

Often, these good old women told him of the story of Abraham, Moses, and the Patriarchs. When Rebecca died, Sarah's eyes were shrieking with tears for her sister's sigh, but shining with hopes, she

[115] Fr. Leopoldo, was proclaimed "Blessed" by Paul VI , on 2 May 1976 and Canonized by pope John Paul ll, on 16 October 1983.

said, "*Rebecca went, but she had a holy death. She raised her hands and said: I see Abraham coming to meet me. And she's dead.* "

John Calabria became a good friend of a poor Jewish old man who was lurking in the streets and stumbling in his uneasiness. Then he attended schools of the Stigmata Fathers. He would have been ten or eleven years old. He tried to adjust his time to leave the house so that he could find himself on the journey of old Asson every day, to accompany him on a stretch of road. This good old man had been a practising lawyer and now he found himself living alone, without relatives. In the Jewish Community of Verona he served as honorary president. Asson, became fond of the young Calabria. Many times, he invited him to the Synagogue to attend Jewish functions. John gladly went there. The mysterious environment of the place of worship and the songs of the Jewish liturgy impressed him, moving in his mind to Nazareth, and making him dream of being beside Jesus while praying in his Synagogue. He felt attracted to that world. On the other hand, his beloved Jesus was a Jew; Mary Most Holy, of whom he was very devoted, was Jewish; And so are the apostles and early Christians. So, there was a close spiritual relationship between Christian Calabria and his Jewish friends. When old Asson became ill, Calabria often visited him and talked with him about Sacred Scripture and eternal life.

In daily visits to the hospital he met a foreigner whom the police had taken from the street. Finding him without documents, they had taken him to the police station but could not understand what he was saying. Strange gestures and absent gaze, they realized that he was suffering from organic decay and mental imbalance. They took him to the hospital and put him in the psychiatric ward. Fr. Calabria, helping with gestures and some words in basic Latin of the school, found out he was an Austrian physician. "tu est medicus?" "Utique, sed Judeus sum" i.e. Are you a doctor? Yes, but I'm a Jew. "This does not matter," said Calabria, "We are all brothers, children of God himself." The poor man confided with the priest. He narrated his story and whispered in the ear, with a manifest sense of mental confusion, that there were people who wanted to poison him to death. Fr. Calabria went to the Hospital

Director and asked if he could be accommodated in a single room. During his meals he was always close to him, because he would not have touched food unless Calabria had not tasted it. They warned the police to contact the Austrian colleagues and report the presence in Verona of this sick doctor. A few days later, relatives came from Vienna to resume their reunion. They thanked the priest for his interest and, for many years they, maintained correspondence with Fr. Calabria, expressing gratitude and mutual esteem.

The relationship between the soldier Calabria and the Jewish medical Colonel of the military hospital was also friendly and confidential. He used to enjoy it with special permissions: "Ah, Calabria asks for a permit: but yes, let us know this permission!" Fr. Calabria was always grateful to him because he favoured the exemption from the military service of Brother Luigi Adami, who had already been reformed but he was threatened to be recalled under the arms. With this medical Colonel he always maintained good rapport until his death. "*He was the righteous man of Sacred Scripture,*" Fr Calabria said to his daughter Professor Mafalda Pavia (1902-1985)[116] when she was presented to Fr. Calabria to seek shelter during the Nazi racial persecution.

And we know that in addition to this doctor who was welcomed and protected under the monastic name of Sister Beatrice, so many other Jews found shelter in the Houses of the Opera which were deliberately opened for them by Fr Calabria. His charity towards them did not conceal subtle intentions to force conversions, taking advantage of the dramatic and tragic moment.

Professor Pavia testified that Fr. John had recommended to his religious: "*I know Professor Pavia and her feelings: no one therefore*

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116 *Shalòm Beatrice, lettera di una "medichessa" ebrea a un santo*, a cura di Luigi Piovan e Maria Palma Pelloso, Editrice AVE, Roma, 2000. Pope John Paul ll, in his homily to the pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's square on 19 April 1999, expressed thus, "*The gospel charity is the virtue that marked the lie of Fr. Calabria. A Hebrew lady doctor who was hidden among his sisters to protect her from the Nazi fascists had witnessed that every moment of her presence appeared like the hymn of St. Paul the Apostle on charity*".

makes the slightest hint and the slightest pressure to adhere to our religious beliefs."

When the fascist racialist laws came out in Italy, Fr. Calabria was saddened. He personally visited the Rabbi of Verona to express his solidarity. We read in his diary on 18 November 1938: "*Charitas Christi urget nos. Only charity, the true charity that embraces all because all are children of God, Charity can save the poor humanity that is on the brink of ruin. Today, with the approval of my spiritual Father, I went to the Rabbi of Verona to express all my pain in the trial that the Jewish people are suffering. There was his lady who loved the idea.*" And Dr. Ermanno Friedental returned the courtesy visit to San Zeno in Monte.

On another occasion Fr. Calabria felt bitter and humiliated as an Italian in front of an offensive scene against Bassani a Jewish advocate. He sent his Vicar General, Don Luigi Pedrollo, to express to this lawyer an apology on behalf of his fellow citizens and to express him solidarity. But we must also say that many Jews also helped the priest Calabria i.e. the first concrete help for the first child found on the street was from a Jew who asked for the honour of clothing the small jumper on foot. And Calabria in this gesture of charity saw a "sign" of God's will to continue the work in favour of the abandoned children. For a long time for the Easter holidays, the two *Raichembach* sisters offered to the Good Children a lamb. Fr. Calabria seemed very grateful for this gesture. He saw something of a mystery, which he did not even know how to define him, but moved him to tears. Once, receiving the gift and thanking donors, he said, "*I will offer you in the Holy Mass."* They retorted *"No, no! Fr. John, pray for us too, bless us, but do not remember us in the Holy Mass!* " That cry echoed earnestly in his heart. It was a small blunder, forgivable because it was understood that it was not an intentional expression but was a spontaneous one. And they who loved him, understood it and continued to maintain good rapport with him. At the funeral of Fr. Calabria, there was also the Rabbi of Verona, Dr. Weiss Levi, on behalf of the entire Jewish community of Verona. In 1955 ten years after the Liberation, the Union of Italian Israelite Communities wanted to give a parchment to the Institution of Fr. Calabria with a

dedication viz. "Gratefully the Jews of Italy". But the most striking thing is the peroration for the beatification and canonization of Fr. John Calabria to his holiness Paul VI made by Dr. Mafalda Pavia: "*It is my duty and pleasure to join my humble voice to the many who are raising up today to your Holiness in order to promote the Cause of beatification and canonization of the Servant of God Fr. John Calabria.*

It is mine, the voice of a Jewish doctor who, in the tragic hours of racial persecution, I was paternally welcomed into the "Casa Buoni Fanciulli" which was founded by the Venerable Fr. Calabria, he was already my father's friend. Here, in a sister's dress and in the name of Sister Beatrice, with the objectivity that I have and at the same time came from me as I was "a separate sister", I was able to move day in and day out now, want to highlight the sublime gifts of that priest.

He was always doing wonder with paternal cares towards me and all those who approached him for advice and help.

His every-day life was the personification of St. Paul's wonderful song about charity. An absolute faith that radiated around him; a detachment from earthly material things. To recognize in those who suffered an angel of the Lord who offered him thus the way to go to the fullest and to come closer to Him. An apostolate always inspired by the aspiration of the future celestial homeland common to all. A concern for spiritual elevation for himself and for all people. An infinite understanding and a religious respect for the sincere faith of others. These appeared to me, in the 18 months of stay in his home, the main qualities of that soul devoted completely to the high Priesthood. It was precisely the "Christianus = alter Christus". With deep respect. Mafalda Pavia. Verona,13 March 1964 "[117].

[117] M. Pavia, *Lettera postulatoria a Sua Santità Paolo VI,* 13 marzo 1964, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

Chapter Eighteen

NEW FIELD OF APOSTOLATE

The Missions in India

The missionary ideal has always been present in Fr. Calabria. Already in the early "Holy Rules" of 1908, he referred to the missions. But the occasion came with the parting of his friend Don Diodato Desenzani, who became a missionary of the PIME of Milan. In August 1914, we find Don Desenzani in Hyderabad (India), considering himself as a road paver for the Religious Poor Servants of Divine Providence. He knew that his friend Fr. Calabria long ago had in mind to create a "Little Cenacle" to educate and prepare missionary vocations, and that the project had already been subjected to the judgment of the bishop and his spiritual father. After receiving the consent of his bishop, Fr. Calabria contacted Propaganda Fide. He received encouragement to start the missionary vocation work. But, for external causes, the project did not take off. It remained as a pious desire in mind and heart, waiting for more appropriate times.

On the other hand, the same Apostolic Institute in Nazareth (Verona) already had a missionary orientation. It was not a seminary school reserved merely for the priests of the Opera, but a cenacle open to any ecclesial perspective. The students, after completing high school, could freely choose the diocesan seminary or another religious institute. *"We are Catholics, right? The whole world is of God,* "he said to those who were amazed at this generous opening. When he sent the first priests to the Roman parishes, he sent them as apostolic missionaries: "*Go as the Apostles, poor in human means, but rich in*

faith and trust in God the Father." Therefore, a ground for a "Missionary Cenacle" already ploughed.

From India, Don Desenzani continuously sent detailed descriptions of the miserable life of the poor "*untouchables*", knowing well to poke the apostolic sensibility of Fr. Calabria and his confreres. On his return home, after six years of mission, Fr. Desenzani settled in San Zeno in Monte was welcomed as "my dearest brother". The missionary man's persuasion became more subtle. His sermons, always enriched with captivating tales, dreamed of the young religious brothers. Fr. Calabria tried to curb that volcano in boiling, promising that "*at a reasonable time he would send a bunch of religious brothers to collaborate with the Institute of Foreign Missions of Milan.*" Don Desenzani flew this veiled promise and tried to force the times, intervening PIME superior General, Father Paolo Manna, and missionary bishops in India.

The Bishop of Hyderabad (India), Bishop Dionysius Vismara, was particularly impressed. The project seemed to have had an immediate implementation; instead, it had to be set aside for a few more years. Msgr. Girolamo Cardinale and Fr. Natale advised prudence and patience. Fr. Desenzani returned alone to India.

In 1930, in the mission of Bezawada (Vijayawada), Krishna district, Fr. Desenzani founded two houses of "Good Children" viz. one for boys and the other for girls. He informed Fr. Calabria and begged him to assume his paternity. Fr. Calabria accepted. Fr. Desenzani frowned with joy, for the network that had long been intimately enveloping and trapping Fr. Calabria.

In 1933, Fr. Desenzani returned home. Despite his fifty years running, he enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine. He wanted to return to the mission as a priest and a doctor. He settled in San Zeno in Monte with his friend Fr. John Calabria.

This time, Fr. Desenzani was determined to return to India with some religious of the house. He did a lot to hasten, to get the approval of Fr. Calabria. Four Brothers would go with him. Meanwhile, however, the Hyderabad diocese had been bifurcated. The territory where the

two Houses "Good Children" fell unto the jurisdiction of another diocese.

According to the word already given to Msgr. Vismara, Fr Calabria decided to send the same Religious Brothers to the Diocese of Hyderabad to help in a diocesan school in a parish. The decision was announced to the entire Congregation. Fr. Calabria asked for volunteers. "*God willing, by the end of this year, some Brothers will go to India under the patronage of Msgr. Dionysius Vismara. They will go to work among the poorest classes, the outcasts. It's a twelve years old plan that has now come to life. If you may decide any brother or Priest would feel this particular vocation and freely dispose of this desire, then leave it to the Providence to go or not."*[118]

Many made the request, but it was not possible to please everyone to get freed from the Houses in Italy. Four young men were chosen: Guido Tovazzi, Aldo Farina, Francesco Cornale and Edoardo Farina.

Later, Fr. Albano Bussinello would join them. On the eve of the departure on 8 November 1934 Fr. Calabria wrote in his diary: "*Today, by the grace of God, a small and great religious ceremony was performed. Four Missionary Brothers, tomorrow, God willing, will leave for India. This evening they received the Crucifix, with a message of Fr. Diodato ...*".

The following day he wanted to accompany the departing missionaries to Venice. Francesco Cornale, took charge of writing the chronicle of the trip. He noted his impressions on a notebook with candour and innocent wonder. After eleven days of sailing, they arrived at Bombay. In front of their eyes the mystical beauty of India opened up. Then by train, they moved to Hyderabad to the diocesan seminary. They overcame the fatigue, began to familiarize themselves with the environment and communicate with the young seminarians, scattering a few words in English. The chronicler writes: "*We have seen very tall*

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118 G. Calabria, *Lettera dattiloscritta*, 4 marzo 1935, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P, Verona.

Indian bamboos ... we have seen mongoose fight against the snakes ... we saw the holocaust i.e. cremation of the dead ... we have seen ...".

Certainly, the dreams that filled up their youthful fantasy did not correspond to reality: they thought of wild places, people shivering in misery, mud huts, according to the stereotype of popular holography and ... instead! "*We never thought we could witness such a show of faith and splendour on the mission land*!" Continues the reporter about a grand procession in honour of Our Lady, to which non-Christians also participated. After a few months of work, they succeeded to set up a small craft school viz. carpentry, mechanics, and a printing press. But the job they were asked most was to accompany the bishop in pastoral visits and restore the chapels of Christian villages.

Life proceeded in harmony and serenity. Then there were difficulties with the British authorities, who poured over Italians the controversy over the Italian-Abyssinia war. In Italy, meanwhile, the storm of divisions had risen; confusions and misinterpretations had provoked the Apostolic Visit. This reached India, like a lightning from a clear sky, an order to suspend any extraordinary activity and return home. They reluctantly returned to Italy. When they came to Verona, they looked around, trying to understand the cause that created such situation but was incomprehensible to them. They moved into the activities of the House, but in their eyes, already began to blur the joy that had once shone at the time of their first departure.

But the missionary passion did not get extinguished. It marked in the heart of so many Brothers a flame ready to arouse the enthusiasm of the Congregation. Every now and then, requests for missionary vocations came from distant regions: Persia, Bengal, Brazil, Uruguay. They were continually calling, blowing on the foyer always on, and reviving hope in the Brothers.

The Italian Medical Missionary Union

"The House of the Sacred Heart is also the Headquarters of the UMMI, an activity that got engaged, with the blessing of the Bishop and our Apostolic Visitor, next to the Opera of the Poor Servants"[119].

So Calabria wrote to the Religious in 1942.

The UMMI (Italian Medical Missionary Union) was born as a volcanic idea of Fr. Diodato Desenzani.

When, in 1933, he returned home to graduate in medicine, Fr. Desenzani met many young students who had the missionary passion, even though they did not feel to choose priesthood or religious life. Sickened by his charism and apostolic obituary, they joined him to form a Medical Missionary Union.

So, the UMMI was born. In one of the first issues in the information leaflet called the Voce of UMMI, we find the Statute and the aims of the Union*. "The UMMI is mainly composed of Italian Catholic doctors and medical students, who have the purpose of joining and to organize themselves in order to make available to the Missionary Institutes their professional energies, both in the cultural and practical fields, for the benefit of the missionary cause.*

The UMMI does not want to overlap with any missionary medical initiative, but rather become the centre of connection and subsidization of what is already going on, as well as organizing the available energies.

The main activities of the UMMI are:

- Establish Centres in every city of Italy for collecting and purchasing health care materials (medicines, instruments, books, etc.), selecting, storing and allocating it to missions that require it;

- adopting and funding dispensaries and hospitals on mission lands;

- maintain correspondence with missionaries, helping them directly or with appropriate medical advice;

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119 G. Calabria, *Lettere del Padre ai Religiosi*, a cura della Congregazione dei Poveri Servi della Divina Provvidenza, Ferrara 1956, p. 111.

- start medicine and give medical training to missionary staff (priests, brothers, sisters);

- Physically inspect, control and direct candidates to missions and protect the health of missionaries with the most appropriate means;

- arouse, recruit and prepare a body of Italian and indigenous health care for missionaries and peoples themselves in mission countries;

- promote the study of medical-missionary problems;

- to propagate the missionary ideal in the medical class and especially among students of medicine, through media and conference".

The beginning was simple and humble. Few adherents and stunted growth. But here comes a soul from distance with true love of God and missionary zeal. A true missionary apostle: Dr. Attilio Riccardi[120].The young physician was spiritually formed in the Forlì Catholic Youth Action, and then in the FUCI (Italian Federtion of Catholic University) of Bologna. A splendid and enthusiastic type who had cultivated the missionary passion as a young person. The orientation of his university studies had been finalized to his future choice of life. He graduated with full marks with a special thesis*: "The missionaries' disease and the means of prevention."* It was the year 1935. He has just completed twenty-three years of age.

In the University Clinic of Modena, he specialized again in tropical diseases, graduating with a thesis always in missionary area*: "Hematographic findings on a group of Italian missionaries in East Africa."*

By reading magazines of specific missionary character, he became aware of the existence of the UMMI. He found that the purposes of this Association were his ideals. He wrote to Verona and made contact with Fr. Desenzani. He decided to leave for India with him.

He redefined his employment contract with Civil Hospital of Recanati, where he worked as an assistant surgeon and came to Verona. It was the evening of 20 December 1937.

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120 M. Gadili, *Attilio Riccardi,* Negrar (Verona) 1997, pp. 81-87.

Fr. Desenzani was enchanted to hear the enthusiastic words filled with this young doctor's apostolic ardour, but did not feel comfortable to take him along with him to India. He seemed too frail to him. He feared he could not withstand the journey and the privations of a hard life.

After waiting a few months, he decided to warn him that he could not take him to India. The news fell on the young doctor as a bang. The dream he had been cherishing for so many years burst in his hand like a soap bubble. The kaleidoscopic colours that had lit up his waiting days dimmed into a black anguish. The desolate Riccardi, confided with Fr. Calabria. He revealed all his bitterness. He traced back all the stages of his life to this great ideal. Fr. Calabria, having listened to him, made him see for his future a new path to follow: *"Even if you cannot go physically to mission, you have an equally important missionary work at home. You will be dedicated to raising, sustaining and animating the little Creature of UMMI. "*

Dr. Riccardi reflected and prayed. Finally, he decided to consecrate himself to the Lord as a Poor Servant of Divine Providence. He became Bro. Attilio Riccardi, making his first religious profession on 7 October 1939.

His first and only field of work was Negrar Sacred Heart Hospital. In this community he consumed the few years of religious life in organizing, animating and developing the UMMI. He died in the concept of holiness on 24 March 1944. Fr. Calabria, honouring him, wrote*: "A saint died. Having become a member of our Religious Family, he devoted himself entirely to the UMMI, with zeal and an activity above his weak physical strength, caring for it's developments and perfecting this organization. On his credit grew around UMMI fascination and accords…[...] Unfortunately, with the start of the war, the activity of UMMI was stopped. And unexpectedly, dear Dr. Riccardi was called to the rewards of the saints. In one of the last visits I had the grace to do, saying that he would leave me alone, with an angelic accent he told me, "I'm going, but I'll send another Brother in my place!" And he kept the*

promise viz. another young Doctor requested at that time to become part of our Opera, so he took his place and the UMMI continued" [121].

The first follower of Bro. Ricardi was Dr. Camillo Clementi, specialized in paediatrics. He left his job in the public health departments to consecrate to the Lord as a Poor Servant of Divine Providence. Thereafter came a rude and sober Romagnolo reduced in the Second World War, an ex-official of Alpine wing, Fr. Fabio Ferdori[122]. Completing his studies in the University of Bologna graduating in Pharmacy. He had with him the passport for India. He wanted to establish a modern pharmacy laboratory in Lucknow (India). In the last days before his journey, with an active febrile he wanted to do research with a product based on sulphur to cure leprosy. An inconvenience happened during the laboratory work, due to the inexperience of his team members, uprooted him on the tragic night of 22 May 1959. A true apostle and martyr of the missionary ideal. After them a series of very efficient religious collected the witness he had left by these pioneers viz. they are Fr. Ottorino Foffano, Fr. Elvio Damoli, Bro. Giuseppe Brunelli and now Mr. Alessandro Galvani.

The prison problem

Come, you who are blessed by my Father;
enter the kingdom prepared for you…
because I was in prison and you came to visit me…(Jesus)

The apostolic horizon of Fr. Calabria had no boundary. The love of Christ had lead him to turn the merciful gaze wherever there was a soul to console or save. Among the many who caught his attention, we find the prisoners. For them he established an association "Apostolato Redenzione della Croce" i.e. *apostolate of redemption by the cross*. He wrote a set of loving letters to the prisoners, with sincere esteem, full of understanding, and trust in the moral recovery of the person. He

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121 G. Calabria, *Lettera circolare per far conoscere l'UMMI*, *25 maggio 1947*, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

122 M.Gadili, *Fabio Ferdori*, breve profilo biografico, Verona 1997.

worked out a series of catechesis simple, practical, extending on different issues, from pain to expiation, from providence to the sense of life. There is a great resource of idea and suggestions derived not from direct experience, but from the sentiment with the same sensitivity of the heart of Christ.

We can collect precious germs exploring the collection of his letters. In one of the letters addressed to Msgr Chiot dean of the parish of St. Luke, Verona, in the Epiphany of 1948, he writes: "*we have to approach them, console the pain of their sad situation, help them to rehabilitate, above all help them to sanctify the long days of trials and if needed assist them materially."*

In his first letter addressed to the "*imprisoned brothers", Fr. Calabria writes: "though in person I am far away from you but in my heart I am very close to you I felt like an inspiration to address you every month, a word of Christian greetings and consolation sprouted spontaneously in my heart. Besides the written words every 25th of the month I will be offering a Holy Mass for you. May the Lord Jesus grant you the grace to sanctify your pains, and the dark and cold days of the prison and to prepare you with determined heart to return to live in freedom according to the norms of the holy gospel and the divine laws".*

In July 1949 he described an acute intuition in the difficulty to serve the prisoners. "*People, indeed, often forget you all, either because they are distracted with many things or because they do not know this duty. Or because they consider less the values of the gospel; but there are also many who would like to do great things for you and to express to you their love, but do not know how to do it. The greater difficulty in fact is the lack of true universal and Christian love.*"

Only the love of Christ can do these miracles. You must pray that this miracle may happen. And, this may do primarily in you yourself.

Because the first to attain mercy is you all by loving and helping the other as brothers. A good word of advice, comfort, sympathy, forgiveness, are the many acts of mercy the Lord will write in the book of life in an indelible way. And how much warmth and light this can generate in the cold sectors of life, deprived of many consolations.

It can become the light and warmth of Jesus Christ living in your midst."

And in January 1951 due to the advanced age and other mysterious pains that marked his body he was forced to tell with a heavy heart to the "prisoners" "*I don't know if I will be in a position to write to you in the future. With my age and sufferings my difficulties increase and the work becomes difficult…. But never think I forget you brothers."*

And that was the last letter Fr. Calabria wrote to the prisoners. But the Opera of Poor Servants carried on this apostolate among the prisoners through the religious brothers such as Francesco Sossai, Luigi Fiorini etc. and many external brothers.

The Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence committed themselves with means and, above all, with religious personal in spiritual assistance and moral and material help in several Italian prisons: Bologna, Naples, Lamezia Terme (Catanzaro), Termini Imerese, Palermo), and Verona.

Prior to World War II, Fr. Calabria had some contact with the prison world, through his dearest friend, Msgr Chiot. The testimony of this priest is interesting. He assisted and prepared to face death, with Christian attitude, of the five condemned by the Fascist regime who participated in the "pronouncement" of the Great Council against Mussolini. Among them was the son in law of Mussolini, the former foreign minister of the fascist regime, Galeazzo Ciano.

"*Fr. John*, describes Msgr. Chiot, *always felt a special attraction for the prison. In the delinquents, he saw the saddest misery, because one sank into hatred and blood. And the punishment, instead of sanctifying it, has aggravated when it is not applied as a means of re-education and accepted as an atonement.*

It is necessary to create a redemptive paternity in the prison home, he said, and for this, not only the chaplain, but all the prison system, from staff to regulations, must be renewed.

