

ST. JOHN CALABRIA

(1873 – 1954)

A PROPHET OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

THE FOUNDER OF THE POOR SERVANTS OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

By OTTORINO FOFFANO

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SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD

"I tell you, do not worry about your life, What you will eat or what you will 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 of the air; They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, And yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying Add a single hour to your span of life?

And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; They neither toil nor spin, Yet I tell you, even Solomon In all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

But if God so clothes the grass of the field, Which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, Will he not much more clothe you–you of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" Or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; And indeed your heavenly Father Knows that you need all these things.

But strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, And all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, For tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Mt 6: 25-3

PRESENTATION OF THE FIRST EDITION

“It is edifying and will be agreeable”.

“The work is written with love but also with seriousness and meticulousness”.

These were the first important judgments on the biography of Fr. John Calabria which I have the pleasure of presenting to you.

This was the very theme assigned to Fr. Ottorino Foffano while with a generous commitment he started the work, indeed not very easy, to write a biography of our founder St John Calabria: it must be edifying and moreover it must rigorously be according to the truth. This is also to pay homage to the memory of the same Fr. Calabria, whose cult for the truth is well known.

It is with great joy and satisfaction that I welcome, after a long wait, the publication of this biography, however, I also confess my anxiety because it is not easy to portray in its various aspects the versatile and complex figure of our Father John.

But I can guarantee that the work was taken on very earnestly by the author and fulfilled with a loving care and meticulous diligence. For many months our dearest Fr. Foffano devoted himself to portray the paternal features of the founder with the expertise of a scholar and the devotion of a most faithful son.

Many brothers collaborated with the author, especially those who since the beginning and for many years were close to Fr. Calabria to assist him; they were precious witnesses of the clear examples of every virtue which he offered in all the events of his long earthly life.

Therefore I hope that this first biography may satisfy the legitimate expectation of many brothers and friends, and may reveal an existence entirely spent for God and the souls, with an urgent longing to make known to his religious and to all, the double breath of his heart and perhaps the double message entrusted to him by the Divine Providence: first, *to remind especially the Priests and Religious of the holiness* through the practice "*sine glossa*" (literally) of the holy Gospel, as the only efficacious means of salvation for the poor mankind, which is on the edge of the abyss; second, *to manifest to the world* – so distracted and deeply affected by materialism, so slave of money, passions and pleasures, in this hour so pregnant of uncertainties and threats – the ineffable and very consoling truth of God our Father, who never abandons those who place their trust in him and always provides for them according to the great promise of the Gospel, which has been assumed by our Father John Calabria as the programme of the Opera and of his life: "Seek first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well".

And now, poor as I am, trusting in the maternal intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, with all my heart I invoke upon this work a particular unction of the Holy Spirit, so that, as it often happens for certain books, the power of His grace make every word bright, and every chapter fecund of holy fruits, for the edification and consolation of many people.

Then every effort will be repaid and every humble sacrifice abundantly rewarded.

Fr. Louis Pedrollo,

Superior General PSD

Verona, October 15, 1958

FOREWORD[1]

While launching this new edition of the biography our Father John Calabria, I am going back with my thought to the times – ten years ago – in which, bent over my white sheets, I was starting to write, to read, to correct and to annotate the various steps of this biography, filling those sheets with a great number of signs from which these pages are coming. And in this assiduous and hard work – which always I loved – sometime a disturbing anxiety assailed me: will I be able to avoid altering the image of our founder and belittling his personality? Will I be able to make him live again in those who knew him, and to increase in them such esteem, veneration and affection with which they surrounded him while he was still alive? Will I be able to present him to those who did not approach him but they knew him only through his writings and his works of charity and apostolate, as these works reveal him: in his urgent evangelical message; in his far-sighted openness of mind; in his great apostolic charity and in the firmness of his faith? Will I be able to arouse interest in the reader to know better his soul? to inquire more deeply into his spirituality? and to deeply understand his apostolic anxiety?

Perhaps it is too early for such an evaluation, even though some interest is increasing around him and the studies on his life and his Opera are going on.

[1] Some notes of the author from his foreword to the fourth edition that is almost the same of the fifth.

Of course, on my part, I cannot but give thanks to the Lord for having abundantly blessed my humble and filial effort, and for having spread it and made it an instrument of edification and spiritual enjoyment for many readers and friends.

May this new edition make live again this “Man of the Gospel”, this “Mystic of the apostolate” as he was opportunely defined. May it contribute to the foundation of that “new order” which Fr. Calabria repeatedly invoked. May this new order start off from the Ecumenical Vatican Council II, a Council so longed by St. John Calabria, and bring unity, peace and prosperity to the great human family.

Fr. Ottorino Foffano

NOTE TO THE READER

The word *CASANTE* means General Superior. Its etymological meaning in Veronese dialect is "Custodian". Fr. Calabria considered himself as a simple custodian of the House because only Jesus is the Master. We didn't translate into English this word which is very dear to the Calabrian tradition.

Another characteristic word of Calabrian tradition is *OPERA.* In the mind of Fr. Calabria it does not mean only the activity, the work, the institution, the house, the congregation, the collaborators and friends. It means these aspects altogether, but it means more than this: it means also the spirit, the ideal, the charism which God inspired to the Founder. Then it means both the Calabrian Family and its spirituality. We did not translate this word. The word *Opera* in English sounds as a musical composition, a good symphony to the glory of God; it is not in contrast with the original meaning of the word.

Comparison between Indian and Italian school system:

Indian System	
Primary school:	1-7 years (standards)
Secondary school:	8-10 years (standards)
Higher secondary school:	plus 1 and plus 2 (years)
Italian system (*classical studies*)	
Elementary school	1-5 years
Junior medium school	3 years
Gymnasium (or higher m. s.)	2 years
Liceo (classical)	3 years

The quotations of the collective letters of St. John Calabria to his religious are taken from the book "My Beoloved Brothers…" - Letters of St. John Calabria to His religious, Congregation PSDP, Ish Kripa Indian Delegation, Bangalore 2011.

CHAPTER 1
THE CALLING

"Your Job is to be a Priest!"

“Get out! Get out! Go, be a priest, because you are good for nothing else: that's your job!” And so, on the spot, he was terminated.

“Go, be a priest... You are good for nothing else”. Yes, it was true, he wanted to be a priest, and he always thought about it and longed for it. Didn't he start, when he was four years old, to make the “small altar”? And didn't he cut his hair a day, tonsure style, to the point of getting a serious scolding from his mother with the threat to be brought, in that state, to Erbe Square, and displayed at the pillory?

It was a mystery to nobody, he was telling it to everybody and always: yes, he wanted to be a priest.

But not the kind of priest, as his master seemed to think, good for nothing, a slugger and idler. He wanted to be a priest who cares for souls, who works for the Lord, who goes around looking for sinners to bring to heaven; a priest in the likes of his confessor, Fr. Gilardoni, who in St. John in Foro was imitating the works of St. Philip Neri, gathering children around him to

educate them in the holy fear of God, to keep them from the dangers of the world and make good Christians out of them. A priest like Fr. Scapini, the Rector of St. Laurence Church; or like his Parish Priest, Fr. Giacomelli: men full of zeal for the souls and of charity for the poor.

He planned to be a priest like this: not to look for an easy life on the way to the priesthood, without much work, almost an escape from his own poverty.

He was not brought up this way by his mother, who, received the charity from that great priest from Verona, Fr. Nicola Mazza, because of the urgent need of her family, and talked about him as a saint, completely moved by love of God and mankind.

And didn't he learn from his teachers in the Stigmatins to know the other great priest from Verona, St. Gaspar Bertoni, who, with pioneering spirit, founded a Sunday School in St. Paul's Parish in Campo Marzio, to get together children on feast days, make them play happily, keep them far from the dangers of the road and teach them the holy ways of God? Oh, yes, he really knew the priests, not his master. And if he wanted to become a priest, it was to imitate these holy men, in doing good to the poor, the sick, the children... to save souls.

With these thoughts, in the meantime, he removed his apron, bundled it, put on his jacket and greeting his former master without resentment, but with respect, he went home, with his bundle under his arm.

While walking, he kept on thinking that it is normal that small incidents happened to everybody during work. But this time, he understood, he did something really serious: he irreparably dirtied the diploma he was framing! It was not even for lack of attention... sometimes he could not get it, that's all! What could have been his fault is that some times, he was absent minded and did not understand the orders given to him. If at times, suddenly, the glass he was holding happened to slip from his hands and was broken... if the frames were scraped, if he could not finish on time what he had been ordered to do.

Certainly that was not his job. His master told him clearly, and even if he did not agree with what he said, he felt that being a priest... yes, he could make it.

With thoughts like these, he reached home.

John Calabria

The young man we are talking about is fifteen or sixteen years old, although the appearance doesn't show it. Rather thin, he has brown hair, light-blue eyes, dusky face, little prominent cheek-bones, and delicate hands; when he talks, he remarkably stresses the letter “r”, like a Frenchman: his name is John Calabria.

He was living in street Disciplina 7, with his mother, brother Gaetano, three years older, sister Teresa with her little daughter Marcellina and her husband, Louis Santurini.

The father had died three years before, after a long sickness, leaving the small family in dire poverty. His mother washed and ironed clothes for wealthy families. Gaetano did little works, too, but all these were not enough to alleviate the poor income, because the father's illness and his death deeply affected their already poor way of life. He himself had to stop going to school, to be put to work, with very discouraging results, as we already saw.

It displeased him no end to go home now and tell he had been terminated. On the other hand, wasn't it a sign from God for him to go back to the road he had unwillingly interrupted but still very much wished for? The world was offering him no charm, no other prospect in which he could be comfortable. He was born to be a priest. And his mother, he was sure, was not going to be much surprised if he, now, was going to tell her again about it, as a long thought resolution. Why lose other time and effort in looking for occupations he had no feelings at all about?

Was his brother Gaetano going to be surprised? Not at all, even if, with this decision, he would be alone to sustain the poor family; in the end he could really agree that his younger brother was born to be a priest.

Let's go back a little while.

Birth and Baptism

John Calabria was born on October 8, 1873 in Verona, in street Disciplina, in the fourth floor of the house with civic number 7, in the Parish of the Holy Apostles, seventh and last child of the spouses Louis Calabria and Angela Foschio.[2]

Little is known about his family, because he spoke little about it; he said something, now and then, about his mother.

Being a family in dire poverty, she was accepted and educated by Fr. Nicola Mazza, in the Institute he founded in 1829, as per suggestion of his confessor, St. Gaspar Bertoni.

Since a year before, Father Nicola Mazza was gathering poor, orphan and abandoned girls, to keep them from evil, rescuing them from want and danger. To better achieve his purpose from the very beginning, he gave to his Institute a clear and homely mark. He divided the internal groups into many small "families", with a "mother" as head, with the help of a "sub-mother" and of the "aunts", within a regime of a homely freedom and education to domestic virtues, so that the girls, moving out, were ready to manage a house.

But together with education to the family values, Fr. Mazza knew also how to communicate the supernatural spirit he was rich of: spirit of great mercy and compassion, which

[2] Brothers and sisters born ahead of him: Teresa, born and died on 1-22-1857; Benedetto, born on 8-20-1858, died on 7-3-1859; Giovanna, born on 8-18-1861, died on 5-8-1864; Teresa, born on 2-22-1864, died on 12-26-1927; Cecilia, born on 1-12-1866, died on 8-1-1868; Gaetano, born on 8-19-1870, died on 3-13-1917.

merited him the nickname of "handcart of mercy"; spirit of great devotion to the Church and to the Holy Father; spirit of poverty and mortification, which made him live poor among the poor, after having experimented the comforts of a wealthy family; spirit of charity and apostolate in the unshakable faith in that “bank which never goes bankrupt” as he used to call the Divine Providence.

Together with the Institute for poor girls, the city of Verona and society owe him also the Institute for poor students, gifted with “excellent talent, good morals and sound common sense”, who gave good hope to be useful to the Church and the social community.

He was gifted with a sharp talent and great memory, strong will and sensible heart. Since his youth, he was observing these good but neglected intelligences, and since then “it pained him to see men with great talent living like plain labourers, or just not going on in improving their skills for lack of training and of the needed basic scientific knowledge”. This seemed to him to be (and it really was) “a great defect of the society”. And so, he started immediately as soon as he became a priest, to take care of poor vocations, to gather children with talent, to whom he used to admonish: “good, clever and with bowed head”, which means that they must put together goodness, wisdom and humility.

The Church owes him further the great impetus given to the African Missions by two eminent missionaries from Verona, Fr. Angel Vinco and Blessed Daniel Comboni, his spiritual sons.

He was born in 1790 and died in 1865, after a life totally spent for the glory of God and the good of the souls.

It is clear now why the Rector of the Church of St. Laurence, Fr. Peter Scapini, who knew for many years Angela Foschio, was able to write on the souvenir card for the thirtieth day after her death: “In the Mazza Institute, where she had her first education, she drew that live faith and Christian strength which permeated her whole active life. Wife and Mother, she felt the greatness of her mission and fulfilled it up to the sacrifice, up to the grave. The Church and the house were the places, the only ones, she knew: of the latter she made a nest of pure affections; of the first a destination of her immortal hopes. In poverty and in the many pains of her life, she always kept her spirit calm, saying like Jesus in the Garden the “fiat” of resignation. Stricken with long illness, she suffered, poor lady, very bitter agonies; she found comfort only in the Blessed Virgin Mary, for whom she felt tender devotion, and in her son, Fr. John, who, after God, was her joy, her support, her everything. ‘Mother, beautiful Mother, dearest Mother’ she sighed, few minutes before passing away and, with her eyes fixed to heaven, she talked with Mary about heavenly things. Bathed many times in the Blood of Christ [3] and surrounded by all her loved ones, just on the afternoon of May 8, 1908, she seemed to ‘go up to the God of Saints, saint in her sufferings’ ”.

[3] It means purified by the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Aside from some emphatic points, typical of the panegyrists of the 19th century, the truth is that the life of this strong woman has been a combination of crosses and virtues.

In 1856, when she was 25, she married a poor shoemaker, who, still young, was a widower without children. After six boys, four of whom died at tender age, our John was born.

In the Office of the Local Civil Register, he was registered only by the name of Oreste, but in the baptism he had the names of John, Oreste and Mary. The baptismal name prevailed over the civil name and John became forever his name.

The parish church of the Holy Apostles was not too far from street Disciplina, maybe only two hundred meters. After covering the short distance of the then Corso Castelvecchio and crossed the small square, the little procession entered from the side door, north of the church: an ancient parish church, but spoiled inside, in its original architectural lines, by less proper repairs.

They proceeded to the big font, formerly belonging to the parish of St. Laurence. Who could have thought then that the little son of the poor shoemaker was going to be called by a Roman Pontiff, "champion of evangelical charity"? [4]

[4] Pius XII in the condolence telegram for his death.

Some Historical Notes

The world had something else to think about and everybody was making different kinds of forecasts; there was no time to make guesses about every child brought to the baptismal font.

We are not saying that Verona was having big problems to solve in those days; but if Verona was at peace, not so the rest of the world, especially Europe and Italy.

France and Spain were bothered by legitimism and succession questions, and their lands were getting soaked in blood. In Germany the persecution against the Church, disguised as "Fight for the Culture" (Kulturkampf), was in full blast. In Austria the confessional laws, that were going to oppress the Church, on the pretext of helping it, had been prepared. Also, Switzerland was persecuting the Catholics; and the Czarist Russia was doing no less, especially in the occupied territories of Poland and Ruthenia.[5] In England, religious and social problems were keeping the spirits in turmoil.

But the true historic climate, in which the little John Calabria was born and was going to grow up, was the one originated with the breach of Porta Pia,[6] only three years earlier.

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[5] Ruthenia: a Latin word to indicate an ancient European region including Belarus, Ukraine, western Russia, Slovakia, and eastern Poland.

[6] In 1870 the Italian army invaded Rome through the breach of Porta Pia in order to include the Pontifical State in the new State of United Italy, with Rome as capital.

A lot of time will pass before history could fairly make a judgment, but right now we may say that the Father of falsehood and Master of confusion had a great part in directing that tormented period. It is the climate of liberalism, with the broadest meaning; the liberalism which started with Voltaire, born in the blood of the French revolution and confirmed in Manchester with the cruel exploitation of the labourers, of the women and of the minors, sacrificed to the idol of the capitalistic industrialization. That climate which was going to give origin to the Marxist socialism, like a spontaneous and reactionary generation. Pestiferous climate indeed, made of enlightenment rationalism and of deterministic materialism, "the one armed against the other", and more or less consciously dominated and manoeuvred by the Masonic idea, in order to extirpate from the heart of the people the biggest riches they still possess: the faith and trust in God.

As far as Italy is concerned, the proof of all these is the abolition of the theological faculties in the Universities, started since 1866. The abolition of the religious Orders and Congregations and the confiscation of their properties; the promulgation of a law declaring that the matrimony had "validity" only "from rules, regulations, ceremonies prescribed by law"; a circular from Government Secretary, which, for the teaching of religion in the elementary school, prescribes for the specific request from the heads of the families; the fight against the Italian Catholic Youth, with ravage of clubs, insults, derisions and blows, also in church. Between 1872 and 1873 sewage of indecent and antireligious performances infests the theatres of the peninsula and even in Rome some people arrive

to blaspheme Our Lord Jesus Christ, in public places. Just in this year 1873 the celebrations in honour of St. Francis of Assisi were prohibited, for fear of the reactions threatened by the Masonic sect, and the masses of faithful who, carried by the devotion to the city of the "Poverello" (St. Francis of Assisi), later on flew to Loreto, were dispersed by the army and the police, for "hygienic reasons". In Bologna, during a procession of the Body of Christ, the Eucharist was insulted; in Turin, in another occasion, the Monstrance was overturned; in Gubbio, the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary is stoned; and the list could go on and on.

The subversives' laws voted in the Piedmonts Parliament since 1865 had been extended to the whole national territory, as it was annexed little by little. These laws appeared in Verona in 1871, but already in 1865 the Sect penetrated and stationed in the city and, two years later, it exposed its ominous influence with a sacrilegious act against the Blessed Sacrament, and few years later an orgiastic carnival feast took place inside the former church of St. Zeno in Monte. Because of this public contempt, a public reparation rite was performed in San Bernardino. And we are only at the start.

The fight against the Church, in fact, will become more and more rough and provocative in the whole country, under the push, at time sly and at time open, of the freemasonry.

The maximum happened during the night of July 13, 1881, with the known try by the Sect to throw inside the river Tiber the coffin of the Pope Pius IX. Only the decisive and generous defence of "his" youth, the members of the Italian

Catholic Youth, packed around him, at his sides, like a carriage, prevented the extreme outrage.

The attack to the revered dead body was going to be a prelude for an assault to the Vatican, “National Bastille”!

We should not be surprised if things went so far: “the original murderer” was blowing on human passions, arming the spirits, the tongues, the pens, before the hands.

The pornography, the antireligious satire, the positivism negating every transcendence, the most open irreligion, violence, disorders, mark the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century. The “Donkey’s” magazine and its founder will be the flag and the most widespread weapon, and the “Italian anticlerical Fasces” will be the most radical organization for the removal of Christianity among our people.

In front of the unrestrained fury of hell, we cannot say that the catholic resistance was missing. The already established Italian Catholic Youth, first sucker of that gigantic and mellow tree which became later the Italian Catholic Action, the Congresses Work, the Union for Social Studies, the Christian Democratic Fasces, other organizations and similar movements, developed a task of embankment and counter-attack, which was going to prepare the recovery and the successes of the present.

The Pontificates of Leo XIII and St. Pius X succeeded to the troubled one of Pius IX and were at times of settlement and spiritual, social and political reconstruction, which, after the inevitable break-up of those sad days, consolidated more and

more the condition of the Church and the position of the Catholics: and not only in Italy but also in other Countries.

But the doctrine is not enough; the action is not enough for the salvation of mankind as well as of individuals: holiness is needed. And the kindness of the Lord moved in Italy, at that specific time, a multitude of holy souls. The Church already declared itself about some of those, about others there is no decree yet; but the fame they enjoy is so big and so many are the evidences favourable to them that, without pre-empting the infallible judgment of the Church, we have no second thoughts in putting them all together: St. Joseph Cafasso, St. John Bosco, St. Dominic Savio, St. Gemma Galgani, St. Pius X, St. Leonardo Murialdo, St. Paola Frassinetti, Blessed Louis Guanella, Blessed Contardo Ferrini, Blessed Louis Orione; Blessed Joseph Moscati, the venerable Ludwig Pavoni, Fr. Pio Brunone Lanteri; the Servants of God: Pius IX, Joseph Toniolo, Lodovico Necchi, Br. John Piamarta, Mgr. John Baptist Scalabrini, Cardinal Andrew Ferrari, Fr. Joseph Frassinetti and then Guide Negri, and Piergiorgio Frassati...

And in Verona: St. Gaspar Bertoni, St. Magdalen of Canossa, Blessed Daniel Comboni, Blessed Joseph Nascimbeni, Blessed Carlo Steeb, the Servants of God: Fr. Nicola Mazza, Fr. Zeffirino Agostini, Msgr. Louis Giacomelli, Fr. Anthony Provolo, Fr. Peter Leonardi, Fr. Joseph Baldo, Leopoldina Naudet, Teodora Campostrini and many, many other persons with no-halo, maybe also forgotten and ignored, but they gave the best, everything for the Church, for Italy, for the souls. They were

men and women of all ages, of all intellectual levels and social status, and of all classes.

After God, we are grateful to them; we have to look at them, because they worked, suffered, taught so much.

Is it rash to think that God had a special plan also for the little Calabria? His fellow countrymen don't look at him at all, now that the grace floods him, but time will come that they will line up in an endless procession and in a never seen before apotheosis in Verona for his funeral.

When he was three, he was sent to a nursery school. At that time, the nursery school covered up to the first cycle of the elementary course, corresponding to our first and second grades. The nursery school attended to by little Calabria was located in course Porta Palio, in the former church of St. Catherine in Ognissanti, suppressed by the Napoleonic laws.

Ms. Giulia Botteon, then aged 21, was the directress of the nursery school; she died old in 1946.

The young teacher was a very good Christian, full of maternal goodness and understanding for her lively little children. Fr. Calabria will keep an undying and grateful memory of her for all his life; until he will live, he will always recite, morning and evening, the prayers learned in the nursery-school. And when this sensible teacher, old by now, will go up to St. Zeno in Monte, looking for her former pupil, to have from him, now, a word of comfort and light for her soul, he will welcome her with all respect and deference and, consoling her,

he will go back to the past, remembering the good things he received from her.

A fact that happened to him then, by itself insignificant and common to all children of that age, can already allow who knew him for long to see, in embryo, his physic-psychic image which, corrected and perfected by the grace and the personal efforts, will accompany him to his death.

A day then, while he was going to write with the ink, he accidentally spilt the ink-pot on the white paper. He started crying loudly and, in between sobs, kept telling the teacher, who tried to console him with sweetness: “I'm good for nothing: I'll never learn how to write”. “Don't be discouraged - the teacher told him - myself, I did a lot of scrawls before becoming a teacher you will learn too, be sure!”

It is not a surprise that we could bring back this far episode in all its freshness, including the sweet Veronese-Venetian dialect. Fr. Calabria used to say, especially during his last years that he had before his eyes all his life, from three years up; and it was sweet for him to bring back facts and things of the past, to get useful teachings. And he always did this speaking in his attractive Veronese dialect.