He hoped to be able to prepare his priests and religious brothers also for this mission. He talked to me, spreading in the dream: holy dreams like a child, like a poet, but then realizes in a miraculous manner. "

Fr. Calabria's visits to the prison were not frequent, because of the bureaucratic difficulties to obtain permission. Permission was more easily granted during the Easter period, to give prisoners the opportunity to approach the sacraments, in fulfilment of the Easter precept.

"One Saturday, continued Msgr Chiot, *I invited Calabria for confession and to celebrate the Holy Mass in the infirmary of the prison. His way of praying, his attitude, simple and persuasive talking, conquered all the sick of the infirmary. After the celebration, Fr. Calabria congratulated for their full participation in faith. But he felt the need to make a recommendation: I must also touch a news that grieved me: I knew from Fr. Chiot that sometimes blasphemy sneaks even in this infirmary. Little children, it is the home of God the place of sorrow, do not offend the heavenly Father right here where he gives you the chalice of passion as a gift of love and forgiveness. I would like, under the Crucifix, the scripture: "Here is love, hopefully, please." And a voice: "But we do not know how to pray." And Fr. Calabria: "So did the disciples also say to Jesus. And the divine Master, lifting his hands to heaven, said: Pray this way ... And our Father first resounded on earth. Also, lift up your hands, and say with me the great prayer. It will disperse all blasphemous profanation from this holy place of discomfort. "They all imitated Fr. Calabria and scanned the prayer of Jesus. He really seemed to find us around Jesus and pray with Him.*

After a few days, he wrote beneath the crucifix, "Here one loves, hopes, prays and ... added - do not blaspheme."

After a few weeks the nurses of the prisoners asked me to forget about the previous incident. They told me, "it offends us because here no one blasphemes now anymore."

On that occasion, only one had refused to approach the sacraments. He was a "hard hearted person" who made it difficult for companions and custodians. I tried to persuade him to request for an audience with

Fr. Calabria. He accepted, boasted of the encounter. He hoped to be victorious. Perhaps he wanted to show to everyone that no one could influence him away from his intentions.

He had an audience with Fr. Calabria. He confided to him openly. He said he was the son of an alcoholic and a prostitute. His childhood was sad and tragic. He fled from the hell of his family, began to work, but the frequency of not getting good companies dragged him on the path of vices and evil actions. In the compulsory military service, he was thinking of redeeming himself from his past life, but the information about his past was misleading his superiors who dropped him into the company of the disciplined companions. He left military service, with so much anger in his body and with hatred for everything and everyone. And he ended up choosing the life of delinquency.

Fr. Calabria sat down and listened to him silently. Stringing his hands, he said, "Do not say, no one ever loved you, no one valued you ... Why don't you begin to love? ... begin to love God, then in Him, you will find yourself and you will love your brothers, and everything in God. You will not be alone in the world anymore." And the conversation lasted for half an hour. The "hard", he confided to me that he had made some efforts to remedy, but the sad daily situation made them vain. "I am still myself, with all my misery." he said, "The feeling that you recognize your miseries is a sign that you have already begun to recognize you as a sinner and not accuse others, but yourself viz. it is a good premise to receive the forgiveness of God." The following Sunday, the "hard hearted man" wanted to make his confession and to receive the Holy Communion with great conviction. While I was giving him the Holy Eucharist, I got the impression to see tears in his eyes; perhaps the first tears of repentance of his life. "

Chapter Nineteen

WE REQUIRE AN ECCUMENICAL COUNCIL

“Renew or die!"

For us distant spectators over time, it is amazing to see this humble "Verona priest" arose from the effervescent magma of innovative ideas and projects that surface from the cracks opened up in the hard crust settled in centuries of spiritual compliance of the Catholic Church. After two barbaric world wars, the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, clinging to the vice of Nazism and Atheist Communism, seeks for a new path of salvation to be revealed to the lost humanity.

"Let us remember, dear ones," writes Fr. Calabria to his friars on 1 November 1940,*“the hour we cross is a terrible one, no one knows what we will encounter. Undoubtedly, God will rebuild a great deal from this general mess of things and principles, but how we will come to this good? We run into an order of new things. He wants everything to be renewed, and we too have to renew ourselves: "either renew yourself or die!" There is no way out. And we will renew if we live practising the Holy Gospel, if we become living Gospels. We must say, there is too much dissonance between what the Gospel teaches and what we do. We must take away this contrast."*

For the great love we have for Fr. Calabria, there is the risk of letting us take exaggerated exaltation and present him as a sudden and solitary meteor, which appeared in the firmament of the Italian Church. Fr. Calabria is part of a constellation of holy reformers; he flows along with that concealed movement, which includes all aspects of the Church's spiritual life viz. from theological and biblical deepening to liturgical and

pastoral experiments. All the tumult of ideas, proposals and actions that prepared all to the setting for the formulations, proposals and indications of Vatican Council II.

Fr. Calabria has not played an important role in the development of theological, liturgical or pastoral sciences. He kept himself informed of everything, but he did not have the basics and requirements to make his contribution in these fields.

Fr. Calabria, with the science and wisdom that come from the Holy Spirit, has sensed the heart and soul of theology and pastoral. He found the unifying principle and thrust. And this left him to conquer and become a passionate apostle.

"Only faith which works through charity" (Gal 5: 6): Here is the heart of the Church. Faith and charity are not attitudes that walk parallel or juxtaposed but merge. Faith is alive if it works by charity; Charity is true if it flows from faith. Two inseparable motives of the Christian soul. Perhaps in this synthesis is the spirituality of Fr. Calabria and is the focal point of what has been elaborated in the Second Vatican Council. Faith, in Fr. Calabria, not exposed in theological treatises or in psychological descriptions. We find this in his writings and in his life. Faith, for him, is to trust God entirely, sincerely.

A faith that does not stop at the verbal announcement, but reaches to the extreme consequences*: "You either believe or not believe; If one does not believe let the Gospel be torn apart!"* From faith comes absolute trust in God*: "God will provide!"*

Meeting with Fr. Riccardo Lombardi

The words of the Verona priest, closed in the reading room of his house, are in perfect harmony with the fiery sermons that he holds, from 1946, a great mob dragger, Fr. Riccardo Lombardi,[123] scornfully the

[123] *Riccardo Lombardi sj* (1908-1979) was the first one to use radio and theatres in Italian squares to proclaim the religious messages. He was a great organizer

Communists called him the "microphone of God". Fr. Calabria, the humble priest, works in hiding, personally communicating with cardinals and bishops and flooding parishes and families with myriad of brochures and leaflets, with the aim of reforming the Church, from high hierarchies to simple clergy, from religious to all Christians; Father Lombardi, the great charismatic speaker, has pulpit as classrooms of the universities, theatres, cinemas, theatres, squares. Father Lombardi's audience, day after day, is growing ever more: 15,000 people at Vigorelli Velodrome in Milan; 20,000 in Pisa; 30,000 in Florence and Arezzo; 60,000 in Palermo; 200,000 in Turin; Half a million in Rome. When you talk through the radio, millions of people remain nailed to listen to him. Such a burning soul, wholly endowed with the ideal of the Kingdom of God, could not but meet with Fr. Calabria.

On 19 September 1947 Fr. Lombardi is in Verona. He holds a series of conferences to propagate the "Crusade of Goodness": a general mobilization for a spiritual awakening of consciences, in view of the birth of a society according to the heart of Jesus. He asks to have an interview with Fr. Calabria. He wants to expose his ideas and get advice from him. So, the meeting between the two priests is presented in the book "The microphone of God" by Giancarlo Zizola.[124]

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of modernization of the mission of the Roman Church. During 1948-1950, he was known as the champion of anticommunism and the secret agent of Pius xii in Italian politics. In communism, he saw the “staff of God” for the conversion of the church. For him everything had its function to realize the principal objective viz. the diffusion of the Gospel message to every humans. For this purpose Fr. Lombardi hit at the peak of the church of the time and pressed the same Pope Pius xii to move him for a structural reformation of the Church with a project of renewal that was by ten years in advance to the Vatican Council II. Vatican Council II emerged after the death of Pope Pius xii in the Roman Curia. He retired in voluntary exile and found the silence, helplessness and mercy as the sole instrument of God for Christianity. He founded the *Better World Movement* (*Movimento del Mondo Migliore,)* that through his preaching helped the clergy to put into practice the resolutions which the Vatican Ecumenical Council had offered.

124 G. Zizola, *Il microfono di Dio*, A. Mondadori Editore, Milano 1990.

"Father Lombardi knows how much Calabria is worried about the holiness of priests. What you cannot yet know is that, since 1946, this old priest appeals a reform of the Church, and even proposes an Ecumenical Council that promotes it.

Neither can he imagine that this encounter is the principle of a spiritual dialogue that will keep him together with Fr. Calabria in the most delicate and tempestuous times of life. He entrusts "the sense of failure" he is trying for the opposition he finds in Rome.

"But thank you the Lord!" Calabria answered him calmly.

"The Lord is preparing just like this! It is the Lord who returns to the world, and returns through you: here he is here! "And touches Father Lombardi for the cassock.

"We have here the Lord! The Lord is near us! He will have hostility and has to suffer much, but you must not be afraid. So are the works of God. And then, the souls cost dear. However, the Lord is with you. "

And, as in the language of the fiery preacher there seems to emerge a will to establish an age of Jesus on earth, Fr. Calabria continues:

"So, you want the Lord come back to the world. Very well! But for now, you try to talk! You have the qualities and use it. Speak; speak frankly, with the Gospel. Speak everywhere! Even louder! ".

"Even to the Pope?"

"Why not? That is just a beautiful inspiration! Certainly, also to the Pope, because there is a need for a nice reform also in Rome, a cleansing of the Roman Curia, that Papal Court. "

"I'm suffering in Rome for this," tells Lombardi.

"It's natural! I suffered when I was there".

"But then I do well to announce categorically that a great time is coming for the restoration of Italy to Jesus, and we will see things that will make strides in history?"

"You have to say," says Fr. Calabria. "Nor is it excluded that there is a collision before that. All depends on us priests, we are the guides. You must first do that general work that renews everything"[125].

The Church renewal

Although the activity of Father Lombardi had a decisive influence on the political life of the first post-war period of Italy, the relationship between Father Lombardi and Fr. Calabria is confined to the spiritual and moral aspect of the Christian community. Political Commitment is frustrating to Fr. Calabria. He cares about man, his soul, the dawn of the Kingdom of God and the salvation of humanity.

Pius Xll had instructed Father Lombardi to elaborate a reform plan for the Church and the Roman Curia. Father Lombardi prepares the draft and sends it to many people for they express their opinion.

Perhaps more profound solicitation, certainly the most impressive of Father Lombardi, comes from Fr. Calabria:

"*There indeed is in many priests the desire for reform, many regret their deficiencies, and they are not satisfied with a mediocrity that weighs first on ourselves and then on others ... I have received several letters of priests who are frankly Open. They expressing the need for a precise orientation that should come from above, but it is necessary both to be prepared from below*"

Fr. Calabria, in fact, is very sensitive to the theme of reform in the Gospel sense: "*To bring Christ back to the midst of the people". It reminds me that some priests lead a "standard of living so different from the teachings of the Holy Gospel. ... It seems to me that a reform plan is needed; I would say almost a general reform. ... It is about the revision of our positions: the problem of priestly and religious vocations, studies and training in the Seminaries, the novitiate year, preparation for orders, theological studies, early priesthood, honorariums, tariffs, and benefits, without excluding even higher goals, such as you mention*

125 *Ibid.,* p. 94ss.

me in your letter. All this with the aim of facilitating the path of holiness to the priest. "[126]

On June 1, 1948 Fr. Lombardi returned to Verona at San Zeno in Monte to consult Fr. Calabria. *"If Jesus inspires you to speak, speak out clearly,"* tells Fr. Calabria.

"You will have much to suffer. The souls cost. But this is also helped by other holy souls." Fr. Calabria insists that, in the draft that is being prepared for Pope Pius XII, it is also mentioned in the change of method that must be with *"non-Christians"* and *"Protestants". "We must go to them without waiting for them to come first. It is an age for the Church as it has never been."*

A week later, while Fr. Calabria celebrates Holy Mass according to the intentions of his friend, Fr. Lombardi, he feels an inspiration that seems to have come to him directly from the Lord. I openly confess it: *"You have a great mission. What has been so far is not even the prologue. The whole world looks to Italy, Rome and the Church. From there, renewal must begin. The present Pope has to start. Then the others will continue and do so much more. You must have twin souls who have the same spirit. I think of twelve people, and they go to the ends of the earth. They will be the apostles of this new era. What wonders we shall see when Jesus will manifest himself fully…."*

And Fr. Lombardi, after these talks, hurriedly fixed on a notebook the ideas and suggestions that Fr. Calabria had exposed to him: the abolition of names, titles, dignity, pompous ceremonies, anachronistic ceremonies, the need to go down among the people, etc.

"It is better that we make the cutting, continues Fr. Calabria on August 5, 1948, before the Lord intervenes by means of some other scourge ... God's designs are great, the events of war have brought peoples closer. Soil is ploughed, many barriers have fallen, and everything is coordinated with the triumph of Christ and the Church. In the communion of all believers in Him, without distinctions and divisions of any sort ... I feel that this is an era that marks the return of humanity to Jesus".

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126 Ibid., pp.148ss.

Points reserved for Church Reform

In the letter he had sent to Fr. Lombardi, in response to the request for suggestions, Calabria, had enclosed some *confidential notes*, insisting on the need for a radical renewal of the Church:

"To renew the world, we need to renew ourselves... Modern minds have come to the fore because of the lack of religious culture. The methods in use are outdated in the Church, lack of social justice ... the poor, the workers have gone away from us because we have turned away from them. We really lack proper understanding of their needs ... The remedy is in the recovery of the interiority of the faith, without which it would be reduced to sterile activism.

Let the priests distinguish themselves with charity. Let them come into contact with the poor, with the misery of the slum.....that the parishes turn from bureaucratic centres to charitable centres ... so that the Church takes its natural and divine task becoming the president of charity, the patron of suffering from material and moral needs. ..... Let the priests be detached from money, let them not demand any fees for the sacraments ... How can they preach blessed are the poor and worship comfortable life? How to boast the squalor of the crib and present a well-decorated presbytery? How to exalt the sacrifice of the Cross and do not know how to give up extravagancies such as the cigarettes? "

Going further, he is not afraid to look up, speaking openly of the Roman Curia… *"their bourgeoisie, of the mentality of business employees no longer concerned with the priestly ministry. Of course, the situation of the Eternal City is not proportionate to the numerical exuberance of clergy and religious, and the lack of support to other positions..."*[127]

In the eyes of Fr. Calabria there is the sad situation of misery and abandonment of the Roman peripheries, where his priests are working.

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127 *Ibid.*, p.164.

And, increasingly, in an increasingly spontaneous and detailed way, he continues his analysis, revealing an indirect but precise knowledge of the Roman Curia. He denounces in a macroscopic way the shortcomings without ignoring the merits and virtues.

As for ecclesiastical celibacy, Fr. Calabria suggests, "*he offers a hand to those who want to rehabilitate*", shortening the trial time. "*As for the others [that is, those who had already been married] it would be quite out of place for the Church to review its practice in this matter, even to grant, in certain cases, full freedom? Many of the children who are in painful situations are equally in dangerous situations to their souls and are, for the Church, a dead weight. By giving them liberties, could be precious energies that serve the cause of good ...* ". He could speak with competence on this problem by having already experienced it in the House for priests at Maguzzano, and, in a more discreet way, in many other Houses of the Congregation. His remarks come from familiarity with charity and mercy of Jesus of the Gospel. Fr. Lombardi notes and retires in his Mondragone, a hermitage to give definite body to his Church reform project. Fr. Calabria follows his footsteps. Pray and tremble for him. It seems he possessed the gift of perceiving, even from far, the difficulties and the crises of this friends.

Then writes to Fr. Lombardi: "*I feel how much you suffer ... But you should not be afraid of anything, because the work is not yours, it's Jesus'. That is why I am not surprised at your trials; these are indeed the "visa endorsements" of all doing His works. Certainly, the war that is being moved by the less likely, saddens, but be certain that the Lord never does things in half, and will serve these trials to a greater triumph ... We are at a great opportunity, unfortunately many do not know gravity, you have the task of making it known before it's too late "*

Given the difficulty of addressing the reform from above and from the clergy, Fr. Lombardi puts it on a reform that begins with the laity. Develops a project for them. He intends to form a so-called "Senate of the World": a team of selected eminent laity, at the disposal of the Pope, put next to the Cardinal senate, as an advisory form. He talks to Fr. Calabria in his visit to Verona on April 18, 1949. Fr. Calabria has no

doubt: "*They will become a permanent institution in the Church to preach the pure spirit of the Gospel.*"

As for the curial oppositions, he encourages him not to give them too much weight: "*You will see, the door of the Pope will open.*"

And he proposed him to visit a person: "*Go find the Card. Schuster in Milan. He is a Cardinal of Renewal. Maybe he is the person looking for the new reform: He is a new San Carlo Borromeo.* "

And Fr. Lombardi goes to Milan. He presents his project to Cardinal Schuster: "We would like a cardinal to begin. If it is not possible from the High [of the Pope], at least a diocese could move: the world is waiting. " The cardinal lets him talk for two hours without interrupting him and his conclusion is drastic: "*I agree with you, Father. But the man who is waiting for is not there, among us Cardinals."*

Fr. Lombardi is disappointed by this silence of the hierarchies, which are affected by the stagnant situation, blocked by the heath of Pius XII. In recent years, Pope Pacelli has withdrawn in solitude. He does not appoint Cardinals; he has no secretary of state. He gives great collective interviews and holds great speeches, but he immediately retraces himself into his isolation. Illness undermines his already fragile body.

Cardinal Schuster, writing to Fr. Calabria, urges him to "*pray very much for the Pope. It is necessary that God may give him light and strength, because many things we cannot do without him.*"

Fr. Lombardi retires on Mount Tuscolo near Frascati, in the vast villa Mondragone. It is based on the "Better World Movement" with the aim of promoting a profound reform of the Church and the Catholic world. He faced for it a period of great suffering. His thoughts are not well understood. For his ideas, then too innovative, he is targeted by all parties and later marginalized into oblivion. Many of these ideas will become reality with the Second Vatican Council. It is certainly a prophetic spirit and, like every prophet, must suffer a lot. Truthfully, some of his passionate shots and verbal rude style on people he considers reticent or too cautious make him invisible to many.

They appreciate his fiery words and his apostolic desire to bring everyone to Christ and his Gospel, but they cannot understand the verbal virulence and the radical nature of his affirmations. Pius XII, too, began to show himself a little cold to him. Nor does he support him openly.

Fr. Lombardi in the retreat of Galloro, to the Roman Castles, forms the Project of Church Renewal in a definitive form. It is made up of 60 type-written pages. On Aug. 22, 1948, he sent them to Pope Pius XII, with trepidation and "*childhood confidence*".

The project echoes, here and there, the prophetic words of Fr. Calabria.

And, Fr. Calabria from Verona encourages him: "*It is Jesus who speaks in you about the reform of the Church and especially of Vatican. Go on. It does not matter to use vehemence on the Vatican and betrayal and mercenaries, ambitions and courtiers. His mission is to prepare with the Gospel preaching the soul of a world, which providentially moves towards the unity of peoples, that is fellowship of all men.* "

And, Fr. Lombardi continues, exhorting the Pope not to spend too much time for Italy at the expense of other Catholic nations of the rest of the world. It would also gain the same Italy. The Italian Episcopal Conference would grow in responsibility and in initiatives.

It launches the idea of Pope's missionary journeys. A dream that will begin to be realized with John XXIII, with Paul VI and, above all, with the great missionary apostle John Paul II. He proposes an open conclave for the election of the pontiff even outside the cardinal group. He suggests an age limit for occupying certain offices. The Roman Curia Congregations need not be pure administrative centres, but have a propulsive and stimulating role for the Church. We must combat the bureaucratic mentality, the Professional spirit, the worldly ambition.

In this long list of reforms that the echo of Fr. Calabria's reserved memoirs and the ideas that have long been circulating among priests, through the *Apostolica Vivendi Forma*.

The project also invokes a change of direction in the ecumenical field. And here are exactly the instances of Fr. Calabria.

He also calls for the reduction of Italian dioceses: from 284 to 140. Bishops are to be chosen among the most capable and zealous clergy. In addition, Pope could promote the idea of an inter-diocesan clergy, available to any diocese and for special tasks (it is the famous "*flying team" or "apostolic priests" of Fr. Calabria*). He calls for the economic equalization of the clergy to remove inequalities between rich priests and poor priests.

On the burning issue of the celibacy of priests, he is not afraid to recognize a large number of those who abandon the priestly mission. For those who would show repentance, "*why not we stretch them a hand with greater charity, so that they may find a way back, or be enabled for active service in the church?*"

Review the modalities for admission to the priesthood: do not be afraid to wait if there is not enough human maturity. Finally, address the apostolate of the laity. He proposes "*unity in diversity, without indulging in monopolistic forms, and leaving freedom of action and spontaneity of charism, all coordinated by a diocesan and national laity consultation.*"

The work of Fr. Lombardi continues in all the pulpits of the world, revealing everywhere his ideas of Church renewal. Many of the ideas of Fr. Lombardi's project have become, through the Second Vatican Council, a common patrimony of the Church. Although, as Calabria had prophesied, they had to spend years of misunderstanding, suffering and hostility before.

Fr. Lombardi died on December 14, 1979.

Fr. Mondrone

Towards the end of 1930, the Jesuit father Mondrone, a writer of the prestigious Catholic Civilization magazine, was passing through the

Venetian province.[128] People spoke to him about Fr. John Calabria *: "It would be good that you know him. You do not often know of a living saint!* - said a confrere to him - *present to him and ask for confession. He will certainly not reject."*

Fr. Mondrone met at San Zeno in Monte and after a short waiting in the caretaker; he was accompanied to the modest living of Fr. Calabria. Fr. Mondrone remembers*: "I discovered in that man, who was looking at me with disarming fatherly smile, a true image of humility. Expression, attitude, words, everything in him said humility. "* Fr. Calabria spoke slowly, with some difficulty, with a few references to 'Catholic Civilization' Journal and in words of admiration for a priest of whom he had certainly read the articles.

Continued Fr Mondrone in his memories*: "This priest was professed to be a simple and humble servant of the Lord's Opera, destined to remain hidden and work in simplicity. But as the conversation spanned over topics about the world, the Church, the priests, I saw that humble priest leap over and take heights to heights that, watching them, crushed those who were listening."*

Then, suddenly, Calabria changed tone and became fervent when he began to speak of *"the urgent need to be men of the Gospel. The world moves away from God, times become more and more sad and will also involve the Church."*

He spoke of *"the hour of God, the hour of great trial"* to which we had to be prepared. And there was no other preparation than to *"go back to the Gospel, live the Gospel, be true Christians, true priests and religious".*

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[128] *Domenico Mondrone s.j.* (1897-1985). Writer of *Civiltà Cattolica* for 54 years. He was asked to write the first biography of Fr. Calabria. He could not accept it because he said, "I feel incapable of capturing all the multifaceted personality of Fr. Calabria, who looks like a saint." In his series "Even today there are Saints", in Volume V, he traced a profile of Fr. Calabria. He wrote a famous article on Fr. Calabria, shortly after his death, titled "*A gem of the Italian clergy*", in *Civiltà Cattolica* Quad. 2509 (1955), pp. 37-52.

Fr. Mondrone felt involved in this desire for conversion and general reform, so he asked for a confession. Fr. Calabria was far away with his words, and seemed to be unwilling to accept this request, but without difficulty, he clutched the table he had at hand, and he listened to him listening.

"You often do not confess to a saint", his colleague told him. So he began to confess, with the intention of giving him a general confession. But it was not half a minute that he felt to touch his shoulder and "*That's right!*" Fr. Calabria added a few words and concluded with absolution. He had understood everything and did not need so many words. A particular gift or charism allowed him to read in the soul. Many people had experience and witnessed it publicly.

After this meeting, Fr. Mondrone saw Fr. Calabria only a few times, but continued to hold contacts by means of letters and postcards (around forty of them), in which the tenacious memory and paternal goodness of Fr. Calabria is evident. They are affectionate greetings for all occasions, always filled with prayers, expressions of appreciation for some articles, or deep gratitude for the reviews of the books that came from the heart of the Opera, beginning with the *Apostolica Vivendi Forma.*

When Fr. Mondrone sent some publications to Calabria that collided with his ideas and concerns, his joy became incontrovertible and he was a caring propagandist. Of two works, in particular, he became promoter and speaker: (*Parole Chiare agli uomini che pensano, e Sacerdote ascoltami*!) Clear words to men who think; and Priest listen to me! A collection of the best writings of St. Alphonse on the priest.

Fr. Calabria wanted *"The Catholic Civilization"* to become an instrument of *"the seven trumpets of the Apocalypse"* to shout in all directions that *"the hour of God is near,* indeed*, is already coming", "that is going to take the great test also for the Church "*that*" urges to change life to follow the Gospel ".*

Towards the end of 1942, in the wake of the war, Fr. Calabria sent a long letter to Fr. Mondrone to encourage him to make a general appeal, to spread everywhere, to call everyone, but especially "*priests and*

religious" to a conscientious examination to see which part of the responsibility each had in the current crisis.

Finally, he invited Father Mondrone to preach to the priests! A hard work. And he also sent him a track for an article.

On January 2, 1943, Fr. Mondrone published an article*: We Christians in the face of the present tragedy.* Fr. Calabria overflowed with joy*;* Fr. Mondrone had guessed his thought. From this article he obtained a compendium, contained in a leaflet, entitled *A voice that cries*.

Italy was then, split into two trunks from the Tosco-Emilian front (the Gothic line). In Rome, the Jesuits printed hundreds of thousands of copies for the South of Italy and Fr. Calabria printed as many copies for the North.

Fr. Mondrone elaborated other articles that always covered the same subject. Before giving them prints, he sent them to Fr. Calabria to read, asking for his opinion. There was no delay: Fr. Calabria marked his punctual remarks, some perplexities and some suggestions.

Qualified lay people, builders of the new humanity

Fr. Calabria advanced times in esteeming the laity in the Church.

The long labour that shook the Congregation he founded and which had as its cause the acquisition and affirmation of the principle of equality between priests and lay brothers, began from his perception of a Church that Vatican II would emphasize both in the dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium as in the Apostolicam Actuositatem* (decree on the laity).

"The laity, assembled in the people of God and constituted in the one body of Christ under one head, whoever they are, are called as living members to contribute with all their strength, received by the goodness of the Creator and the grace of the Redeemer, The rise of the Church and its ever-increasing asceticism in holiness. The apostolate of the laity is therefore a participation in the same saving mission of the Church and

to this apostolate are all destined by the Lord himself through baptism and confirmation."[129]

For Fr. Calabria, the consecrated layman should not be merely a subordinate, an auxiliary, but a conscious and necessary complement of priestly ministry: the *"a parallel rail tracks" to the priest in the path of salvation, "soul and body"* of the same organism. Great idea, prophetic, too advanced for his times.

But he did not stop only with the consecrated laity. Accepting the offer of the House of San Giacomo of Vago, he immediately thought of using it as *"centre of people's encounter": "to prepare professionals, experts in all fields of culture, science, arts, social and political services, so that they could become Animators and priests in temporal realities, in the line of Christ, of His Gospel, and of His Kingdom"* [130].

In 1954, a few months before his death, Calabria wrote an article on Veronese Catholic Daily newspaper 'The Corriere del Mattino': *"Humanity is going through a very serious hour ... it has come to a truly decisive turn ... Urges a remedy. Who has to do? To all of them certainly! But there are categories of people who more than others can and must work ... to save the whole man. Priests, doctors, masters, executives, authorities, and those who have public responsibilities: business executives, entrepreneurs, scholars, heads of associations, writers, ministers of the nation ... all of them weigh a great, sweet responsibility for the sake of the brethren* [131].

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129 Lumen Gentium n. 33.

130 A. Majo-L. Piovan, *L'Epistolario Schuster-Fr. Calabria 1945-1954),* NED, Milano 1989, p. 106.

131 G. Calabria, *Formare uomini nuovi è urgente*, in *Corriere del Mattino*, 14 aprile 1954

Fr. Calabria tried to raise in the laity an awareness of their vocation and mission, without fear of pushing them to holiness, to the full gift of the Kingdom of God, each according to his state [132].

All the writings of Fr. Calabria that deal with the apostolate of the laity seem to advance, albeit with vague and non-organic terms, the magisterium of Supreme Pontiff John Paul II, in the two enchanting encyclicals, *Christi fideles laici and Redemptoris Missio.*

The laity is not a Christian of "B" series for the priest and religious, but complete Christian, elevated to priestly dignity as regards the works specifically assigned to him [133].

"Hence the laity, dedicated as they are to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvellously called and prepared so that even richer fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit--indeed even the hardships of life if patiently borne--all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (cf. Pet. 2:5). In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God. [134]

With a decade in advance, we find these same thoughts in Fr. Calabria. Responding to Mrs. Pirelli, who had created an association in Milan to promote the work of Nomadelfia by Don Zeno Saltini, took advantage of this to reiterate the concept of Catholic laity*: "There is an urgent need for holiness in Christians; there is a need for the "Living Gospels" who shows the practice of what is being taught. The world*

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132 Cfr. padre Valentino Macca, relatore della Causa di beatificazione, in *Congregatio pro causis Sanctorum, Relatio et vota Congressu speculiaris super virtutibus Servi Dei Ioannis Calabria,* Roma 1985, p. 139.

133 Cfr. G. Ramseyer, Povera Serva della Divina Provvidenza, *Questa è l'ora di Gesù*, in *Studi calabriani*, Verona 1998, pp. 85-102.

134 Lumen Gentium 34.

does not listen to the good speeches too gladly, but firmly believes in charity, in the practice of the Gospel. And the Gospel affirms the secret of the apostolate in favour of souls: inner life, prayer, meditation, spiritual readings ... the spiritual food, dispensing with others effectively; Otherwise, if you are empty of God, how can you sanctify the souls?

Therefore, our external activity must be nourished and always supported by inner life, union with God."[135]

External Brothers

Since 1932, Calabria was thinking of creating a lay aggregation to spread the spirit of the Opera in the midst of the world. He wrote: *"I feel that the Lord wants to unite, to this Congregation, two other branches, which must bring great glory to God and good to souls. I do not know if the goodness and mercy of the Lord will allow me to see this divine seed. Certainly, it is a great design: it is about Catholic diocesan priests and Catholics. Everyone in their own place, with special rules, must achieve, with the evangelical spirit, their own and others sanctification.*

As belonging and early in this century-old Order, it seems to me that the Lord wants to be use Eng. Stefano De Stefani, Adv. Ferruccio Giuli, Dr. Achille Roncato of Padoa, Dr. Luigi Bellomi of Genoa. These must become source of so much work.[136]

The authorised birth of this branch of the Opera takes place on October 8, 1944, the day of the 71st birthday of Fr. Calabria.

The first secretary, the Architect Cesare Carletti, describes us as we have come to the drafting of the External Brothers' Rules: *"For some time, Fr. John Calabria was in the mood to bring together a group of men who, living in the world in the spirit of the House and Opera, may*

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135 G. Calabria, *Scritti,* ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona, Fasc. 44,n. 4335.

136 G. Calabria, *Rendiconto – Diario, 7 maggio 1932* [Diario 1930-1935], ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

shine the grace that Providence infuses into the House itself. This was so much in the heart of Fr. Jphn Calabria. "

The seed of this work, said Fr. Calabria, would be sprouted at the time. Meanwhile, they had to pray and live according to the evangelical spirit.

Twelve members formed the first nucleus. Fr. Calabria was in Negrar for treatment. He sent a greeting message asking for the blessing of the new Opera. The officers, which he had already chosen for this time, Fr. Calabria himself: president, Giacomo Martini; Secretary: Architect Cesare Carletti; Counselors: Dr. Filippo Parolari, Professor Luigi Squassabia and Brother Giovanni Corradin; Ecclesiastical assistant, Don Antonio Dalla Riva.

In a second draft of the Rules, on February 12, 1947, it was clarified that the Family of the External Brothers should not be like a Franciscan Third Order. Fr. Calabria presented it as a new Opera*, "suitable for the times we live". With theological precision anticipated by the Second Vatican Council, the external brothers urged "to share with joy the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience of the Poor Servants", living in their vocation as baptized "the spirit of poverty and chastity according to their own State and with the promise of obedience to the Superior General. "*

In a letter addressed to the whole Congregation, written in Lent of 1946, Fr. Calabria said, *"I feel that the divine Master wants me to address my poor word ... even to the dear External Brothers, the first cell of a great Opera, small Seed of a big tree. As their name indicates, they are not Religious in the strict sense; They could not even be because they have their family and live in the world, where they have to radiate that light drawing people to the source of the Opera.*

His Excellency our beloved Bishop ... has deigned to bless this new creature. The Divine Providence, for miraculous ways, wanted to mature a design outlined for years, by placing these my dear Brothers and Sisters alongside you Poor Servant Religious. Let them form one with you, fulfilling a special mission of our present time, parallel to yours, always with the same pure and genuine spirit that the divine Founder

has put from the beginning; and alas if we fail in it! The Opera would fall, this luminous light, switched on by divine Providence ... would be extinguished. "

And again*: "The Opera of the External Brothers must be the little flock that must invoke men and the world to the Holy Gospel ... The purpose of the Congregation of the Poor Servants must be to cooperate for the unity of Christians. You too, have a special mission to do: in the family, in the office, in your profession you practice, in the work environment, how much good you can do!* [137].

And finally, in another letter to the Religious, on Thursday, 1948: *"Speaking to the Religious, I also include you External Brothers, who are part of the Opera, and so share in the graces, merits and responsibility of the Poor Servants. If you live in the holy love and fear of God, irradiating the pure and genuine spirit of the Opera, first, at home, fulfilling all the duties inherent in the proper state. And then out of the house, in the office, workshop, everywhere, how good you can do, especially in this grave and decisive time for the fate of our dear Homeland!"* [138] .

Today, the External Brothers' Family has also been opened to the External Sisters; it has also spread outside Verona and has branches throughout the world. The headquarters are always in Verona, via San Zeno in Monte 23.

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137 G. Calabria, *Lettere del Padre ai suoi Religiosi*, a cura della Congregazione dei P.S.D.P., Ferrara 1956., pp. 221-226.

138 *Ibid.* p. 260.

Chapter Twenty

DECRETUM LAUDIS
THE PONTIFICIAL APPROVAL

After the tempestuous story that led to Vatican intervention, the Congregation of Poor Servants slowly resumed activities and its normal life. The apostolic visit, although could be said ended by August 1937, it lasted for many more years. Abbot Caronti had proposed to the Sacred Congregation of the Religious to "study the text of the Constitutions more thoroughly in order to make them, if necessary, the modifications that best reflect their own and specific purposes of the Institution."[139] He himself offered to redefine the text of the Constitutions and reach *Decretum Laudis* (Decree of Praise) by the Congregation of Religious. Unfortunately, due to the many duties of the abbot, the revision was slow. And went up to June 1943. The Apostolic Visitor finally came to Verona and handed over to Fr. Calabria the new draft of the Constitutions. The scheme was well structured, according to the legal systems of the Code of Canon Law, but remained elusive as far as the complete equality between priests and brothers was concerned. Fr. Calabria also showed the draft to members of the General Council and on his own wrote some notes. The text is preserved in the Historical Archives of the Congregation with the valuable autograph records of Fr. Calabria. On the cover of the file, it is written: "July 23, 1943 - *Annotations that in the Lord I feel I am doing because the Opera is truly*

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[139] E. Caronti, Sacra Congregatio pro causis sanctorum, Veronen., Canonizationis Servi Dei Ioannis Calabria fundatoris Congregationum Pauperum Servorum et Pauperum Servarum Divinae Provvidentiae, Positio super virtutibus, Roma 1984, Summarium, Pars altera, p.612.

what He, the Lord our Master, desires".[140] And again: "*I feel right now, that our Congregation should be called and be virtually a Family, and with this name it must be indicated, replacing the term Congregation. The name family best expresses the constraints and relationships that must be established between the various members, namely the bonds of perfect brotherhood among the Religious, the bonds of children in the juniors to the seniors and the close union of all towards the Casante who is the father."* He wanted to be reiterated that Lay Brothers should not be equated with the Familiar Brothers of other Orders, but be considered Religious with full rights and duties as Priests. That is why they had to possess or acquire a convenient and sufficient culture by acquiring qualifications, degrees and Masters. However, both priests like the Brothers, should be willing to do everything, even to the humble offices. Unfortunately, Abbot's aristocracy, legion to the regulations and the Benedictine tradition, could not grasp and codify this new spirit that erupted into canonical laws, codified over time.

On July 24, 1943, Fr. Calabria sent back to Father Abbot the draft of the Constitutions with the side notes. On September 25, 1943, Father Caronti wrote to Fr. Calabria: *"I take advantage of these days in which I live in Subiaco, to give the last touch to the Constitutions, having now received all the remarks also from the priests of Rome ...*" (to which he had shown it). On November 11, he writes again: "T*he work of the Constitutions is over, and I have tried to introduce what is in your desires ... I would like to show you before introducing them again. But how do you do it now? The Lord will help us.* " In fact, Italy was divided into two trunks, the Allied Forces in the South and the German Army in the North. The text remained in the apostolic Visitor's drawer for another three years. Fr. Calabria in a reminder of June 1944 wrote: "*Reaching the pacification of fact, Fr. Abbot Caronti acknowledged the need to review the Constitutions, to take root in everything that had given way to misunderstandings and inconveniences, and to perfect them*

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140 G. Calabria, *Annotazioni alle Costituzioni del Caronti, 23 luglio 1943*, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona. Fasc. 111, doc. 8730.

according to the nascent thought."[141] The bureaucratic process was slow. And even this time, external forces intervened to hurry to final approval.

In the summer of 1947, Don Isaia Filippi, a co-worker priest of the parish of San Filippo Neri (Rome), who was working in the area of Primavalle, planned to start an opera in favour of the township boys to remove them from the street and start them to study and work. He asked for help to Supreme Pontiff Pius XII, through Sister Pasqualina Lehner, who was in charge of the Pope's Private Secretariat. By the intercession of this sister, Fr. Isaiah Filippi was able to access the private stock of the pope and of course also approach the same Pius XII.[142] Fr. Isaiah had looked at a plot at Torrevecchia area to build the Institute for the boys. The chief of the Vatican State, Count Galeazzi, after seeing the place, had given a favourable opinion on the implementation. The Vicariate of Rome, on the other hand, did not find good at the somewhat confusing, though generous, activism of the Primavalle curate. Fr. Isaiah, with a little diplomatic touch, still resorted to his patron Sr. Pasqualina, who informed Pius XII. The Pope appointed the Undersecretary of State, Mgr. Giambattista Montini, to be interested in the matter. Fr. Calabria did not like these manoeuvres and did not want to engage in this work. He communicated it to the Vicariate of Rome and to Vatican's Secretariat, claiming that he did not have any mediator. Msgr. Montini was not cautious of this answer. He wanted to realize the true reasons for denial, since the pope had himself proved interested in the realization of this Opera. He went to the parish priest of S. Filippo Neri, Fr. Ottorino Foffano, from whom Fr. Isaiah was dependent, to ask for explanations. Fr. Foffano, confided to Msgr. Montini that the Congregation did not even feel it was taking new commitments because "*it was still under the Apostolic Visit and that Father Visitor encountered*

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141 G. Calabria, *Promemoria del 22 giugno 1944*, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona, Fasc. 72, doc.5915.

142 G. Rocca ,*Gesù Divino Operaio,* in *Dizionario degli Istituti di perfezione*, Roma 1977,IV coll. 1138s.

difficulties in presenting his final report even in view of that unfavourable impression on the part of the Vicariate of Rome." Msgr. Montini was astonished that the Congregation was still under the auspices of Apostolic See and promised that he would have spoken to the pope. At this point, the events took a quick pace.

The State Secretariat asked the Prefect of the Congregation of Religious to officially close the Apostolic Visit, which was acquiesced to the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence. Abbot Caronti answered a little bit annoyed, in spite of the diplomatic words, and added some vague comments: *"The institute was born with a well-defined canonical form: in some respects it was lay, under some others it was mixed. But it became simply clerical with the Constitutions approved by the Bishop of Verona ... Among the measures taken, there was some change in the legal structure, experimentum, to bring the brothers back to the original situation as they were before the diocesan approval of the Constitutions. It did not appeal to everyone, but did not come to serious difficulties, so in fact the mixed type institute began to emerge. All this in addition is not Coded at all."* [143]

Fr. Calabria was saddened by this relationship and the accent made by the Abbot to divergences still existing among his priests. On November 30, 1944, he wrote in his diary: *"My sunset begins with faster steps. I cast into the great arms of Divine Mercy and, with the grace of the Lord, make this last remnant of my long, but poor life, for my sanctification and for the Opera. Enduring in silence the trials, sufferings and humiliations that God's hand will degenerate to send me ... I formulate the following propositions and then pray the charity of my spiritual father who wants to put a word in the seal of the holy will of God. 1 - To remain concealed as much as I can. 2 –Continue my sacrifice.*

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143 E. Caronti, *Poveri Servi della Divina Provvidenza (Verona). Alla Segreteria della Congregazione dei Religiosi*, dattiloscritto del 13 dic. 1947, in Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

3 - Do not talk about me and the Opera, except in extraordinary and obvious cases of the Divine Will." [144]

His father, confessor, Father Cherubino of the Virgin of Carmel (Andrea Richiedei), appoints at the foot of these notes: "*My paternal and priestly blessing on these motives inspired by the Immaculate Virgin and ordered to elevate to a closer union with Jesus the 'the soul of his beloved priest Calabria. His plan, Fr. Calabria in Christ, is this motto: to ascend, to ascend with the exercise of virtues, especially of concealment and silence, in the conquest of religious and priestly perfection. But when it requires the glory of God, it does not matter to come to nothing, but speaks with holy freedom. I count important such is the will of God, who chose the Priest Calabria as a tool for performing good works to the sanctification of souls ...*". And Calabria, energetically out of the ordinary, wrote and sent a reminder to the Holy Father, exposing, without resentment but with great dignity, his original vision of the legal relationship between Brothers and Priests.

"*In relation to the 'information' that the Rev. Father Abbot Caronti, our Apostolic Visitor, sent to the Sacred Congregation of Religious, having read and meditated before my Crucifix, it seems to me to have to do, as if I were on the death bed, the following statements:*

The exposition to the Secretariat of State of His Holiness came as a result of a proposal by the same Secretariat to entrust us with a new activity within our parish of S. Filippo Neri, in Rome, and specifically in Primavalle. The suggestion was made to his Excellency Msgr. Montini that it was not convenient for us to engage in a new activity, while the Institute is still under the tutelage of the Apostolic Visit. Bishop Montini took this to heart and asked us to make a reminder to the Holy Father to have a clear understanding of our situation. The exposition therefore did not intend to ask for a formal "Decretum Laudis". And for correctness we have sent a copy of the reminder to the Apostolic Visitor." Fr. Calabria intends to make it clear that the initiative did not start from

144 G. Calabria, *Diario,* 30 novembre 1944 [Diario 1942-1947], ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

him and there was no attempt to overtake the Apostolic Visitor, although we can say that he had all the reasons for it.

"Now, in the "information" of the Apostolic Visitor it is said that the Institute was born without a well-defined canonical form. To illustrate this, let me take note of the following: One must keep in mind that the Opera is willed by the Lord, He has founded it, that was born of the Holy Pierced Wound of Jesus Crucified. I am nothing but an instrument, poor among all the poor, and precisely because I am here by Divine Mercy as Guardian and Casante, of this Opera, small and humble in itself, but great in God's mind, because it is destined to accomplish new and big plans all during the serious time we are going through ..."

Then he explains the purpose of the Opera and the spirit that must animate it*. "Pure and genuine"* spirit that the Divine Founder has put into the Opera ... that must be manifested through present and future activities, which, to be *"legitimate and genuine",* must always bear the imprint of th*e "Worry Not".* Then, he deals the burning theme of legal equality between priests and brothers. *"As for the members of the Opera, Priests and Brothers, I have always thought of them in the Lord as one, on the same level, in full collaboration, equal in everything, both capable of carrying out every responsibility, even of direction, for as usual, the superiors of the individual Houses agree to be Priests. The Brothers and Priests consider themselves as the body and soul of the same person i.e. here is the genuine spirit of the Opera, here is the precise will of God for us. The Opera of Poor Servants, Priests and Brothers must be an eminently priestly Opera, and therefore legally Clerical ... In some activities that the Lord will give rise according to the needs of the times, even a Brother can be a local superior assisted in this case by a priest for the spiritual aspect. To this end our Brothers can and must be distinguished also by academic formation, necessary to cover such tasks as engineers, doctors, professors ... The Brothers are part of the General Council. I never thought of forming a lay or even simply mixed institute, but, as the Lord made me understand, a Congregation or better a Clerical Religious Family with full equality among its members, priests and brothers. ... From the beginning I had clear signs*

that the Opera was of the Lord, and my confessor, whom I have always held as the interpreter of God's will, saw it in this light [...]. Around 1922 Father Adeodato Piazza, now Cardinal and Patriarch of Venice, who was in charge of the Congregation of Religious, urged me to speak to my Bishop, Cardinal Bacilieri, to erect it as a religious Congregation [...]. I sent him our program, but before receiving a response, unfortunately the death of Bishop Bacilieri was a breaking everything. ... If the Constitutions were approved in the present form by Msgr. Girolamo Cardinale, it has been determined by circumstances that we must not forget." And he explains in detail all the circumstances that led to the diocesan approval. The request of priests for a Roman parish, the solicitation by Father Giulio Bevilacqua, the will of the bishop in wanting to approve only a Clerical Congregation, haste, etc. *"All this led to the approval of a text of Constitutions which, in the haste, did not respond to the genuine thought and manner desired by the Lord [...]. In deference to the ecclesiastical authority and seeing in it the interpreter of God's will, I accepted. But I must say, as if I were on my death bed, that in my heart I felt that the Lord Himself had to intervene in time. That I always told all those who spoke of this, among the members of the Opera, with the same Bishop of Verona; but as long as there had not been a clear sign of the Lord, I kept for God's will what was approved. ...The sign came through the painful facts that Providence allowed and which determined, not by my will, but by the Apostolic Visit ".*

And, for that accusation of the objections of some priests in Rome, he definitely states: *"If anyone, but I do not believe, did not feel to live in the pure and genuine spirit of the Opera, I have always said and repeated , can go, that the whole world is God's field and there is room for everyone to do good. But the Opera is what the Divine Founder wants.*" However, a third letter of the Visitor on 11 December 1943 reiterated to Fr Calabria that the work of the *Constitutions* was over. Unfortunately, the War events did not allow for us a conclusive review. Now we were going to review and deal with the matter thoroughly. "*I repeat that the Opera is precisely for the present times, destined to accomplish in its smallness and poverty, but great in God's mind, new*

and big plans for all time we would be going through. But because it can really achieve these divine designs and be light and ascend with the pure and genuine spirit it is necessary that it receives your "Confirmation", as he repeatedly told the Rev. Father Visitor, a definitive seal of the Lord through the Holy Mother Church, In Sacred Heart, Fr. J. Calabria ".