We were saying that in this almost meaningless episode the little Calabria shows all his very sensitive nature and a nervous and a shy temperament, which made him easy to be discouraged, self diffident, with reactions not always adequate to the causes, especially if unforeseen. He always had a rather emotional temperament.

These are counterpoint notes in the wonderful symphony of his life, accentuated by the almost miserable poverty of his infancy, by the humiliating trials of his life as a shop-boy, by the difficulties which will hinder the ascent to the longed for aim, by his precarious health, by the deep fight of the Devil who, with different grades of intensity, will persecute him all his life.

It will be the Lord, and those who represent him on earth, who will value his great qualities of spirit and heart, so that he will be awakened and moved to start grandiose works and to perform heroic deeds.

After the nursery school, his parents sent him to the elementary school of the Stigmatine Fathers.

Those places were still pregnant with the smell of the virtues of the saint founder, St. Gaspar Bertoni, died not even thirty years before.

He was born in Verona on October 19, 1777, from an almost noble, and wealthy family. When he was young, he studied in St. Sebastian School, formerly of the Jesuit Fathers and now, after the suppression of the Company, administered by the Municipality, but still managed by those Fathers.

Ordained priest in September 1800, he soon became the “children's missionary”, following the suggestion of the Parish Priest of St. Paul in Campo Marzio, in answer to his intentions to be missionary among the pagans. In the said parish; he started in 1802 the first Marian Sunday circle, abolished in 1807 because of suspicions about its activities by

the Napoleonic government, reopened seven years later, more prosperous and strong than before.

For these clear qualities, Father Bertoni was sent in 1816 to manage the Stigmata Church, with the order to teach poor children free.

His zeal for the health of the souls and the love for preaching the word of God, made him worth in 1817 of the title "Apostolic Missionary" and moved him to start a "small Company", totally full of Ignatian spirit, with the purpose to preach Spiritual Exercises, Missions, catechisms and sermons to the people on Sundays; and to this he added the apostolate of the confessional and the visit to sick persons and prisoners: all these and always for free. "*Gratis omnino servire Deo et Ecclesiae* – to serve God and the Church and everybody always for free" it is read in his Constitutions, "in aid to the Bishops", without any limitation to his scope of work.

He was contemporary of great Veronese apostles, like Fr. Peter Leonardi, Blessed Carlo Steeb, Fr. Nicola Mazza, Fr. Anthony Provolo, Leopoldina Naudet, St. Magdalen of Canossa and Theodora Campostrini and, according to various circumstances and orders of the Providence, he was their emulous, collaborator, councillor and example.

Among his great merits is to have been an eager promoter of the priests' holiness, starting with don Mazza the Congregation of St. Carlo for the Retreat of the priests.

Under the guidance of the children of such a Father, the little Calabria took the first conscious contact with the school and the life.

In grade one he got the price of the first degree: he was eight years old. In the successive years, he always passed well his exams. During this period of elementary school, he had best teachers in the likes of Fr. John Baptist Cavinato and Fr. Albano Clementi, the “holy teachers”.

After the elementary school, he started middle school, but the death of his father put a stop to his studies in the second year and forced him to devote himself to work for three years.

His teachers will remember for long time the good, diligent, pious child, who studied in their school.

The Flood of 1882

A fact of importance for Verona, in the chronicle of those times, is the great flood of the river Adige in September 1882. That year, meteorologically, had been a strange year. An extended winter raised big fears in April and May for the future of the crops. Moreover, in May, an invasion of grasshoppers ruined in many places whatever the winter had spared. And the summer had been very capricious, with high and low temperature, which in August reached extreme levels of sultry heat and intense cold. In September, it started raining almost everywhere in the North of Italy: Veneto, Lombardia and Trentino were the most affected regions. The newspapers

spoke of high rivers: in the Vicenza area some rivers broke the banks: but nothing yet foretold what was terribly going to happen in Verona, even if it was already raining for almost a month on the Veronese mountains.

In Verona it started raining on 14 September and already in the next night the river Adige started to overflow in some points. Anyway, there was hope that the situation would not deteriorate. In 1868 there had been “high waters”, too, but everything subsided with little damage and no casualties. But now, reaching the water more and higher levels, everybody started looking with anxiety to this impetuous river, which lapped the banks and the bridges' arches, carrying sweepings, trees and carrions of animals. The many characteristic mills, along the river banks, were secured to the trees with big ropes, but their intermittent creaking had something fearful and foretold nothing good.

On the night of the 16th, in fact, a mill of the Bra' dei Molinari, at the back of St. Anastasia Church, broke the moorings and went to crush violently against the Ponte Nuovo, breaking part of the parapet and causing cracks and splits of serious proportion in one of the arches.

After a little while, on the opposite side, at the saws of Santo Tommaso, two little houses were swept away, provoking casualties. The crushed of the struck bridge and the collapsed houses, in the middle of the night, awoke the people by near, who ran away along the road, frightened, shouting: “The Adige is breaking the banks!”

The lower part of Verona, from Campagnola to Porta Vittoria, was totally flooded. One of the secondary canals of the river Adige, called Acqua Morta, started flooding, since the day before, cellars and undergrounds. Also at the right side of the river, especially the low areas of Sottoriva and Trota streets were under the threat of the muddy waters.

Now the wheels of the mills did not turn any more: they were stopped for fears of the worst; the black constructions of bituminized wood swung dreadfully over the slimy waters of the enraged river, creating a continuous serious danger.

And it continued to rain; the Adige river became higher and higher. Four fifth of the city were under water: St. Zeno, Porta Palio, Castelvecchio, Stradone Porta Borsari; also street Disciplina was flooded and the little John saw, in one of those evenings, his dad carried home by two strong men, because, being sickly, he was not able to cross the high waters in the roads.

The river Adigetto, in the meantime, was bringing distress and terror towards Cittadella and the Campo of Fiera: after making tottery the Cittadella bridge, swept away the Roffioli Bridge.

On the left side of the Adige, the Acqua Morta Bridge had collapsed, too, and Veronetta [7] was completely flooded.

In the morning of the 17th, Sunday, the level of the Adige River reached four meters and seventy centimeters above the safety high watermark; the height of the water in the city

[7] The old part of the city, on the left bank of the river Adige.

ranged from one to four meters. At about 11 o'clock, the bridge called Ponte Nuovo collapsed with a kind of rumbling. People living in the area of “Binastroa”, near the fish-pond, were rescued in baskets and boxes pulled by ropes and kept high on the road, which was like an impetuous torrent.

The waters entered also the gasholder and so darkness came fast because of the darkness of the leaden and rainy sky and the lack of lighting service, and gave the city a gloomy look, which oppressed the spirits more and more. The angry river was reigning in the city covered by dark, fearful strong crash of waves.

The night between 17th and 18th was the most terrible night. In addition to the terror brought by the water, there were strong earthquake shocks. Other houses collapsed; other mills were pulled away from their moorings. Also the iron bridge at Pallone crashed in the vortex of the river, which gave no sign of calming down, even if from Trento came the news that there was a little but continuous decrease.[8]

The outcome of those black days was disastrous for Verona: most of the houses were flooded; about five hundred were damaged, about twenty collapsed; more than thirty thousand hectares of cultivated land went under water; and

[8] The few areas free from water were: Erbe Square with the nearby small historic centre; Bra Square and Cittadella Square; Stigmata and Porta Nuova; Scalzi and the Military Hospital, San Stefano and San Giovanni in Valle with the nearby hills. All the rest had water and mud up to three meters in high.

hundreds of people had no home. Casualties, however, thanks to God, were not so many.

Did little John understand the vastness of that disaster? He did not say anything about it but, when he was conversing with the elder Brothers of the House, he remembered that he once built a small paper boat, letting it go adrift on the water which was flooding his street Disciplina. The water must have been quite high: let's not forget that the Calabrias were living on the fourth floor.

The First Signs of Vocation

On May 29, 1882, when he was eight and a half years old, little John received Confirmation and after one year he went for the first time to the Holy Communion. He had been prepared by Fr. Vincenzo Gilardoni in St. John in Foro, the Sunday school he used to attend then.

There is a little episode of that time which he kept indelibly fixed in his sensible spirit. It is known that, for the conferment of the Confirmation, the Godfather feasts with some gifts the spiritual relationship he is acquiring with the godson. It is a tradition in Verona that the gift is a watch that the boys then show to each other with childish pride.

Coming out of Church, also little John was besieged by his companions, who wanted to see the gift he had received. “The watch! the watch! show us the watch” they shouted together. But little John had received no watch as a gift, and

was looking a little confused at the Godfather, not knowing what to answer. “Your watch is that one”, answered the Godfather, to get himself out of a scrape; and with his finger he was pointing at the big clock on the pediment of Portaluppi Palace, which was there in front. The humiliations of poverty started quite soon for John.

By his nature, he was not fond of noisy games and, without being sullen, he rather preferred on concentration and calm. As soon as he could, he used to go back home, where his favourite occupation was to play with the small altar, a play he started when he was four and he continued until he was fourteen or fifteen years old.

It was very common among the children of the 19th century and early 20th century to build small altars on chairs and chests with emergency table clothes, pieces of candles and other furnishings, more or less authorized by their parents; they imitated this way the sacred rituals, with a lot of gestures and formulas, in a garbled and mumbled Latin, with an overdose of “amen” and “*saecula saeculorum*”.

The deep Christian education of the people of that region and the magnificence of the sacred ceremonies did not fail to impress the fervid imagination of those kids, nor yet destructed and gone astray or elated, like today’s children, by the press, sport and shows; and their innocent and simple spirit forced them to put in a play what they admired in Church and on the altar.

But for little John, to do the small altar was not just a simple play he was already looking far ahead.

He prepared his small altar with care: a paper table cloth: a stole or a mother's big tablecloth as chasuble or cope; a sacred image in between two burning candle-ends; a glass as chalice; any kind of prayer book as missal, and the altar was ready. Then he assembled everybody, not bothered by criticism, sometimes quite heavy, from his brother: “I never saw a Mass celebrated with a glass... I never saw a ceremony performed wearing a shawl!” He still started his ceremony undaunted and very often a short homily followed: and he wanted the listeners to be attentive and devout.

One day, while he was praying the Rosary, he suddenly stopped the prayer, stood up and put out the candles... He explained to the surprised bystanders, pointing at the old Barbara:[9] “She is eating, while we are praying the Rosary”. Truly the poor old woman had inadvertently put in her mouth a piece of barley; he saw it. “Forgive me, little John, forgive me, I will not do it again”, the good godmother apologized. And so they continued the Rosary.

There is in these episodes an early start of wisdom and maturity. The young boy starts showing what he is going to be: sagacious and sharp observer, bringing out the best of people and things, very sensible for everything which concerns the cult of the Lord. “Everything is great in the house of God; in the service of God and in what concerns God”, he will constantly admonish. It seemed like he was not looking or he did not see instead nothing escaped him.

[9] Mrs. Barbara was a neighbour, the John's baptismal godmother and a very close friend of his mother.

His word, also in this childish preaching, was convincing; it was clear that he was really careful to the sermons he listened in church; and he was benefiting from it.

Maybe, it was then that he got an answer from his father, talking half jokingly, to one of his umpteenth exhortations: "We must save our soul!" "Yes, one of the button", replied his father, leaving the boy so mortified to make him remember that answer also when he was old, admonishing others never to give similar answers to kids, who may keep a bad impression for life. [10]

Sickness and Death of his Father

He alternated his small altar play with little favours done to his mother. He delivered to the house of rich families the laundry washed and ironed by his mother, or he just did errands for the family.

With regards to this, he would often tell of the few episodes from his childhood memories. For instance, a certain Maimeri, owner of a grocery store where he used to buy for their daily needs, every time John entered the store, cheerfully and forcefully striking the counter with the delicatessen seller flat knife would say: "Whether you have money or not, you will

[10] At that time, buttons were made of cartoon or wood covered by thread, cloth or leather with colour matching the one of the dress. This inside part was called "soul".

always be Calabria". Rose, his grown-up daughter, would often go out of the counter to let little John recite the short poem in honour of St. Rose: "I greet you, Saint Rose, loved spouse of Jesus. Praise Christ and the Virgin Mary, so they will save my soul". He would get, as reward, a loaf and he was very happy to bring it to his mother. One day, talking half-seriously, Rose told him: "When you will be a priest, I'll go to you for confession".

When he reached the priesthood and became Rector of San Benedetto al Monte, this young lady, by now spouse and mother, will chose him as her confessor, fulfilling that distant promise; and her son, though already graduated and with a stable job, will answer the call of the Lord and will become a priest, following the advice of Fr. John.

When Providence, through marvellous ways, will bring him to St. Zeno in Monte and will let him have the small villa below, he will remember that, as a little boy, he used to bring to that villa, belonging to the Stefani family, the laundry washed and ironed by his mother; and since the journey from Street Disciplina to Street San Giovanni in Valle was not short, and being the last part uphill, once on the peak, he would sit and rest under the two big cypresses that rose majestically almost at the entrance of the small courtyard of the villa.

Days passed in the intimacy of the family. Gaetano frequented the shop, the mother attended to her work, and Barbara, poor and sickly, tried to be useful in some ways.[11] The

[11] This good old lady, finally bed ridden, ended her life in the Home for aged on December 7, 1892.

father, Louis, was always the principal pillar supporting the small family.

During feast days, after the sacred ceremonies, he would bring his sons John and Gaetano to the Four Seasons, outside Porta Vescovo, to have a drink in a tavern, destination of a stroll for many families and daily meeting place for porters and carters. Just in that tavern, one day, it happened that John witnessed a “theological” discussion which impressed him a lot.

Gathered around a table, many men were discussing about God's existence and one of them was furiously denying it. But suddenly, an old man stood from another table, walked towards the atheist and, with the authority emanating from his age and the strength drawn from his faith, he animatedly addressed him: “Tell me, you who think you are very wise: who made the stem of the cherries? Tell me, you wise one!”

The simple but unconditional argument fell like a cold shower on that atheist and brought a great joy to the pious boy.

Poverty did not take away anything to the pure joy and serenity the little John felt inside his family, in frequenting the church, in his small altar play. If there was at times a cloud crossing the bright heaven of his soul, it was maybe the thought of how he could become a priest.

Because *he had* to be a priest!

The sublime ideal, which was clearly set in his conscience and in his acts, maybe was not seen from the outside; his confessor, Fr. Gilardoni, who was also his mother's

confessor, did not want to take sides and, while cultivating the young boy's inclination, he will just wait for the hour of God.

This, at a certain point, was a distant rather than a near reality.

During the last months of 1884, his father Louis felt strange pains and heaviness in his shoulders. He became more and more pale, thin, curved. Aside from this, he was suffering for lack of appetite. Towards the evenings he was burning and shivering with fever; work was not proceeding fast as it was before. What was happening?

The result of the medical examination was a case of advanced inflammation of the lung membrane. He had to be treated: he could not work this way; the situation could become worst.

Undergo a treatment? Stop working? It was easy to say, but when one is poor and head of the family, how could it be? However, it was necessary to stop working for a period of time and undergo treatment. God will provide! The clobber's bench was silent for many days while he was in bed for few months.

It seemed that, during spring, he was getting better, but it was only for a short time. Summer made his work extraordinarily heavy and, for a slight effort, he was already profusely perspiring.

To alleviate their poverty, the parish priest sent assistance through the members of the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul. It was a rather good help. But the reflective and attentive boy did not miss a detail which he would

remember forever in his whole life, to gain something good out of it, as usual.

He would never forget that once one of those rich men before laying down the “vouchers” on the table went to open the kettle to find out what was inside, and another one would mortify his father with reprimands, because he smoked. These things remained impressed in him as matters that humiliate poverty, taking away the best perfume of charity.

The basic needs were increasing and his parents thought it would be proper if also John could earn a living. Therefore, he had to stop going to school.

Initially, they chose a job suited for him, a job which he used to do while helping his mother: he would be a small apprentice of the Hebrew ironer sisters, Sara and Rebecca Camis.

The relations between the little John and the Camis sisters go back to the months between the end of 1881 and the beginning of 1882; the boy was a little more than 8 years old. It happened this way: Teresa, John's elder sister, worked at home as fashion dressmaker. The work had been commissioned to her by the Camis-Colamano haberdasher's shop in Via Nuova, managed by the spinsters Israelite sisters Rebecca and Sara Camis. John would go to get and bring back the work done by his sister. He would also do other small jobs. Rebecca died on March 31, 1882.

The boy was diligent and serious in performing his small duties. However, we cannot say that everything was rapidly

done; he himself admitted that often lingered in Erbe Square, watching the birds inside the cages.

His love for the birds will always remain in him.

He remembered that once he picked up a starling that fell from his nest; he was also able to train it. It would leave its cage, fly around the house, go out through the window and come back by nightfall; and he was so happy about it. But once, in springtime, while the starling was on the window sill, it saw a flock of companions passing by: it went with them and never came back. John felt great sorrow and kept repeating that his bird flew away with bad companions.

He was also attracted by the Synagogue and often he entered there to see the ceremonies.

In those days, Verona had within its walls about five hundred Jews of various class and they were good citizens. Fr. John always had a friendly rapport with them, liked in return; and this allowed him to do them some good; and not only for their souls. We'll often meet some in our story.

The two old Hebrew ironers loved that Christian boy, so educated, with blue eyes; he seemed like one of them. And he will always remember the great veneration they felt for the Holy Bible. One day, the sacred Book slipped from their hands and fell on the ground: they picked it up with great respect and kissed it. Because of the innocent amazement shown by the boy for that homage, they pointed out: “It contains the word of God!”

They were right souls, of old observance; every Saturday they used to go out Porta Vescovo, in the eastern side, to see if the Messiah was coming. John then tried to tell them that the Messiah had already arrived. But they invariably replied: “The Messiah will come, even if I'll not be here, the Messiah will come”. And spent time talking to him about Moses, Abraham and the Patriarchs, with great veneration.

When Rebecca died, Sara, talking to the little Calabria about her, invariably said: “Rebecca went to the bosom of Abraham!”

There was another episode which probably happened when John was going to school: we cannot miss it.

A poor old Hebrew lived in the neighbourhood. His name was Asson and he was the object of reckless derision from the street boys. Of course, John never joined them and a bond of friendship was born between the poor old man and the little boy. Later on when the old man got sick, the young Calabria would often go to visit and to comfort him; and in spite the tight watch of the old man's relatives, he was still able to gain his soul for Christ.

Meanwhile, the father's sickness was aggravating to the point that he had to be confined in the hospital.

If sometimes, at the start of the sickness, the good Father Louis forced himself to work at his cobbler's bench, just to earn something for his family, now he could not do it anymore; and soon poverty became misery.

In spite all his efforts, Gaetano was too young to earn enough to be a valid help; the mother, poor woman had to take hours from her sleep to face the orders, while her heart as a spouse called her at the bedside of her husband in the hospital. She also tried other jobs: she knew how to sew white clothes, but the income was not commensurate to the expenses. The need came to run to the pawnshop. The poor house became little by little more and more bleak. The best things, the most loved, were brought to the pawnshop and were never redeemed.

During the summer vacations of 1884, it became necessary to find for John a better paid job. He was sent to do errands for a small merchandise shop, near the house. John could not enroll during the school year 1884-85 due to the father's sickness. Instead of burying himself in books, he had to earn a living for the needy family from the stationer's shop of Ernesto Rigotti, near Castelvecchio. Rigotti retired from the business and was succeeded by the lithographer Perigozzo for a brief period of time. John's last employer was Mr. Felice Querena. When the stationer’s shop in Castelvechio closed down, Mr. Querena opened the store in Corso Porta Borsari and John started working again here until the end of 1889.

We can say “working again” because there was an interruption in the period of John's employment. During the summer of 1885, daddy Louis felt a little better and the boy resumed his schooling. But in winter the father got sick again and got worst and reached his early death; and this happened in the end of February of the following year. John did not leave

the school for this reason. The assistance he gave to his father, the frequent absences of the mother to minister her husband in the hospital, the emotions, the poverty... all contributed to his failure that school year. He was sent back to the summer exams session, but by autumn he quitted school and went back to work.

Talking to the novices a day, Fr. John acknowledged that he worked in the stationer's shop for two or three years. This was what happened, maybe during the initial stage of his employment. The candour and the naive attitude of John were due to his tender age and to the zeal he had since then in his heart for the love of God and of the souls.

It looks like the young boy was more inclined to do his best to convert his employer than to attend to his work as shop-helper. Now and then he got on top of a chair and made a “sermon” to his master. For few times the man listened to him, maybe just out of curiosity, but then, tired to hear things he did not like, or because the boy was not so good at his work, he just fired him. But, at the same time, the employer stopped his activity.

A long winter passed in a cold house, almost always without a fire; the old song of the hammer on the sole could not be heard any longer; cold and silence: two oppressive elements for the spirit of a so delicate and sensible boy. Cold and silence are prelude of death.

And death came soon to visit that family. On February 28, 1886, Louis Calabria, already worn-out by the long sickness,

left this earth and went to heaven. He was sixty five years and seven months old.

That day, John had been sent by his mother to visit the father in the hospital. When he reached the hospital, his father had just died few minutes earlier. Providentially, a sister saw him before he was able to get near the dead man's bed and sent him back home, telling him a merciful lie: his father was sleeping; it was better to let him rest.

Following this long trial, which ended with the death of the head of the family, the Calabrias found themselves deep in total misery. Still managing to pay the rent and stay in street Disciplina, the poor house was emptied of every furnishing. The matrimonial bed was sold, as well as the table and the chest of drawers; everything was bought by Mrs. Therese Lizzi, who owned a pawnshop in the small Busa Street (no more in existence), between Pompei Palace and Portaluppi Palace, now office of the Bank of Italy.

On the other end, the house of Aunt Teresa, in Riva San Lorenzo 7, corner of Street Calcina 3, suffered serious damages, because of the floods. The aunt had to find an emergency shelter in provisional place, in the women's gallery of the St. Laurence church, non communicating then with the sacred areas and made available by the charitable Rector Fr. Quinto Triulzi. John used to go there often, to visit the aunt and narrated that usually it was his father who brought him there, carrying him on his shoulders. Aunt Teresa remained in the women's gallery, where John visited her, until 1887, when she transferred to Corso Cavour 23. It was then that the new Rector

of St. Laurence, Fr. Peter Scapini, started the big works of restoration of St. Laurence. Also the women's galleries were opened on the church, as it can be seen today.

Barbara

Many times as we went ahead in this story, we did meet this poor old lady, though we said nothing about her. The truth is we know little about her and that much knowledge we got from the same mouth of Fr. John, who affectionately talked about her. Such information was enough to shed new light in the house of the Calabrias.

This poor woman emigrated from Codogno (Milan) in January 1, 1872 and she lived in street Disciplina 7, near the house of the Calabrias; when John was born, she brought him to the baptismal font, since she was his godmother. During his birth, the mother got seriously ill and Barbara took care of the little one for a time.

She showered her godson with her love; she became one of the household members. Aside from this she could also do other things: mend socks, do patchwork, dry dishes and pray. “She got her fingers calloused due to frequent praying of the rosary”, said John.

When one cannot do anything anymore, prayer is worth more than a treasure for someone who believes and hopes in God. In the Calabria's house they believed in God and placed themselves with the fullest trust in the Providence that feeds the birds of the air and dresses the lilies of the field.

It was obvious that she was fond of him and showered the little John with her affection for she felt a special predilection for him and this was not because of his age and for being his godmother but above all for that something particular she saw in him.