As you can see, Fr. Calabria continues to repeat what he always thought and stated. He did not care much about the formulas, as long as the substance did not change. On 2 December 1947, the Secretary of the Congregation for Religious, Msgr. Luca Pasetto, issued a decree. It certified that the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence, based in Verona, had to be considered a Body of Pontifical Right. And as such had the legal capacity to acquire and possess, according to the Concordat of the 1929 between the Holy See and Italy. The Decree also indicated the Italian citizen Bro. Consolaro Antonio as the legal representative of the Congregation. He held the office of General Treasurer. This document had only civil legal character, and it was not yet a papal approval of the Constitutions and the spirit of the Opera. Fr. Calabria gave official assignment to Fr. Ottorino Foffano to follow the practices at the Congregation of the Religious. Msgr. Sposetti and Msgr. Arcadio Larraona[145], undersecretaries of the Congregation of Religious, displayed as duty towards the Founder and wanted to know his thought well so that they could codify according to his wishes. Then, he was advised to choose a Cardinal who assumed the task of presenting the instance. They chose Cardinal Adeodato Piazza of the Order of the Discalced Carmelites, who knew and esteemed Fr. Calabria. He willingly accepted. On 18 March 1948, the Congregation of Religious informed Abbot Emanuele Caronti that the apostolic visit was to be considered definitively closed. You carried out all the numerous practices and had all the Commendation Letters by the Bishops where the Poor Servants were working, the massive collected dossier came to

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145 *Arcadio Larraona,* Professor of Canon Law at the Apollinare of Roma and Missionary University of Urbaniana, He became Cardinal during Pope John XXIII, in the consistory of 1959. Partook as expert at Second Vatican Council. He died on 7th May 1973.

the office of the Congregation of Religious and there it stopped. Fr. Foffano wrote directly to Pope Pius XII, soliciting the much desired "*Decretum Laudis"* for the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence. The practice resumed its slow course. The final text of the Constitutions was presented. It was prepared by Fr. Luigi Pedrollo, Abbot Emanuele Caronti, Fr. Calabria, and finally the two experts Msgr. Spozetti and Father Arcadio Laraona. However, the most important and innovative part was well expressed in Rule No.10. "*Our Family is a Clerical Congregation, with full equality among its members, priests and brothers; equal in all, on the same level, forming as one, in full collaboration, one and the other able to cover every charge, even of direction and of government, excluding the laity to have jurisdiction. Therefore, ordinarily on individual houses, especially in formation houses, the Superior will always be a Priest."*[146]

Having received the favourable opinion of the Commission of the Consultants of the Cardinal Commission, "*His Holiness, on 25 April 1949, granted His Excellency Cardinal Luigi Lavitrano, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Religious, [...] kindly deigned to praise and recommend, in broad words favours the aforementioned Institute, as a Clerical Congregation of simple vows. It will be under the government of the Superior General, to approve and confirm the Constitutions drafted in Italian ...as experimental for seven years."*

After the "seventh year as experimental," the Holy See, definitively approved the Congregation of the Poor Servants, on 15 December 1956 maintaining the same principles as they had already been approved in 1949. After this long and tormented journey to the sighing of Papal approval, an important facts occurred within the Church. Several papal documents took notice of the Consecrated Religious life. We quote, "*Perfectae Caritatis*" (1965), *Ecclesiae Sanctae* (1966), "*Evangelica Testificatio*" (1971), the *new Code of Canon Law* (1983), and finally John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation "*Redemptionis Donum*" (1984).

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146 *Costituzioni dei Poveri Servi della Divina Provvidenza,* Verona (1949), p. 24.

Much, therefore, has changed in the legal mind-set of the Church. John Paul II, in the Apostolic Constitution "*Sacra disciplinae leges*", reiterates the novelty of Vatican Council II. "*The doctrine that the Church is presented as the People of God and the hierarchical authority is proposed as a service. The doctrine, for which all members of the People of God, in the same way as each one, are part of the threefold office of Christ: priestly, prophetic, and royal. This doctrine also recaptures what concerns the duties and rights of the faithful, and especially the lay people.*" However, despite all these advances in the doctrine of the Church, the intuition and charism of Fr. John Calabria , cannot be said to be fully implemented. It remains as a prophecy and pungent for a new understanding of religious life, which is absent from the clerical or lay state, but emphasizes above all "*the total donation to God, highly beloved.*" Religious people are not in an "*intermediate state between the clerical and the lay state, but on the one hand some faithful are called by God to enjoy this special gift of the life of the Church and to help each in his own way his saving mission*". And yet, according to II Vatican Council: "*The profession of evangelical counsels appears as a sign of the future life ... it does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church, but to its life and Holiness.*" So, continue to make a distinction between Religious Priests and Religious Brothers, known as ancient. Jesus said that you cannot put new wine in old barrels. It is therefore not possible to lock in old schemes the novelty that breaks into the Church by the liveliness of the Holy Spirit. If religious life does not belong to the hierarchical structure, but to the life of the Church, one cannot understand why it is to be encapsulated in schemes that in practice coercive and prevent them from living in the freedom and the goodwill of the children of God. The discipline and the rules are certainly necessary and have been set to protect us from abuse and distortion, but not to mortify the vitality and novelty that the Spirit of the Lord continually enters into his mystical Body, which is the Church.

Pope Paul VI in the "*Octuagesima Adveniens*" states, "*The aspiration to equality and the aspiration to participation are two forms of man's*

dignity and freedom." The push for a community of equal people who are actively involved in community life is no longer a dream, but a burning reality in the soul of the religious Brother, because he also participates in that "*dignity and freedom that goes from the filiation of God the Father*".

Chapter Twenty-One

DIVINE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

There is Providence!

A short word among the *“Good Children`s Home”* of San Zeno in Monte, which sounded strange in the ears of the worldly. In general, words such as money, food or material things were not mentioned, but they used such terms as *"Providence is missing ... Let's pray for Providence to arrive ... Do you need Providence?. Providence has come. "*

In the catechism and vocabulary that circulated at that time, Divine Providence is the one that holds everything and everyone i.e. the grass line and the aged oak, the flower of the lawn and the white lily, the tiny humming-bird and the majestic eagle.

Certainly, Providence is also intelligence, will, labour, technique, and applied science. It is Providence *"the head on our neck and arms! But when it comes to Providence in charitable institutions like ours, we give this word a special, extraordinary meaning, a sense of paternal goodness and care of God in providing material means: food, clothing, and lodging to those who are waiting for seeking his holy kingdom on earth. For us, in particular, there is more to it, because we do not even use certain pure lustres, reclaim, lotteries, festivals, etc. to raise funds. And it is truly an amazing fact that for many years, God has helped the many and serious needs of the House, where so many people need, besides spiritual food for eternal life, abundant nourishment for earthly life."*

To better understand how, in the early years, the action of Providence was understood, stressed and worked concretely within the

Opera, we cite some episodes that were published in 1927 on the occasion of the XXV foundation of the “Good children`s Home”.

The facts that are cited here have the seal of absolute truthfulness. There were too many living witnesses to try to indulge in uplifting examples without a basis of authenticity. And, above all, Fr Calabria was vigilant, in the veracity and hold a control over imaginative anecdotes. The examples have the scent of Franciscan innocence. It's nice to bring them back to these pages keeping the same style in which they were written[147].

The folk tales

"Among the people of Verona circulated many stories of extraordinary facts and miraculous happenings that took place in the House of St. Zeno in Monte viz. stuffed wagons, filled flour bags not known from where, always full barrels of wine, dining table suddenly full with every good gifts of God, fabulous legends ... Fantasies, fantasies. Nothing is known about its sources.

The Lord has certainly the power to do these miracles, but generally, He works through people; and does not mean that this is not a miracle either.

Ironically, these imaginative stories sprang up when the House was in extreme economic difficulty and was struggling between starvations and debts."

The funds to restore the Church

"Father Natale recommended at the beginning of the Opera: "Think also of the children, but do not forget renovating the Church." "But the means?" "You think seriously, and the Lord will manifest his affection by sending the necessary." It is not long time, that Fr. Calabria encounters a wealthy person on the street, who holds him and offers a bank check of

147 Cfr. L. Adami, *La Casa Buoni Fanciulli nel XXV anniversario della sua Fondazione*, in *L'Amico dei Buoni Fanciulli,* Novembre 1932, pp. 228-231.

thirty thousand lire." I heard that you plan to renovate the Church of San Zeno in Monte. My wife and I had thought to devolve this sum at the time of our death, but you need it now, take this money and do what the Lord has inspired you to do. "And these good, old couples without children continued to help the Opera. And this couple had destined their own tomb in the colossal cemetery of Verona. Everyone can see their tomb because it is in the centre of the entrance to the cemetery."

The maid's savings

"A woman, who worked as a house maid in a home, had set aside some savings for her old age. Three lire rolled up and tied with a twine. On a beautiful day she comes to S. Zeno in Monte and handles the money roll, begging to accept the offer.

The director remains puzzled and invites the woman to reflect on what she was doing. "Do not you think about your old age?" "For me, as long as I can, I'll work. Then, Providence will think about it.

A poor man?

"A man in shabby dress comes at the reception. The brother opens the drawer box and is about to give something. But the other stops him and puts him in front of a bunch of coins, the result of his savings, because "you can buy bread for the children." And he goes away being very happy about it.

What's your name?

"An old man offers an offering of three thousand lire. The superior asks his name to report to Fr. Calabria. "You do not have to tell him my name. Simply accept this offering and spend it for your Children."

If I had more

"A worker pays everything he has spared in many years of his work. He offers his donations. And he apologizes for not being able to give more. But he had given everything he owned. "

The offerings of the old woman of the shelter home.

"A small group of old disabled people, dragging hard on S. Zeno in Monte, opens a small bun and pulls out some fruit and a sugar cake. Then they pull out a purse and drain the contents of several coins. "We saved this sugar, renouncing to sweeten milk in the morning. Money is what relatives gave us for our little needs. But we already have everything we need, while these children are orphans and they have nothing". And they came several times to bring their small offerings. "

Investments of a professional

"Because of a foul deal, a professional was risking, going bankrupt. He promises the Lord to allocate some of his earnings to the Good Children`s home if things were resolved positively.

The hopes seemed to blur and he then increased the stake, promising to devolve the full sum of the deal. Suddenly things went well and he kept the promise, delivering twelve thousand lire. "

The miracle of Friar Martino

"A holy Capuchin friar, with a sack on his shoulder, turned to Verona to do the quest for the convent. He was a nice, sociable and charitable figure. This friar seeker, with the permission of his superior, also collected bread for the Good Children. Under the weight of his sack, he climbed up the steep Ladder and drained all the contents of the begging

into the gatekeeper. And, he apologized for not being able to collect more. "

There is a big debt? An old woman thinks in this way.

"We are in the year 1907. There was a thousand lire debt that we did not know how to refund. An old woman comes to St. Benedict Mount and asks the sacristan to speak with Fr. Calabria. "I know that you Reverend took the poor boys-home, who knows what to spend to keep them, while everyone knows that you are poor, and I want to compete with the little I have." She opened a staple, containing ten bills of hundred lire. "The Lord reward you," Fr. Calabria smiles, "tell me your name." "Oh, that does not matter, Reverend. My name, God knows and that is enough. Pray for me "Does it not taste ancient? Is it not pure Gospel? Says St. Augustine:" Simple souls will arise and capture the kingdom of heaven."

The Eight per thousand is not a modern invention

"We are in Este, Padua. A worker proposes to his colleagues to pay a small weekly, free choice, for the Good Children. All accepted the proposal. They come up with a container with the writing on it viz. "For the Good Children". They were small sums, but the workers are hundreds. At the end of the month, a fair amount was collected. And among the workers there were also socialists and anticlerics, but no one refused to give his offering. But they did not content themselves with this. They also thought of the children's festival, which is celebrated in Santa Lucia in Veneto on 13 December. On the eve of the day, a group of workers wore loads of toys, sweets, fruit, to fill the stockings of children."

"We must pull up the benefactors with faith!"

"Many means are the most dangerous temptation," said Fr. Calabria to a brother responsible for the economy.

"We must pull on the benefactors with faith," that is, with the breath of prayer. So sometimes, he sent a Religious to beat the empty buckets on the terrace to attract Providence! Someone, down in the city, commented*: "Up there from Fr. Calabria, they are shaving the bees!"* It's an old system used by beekeepers when they see swarms ready to immigrate to other hives. And instead, for Fr. Calabria, it is a message that sends generous souls to their help.

Sometimes they saw him pick up the wallet and beat it with his hand. He said*, "I'll dance here. Benefactors from afar feel and bring me providence. "*

And providence came in the strangest form.

Fr. Calabria used to go to the custodian every day to see if Providence came. It was not uncommon to find envelopes containing the amount needed to pay an urgent debt for the needs of that day.

Don Luigi Pedrollo reports an incident that Fr. Calabria had told him, "*We were in a time of great need. In the morning I had celebrated the Holy Mass to attract Providence. I felt it would come. I walked in the garden in front of the doorman. Play the Bell Ring. They warn me that Msgr. Serenelli. I thought in me: he'll come and recommend me to taking some needy child. I go and welcome him with admiration and great respect. He immediately tells me: "I thought it would be best to do some good when alive, instead of waiting for something to be left after death, I have something set aside, I thought I would take it to another institute, but I heard it like a voice who told me to take it to you. "I thanked and confided to him that I was just waiting for Providence to arrive. He handed me an envelope containing Seventy thousand Lire!."*[148] It was a huge sum in those days of 1915.

But there is another form of Providence, which meets the needs of a large home that hosts hundreds of people - doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, priests, suppliers. You could make a long list.

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[148] L. Pedrollo*, Cronistoria*, note del 28 Dicembre 1935, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P.,, Verona.

And what about the many public administrators who came to the House, especially when there was rationing and you had to bake bread, pasta, sugar, etc. on ration? And help came from so many people, irrespective of their political colour or their religious faith.

"*The Lord chooses him who is worthy of becoming Minister of Providence*," said Fr. Calabria.

There was, finally, a particular category, whom Calabria considered benefactors. All those who opposed or fought with the Opera. In his great faith in God, he considered them instruments of Providence.

*"*The whole world is Providence" he used to repeat[149].

This unlimited faith and trust in divine Providence must be the trademark of the Opera (the Charism), the end, the very existence of the Opera. And this charism was to be transmitted in "*pure and genuine*" form to the whole Church. It was necessary, that is, to assume a prophetic role for today's world. Of course, the terms "*charism and prophecy*" were not part of the usual vocabulary of Fr. Calabria, expressed in other words: "*pure and genuine spirit ... spirit of the Gospel ... Living Gospels ... Life in the manner of the Apostles ... Absolute Gratitude and Catholicity, etc.* "..

The secret of faith in Providence

In a sleepless night, Fr. Calabria read the whole Gospel. He was shocked. He confessed to one of his priest friends: "*I discovered the Gospel*!"

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149 Fr. Calabria called "*providence*" also the painful facts. In the specific case of the bombing on San Zeno in Monte in the night between 10 and 11 of October 1944 he expressed in this way viz. "*Great misfortune. But my dear ones, a hundred thousand bombs are nothing compared to a single mortal sin. You really have to be afraid of sin.* " Then, as he walked away he told Brother Prospero viz. "*This too is providence*!" In fact, a few days ago a team of republicans of Salò, had appeared, claiming to use the printing press to print leaflets and propaganda posters.

It is easy to read the Gospel; it is more difficult to understand it; impossible, for human beings alone, to live it fully. But Jesus urged us, saying, "*What is impossible to man is possible to God*." Fr. Calabria believed this divine endorsement.

What Calabria was most impressed was those beautiful pages of Chapter VI of Matthew. "*For your life do not bother about, what you will eat or drink, and not even for your body, what you will wear ... Look at the birds of the sky : they do not sow, they do not reap, they do not sow in the barn; yet your Father feeds them ... Look at how the lilies of the field grow: they do not work and do not spin. Yet not even Solomon, with all his glory, dressed like one of them. Now, if God has thus dressed the grass of the field, which is today and tomorrow will be thrown into the oven, will He not do much more for you, people of little faith? Do not bother then saying, What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What will we wear? Of all these things the pagans are concerned. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things will be given in addition*. "

"Therefore I *tell* you, do not *worry* about your *life*, what you will *eat* (or *drink*), or about your *body*, what you will *wear*. Is not *life* more than *food* and the *body* more than *clothing*? *Look* at the *birds* in the *sky*; they do not *sow* or *reap*, they *gather* nothing into *barns*, yet your *heavenly Father feeds* them. Are not you more *important* than they? Can any of you by *worrying add* a *single moment* to your *life-span*? Why are you *anxious* about *clothes*? *Learn* from the *way* the *wild flowers grow*. They do not *work* or *spin*. But I *tell* you that not even *Solomon* in all his splendour was *clothed* like one of them. If *God* so *clothes* the *grass* of the *field*, which *grows today* and is *thrown* into the *oven tomorrow*, will he not much more *provide* for you, *O* you of *little faith*? So do not *worry* and *say*, 'What are we to *eat*?' or 'What are we to *drink*?' or 'What are we to *wear*?' All these *things* the *pagans seek*. Your *heavenly Father knows* that you *need* them all. But *seek* first the *kingdom* (of *God*) and his *righteousness*, and all these *things* will be *given* you besides.

Do not *worry* about *tomorrow*; *tomorrow* will *take care* of itself. *Sufficient* for a *day* is its own *evil*."

They are the words of Jesus. They might sound like a poetic allegory. But it is the Gospel, that is, true and eternal words, not allegory. And as such they are truth says Fr. Calabria. He believed and consistently put them into practice.

In the year 1908 he wrote, "*The House of Good Children for now, is the will of God. We live entirely and totally abandoned to Divine Providence. Therefore, nothing to worry about, but we need only to pray very much. And the Opera is fully His. He will think about it.*

If we used human means, the Opera would cease to be of God's, and then it would become of humans, and would go on like a bank, like a house of commerce, which blooms today and fades away tomorrow ... " A logical and stringent speech as a syllogism. These pages Fr. Calabria did not write as a beautiful proclamation, fruit of fervent meditation or mystifying infatuation. He did not compose it at the table, with the risk of seeing them vanish when it would come in touch with reality, like a night-dream at the dawn of the day. He first experimented, then wrote. They are sentences of 1909 and 1911. But Opera has been living that program for some years now. There was therefore a test of experience. The Gospel inspired the facts, and the facts gave reason to the Gospel.

Fr. Calabria was left to acknowledge the truthfulness and the effectiveness of those words. Providence came without asking anything, except to God, in the supplication of every day, "*Divine Providence, Provide Us!*"

And every time a benefactor sent something, he would say, *"Providence has sent, Providence is given."*

"Where do these furniture come from?" They came as Providence.

"Who sent that potato cart?" They came as Providence.

"And these textile rolls to make clothes for the children?" The Providence sent them.

"Providence gives us, next Sunday, a trip to the village of ... with lunch, offered by the public," he told the boys. And the hundreds and

more of the Good Children gratefully thanked not the Jack and Tim, but Providence. It is understood that Fr. Calabria, very kindly, was never to thank the "ministers" of Providence. In fact, he involved them in this attitude and conveyed them his evangelical certainty: "*Thank the Lord for making him worthy of understanding and of doing charity. He receives far more than we. Thank the Lord! "*

Everything is guided by the Providence of God. It is useless for the treasurer to go with him along to complain about persistent creditors. They threatened to say, "*But you do not trust Providence? See, I do not even have a penny and I think I'm a billionaire.*"

But how many times Fr. Calabria, having found the water in his throat for the urgent needs of the Opera, wiping the rosary and walking slowly up and down the veranda overlooking Verona, "rolled out the Providence," according to its characteristic expression. His breath was a burning, persistent, confident prayer. Prayer was enough. Not a ticket, a phone call, a nod to some benefactor to let him know he was in trouble. Never. He trusted in the Lord. And he prayed, "Divine Providence, Provide us!"

He sent some religious to knock at the tabernacle door or make him remain in Church to pray for hours and hours to "insist and knock" following Jesus' counsel. "Ask and you will be given; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you, for everyone who asks receives, and whoever seeks finds, and whoever knocks it will be open"(Mt 7: 7-8).

Of this lifestyle, with the passage of time, he did not even change a comma. In 1932, when the Opera of Good Children was erected to the diocesan Religious Congregation with the name of Poor Servants of Divine Providence, he wanted it to be codified in the Constitutions. The text remained unchanged even in 1949, when the Opera had "ad septemnium" approval (for seven years) by the Holy See. And so it was maintained in 1956 (Fr. Calabria was already dead), to the final approval. And always with the same words as fifty years ago. And in 1978, after the review of the text for the contributions of the Council documents, there were no changes, even in the lexical form.

"Our present and future works, to be legitimate and genuine, will always have to carry the" Do not be in anguish! " No good work, no soul is excluded for this reason only lacking the means: these will not fail, if we faithfully receive this soul and with faith we give thanks to this opera. The Spirit of Faith and Abandonment to the Providence of God the Father excludes us from claiming any right or compensation for receiving the assistance or for any benefit in their favour if they could not give anything. Indeed, preference must be given to the latter.

It is forbidden to exert any form of advertisement, both in view of material advantages and in enhancing the fame of the Opera.

It is forbidden to promote any self-advertisements, lotteries and the like; make any public thanks and make projects that may put the action of Divine Providence into shadow.

The Opera cannot own real estate, except those necessary for the free conduct of its activities. Even so, he cannot accumulate money or other goods in order to enjoy the fruits and create human security: everything Providence sends, it will be spent for the poor whom the Lord entrusts to us or devoted in charity to the needy.

Our Religious will not seek human protections, they will not count on the material and moral benefits that can come from men; however, they will gratefully accept any spontaneous help or support that through them they would want to send God's Providence to our Father.

You should avoid putting yourself in sight, to exert any form of advertisements, to draw the attention and interest of men on us and on our activities. All this would remove from Divine Providence the opportunity to manifest his paternal, continuous, immediate care to the world. And our brothers would find it an obstacle to clearly acknowledge the presence of God among His children and His love for them". [150]

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150 *5 Constitution and Directory*, Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence (1988), Verona, pp. 42-47.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE ENTIRE WORLD IS OF GOD

Fr. Calabria said with conviction, "*We must be Catholics. The entire world is God's.*" It does not matter to which one he is pleased with, in his or other religious Congregations, as priests or as simple lay people. Therefore, the Opera belongs to each one who lives according to the "*pure and genuine spirit of the Gospel*"[151]

"The Opera must be like a match stick that lights up other Operas," repeated Fr. Calabria. Moreover, how many Opera, big or small, he switched on and helped to turn on, only God knows! [152]

Congregation of the Sons of the Heart of Jesus

Father Mario Venturini (1886-1857) was born in Chioggia, Venice. Ordained as diocesan priest, he pledged with devotion and enthusiasm in the parish ministry and spread devotion to the sacred Heart and the Eucharist. In 1912, he had the inspiration to establish an institute that had the main purpose of honouring priesthood of Jesus, praying and working for sacred ministers to be holy according to the desire of the Heart of Christ.

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151 L'*Opera* (with a Capital 'O' because of its Divine origin), not so much about the members of the Congregations of the Poor Servants and the (sisters) Poor Servants of Divine Providence or the Houses and the Initiatives. True, these are also essential elements of the Opera. But the Opera is above all the **purpose, the ideals, the reasons** for which it is born and grown.

152 M. Gadili, *Tutto il mondo è campo di Dio. Rapporti tra san Giovanni Calabria e i vari Fondatori di istituti Religiosi*, Lito tipografia Fr. Calabria, Verona, 2004.

This men's Congregation began in the year 1926 and the women's section in 1929.

Fr. Venturini devoted all his life for the priests, of whom he was an animator and friend. He welcomed both boys and adults, helping them to discover their journey through the priesthood. He began a spirituality periodical for priests, seminary educators, consecrated persons and God's people. Since 1948, he has promoted the "World Day for Priestly Sanctification".