In fact, when petty quarrels arose among brothers due to the elder ones making fun of the younger brother for the uniqueness of his vestments or the ornaments of his altars, Barbara brought the brothers in good terms and would scold the troublemakers saying, “Leave him alone, let him do it”

Maybe it refers also to her this other small episode that Fr. John remembered in 1945. When he was 11 years old, he had a very serious illness that became a threat to his life. His mother was very worried and was crying, as Fr. John would refer to her then a “saint woman of old traditions”, told her: “Angela don't cry, you will see that the little one will be healed and through him the Lord will do great things”.

Her playing favourites (fondness?), sometimes was so strong specially during her last years that she would daringly call him “My little John”, to the point that there was a gentle conflict due to jealousy from John's mother.

She was periodically visited by her confessor Mgr. Serenelli, a noble spirited priest who also belonged to a noble family. He would take the opportunity to give two lire each to the penitent and to John's mother.

One day the generous confessor gave John a half coin of gold, telling him: “Give it to your Mama”. It was a way of helping

the poor and it was also a way of recognizing the charity the Calabrias extended to the poor woman,

The old Barbara had her sayings and sentences that Fr. John loved to repeat for a period of time. For example she would say: “He who dies is a true old one. To give and take it back is like having a snake in the heart”. Every now and then Fr. John was delighted to repeat a particular refrain that she used whenever she made the sign of the cross:

“When I wash myself with the holy water, Jesus Christ will accompany me.

Bad things get away from here, Holy Spirit stay here with me”.

When Barbara died, he cried as if his mother died. Before dying, Barbara had had the ineffable joy to see her John entered the seminary.

CHAPTER 2

THE DIFFICULT YEARS

Father Peter Scapini

When John arrived home after the unexpected dismissal from his job, he told his mother, not without trepidation but with great confidence, what happened and implored her not to send him to work any longer but to allow him to go back to study, because he felt the call to be a priest.

The wise and loving woman did not scold him, but neither did she make any decision, she would talk to Fr. Scapini about it. That is all.

Fr. Peter Scapini took care of the Rectory of St. Laurence for more than three years; he was nominated as Rector on February 2, 1886.

St. Laurence is a very antique church of Verona, in the vicinity of the Adige river, rebuilt in 12th century and its origins date back before the year 700. During the time when Father Calabria was still young, it depended on the parish of Holy Apostles and it is there still until now. It was and is run by a Rector.

On November 15, 1885 Fr. Quinto Triulzi, the Rector of St. Laurence died. Fr. Scapini, the young vice collaborator of St. Anastasia was then sent to help the parish priest of Holy Apostles, Fr. Caprara, who a bit later left the parish. Fr. Louis Giacomelli was then appointed his successor. He, in collaboration with Fr. Scapini prepared in occasion of the end of the year 1885, a solemn ceremony of reparation, done contemporaneously at Holy Apostles and St. Laurence. We can say that the whole city took part in it. Fr. Giacomelli installed himself in the parish during the first days of March 1886 and Fr. Scapini, who was working there, was appointed as Rector of St. Lorenzo.

The sickness of Louis Calabria was an occasion of many encounters between the young priest and the poor family of John. That's why mother Angela thought of confiding at once to Fr. Scapini.

Who was Fr. Scapini? We have already said something about him.

After he taught humanities for some years in the seminary, now he was teaching mathematics, a subject he was very good at, that when he was still a fourth year secondary student, he was already teaching in private lessons.

He was an art lover but he loved the people more. He would spend all what he had and his own life for both.

If today the ancient church of St. Laurence can be admired as a jewel of Romanesque art, in one of the most

beautiful monument of Verona, we owe it to the impulse and sacrifices of Fr. Scapini.

It has been three centuries that the church, as what the Maffei [12] would say, suffered the “insults” from various Rectors previous to him. From 1735 to 1806 it was also a parish, to give then away the baptismal font and records to the church of Holy Apostles. When Fr. Scapini became rector in 1886, the church was in a fairly bad state of defacement: the Romanesque windows were covered and substituted with squared large window; a baroque balustrade and heavy plastered frames made it more awkward; added to this, the general whitewashing made (maybe following the great infection of 1630) completely destroyed the 14th century and renaissance frescoes; the external appearance was not spared; it was a real havoc!

Moreover, those who could enter into this holy building would see above his head a ceiling of wood in place of the original trusses that supported the roof. The height of the building was reduced in half. Above the wooden ceiling, there existed (though not visible) the antique women's galleries turned into a storeroom and an unsafe dwelling place. Even the courtyard of the church, which was used as an oratory, became smaller because of the many goods stored by the shops along the small river port.

The good Rector started at once the job of restoration and assisted by the competent Eng. Marques Alessandro Da

[12] Scipione Maffei (1675-1755) was a famous Veronese writer and art critic.

Lisca (whom we will meet in the future in these pages because of more noble reasons) gave back to the beautiful church the powerful mystic impression of the medieval church.

Aside from art and studies, Fr. Scapini loved good company, rather, friendship; his house and his table was frequently visited by many priests for meetings, priests who, would honour the Veronese church with their wisdom and apostolic zeal. Pighi, Grancelli, Giacomelli, Zamboni, Zenati, and Manzini were good friends of the rector of St. Laurence.

Much later, Fr. Calabria would often remember these meetings when frequently he would attend to, the humble and silent companion. He remembered as well that one time when a theological argument became controversial, Mgr. Manzini disrupted the argument, in his own particular way, saying, “Well, let's ask this question to the seminarian Calabria; his answer will be the solution”. But the seminarian Calabria excused himself and did not say a word, and the argument ended just there.

The object of the argument was about a 12 year old protestant who, in America, was miraculously healed from a very serious illness and this was made possible by the prayers of his very pious parents. Was it possible then, it was asked from this club of theologians and philosophers, for a miracle to happen outside the true Church? The discussion became heated and it seemed it was going to be long leading to no answer for both parties; Mgr. Manzini did not interrupt such discussion. With that question with no answer calmed down and ended that peculiar and interesting debate.

It seems that the young man, they were discussing about, could have been the one who became President of the United States of America, Dwight D. Eisenhower; Father Calabria, in fact, remembered this episode during the installation of this famous general to the highest position in the government.

Apostle of the youth, Father Scapini was among the first Ecclesiastical Assistant of the Catholic Italian Youth Association “St. Zenone”; he was also among the organizers of the recreational club for the youth in Street St. Eufemia in the Guerrieri Palace.

He was a diligent confessor and visitor of the sick, lover of the liturgy and the splendour of the church; he organized and promoted ceremonies and practices of piety above all in honour of the Sorrowful Virgin, an ancient form of veneration in St. Laurence.

This devotion was also very dear to Fr. Calabria, which he took into heart while on his mother's knees, who was a regular devotee of St. Laurence for a long period of time.

Of strong temper and daring character, many times also impulsive, the good Rector knew how to struggle within himself and to control himself; and for his failures, he knew how to be humble and to apologize if there was negligence committed on his part.

Ten years before his death, he suffered from arteriosclerosis and underwent a psychological depression such that whoever approached him was moved to pity. There was no

longer that brilliant intelligence and the unwavering memory became so cloudy.

Even Fr. Calabria will remember with deep sorrow, this semiconscious state of the venerable priest.

“Who are you? Where can I find the parish priest?” he would ask whenever he would go and visit him. “I am Fr. Calabria!" was the answer of the former disciple.

“Oh yes, I know you”. Then a little bit later he would ask again: “Where do you live?” Fr. Calabria was deeply saddened because if he reached priesthood it was principally due to Fr. Scapini as we will see later. He died in his 90's on March 3, 1926.

The First Steps towards the Goal

Well, the mother of Calabria went to this remarkable priest to have an advice.

In his three years that he was in St. Laurence, Fr. Scapini had a way of knowing and admiring the young Calabria for his assiduous service as an altar boy, for his piety and behaviour and for his apostolic zeal among his companions. Yes, that young boy could never be anything but a priest, that boy with transparent eyes, with simple self-modesty, so poor in material wealth but otherwise rich in piety and love of God.

The mother was advised to keep him in the house and to leave him to do the jobs that suited him most, giving him enough time to study. Fr. Scapini would see to his preparation

for the seminary. The young man was intelligent and in three years he hoped to pass the exam for admission to higher secondary school, John was already sixteen years old and he had to make up for the lost time.

The good Rector was not deceived as he saw the young man, since then had the making of a priest and of an apostle. A man's childhood is like the coming of the morning; cunning eyes know with accurateness if the day to come will be a good one.

The lessons started at once. He had books and teachers for free and even if he could not attend the school regularly, by the end of the third year, his teachers considered him ready for the exams.

Among those who volunteered to teach John, has to be mentioned, aside from Fr. Scapini, Fr. Paulo Rossi, one of the first collaborators of Mgr. Daniel Comboni,[13] the seminarian Louis Zoppi, who became an eminent professor later on in the seminary.

On November 10, 1892 when he was nineteen, John Calabria, took written and oral exams both Italian and Latin. Not much was then asked from the private adult students, it was altogether a test in culture and about vocation.

The Italian exam was also an opener to an exam on general culture.

[13] St. Daniel Comboni (1831-1881), was a great Veronese missionary in Africa; he was the Bishop of Khartoum (Sudan) and founded the religious Congregation of Comboni Missionaries (Combonians).

Calabria was found to be sufficiently deserved to be admitted to the first year of the higher secondary school.

What we have, are his assignments and his grades which looked quite modest. We think that, for the insufficient preparation, a substitute was the authority and a guarantee from Fr. Scapini. In Latin he had 5 and 5 (he needed at least 6 and 6 to pass the exam); in Italian instead 7 and 7.

In his written assignment, which until now we can still read, while he was a little bit out of focus, still reveals a noble soul, a rich nurtured and profound thought, a personal smooth and flowing style in doing this exercise. The theme was “It always means iniquitous thing to accuse an innocent person; but, oftentimes, it is human to defend the enemy”.

The young Calabria did not stop analyzing the proposed text. In his mind nurtured with holy readings, the act of St. John Gualberto appeared in its heroic beauty when he met on a Good Friday his brother’s assassin. For the love of Jesus Crucified he forgave the person he had vowed to kill.

John Calabria was taken by this act and realized that forgiving one's enemy is the greatness of love, the triumph of charity and he ended his written assignment in this way: “Oh, how beautiful is the evangelical charity that knows how to forgive and end in that moment the hatred and bring back peace where before there was disharmony. Thank God for it. Oh, Charity, most pure and most noble of the virtues coming from heaven, only you know mercy and deny pride, you who are the true flame that warms and brightens up our hearts and

other hearts and leads them to God. Hail, Oh Charity, Queen of all Virtues!"

The Difficult Path

In the meantime, the family of brother Gaetano, who was newly married, became bigger. Mama Angela with her Calabria moved from Street Disciplina to Riva San Lorenzo 7, in the corner of Calcina Street. This happened on November 27, 1893 and Calabria had started his few weeks before his second year of the secondary school. The new house was well known to mother Angela because during her younger years she stayed there with her father and stepmother, Angela Merlo, who at that time was still staying there. The mother of Fr. Calabria could earn something by assisting sick members of the Cola family who were then staying in the same building.

Some blocks away, lived the very good Fabbro family. Certainly, was Father Scapini who briefed the Fabbro family about the indigence of the two Calabrias. His briefing was not in vain.

From then on Calabria regularly went to school at the seminary as a day-student.

In those days until the end of 1930, the seminary admitted day-pupils in the secondary school and in the higher secondary school; this was to meet the need of many good families who did not want to send their children to state schools where dangerous theories and sentiments threatened the

young students. Even for theology, day-students were admitted being entrusted to a well esteemed priest; and this was until 1910.

Four times a day, Calabria had to do the trip from the house in San Lorenzo to the seminary. During free time from school and studies, he helped his mother and would attend to his exercises of piety, the liturgical services, the visit to the young sick and the apostolate.

Difficult years, years of trials these were for Calabria.

Poverty was the reason why there was not enough food for nourishment. Returning from the seminary, many times, he would find a cold fireplace and hir mother in bed. To add up to the family income, the poor lady would lend a hand, among other things, by watching at the bedside of the sick and would come home in the morning, resting a bit and sometimes would fall asleep. So as not to interrupt his mother's sleep, he would do everything possible, but the insufficient diet would weigh heavily on his health and naturally also his scholastic works regressed.

It is true that, not few times, the charity of the Fabbro family met their needs. Fr. Calabria would say that Mrs. Fabbro was like a mother to him in those years; a mother so delicate that, not wanting to humiliate him with her charity, she invited her beneficiary to give some tutoring to her children.

During the last year of theology the charity of the Perez family came together with the charity of the Fabbros and Father Scapini often took him under his custody.

The insufficient secondary school preparation required of him an extra effort so as not to lag behind his companions, since he had to go to a regular higher secondary school.

Even the road made him exhausted especially during the summer months and many times it happened that being weary due to heat and starvation, he fainted and had nervous attacks; the rector of St. Laurence told him with all authority: “You have to study at home. If you will get sick inside the seminary, they will send you home, and you can no longer be a priest”.

There was nothing needed anymore for him to continue his cheerful effort to become a priest.

A Particular Student

The opinions of the professors in the seminary were discordant. The remarks about the student Calabria were not that alluring: “Insufficient among others”; “with little talent”. There were lots of 6 in his marks; some 7 and one 8, but there was a 5 plus in Greek, too.

Considering his age and how he entered the higher secondary school, these marks were not really that bad. But what were puzzling were his temperament and his humble but very personal ways. His behaviour was addressed to heavenly charity and his words which expressed his strong faith, on one hand conquered souls and on the other hand left one sceptical

and in doubt in judging him. He was a real “sign of contradiction”.

Fortunately, Fr. Scapini was there to defend him against everyone and everything. He put an extra effort in recommending him, to put him in good light and to sustain him.

One day, Calabria himself, then a student of the second year in theology, overheard this exchange of words between Father Scapini and a professor of the seminary:

“No, he cannot be a priest”. He was saying.

“Yes, he can be one”.

“But don’t you see he is sick and ignorant?”

“No he is not sick! For his health, I will take care of it. I will help him...”

But Calabria was not supposed to know any of this. Fr. Scapini was formal and so impersonal with him. He only had few words and always authoritative towards him, but kind: “Did they ask you questions. Did you answer well?”

And how he worked on him! If he was not intelligent enough, he had to put emphasis on his virtue.

It was not a tender education.

One day, a certain Joseph Pellegrini, to whom every week the young Calabria brought the washed and ironed laundry done by his mother, gave him a tailcoat and a bowler-hat as Easter gifts. When the urchins see somebody with a hat like this, they teasingly shout: “It will burst”.

The gifts were very conspicuous and impressed Calabria so much that he went of Pellegrini's wife, Mrs. Angela Fenzi to share with her his joy:

“Mrs. Angela, look what Mr. Joseph gave me!”

“Oh, well, said the lady who did not want to be out done by her husband since Joseph gave you all those things, I will give you my wedding shoes”, and immediately brought a nice pair of shiny boots and gave them to him.

Calabria went home overjoyed; bringing in his arms all the things that rich people wear, as if it were a victory trophy. Naturally, he went to show his new acquired riches to Fr. Scapini. The good Fr. Peter showed much satisfaction that ordered him to use them at once and to start wearing the suit the day after, when he would go to school in the seminary.

Calabria's enthusiasm dampened at once but he did not say a word. The day after, before going to school, he went, as always, to church; he was wearing the bowler-hat, the tailcoat and the boots of the bride. In his face it could be seen his effort to wear such an outfit. However, the Rector of St. Laurence, to break any possible repentance said: “Look how they fit you”, exclaimed; so Calabria had to go to school dressed in that way. Though his schoolmates were overwhelmed by the fascination of his virtue, they could not refrain from laughing and from this came the motto: “Calabria, like lightning he comes, like lightning he goes”. (The people of Verona call “lightning” the tailcoat with the tails like that of a swallow).

Also in the streets more than one person would look back to admire the pale lad, with recollected eyes dressed in this strange style.

The feeling of uneasiness did not last only for a few days; but Fr. Scapini held on to it; confirmed and repeated that, that was God's Providence, given to him, and should not be taken for granted.

Other times he had to go to school with and oversized broker's jacket that reached until his knees and wherein he could enter two times.

Same thing also happened in other cases, whenever the charity of the kind hearted would happen. John Calabria had to overcome trials of this kind: and he was able to overcome it, to despise the material world and to overcome himself.

While for the boy all these were part of a school of high virtue and a source of experience and merits, for others it was a confirmation that he lacked intelligence, and he was a little stupid.

Postponed Enlistment

John Calabria started his studies in the seminary in the year 1892, he was nineteen; the following year, therefore, was year of enlistment for him.

The rules that time did not allow exceptions for those aspiring for priesthood and the young recruits had to commit

themselves for three years. For our new recruit there were only two solutions on hand to reduce the service from three to one year: the drawing of a high number or a deposit of an amount of about a thousand lire, with which the enlisted person would be admitted, we can say, in the year for the voluntary service, with the right to choose the place of service.

John Calabria drew the number 661: a low number since it was included in the military contingent assigned for the entire length of service. To be included in the reduced number of years in service, there was no other means but make a mandatory deposit of a thousand lire. Where will he get such an amount, which at that time was a capital?

Usually, the seminary of Verona paid such an amount for poor theology students, in view of the considerable benefit drawn from it, since, aside from the reduction in service, the seminarians had the advantage of staying in their cities, in contact with the seminary and their Superiors, with a better possibility of maintaining the piety alive and cultivate their studies; but Calabria, while he was more than a poor one, he was not a theology student, therefore, as per strict point of justice, he did not have any right.

Nevertheless, we can think that the major obstacle for an act of benevolence, which today it looks so natural and opportune, could have been another presumed poverty of the Calabria: the poverty in intelligence and the scarcity of positive signs of a true vocation. Rather, we can assume that maybe the Superiors thanked the Providence for this trial which came at the right opportune time.

It is always a great responsibility to stop a vocation; but it also gives a feeling of anguish when yes and no would alternate in a case of doubt in vocation.

The military service, therefore, removed so many hindrances. Who knows, maybe he could find himself another way, make another choice, maybe he could understand that the studies and the life of priesthood, with all its obligations, were not suitable for him. It is wise, in certain cases, to let time decide.

To postpone the problem, however, a circular came that allowed the class 1873 the furlough setting the definite enlistment for class 1874.

John Calabria went back to school.

This was another way of effort so as not to be left behind by the others and another apprenticeship in humility, of incomprehension, and of bitterness.

At the end of the school year, he had an inevitable 5 plus in Greek and a 5 plus in Latin.

John Calabria resumed his studies for the school year opening in November 1894.

The final result of the second year higher secondary school made the professors perplexed as to whether fail or promote him: to fail him would not reassure them, to pass him would neither give them satisfaction. Then, there was always the interference of that blessed Fr. Scapini! John Calabria was enrolled in third year higher secondary school (Liceo).

Nevertheless, it was a little more than a month of school because on December 10, the enlistment came.

John Calabria wore the military uniform from December 10, 1894 to September 2, 1896. The mother, who was left alone, moved from the house in Riva San Lorenzo to the third floor of Piazzetta Scalette Rubiani where the son Gaetano lived with his wife and the little child Louis; and the wife was expecting another child, John, who would be born on December 4, 1895.

CHAPTER 3

THE GREAT TRIAL

In the Military Hospital

He went on December 10, 1894, to the military District to wear the military uniform. John Calabria was assigned to the 5th Health Company in the Military Hospital of Verona on December 15, 1894.

This is a majestic building, west of the city, between Porta Pallio and Porta Nuova. Its origins go back to the end of the 12th century, in the beginning as Convent of the Umiliati (men), then of the Umiliate (women) and then of the Benedictine Sisters. The small church was dedicated to the Holy Spirit; the folk legend indicates this chapel as the one where Romeo and Juliet secretly got married.

The Convent was suppressed by Napoleon, but the succeeding Austrian government rebuilt from scratch, on the area of the old convent, the Military Hospital, with a project by Giulio Bolza, bringing it to the actual expanse and majesty; this is understood considering the strategic importance the

Austrians gave to Verona, the most fortified corner of the famous Quadrilateral.[14]

Also, after the annexation of Verona to the Kingdom of Italy, the building kept its function as Military Hospital.

Within this environment, we may say the least suitable to his temperament John Calabria had to spend his two years of military life.

But if nature seems weak, the Grace, the personal effort and the charity will transform these years, which somebody thought to be fatal for his vocation, in years full of apostolate and good.

Inside his soul he was keeping the secret of his priestly vocation: he "had" to be a priest; he "wanted" to be a priest.

What does it mean to be a priest if not to be the one who gives? Then he will be a joyous and generous giver, up to self sacrifice. In the call to arms he sees the call of the Lord, the will of God to start, somehow, his priestly mission; for this reason he will totally commit himself, without any reserve.

If he was found ready to serve his Country, was he not also to serve God in the person of his suffering brothers?

But what can you give, you "the lowest of all" and the one with "little talent?"

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[14] The *Quadrilateral* was the traditional name of a defensive system of the Austrian Empire in the Lombardy-Venetia in the 19th century; it connected the fortresses of Peschiera, Mantua, Legnago and Verona between the Mincio, the Po and the Adige Rivers.

"I realized – he will say – that a little boy is hiding inside the soldier: removed from the family environment, he still needs his mother".

And so he will give to these brothers, specially to the suffering ones the love of a mother; that love which was burning inside of him and was consuming him; that love which did not rest and will not measure sacrifices; that love which dominated everybody and will make him arbitrator of everything and everywhere; loved, esteemed and venerated!

"Those were the most beautiful days of my life!" he would reveal later on. "I was the master". And his eyes sparkled, and he was all smiles remembering and talking about those times and episodes.

The First Adventure

It was definitely not easy in those first days. But during his still short life, he had already accumulated a lot of experience and self control, in the humiliations of poverty and the shop, in school and under the rough guidance of Fr. Scapini that the barracks will not keep him in uneasiness much longer.

And then, his intimate and continuous union with God created around him a certain atmosphere which, unconsciously but irresistibly, attracted also others, whether they liked it or not.

From the episodes he told us we can rebuild all his military life and fully understand why he thought that it was the

best time of his life, and how willingly he talked about it: almost with nostalgia!

The first episode clearly shows the atmosphere of tension between Church and State.

After the first days in the barracks, he went to greet his Rector of the Seminary, His Excellency Bartholomew Bacilieri, titular Bishop of Nissa and Auxiliary, at that time, of His Eminence the Cardinal Louis of Canossa.

He discretely knocked at the door of the study room and, after getting permission, he went in. Standing at attention, he made a nice military salute, touching with his hand the peak of the kepi. His Excellency was busy writing, raised his eyes, and giving a sudden look at the poor recruit, who stood at attention, asked: “Who are you?” The soldier respectfully answered: “I am the student Calabria, I am a soldier and I came here to greet His Excellency”.

“I don't know you” was the hard reply of the Rector; and kept on writing.

Mgr. Bacilieri was an austere man, performing his duties; he was also authoritative and belonged to the group of uncompromising people regarding the fidelity to the Holy See.

The poor recruit was still standing in the stiff position of salute while it seemed impossible for him that he had not been recognized. “But... I am Calabria” he tried to say. The other, without looking up and continuing to write, replied: “I repeat that I do not know you”. The recruit tried for the third time to make himself recognized, but the Bishop answered again: “Yes,

it is true; there was a student by name John Calabria, but you are not that one".

The unfortunate recruit did not understand anything anymore. He thought it was not proper to speak again and he did not dare to move... Who knows how long he was going to stay in that position! But the Providence suddenly made the door open, and the young secretary of the Bishop, Fr. Silvino Tomba, came in the study room. When he saw Calabria standing that way in front of His Excellency, with his hat on the head, immediately understood the situation and whispered to him: "Remove your hat!"