At the beginning of the Opera, he encountered difficulties in realizing. Thanks to Fr. Calabria's fatherly and enlightened help, he succeeded in carrying out his project, which began in Trento. From Trento it has extended to Barcelona in Messina, In Novara, Loreto in Ancona all in Rome, Zevio in Verona, Marila and Barretos both in Brazil[153]. The Opera of Poor Servants of Divine Providence and the Priestly Congregation of the Sons of the Heart of Jesus always remained united not only in the memory of their saintly founders, but also in an attempt to prepare and donate holy priests to the Church.[154]

Father Gasparino and the Movement "Fathers of Foucauld"

By reading the rules of this modern contemplative Missionary Movement "Frs. de Foucauld " one turns out with pleasant surprise the identical substance, with slight shaping of form, of the spirit of Fr. Calabria[155]. Fr. Gasparino, the founder of the Movement, openly confesses to being *"A spiritual son of Fr. Calabria". So, he introduces himself: "I was little more than twenty years when I was motivated by Fr. Calabria. When his book "Apostolica Vivendi Forma was in light," I took that fever. At the seminary, we passed it by hand and I commented to my companions with passion. These were, immediately after the war, the*

153 C. Caminada, *Un apostolo del sacerdozio, Padre Mario Venturini*, Milano 1963, pp. 123-127.

154 M. Gadili, *Tutto il mondo è campo di Dio*…Op.cit. pp. 233-244.

155 *Ibid.* pp. 55-58.

current of youth abandoned to themselves. Then I said, "As soon as I'm a priest, I'm going to commit myself among the street children." My model was Fr. Calabria and his Opera. My bishop did not want to give me the freedom to realize straightaway my dream, because he wanted me to make my bones first in the parish. I waited four years. Then, he made me realize this apostolate. I copied to the letter and spirit of Abandonment to Divine Providence. Our beginnings were tough and heroic. Difficulties that seemed insurmountable blocked me in doubt. I wrote to Fr. Calabria, asked for advice. He replied to resist the breach." "The Opera," he said, "is desired by the Lord." I trusted and went ahead. Now our Movement is recognized by the Holy See, with a papal decree as the Ecclesial Movement, in which brothers and sisters are at parity."

Every new foundation of the Movement is born with the brand of the genuine spirit of Fr. Calabria. It has spread all over the world: in Europe (Italy, England, Albania, Russia); in Asia (Korea, Bangladesh, Hong Kong); in Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar) and Brazil. Many small fraternities living among the poor. "*Certain evangelical paradoxes proclaimed by Fr. Calabria have led us to the last consequences. For example, the equality between Brothers and Priests, which had caused much sufferings to Fr. Calabria; we have taken it beyond, including the Sisters. It was Calabria who opened the breach of equality, among brothers of every state or sex, in the unmistakable wall of Canon Law*".[156]

FAC: Fraternal Christian Help

Fr. Paolo Arnaboldi, Salesian, founder of the Movement, wrote: "If the root of the poor undersigned man, is of the Salesian Family, a mysterious yet real graft is with the spirit of Fr. Calabria".*[157]*

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156 A. Gasparino *Lettera riservata ai componenti l'Opera di Don Calabria*, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona. Trattasi di una conferenza tenuta a S. Zeno in Monte, il 10 ottobre 1998.

157 P. Arnaboldi*, Lettera, 26 aprile 1959*, ms. Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

In the year 1947 Fr. Arnaboldi was inspired by the book, "Apostolica vivendi Forma". Then in 1948 he also read the other book that is "Amare (to Love) ". He immediately felt himself to vibrate in harmony with that program of evangelical life that was offered to him. In prayer and meditation, still inflamed by the reading of those deeply evangelical books, Fr. Paul founded the "FAC" Movement. I met Fr. Calabria. He manifested his inspirations. I asked for advice. The two priests became familiar with the flight and felt that their hearts were in accord. Fr. Calabria told him, "Father Paul, the FAC has two crowns: the Salesian and the Poor Servants."

Then, in the typography of the "Good Children" in Verona, printed the book "The Family of God". He promoted meetings and made publications of the Movement throughout the diocese of Verona.

But what is FAC? A Movement that aims to educate Christians in the genuine Love of Jesus, expressed with concrete facts, to answer the present problems. It is a genuine Revolution of Love. In practice, the FAC engages in the parish, in fact wants to become the soul, transforming the parish community into a large family, where everyone is working for the material and spiritual good of the brothers. Everyone gives what he can and takes what he needs for his needs. The criterion is the charity of Christ. The FAC Movement does not intend to conjure up other existing institutions, but to coordinate and animate them with the genuinely evangelical spirit. The most striking aspect of the Movement is certainly the whole of the activities of charitable material viz. relief to the poor, sick, old, and extraneous; distribution of food, clothing, medicine; home help, medical visits, even specialized cases. Equally important are the activities of a spiritual nature, in order to meet a less apparent but more severe spiritual poverty. Therefore, he began catechism for young and old, education to piety, with the daily recitation of the holy Rosary in families, preparation for a regularity more assiduous to the sacraments, etc.

The FAC commits itself to a widespread action of education to charity, saving and struggling to surplus. All families are encouraged to tax freely and voluntarily for a common cash fund.[158]

Sisters "Poverette della Casa di Nazareth – Handmaids of Nazareth Home"

At the death of Fr. Calabria, Fr. Filippo Bardellini[159] (1878-1956) shared in the Congregation of the Poor Servants, expressing himself in this way: "*Without Fr. John Calabria , my Opera would have never existed."*

Fr. Bardellini was born in Verona in 1878. In 1904 he became a priest in the Congregation of the Oratory. For about 12 years, he served in pastoral ministry in the Parish of the Filippini, in Verona. In 1916, he was entrusted with the Rectory of St. Pietro Incarnario, Verona. Here in 1921, with the collaboration of Teresa Scaglia, he started the Institute of the "*Handmaids of Nazareth Home*". Fr. Calabria suggested this name.

Trusting exclusively in Divine Providence Father Filippo began to receive "*psychic or mentally disordered youngsters*". In 1928, he opened a branch in Ponton di Domegliara Verona for assisting the young people who were sent to the sanatorium. Increasing the number of consecrated workers, the Opera extended to other areas of Verona, always in favour of the most disadvantaged. In 1938, he founded a Residential Educational Centre. Then they opened the CEODs, the Summer Holidays for hydrotherapy treatments and mountain holidays centres, the Rehabilitation Service (SRA) and, finally, for the Elementary and Middle Schools, with specialized methods and interventions.

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158 M. Gadili, *Tutto il mondo è campo di Dio*, Op.Cit. pp. 141-146.

159 G. Cappelletti., *Padre Filippo Bardellini, servo degli Umili,* Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 1986, pp. 36,42,44,75.

Fr. Bardellini died in Ponton. He was 78 years old. The cause of his canonization is under way.

Fr. Philip has been acquainted with Fr. Calabria since his youth. He was five years younger and lived a short distance from each other. He was irresistibly attracted to Calabria, who stood out among all the youth in the neighbourhood for his ardent spirit of the apostle of the sick. They met frequently, both in the parish of Santo Stefano and San Zeno in Monte. Their friendship was so consolidated that they became two bodies in one soul. "*Friendship: finds similar or does same*," says a Latin proverb. The two holy priests imitated emulating each other in the love of God the Father and in the love of the poor and abandoned. They used to help one another materially.

Saints have no other nature than ordinary mortals; they are not without doubts and uncertainties. They also need advice and comfort. Fr. Calabria used hard times in his father Fr. Natale; and Fr. Philip recounted to Fr. Calabria. In the sad moments of discomfort and fatigue, Fr Calabria's word became inspiration and encouraged to continue. Even after the death of the two Holy Founders, the two Opera continued to help each other.

"Buoni Fanciulli" Hostel of Bologna

Bishop Filippo Cremonini (1879-1970), encountered Fr. Calabria in 1916 during military service. Fr. Philip had assisted Lieutenant Don Ceriani of Portogruaro. Together they decided to go to S. Zeno in Monte to know Fr. Calabria and confess to him.

The encounter with Fr. Calabria marked an important stage in Fr. Cremonin's life.[160] He was immediately attracted to the charismatic figure of Fr. Calabria, despite the simplicity and good nature. The imminence of War led him to the front. The atrocities and the massacres impressed in his eyes and heart. Shortly before the ceasefire,

160 *Ibid.* pp. 223-232.

he returned to Verona to attend an annual retreat. He deepened and deepened his friendship with Fr. Calabria. In fact, he felt the desire to join the Opera as a religious. His superiors did not allow him. They told him that his mission was in Bologna.

He returned to Bologna, but kept in touch with the Opera of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence. Almost every year, he spent a summer month in the Houses of the Opera, to replace the directors or other priests who were absent.

On 8 September 1926, he opened a House in Bologna: the "Collegino Buoni Fanciulli" Good Children's Home, at the Church of Santa Maria della Visitazione al Ponte Lame, Bologna. It was his intention to associate with the Opera of the Poor Servants. Fr. Calabria sent two of his religious to prepare to graft with Verona Opera.[161]

After ten years of affiliation, the time of osmosis seemed to be near. However, the apostolic visitor's order came to cut off any initiative. However, the epistle's contact continued[162]. Fr. Cremonini used to read out to his seminarians the letters of Fr Calabria with great veneration.

Over the time, the Bologna 'Good Children's Home' became a venue for the formation of chaplain work, ONARMO (National Religious Moral Assistance Opera of Workers).

"*In my opinion* - he witnessed to the Diocesan Ordinary Process of Fr. Calabria, *among the Founders of Religious Institutions, was one of the most brilliant, for having understood the necessities of his time and the equilibrium always validated in all his initiatives in all necessities."*[163]

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161 Don Augusto Cogo e il chierico Mariano Sartori.

162 F. Cremonini, *Memorie di un vecchio prete*. These are six cordage-bound volumes, featuring a short biography of Fr. Calabria and the story of his friendship with Fr. Calabria.

163 Padre Filippo Cremonini, in *sacra Congregatio pro causis Sanctorum, Veronen,.Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Joannis Calabria sacerdotis fundatoris Congregationum Pauperum Servorum et Pauperum Servarum Divinae Providentiae. Positio super virtutibus*, Roma 1984, p. 171.

Don Facibeni and the Opera Madonnina del Grappa

Fr. Giulio Facibeni (1884-1958), another great friend of Fr. Calabria, linked to him with very close ties of Christian charity, of perfect consonance with ideas and tastes in the field of charity.

During the 1915-18 World War, he was on Mount Grappa, as a military chaplain. He sprang with extreme heroism in assisting the wounded and the dying. At the harrowing sight of so many dying parents, he felt called for making efforts for their children who became orphans. After the Armistice he returned to Rifredi, Florence. With some priest friends who were animated by the same passion, he tried to lay the foundations for an institution for youth. He made a pilgrimage with them in search of lights and advice. The first stop was Como, on the grave of Don Guanella, "the mountain priest so intense in his intentions; the priest of the discarded, because he received the poorest, the most unhappy, the most deformed "; Then they came to Verona, at 'Casa Buoni Fanciulli', guests of Fr. Calabria. "*We entered a blessed oasis,*" wrote Don Giulio. "*The supernatural seems to envelop every tiny thing!*" They made their confessions to Fr. Calabria. Then they visited the house, the labs and the classrooms. They remained with him for a couple of days. Fr. Facibeni concluded, "*They were beautiful days*, *almost decisive in my life*" [164].

He returned to Florence, taking this advice from Fr. Calabria: "*My poor word is this: be always a docile and humble instrument. God will do it. I feel that. I urge you to become the community and to infuse your spirit. God will visit you*". Fr. Calabria's words were a supernatural guarantee of God's will.[165]

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164 G. Facimbeni*,* note tratte da *L'Amico dei Buoni Fanciulli,* luglio-agosto 1974, p. 24; Silvano Nistri, *Vita di don Giulio Facimbeni.*

165 M. Gadili, *Tutto il mondo*…Cit. pp. 135-140.

Fr. Agostino Gemelli and the Medical Faculty

Fr. Agostino Gemelli (1878-1959)[166], chief artisan of the foundation of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan, met Fr. Calabria in 1909, on a series of conferences in Verona. Their relationship was intensified in the common interest of the University of the Sacred Heart. Fr. Calabria had recently opened at Negrar small hospital and was interested in making known the UMMI Association i.e. Italian Medical Mission Union, which also had a branch in Milan, headed by Dr. Marcello Candia[167].

On 25 November 1947 he wrote a letter to Fr. Gemelli, entrusting it to the hands of Dr. Achille Roncato and Dr. Antonio Pittoni, Professors from the University of Padua, External Brothers and Members of the Council of UMMI. They urged the institution of the Faculty of Medicine within the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. It has always been Fr. Calabria's dream to be able to collaborate with the creation of a School of Medicine to train the physically gifted physicians with human and Christian sensibilities[168].

They had to spend many years in numerous activities, but in the end, the dream of Fr. Gemelli and of Fr. Calabria was realized. In 1959 there began the work of the Biological Institutes of the Catholic University of Rome; on 15 July, that same year, Fr. Gemelli passed away. On 5 November 1961 Pope John XXIII inaugurated the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery and in 1964, Pope Paul VI blessed and inaugurated the "Policlinico Agostino Gemelli"

The "Boys Home" in Foligno

Msgr. Guglielmo Spuntarelli, writes [169]:

166 *Ibid*. pp. 171-180.

167 *Ibid.* pp. 165-170.

168 Vedi infra. Cap. XIV, Casa di Milano e l'opera San Raffaele di don Luigi Verzé.

169 M. Gadili, *Tutto il mondo*…Cit., pp. 119-124

"*I met Fr. Calabria in 1921, along with several Umbria seminarians. I was a soldier in service at the military hospital in Verona. We decided one day to go up to S. Zeno in Monte to get to know that holy priest. We found him surrounded by so many children. He was impressed by that smiling face and the glamorous look. We made our confessions and exchanged a few words. We returned to the barracks convinced of having seen and talked with a saint. I had to move from Verona to Trento. I wrote him a letter. I confided to him a wish and asked for advice. He answered me with a few wise words full of priestly spirit. They were for me comfort, spur, and edification. What he had prophesied to me became reality in 1951. In front of the difficulties, I faced, my brothers told me: "Don Guglielmo be safe because you have on your side Fr. Calabria.*"

Don Guglielmo Spuntarelli, returned to Foligno, was assigned POA i.e. Pontifical Work Assistance. Using the help of the Holy See, he thought of constructing a House to help youngsters in their studies or in learning a trade. All kinds of hardships involved in the project were discouraging the priest. However, then, as a teacher, on the advice and support the oral and written word of Fr. Calabria he went ahead. Thanks to the advice, encouragement and concrete encouragements of Fr. Calabria, Fr. Spuntarelli, was able to start the Boys Home in Foligno.

Fr. Zeno Saltini and Nomadelfia

Nomadelfia is an autonomous village not far from Grosseto, born out of nothing. Fr. Zeno implanted it on the marshy and desert land within his Nomadelfia. It was 14 February 1948. The constitution of the new people was signed on the altar. The name with a Greek root meant "Fraternity is the law."[170]

Zeno Saltini (1900 -1981) born in Fossoli of Carpi (Modena).[171]

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170 Carena, *Fr. Calabria e don Zeno*, 1, in *Nomadelfia è una proposta*, n. 5 1988, pp. 3ss. e id., *Fr. Calabria e Don Zeno*, 2, in *Nomadelfia è una proposta*, n. 6 1988, pp. 3ss.

171 M. Gadili, *Tutto il mondo…*Cit., pp. 87.98.

He enrolled in Law school to graduate in law with the specific purpose of practising Law for the poor, and free of charge.

But in this vocation for the social apostolate, another vocation emerged: becoming a priest. However, a girl liked him and responded to her attentions. A young man who shared the same ideals with him. Together they could do much as simple lay person. He was uncertain. He had to think about it. He confided with his bishop, Msgr. Giovanni Pranzini, who listened attentively to him and advised him to visit a saintly priest of Verona: *"He is Calabria. He has many ideas in his head like yours. But he has also made them to collect orphans and nobody's children and does everything for them as a father. Nobody pays anything and he does not ask anyone at all, because he believes in Providence. Go to him, stay there for some time. He will help you to decide.*" In an autumn evening of 1926, Zeno knocked at the door of Casa Buoni Fanciulli, in San Zeno in Monte. Fr. Calabria read in that soul his future. He advised him to go to Trent for a week of spiritual exercises in a Jesuit home. He returned to San Zeno in monte with the intention of becoming a priest. He stopped at Fr. Calabria for a few years. Then he returned to his diocese. On 6 January 1931 he celebrated the first Mass in the Carpi Cathedral, welcoming in his home as a son the young Danilo who was an ex-prisoner. Fr. Zeno went to Verona to celebrate Mass in the House of Good Children on the following Sunday 11 January. The relationship between Fr. Zeno and Fr. Calabria continued over the years viz. a relationship of friendship, advice, mutual support and prayer. In his book, "*Man is different*", Fr. Zeno writes, "I have known a saint. He is called Fr. John Calabria. When we met at the first Mass, he said to me, "*If you were on the road a diamond dropped into the dung, what would you do*?" I replied, "*I would not have any regret to dirty me; I would pick it up, I would wash it and restore it to its original brilliance." "You do so to human beings*," he added.

On 22 May 1994 the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy granted Nomadelfia the Decree for the Approval of Constitutions and the Statute of the Community, which is defined as "*Private Association of Clerics and Laity.*" In this *sui generis* community, which was made up of

many families, brought together their human and economic resources and around 150 children in difficulty were residing there.

Other Opera that had associations with Fr. Calabria

Diocesan Free Spiritual Retreats Opera by Botta of Sedrina, Bergamo, founded by Fr. Pietro Buffoni[172].

Fr. Peter was convinced of the benefits of the Spiritual Retreats. The paternal care and support of Fr. Calabria enlightened and helped him.

The Opera of the Retreat was composed of three branches viz. Priests, Brothers and Sisters, or the Oblates of Santa Marta. The Brothers were lay people living in the world viz. workers among workers and professionals among professionals. They shared the same life of ordinary Christians, the same problems and the same concerns but at the same time were consecrated persons to God. Their purpose was to organize Retreats and Spiritual Exercises for the Opera, to Help Priests in conducting retreats, even with preaching, to prepare the working environment for the reception of the priest and to abandon oneself unto the hands of Divine Providence. The Opera must not possess anything. If there was something positive in the balance, it must be completely placed in the hands of the Bishop. The members of the Opera should be delighted to have worked for the Kingdom of God free and starting every day from scratch.

Chiara Lubich and Focolarini. Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolarini Movement[173], in 1948 wanted to come to Verona and meet Fr. Calabria, to have a confirmation that what she was doing was according to God's will. "*I met Fr. Calabria*," says Chiara Lubich, "*I entered his office room with a companion. I had the impression now of being in the presence of a soul of God, for the security of the newly born Focolarini Movement and for the atmosphere that the Saints left: the*

172 *Ibid*., pp.. 65-68.

173 *Ibid.,* pp. 337-340.

soul at their contact finds encouragement and a consolation they cannot find elsewhere. After so many years, I realized that the fundamental aspect of that encounter was that of "prophecy" ... He told us: "You will have many obstacles, but go ahead! Be Living Gospels." And this is the note that later became the Movement.

"*You bring the unity. That's what I wanted to do*," Calabria told me. Then he advised us in his Veronese vernacular: "*Tanéta e buséta*", which implies in words: humility and concealment, not to perform, to make noise. It was a prudent counsel that was well suited to our initial situation. "*We emerged consoled and refreshed and his words were helpful for all subsequent years. We found in him a protector. It seemed normal for us to see him climb to the honours of the altars"*[174]

Fr. Giovanni Ciresola (1902-1987) and the "*Coenaculum charitatis*". Giovanni Ciresola one day presented a young seminarian to Fr. Calabria[175] who was uncertain whether to become a diocesan or religious priest.

Fr. Calabria directed him to the diocesan priesthood. The young man listened to Fr. Calabria and remained as a faithful follower until death, faithful performer of the divine inspirations that came together, praying and offering sacrifices to God.

In August 1932, Fr. Ciresola was appointed as parish priest of Cancello di Mizzole in a village on the Veronese mountains. In a lane called Caiò, he found a group of 12 girls who spontaneously decided to consecrate themselves to the Lord: it was the first group originating from the new religious community that would be born on the Pentecost of 31May 1936. The purpose of this Opera was clarified by the words of Fr. Ciresola, "It is necessary for those who know how to prepare the ground for the birth of priestly vocations, who wants to water it with their own blood, together with the Divine Blood of Jesus. It will make the divine seed that the Lord continues to throw into the hearts of young

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174 Franca Zambonini, L'avventura dell'unità, intervista a Chiara Lubich, Ed. San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano), 1991, pp. 23s..

175 M. Gadili, *Tutto il mondo*… Cit., pp. 365-378.

people and girls. But people want to see in us the reproduction of the perfection of the Divine Face of Jesus."

The group of girls continued their spiritual formation, silence, concealment, prayer, and suffering. Increasing the number of the group, they agreed to help in the parishes of the Diocese of Verona and even outside the diocese. They also had roots in Brazil, where they had multiplied prodigiously. The Congregation received the diocesan approval on 8 December 1958 and named *"Poor Handmaids of the Most Precious Blood - Cenacle of Charity."*

Pia Società San Gaetano of Vicenza, founded by Don Ottorino Zanon (1915-1972), a great friend of the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence and spiritual son of Fr. Calabria [176]. After his priestly ordination, he was appointed chaplain of the town parish of Araceli, Vicenza. Suddenly he realized that there was a need for an activity for the youth. He was young, just twenty-five, and full of apostolic ardour.

Recommended by his spiritual father, he went to Verona to meet Fr. Calabria and could not meet him. Then he decided to write a letter, asking for an appointment for a conversation, without revealing the reason. Two days later, on 18 February 1941 Fr. Calabria went to find him and spoke to him confidently as if he had known him forever. Fr. Ottorino tried to convince Fr. Calabria to send the priests of the Opera to take care of youth.

"*It seems to me to see the future,"* said Fr. Calabria*. - The Lord wants to do great things through you. You have to start right away. Go to the Bishop in my name; just ask for the blessing. Pray and do not be afraid. The Lord will help you.*" A few days later, Fr. Ottorino went to the bishop, Msgr. Ferdinand Rodolfi and reported what Calabria had told him. The Bishop, having great esteem and veneration for Fr. Calabria, said, "*If Calabria said so, that's right.*" And he blessed.

On 24 May of that same year, Fr. Ottorino picked up the first orphans in Araceli and began the Institute, in humility and simplicity. Fr. Calabria followed him with particular interest the beginning and

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176 *Ibid.,* pp. 99-104.

development of the first house of the Institute. He joined Fr. Ottorino with close ties of spiritual friendship and never failed to bring his word of encouragement and counsel.

After a decade, Fr. Ottorino assembled a group of collaborators who became Religious, Priests and Assistants, and gave birth to the "*Pia Società San Gaetano," the Pious society of St. Cajetan*. Charity and availability were the motto and soul of the foundation. Fr. Ottorino Zanon died at 57 years of age in a car accident, but his work continues in his children.

"*The aim of the Pious Society is to bring men to love God with all their heart and to love each other as Jesus loves them. ...To animate in Christian manner every human activity and in a special way work. Work is understood as the fulfilment of the creative work of God, source of meritorious redemption, instrument of service and elevation of neighbour. In order to attain its special purpose, the Pious Society San Gaetano accepts from the local Ordinary, parish priest's care of the locals, with the preference for dioceses who are limited in clergy. It performs works aimed at educating Christians to sanctify themselves through day-to-day activities and, wherever feasible, takes the lead of vocational schools or training and recreational centres for workers."*

Children of Charity i.e. The Canossians

In 1923, the Congregation of the Sons of Charity was languishing. There were only a few religious, elderly and disillusioned people in the community. Fr. John Calabria had asked the patriarch of Venice, Cardinal La Fontaine, to find him a home to start the Institute of Apostolic Priests. Cardinal wrote to Fr. Calabria to go to St. Job, "*to see the locals and to know that good soul, who is the superior." And added: "The Lord and Our Lady of Sorrows, as I write, speak to you, tell me that you are reserved for the task of saving the Opera, which can be the principle of wider work and from you in wondrous Domino.*" Perhaps he was thinking of embodying this work in the project of apostolic priests.

Fr. Calabria went innocently to St. Job and met the venerable superior. The Patriarch had advised him not to disclose the reason for his visit. Fr. Calabria stayed a few hours talking to Fra 'Giovanni. He visited the premises, observing the life he was leading, and the training setting that was being practiced. Before returning to Verona, he went to the Cardinal and reported his impressions and conclusions: "*The Opera must continue because it is the digitus Dei est hic i.e. here is the finger of God!*".

And he was a prophet. The Congregation slowly reinvigorated and had new vocations. In 1950, after the papal approval of the Congregation of the Sons of Charity, Fr. Calabria wrote to the superior of the Institute: "Deo gratias! It is the word that erupts from my heart reading the happy announcement that this institute received the papal approval. We thank the Lord for this great gift! I enjoy it as if it were our home because I feel attached to the Canossian Brothers through my old friendship, and I have always followed with prayers and wishes for the various events of these years. I still remember, as it was yesterday, about thirty years ago, the Patriarch of Venice proposed to take over the opera that seemed to disappear for lack of members, and I told him that I did not feel like doing so, for Providence certainly would bring good fortune for the dear Brothers. Announcement will come true."

On 8 May 1982 John Paul II, meeting with a group of Canosians, said the following, *"The spirituality and the activities of Maddalena of Canossa have passed the century and even today we can repeat what in 1923 at a crucial moment of your Institute the servant of God Fr. John Calabria told Cardinal La Fontaine, Patriarch of Venice, "The Opera of the Canossians must remain because" digitus Dei est hic"* [177].

[177] Modesto Giacon*, I Figli della carità - I Canossiani*, Novastampa, Verona 1981, pp. 92-94); Cfr. P.M.G., *Sollecitudine dei Patriarchi di Venezia per i religiosi Canossiani*, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (21/22 maggio 1982)].

Little Opera by Father Leopoldo, Rovigo

During the war, Miss Venuti Laudomia[178] had the task of elementary teacher at Cavazzara, a very poor country, with homes without water and light. Primitive poverty. She was interested in abandoned children. But with her salary she could not cover the expenses. She was disheartened. She wrote to Fr. Calabria telling all her story. He encouraged her to go on*: "Her work is so comforting the Heart of Jesus ... How could she now leave these little souls themselves who have tasted the joy and affection of Christian charity?"*

But in July 1948, Miss Venuti Laudomia went to the Orsoline sisters of daughters of Mary Immaculate of Verona. She intended to join that Congregation. But at night she had a dream. She seemed to hold a baby of three or four years in her arms. The baby's head was resting on her chest. "And his head was heavy", Laudomia said*, "weighed so much that it could hurt my heart."*

On the following day she did not speak to the superior of the Daughters of Immaculate Mary, but decided to go to Fr. Calabria. She said, *"He knows how to read into the thoughts and to scrutinize the hearts. He will tell me what to do."* He listened to her. He was instantly absorbed in prayer, and then said*, "Your wish will come true, but remember that the glory of God costs you." Miss Laudomia returned to Cavazzara to resume her work in favour of children.* Every now and then, Calabria sent encouraging messages to her saying, *"Do not doubt, the means will come."*

Laudomia discarded the idea of running a great institute. She preferred for her children a family home, where they could breathe a family climate that could foster confidence, serenity and joy[179]*.*

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178 M. Gadili, *Tutto il mondo…*Cit., pp. 108-112.

179 L. Pedrollo, note tratte da *L'Amico*, *Le Case-famiglia di Padre Leopoldo*, (1975); vedi anche R. M., Nuova iniziativa della "*Piccola Casa di Padre Leopoldo*", in *Il Resto del Carlino*, 17 marzo 1975.

Msgr. Michele Peyron[180] (1907-1993), the founder of the *Turris Eburnea* Institution was born in Turin by a large and deeply Christian family. His brother lawyer Amedeo Peyron was mayor of Turin for about 10 years. His uncle Abbot Amedeo Peyron founded the Egyptian museum in Turin, and another uncle Mayor Zaverio Peyron founded a female religious Congregation.

Michele Peyron, after graduating in law, practised the profession for some time. But soon abandoned his legal career to undertake theological studies at the seminary in Turin. He had many pastoral assignments viz. Chaplain of Alta Moda, Chaplain of the Volunteer Benefits for Suicidal attempts, Chaplain of the Opera of San Giobbe and the Chaplain of the Factories. He organized several initiatives and fashion shows to bring youth closer to the Church. He was thinking of making similar events stable.

On 7 September 1942 the theologian Peyron presented the program of the new institution to Fr. Calabria "*What do you think of a priest who goes with girls, theatres ... fashion shows and talks about love*?" Fr. Calabria widened his arms, looked at him smiling. And he wrote to him, "*It is an apostolate made on proper measure!"*[181]

And he added, *"New times, new works and means."* And he continued to support him with prayer and counsel to deal with moral and material obstacles and difficulties.

Msgr. Peyron organized hundreds of fashion shows called *"Days of Serenity" in different regions of Italy, pushing abroad, without spending any money and sacrifices.*

The small opera *"Turris Eburnea"* continues today in Italy and around the world. On the occasion of the World Youth Day, in the Jubilee of 2000, a group of girls danced in front of the Pope. They were part of the *"Turris Eburnea"* association. The journalist of the Arena interviewed one of them. A 19 year old girl answered*, "With our work we would like to express a style different from that of the great*

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180 M. Gadili, *Tutto il mondo*…Cit., pp. 129-134.

181 M. Peyron*, memorie*, ms., Archivio Generale P.S.D.P., Verona.

designers. The woman elevates or degrades, with the dress expressing not only a language, but a way of being"[182]

Pia Unione Oblati Missionari della Madonna del Divino Amore and the Congregation of the Daughters of Madonna of Divine Love. Fr. Umberto Terenzi (1900- 1985),[183] the founder of these institutions was born in Guarcino, Lazio from a poor and numerous families.

He attended the Roman Seminary. Became a priest in 1923, was assigned as a prefect to the Minor Seminary. Then he practiced parish pastoral work at San Eusebio, located in the heart of Rome.

Bishop Migliorelli, the canonical Bishop of St. John Lateran during his inspection visit to the Shrine of Divine Love called him to be his secretary. Monsignor himself proposed to him to be the Rector of that Sanctuary. Fr. Terenzi accepted it and he was 30 years old. Here he spent all the rest of his life.

On 24 September 1934 he formed Rules for the Oblates of Our Lady of Divine Love. Fr. Terenzi thought of forming a group of priests who were made available to Bishops and became apostles of the Madonna of Divine Love. He anticipated the ideas of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council viz. the priests of the Church and then oblates for the whole Church.

The Congregation of the Daughters of Our Lady of Divine Love, Rome was born from a first nucleus of five young Romans who left their families and friends in 1934 and moved to a cottage near the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Divine Love. Their purpose was to serve the sanctuary and the outside environment. The abandoned state in which the little church was located, reduced to grazing field for the sheep, and the surrounding environment infested with the underworld, required energy and faith. That group of girls began a work for spiritual rejuvenation through numerous activities viz. infant school, elementary school, female orphanage, clinic, small seminary and pilgrimage

182 Note tratte da *L'Arena* del 15 agosto 2000.

183 M. Gadili, *Tutto il mondo*…Cit., pp. 255-264.

assistance etc. And the environment slowly changed. The number of girls grew, propagated in Italy and abroad, keeping faith in the charism of the Founder: "*Knowing and making known, loving and being loved by Our Lady*".

The Daughters of Our Lady of Divine Love do not have their own works, but they are made available to Bishops to collaborate in parish works.

Fr. Umberto Terenzi had contacts with Fr. Calabria since 1938. In 1939 Fr. Calabria wrote to him, "*I pray that the great projects which the divine Mother has over the Shrine of Rome! Fr. Umberto go on; do not lose heart! Our Lady will triumph!* "

In the following year Fr. Calabria wrote with optimism, "*The Shrine of Divine Love would become the Light for all the Shrines in the world. Remember, dear Fr. Umberto, that the Cross, the suffering, the contradictions are the seal of the works of God".*

In 1941 he sent him a note to say, "*That the Opera is great and so dear to Jesus and Mary. The Opera that I believe when it is put on the right track will do a great thing not only in Rome but in the whole world."*

On the occasion of the anniversary of the laying of the first stone of the new Sanctuary Fr. Calabria wrote, "*What I have always dreamed of is that there will be a great Marian Shrine in Rome founded on the basis of the seriousness and the holiness, according to the liturgical norms and the spirit of the Church which will remove all forms of superstition from Rome. And the light of grace and goodness will be radiated throughout the world from Rome in favour of the poor and the suffering humanity"*[184].

These two souls in love for the Church and Our Lady met several times. They had many Apostolic interests in common viz. devotion to the Most Holy Name, reform of the Church, and the formation of Apostolic Priests and lay people engaged in social activity.

But in particular they were in tune with the creation of priestly work. Fr. Terenzi wrote to him, "*I hope I can begin the priestly Opera soon, with those priestly twin souls you promised me imminent in*

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184 U. Terenzi*a Fr. Calabria,* 23 ottobre 1942, ms., Archivio Generale. P.S.D.P., Vr.

December 1942." And he kept saying, "*Here's how I would like priests i.e. I wish that inter diocesan priests were formed, but not for Rome alone, but for any Diocese where their number would allow them to open houses. In the diocese, there would be the "flying team" to the episcopal direction, with a Common House at a sanctuary whereby they would be missionaries where the Bishop sends them, without fixed posts, returning to the base house when they have finished their mission or assignment they were entrusted with. What do you think? I look forward to your advice or any other suggestions.*"

When thinking of the missionary institute of Msgr. Bernareggi, Fr. Calabria was pleased to express in his apostolic soul his own feelings viz. "*In my small mind I see how the Lord inspires here and there thoughts similar to my own. We must understand that a new order, a renewal of the world can only begin with the reform of our priests."*

Fr. Terenzi's friendship with the Congregation of the Poor Servants continued through Fr. Calabria's successor Fr. Luigi Pedrollo with whom he maintained continuous correspondence.

Free Mission to Prisoners and the "Sixth Opera"

Don Giuseppe Girelli (1886-1978)[185] was born in Dossobuono, Verona. He became a priest and he was appointed parish priest of Rosegaferro, Verona.

He asked permission from the Ministry of Justice for an apostolate in the Italian prisons, which he carried out with his own name viz. Fr. Giuseppe Girelli (1875-1946) the parish priest of Porto Legnago, Verona. In 1951 at the age of 65 he left the parish of Rosegaferro to dedicate himself to the *St. Joseph's House*, at Ronco all'Adige, 26 kilometres from Verona, where he welcomed former prisoners to help them in their

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185 G. Girelli, *Don Bepo missionario delle carceri visto dal suo omonimo e confratello (don Giuseppe Girelli),* Verona 1965, pp. 20ss; Torregiani D. e Dal Verme C., *Don Giuseppe Girelli, un apostolo moderno delle carceri italiane*, Verona 1984, p. 97; M. Gadili, *Tutto il mondo*…Cit., pp. 203-206.

recuperation into society. In 1977 at the age of 91 he retired to the Geriatric Hospital of the Sacred Heart of Negrar as a spiritual assistant, where he died seven months later. He was buried in the cemetery of Maguzzano, along with the departed members of the Congregation of the Opera of Fr. Calabria whom he loved. He engaged all his forces in parish pastoral care, in prison missions, in the Sixth Opera of Mercy i.e. visiting the prisoners, and in the House of St. Joseph of Ronco all'Adige, Verona for the ex-prisoners.

He himself described the relationship with Fr. Calabria in the following words, "*I met Fr. Calabria in 1908 at St. Benedict Mount. I was a grammar school student from "Stigmate*". *I went to Church in St. Benedict and spent hours playing the harmonium that Fr. John had put at our disposal".*

I was fascinated by his figure, and always resorted to him in all my difficulties. I remember him during the World War of 1915-18, for his concern to save me from the dangers of the front and the barracks ...

I had a great attachment to him because of the proposal to start the Missions in prison. He set up a monthly magazine, which was sent free of charge to all prisoners in Italy who ever asked for it."

The interest and the encouragement of Fr. Calabria for Fr. Girelli continued until the last days of his life. Fr. Joseph, because of certain circumstances, could not consecrate himself to the Congregation of the Poor Servants, as he always desired. But this did not stop him from living according to Fr. Calabria's spirit and teachings. Msgr. Flavio Roberto Carraro the Bishop of Verona in 2002 opened the cause of the beatification of Fr. Giuseppe Girelli an Apostle of the imprisoned brothers.

Opus Mariae Reginae

Fr. Mario Merlin, born in the year 1911, is the founder of Opus Mariae Regina.[186] On 17 September 1928 he met Fr. John Calabria,

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186 M. Gadili, *Tutto il mondo*..., Cit., pp. 125-128.

requesting his help to become a priest. He was 17 years old. Fr. Calabria welcomed him among the students of the house of San Benedetto and then in Nazareth. But the superiors did not think of a priestly orientation for him.

Fr. Calabria, on the other hand, with prophetic intuition, reassured him, "*You will become a priest. This is the will of God. At thirty, you will be a Priest!* " In fact, on 6 March 1941 young Mario Merlin, at the age of thirty, was ordained priest. The road was long and difficult. Blocked by continuous obstacles. During the long years of waiting in Verona (San Benedetto - Nazareth) and Rome (San Filippo Neri), Mario Merlin matured and forged a strong and determined character. Fr. Calabria knew him at the right time. He recommended him to Fr. Guanella, who welcomed him and brought him to the priesthood.

He became a religious of Fr. Guanella who had the task of following a group of girls working in the field of female youth education. Fr. Mario Merlin, following the Lord's inspiration, helped these girls mature their vocation and led them to found a religious institute which he named "*Opus Mariae Reginae, Work of Mary Queen*" which has "*as its specific purpose the apostolate addressed to special way for women ... to make it a saving tool for the family and for society*." The Institute has as patrons "*St John Maria Vianney and St. John Calabria, two top educators for the evangelization of souls*".

The "Istituto Feminile" *Opus Mariae Reginae* works above all in the Female orphanages. Their headquarters are at "San Giuseppe" of Pieve di Soligo, Treviso which has other sixteen centres around Italy.

Istituto Gesù Divino Operaio (Institute of Jesus the Divine Worker) and Fr. Isaiah Filippi[187]

Fr. John Calabria, from the early years of his priesthood, thought of bringing together the priests who choose to live in the manner of the

[187] *Ibid.,* pp. 145-154.

first apostles and to serve the universal Church. Over the time, his dream has developed into an ambitious project: to create an Apostolic Institute in every diocese, morally connected with the House of Nazareth, Verona but all at the service of the local Church.

Regarding Rome, the project gained a special value. He said, "Rome, Rome! Everyone looks at Rome." *If we could create an Apostolic Institute in Rome, it would also be an example for others.* And he insisted with his religious*, "You came to Rome and went through the parish door, but it was always a door. The Lord wants another opera in Rome. "The Apostolic Institute dreamed of by Fr. Calabria never took off. There were timid attempts at the beginning of 1933, with a group of seminarians housed in the San Francisco Neri, Rome*[188].The Apostolic Visitor, Abbot Caronti, closed this experiment, not realizing the conditions required for a complete formation of the boys. Then began a new activity that is, adult Vocation activity. For many years, in the Parish of St. Philip Neri, as well as in the Primavalle Collegino from 10 January 1943 young people were accommodated who wanted to become priests. The mission of adult vocations was troubled due to misunderstandings and external interference, until the Bishop of Sarsina, Forlì. Bishop Emilio Biancheri intervened in the life of young people who attended theology courses. In October 1950, he wrote to the Congregation of Poor Servants: "*S. E. mons. Emilio Biancheri, Bishop of Sarsina, Forlì assumes under his full responsibility the late vocations of the "Jesus the Worker House" (Rome, Torrevecchia, 88), incardinating them into his Diocese, provided that Isaiah Filippi priest of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence continues to assist them morally and materially. Sarsina, 22 September 1950 "*

After a heated debate, the General Council of the Poor Servants accepted the actual situation, though bitterly. Fr. John Calabria was sick. They did not want to disturb his physical health already too stressed by

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188 Seven students aspiring to priesthood, a boy in Second grammar school ; and four boys in third grammar school; and two youth , Gastaldello Livio and Foffano Ottorino, students of philosophy in Propaganda Fidei.

illness. When Fr. John finally regained his health, he became aware of the situation in Rome. The news made him suffer a lot. Then he ended up accepting the situation and encouraged and blessed Fr. Isaiah Filippi.

The Opera of the Adult Vocations of Torrevecchia, was erected legally on 8 December 1953 by Msgr. Biancheri into a Pious Priestly Association, under the name of the Institute of Jesus the Divine Worker " i.e. *Istituto Gesù Divino Operaio*". In 1971, the Institute got recognition from the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy.

We end this long and incomplete chapter on founders of the Institutes, spiritually united to St. John Calabria so that the text may not weigh too much..[189]

[189] For those who are interested, we refer to the reading of the work, already many times considered "*The whole world is the field of God*" for other interesting meetings of St. John Calabria with: don Primo Mazzolari, Padre Arturo D'Onofrio, Maria Elisabetta Mazza, Dr. Marcello Candia, blessed Paolo Manna, St. Pio of Petralcina, Padre Pio, etc.

Chapter Twenty-Three

GO AND REPAIR MY CHURCH

A call

In every time and place the Holy Spirit kindles prophets and reformers to remind the church of its original vocation "to present itself to Jesus Himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind, so that she may be holy and without blemish." *(Eph.5:27)*

Also, to the poor Verona priest, "*the most poor among the poorest, the man who proclaimed zero and misery,*" is entrusted with a special mission.

Blessed Cardinal Schuster[190] writes to Fr. Calabria: "*I believe that the Lord now gives you this special mission viz. to suffer for the Church. However, you will be consoled after the Passion and the Resurrection. What a privilege it is to suffer! God grants this only to his few friends. Now the Church is going through a period of martyrdom in the east and a dangerous crisis in the West. Only prayer and holiness can serve her at this time*".

In the last years of his life Fr. Calabria feels called to carry out a mission for the universal church. The previous concerns about the affirmation, growth and development of the Congregation of the Poor Servants pass in the second order. An incoherent anxiety and a primary urgency now absorb all his thoughts and residual forces for Church

[190] A. Majo-L. Piovan (a cura di), *L'epistolario Schuster - Fr. Calabria* (1945-1954), Ed. NED, Milano 1989, p. 51.

reform. He confides with modesty to Cardinal Schuster,[191] *"Because I speak with you in confidence, I also want to say that for years, with increasing insistence, I feel the lament of Jesus "My Church!" at the bottom of my heart. Sometimes it seems to me that there is no faith, surely, there is so much failure, we are so far away from the holiness we have to strive for, so the Heart of Jesus, seems to me, to be very distressed. And I wonder whether one could remain silent and let it go, or should we rather talk and shout out almost as I would say, that even the most rebellious and distracted people should feel upset and shaken? But who will speak? Sometimes, Eminence, especially after the celebration of the Holy Mass, I feel a voice telling me, "Speak and make my voice be heard that the Opera which you belong to is mine, and I have matured it to perform special designs, and also for this ..."*

What an illusion, Eminence, on the other hand, I have seen by experience that a word that is however poor, but told lovingly and drawn in the Sacred Wound of Jesus Crucified, has benefited a little. ... And even now, I think, that if Jesus wants it, he will not look at the instrument, which even the more will be poor and miserable, the more will be conducive to cooperate with the greater glory of God and the good of souls.[192]"

This voice and inner strength pushed Fr. Calabria out of his conscience, from the "*tanéta and buséta*" (hidden in small trench and hole) where he has been hidden so far to write, to solicit spiritual

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191 Ildefonso Schuster (Roma 1880--Milano 1954), in 1926, he was appointed as Archbishop of Milan and, soon after, became Cardinal by Pius XI. He opened the new Seminary in Lower Venegono. Strictly defending the Church's right to educate Christian youth, against the monopoly imposed by the fascist regime. He had a busy life in various pastoral activities: pastoral visits to the parishes of the great diocese, the Catholic University, the formation of the clergy and consecrated life. From 1945 he began a close correspondence with Fr. Calabria. There was a holy friendship between them. In 1954, he was elected as President of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI). He died in holiness on August 30, 1954. He was proclaimed blessed by Pope John Paul II.

192 Ibid., p. 31.

renewal and awakening of consciences, especially those of consecrated persons, priests and religious.

He writes and contacts Cardinals, bishops, priests, religious, qualified lay people. Invites a Christian rejuvenation, a restoration of the Kingdom of God.

While remaining firmly anchored in the faith in Divine Providence, he sees on the line of the horizon the future of humanity with dense clouds of hailstorms. In keeping with a vast world of mystics, he preaches stingy at times and full of unknowns to the Church: the spectre of atheism, communism, the still-high memory of the atrocities of Nazism, the climate of terror for the Cold War, the ever-present danger of ' atomic war, and religious persecution, crowded his mind of apocalyptic presences.

But what most disturbed him is the calmness and immobility of the Church, from the high hierarchies to the simple faithful, similar to the tense and cold silence that petrified nature before the advent of a great catastrophe or a schism day.

In front of Fr. Calabria, there is a scenario of general crisis of values and faith, which will be denounced with painful accents, some decades later, by Pope Paul VI.

The anxiety and ardour that stings into his chest pushed him to write to the Heads of State and Religious Leaders and even to the Patriarch Sergio of Moscow. Fr. Calabria cries for an alliance of all the forces of good, a “tightened ranks” of all men who recognize themselves in faith in Jesus Christ, to fight evil and stem the assault of Satan's army.

An inner force drives him: The Lord wants it!

And he feels that his Congregation must become a living part of the mystical Body of Christ, according to the bold syllogism. "*The Church is Christ, Christ is Opera, and the Church is the Opera*". That is why he feels the Opera intimately united to the Church.

He writes to Cardinal Ildefonso Schuster: "*My Church, how I feel*!"

The last decades of life, but especially the five mysterious years before dying, find an explanation only in this mystical union with the passion and death of Christ in view of the birth and resurrection of his creature, which is the Church.

Schuster - Calabria letters

There is an interesting correspondence between Cardinal Schuster and Fr. Calabria. Running from 4 January 1945 to 5 August 1954.

The two "men of God" have long been known by reading their own works. Fr. Calabria had enjoyed Cardinal Schuster, as author of the *Liber Sacramentorum*, a work he reads assiduously as volumes came out (the first volume came out in 1919). Fr. Calabria admired the Benedictine spirituality of the Archbishop of Milan, who will have the opportunity to get in touch with the Benedictine Apostolic Visitor, Abbot Emanuele Caronti.

In turn, Cardinal had read the proof copy of the book *Apostolica Vivendi Forma*, finding himself in the ideals and sharing the same concerns for the Church of the saintly priest of Verona. The two works resounded in Italy and in the world.

Reading the register of correspondence, we find two unmistakable styles: sober and inspired by Schuster's texts, effusive and rich in holy elevations of Fr. Calabria. But, in both of them we find some common features viz. a profound supernatural spirit, sustained by assiduous prayer and steady asceticism, an untiring effort to serve souls and a passionate love for the Church.

Faced with presence, even in the midst of the clergy and religious houses, of the worldly spirit and of adjusting to the world's mentality, both proposed a "*sure antidote: holiness, living coherently in evangelical poverty*".

"What matters absolutely," Schuster writes, *"is that the Poor Servants must remain always poor, and never become rich Aristocrats, as unfortunately has happened to other several Religious Families."*

Among the lines of the letters, we find spiritual elevations, exhortations to the good, personal confidences and interesting evaluations concerning own mission and the mission of the Church.

The ailments of the advanced age of the two men of God led them to indulge in the pessimistic visions of the present, and above all, with an accentuated fear of the future. Then, enlightened by faith, they abandoned themselves to the hands of God, where they found serenity and peace.

The main concern of all these letters was always the same viz. the Church, the souls, the kingdom of God.

They did not have many opportunities to meet in person. In the last visit that Cardinal Schuster made to Verona, Fr. Calabria was in a state of physical and spiritual humiliation. The two friends were meeting. A picture captured them in the moment of fraternal embrace. But if the photographer arrived more timely, he would have been able to set a singular picture viz. the two holy men kneeling in front of each other to ask for the blessing. Cultural distances and hierarchical degrees have no value and only excel the immense love of Christ transfigured in their souls.