At that point, the Bishop Bacilieri, looking up straight at him, said with his usual gravity: "Now I know you". And he gave the poor little soldier a thorough dressing-down.

Now, John understood everything, too. But what was his fault, if in those days it had been so recommended to the recruits, before sending them off duty, that they had to keep always their hat on the head, in greeting people, in passing by a church, and even if they met a procession of the Most Holy Sacrament.

He ran straight to his Fr. Scapini to narrate what happened. He felt dejected and disconcerted; he thought it was all over for him and he was not going to be admitted to the Seminary anymore. Fr. Scapini, too, understood that the fact could have been compromising and advised his protected to go again to the Rector, the following day.

It took John no little effort, but he obeyed; he humbly explained his attitude the previous evening; the Rector seemed satisfied and did not mention it ever again.

An Absent-Minded Soldier

The Health Corps was suiting him; he was like a fish in its own element. To assist the sick soldiers, to give them what they needed, to comfort them... it was what he wished most.

But this work did not exempt him, at least during the first three months, from the military drills. He had to learn how to march, to vault in squad, to insert the bayonet: all these exercises were unpleasant to him; he did not feel them, the same way as when he was in the fancy goods shop, framing diplomas and cutting glass.

He was not lazy, a person who necessarily resigns himself to a system of life he did not like, avoiding as much as he can the duties and troubles he found. No, he really dedicated himself to learn; he just couldn't make it. He could not learn or remember the right movements, the geometrical manoeuvres, the mechanical gestures.

For a certain time he was also assigned to a make-up squad, just so he could learn at least a minimum of military culture: nothing to do!

He was a poet! A poet of the soul; an unwilling poet, but true poet. He dreamed about souls, the sick, the poor, the children: this was his kingdom where he could space: this

conquered him and filled him with enthusiasm; this was what he longed for.

However, with his charity and sense of justice, and exhausted all the efforts to succeed, he tried to be less troublesome as possible to his companions, during the overtiring drills: he did this by changing place, when he realized that the one occupied by him made him more visible, forcing the commanders to order the repetition of the drill, because of him. And in doing this, he was happily helped by his companions.

"Everybody Liked Me"

He used to say that, during his military life, he never had any grief and everybody liked him. And to prove this he narrated many episodes.

One day, he was coming downstairs carrying a basket full of medicines; he slipped, throwing the basket, while falling down. All the medicines were scattered around and plenty were spoiled. He went to report what happened to the officer in charge, known by everybody to be extremely strict. His answer was: “Well, we’ll make another coupon”.

It also happened that he broke some thermometers. He did not hide the accident and did not run away from responsibility, throwing the blame to others, as others used to do; but he accused himself simply and sincerely, and the answer always was: “We'll issue another coupon”.

Another day, coming from a march, on the road that from Poiano brings to Verona, he found out that he lost the rifle's breechblock; he went back then and, within the distance of two kilometres, looked for the scattered pieces; but he could not find the spring, indispensable mechanism for the operation of the rifle. After some more useless searches, he finally went back to his Company, which was waiting for him. He went to the sergeant and informed him about what he had found and what he did not find; he expected a punishment, instead the sergeant, opening his cartridge-pouch, said: “Take this one” and gave him a new spring he was keeping for reserve.

But his biggest adventure, the one which put an end to marches and military drills, happened in Army Square, in front of the highest Military Authorities.

It was the Statute feast and Army Square saw the troupes of the garrison in parade array, to be reviewed by General Pianell. The Health Corps were represented, too.

In the culminating moment, the order to insert the bayonet was given. The soldiers, with sure and synchronized movements, performed the manoeuvre and then went back to stand at attention. Only one soldier was still hesitating: the bayonet, removed with enough timing from the sheath, could not be inserted. Seconds passed and the soldier was perspiring and getting more confused; his movement became clumsy and frantic; the bayonet was shining under the sun and he realized that everybody was looking at him. Time ran and the supreme order was near: here it was: “Present arms!” A rifle, his very

own, reached late the right position and, on top, the bayonet was precariously wobbling.

Nothing escaped the acute eye of the General. The same evening, in the agenda of the Garrison Commander, a blame note for the Health Corps appeared, with the suggestion that the “erring” had to be punished.

The following day, the soldier John Calabria was called by the Corps Commander. The Colonel read the part of the note concerning him and then said: “This is the order I got: what do you think?”

“Colonel, Sir – he humbly but without fear answered – I have no attitude for arms: they'd better let me home; I'm a lot happier with my patients!…”

The Colonel looked at him, kept silent for a while and then said: “We'll do this, next time; you are dismissed!” And nobody saw him anymore taking part in military drills.

When he said that everybody liked him, it was like saying: I do not know why. But we know that he was loved not only for his humility, simplicity and frankness, but also for his spirit of self denial, for his concerns, for the scrupulosity and competence he displayed in assisting his patients. Not only had his Superiors liked him, but also all the soldiers, specially the sick and the Sisters in charge of the Hospital: everybody.

He, himself, attested that, entering the dormitory, sometimes heard them whispering: “Calabria is here, change topic”.

And his Superiors were generous in giving permits and nobody resented it, because they knew he did not request for permits to go to enjoy himself or for petty reasons, but to go to church, to receive Communion, to participate to the solemn Mass on Sundays, to attend to some special religious functions, or something like that. Also the normal time-off was spent by him in visiting his family or sustaining his spiritual life by visiting the Most Holy Sacrament, by praying the Rosary, reading spiritual books, contacting his Rector Fr. Scapini or his new confessor, the Carmelite Fr. Natale of Jesus

There was also a Major, the Veronese Major Cavazzocca, who always received his request to go out off schedule with a typical answer: "So, you want a little permit, just a little permit". And listening to him speaking in dialect – he always spoke in dialect with everybody – he used to tell him: "Keep you up! Keep you up!" These were moments of honour and benevolence, which touched the soldier Calabria, and were never forgotten.

Also with food, in certain instances, he was treated differently from others. The medical officer, in fact, gave him the order to include his name in the note prepared for the patients, and he took advantage of it, getting more dry rice and a little of good wine. It was not greediness: he really needed it.

Discordant Notes

If during the military parenthesis of Fr. Calabria there were no sad moments, our story would not be true. There really were some unpleasant episodes that he narrated, in order to stress that these were isolated episodes among a chorus of benevolence and favours; but dissonances can also serve, sometimes, for the general design of the divine harmony.

Among other duties, the soldier Calabria had to make the list of the confined soldiers, the diagnosis, the course of the illness and the respective diet. His hand-writing, to say the truth, was not really readable and sometimes created a puzzle for one who had to interpret it; and so one day, a nun in charge of the division, bothered because she could not understand anything of that registry, rudely threw it on his face. Regretting doing this, and maybe more mortified because of the humble reaction of the little soldier, she did not stop, every time she approached him, to ask for his pardon.

A pharmacist had just been enlisted; having seen a day the soldier Calabria serving Mass, that evening, when Calabria entered the dormitory, he intentionally smelled the air saying: “What a smell of incense! May be is a false priest here?” With humble simplicity, looking at him, John approached him and said: “I was serving Mass this morning, because I would like to become a priest, and I will go back to school, once terminated in the military service... and, by the way, I know that you wake up early in the morning, can you please do me the favour to wake me up, too?”

“But of course dear” was the only thing the other could answer; and every morning, he woke him up. Calabria, in

exchange of this and to keep him as a friend, made his bed; and he used to do the same also for others, to gain them and to prevent evil, doing good to them.

These were holy occasions of charity and zeal, which transformed evil in opportunities for good.

The Spoiled Confinements

The Providence was watching over him with motherly caresses to reward the goodness of its faithful son.

A non-commissioned officer, a day, noticed that the place of our soldier was not exactly in order. He waited for him near the exit and, when the poor soldier, longing for liberty for relief of his spirit, was going to cross the door, he stopped him to indict the punishment on him. Good that an officer was there. The subaltern now could not give the punishment capriciously, without asking for permit from his Superior; turning then to the officer, said: “Major, Sir, if you allow me, the soldier Calabria will be confined”. “Why?” asked the Major; when he heard the reason he looked at the little soldier, who was standing at attention, and said: “You can go out”, and, talking to the subaltern, said: “You can tear up your report”.

Also another one tried, for the same reason to confine him.

Coming from an inspection in the dormitory, he met Calabria along the stairs: “Soldier Calabria, you are confined”. “Why?” replied the ignorant and surprised soldier. “Because

your place in the dormitory is not in order". "But I have no time: I have to take care of the patients! I will accept the confinement... but we are going to see each other in God's tribunal! because this confinement is unjust!"

Maybe because he was tired, or maybe thinking that he could not go out, he became a little daring. While he was going to proceed on the stairs, the other, hearing "God's tribunal" got scared and, almost frightened, stopped him: "What did you say? God's tribunal?... Forget it, forget it: you are not confined to barracks anymore!"

The Father was so pleased in narrating this episode and laughed. But, when the good Peter Carlini, one of the first Brothers of the Congregation, an old fellow who had been a sergeant in the Army, was present, replied: "By Mary Stuart! I would have put him in jail for an answer like that!" And the Father laughed even more.

Typhus Epidemic

It was not only because of his simple and sincere faith, professed without human respect and showing off, that he enjoyed respectful attention during his military life. He, himself, narrated to have heard, one day, unnoticed, a discussion among officers, in the presence of Major Darra, good Christian, on how the soldier Calabria could keep himself pure. Everybody read purity on his face. And Major Darra explained: "You trust

only in the natural strength; Calabria asks for help from the divine Grace".

With the courage of his faith and the strength of his purity, also the flame of his charity put him higher in the universal esteem.

In the spring of 1895, a typhus epidemic exploded among the soldiers. To face the situation, the Superiors were forced to request from the soldiers extra services.

Summoned the whole Company to cast lots for who should have assisted the victims, John Calabria volunteered and others came forward after him, so that the desired number was reached.

The infection lasted for about a year. It was a year at total devotion to the dear patients; tirelessly and totally; mindless of time and efforts; "all to everybody", putting together the medical assistance with the moral and spiritual one; to cure the souls with the bodies; to make up with Christ's charity the deficiencies of the human resources.

The following episode is enough to prove how at heart he had the souls of these suffering brothers.

The True Friendship

Two comrades-in-arms, from the South, came to a dispute for petty reasons and one, simple soldier, threw a banal invective to the other, just promoted corporal. The last, without

thinking of the terms and the consequences, reported the first, for having offended the military hierarchy. The poor soldier was condemned to three years in jail, to be spent in the Discipline Company of Peschiera. And in Peschiera he was found with tuberculosis.

Brought to the Hospital, he was assisted by John with motherly attention, but the illness became worse, bringing him fast to near death. John then felt the duty to invite him to receive the Sacraments; the patient refused: he could not forgive the person who, for a so little reason, sent him to die, and far from his loved ones. Our John did not give up; he kept himself closer to him and with loving words tried to convince him to forgive, to be again in the grace of the Lord. The sick soldier replied: “Look, I could have got sick at home and I could have died; but I could have had my mother assisting me. Poor Mother – he added crying – what will you do without your Ciocci. If that fellow-townsman did not accuse me I would be home years ago... No, I cannot forgive him”.

But in the end, the zeal and the charity of Calabria overtook him and the soldier, one day, answered to the continuous exhortations of John: “For the love of Jesus, I forgive him, but promise me that, after my death, you will come to pray on my tomb, as you were my mother”.

John promised and kept his promise, until the dead body was exhumed, many years later.

Sick with Typhus

After about a year of generous effort given to those sick with typhus, John got sick himself. He could feel it spreading on his limbs; he tried to resist, but one-night, easy prophecy, he told his patients: “Tomorrow, I'll be with you”. There was a chorus of protest: “No! No!” But the following day, after having assisted many, he himself needed the help of others.

As he has been kind towards the others, so were they towards him. Subordinates and Superiors, nuns and doctors would alternately aided by his bedside until, after more than forty days, he was cured. He was given 60 days leave.

When his mother learned of his leave, she looked for civilian suits which her son needed for two months. How would she manage to buy them? She joined the lottery, and won a pair, making enough money just to make him a suit. So, on November 6, 1895, soldier Calabria went back to his mother in Riva San Lorenzo, and started his recovery.

Clinical Ability

When he went back to the hospital, he continued giving medical aid to the patients of the medical department. After sometime, he was promoted to corporal and was assigned to the Celtic department. Also here, he served these poor and humiliated brothers with great charity and with his noble simplicity. “I did not know anything then about the evil and malice of men”, he would say later on.

For his continuous aid given to the sick and for the love he poured on them, he acquired the experience and an extraordinary clinical intuition. For example, by the mere touch of the pulse, he knew with accuracy the temperature of a sick person: from the initial clinical information he knew how to make a perfect diagnosis, and sometimes, knew the diagnosis ahead of time by just looking at the sick person or from some indications given by the same; he knew by memory many prescriptions that he could still repeat with senile pride during the last years of his life.

He also told of a poor soldier, already given up as dead by the doctors, for whom he made a request to the lieutenant of the division, to do something for him, because he could not bear to see him in that condition.

“Do whatever you want – was the answer – anyway, he will not last but only for a few hours”. It seemed to him then that a powerful revulsive could benefit him; he placed a mustard compress all over his body and prayed... The following morning, to the surprise of the section head, which came to issue a death certificate the dying person was alive and strong.

However, he always had great respect and veneration for the doctors and this is proved not only by the good memories of his military life, but also by the great number of doctors for whom he was a friend and a confidant, and by what he left written about the nobility and responsibility of their profession.

Corporal

By promoting him corporal, maybe there was a need to reward his many merits: maybe there was also the need to give him a certain hierarchic authority towards his comrade-in-arms. He was recommended to give honour to the new status.

But the promotion left him indifferent: nothing adding or lessening in his special behaviour in his military virtue. On the contrary, if the prestige enjoyed by him did not spare him from ugly surprises, the ranks could have been source of troubles and punishments.

For example, one day, he had to lead a small troop to shovel and clear a courtyard from the snow. He assembled and organized the troop and was ahead of the group leading the march: “One, two... One, two...” Upon reaching the designated place: “Platoon, halt: One, two...” He turned around to give orders and... found nobody. Aware of his goodness and his “absent-mindedness”, taking advantage of that soft carpet of snow that muffled the footsteps, the group dispersed and left him alone. And he, laughing his heart out for his “distinct military quality”, did the job hurriedly by himself.

Another time, at night, being Calabria, the Corporal of the day, the inspecting lieutenant noticed that some beds were empty or better yet they were filled up with objects giving an impression in the dark that there were persons sleeping in them. Calabria was called and:

“Corporal, is everything in order?”

“Yes, sir, everything is in order”.

“Are all the soldiers present?”

“Yes, sir, all; you can see for yourself”.

The official then led him to the different beds and showed him the easy trick done on him. The poor soldier was sweating cold; he was expecting an outright imprisonment: the lieutenant, instead, after showing him where they slipped away, simply admonished him to be more careful next time.

One thing could be said: soldier Calabria, as what one had written, “always had the luck to fall standing on his feet”.

One time, it was he who threatened somebody with punishment. He heard a soldier blaspheming; he approached him: “You will be confined to your barracks”, he said in a serious and resolute voice. But while he was walking away from him, he thought: “Will the punishment benefit his soul?” It did not seem likely to him so he went back and said: “I forgive you; you will not be confined to the barracks, but please, for your soul, do not curse anymore!” The soldier promised him that.

A Frightening Adventure

His charity was not only confined to the living. He also gave attention to the corpse of the poor dead: wash, dress them and take care of the funeral rites.

Talking of the dead, he narrated of another military life adventure that for us was a unique, if not a rare case.

It was customary in military hospitals to tie a bell to an arm of the dead person who was on top of the stone table of the mortuary cell; this was so because it was said that at one time, a soldier in catalepsy was brought in presuming he was dead. He woke up at night and finding himself in the midst of the dead, died due to fear. True or not, the fact remains that it was customary to tie a bell on a dead man's arm. Once he would be awaken, though he could not shout due to fear, he could be heard through any movement done and would be helped; the mortuary cell, in fact, was near the guard corps station.

During a stormy winter night, while the wind and rain were raging, all of a sudden, it seemed to the soldiers of the guard corps to have heard the mournful ringing of the bell. They jumped on their feet, looking at one another, almost immobile for fear; the howling of the wind and the hard pouring of the rain made it more tragic.

After overcoming the initial state of panic, they asked themselves the question: “Who will go?” Nobody moved; not even the master sergeant. And yet everybody heard that distinct ringing sound of the bell. Suddenly, to one of them came an idea: “What if we call Calabria?” So as to free themselves from the nightmare, everybody ran towards the door to look for Calabria.

John came at once, but, to tell the truth, he was not enthusiastic of this expedition. A compromise was arrived at: he would lead the way and the others would follow closely. The small and anxious group then proceeded... John opened the door, raised the lantern fixed the gaze on that gloomy secluded

place, the flicker of the lantern's light produced strange plays of lights and jumping shadows; John could, at first, have a glimpse of a human form on the table, a face of wax, two still eyes fixed on him... When all of a sudden, an impetuous gust of wind shut with violence the door and put off the lantern light.

The howling of the wind and the sudden blackness completed that atmosphere of fear and terror. With the sergeant as the lead, without restraint, everybody escaped like madmen.

And John?

Closed in that room, he groped in the dark with hands in front of him, with eyes wide open; he was trying to find his way towards the door. After a few steps, he jumped: his hands touched something cold: the dead man's face. “He was really frightened”.

Nobody answered to his repeated and desperate banging of the door for some time. In the end, the soldiers recovered their senses, went back and freed him.

He was with raised hair, white faced and was trembling all over. He had to stay in bed for some days due to high fever and his body was covered with a number of boils. But he did not feel any resentment, not then nor later, for his companions who left him alone in such a difficult situation.

And what about the dead... who rang the bell? The dead did not ring the bell because he was really dead.

Maybe, the corpse was placed in such a way that the arm with the bell slipped down and made the false alarm.

Maybe by telling this episode, Father Calabria wanted to be humiliated, showing that he was like anybody else.

Continuity of his Charitable Mission

The days of his furlough were approaching. If his military life was about to end, the service given to his sick brothers would not end that soon, because he took this as his mission. He was, for them, a brother, a friend, a “mother”; we would say “like a priest”. Why can't he continue with his mission now that he was already prepared to take his interrupted path? And more so, when finally, he'll be a priest? The priestly ministry is principally dedicated to the Eucharist; but the sick, is he not a mystical Eucharist? Didn't Jesus say: “I was sick and you came to visit me?”

He was taken so much by this reality that, when he became a priest, in his frequent hospital visits, he would say to the nuns who were lamenting of not dedicating enough time to prayers: “It is not necessary for you to go to church to visit the Blessed Sacrament; you have the Lord here with you: in the sick”. With this faith, with this love, he served and assisted them; he would continuously serve them, “the dear sick ones”.

Even as a theology student and as a priest, he would often go back to “his” hospital, to visit his patients and lend them, in his more suitable state of life, his work and his assistance. And he has always been well accepted, oftentimes wanted, many times sought-after. The doors of the military

hospital would always remain open for him anytime of the day; and so he could help a great number of soldiers, especially the seminarians, priests and religious: particularly during the war of 1915-1918.

He was pleased to go back often to that barrack-room where he used to sleep, in front of the place where he stayed; happy to find after so many years, a beautiful sacred image he placed there.

And also this post-military period, there would be some amusing episodes typically military, which were solved in his favour.

One day, an official who knew little about him and who wasn't pleased with his frequent visits not within the visiting hours, followed him and ordered him to leave. The priest was aware of it, and quickened his steps, slipped towards the corridor and passageways known only to him, so that the official lost track of him.

He came back in the afternoon, he heard the guard telling him that it was prohibited for anyone to enter the premises without an authorized permission.

“It has been years that I always come...” the father started.

“I don't know what to say, Reverend, but there is an order not to allow anyone to enter without the permit”.

“I'll go to the Director”. And the father went towards the Director's office.

“What happened, Colonel, sir? It has been years I've been coming here and now they told me that it is no longer possible to enter here”.

“Reverend, the Director answered – if until now you've entered arbitrarily, from this day on you can come regularly: I'll give you a regular permit”. From that day onwards, nobody stopped him from entering the hospital.

After about twenty years, this colonel, who was about to retire, introduced him to his successor as the old soldier of Health Corps; and the successive commanders did the same way. The doors of the military hospital remained open for him.

During his last visit, which was on August 15, 1951, the lift being out of order, he climbed the stairs with great effort, until he reached the chapel. After he had greeted the chaplain and blessed everybody, the healthy and the sick, a nun gently whispered to him: “Father, can you climb to the upper floor and give your blessing to a captain who is very sick and so depressed?”

The father was a little bit uneasy, as it happened whenever there was such a sudden request from which entailed an unforeseen effort and which was beyond his physical capacity; but this was only for a moment. Charity prevailed and supported by the brothers who accompanied him, he faced the new hard climb.

The sick one, an infantry captain was in the isolation room because he was sick of advanced tuberculosis and had little hope of being cured. The sick was so disheartened and

depressed, he was tormented by the thought of his young wife and his only little girl and the uncertainty of a dark future.

“I'll pray much for you; and you pray much for me”, Fr. John Calabria told him when he was near him.

“But I don't know how to pray”.

“Oh, I'm sorry. There is a need to pray”.

“I don't remember the prayers any longer!”

“Now with your permission, I'll send a Brother here who will help you pray... and you – he said to the Brother who at that time came near them – you'll come here in my name, you'll talk to him, you'll bring him comfort. And I'll be near you”.

“Have faith – he said as he faced the sick one – Jesus loves you very much. I bless you; I bless your loved ones. Pray much, for me. Yes, yes, the Lord loves you!” He left him with much comfort.

When the father left, to the nun who approached him, the captain asked who the priest was and he asked the chaplain to be called. He confessed; and the day after he received the Communion; and with the help of the Brother assigned to him by Fr. John, he did again the religious practices which he interrupted before.

In short, he lived again, hope of being healed, of life, of the family was reborn in him. After a short time, he was transferred to a place suitable to him where he got well and went back happily to join his dear ones.

We were saying that his military life was about to end; it will not be wrong to remember that the military service of Calabria was desired by the superiors so as to postpone the decision about his vocation and find new criteria in order to arrive at the solution to this painful question.

CHAPTER 4

OVERFLOWING VASE

Back with the Family

On September 2, 1896, Corporal John Calabria was given his furlough papers signed and countersigned: “During the time he was in the military service, he showed good behaviour and served the country with fidelity and honour”.

The military bureaucracy could not say it differently and could not have said more. But things which men would not say

then, nor could be written today, the angels have written in heaven and only will be known in the final days.

He went back home accompanied on a carriage by one typical priest of Verona by the end of the 19th century, Fr. Anthony Pighi, named also for his stature, Fr. Pighetto, the one in charge of St. Laurence Church.

He was welcomed with particular and touching affection by his mother and Mrs. Angela Masina.[15] Good lady from the common people, already old and just like Barbara, she tenderly loved John as if he were her son. She was then living near the Calabrias and was always in their house; later on, when Fr. John would be the Rector of St. Benedict, she went to live with them.

During the military training months, she could not restrain from going to the Bastion of Magdalen every now and then, to see "her John" marches. She would be back and so touched: I saw John passing by with the bag and I pitied him". She would say this to John's mother who would in turn reprimand her: "Don't you feel ashamed to go and pry on those many soldiers?"

If for some reason John couldn't go out of the hospital, the two good women would go and visit him bringing with them things which they thought John needed. Then, every Saturday,

[15] We don't know when Mrs. Masina entered the scene; we found her present during the military service of John. Maybe the rapport began when Aunt Teresa went to live in Corso Cavour, 41. She had her livelihood and did needlework.

Masina would give John some money for him to have a good shave.

He was, therefore, welcomed with open arms at the end of his term.

He presented himself to Fr. Scapini. Without giving him compliments but not denying him his big heart, he exhorted him to work on his health and go back to his books to be able to start again his regular studies in the seminary in the coming months.

Still on Trial

John was set again to cross the doors of the seminary, to enter and study theology, with great love but with trepidation.

Theology: magic word; study of God, a plunge into the mystery, knowledge of the divine plans for the salvation of the world; the presence of God in history, with the grace, with the Church, with the Providence, Canon Law, Morals, Holy Scriptures...

Here, it is the soul that studies, it is the heart; study becomes prayer; the spirit is elevated; the effort becomes sweet.

With these sentiments and thoughts, John took his place at his desk, among his companions that had overtaken him; he was wanted and expected by all.

But the time of trial was not over yet.

At the beginning of the lesson, the Rector Mgr. Bacilieri, came in and noticed John:

“Oh, Calabria, are you here?”

“Father Scapini told me to come to theology”, our John answered. The Rector did not reply at once; evidently he was fought between mercy and strictness. He moved forward and backward... stopped, finally, in a hard tone, pronounced his verdict:

“It is better for you to repeat the eighth (III year higher secondary school). Yes, yes, you go back to the eighth”.

John stood up, took his books, moved out of his desk, bowed to the professor and Rector, and in silence headed towards the higher secondary school classrooms.

Maybe a lump tightens his throat but he never said anything. Maybe his colleagues, the same teacher in front of such humiliation felt the creeps in their bones. Apparently, only the Rector remained impassive; he was acting according to his stern scrupulous conscience which still hindered him from seeing clearly into the Calabria “case”.

Moreover, there was a good reason for the apparent strictness of the Rector.

For the seminarians who had interrupted the school year and who took the major part of the program before undergoing the military service, it was requested that they took a supplementary exam, after the furlough, in order to pass the

higher course. For the soldier Calabria, the situation was quite different. He had just started the last year of the higher secondary school when he joined the military; only a month of classes. He went to the barracks on December 10, 1894. He got the number 661 when the number was drawn, which meant a long service; and this ended on September 2, 1896. Maybe for the intercession of Fr. Scapini, and Fr. Natale, his confessor, and of the Camillian Fathers, Sommavilla and Ferroni, he was put together with the group of those who received the furlough and took the examination to enter the theology course. He prepared himself, presented himself and was found fit for the course.

Nothing slipped Mgr. Bacilieri. Consulting the registry of the second course of the higher secondary school, he found Calabria weak in various subjects even if he did not fail the course. He took his strict position from here. It was not useless to send him back and repeat the year because the marks of the third course became better except for the Greek language.

During the term of service, Calabria was the only seminarian in the Health Corps in the military hospital of Verona. For the exams, he found himself in the company of Joseph Girelli, formerly a member of the alpine troops, the famous Fr. Bepo, a hero and a well loved chaplain of the alpine troops.

Priestly Cassock Day

As God wanted and with the unfailing help of Fr. Scapini, the eighth year ended as well.

At this point, there is an amusing episode which we cannot omit.

It was about how to finish this last year of the higher secondary school with flying colours in order not to find any hindrances in reaching the longed for doors of theology. The air was not serene; the good Fr. Scapini saw it, perceived it; and once again he was in his continuous effort to assure a nice outcome for his pupil.

His Latin went quite well. He talked privately to the professor of Italian, his former alumnus and entrusted John to him.

The exam period was a real torture for Fr. Scapini. After the exam, he took the professor arm-in-arm to know how it went: “Did you give him a six?” The other one, much younger but alert and witty, knew the weakness of his old professor towards Calabria, on purpose, wanted to beat around the bush and harshly replied: “No, I cannot give him that grade. He doesn't deserve it”. The eyes of the old professor lightened and almost aggressive and he said:

“Is it possible you could have not given him a six?”

“I repeat, I could not give him that”.

The anxious emotion of the venerable priest, sharpened by the waiting but controlled by the virtue, instead of bursting

into anger, was going to give way to a feeling of painful discouragement. But the other, now satisfied, continued with the game: “Six, I couldn't really give him that; I gave him... seven… because he deserved it”.

It came like an electric shock: the old professor embraced his “cruel” brethren and taking him arm-in-am invited him to his house for a drink of “*el nosin*”[16] which was a family specialty, reserved for very close friends.

Now, a decision had to be made if Calabria could wear the priestly cassock and be taken definitely to the theology class at the beginning of the school year.

The professors, gathered under the chairmanship of the Rector did not reach an agreement: even the Rector was perplexed. Again, the authority and the personality of Fr. Scapini took the advantage.

He enjoyed a great prestige of being the teacher of almost everybody including the Rector-Bishop. In front of the astonished colleagues, he stood up and with a vibrant touching voice and with certainty, he affirmed he did not know any student more pious, more humble and more obedient than John Calabria and therefore, more deserving than him to wear the holy vestment. If the commission would decide otherwise, he would not take any responsibility and only they would answer to God's tribunal for a lost vocation.

The solemn words of the old professor made a great impression and led to a result: student John Calabria was found

[16] A kind of liquor made up of walnuts.

worthy to wear the priestly cassock and, therefore, to frequent the sacred theology in the coming school year.

At the age of twenty four, on August 10, 1897, in the beautiful church of St. Laurence and on his feast day, John Calabria could finally wear the sacred cassock, a gift of charity from good people, to whom he would always pour great veneration. He would always kiss it; wear it, repeating the proper biblical phrase being said during the conferment of the sacred tonsure: “You, O Lord, are part of my inheritance and the cup of my joy; you are the one who will give me back the eternal inheritance”.

The love for the sacred vestment was confirmed to him by the Lord and this could be seen by these two short episodes he loved to share with his theology students and priests.

“You are wearing black, John; remember that the black can get stained easily and such stain could be very conspicuous and doesn't look good on the black”, a pious lady told him on the day of his clothing.

Another time, a poor lady, sick of tuberculosis and dying, in a corridor of a hospital, thinking that he was a priest, called him and requested for a confession. He, then, with his humble bewilderment said: “No, I am nobody but a black habit of a poor theology student. Unfortunately, underneath this cloth there is nothing, just nothing”.

That lady, then, with trembling hands got hold of the edge of his habit, kissed it and entrusted to him her two little sons, who would have been left without a mother.

He didn't only kiss his vestment, but he would like it clean and proper; he wanted the same from his priests and theology students: “Poor, but clean; poor but tidy”, he would often repeat to them.

The Sacred Theology

Finally, in November, he entered the doors of the sacred theology. But if the sacred study were more suitable to his spirit, the age, the poverty, his temperament, his health, the prejudices made also those years very hard.

"*Per aspera ad astra*" (reach the stars through hardship), John really had to go this way. The summit of priesthood had to be conquered inch by inch, laboriously. God's designs: for him, for us.

This was the unfailing trial of his vocation, the real gift of God. Here lies the measure of his love for it; the confirmation of his humble but tenacious will to pursue it. There would never be a place for pride, obstinacy, ambition, illusion. It was a goal that, in the obscurity of the human weakness, faith made clear beyond the clouds, by the word of those who led him in the name and spirit of the Lord.

Greek was his problem in higher secondary school, now it is the Dogmatic theology which is really hard for our theology student. But they didn't feel like failing him or stopping him. Rather, by the end of the third year of theology, when they had to decide for his admission to Sub Deaconship, a decisive step

towards a total consecration to the Lord, there was a very significant dialogue between the Bishop and the Rector of the Seminary.

It was August of 1900. In March, Cardinal Louis of Canossa died, leaving as his successor to the Chair of St. Zeno, his assistant Mgr. Bartholomew Bacilieri. Now the Rector of the Seminary was Mgr. Andrew Casella, a philosophy professor, an upright and pious man who enjoyed the high esteem of the Bishop.

The Rector was consulting the Bishop regarding each theology student candidate to Sub Deaconship: their studies, behaviour, piety. There was a brief interruption: It seemed they were through with the list.

“Is there anybody else?”

“There would be, Calabria”, answered the Rector hesitantly.

“What do the professors say?”

“Your Excellency, you know that the opinions vary, especially because of his deficiency in study matters”.

“About science, we know, we are almost on the ground, the Bishop noted – But... how about his goodness?”

“Oh, for that there is nothing to object. Calabria is terribly good, with real excellent virtues: on this everybody unanimously agrees”.

Well, said the Bishop after a brief reflection, we have admitted many skilled students; let us admit one who is pious. In the Father's house there are many mansions".

The thaw is complete in this conversation; but what a great suffering before arriving to this!

Negligent Student?

If during his higher secondary level, he was taken as a slow witted, during the theology class, some people were convinced that he was not studying sufficiently. This doubt, at first look, wouldn't seem without basis; but since now we can strongly say that the situation was not really like this.

Properly said, it is certain that he didn't have the makings of a man of science.

His intelligence was anything but mediocre, but he didn't have the dialectic quickness and systematic ability needed so that the mind could easily extricate itself in the world of abstract terms, grammatical figures and logic schemes.

The dialectic quickness and this systematic ability can be acquired and developed step by step, through continuous exercises. It comes as a result of an inborn aptitude, practice and also of passion.

He did not have such exercises just during the years which are more precious for results in learning; if we are not mistaken in our interpretation, there was also his failure to be

convinced of the extreme importance for apostolate of normal study, of the technical and the aesthetic part of the various fields of knowledge.

His intelligence, which many times had a flash of a genius, didn't lag behind the normal development of the common sense, but strikingly intuitive, it would immediately catch the essence of terms in their practical formation, so that Fr. Calabria would instantly find, in front of his eyes, the clear and precisely concrete truth: like a born mathematician who could solve an equation by bypassing some steps of a normal process.

This attitude, probably unconscious, of an intelligence that would leave behind details, technical schemes and conventional forms of the exact science and of literature, most probably was the foundation of the suspected negligence in studying, which his superiors were noticing.

Maybe this psychological structure of Fr. Calabria explains as well, though in some parts, that mysterious phenomenon that could have, during his ministerial priesthood, astonished many of his visitors: men with tremendous culture men in action, who found in his first words the answer to their distressing questions, they had already reflected upon and until then without any answer.

Naturally, we do not want to exclude the particular and extraordinary assistance given by the Spirit of Counsel, but it is certain that this human instrument was more than anybody else able to grasp the situations in their real essence and their notable actuality.

Now, instead, his teachers thought that the theology student Calabria did not put more importance to study but paid more attention to charity works and apostolate; as it could be seen, among others, from an observation that a professor in Moral told him, after an interrogation which went better than usual: “Look, Calabria, you can do much more if you study. Therefore, study, study more and don't let yourself be distracted by other pursuits though right and good they could be”.

It was not for his teachers to understand that the extracurricular activities were never in competition or a liability to his scholastic standing, but rather it was his unique way of spending his recreation moments, wherein he could not only vent his charity, like overflowing from a full vase, but in return gave back the equilibrium and the needed energy to his delicate physic-psychical complex often strained by studies.

The other would spend their free time by taking a walk or playing depending upon their preferences and needs; instead he found his preference and his comfort in giving catechetical lessons to the boys and consoling the sick.

In reality, he was not studying less than the others. That was proven by his schoolmates, especially those who met with him at the Pompei stable during winter and at the Giusti gardens during summer, to review their lessons.

Why in the Pompei stable? According to history, when the Count John Perez in 1885 inherited the title Pompei together with the properties that went with the title, he sold the horses and carriages thus' leaving the stable empty. The

caretaker, the Fabbro family, used it then as a storage area. The place can still be seen until today, it was quite a vast area. The theology student Calabria lived in a corner of the palace from 1900 to 1901 through the benevolent permission of the Fabbro family. He and his companions of Theology would meet and review the lessons in the very hospitable stable, passing through the proper alley.

In that familiar exercises, one of them who had the sharper intelligence would explain the lessons, John, who had a good memory, would repeat them.

John, by nature, had an extraordinary memory, a gift generally linked to that kind of intelligence which focused on essentials, never distracted by the particulars. It was true that the insufficient practice of the first years of his adolescence, the physical discomforts which he often underwent, his failing health, had a little effect on that precious gift but his memory was still very good.

While during the private lessons he showed he understood and could retain the lessons, in school, instead, he would stammer, feel confused and stop... This phenomenon shows the effects of a physical weakness, due to malnutrition and emotional temperament that, in front of the school officials and specially in the presence of some professors – for example, that professor in Dogmatic theology, Mgr. Zenati, famous for his stiff fidelity to his duties, which made him look too much demanding with his students – would place him in an inferiority condition and didn't allow him to use and show his intellectual capacities.

An anecdote. A mathematics teacher in the seminary, Mgr. Joseph Cappelletti, narrated to Fr. Vittorio Montorio, a teacher in the seminary as well, that Prof. Zenati accompanying often the Rector Bacilieri during the afternoon walks, made the comment that the scholastic difficulties of the young Calabria, didn't depend only on his incompetence but also to the lots of hours he spent in assisting the sick in the hospitals. It is understood that the strict professor didn't accept the compatibility of the two commitments and disapproved them. Talking then to Cappelletti, this one instead of agreeing with the disappointed Mgr. Zenati, regarded Calabria as a theology student with extraordinary virtue.

Sometimes, remembering the difficulties and misadventures suffered during his study, Fr. John would later on assert with serenity and certainty: “I am aware that I always studied seriously”. He would say so with a sense of justice: not for his defence but in order to eradicate from the others the false conviction that one can neglect the studies in exchange of good deeds.

Precisely, this sentiment served as the norm in a school misfortune that happened when interrogated upon on ecclesiastical history. The relative text was compiled by the same teacher, Mgr. John Baptist Pighi, according to the method used then: in a thesis form and in Latin. There was a need to learn it by memory; the same it was for Dogmatic theology and for Morals: really severe, serious and tedious studies. He was questioned then and for the first questions he seemed to know the answers; but after about ten lines, he stopped; the

suggestions of his classmates and the help of his professor didn't serve to get him out of the mess he was in. In his agitation and in that awkward silence, somebody from the bench made a faint laughter, provoked maybe more by lightness than by insensitivity to the situation.

Calabria was not offended; but in his spiritual maturity he couldn't remain silent. He turned and with his unconstrained humility he protested: “You know, I studied the lessons; and if the Lord did not give me the ability to retain them in memory, what could I do?” He didn't want to be the stumbling block, he! The last among everybody, yes; the despised one: yes. But he is not a scandal, not a bad example, not an alibi for the negligent ones.

There was a great silence in the room; what remained of that answer were not the words but with how much humility the words were spoken. Were his schoolmates who could attest to this.

It is not for everybody to be a psychologist, rather only few could be one. There were also those who understood and loved him and tried to justify the value of his qualities. Among them were Fr. Ferrais, the future Archbishop of Catania and Fr. Vedovi, Professor in Holy Scriptures and with them, the old Greek professor Fr. Trida.

Sometimes, for an excuse, Vedovi would send John to Fr. Trida's class, and there was an agreement about this, and he would take advantage of this occasion for him to give words of admonishment to the students, a “good word”: he knew it was welcomed and listened to: even if the words were those of a

simple theology student, one of the seminarians. That's why his classification was always good in Sacred Eloquence.

It was also said that one time Fr. Vedovi, who was feeling a little bit nervous and wanted, as a virtuous man, to overcome it, turned point blank to our John:

"Calabria, a motto!"

"*Homo pacificus magis prodest, quam bene doctus*",[17] John read from the golden booklet of Imitation of Christ which he always brought with him. And peace came upon the whole class.

"There is only one Calabria"; this good professor would say one day to a theology student who, without being asked, tried a year later, to imitate that style...

He, whose providence never fails, sometimes intervened to save him *in extremis*. This episode was narrated with joy by the same Father: during the final exams of the fourth year in Theology, which seemed to be very serious, His Eminence Card. Bacilieri known for his strictness was the commission examiner for Dogmatic theology. It was John's turn. He entered, took out his thesis and started to make good with his school work. First point: from the Holy Scriptures; his assertions and proofs came from the Sacred Books; second point, from the Fathers of the Church; and the arguments flowed smoothly one after the other with such beautiful

[17] A peacemaker is more useful than a scientist.

certainty. "*Et nunc venio ad tertium punctum, quod est cornutum*".[18]

"Sufficient! It is enough", the Bishop solemnly interrupted, amazed by such readiness. But the one who was more astonished was John, for that providential "Sufficient". "It was really the Lord – he said – who made him say that word; because I wouldn't know to proceed with the third point... I wasn't able to learn it by memory".

Apostolate Among the Children

In St. John in Foro – an impressive picturesque small church on the road that goes from Erbe Square to Portoni Borsari – there was a festive Sunday School for children and a holy priest was conducting it: Fr. Vincent Gilardoni. Our John started frequently to visit it since childhood accompanied by his mother who had Fr. Gilardoni as her confessor.

In that Sunday School, he was prepared for the first Communion and Confirmation and to that same priest he would go to confession every week. He was committed and the seriousness he put in going to this Sacrament was an example to all. In fact, when it was his turn, after him, the children would look at each other and with a resigned sigh would say: "Now we have to wait for half an hour"; even if it was not really half an hour.

[18] And now to the third point which is divided into two parts.

When he was older, he accompanied those who lived in his area: the mothers would voluntarily entrust them to this serious and well behaved young man.

Later on, above all for the merit and will of Fr. Scapini, while keeping Fr. Gilardoni as his confessor, he geared his life of piety and apostolate to the church of St. Laurence. [19] He rendered his services during the masses and sacred ceremonies, he was an apostle with good example and word among his companions and he visited them when they were sick; as a theology student he explained the catechism.

This following episode is enough to show and to summarize the activities of those years.

In Street Disciplina where he lived, there lived also a shoemaker of German origin and a protestant, Christian Friedmann; neither he or his wife were concerned about their children's education, Among them there was the last one who was the most restless and naughtiest of all: Goffredo.

John saw him since birth, he saw him grow; he saw him now that he was seven, eight years old marching along the streets and adjacent alleys, with windblown hair, untidy clothes, and intolerant of any rule.

Maybe in his early maturity, he perceived that he was destined to do good or bad; anyway, it could be seen that he was a generous soul but there was a need to check that natural

[19] We note that in 1887 the demolition works started for the internal deteriorated structures. In 1890, the oriental courtyard was cleared. Notwithstanding the ongoing works, the church was always in operation.

zest, to straighten its ways; now at once, for tomorrow would be too late.

He made friend with him; he brought him to Sunday School, to catechism, to mass... But he is protestant! Protestant? But he is a soul: a soul that must be saved, now, for it might be too late. He put him in the list of the altar boys. A protestant! Isn't he also a son of God redeemed by Christ? If nobody would attend to him, not even those bound by nature of apostolic vocation, then John would attend to him.

The young boy was enthusiastic about what his elder friend would let him do; he was filling his soul with what John was instilling in him with apostolic art; he still could continue to play as he did before; more than before; not by himself or with the street urchins but with many others who were good, educated, and happy. His soul and his intelligence were enriched with things he never heard before; he felt joy he never felt before, it was beautiful to stay there, to live like this, in joyous spiritual harmony with the knowledge of Jesus, of Virgin Mary, of the Angels in Heaven, and of the stories of the Saints.

But why could he not, just like the others, confide his pains, his small crosses, confess his inevitable pranks to the priest so that he could find peace in his heart and a cheerful serenity, instead of regret for having answered back his mother, disobeyed his father, harassed his brothers and sisters. Why?

Why could he not go near the balustrade to receive that disc of white bread that others received with such solemnity

and devotion that was working on them with such mysterious transformation? Why?

Because he was not catholic, his friend John told him. Why was he not catholic? Why could he not be one? What difference was there between him and his companions?

There was his father in the midst, his mother and in the midst was the difference in faith.

He could not understand all but he believed his great friend, he was satisfied with his words, and he obeyed him. John promised him that, God willing, he could also go to confession, receive the Eucharist; meanwhile, he should continue being good, study catechism, and pray. And he tried to do these as much as he could.

In the house, they knew and didn't know it. Yes, they knew that he was going with John and frequented the church of St. Laurence but they did not give importance to this. It was a play just like the others; he would be tired of it before or after. But as time went on, seeing that this fact was starting to have its foothold, that the young boy was showing seriousness in this, his father wanted to end it all.

On a Friday of Lent, not seeing him return for supper, the father furiously left and went towards St. Laurence decided to bring the boy home at the sound of slaps. Not finding him in the vicinity, determined, he entered the church, without looking at the face of anybody; he was looking only for the person he was interested in.

The Way of the Cross was being done. In the shadows of the church, the devoted and concentrated folks were not aware of the presence of the intruder. But there, in the group of people bringing the cross, dressed in white and black, a young boy holding a candlestick took a glimpse of that not very devout man who entered, he was expecting him. In an instant the candlestick dropped on the ground; at that crashing sound, the faithful turned to take a look but the boy was gone to the sacristy, in a minute, he took off the surplice and he ran away; he slipped through a door he was familiar with and arrived home earlier than the astounded but angrier father.

He was not seen for many days; then in secrecy, he went again back to the church. Now, John had to leave for the military service. Nevertheless, the link was never cut. When he returned, Goffredo was twelve years old and he had that firm intention of becoming a catholic. He confided to a friend that when his father took him to the cold protestant church, he plugged his ears so as not to hear the pastor's homily.[20]

They planned one more year of deeper learning and a taste of family reaction. Things went well; nobody firmly opposed this. Having consulted the bishop, on May 27, 1897, Goffredo Friedmann was clothed with a new suit by the charity of Count Francis Perez whom he wanted to act as his godfather, he was baptized under condition, and the day after received the Confirmation. The next June 1, he was able to go near the altar to receive the first Holy Communion.

[20] We feel here the climate before the development of the ecumenical movement.

John had the right foresight; that young boy was destined to do great things. Two years after, feeling in himself, the seeds of a priestly and religious vocation, he entered the Stigmatine Fathers College in Trento. He was then a religious and priest who had a big responsibility in his congregation and left behind a real saintly life when he died.

Prelude to a Great Opera

It was a late evening in November 1897: it was 10:30 p.m. The theology student John Calabria comes back from his visit to a young boy from the Sunday School of St. Laurence, John Maragnoli, who was then seriously ill. It was dark and cold. At that time Calabria was living in Piazzetta Scalette Rubiani, 5. Upon reaching the entrance gate, he thinks he saw a heap of rags. He knelt down... Among those rags he heard something alive: a normal breathing and a sleeping child.

With a heart strongly beating, with dilated pupils and tensed face for the discovery, he sweetly moved the child who woke up. In that haggard looking face, in that fixed look from those big eyes, notwithstanding the darkness, he recognized the young beggar who, in Corsio Castelvecchio, asked alms from passersby by showing his trained mouse that knew how to pick the right lottery numbers from the “Planets of Fortune”.

How many times he stopped and stayed with him, to share with him good words, to give him alms, He made him a friend and the young boy trusted him.

“What are you doing at this time of the night?”

“They beat me, they always beat me!”

“Who beat you? Why?”

“They told me to go to work, that I am good for nothing, they want that every night I bring lots of money in the house, if not, I'd be beaten... also today, I took the beatings... so I escaped and I said, I'll go to the young priest”.

The uninterrupted and suffocating sobs now turned into a loud cry like an unrestraint falls.

It was already too much to move the young priest's heart. On the other hand, as such time, to whom could he run to? Whose door would he knock on?