The Bishop of Ferrara Msgr Carlo Caffarra later on the Archbishop of Bologna commenting on the Epistle between the two men of God wrote, *"The basic thesis of my reflection or if you want the "hermeneutic key"* of the epistolary was this. *Blessed Giovanni Calabria felt involved in the above mission of recalling the Church to the sources of the Gospel. This might seem obvious or too normal for an apostolic priest and founder of religious Congregations. The charism or mission of all Founders was precisely this viz. to open a breach towards the origin, towards the immediate and personal encounter of Christ; to rediscover purely and simply the face of the Gospel, freeing it from the incrustations of an organized and unedited Christianity."*

Fr. Calabria never rebelled against the institutional Church, but was always in the fullness of an ever loved and voluntary communion."[193]

Fr. Calabria's call to the rediscovery of the Gospel had all its own characteristics. The Holy Spirit does not repeat at all. He is an artist who uses a rich colour polychrome in the formation of the great masterpiece of redemption.

Fr. Calabria's lamenting especially during the celebration of Holy Masses absorbed the last years of his life.

He saw and evaluated with the penetrating eye of faith, the state and stagnant situation of the Church. *"I carved into the mind the words you once told me viz. the canonical dress is there, but the spirit is lacking."*[194]

These two great modern prophets recognized that the great organizational effort of the Church, the great worldwide triumphal manifestations, do not correspond to an intimate evangelical vitality.

Cardinal Schuster wrote, "... *we find a Christianity basically emptied of its content. Rite and choreography prevailed over doctrine and evangelical life ... Today we have a lot of talk about organizations. Very well! They are like machines; but the machine assumes life ... Simple organization without the intelligent workers will only make noise, but will not produce any good work ….. To be busy with many things is very human while Jesus counter places with the essential One"!*[195]

The absence of the supernatural sense is the true cause of the Church's situation. The same thing is denounced by Antonio Rosmini in his unimaginably true book "*The five Wounds of the Churc*h" which Calabria had read and meditated upon. Supernatural meaning was found lacking in it for flattening the rationalist mentality.

In front of the evil that goes against humanity, Calabria does not isolate himself and does not end in sterile complaints, but tries to bring

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193 C. Caffarra, *Conferenza tenuta a S. Zeno in Monte,* Verona, 7 novembre 1998, ms., Archivio Generale PSDP, Verona.

194 *Epistolario Schuster – Fr. Calabria* (1945-1954)cit.,p.64.

195 *Ibid.,* p. 139s.

his contribution, to pay his share to redeem mankind from sin and spiritual death. Fr. Calabria confides, "How precious are the souls and God's works!".

And Cardinal Archbishop Schuster confirms to him: "*God shows you the needs of His Church because He has consecrated to the dignity of living host and suffering for the integration and sanctification of the Church. Trust in the Lord, and do as the Apostle had written namely, rejoicing, to be crucified (sibi gaudio, sustinuit crucem). And, he continues in the same letter that, "you often wrote to me that Jesus says to you:" My Church ". You ask him whether He wants something from you?*

I too always see the Church, and I continually pray for it.

What else does God want from me? However, I prefer to serve Him in concealment, silence, and humility. It's always better to notice how difficult and dangerous it is to stay up ..."

And Fr. Calabria wrote in reply on 15 January 1953, *"In intimate and deepest confidence I tell you that I always have in mind the words of the Holy Father. 'The entire world needs to be restored from the foundations, and must be transformed from the wild to human, and human to divine heart of God'*, and it is true. *But when I celebrate the Holy Mass, at times I think Jesus tells me, yes, it is true, but we must begin with "My Church."* Fr. Calabria requested Cardinal Archbishop Schuster to explain to him in confidence about this expression….(8).

There is in Fr. Calabria a progressive identification with the "Christus patiens" who suffers for the Church, whose divine vocation and human inadequacy are perceived by this sublime call.

Msgr Carlo Caffarra says*, "In the sanctity of the twentieth century, I have personally found no one who has lived like Fr. Calabria the experience of the Church. No one, it seems to me, felt that the Church was born again from the passion of Christ, participated by his minister. "*

To participate in the agony of Christ

Reading the spiritual diary of Fr. Calabria, we find from the early years of his priesthood a constant mention of physical and spiritual suffering. We have talked about it widely in the previous chapters. During the great trial from 1949 to 1951, which brought Fr. Calabria into the spiritual darkness, the drenching of the flesh and the silence of God, we find surprising expressions written by him on 10 June 1950. *"I have moments that only Jesus seems to have tried me,"* and on 7May 1951 he wrote, "*They are dark days and unprecedented trials*". On 8 November 1951 after continued suffering of this darker period, he had the perception that his dark days came from a particular cause and purpose viz. *"I have suffering, but all new".* He wrote on15 November 1951, *"One needs grace to understand my suffering"*.

Again, he wrote on14 December 1951. *"I have new trials, but I feel that these are directly from God"*, and on 22 December1952 he wrote, *"I feel my nothingness and my misery, but I feel that on my misery and my nothingness Jesus wants to build and make 'his own designs for the present hour', which is so obscure now ..."*.

Fr. Calabria wrote on 14 April 1953, "*For days I have new sufferings that only the Lord knows. These sufferings, sometimes I feel, my spiritual Father assures me, come from the Lord to do new designs on the Opera of Poor Servants ... for the present time. 'My Church,' says Jesus, 'My Church is prolonged with the Opera of the Poor Servants.' My God, what a grace, but what a responsibility in all of us ..."*

He further wrote on 29 April 1954, *"It seems to me to swim in suffering, without a particular help from Providence, which I think, leaves me alone. Nights of love, what a holy moment, what can I give now! 'That Jesus shows me and uses me in His great mercy and allows me to do His divine will, whatever be the trial and punishment* ".

My Church! It was the groaning he had on his lips. And he felt it deeply like a blade that pierced into his flesh. The prophetic motive that vibrates in that groan has the notes of his love for the Church, of the joy

of the vitality of the activities he has accomplished, of hope in the victory of Christ, to whom he has believed with the fullness of faith.

Chapter Twenty-Four

THE EDUCATIONAL METHOD OF FR. CALABRIA

The pedagogic style

Fr. Calabria was not an educator or a psychologist. He has never written any exclusive pedagogic works. Nevertheless, this did not create any problem for his religious, they learned because the educational method from the examples and constant exhortations of Fr. Calabria. He had a method that we can sum up in one word: love.

This education *to love* flowed from a supernatural source, his faith in the paternity of God. A gracious paternity lived personally as a gift and instilled into others with the same gratuity and universality. The method of pedagogy was not written in systematic language but visible and concrete forms in everyday dealings.

Fr. Calabria built a cultural luggage by reading and selecting some texts of authors who had worked with a passion for the youth. He knew very well the "preventive method" of Don Bosco; indeed, he printed it in supplement to the first issue of the Constitutions of his Religious. But we are already in 1932 and Fr. Calabria was 59 years old. Fr. Calabria read that book, he also imprinted it in his memory, nevertheless he did so since he started taking care of the boys.

He liked to read the work of a Protestant author, the two volumes of "*The Gospel of Life*" by Foerster. He read with great interest the works of the Hungarian Bishop *Toth Thiamer*, full of wisdom and love for the education of young people. He also recommended these books to his religious.

We do not have a gradual and systematic text. We find here and there in his brief written rules that aim to regulate the good performance of the house and rapport amid the boys. Immediate application and practical use were made. Yet, despite this lack of systematic work, according to the canons of modern pedagogy, the results of the education given by Fr. Calabria, that is found in the earliest ex-students, revealed in their lives an unmistakable imprint of the original brand. A way to see and act, to think and to talk that denounced a singular common source. Now if one method is to be judged from the results, we must state that the style or educational method of Fr. Calabria was and still is valid for forming younger generations.

In an article, published in the journal *"La Scuola Italiana Moderna"*, we find written: "*The story of this humble priest, for those who have educational responsibilities or youth training tasks, has much to teach. He appears, in the world of educators, among the most instructive and significant. He who did not claim to have special pedagogic formulas, but with the intuition of the saints, managed to be a true master of souls, a specialist of hearts and a trainer of consciences. Above all, aligned with the highest representatives of Christian pedagogy, reminds those who feel guilty of leadership, that the educational problem is at the top of the commitment of building a Christian city, and for that purpose, it is good to employ and consume an entire existence in the act of love.*"

An instinctive mentor

Fr. Calabria, as we have already said, has not done any specialized studies in psychology or pedagogy. Where did he get his didactic art?

He got this didactic art and the disposition of his generous and delicate heart from the grace of God. As a young man, we find him always surrounded by oratory children. He became a well-known leader and game organizer. His comrades remain enchanted by his way of

doing and after playing captured by his goodness the children gladly follow him for catechism and other Church functions.

When you want to lead a bit dispersed boy to the Lord, you deal with him in firmness. We remember the story of Goffredo Friedmann, the little boy who lived near his home, in the same alley of Disciplina. If he could make him a friend! He took him from the street, accompanied him daily to play in the oratory and in the meantime tried to soften his rebellious and restless character. The Friedmann family was of the Protestant confession, good and serious people, but did not have time to follow the son. He trusted the good young Calabria and gladly went with him. Calabria, with his touch of goodness, helped the boy to improve, inculcated his love for study and, with the help of Earl Francesco Perez, enrolled him in the Stigmatine School. The rebellious little boy, after a few years, expressed the desire to enter the College of Stigmata Fathers in Trento. He became Religious and Priest and occupied important offices in his Congregation. We will find him as Vice Rector of the Seminary of Belluno and Feltre. He had organized the encounter of his old friend Fr. Calabria with Msgr. Cattarossi, Bishop of Belluno and Feltre, and prepared the ground to open a house for the clerics of the "Good Children's" Opera in Feltre.

The young Calabria knew how to find words and ways to conquer the hearts of his boys. The boys of the oratory remember him with esteem, reverence and sympathy. We have the testimonies of the psychiatrist doctor prof. Cherubini Trabucchi and Mr. Antonio Fabbro, who received from the Calabrian cleric the repetitions together with his brother Emilio.[196]

Beginning with the Opera of the "Good Children", he tried to educate the religious teachers not so much with lessons of scientific pedagogy, but with practical exhortations and continuous verifications. A century ago it was applied in Italian state schools, Calabria had already invented it viz. the personal card for every boy, and had marked

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196 Cfr. Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis Sanctorum, op. cit. p. 124.

all stages of education, progress or failure, with personalized action plans.

His collaborators came from every social category. There were Graduates and workers, priests and traders, the poor in sackcloth and the rich Counts.

Fr. Calabria made the choice not based on cultural preparation, but on criteria that evaluated the inner qualities, the basic qualities, solid Christian formation, availability to the service, and the spirit of gifting.

Fr. Calabria was clear on this point when he addressed his associates, "*One thing, a great thing, I recommend to you with humility, faith, and love for the study of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ and make sure you put it into practice. At times of trial, depression, lift up your heart, resort to Jesus, and do not doubt his divine help, think that with Him you cooperate in the divine work, which is to save the youth"*[197].

He insisted on the Brothers to see in the boys the precious pearls, worth millions, billions, of the children of God. He said that every boy had immense treasures, albeit hidden or masked by unrefined contradictions, bad habits, rudeness, affective frustrations, state of abandonment. He had experienced that by touching the nerves of the heart, the so-called hard ones melted. He knew instinctively when it was time to silence or wait and when, instead, he had to intervene. He had the greatest respect for the person and their smallest secrets. However, he was strict, uncompromising, with the frauds and perverts.

The boys, he used to say, must feel that they are loved but above all they have to experience it in practice. We know that boys, many a times, have the ability to test the sincerity of their mentors' intentions. They bribe, displease, rebel, to check the consistency of educators' words.

The first old students of "Casa Buoni Fanciulli", recalling Fr. Calabria, moved to the memory of the paternal and maternal attentions towards them. Many of them, in fact, had not known their parents.

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197 Mondrone sj, *Una gemma del clero italiano*, in *Civiltà Cattolica*, quad. 2509 (1955), pp. 37-52.

Asking them therefore what was like the Calabrian educational method is to marvel what the educational method of Jesus Christ was.

Of Jesus, the Gospel says *"Coepit facere et docere*" i.e. "he began to work and then to teach."

There is nothing crystallized or systematic in teaching, but only a living with a flexible style, every day different, specific to every boy, adapting, as divine grace, to the infinite variety of characters, temperament and circumstances. However, in Fr. Calabria we find a connecting cord, a catalyst nucleus around which all his ideas and actions are concentrated.

Features of Fr. Calabria's didactic system

The central core of the educational system, starting with the text of St. Matthew, 6: "Seek first of the kingdom of God ... Do not worry, do not be anxious for your food and for your dress ... Your Father knows what you need."

From this revelation of Jesus, we reconstruct the cornerstones, the pillars on which to base Calabria's educational method on the Paternity of God and the consequent abandonment to his supportive hands. He overcame anxiety for living by counting less important material goods than sobriety and simplicity of life. Fr. Calabria wanted the religious and collaborators to be immersed in this spirit viz. "*Beloved brothers, it is not sufficient to write on the facade of the House, "*Quaerite Primum Regnum Dei ", *but it is to be engraved in our mind, in our heart and in our actions. Let us seek God and let us abandon ourselves to Him.*

Let us remember that at the moments when your faith is wavering, in front of a difficulty, trial, need, we mistrust God and let live by human prudence, losing sight of the Lord, his glory, his souls, then the providence withdraws, leaves us alone, and then what could we do? ".

The Paternity of God and Abandonment to the Divine Providence is the foundation upon which the Opera and all its educational activities are based.

The writer of "*Civiltà Cattolica*", Domenico Mondrone S.J., writes: "*Once the principles were put, Fr. Calabria proceeded with a clear, inflexible logic, sometimes even astonishing.*

Thus, with himself and with his religious, so too with the outsiders,

Any offer of millions or billions, subject to public recognition, a small insertion in the newspaper, or a dedication or a nameplate on any angle of the Succour House, was undoubtedly rejected. Those who wanted to make charity should do as the Gospel wants: - Do not let your left hand know what the right hand does."

A profound enthusiast of Fr. Calabria Fr. Carlo Sempreboni who for many years was director of St. Zeno in Monte wrote, *"His Mother idea of all pedagogical intent is this viz. God is the Father of all, and all people are His children. God cares for each good or bad person, with infinite love, and is infinitely multidimensional in his way of loving.*

Each person holds a divine vocation. The task of the educator is to discover this vocation, dissimilar in each one, and to humbly contact God to help him develop and bring it to accomplishment"[198].

Outcome of Faith in God the Father

By faith in the paternity of God, follow family education and community living. Fr. Calabria calls "Family" all his boys and religious and "House" the Institute. The example came from another great Veronese educator, Fr Nicola Mazza who had invented for girls who attended "family groups" of eight or ten members, followed and assisted by "mothers" or "aunts".

Fr. Calabria's notes on the rules of the boys say, *In the House" we are all members of the same family. Do not ever say, "It is not up to me ... let the superiors think ... This House is not an ordinary college where*

198 C. Sempreboni, Relazione per il Capitolo Generale dei P.S.D.P., Archivio Generale Psdp., Verona 1961.

you get roof and bread. It is a House of the Lord; a House that lives by dint of the miracle of Providence."

All, the boys and educators, are included in the Opera and all must feel belongingness to it asits real members. The good performance of the House depends on everyone. Therefore, everyone is called to the sense of responsibility, sharing, and active commitment.

Fr. Calabria did not like the big encampments, with too many boys, because it is impossible to create a family atmosphere. There has to be the family figures in every family viz. the father who is the director, the brothers who are the educators, and the sisters who are the nuns who are concerned about the kitchen and the wardrobe.

The great number, imposed on him by so many demands and needs, he worked out by the creation of the "Groups", which partly dampened the anonymity of the mass and created a more family environment.

The "group" had some autonomy for recreation, stud and extracurricular time table. In the "group", every boy had a specific task viz. chief, deputy chief, housekeeper, library, cashier and newsprints etc.

The group became a solid body and a microcosm of society. Everyone was committed to supporting the most disadvantaged and the youngest.

"*Help each other to do well, to improve further. When a new companion comes in, please come close to him with your kindness and courtesy to make him understand how lucky he is to enter the House of the Lord, where everyone loves and helps fraternally, all being children of the same Father who is in heaven and brothers in Jesus Christ*. "

Older boys, as in a patriarchal family, help the Brother teacher and sometimes replace him. These are forms of self-government that train themselves in responsibility and in the society. Therefore, no to crowd education. Authority and order yes, but never a dictatorship.

Relationships between educators and boys need to be permeated by love, but not falling into delusions or sentimentality.

In the field of education or learning of an art, each one chooses what is best suited to his personality and abilities.

J. J. Rousseau used to say: "*It is a great secret to know to await ... It is great to waste time to gain."* Fr. Calabria is a great optimist: he knows how to wait and trust the success of the boys.

One day he presents the case of a young man who is irresistible and unruly. The assistants are pressured to get him away from the Institute. Fr. Calabria does not immediately make a decision, he preferred to take time to reflect. This is always the case, especially in front of important and particularly delicate decisions. The next day, Fr Calabria orders to prepare the carriage. Call the boy and take him along with him on a tour of the city. The young boy admires the monuments, looks around the streets, but in the meantime asks why this goodwill of Fr. Calabria. Lunch time comes, Fr. Calabria stops at a family he knows very well and had previously informed. He pauses for lunch with these friends, presenting the youth as his dear "good boy". Returning to San Zeno in Monte, Fr. Calabria invites him to his reading room: "*Look my dear*," says Fr. Calabria, "*many urged me to send you away, because of your bad behaviour. Today I wanted to give you a reward for the good conduct you will have from now on.*"

The young boy will not become a saintly one, but will change his behaviour very much. Becoming an adult, at an annual gathering of alumni, he ascertains that delicate gesture of Fr. Calabria. "*An act of love and confidence that has changed me,*" concludes the man who became well respected.[199]

Fr. Calabria used to say, "*As far as one can be bad, he will always have a good side. We have to weigh that ... We have to make credit of it."*

[199] S. Marina, *Con la forza dell'amore. Educare alla maniera di Fr. Calabria*, Verona 1998, p.48.

Chapter Twenty-Five

ENIGMATIC ANGUISHES OF THE LAST DAYS

The hour of Satan

Fr. Calabria suffered a lot during his whole life. Nevertheless, physical and moral pain has become more evident in the later years. He recommended his religious: *"Pray for me to understand the gift of suffering."*

He used to admit the physical pain with passive acceptance, offering it for the atonement and repair of his sins and sins of the world. But even more tormenting was spiritual pain, caused by a vision and intuition of the sad situation in the world. During his lifetime the two great World Wars arose, causing material damage, death, innumerable physically invalid of post Wars, defeat of moral values, the ruin of a world associated to the changes of the village or city, creating a whirlwind of general hatred and unprecedented violence.

Fr. Calabria saw, in these horrific events, Satan and his militia, men marched to exterminate souls and Christian values. He took note, in vision, dark clouds enveloping humanity and the Church.

And, at the same time, he ascertained the weariness and abandonment of those who, on the contrary, had opposed to fight evil.

"This is a terrible hour now that ever happened in the long human and Christian history. It is Satan's time. Nevertheless, it is also the hour of Jesus; it is the time of great decisions ... Jesus will not fail his word."[200]

In addition, elsewhere, he affirms*: "The present time is a terrible hour. I will never tire of repeating it, dear brothers; do not exaggerate,*

[200] G. Calabria, "*Confidite*", ms. Archivio Generale P.S.D.P. – Verona.

you know; ... Things go wrong, but I feel more and more that if we do not return to the Gospel, the hour will deteriorate to more and more dire."[201]

His hope in God assures him through the words of Jesus *"the forces of hell will not prevail,"* and gave him strength to struggle and persevere in stirring young people and confreres in the priesthood above all to fight against evil within themselves.

His heart is full of bitterness for so bad offenses to God, for souls who are lost, for the light of the gospel that goes out, for the inertia of good people.

The suffering that manifested in the last few years had all the characteristics of an inner purification, an offer as a victim to repair sins, a price to pay for the consolidation of the Opera and pledge for the future victory of good. Perhaps, the deep causes of his illness can be found in his spiritual infusion.

Of course, he suffered a lot, like a mother who gave birth to her child into the world. He feels and is truly the father of so many of the Opera and of many souls who entrusted to him. He repeated: "Souls cost blood ... God's Works cost."

The Holy Mass celebrated on the occasion of the fiftieth ordination anniversary convinced of his great spiritual paternity, Calabria wrote*, "I will repeat with more fervour the prayer I usually do since many years after the celebration of the Holy Mass: "*Ut cum fratribus meis et pueris tuis, laudem te, in saecula saeculorum! *i.e.* so that with my brothers and children we may praise you forever. *Oh yes, my dear and beloved brethren after we have completed our earthly days, we all can find together in the holy paradise as the Lord has joined us on earth. Calling us to be part of this Opera which is all His, to a medium by which, He wants to make new and big projects that are for all time. And he will*

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201 G. Calabria, *"Urge meditare"*, ms. Archivio generale P.S.D.P. – Verona.

certainly do so provided that we are always faithful to our divine program: Quaerite primum…, Seek you first…".[202]

Fr. Calabria's pathological history

We can divide the suffering and illness of Fr. Calabria into three major phases of his life. We will rely on the written documents and testimonies of people living next to him. While they were helpless witnesses of a pain which they could not fully understand.

Phase 1: From birth to culmination of illness in December 1949

In the life of young Calabria, we find vague hints of illness and certain pathological manifestations.

At eleven, he became seriously ill. He was in danger of death. His Mom, who had already lost four tiny little children, was afraid of losing this last child. The old widow Masina comforted her, saying, "He will get healed and the Lord will do it to do great things." He got healed and grew, without any other critical diseases of particular relevance.

Towards his 19, as we have already mentioned, he had black outs; it was mainly due to malnutrition. "During the journey from home to school, because of the heat and famine, he had fainting, attacks, of deliberate and nervous nature."[203]

"When he resumed his studies, he often suffered from headaches," according to the testimony of his school mate Fr. Umberto De Daniele.[204]

Towards the age of 23, in the sacristy of St. Lawrence, after religious ceremonies, *"he fell to the ground as a victim of convulsions*". Physicians suspected epileptic seizures while later on they realized that it was all due to starvation and empty stomach, owing to very poor diet.

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202 *Lettere del Padre ai Religiosi*, a cura della Congregazione dei Poveri Servi della Divina Provvidenza, Ferrara 1956, p. 318.

203 O. Foffano, *Don Giovanni Calabria*, Verona 1981, V ed., p. 31.

204 Umberto De Daniele, compagno di scuola di Fr. Calabria. Cfr. la sua testimonianza in *SACRA CONGREGATIO PRO CAUSIS SANCTORUM*, *Roma 1984,* op. cit. p.87.

When he was appointed as Rector of St. Benedetto al Monte, his Mama Angela did not want him to be left alone in the presbytery. He sent the boy Alessandro Noventa to help him for the night.

Mr. Noventa gives testimony that "*Fr. Calabria often suffered from headaches and during nights it was necessary to bring him a cold patch to be applied to the forehead.*"

Transferring to San Zeno in Monte, according to the testimony of Dr. Consolaro, Calabria always wanted a person to sleep in the next room namely, Bro. Luigi Borgo, Bro. Angelo Faccioli, Bro. Attilio Rossi, Bro. Antonio Consolaro, Bro. Albino Bortolla, Bro. Giovanni Corradin, Bro. Pietro Bisello, the seminarian Danilo Chiaffoni.