“Come inside, meanwhile, come with me”.

He led him to the house while holding his hand and on the other young boy's hands were a firmly held cage of the trained mouse and the box of planets with lottery numbers.

The mother did not complain. The set lean dinner was divided into two; then fixed the mattress on top of three chairs, John placed the child there. He contented himself sleeping just on a straw mattress.

At the first sound of the morning bell, John was already on his feet: it didn't require a great effort to pull himself from that hard bed. He gave a worried motherly look at the still sleeping boy and off he went at once to Fr. Scapini to tell him everything and ask for his advice.

It is the opinion of the good priest that one could not be indifferent to such a pitiful case; but the civil responsibility which this thing may entail is not to be undermined; there is the need to be cautious by getting the right information; and to know also the opinion of the confessor, Fr. Natale of Jesus, of the Carmelites of the St. Theresa Convent. Fr. Natale's advice is to keep the boy with him for the meantime and to ask the Lord for a sign on how to go about it.

A sign, what sign?

A sign!

And the sign was not late in coming.

You can imagine if this could remain unnoticed! Nevertheless, it didn't go beyond the limit of the Calabria family's acquaintances. Among them, it came also to the knowledge of Mr. Franco, Israelite, who thought to send to John on the same day what, was needed to clothe the boy. Was this the sign? This was the interpretation.

A confirmation came three days after. In the house of the Marquis Da Lisca, in the occasion of the family's small party, an amount came about from a bingo game 60 lire “for the boy of the theology student Calabria”.

The situation couldn't continue like this for long. From the thorough investigation and questions addressed to the boy who could have had the age of six or seven, it was assumed that he was part of the group of gypsies who probably kidnapped him in the countryside of Riviera Ligure and maybe this was the reason why they were careful of not asking him back.

It was thought as opportune to baptize him under conditions, giving him the name: August Meneghini. The Providence established then that the "Children of Mary Immaculate", known by the name of Little Artisans of Brescia and founded by the venerable Fr. Ludovico Pavoni, who had a flourishing agricultural farm in Bussolengo, generously had to host his stay and educate him.

For the juridical settlement it was needed still to wait while continuing with the investigation. Ten years passed; it was by then convenient to come to a definite decision. John was already a priest, and gone beyond, with the cooperation of the three Fabbro brothers who were good witnesses, all the difficulties of the bureaucratic machinery, on May 02, 1908, he got the official minutes of recognition of being a civil citizen, getting the name already given to him at Baptism. He was then presumed to be seventeen years of age. [21]

John was so concerned in a special way for this forsaken youth.

This episode has a special revealing value and very well symbolizes the prelude to a Great Opera;[22] more so it is an altogether introduction and a summary of it. The "Opera", in fact, which later on would be developed, will assume, exactly because of this, peculiar shades of a never thought breadth.

[21] August Meneghini died in Cremona on May 9, 1954, in the same year when Fr. John Calabria, his venerable protector, passed away.

[22] *Opera*; about its meaning see the "note to the reader" in the beginning.

If we would like to give a name to this “prelude”, we will call it the way someone called it later on: “The Son of the Carousel”

Pious Congregation to Uplift the Poor and Sick

John was in love with the apostolate that benefited the sick specially the poor ones.

What he had done and learned in the military hospital fascinated him. Why shouldn't he continue a work so benevolent and profitable for the body and more so for the souls? Yes, he had to devote himself now, principally to his studies; but during his free time, vacation on feast days, who would prohibit him from giving his time to this work of great mercy?

After asking for approval from his confessor, he talked about it with two schoolmates who, among others, showed the same preferences and intentions.

He revealed to them his project: on Thursday, during break time in school and during the visiting hours of the hospital, to visit the sick poor, and to hand those also material help together with a Christian word.

He found a perfect agreement; but... there is always a “but”: where would they find the material means? They were not rich; what they could give was rather ridiculous. How would they find the provisions? They agreed that during the week they would ask for offerings from the well-to-do families whom they

knew and whatever they would be able to gather would be used for that purpose.

Therefore, they drew the Statute-Rules, putting the Charitable Institution under the protection of Our Lady of Sorrows and the patronage of the Saints Camillus de Lellis and Vincent de Paul. The Statute was approved by the then Bishop of Verona, the Cardinal Louis of Canossa, who coupled the approval with a big blessing and an indulgence of forty days for a small prayer that the members committed to recite every day. [23]

The Statute-Rules stated:

I. Due to a private initiative, a Charitable Institution arose in Verona which will give comfort to the sick who are poor, under the direction of a priest.

II. Its goal is to visit and to give alms to the sick especially who are poor and abandoned in the Hospital and Shelter.

III. The visit is made every week, on Thursday, during the visiting hours of the said institutions, by the founders of the Institution, who will try to console the sick, stir up in them the Christian resignation and the desire for heaven.

[23] This is the text of the approval: "Verona, April 30, 1898 – Clearance: we approve and recommend the charitable institution to all the good people, and we bless it with all our hearts". + L. Card. of Canossa, Bishop.

IV. The Institution is composed of the founders and the benefactors. The founders, within the people they know, will propagate the Institution looking for benefactors; they will collect the offerings which are properly registered for the annual report, and every Thursday, they will visit the sick in the Shelter and the Hospital; and in case the Institution will further develop, they will also include the sick in private homes who would need more their assistance.

VI. The benefactors will hand over the offerings to the founders.

VII. The spiritual favours enjoyed by the benefactors together with the founders are:

a. The daily prayers from the beneficiaries.

b. A requiem mass, which is not intended only for the dead benefactors, but also for the dead beneficiaries. This mass will be celebrated in a time and place to be established and the offerings for the mass will be taken from the cash box.

VIII. Each benefactor can have access, if he wants, at the end of the year, the report of what has been done by the Pious Congregation during the same year.

Among the first and rich benefactors were the Marquis Alexander Da Lisca and the Count Francis Perez who did not want to remain only as benefactors, but rather wanted to be counted among the founders; and so with our theology students, under the guidance of Fr. Scapini, they too went to visit the sick, giving an example of a great Christian spirit, the spirit that then animated all their lives.

They started with the civil Hospital and the Shelter and then extended to the military Hospital and the psychiatric Hospital.

It was a work done with diligence and intelligence. From the nuns-in-charge of the various divisions, they got the information who were more in need of material and spiritual help and those who were greatly abandoned; they asked what their needs were and they went without hesitation and without wasting time, with their discreet charity, to the corridors and walls doing a lot of good work.

The founders' intention was for the Institution to continue and grow, but practically, it did not go beyond the above-mentioned founders. Once the theology students reached the priesthood, due to obedience and ministry, they had to disperse and the life of the Institution did not go beyond the four years of their theological studies.

With our John, the Count Francis Perez distinguished himself from the others, since then, for a saintly reputation; we will meet him later on in these pages, being totally consecrated to the Lord in the Congregation of the Good Boys' House.

Fr. Natale of Jesus

At this point, it is good to know who deeply knew the character of Fr. John Calabria, he who for forty five years was the father and director of his soul, the animator behind his Opera, his spiritual support, and the true interpreter of God's

will for him: Fr. Natale of Jesus, born Joseph Fada, a Discalced Carmelite, a religious of the convent in Verona since 1892.

John met him at the military Hospital where Fr. Natale went to give the ministry of confession.

Although he was a little more than thirty years old he was nevertheless appreciated as a confessor and in that environment he was the priest most accepted by the officers who sought his company and conversation. With a masculine and ascetic aspect, his conversation in fact, though sober, was brilliant and never lacked humour, that sometimes would end up in irony. Also John would experience his harsh words, his reprimanding and stinging expressions but coming from a heart of gold, all zeal and charity.

Intelligent and sharp, he was precise and answered thoroughly any questions asked to him. This self confidence, fruit of his culture, of experience and a good dose of intuition made him sought after, appreciated and well loved.

Monasteries and religious institutes, prisons and places of sufferings, common people and aristocrats, rich and poor would go to him, they would vie for his attention; he knew how to give to everybody, how to help everybody specially the poorest and the weakest, those who were more needy, becoming for many – single or community – a “channel of providence”.

A model religious, he distinguished himself for his spiritual faith and an austere life, for his exercise in poverty and patience. If his harshness was hiding a delicate and sensitive

heart, even with animals, the manly figure concealed a delicate health; yet he did not stop until the end his ministering of peace, of pardon, of light and comfort, of spiritual and material help.

For many years he was the local superior of the Verona convent; from 1930-1933 he was also the Provincial Superior and then the Definitor [24] of the Order, always residing in the convent of St. Teresa of the Discalced Carmelites.

Even in the responsibilities bestowed on him, Fr. Natale always brought the mark of his particular personality. He governed with charity but without failing his duty of exhorting, with example and with words his brethren and subjects, to the practice of values proper to the Order: the humility, the penitence and the spirit of prayer. Being intuitive and ironical, he would call a “Carthusian” a brother who didn't love the cell and those who were caught tasting something outside the meal time he would call “the ones who love fasting”.

During summer as well as in winter, at 4:30 a.m. he was already on his feet to attend to the business of his soul, so as to be more at the disposal of those who would go to him.

He loved his church and was very demanding when it concerned the orderliness, the cleanliness, the decorum of the sacred ceremonies.

[24] A religious who generally provides counsel and assistance to the Superior General and Provincial Superiors of his Order.

Shrewd and a courageous inquisitor he knew many times how to face difficult and delicate situations, even going against influential persons.

He was a complete man, a man of God.

He died at the age of seventy-eight, after fifty-seven years of religious profession, on October 2, 1941.

He had a grandiose funeral with huge crowd participation and with the participation of the General Vicar of the Diocese – the most venerable Joseph Manzini who gave a funeral eulogy –. His body, brought to the church for public viewing, was an object of great veneration; many requested for any of his personal belongings.

John, as we said, met him at the military Hospital since the beginning of his service and at once he felt drawn to him. It was the Providence that made this meeting.

The recruited young man completely and unconditionally entrusted himself to Fr. Natale, because he was looking for nothing else, wanted nothing else, but to know and to do the holy will of God.

The supernatural relationship started this way and lasted for about fifty years. On one hand, the teacher, the unfailing artist, firm, precise, apparently rigid; and on the other hand, the disciple the delicate instrument, sensitive, and always anxious. In this relationship, it is not clear, if we have to admire most the baffling certainty of the first or the heroic docility of the second.

In fact, the one who would like his sons to be “like rags”, “like clay”, “without head” in his hands, must be the first to be an example; without giving up his own responsibility, feeling the hard aversion of the nature, until reaching the dramatic moments wherein the rough hand or the lashing word almost biting, many times impelling, will dominate the stiffen cords, the hardened clay, the reluctant will. One example among many.

It is almost four in the morning of spring; we are at S. Zeno in Monte during the first years of the Congregation. Fr. John, after the umpteenth restless night calls a brother and makes him prepares the carriage: “Let's go to Fr. Natale”, he orders the rig driver.

It is still dawn and the streets are deserted, the shuffling of the hoof on the pavement makes one think of the sinister sound of Satan’s faint laughter. At the back of the carriage, with hands buried inside the wide sleeves, with a discomfited face, the father prays in silence, his lips moving in tremor. Only the face and the voice of the brother that stirs the horse give a human touch to this picture.

They arrive so early in the convent that Fr. Natale isn't up yet and Fr. Carmelo opens the door. Knowing the place, Fr. John, goes straight to the waiting room and sits in one of the benches. After a while, comes Fr. Natale. “Well, what is this at this time?”

“I don't want to go back to St. Zeno; it is not for me. It doesn't suit me. I will ruin everything. Do with me what you want... but I won't go back to St. Zeno in Monte”.

In a spur of the moment he said everything with a suffocating and shaking voice. It is one of the many hours of Satan.

But Fr. Natale is not upset; there's no need to argue with Satan, and God's works need these hours, to strengthen them.

“Does the Opera belong to you? If it is the Opera of God, would you like to shun His Will? The Lord could have done it very well even without you, but would you like to take the responsibility of not corresponding to His design?” The voice is firm, almost strong and with a burning look; and at intervals, there is almost a naughty smile on his lips. It is necessary to do this, though the heart bleeds. Later on, he would know how to be sweeter, almost maternal without showing it; but now, no. This is Satan’s hour and there is a need to overcome this.

It is not necessary to say more. Fr. John seems still more with a heavy heart; but there is nothing to answer: those words with their strength are the expression of God's will. Fr. Natale is already by the parlour door and calls the brother. “Take him at once to St. Zeno in Monte”. And everything is said. Nothing remains but to get up and go. It seems that the whole world is on top of his shoulders but a new strength helps him to carry it with less effort: it is obedience.

“I have always obeyed my venerable confessor Fr. Natale; that's why I am at peace”, he would repeat often until the end of his long and tormented life.

Here are the two men the Lord wanted, one to be near to the other to realize his designs: “Great designs, new designs,

suitable for the present time; designs which would develop little by little; in humility, in silence, in secrecy, without prefabricated plans, following the divine impulse, for every kind of apostolate, without limits of space because the whole world belongs to God".

"Men's works start on wide base, and end in a tip; while those of God start on a point and widen more and more. Men's works are like pyramids that rest on earth while those of God rest on a point. We have our roots on high".

These are his sayings, which in their imaginative effectiveness fully reveal Fr. John, giving an imprint of his soul.

CHAPTER 5

SACERDOS IN AETERNUM

Sunny Days

The clouds disappeared on the third year in Theology. After so many sterns and after so many alternating menaces finally the tranquillity.

The admission to being a Sub Deacon was decisive, no more beating around the bush; John was weighed enough: nothing more could be asked of him.

His output had undoubtedly scored a steadfastness of his intellectual capacity; the abundance of his virtues could have completed what was really lacking. Why still doubt?

Also his apostolate was seen now from another point of view; it was an exuberance of internal life and of charity; it was a necessity for him.

Therefore, his fourth year in theology starts with clear skies; the sun would soon rise.

The loosening of tension brought about the improvement in his scholastic output, at least in the first trimester. Then, once more, his effort, badly supported by his physique, weighed heavily on its continuity. There was a slight regression but this time nobody paid attention to it.

On March 23, 1901, he became a Deacon. The stole that the Deacon places diagonally gave him this cue to give a witty comment:

"It is a good sign when things are placed askew!"

Yes, a good sign: the goal is near. But how much effort he had to go through to go near, to reach it! How many times, it seemed to slip out of his hands; how many times would low dark clouds hide it! But firm hand sustained him; an authoritative voice would always exhort him to go up: the hand and voice of Fr. Scapini. Now also for the venerable priest it was a great consolation to see his John a Deacon.

Still few more months, few more days and then there will be a great feast for everybody at beautiful St. Laurence. All the bells will ring, the church will glitter, the organ will be filled with sounds of its notes and the Gloria will attain the value of a solemn Te Deum, even with the soft voice of the new Levite which would echo in the heart of the great benefactor who is beside him in the altar.

It will be feast for everybody on that day! Not only the Fabbros, the Perezes, the Liscas, Masina, Fr. Gilardoni, Fr. Natale, his parish priest, but the whole parish will rejoice because everybody knows him, everybody loves him, the great

and the small, the healthy and the sick, rich and poor. He is part of everybody and everybody is a little bit his.

But in the midst of the general jubilation, to the overwhelming joy of the many, there will be a simple and hidden soul who will rejoice from deep within her heart, more than anybody else, rising the canticle of thanksgiving: his mother.

The genuine and saintly things of which she was educated in, had sustained her during the years of sufferings, of great and various trials. She didn't remain insensitive – she just couldn't do it – to the humiliations, to the efforts, the sufferings of her John during the long years in the seminary and during the military service. With him, she shared the empty dinner table, the fireplace without logs burning, the miserable places, the oppressive poverty, the vigils, the efforts, the sickness, the misfortunes, and death.

In silence and in hope, with prayers she was his strength. She sowed with tears, now she would reap with joy. The Lord's kindness had looked upon their being low and had done great thing. Now it was just right to sing the *Magnificat* of thanksgiving.

On August 11, 1901, twenty-one deacons of the Verona Church received the priesthood by the imposition of the hands of His Eminence Cardinal Bartholomew Bacilieri, and among the Deacons was John Calabria.

On the following fifteenth, on the solemnity of the Virgin's Assumption, twenty one churches and parishes echo

the bliss in heaven, accompanying with prayers, songs and vows the new priests to the altar to offer their first Holy Mass.

For our Father John, the anxious waiting was spent in prayers and as it was the custom at that time, he did not celebrate the mass during those days.

Only God can penetrate a man's spirit and read through the end the sentiments, the reactions, and the emotions. Who could ever say what transpired in Fr. John's mind and heart in those days, in that day, that “really the Lord had made”?

He truly tried to *understand what he was doing* and he really put much effort *to imitate the One he was dealing with*.[25] All those who went to take part in his masses have had wholesome impressions and unforgettable moments.

It was said that, one day, when he was an assistant in St. Stephen, the parish priest waited for him by hearing his mass since he wanted to talk to him. The celebration progressed in a regular rhythm, without overdoing it but with great devotion. The good parish priest was so uneasy and was hurrying him up with frequent nervous movements. It was almost the communion part and in the recollected silence inside the church, the words of *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God) echoed clearly. There is such devotion and sentiment in this prayer that the rhythm of the celebration slows down, like the celebrant almost wants to taste the beauty of the invocation. The parish priest could no longer get hold of himself and went out shaking his

[25] These italic expressions are taken from the Rite of Ordination.

head and repeating annoyingly in high voice; “He will never end with the *Agnus Dei*”.

But while before, he would treat him with such an authority, addressing him with a personal “you”, from that time on he treated him with much respect, addressing him more formally.

Seeing him celebrating the mass with much devotion, the good souls voluntarily asked him to offer the Holy Mass for the souls of their beloved departed. They said “it really seems that it pulls the souls out of the Purgatory”.

The exhortation of the consecrating bishop, to strive to live saintly and live a life pleasing to the omnipotent God did not fall in vain in the heart of the new Levite.

Assistant at San Stefano

After two months vacation which he spent in St. Laurence, close to Father Scapini, he received a notice of appointment for assistant Vicar of St. Stephen.

St. Stephen is one of the most ancient churches in Verona, in Romanesque style with three small naves, a crypt and an elevated presbytery: because of a rough stone chair found inside and at present walled in the apse, it is believed that it could have been the first Cathedral. It stands in a very antique oratory built in honour of the first martyr and demolished by King Theodoric, an Arian who had a strong aversion towards the Catholic faith.

The works done in that zone, after the disastrous flood of August 1937, took away the characteristic of being a “slum” place which distinguished St. Stephen from other quarters of the city. It has not lost its mark of being “popular”, but at that time hidden in its alleys were the underworld, the crooks and the many poor and miserable people who lived there. Therefore, it was a difficult environment where there was a need for honest priests, tried and rich in virtues.

The parish priest, Fr. Louis Masetti, was a priest made of this character, his temperament though, as what we’ve said, was rather fiery and would get upset so easily, in spite of his effort to win over it and overcome it. Also for this, there was a need for an assistant who was humble, patient and full of charity.

Somebody was sorry for him, for that nomination but by the end of his first mission, he could write: “After having been for six years under his teaching, I profess that I found myself happy and I thank the Lord who sent me to St. Stephen under that priest, during the first years of the sacred ministry”.

It had been six years rich in a various and profitable ministry so much so that he deserved to be given the title of “universal priest”. Years rich in various episodes that had gifted him with experiences and merits. Years of difficult conquests, in and outside the parish; these widened even more his known illustrious virtue.

Small Trouble

During the first years, the Parish Priest assigned him to go and celebrate mass during the feast days in the small church of St. Leonard on the hill with the same name. He went there by riding on a donkey that the good villagers placed at his disposal. He considered it an amusement and he enjoyed going up in that manner; it was also a way, though humble, which lessened the effort during the stiff ascent.

One day, on his trip up this way, he was all absorbed by his prayers, and suddenly he came across a group of gangsters that upon seeing him they started laughing in a rowdy manner and making ridicule of him: “Where are you going, you two? Would you like us to accompany you so you will not lose your way?” And other crack comments of this kind. He proceeded without saying a word and continued praying; but from that day on he didn't want to have that donkey ride and undertook the hard work of going on foot, even if he was not a person who loved walking, but he did not want to give occasion, though unintentionally, of insult and mockery to the priestly dignity.

Another incident. Coming from his house in Street Fontanelle 1, near the cathedral where he lived with his mother since November 15, 1901, on the way to the parish, near the higher secondary school he often met a student who greeted him with big bows, while his companions were looking and laughing. For a while, he just let them be; but understanding that the fellow was teasing him, he asked around whom he was and where he lived. He went to his house and in the presence of the student's parents told him, “I think you and your friends

are making fun of me; I could have called the dean but I thought of saving you from a serious scolding; but I would suggest that you must not make fun of anybody and much less of priests". That boy apologized and promised not to do it anymore. He kept his word; he would greet him with much respect every time he met him.

If we take away these unpleasant, still but small episodes, his life as an assistant in St. Stephen was spent with the benevolence of the superiors and of the population.

Benevolence of the Superiors

We have said that the Parish Priest, after the famous "*Agnus Dei*" had changed his attitude towards him; but many times his emotional nature, though unintentionally, led to rudeness towards the good assistant. Once, for example, while Fr. John was hearing the confession of the boys in the oratory which was a little far from the parish and being already the hour of the sacred ceremonies, the Parish Priest addressed him rudely: "It is now time for you to be in the church for the ceremonies. Quit hearing confessions!" Humbly and without objecting, Fr. John left the confessions and went to the Parish. A little later, the Parish Priest felt it was his duty to apologize to him.

After a few months that Fr. John was in St. Stephen, the Cardinal called to entrust to him the responsibility of being the confessor of the Seminary.

One day, during the interval between lessons, he ran into a group of professors; among them was the illustrious Mgr. Michel Angel Grancelli. He tried, with the hat in hand, to slip away along the corridor, but they prevented him, occupying the whole corridor wall to wall so that he was forced to pass in the midst of them. While, confused, he proceeded towards the lines of this cultural aristocracy; suddenly, the serious voice of Mgr. Grancelli addressed him: "What are you doing here, you?" "They called me to be a confessor", Fr. John humbly answered. Then Mgr. Grancelli, in a solemn tone said: "*Lapidem quem reprobaverunt aedificantes, hic factus est in caput anguli*".[26]

His confessional was the most frequently visited.

For his zeal and his charity the narrow boundaries of a parish were not enough. With regards to the sick, his apostolate spread and continued in the civil and military Hospitals and upon request by his fellow priests, also in other parishes. Principally, serious cases were referred to him and where others would not achieve, he could. All this could not remain hidden, more so to the Bishop's household and the Cardinal bestowed on his Fr. John the special favour of carrying the Holy Oil with the power to administer it whenever it was necessary.

[26] The stone rejected by the builders, has become the chief cornerstone (Ps 118: 22).

People's Benevolence

A very significant episode happened. During the administrative elections of 1904, Fr. John was going to fulfil his duty. In Verona, there were many “reds” and particularly in St. Stephen. As he was going towards the polling place, he was spotted by a group of about ten young men, who had a bright red carnation displayed on their button holes. They surrounded him and asked:

“Where are you going, Fr. John?”

“I am going to vote”.

“But don’t you know that it is dangerous today to roam in the streets?”

“I am doing my duty as a citizen: I have no fear”.

“Now, Fr. John, we'll go with you, so that nobody will do you any harm”.

“They really accompanied me, to the polling place, these socialists themselves – Fr. John narrated – and then they accompanied me home. And yet they knew fully well that I wouldn't vote for them”.