The young Attilio Rossi, who later became a priest and secretary of Fr. Calabria, recalled that in the early years of college he saw: "*Fr. Calabria sleeping in the boys' dormitory, separated by a curtain. I also was in the same dormitory and watched him during some of his illnesses*".[205]

The reason, says Fr. Danilo Chiaffoni: "*He was ill and was in need of help during night."*[206]

And Fr. Carlo Sempreboni will say: "*the precarious health conditions were the real reason. He suffered from headache, nights of vomiting, anguish for the uselessness of his life*." [207]

On this state of psychophysical health will certainly have influenced the life of youth. A sense of inferiority complex in attending school by wearing the clothes donated by others, poor consideration given to him by some of his professors and, therefore, lack of confidence in himself. His excessive timidity, insecurity, needed a strong guidance; his sensitive character over the time became hypersensitive due to the typhoid he suffered during his military service.

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205 Ibid., p. 93.

206 Ibid., p. 481.

207 Ibid., p. 486.

Phase II: The Great Testing Period: (December 1949 - May 20, 1951)

Until 27 March 1949 in the minutes of the General Council of the Congregation, there is no mention of a disease of Fr. Calabria. We see that he did not have yet a disease of much concern.

However, on 25 May 1950, the Councillors asked Fr. Calabria to give a delegation to his vicar Don Luigi Pedrollo, so that he could make the most urgent decisions. In fact, his health had deteriorated visibly.

At this point, he himself asked the General Council's confreres to talk about his illness. They did so at the sitting of 15 June 1950. The counsellor Bro. Consolaro who was also the personal physician of Fr. Calabria, expressed his opinion: "*Father John suffered from an infatuated arteriosclerotic form, but started with phenomena a little different from the usual. The present phenomena are the aggravation of the usual disturbances already suffered several times by Father.* "

During this time, there are few written notes in his diary. Two simple writings in May 1950 - two in June 1950 - one in July and August 1950 - then, for eight months, until 7 May 1951 the journal was closed in the drawer of the desk. It is the moment of silence that reigns the night of the spirit and the maceration of his body.

On 31 May 1950 a cataract appeared in the right eye. His vision diminished more and more. On clinical examination of 16 July 1950, he was diagnosed with "cataract from sclerosis to both eyes".

On 28 June 1950 he wrote in the diary, "*Day of great moral desolation. Only Jesus can judge it. People speak of sending me for treatment, always for my material and spiritual good. Entering into treatment comes out for burial. Fiat, fiat, fiat* ". The last four words are indecisive.

In fact, some doctors had suggested hospitalizing him in a clinic to keep him under observation and give him the necessary treatment.

And on 14 July 1950 we find only this phrase: "*In the Tribunal of God we will understand (the grace of) being Poor Servants. Suffering, I hope, will purify me to enter eternity."*

On 19 July 1950 Fr. Calabria no longer sees by his left eye.

On 21 July 1950 doctors are no longer talking about cataracts but glaucoma.

On 15 August 1950 in the diary we find only this lapidary phrase written, *"Let everything be for Jesus, for His glory."*

The delegation for his vicar Don Pedrollo, requested by the councillors, was not granted immediately. Probably on the advice of Abbot Caronti and his new confessor Father Cherubino.

With enormous worsening of health, on 5 October 1950 Fr. Calabria decided to delegate to Don Luigi Pedrollo.

Meanwhile, the General Council, worried about the evolution of the disease, called a famous prof. Sisto, neurologist professor at the University of Turin. This was his diagnosis, "*Phenomenon of sclerosis. Nothing special to do. Intensify your treatment so that he may sleep*".

Also called a well-known psychiatrist, prof. Cherubini Trabucchi, for many years director of the Provincial Psychiatric Hospital of Verona, who knew Fr. Calabria since childhood. The psychiatrist proposed an energetic treatment with the "shock". However, before he wanted to hear the opinion of prof. Lambranzi, head of the psychiatric department hospital in Verona.[208]

The two physicians agreed to propose electroshock treatment. The Councillors asked for time to reflect.

On 5 September 1950 a new consultation was held, with the participation of Prof. Achille Roncato, director and founder of the Institute of Biochemistry of the University of Padua and Dr. Avocate Filippo Parolari, an intimate friend of Fr. Calabria and *"External Brother".*

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[208] *Prof. Lambranzi,* was a non-practising Christian and socialist man. He esteemed Fr. Calabria greatly. When in turn he found himself gravely ill, and he sent a word to call to his bedside Fr. Calabria. He received the holy sacraments and died in peace with God on 7 January 1954.

Prof. Achille Roncato confirmed the diagnosis made by prof. Trabucchi*: "Melancholic depressive form".* He proposed a new less violent than electroshock treatment: four intravenous injections of Cardiazol.

However, before starting this treatment, prof. Trabucchi also wanted to hear the opinion of prof. Belloni, neurology professor at the University of Padua.

So, on 9 September 1950 new consultation. The following were present: the prof. Belloni, prof. Trabucchi, prof. Lambranzi, prof. Roncato, Dr. Parolari and Dr. Brother Antonio Consolaro.

The professor Belloni did not recommend cardiazol treatment and suggested, instead, sedatives like those already in use, but a higher dose.

Fr. Calabria, seeing himself surrounded by all these doctors and clasping some soft word, feared that sedatives would be given to him, which would make him numb and incapable of understanding. He told Don Pedrollo: *"I want to remain master of my mental faculties."*

From 17 September to 28 December 1950, there was a slight improvement. Don Pedrollo, who followed the course of the illness and carefully noted everything in his notebook, used the formula "*full recovery*". In fact, Fr. Calabria began again to receive people and expressed the desire to visit some Houses of the Congregation. He would have wanted to go to Rome for the proclamation of the Dogma of the Assumption. He was advised not to travel because of the great crowd of pilgrims.

Every day, he followed with great interest the preaching of Father Lombardi. He manifested the desire to see again Card. Schuster. He wanted to go find him in Milan. Instead, Cardinal himself came to see him in Verona on 2 October 1950.

The encounter between the two holy priests was moving. After the interview with Fr. Calabria, Card. Schuster told the priests of the Opera: *"It seems to me that in these sufferings of Fr. Calabria there is the hand*

of God. When He wants to use a soul, the writhing ... I think I can apply the verse 10 of Isaiah Chapter 53... ".

He referred to the famous passage of Isaiah that speaks of the Lord's Servant, *"The Lord wished to crush him with sorrows."*

Don Pedrollo asked the Cardinal for an explanation of the spiritual aridity that afflicted Fr. Calabria. Schuster said, *"The naked on the cross. When tribulation comes from God, when God really wants to experience a soul, no human consolation can benefit. Here is the hand of the Lord. There is the Lord. The Lord who wants to try his soul. I'm sorry to say these things to Fr. Calabria, but it is so: as the holy Simeon told Mary ... "*

On 29 Dec. 1950 the health of Fr. Calabria worsened. He did not see us almost anymore. On 17 and 28 January 1951, prof. Trabucchi visited him, he advised to take Fr. Calabria to admit into a specialized nursing home. The confreres of the council were puzzled.

Fr. Calabria came to know him and said, "*I go there, but that's what I suffer.*"

We are at the culminating moment of his suffering.

Confided with Don Pedrollo: "*Don Luigi, I cannot bear anymore ... There is a wall of division between me and Jesus! It seems to me that I am rejected. For an eternity, O God! O God, for me there is nothing else now ...* "

He dictated a letter for the Card. Schuster. He compared his suffering with the one suffered by Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. He repeated that he suffered greatly for the martyrdom of the Holy Church and, with his first, with an almost unreadable handwriting, which was rewritten by typewriter, thus closed the letter: "*Jesus revered his charity in these moments which are moments of God, which does great projects. The Holy Spirit will tell you so many things.*

On my knees I ask for the holy blessing for my poor soul."

On 15 April 1951 Msgr. Angelo Grazioli had been Professor of Moral Theology in the Seminary for 42 years. Fr. Calabria seemed not to recognize him. And the exemplary priest, strongly moved, wrote to Don Luigi Pedrollo: "*It seemed to see him always in Gethsemane! God has*

given him the mark of the saints ... I seem to see in him all that was the torment of St. Alphonsus, in his last years".[209]

On 3 May 1951 there was a new consultation between Prof. Belloni and Prof. Trabucchi. It was considered necessary to give Fr. Calabria the "shock therapy" under narcosis. Don Pedrollo this time consented to give Fr. Calabria the first electroshock. He decided to do it in four shocks without taking him to a clinic. The first shock was given on 6 May 1951.

Fr. Calabria, the next day, wrote in his Diary: *"These are days of darkness, of unprecedented trials. Jesus you see. Have pity on me and do it all for your love of souls and for Fr. John Calabria. "*

He was given the second shock on 9 May 1951.

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209 Théodule Rey-Mermet, *Il Santo del secolo dei lumi, Alfonso De Liguori*, Città Nuova, 1983, pp.820ss. St. Alphonse (1696-1787) and in his last years he suffered spiritual trials similar to those of St. John Calabria. In the years 1784-1785 he was tormented by the harrowing abandonment of Christ on the Cross. He said, crying, *"Who knows if I am in the grace of God, and will be saved?"* Addressing the crucifix: "*My Jesus, do not let me be damned ... Lord, do not send me to hell, because in the hell there is no love.*" One day they asked him, *"How are you*?" "*I'm under the brawl of divine justice."* He had temptations against faith, to which he replied, *"My God, I believe, and I want to live and die as a Son of the Holy Church.*" Scruples tormented his conscience, which the saint could no longer dominate. Then only obedience gave him peace. Worse, voluptuous excitations disturbed his senses, tearing off his groans and throwing him in the fear of offending God. Prof. Gennaro Goglia of the Anatomy Institute of the University of Naples, studying the skeleton of Alfonso, explains these disturbances with the severe alterations suffered by the lumbar vertebrae and their irritating action on the centers that control the innervation of the genitals. Alphonse confessed to a father: "*I am eighty years old, and the fire of my youth has not yet expired"* And he told a parish priest: "*I suffer the punishments of the hell.*" In addition to physical suffering, there are demonic temptations. Demons' apparitions, come to tempt him against faith, hope, or humility. But in the midst of all these suffering there was no lack of mystical experiences. He ended by taking refuge in God's mercy. "*Lord, You know that all what I have said, written or done, I have said and done for the souls and for Your glory*."

The health condition of the Fr. Calabria was worsened on 10 May and Fr Pedro Pedrollo noted *that Fr. Calabria could not remember anything. These two shocks given to him remained his two main mysteries of faith.*

However, there was a noticeable improvement on 13 May.

The last electroshock was applied on 16 May.

Fr. Calabria wrote on 16 May in his Diary*, "After days of great trials, which only Jesus knows, I was able to celebrate the Holy Mass for his divine grace. The trial continues. May Jesus use me in his great mercy and give me the grace to understand my brothers who make me so good in the spirit."*

Father Pedrollo remarked on 20 May 1951, *"Fr. John was born again!"* In fact, that same day, he began to write thanksgiving cards to all the doctors who had cared for him and contacted the epistle with Msgr. Adriano Bernareggi the Bishop of Bergamo.

Fr. Calabria wrote in his diary on 31 May 1951,

"The Lord, after so many months of great suffering, has given me some interval and allows me to resume my diary. Deo gratias, Deo gratias ".

Stage III:

From the recovery of 20 May 1951 until death on4 December 1954

Fr. Calabria resumed his normal life from 20 May 1951, but from his way of doing and from his words, he perceived a change and a different vision of suffering, as if he had undergone an inner purification. He went to vote for municipal elections on 27 May.

Until 3 November 1953, no exceptional suffering occurred.

He will call these sufferings *"new". Fr. Calabria penned down his experiences in his diary on the following dates viz.*

On 8 November 1951, *"I have all but all but everything new ...".*

On 10 November, *"For two or three days I have new spiritual trials that, after all, bear me signs of goodness and mercy that Jesus has towards me so poor, and this for the Mercy of the Poor Servants to whom I have the grace to belong as the Casante of the divine Master… "*

On 14 November 1951, *“One needs grace to understand my new sufferings”.*

On 27 November 1951, *"I have excessive and new sufferings. I feel, it seems to me, in the light and strength of God, me, though so miserable, keeps me here in the House of the Lord and wants me to serve him, his Casante ... I need, and it is necessary that the Opera understands me, poor, in a supernatural way. "*

On 30 November 1951, *“since many days of trials and suffering all special...".*

On 14 December 1951,*"There are some days I have new trials, but I feel that they are directly from God, certainly for this Opera, that if with the divine grace and with the help of my dear brothers who are near me these trials I will overcome. Let Jesus make new and great designs ... I have the feeling of being, from one moment to the other, called and I do not feel prepared. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus! "*

On 22 December 1951, *"My Jesus, I heard the word of God. I feel my nothingness and my misery, but I feel that Jesus on my misery wants to build and make plans for the present hour, now so much obscure, and this with the pure and genuine spirit of the Opera, to show that it is He, and he is Jesus who does ...”*

On 15 January 1952, *"How many trials of indolence, inherent to me, Poor Servant, as the Casante of this small but great Opera, which no external struggle can cause to die, only we Poor Servants ... In the midst of so many trials I feel, from time to time, the hand of God who supports me and helps me. "*

On 23 January 1952, *"My trials are great and I feel that I am working with the Great Opera of the Poor Servants. ... It will fulfil new designs of good for the poor humanity ... I feel and experience that in*

the extreme needs, Jesus supports and helps me and will help those my brothers who are close to me and helping me... "

On 31 January 1952, *"The new and painful trials continues, though with some relief in the most painful moments ...".*

On 4 February 1952, *"Suffering, trials continuous, they tell me how much Jesus wants to purify and sanctify my poor soul, so close to the great call."*

On 23 February 1952*, "For more than a month, suffering is of an extent that only Jesus knows. I feel how much the Lord favours ..."*

On 1 March 1952*, "To my confessor, Father Cherubino, I have exposed my new state so painful for the physical and spiritual trials and, at the same time, what I feel, though zero and miserable, for the Opera of the Poor Servants of which I am nothing but a poor member, among the poor servants, placed here by divine mercy. He confirmed to me that I still have to remain as Casante as a divine will ... I feel the old man in me, with all its consequences, but thanks to God I also feel the new man with the divine supports. God's souls and works, how dear they cost..."*

On 26 March 1952, "Today a letter was read to the Council concerning the history of my sufferings, from 1949 to 1951."

On 31 May 1952, "*I have spent days of great sufferings ..."*

On 2 December 1952, "*I have spent days of suffering never before in the past. I had pains and inner sorrows that have hurt my heart as a father and a follower of this Opera ... "*.

On 1 January 1953, "*December 23 was the day of painful physical aid and help. Deo gratias. For the prompt care of Physicians Bro. Dr. Antonio Consolaro and Dr. Vantini, with the grace of God, have overcome ...”*

On 20 February 1953, "*After days of trial and penance, I would say almost without name, for a few days I feel, and this by God's grace, quieter. ... That Jesus give me the grace to treasure the signs he sends me, for the atonement of my sins, to sanctify my poor soul, and to carry out the divine plans, appropriate for the present hour ... "*

April 14, 1953, "*For days I have new sufferings that only the Lord knows. These sufferings, sometimes I feel, but my spiritual father reassures me, come from the Lord to perform the new divine designs he has on the Opera of the Poor Servants ... "My Church - says Jesus - my Church is prolonged with the Opera of the Poor Servants ..."*

On 27 April 1953, "*What days my dear Jesus permits. What a pain, what a trial! I feel I would be lost, without the particular help, which I trust will soon come from the great mercy of Jesus ..."*

On 16 June 1953, *"My God how many painful trials. I feel that beyond physical trials, Satan, especially in a certain moment launches, I have evidence that, without the special help of God, I would be killed."*

On 13 July 1953, "*Only Jesus can understand my sufferings ..."*

November 27, 1953, at 13.30*: (on a leaflet) "To Don Pedrollo. I can not do it anymore. Notify the reception ".* It was to inform the reception to refuse anyone for that day.

On 7 April 1954, "*I feel the suffering that, united to that of Jesus, purifies my poor soul and slowly completes the great designs of today's hour, now all of Jesus."*

On 9 April 1954,*"A day of special serenity* in Negrar *.."*

On 29 April 1954,*"Night of Love. What a holy moment what I can now give. May Jesus show me and use me his great mercy and allows me to do whatever costs and punishments his divine will. What will Jesus do to me? How poor I am.."*

On 6 May 1954,*"Today is quite quiet. Days ago, I lived days of trial so intimate, nameless. "*

On 7 May 1954,*"I spend so painful days ..."*

On 9 May 1954 he wrote, *"I rely only on the great mercy of God and of Our Lady. Poor in all. Fr. J. Calabria ".*

On the evening of 29 May 1954,*"Now I'm in the end. Satan wants me in discouragement and misery. I entrust to Divine Mercy under the protection of St. Pius X. Pray, pray for me, poor in everything. Jesus, have mercy. "*

And with this invocation he completed his diary, which he had begun forty-four years ago on 10 November 1911.

The Calvary of Fr. Calabria

Near Jesus crucified, says the Gospel, *"there were some women looking from far away. Among others, there were the mother of Jesus, her sister, Mary of Clèofa, and Mary of Magdala*"(Jn 19:25).

Close to Fr. Calabria there were religious confreres. Everyone was spiritually united to him and to his suffering. But there were some physically nearby and watched *Fr. Calabria who was* unspeakable and helpless.

Let's take two important testimonies viz. that of Brother Oliviero Prospero and that of Fr Attilio Rossi the two serious, balanced and concrete people.

Brother Oliviero Prospero[210] the Bursar General of the Congregation tells, *"Towards Christmas of 1949, Fr. John began a series of serious suffering, which took him a few months, from Pentecost in the year 1951 and part of 1952, accompanied him till his death.*

Physical, but much more moral, grief, he was tormented by scruples. He was tried in faith, he who had reassured so many scrupulous people, was now being tested with so many scruples. Fr. Calabria said, "I do not feel anything anymore, you know."

Once, while I was serving the Holy Mass at the time of consecration, addressing Fr Rossi who was celebrating the Holy Mass, Fr. Calabria said, "I do not believe anything anymore," but then, with a low voice, Fr. Calabria murmured, "I believe, Lord, I think".

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210 *Prospero Oliviero*, Religious Brother and Bursar General of the Congregation of the Poor Servants of divine Providence. He joined the 'Good Children's Home in the early childhood, in 1909. He stayed very close to Fr. Calabria for all his life. His testimony is very important, and it is placed completely in Summ., pp. 151ff..

And he ended quietly the Holy Mass.

Other temptations disturbed him such as the thought of not doing anything good and, that he had done only a little good, to have done it out of pride or for other intentions. The thought of death grieved him, which came from a holy fear of God and from the thought of the final report in the face of the Most Holy God. To those who approached him, he said in a sincere and cautious voice: "Pray that my soul is saved and that I may not go into hell."

And he often said to Fr. Attilio Rossi and to Fr. Pedrollo, "Who knows if I am in the grace of God and whether I would save myself?"

He was tempted to say horrible blasphemies. She said to me confused, "Think that I always wanted the Lord, I always loved him, think what horrible thing would be to blaspheme him, and what a serious scandal it would be!" And the temptation was so strong that he thought he had truly spoken blasphemies. He said to me, "Come on, call Fr. Luigi Pedrollo. Tell him to come right here. "And he made his confession. During these terrible temptations, he continued to invoke the Lord, the Madonna, the saints. And he prayed and read spiritual readings"

And he continues his testimony, "I stayed close to Fr. Calabria every day of his illness, until the day of death, because I had to go to Rome because of my office. Fr. Calabria had celebrated Holy Mass until 20 November inclusive. On the 21st morning, he had a haemoptysis. The doctor advised him to stay in bed. Since then, he received Holy Communion from the priest celebrating in his study room, that was transformed into a chapel. The day was a constant alternation of prayers, despite being always tormented by doubts and scruples. Above all, he was bitter because he said that he no longer felt the Lord close, that he had not paid generously to the graces and that he had ruined the Opera because of his sins. Only prayer gave him relief.

The torment lasted day and night. And he asked for help and sought comfort in prayer, jubilation, in supplications to Mary Most Holy.

We who were assisting him were exhausted. But he always wanted to pray. In the last days of the illness, I helped him to thank Jesus after the Holy Communion. It was the only moment of truce in this spiritual struggle, which ended an hour before falling into a coma at 14.30 on 3rd December until 4th December 1954. "

The testimony of Fr. Attilio Rossi[211] and this too is important. *"During the last infirmity I was always near to assist him. He suffered a lot ... He felt abandoned by God, separated by him as by an unsurpassed wall. He felt he had ruined the Opera, not having tried anything other than himself. He felt damned. He seemed to hear a voice saying to him, "You're damned, there's nothing else for you.*"

He said that he used to hear his mouth full of bad blasphemies.

During these trials he refused to receive Holy Communion because he said he felt unworthy and only obedience made him decide to receive the Holy Communion.

In the last days, I celebrated the Holy Mass in his reading room. Fr. Calabria listened from his bed, usually assisted by Brother Prospero.

Alternative moments of great depression to moments of serenity and peace.

Last days his serenity was admirable.

When on the morning of 3 December, Dr. Luigi Vantini[212] told him that Pope Pius XII was seriously ill, Calabria said, "I would gladly offer my life for him if the Lord accepted it."

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211 *Rossi Don Attilio* was the secretary and nurse of Fr. Calabria for many years. He had taken on himself the ungrateful task of defending Fr. Calabria from the assaults of insistent visitors, especially when he realized that Fr. Calabria was suffering very much.

212 *Dr. L. Vantini*, (1906-1969), a man of great faith and Christian charity. He was the physician of the poor, whom he served as "Jesus Himself." He was part of the External Brothers Family of the Opera. He met Fr. Calabria, became his personal physician, and stayed with him until his death. "*My dear Dr. Vantini*" Fr. Calabria used to call him always. "*How much they loved each other, two friends and how they understood each other!*" Said Don Luigi Pedrollo. And

Soon afterwards, he said calmly: "It was accepted." Dr. Vantini, who was a close friend of Fr. Calabria, advised him to shave his face.

"You torment me all the way," complained Fr. Calabria, but then let it go.

With great serenity, he said:

"Behold, it seems to me that Jesus is meeting me."

One pause and then:

"Yes, I feel that the Lord is so close to me and he loves me so well."

He had just started reciting Ave Maria with the short prayer: "O Jesus burning love" and a verse of the song to Our Lady "when I think of my fortune, that I am the son of Mary ..."

Then he fell asleep in a restful sleep.

The Dr. Luigi Vantini, back at 16.30, said, "This sleep I suspect," and found the right cerebral hemiplegia. He was right, because at One o'clock am of 4 December, he stopped living."

Calabria wrote to him, "*I feel that the Lord loves you, loves you for your great charity, which surely originates from the Sacred Heart of Jesus*" (Christmas 1938). He was the Head of the Geriatric Hospital of Negrar. He tragically died in a car accident while traveling to Bologna to attend the defence of his daughter's degree thesis.

EPILOGUE

Fr. John Calabria had written, *"I want my funeral to be done in the utmost poverty and that, when the funeral rites are over, my body is brought to the cemetery outside Bishop's Gate through the shortest route."* The Poor Servants of Divine Providence agreed to faithfully perform the will of their Father. Civil authorities were not with the same opinion. On behalf of the entire population, they said*, "No, Calabria does not belong only to you, he belongs to all of us and many others*." And they intended solemn funeral. The body was exposed for three days in the biggest church in Verona, St. Anastasia: *"The flow of people was extraordinary, so as to fill the immense Basilica, the square and the adjacent streets permanently ... They prayed, they touched the coffin with veneration ".*

Pope Pius XII sent a telegram of condolence by defining Fr. Calabria as the " *Perfect Example of Gospel Charity*" and Cardinal of Milan Ildefonso Schuster, who died three months earlier, had exalted him with the words to carve on his tomb viz. "Fr. John Calabria ... with life, writings, and providential institutions, assisting the poor, shines as a bright lighthouse in the Church of God."

Pope John Paul II, on 17 April 1988 came to Verona. In a solemn function at the stadium of "Bentegodi", declared Blessed, Fr. John Calabria and Msgr. Giuseppe Nascimbeni.

On 18 April 1999, this time in Rome, John Paul II declared him Saint. The liturgical feast of St. John Calabria was set for 8 October.