Beyond the political parties, and contrasting ideas, it is charity that wins and the virtue that dominates. For the same reason the Jacobins of Paris in 1779 spared the monument of St. Vincent de Paul.

Enlightened Zeal

There were two assistants in St. Stephen: he and Fr. Eric Bovo. To the latter was entrusted the care of the sick and to him the youth. But then from the expressed desire of the same Fr. Bovo and with the approval of the Parish Priest, they swapped assignments. Fr. John had a special preference for the sick.

In order to reach everybody, so as not to miss anyone, the district doctor promised him to report to him all those who were sick.

He put together a repertoire of episodes, tales, witty remarks, and he used these to introduce himself in a pleasant way. Rarely would it begin with a spiritual talk, he knew how to arrive to that point after a cunning and intelligent preparation.

But when his proven intuition understood that there was no more hope for healing, with tact and courage he spoke of the coming death and the paradise that awaits us.

“Are you willing to go to Paradise?” he asked a seriously ill boy, one day.

“No, Father”, he answered.

“Why are you not willing to go?”

“Because I played too little with that horse over there” and he was referring to his rocking horse.

“But in Paradise you will always play”.

“Is it allowed to play in Paradise?”

“But for sure!”

“So, I am willing to go”, said the boy.

He admonished to be very careful and not to discuss with the sick topics difficult to tackle.

He would rarely go to a sick person if he was not being asked; except when charity, duty and circumstances were warranted. This is above all, for the sick ones outside his parish.

One time, upon learning that a seriously ill person, whose relatives were not in a hurry to call for a priest, he went to the place; the family did not allow him to enter, with the usual excuse that the sick would be upset and it would lead to the danger of getting worst, etc., etc.

He came back many times but the effort seemed useless. One day, he bumped into a Notary in the house of the sick person. The relatives called the Notary to get the last will of the sick person.

He told the relatives, “So, why is it that you worry about the material things and you're not afraid what it would do to the sick person, and for the things of the soul, nobody is trying to do anything?” With saintly courage he went inside the room of the sick person and was able to provide for the good of his soul, who received him well.

Instead, another time, he was called for a very seriously sick person who would stubbornly refuse a priest's visit. The family was so dismayed and turned to him as if he was the only one who could do something. Then an inspiration came. With agreement made with the attending doctor, he put on the

medical uniform and introduced himself as a consultant. His many experiences gave him the ability to use the technical terms and diagnose the sickness, according to the doctor's findings, without losing his face. In that manner, he returned two or three times; but then, one day, with a charitable courage he revealed who he really was. “I am a doctor, not of the bodies but of the souls”, and he exhorted the sick to think of his soul. These were dramatic moments, because the sick person resisted with all his might and sent him away; but then, being overcome by grace, he wanted to confess and to die at peace with the Lord.

When he was requested to visit a “special” sick, he would inquire if the sick wanted it; in case of the contrary, he prayed that he would be prepared to receive him.

If it concerned a sick of other Parishes, he wanted the Parish Priest to be notified, but if there was a time constraint, he would then go to the sick person first and would notify the Parish Priest as soon as he was able to, reporting to him the status of the sick one and what he was able to do for him.

The clergy of the Parish used to say: “he has a very special grace, the grace of state, for the good of the faithful”

It was then very delicate, avoiding anything that the sick would dislike; and even without approving of the obvious prejudices and superstitions, he was careful not to offend certain sentiments and weakness of the poor sick.

He recounted, about this, that when he placed his hat on the bed of the sick woman who called him for confession,

she, who was very superstitious, didn't want to go to confession any longer, not then or after.

He shared his precious experiences with his brothers and sons so that they could treasure them, avoid imprudence and being tactless. For example, he told of having assisted a seriously sick person who, for a certain moment, seemed to have lost his cognitive ability, such that those around him didn't mind discussing about his funeral. Well, after having recovered a bit his senses, the dying person complained to the Fr. that he was appalled to hear what was said in a very tactless way.

One of the sick he used to visit, hear confession and console, more than the others, was the noble Mgr. Serenelli, his old benefactor, who became indigent, deaf and blind and he was no more than a guest in his own palace. The Father felt for him profound gratitude and great compassion.

White Sheep and Black Sheep

During his daily trip from the house to St. Stephen he never failed to meet a beggar to whom he would give charity of two cents a “palanchetta” as the people of Verona would call it. When he learned about it, Fr. Scapini, warned him: “That man doesn't deserve your alms, because at night he would just squander it in the tavern”. Fr. John didn't feel to discontinue his act of charity. For some months, each day, a hand would stretch out and another would nearly touch, letting a coin fell.

One day, the beggar was not in his usual place and so it was for many days. The coin went to the hands of others and the memory of the old man faded and muddled with the many faces of the poor, the old, the beggars that Fr. John met along the way in Verona, among the alleys and shanties of St. Stephen in the corridors of the Hospital and of the Shelter.

It was precisely in one of these visits that he found him again in a providential way.

He had just entered the Hospital and a nun ran to meet him: “Just you come; there is a seriously ill old man who doesn't want any priest. He said that he would only go to confession if we could bring to him that young priest who gave him charity everyday... But how are we going to find him since we were not able even to get his distinguishing features? You try...” Fr, John was led to the sick man, knelt to where he was. He recognized him: “Here he is!” said the old man to the onlookers; and to Fr. John: “I'd like to confess”. He received the sacraments and died in peace with God. The few coins given as alms for the love of God had acquired an immense value in the eyes of the Lord, until a soul could be bought “for eternity”.

It was not like this for a poor miserable, also an old man, who would frequently approach Fr. John during his visits in the Hospital, but he never went to confession. Rather, when the Father would visit others, he would take advantage to utter curses. “Is there hell, Fr. Calabria? I would like to go there!” and these words were followed by another curse. Somebody tried to reproach him, but the situation became worst. The others, unfortunately, were almost enjoying that unusual sight.

The days past and the illness aggravated. When he felt he was going to die, he called for Fr. John; but Fr. John didn't go to the Hospital that day. They went to look for him but he was not home, either. The old man died, without any possibility to receive Confession: with his eyes popping out of his head, his face lined by despair. There was such a fright in the room for this death that the day after all went to Confession and received the Holy Communion; many of them had not done this for many years.

If the old ones were hard to conquer, it was the other way around for the young ones especially the younger ones. They were a great consolation.

He often remembered the unviable death of a young man and he was present then. “Fr Calabria, what a music, what songs!” he exclaimed. “It seems I am in Paradise. Fr. Calabria, I am going to Paradise. What a joy! What a satisfaction!” And another young lady, wife of an officer he had visited and blessed many times. She was always afraid to die, but when the moment came, she said to those near her: “I don't feel I belong to this world; I feel being raised! I am very, very happy!” With these expressions, she died.

The Austrian Doctor

One day, the police found a strange person without documents and more than this, he was a foreigner. With a haggard looking face, a blank look, a weak appearance, it was

suggested that he be brought for confinement to the Hospital. It seemed that he was showing signs of mental derangement and he was placed in the section of the insane. When Fr. John knew about this, he went to see him. He learned that he was the son of a known doctor from Vienna and he was a doctor himself but was tormented by a persecution mania, and felt being wanted to be put to death. He tried to start a conversation in Latin.

“Are you a doctor?”

“Yes, but I am a Jew”.

“It is not important – answered Fr. John – We are all brothers”.

To that the other answered, surprised:

“Your religion is very marvellous; if I get well I'll become a catholic”.

After the conversation, Fr. John went to the director of the Hospital and briefed him of the patient's personal data, and he was brought into another hall, in a separate room, of first class. But the poor one wanted to have always his priest friend near him and he didn't want to eat unless the priest had tasted the food, for fear of being poisoned, and Fr. John was pleased to lend himself kindly.

Meanwhile, his parents were notified about him and after some days, they came to take him and they showed their heartfelt gratitude to Fr. John for his charitable concern; until 1915, which is until the outbreak of the war, they maintained an epistolary relationship.

Apostolate of Various Forms

The care of the sick didn't occupy him completely; the two assistants, bond to one another by the charitable link of friendship tried to give mutual help, acting as substitute and covering up for what the other couldn't comply.

Therefore, we heard Fr. Bovo by the bed of a sick boy and Fr. John attending to the young boys, hearing their confessions, preparing them for their first Communion, going voluntarily, when invited, or to act as a substitute near the Fr. Mazza Institute to teach catechism, or give nice short homilies.

He had a particular care for the little chimney sweepers. These poor young fellows, who came down from their mountains, were hired during winter to clear the chimneys, most of the time they were abandoned to fend for themselves; they were very young, without a permanent place to stay, they were exposed to all dangers and many times they were maltreated by their inhuman employees. Fr. John felt a special sympathy for them. He rented a room near the Parish for them, in Blind Alley Cigno 1, he attended to them, gave them catechetical lessons, assisting them with all means in their physical and spiritual needs.

And also for the adults who had not been ministered yet the sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion, he extended his apostolate. He often remembered the great impression he got from a poor porter he was preparing for his

first Communion. Having explained how sin repeats the Passion and Death of our Lord Jesus Christ, he was interrupted by him: “I didn't know it Reverend, that one could nail the Lord on the cross; you can just imagine, if I had have known, would I have cursed? Not by any means!”

He was very happy to be useful to the soldiers. He received them to his house, he put himself at their disposal, he refreshed them, gave them money and advices: he attended to them like a mother. And his profound human and Christian action left streaks which could no longer be erased from the hearts of those who had the providential chance of feeling it.

One day, a lawyer who wanted to discuss religion with him, approached him. He was against such discussion; he knew that such discussions would lead to nowhere. He delayed such encounter until an agreement with the Director of the Psychiatric Hospital; the day came when he could say to that man: “Tomorrow, if it is alright with you, we will discuss”. He was there at the designated time and Fr. John requested him to accompany him first for a visit he had to make; the other agreed.

The Hospital's Director accompanied them passing through the different sections until they reached the agreed place. After comforting the poor person whom he had to visit, while leaving the place, he turned to the lawyer: “If you think it is alright, said Fr. John, we can discuss”. Reverend, he answered, I have had enough of it”. Facts were more powerful than words.

The False Priest

His humble aspect, his generous charity would maybe make him appear like a naive priest, ready to be fooled by everybody. The following incident instead, will show his sagacity, his courage and his strength in front of any situation when it concerned the glory of God and the good of the souls.

One day, somebody who was dressed as a priest introduced himself saying he had to go to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of the Cross to hear confessions. The Father was reciting the Breviary and he was advised to wait for a while until he was finished.

“Also I, he said, I should finish it; but... but I forgot my Breviary”. This word was somewhat odd: Fr. John started to suspect, his look wasn't reassuring. He looked for another Breviary and gave it to the... distracted priest to finish the recitation together.

The recitation was not that easy for the poor one, so Father Calabria's suspicion grew. Since it was then midday, he invited him for a meal. After meal, that priest asked for help for his trip; Fr. John gave him five lire (not a small amount at that time) and he left.

After few moments, he returned breathless because “he had lost the five lire”, but Fr. John didn't bite the hook and didn't give him any. He understood and left.

Fr. John also went out and he saw him with two luggage walking quite in a hurry. While keeping an eye on him, he tried

to follow him. The strange priest realized he was being followed and took advantage of the approaching tram and got into it. Realizing his movements, Fr. John quickened his steps and was also able to get into the tram.

The pursued person was uneasy and got off the tram at the first stop, but Fr, John followed him. Just to escape, he quickened his steps and Fr. John was behind him. Upon reaching a front door, maybe without any definite plan, he entered it but Fr. John was also able to step inside before the other could close the door on his face.

By then, there was no longer any doubt: he was an adventurer who took advantage of a uniform which was not his, trying to make a living out of it.

“Why is it like this? You are dressed in something which is not yours; you are living a bad life that leads to perdition. You have offended the Lord. Now is the time to change life and take the good road; you can still save your life and also your honour!”

The other one listened without uttering a word; two big beads of tears rolled down his cheeks. Fr. John didn't want more, he understood that he was sorry for what he did and he wanted to help in his rehabilitation. “Wait for me in my house while I go and look for something that will fit you”.

He went straight to the house of the Marquis Da Lisca and asked for clothes for a poor man who was urgently in need. He was able to get one.

Meanwhile, the poor man was in the house waiting for him. He took off the cassock and gave to the true priest “the false pretences” and left thanking him.

Strange Phenomena

St. Stephen was rather far from St. Laurence and he had to go there twice a day and come back also twice a day. Certainly, this was not that easy. Time and effort were wasted and impaired the ministry. Because of this, after sometime, Fr. John asked a friend, Fr. Emilio Fabbro, to look for a small apartment for him, near the Parish, for him and his mother.

The apartment was found in the second floor of a building in Street Fontanelle, with no. l marked on it; almost in front of the of the house of the Vicar General, Mgr. Louis Peloso, two steps away from Bridge Pietra; therefore, very near St. Stephen though located within the Parish of the Cathedral.

He went there with his mother; for a certain time was also with them his niece Marcella, daughter of his sister Teresa, who was in a difficult situation due to her husband who migrated in France and who didn't send any news of his whereabouts. Later on, the old Masina joined them.

Life went on so quietly, serene, in the simplicity of poor people. To Mother Angela it seemed it wasn't for real. But it didn't last long.

After sometime, in fact, strange phenomena started to happen in the house: some objects moved by themselves; some

changed place; others were suspended in the air. One day, without anybody touching it, the doorbell rang. They tried to stop it, but they failed. They cut off the connecting rod, it still kept on ringing. They wrapped it with rags inside and outside but an invisible hand would untie each thing and the bell would ring again.

The mother who was not afraid, looked and said, “Let us leave them to do it when they will get tired, they will stop. If they believe I'd get tired of this so I'll transfer out of this house, they are wrong... just now that we are in a much better condition”.

But the whole thing couldn't be kept secret. Friends, relatives, known persons like the Marquis Da Lisca, Fr. Scapini, Professor Grancelli and others would like to see things with their own eyes; there was no doubt; the bell rang, the furniture moved, the objects changed places.

Though not personally intervening, the same Mgr. Vicar was an involuntary testimony to certain sounds and noise.

The Parish Priest of St. Stephen Fr. Masetti, intervened as well, he covered his hands with a band and tried to hold the metallic cord of the bell: “I would like to see now if you can still ring!” But if he wasn't quick enough to let go, the cord could have wounded his hands.

One night, an engineer and a professor, friend of Fr. John, two sturdy and strong young men wanted to see with their eyes these phenomena and waited for their manifestation by playing cards.

At a certain point the table where they were sitting at moved; the alarm clock on top of the night table near Fr. John's bed shifted its place; and a noise of pebbles being poured from a cart could be heard, stones rolling and, then added to this, was a shrilling blow, like that of a hammer hitting an anvil.

There was nothing more needed to be convinced that objectively, they were real phenomena.

It was believed everything could be explained by the fact that in the near apartment lived a lady gifted with a mediumistic power. Could this be a sufficient explanation?

Naturally, Fr. Natale was well informed of all these and one day he decided to intervene. “If something will happen tonight, notify me”, he said to Fr. John.

Around 10:00 p.m. various sounds and noises started to be heard. Fr. John sent somebody to notify the Father; he came with a domestic helper of the Convent, a good man from the common, short and sturdy.

Fr. Natale was in the middle of a room beside and, a little bit behind, was the helper. The dialogue with the invisible troublemaker started.

“Tell me how old I am”. Many tapping sounds could be heard, as many as the age of the Father.

“How old is that man?” The tapping answered the exact age.

"Tap the Garibaldi's march". The tune and the rhythm of the very popular march "*Si scopron le tombe*..."[27] could be heard distinctly.

"Now, slap my man", pointing to the helper.

"Upon hearing this, the helper made a leap behind with a pale face:

"No! No! – He shouted – Jesus, have mercy! My Jesus, help me!"

Suddenly uproar could be heard, accompanied with jolting tremors: the whole house seemed to shake and about to collapse.

Calm came back to the souls and the things. Fr. Natale resumed undauntedly his questioning. Examining the answers to his questions soon enough he observed through his prompt intuition: he noted that the invisible being could answer correctly when it pertained to exterior things and passed events; but when the questions were geared towards the interior things and the future, the answers were not complete but evasive.

In the end, upon a question from the Religious, the night table rose, falling then with a loud roaring sound, turning the Crucifix, that was on top of it, upside down and destroying it.

Nobody wanted ever to talk about these strange phenomena. Even in the annual qualifying exams for

[27] "*The tombs are opened*": the beginning of the war hymn of Garibaldi's special military corps, "The Hunters of the Alps".

confession, Fr. John was questioned on this and he with humble simplicity narrated what happened without any judgment from the examiners.

These phenomena lasted for many months at various hours of the day and night. In the end all these stopped.

Other phenomena more serious than these of which we will see latter on happened to St. Zeno in Monte and then during the whole life of Fr. John.

An Accident that Brings Fortune

Let us leave now the strange phenomena, to narrate about a less tragic incident, which was quite funny, too.

One day, when he was opening a window, our Fr. John slipped and banged the glass with his left hand thereby causing a long wound in his forearm. Having wrapped it somehow with the bandage, he was brought to the Fatebenefratelli Hospital in Street XX September where, because of the seriousness of the wound, he had to be confined for a few days.

In that accident, he lost the sensitivity of his middle finger. Who benefited from this, instead, were some poor people in that miserable area. To the common people, who would voluntarily take shelter with their small amount of money as capital and much hope, in the state lottery office, the trite incident had suggested three sure numbers: the day, the hour, the blood. The three numbers came out and many benefited from them.

Fr. John was not keen of becoming popular that way but in his love for the poor and in understanding their weaknesses; he smiled to that few drops of providence.

Development of a Prelude

In his apostolate by the bedside of the sick he would often come across moral problems as well as the material ones which had to be resolved at the earliest possible. One of these was that of young boys who were orphans and abandoned with no human support to lean on: children that needed to be urgently aided and not in a precarious way, so that they wouldn't be lost.

Giving alms, clothes or a bowl of soup was not enough; there was a need to find a way to guarantee their earthly and eternal future: educate them; prepare them for life, and settle them.

How to go about it?

He did everything possible to find a place for them in various schools in the city or in the province, and if necessary, also outside; sometimes paying a boarding fee with the help of benevolent persons.

The Don Bosco College of Verona; the Artigianelli of Brescia and some other Institutes were asked very often to help him; and with his much insistence and prayers he almost always was able to find a place for his favoured young boys.

He was pleased to narrate the answer given him one day by the Director of an Institute, to whom he warmly had recommended a poor person, and he was repeatedly insisting for his accommodation. “Oh listen for a while”, he exclaimed both seriously and jokingly, “there's also a need for Fr. Calabria to hear a ‘no’ sometime”.

Among the good benefactors who until then were effectively helping him and who honoured him with their friendship, to be remembered were Fr. Ciprandi, Salesian, and the Director of the Artigianelli of Venerable Fr. Ludwig Pavoni, in Bussolengo.

There were also some charitable families who would take in for some time “his” boys until such time he could find a place for them where they could stay. Among these, the family of Mr. Trivillin, a carpenter, who later on, would become one of the first artisan masters in St. Zeno in Monte.

There were also the three sisters Trevisani who lived on the first floor of the same building where he lived, they helped him efficiently in assisting those children that he was keeping with him.

Of course, because when he couldn't find a place to stay for them, he would bring them home, in Street Fontanelle, often keeping them with him for days and weeks.

There was one of these boys, Guerrino Campigotto, who did not want to accept providential help and as soon as he was brought to the house, started shouting and destroying chairs,

glasses or anything he could get hold of, hoping to be sent away:

“Help, they're mistreating me, they’re hurting me! Help!” Shouts of this kind went ahead for some days; but the good Assistant Parish Priest and his mother were so patient until the time they found a place for him.

His good works were much appreciated; but among others there were some who, moved by false compassion towards the poor Assistant who didn't have for himself sufficient funds to live on, but occupied himself for the others, would continue to advise him not to take so many responsibilities and burden: “But why all these troubles? Be happy with your duties and leave it to those who are supposed to be concerned”. [28]

But he, relying upon the advice and exhortation of his confessor, didn't feel to follow those suggestions: “How could I not be concerned with those poor ones that the Providence placed before me? They were creatures of God, who were so needy”.

Without being completely aware of it, the harp of his beautiful soul vibrated to the touch of God and the “prelude” was becoming consistent.

[28] Fr. Calabria was the Assistant Parish Priest in St. Stephen for two years, until the arrival of Fr. Eric Bovo. After which he still stayed in the parish, as a confessor from 1903 to 1907.

Given the considerable difficulties in finding the place for the young poor ones, it happened that he kept one in his house: a very vivacious lively little child.

It was in November 1906.

CHAPTER 6

VICAR OF ST. BENEDICT

The Healing of his Mother

The trouble created by that urchin to mother Angela was not less, so his settlement in other place was a real relief to her, especially because the physical constitution of the poor lady had lost most of its vigour. In November another child was taken in. He seemed to be a promising boy and did not give her lots of worries; but the mother's health continued to fail day by day.

It is winter of 1906-1907, cold and humid, as it is for the whole Po River plain. There was insufficient comfort in the poor houses and in Street Fontanelle the sun was more bothersome in summer than efficacious in winter.

The cold, the age, the weary past didn't concede the poor lady to overcome a simple bronchial flu that sooner the bronchitis developed into bronchopneumonia. The son was worried about his mother. Days passed and the hope of a recovery was much to be desired. On the evening of December

13, the doctor declared the seriousness of the case: mother Angela would go any moment then.

Count Francis Perez, the intimate friend of the house, came as usual to visit the dear sick lady; even he believed that there was no more remedy to it.

Fr. Calabria looked into the eyes of his friend; both were dismayed; a pause of silence and prayer, then Fr. Calabria and Count Perez retreated to the small study room. What went on between the two, we wouldn't know. From a woman's indiscretion we knew how it ended since the niece, who assisted mother Angela, passing by near the study room overheard clearly this kind of pact made by Fr. John proposing: “If the Lord wants that I take care of the poor boys, for at least a year he has to give back my mother's health”.

Beyond any expectation, the mother almost immediately started her recovery.[29] It seemed that the Lord wanted to sanction in this way the mission the good servant had to undertake. In that healing Fr. Natale saw clearly the “sign” of the divine will: the Lord would have manifested the rest time by time. Meanwhile, upon his mother's recovery in January 1907, Fr. John took in the second boy: Oreste Martini.

[29] She lived for another seventeen months and died on May 8, 1908.

"Good Morning, Mr. Vicar!"

Fr. John Calabria wasn't an ordinary person and his life was a sequence of unforeseen events that would leave others dumbfounded and puzzled. He attracted and dominated.

They ordained him a priest by considering his virtues and they were not disillusioned; he showed himself as a priest of zeal and initiatives, docile and obedient, with a profound piety and an upright modesty, simple and cunning, according to the Gospel; with a charity that needed to be spread in an atmosphere of greater freedom, according to God's spirit.

The occasion to give a broader extent to his apostolic activity came together with the need to provide for the Rectory of St. Benedict al Monte.

This is a very ancient church, which went through, like most antique churches, a series of not always happy transformations. It seems that until 1140, it was officiated by the Benedictine Fathers and after said date, by the secular clergy and until last century it was a Parish church, then it became the subsidiary of the Parish of St. Anastasia, with some duties of souls' assistance from Street Rosa to Street Fama. Though a little bit hidden, it rises, nevertheless, in a very central zone, near the Erbe Square, behind the Maffei Palace, beside the Mount of Piety.[30] Roman Verona had had the Forum just nearby.

[30] It was the name given to the pawnshop.

And so, since the Cardinal had to provide to this church, he set his eyes at Fr. John. He was then thirty three years old and worthy of being relied upon for his prudence and his acquired and proven experience: he was the right and needed person.

On the first days of February of 1907, a note from the Bishop arrives in Fontanelle Street:

“My dear Fr. Calabria, I would like to see you immediately because I need to talk to you about a matter that concerns you and bothers me”.

Father Calabria hurriedly goes to the audience without knowing or imagining anything. When he enters the waiting room, the Bishop's secretary, Fr. Silvio Tomba, greets him: “Good morning, Mr. Vicar!”

His astonishment doesn't last long, because, introduced at once to the Cardinal, His Eminence, tells him simply his new destination.

In his humility he tries to object: “But I, Your Eminence, don't know anything on benefices, registers, material things...” But His Eminence doesn't want to take back his pondered decision and cut him short: “You'll be trained for it; you let other help you, but always under your responsibility...”

An expression stayed strongly in the mind of Fr. Calabria, who often, with a light and respected irony, repeated, “And the taxes, my dear, who will pay them?”

Nothing remained but to ask for the blessing so as to be a faithful administrator... also of the taxes.

Fr. John Calabria then went to his Fr. Natale to tell him about the dialogue; he took this at once as a new “sign” of the Providence, because for a time he had been telling him that he should have been more free, to assist better those young boys the Lord was sending to him.

What does the Lord want from him, now after giving him a big heart, a spirit geared towards all brothers, anxious to give God to all and give all to God? What does He want?

On Monday, February 11, 1907, the sacred day of the Immaculate of Lourdes, Fr. John Calabria celebrated the first mass at St. Benedict al Monte. On that day, two young boys joined him, Alessandro Noventa and Oreste Martini who were already staying with him; the mother and the niece Marcella, stayed for the whole winter in Street Fontanelle.

The acceptance of the Rectory of St. Benedict al Monte was a real heroic act on Fr. Calabria's part, considering the poverty of the environment, the few proceeds of the benefice and the late payment from the sub-bursarship done in 1910. He decided to take it only for obedience sake and for the love of the souls.

"Martino's Fixed Idea"

In January of the year 1907, because of a funeral in the St. George Parish, our Fr. John Calabria met the young priest Fr. Diodato Desenzani, his penitent since a year, who had manifested the wish to talk to him lengthily about something

he was keeping secret up to that day. When the funeral was over, they walked together towards Street Fontanelle and the young priest completely opened his heart to Fr. John Calabria.

Since May 1904, when he was still a third year theology student, he got the idea of a great work, "*sui generis*",[31] for the salvation of the youth. He gave some hints to Louis Martelli and John Nicolini, two young people from his Parish, St. Paul in Campo Marzio. First, they started looking for funds to help the Assistant, Fr. Gaetano Fiorio, in constructing a big Institution, but, when this initiative vanished, they were more convinced about their project, together with some other young friends, conquered by the idea, and started putting down some lines.

Their intention was to create a Society that, starting by taking care of the youth, could later on be extended, by gathering, as associates, the most progressive and convinced Catholics, belonging to different classes: kind of a "Catholic International", something like an "anti-masonry, a white masonry", secret, with a symbol of a white lily, which was going to be both motto and pass-word, with the aim of mutual temporal and spiritual help among the members.

The society already counted about thirty members: young, adults, craftsmen, professionals, priests; these ones had to be like the focal point, the engine, the guide of the big Association.

To explain and spread the idea, few years before Fr. Desenzani worked out a dramatic sketch: "Martino's fixed

[31] Unique in its characteristics.

idea", with the hidden meaning of the Society of the White Lily, but with the clear and repeated idea of a "Good Boys' House", which, in the mind of Martino (Fr. Desenzani), was supposed to be the first step for the establishment of the already started Society.

He dedicated the sketch to Fr. Fiorio, but now he understood that priest was not the man with whom he could agree to actuate his projects. For this reason he was now talking to Fr. John Calabria, inviting him to join his Society, with the secret hope to find in him the man who could have understood and helped him, more than anybody else.

He let him talk to the end. Fr. John Calabria grew up in a climate of hard realism since infancy and didn't let himself easily carried away by the enthusiastic fantasy of the youth, but it was his duty, good psychologist, grown in the charity, to put in the right light every good, without giving the impression of cutting down the unnecessary. He had himself his ideals; he also tried to translate into reality what the grace kept suggesting to him, in a realism of concrete charity. He too felt the many problems of the world knocking at the door of his spirit; problems the world could not solve, because they were above its poor capabilities. The poor, abandoned youth, lacking moral and material help, made his heart bleed, more than anything else.

What did he do, so far? He got interested particularly on those smallest and defenceless brothers and tried to put them in Institutes and families, knocking at every door. But this was not enough. If many found a house, many more were on the

road, prey to vices and candidates for criminality; and their number was growing every day. Actually he was keeping two of them in his house: he did not find anybody who could take care of them; the Lord would have provided.

He did not think it was proper to say everything in his mind; but, to conclude his internal thoughts, he said: “Good, I'll give my name to your Association and you will help me to find a house for these children. Let's put together our ideals, our prayers and our strengths: God will tell us what to do”.

This “prelude” was getting all the more wide-ranging.

Fr. Natale could not be kept out from this dialogue, since Fr. Calabria used to tell him everything. “We’ll see – was his comment – in the meantime pray that the Lord will give you some more ‘signs’ ”.

First Helpers

To help him in the education and assistance to poor children, there were two dear friends, Count Francis Perez and a young student who lived near St. Benedict church. This one who already went to the church with the previous Rector, helping him during the sacred ceremonies, especially by playing the harmonium, immediately met the liking of the new Vicar and became his friend.

“When you have time, please, come to play, whenever and as long as you like; I love listening to the harmonium while I recite my Breviary or my prayers”.

In exchange, he was ready to help him in any way he could.

Masina

Besides these, his mother and Masina were his collaborators at any moment. Masina was a simple and sincere woman a little gambler, but with a golden heart. Conversing with mother Angela, sometimes she had words like these:

“What do you think, Angela: now that he is a priest and could be quiet, he goes to bother himself with these kids!” And to Fr. John Calabria she said:

“Courage, John, I'm going to play lottery and, if I win, I'm going to pay all your debts; but after that, no more kids, no more kids!”

Fr. John Calabria smiled and let her talk; and when he had a new case to take care of, he introduced the boy to the old lady, asking:

“Masina, I have this small boy: his father and mother just died. What do you think? Can we take him, can’t we?”

“Oh, poor boy! Take him, take him, dear!” And she took the boy under her protection.

But, after few days, she was telling him: “You go away! Don’t you see that you are eating the ribs of Fr. John? Go away!”

Also Masina, then, grumbling but protecting, was helping Fr. Calabria and mother Angela in the care and assistance of the poor boys; really happy, when she could contribute to appease the hunger of those never full mouths.

The Ways of the Providence

The Vicar of St. Benedict al Monte was esteemed since then as a man of counsel; his confession booth was very frequently visited and also many priests ran to him for difficult cases or important decisions.

One morning, a young priest, Fr. Joseph Bonometti, Assistant Vicar in Holy Apostles' Parish, went to him. He had been called by the Cardinal the previous day, and he received the proposal to accept the Vicariate of St. John in Valle, which then was under the Parish of St. Mary in Organo.

He was taking his time and was undecided; he felt a little reluctance and was asking for his advice.

Fr. John Calabria collected his thoughts, reflected, and prayed briefly, then, in an inspired way, said:

"Accept, because I think the Providence has some plans in store for you".

The following day, the priest went to the Bishop to inform him about his acceptance.

Meanwhile the Providence, on August 19, sent a needy young fellow from Serravezza (Lucca) to Fr. Calabria: his name

was Bei Enrico; in September, a forth one: Micheletti Attilio from Verona.

The Providence, together with the poor boys, was also sending something to feed and to support them. Fr. Calabria himself often attested this later on to his sons:

"It is the Lord who does everything in our Opera. When, at the start, I gathered the first boys in St. Benedict, we had nothing. And people were telling me: Where will you put these boys to sleep? But the Lord, you see, while sending a boy was also sending his bed".

He will fix forever this line of thinking and acting in the Constitutions of the Poor Servants of the Divine Providence:

"No good work, no soul has to be excluded for the only reason of lack of means; we will not be lacking in means if we receive this soul, and we dedicate ourselves to this Opera with faith". [32]

Many women vendors in Erbe Square, who often started their day visiting the church of St. Benedict, the moment they knew that Fr. John had with him needy children to feed, were proud to help him with vegetables, fruits and whatever else they could offer.

Fr. Calabria rejoiced, because he saw in this many small and big "signs" of the divine benevolence, and became more

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[32] This is from autographic remarks on the Constitutions Project: July 23, 1943; cfr. also Const. 30 of the new book of Constitutions.

and more convinced that the cause he embraced was really wanted, and thus blessed, by God.

But the house was getting smaller and smaller: something had to be done about it. Fr. Desenzani, Fr. Bonometti and the Count Perez were put in charge of looking for a solution.

Case Rotte Alley

It was a tradition, the third Sunday of September, to celebrate Our Lady of Sorrows in St. John in Valle. Also Fr. Calabria was invited. During dinner, he was conversing with his two good friends, the Vicar Fr. Bonometti and the Assistant Fr. Desenzani. The talk went quite naturally on the gathered boys, on many others who needed the same, on the house to be provided... Suddenly, Fr. Desenzani came out with an interesting proposal, which seemed inspired by the Lord. In Case Rotte (Broken Houses) Alley there was a house occupied by an old priest, which could be vacated shortly. In fact, the priest was looking for a house nearer to the St. Anastasia church, where he was caretaker and where he celebrated the Sunday mass.

The house to be vacated was not really big, but had the advantage of a small courtyard, and was located in the area of Fr. Desenzani, who could give his help much easier.

Thank to Providence, the house was owned by the Sisters of the Sacred Family – popularly called Theresas – and

its administrator was just the Count Francis, who, no doubt at all, was going to do everything to get the most advantageous conditions.

Since the whole thing could not be under more providential auspices, the Count Perez was immediately put in charge of it.

Fr. Desenzani, happily, asked Fr. Calabria that the starting organization be called “Good Boys' House”. Father Calabria willingly agreed.

The First "Good Boys' House"

Fr. John is always very discreet in his things, but he feels the need to talk and open himself up first of all with his Fr. Natale and – to ask for prayers – with the small group of the closest friends and with the little band of the “Good Boys”.

Meanwhile, the Bishop, informed by Fr. John, did not deny his blessing, without this, Fr. Calabria would have never started anything.

In October, some new people came to St. Benedict: Joseph Carletti from Verona, the fifth “good boy” and a helper, the young Attilio Negrini, who had given up his intention to become a Capuchin friar, for health reasons.

On November 1, came in the sixth good boy: Racanelli Joseph. After few days, the small house was available in Case Rotte Alley, because the old priest had found a more convenient arrangement.

The Count Francis Perez in the meantime arranged everything with the good Sisters of the Sacred Family. But it was not possible to occupy the house immediately, because of the need for some renovations. Fr. Calabria then gave to his friend, Fr. Emilio Fabbro, the amount of 50 lire, telling him that... it was up to him.

It was a very meagre amount, but the faith was abundant, as well as the trust in the Divine Providence; and it helped also a little of... holy trickiness. It is known that one of

the secrets of the humility of Fr. John Calabria and of the success of his undertakings was the ability in convincing people to help him.

On November 26, the house was ready to welcome the small impatient group of the Good Boys.

The moment that, in the plans of the Divine Providence, was going to be the start of a great Opera, happened in the biggest simplicity, in silence, almost in hiding: the way all the true Works of God start. "*Buseta e taneta*"; a small den inside a small hole: it was and it always is his program.

Also that evening, after praying the Rosary in front of Mary's altar, together with the faithful, who regularly frequented the small church, Fr. Calabria told his boys a word of exhortation. But that evening belonged to them. So, he welcomed them in the sacristy and admonished them to be grateful to the Lord and to treasure his gifts. There was a little sign of emotion in his voice. Then he raised his hand to bless them: a large, sacred gesture: like he was throwing a seed to the four winds.

The small group went out in the foggy road, impatient to reach the new nest. The hurried and chilly people did not notice at all that group of small and poor boys, object of divine tenderness: a Father in heaven called them one by one by name; a priest on earth loves them like dear children; an elder brother, Fr. Desenzani, at number 6 of Case Rotte Alley, is waiting for them, happy, with opened arms.

While they pass through the entrance of their “House”, a late sound of bells comes softly, from far, softened by the fog: they were the last notes of the “prelude”: the Opera of the Lord was starting.

The Certificate of Birth

That evening, Fr. Calabria found himself alone in St. Benedict al Monte. He closed the door and paused lengthily in front of the Tabernacle. He felt all the importance of that day and that gesture.

It has been the Lord, not him: he was convinced with no doubt. He knew well himself and the economics of the Lord, who chooses the stupid, weak, ignoble and despicable things, according to the words of St. Paul, to confuse the strong and wise men of the world.

This was the day that the Lord had made: glory and honour to him! As for himself, more than ever the sense of responsibility was over him. The Lord, by now, very clearly indicated the road he had to take, the purpose of his “poor life”; he couldn't do anything else but to accept in adoration, to accept without reservation, absolutely; without looking back, no matter the price. And he will find out, during all his life, how much will cost the souls and the works of God.

The following morning, after the mass, he feels the need to open his soul to somebody and chooses the friend of the first start, Fr. Pio Vesentini, and he writes to him the following short

letter, which is like the official birth certificate of this Opera of God:

J.M.J. November 27, 1907

"*My dear Father Pio,*

In all confidence and friendship, I give you encouraging news: the cabbage has been planted! Yesterday, in St. John in Valle, the small house has been opened.

Up to now, God is conducting things well: there are seven boys[33] *and the local Vicar, Fr. Diodato Desenzani lives with them. Please, help me, first of all with your prayers and then... in any way the Lord will suggest you.*

Up to now you are the only priest to whom I made this formal participation: are you glad?

I offered this poor life of mine to the Lord, if he wants it...

Fr. Pio, we are united in the Lord.

See you. Pray for me.

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[33] Noventa Alessandro, November 1906; Martini Oreste, January 1907; Bei Enrico, August 19, 1907; Micheletti Attilio, September 1907;Carletti Giuseppe, October 1907; Raccanelli Giuseppe, November 1, 1907; Castellani Giovanni, December 1907; Melchin Gabriele, December 29, 1907. The boy Castellani, already accepted, will enter after few days, in December.

Yours in Christ,

F. J. Calabria

Pray, so that I could love to suffer".

This is the birth certificate of the Good Boys' House, an act full of faith and love.

What People Think About Fr. John

When the news about the appointment of Fr. Calabria as Rector of St. Benedict al Monte started going around in the ecclesiastic circles, one of the first who came to know it was... the sacristan Bigicchi Louis, who, of course was so anxious to pass this news to others. The first person he met was just the young student, the harmonium player. Making it mysterious but know-all, he suddenly asked: "Do you know who is coming as the new Vicar?"

"I don't know" replied the other.

"He is Fr. Calabria; he must be rich but he is a very charitable man – told the sacristan without drawing breath –. Imagine, he gathered in his house two poor boys and supports them, like he is their real father".

When his very poor household utensils came to St. Benedict, these poor things rectified the opinion of the wrongly informed sacristan.

But he, as well as whoever already frequented or started to frequent St. Benedict al Monte, realized that the new Vicar was really “rich”: rich of faith, of piety, of charity, of counsel; these were riches the thieves could not steal and the rust could not ruin.

The harmonium, which the young student now played with such passion and commitment, had been given to Fr. Calabria by a friend Fr. Emilio Fabbro, but only as a free loan.

During the month of May, Fr. John, who did not like to abuse of the kindness of his friend, informed the faithful that the church offerings of that month would have been used to buy the indispensable instrument. At about the end of the month, together with the young musician, he went to one of the best shops of musical instruments of the city, to make the purchase.

He is welcomed, of course, as a regular client, with courtesy and attention. Different types of harmoniums are shown to him, while the young musician immediately tries them with some notes.

In the meantime, Fr. Calabria bargains with the owner to get a good deal, to make him pay without much difficulty.

“For what church are you buying?” asks the vendor.

“For St. Benedict al Monte”

“Ah, is it where the new Vicar Fr. Calabria is? I know that priest very well, you know!”

“Ah, yes?”

“Yes, yes: I know him since long ago. Very good priest… But you know him too, I suppose”

“A little…”

“Good priest, zealous, full of charity, but…”

“But?”

“You see, just looking at him, he is no big deal! And then, just between us I hope nobody is listening...” and, saying this, he nears the ear of Fr. John, covering his mouth with his hand: “He is also an ignorant... Meantime he has put on himself a heavy burden, gathering those children... Well, we'll see...”

“Is that one good for you?” The question was addressed to the young musician, who was getting up from the harmonium, with clear signs of satisfaction.

The deal was concluded; then, with many bows, smiles and reverences, the client... so well known, was accompanied to the door.

Fr. Calabria was pleased by these opinions: there was really no danger to indulge in pride! He was looking for this and saw in these demonstrations of esteem in reverse a “sign” of God, which made him certain that the work was inspired by the Lord: “All those who see this Congregation – he will say later – must say: We know Fr. Calabria and how he is poor and ignorant...; so the House cannot be his own work, but work of God! We have the proof!”

One day, he receives in St. Zeno in Monte a lady from Bologna, who tells him: “Father, I asked my spiritual father (Fr. Genovesi, a Dominican father) for permission to visit you”.

“But, does Fr. Calabria – he asked – still live? Does his Congregation still exist?”

“Yes, Father – I answered – and it grew. He also founded a Religious Congregation, two, rather: the Poor Servants (men) and the Poor Servants (women) of the Divine Providence; and the Congregation has been extended: it has also two Parishes in Rome!”

“Then go – he advised me – because that is the Work of God”. And he added: “I have been in Verona in 1908 for the preaching of a novena and I heard some opinions about Fr. Calabria..: some said that he was crazy, a lunatic, that he had gathered some young boys and that he joined some other lunatics like him. Go, go – he concluded – because that is the Work of God”.

During this conversation he felt some uneasiness: but what remained strongly impressed in his mind and he continuously repeated were the last words said by Fr. Genovesi: “That is the Work of God!”

Probably, the reference to the not so good opinions, heard by the famous Dominican father, goes back to a meeting that just in that time happened in the sacristy of St. Anastasia.

“What is that crazy Fr. Calabria inventing, looking for poor dirty boys?... Doesn't he have anything else to do?...”

If these were the opinions of the “base”, on “top” people were watching perplexed.

“What do you think you are doing? – his former Dogmatic theology Professor asked one day, in front of the church of St. Mary in Organo –. Do you open so big a house without means? (He was talking of St. Zeno in Monte; we’ll see below). Think well of what you are doing, because there is the danger of discrediting the whole Clergy of Verona. Stay quiet, be just a priest and do not put in your mind so many things!...”

Father Calabria replied humbly:

“Professor, you taught me the Dogmatic theology”.

“Yes, I remember”

“And you also taught me the thesis about the Divine Providence”.

“Yes, I remember”.

“So, Professor, I'm just putting into practice that thesis, and you, please, help me with your prayers!”

What could a Dogma Professor reply?

Another time, it is the Cardinal who wants to talk to him:

“What are you trying to do? You are a priest, you have to be prudent: what are you going to do with those kids?”

Father Calabria, then, kneels down in front of him and says: “Eminence, I want to do the will of God. I put everything in your hands; if you tell me to close down, I will send those kids away immediately and I'll retire”. He was still kneeling down,

with joint hands and looking straight at the Bishop. The Cardinal kept thinking, looked at him and with serious and touched voice replied: “No, no, go ahead!” And he blessed him.

When somebody went to the Bishop to make some judgments, he invariably answered: “I just stay at the window and I keep on looking”.

Sometimes, it was himself who tested the opinions, and when he thought that the answer could be a little funny, he provoked it.

One day (he was already living in St. Zeno in Monte) he goes to the Don Bosco Institute, and, while waiting for a priest in the waiting room, he asks to the old door-keeper:

“What Institute is this?”

“Don Bosco Institute, Reverend”.

“Is there only this Institute in Verona?”

“No, there are others, for instance the Civic Institute”.

“Any other?”

“Yes, there is also the Institute of Fr. Calabria”.

“Fr. Calabria? Do you know this Fr. Calabria?”

“No, Reverend”

“And what do people say about Fr. Calabria?”

“Well, some say he is a saint, and some say he is crazy...” And you did you ever see Fr. Calabria?”

“No, Reverend, but I would like to satisfy my curiosity and see him!”

He used to comment in the words of St. John Mary Vianney: “Let people call us saints and let them call us demons: in front of God, we are what we are. It is the Lord who judges me”.

For him it was enough to do always the holy will of God; and the holy will of God, for him, was the word of Fr. Natale, the blessing of the Bishop, the daily help coming from the Divine Providence: this is what he cared about and felt sure and quiet... and he continued his way.

Simplicity and Prudence

The ministry in St. Benedict al Monte was not as easy as it seemed at first look, because of the deficiencies of the area and the ministries.

Some nearby areas did not have a very good name and some equivocal and mean people thought they could easily play around with the new Vicar.

Fr. Calabria knew how delicate the situation was and, as a good disciple of Christ, put into practice the words of the Divine Master: “Be prudent as snakes and simple as doves”.

The fame of his charity, which preceded him and soon appeared so real, called around him a lot of needy people, aside from those who were attracted by the sanctity of his life.

He welcomed everybody and never sent away anybody without moral or material help.

But he used to receive women with half door opened and advised his mother to be on guard for any call from him. These precautions of Fr. Calabria were not useless and needless.

One day, a young woman, carrying a few days old baby in her arms came to him. She had been sent to trick him with the purpose of compromising him. After a while, in fact, that she was in his presence, she pretended to feel sick and to faint.

“Reverend – she said with soft and mournful voice – Reverend, I'm feeling sick; take my baby!...” And, saying this, she tries to give him the baby to hold.

“Mother – Fr. Calabria shouted, moving fast towards the door – come here and take care of this woman!…” And he went immediately out.

It was not easy to catch him off guard; he was able to put together probity and vigilance, chastity and prudence.

Purity was for him a most precious pearl which he kept with utmost jealousy, and will keep for all his life with persevering strength, with delicate attention, with holy cautions and wise interdictions.

For instance, he did not allow women to kiss his hand; and when a woman showed deference and eagerness to do so he was ready to make her kiss the Crucifix. He never allowed anybody to take pictures of him in group with women; and

when he had to deal with women, he did it with propriety and distinction, and as fast as possible.

When, after a year that he was in St. Benedict al Monte, his mother got sick, it took the authority of his confessor to make him accept, for the sick mother, the assistance of his brother's wife. It could be interesting to take, from the “Letters to his Religious” or from the short evening exhortations to his boys, the precious rules to guard the beautiful virtue or the burning invectives against the contrary vice.

He admonishes his Religious to be “burning lamps”, well provided with the oil of interior life, “rays of sun”, which penetrate everywhere and without getting dirty, purify the mud of the earth; he will recommend them the study and the work, the retired life and the mortification, the modesty and the prudence.

These are exhortations and recommendations, counsels and rules that the men of the world, the so called “strong spirits” – whom the daily experience instead shows very weak and the frequent and ruinous falls make cynical shameless – would think as childish ridicules; and to many followers of the “new times” they may seem like exaggerations and scruples.

But he, educated by the school of holy people and made cautious by tragic examples, did not let himself frightened by such judgments and will always insist about these “holy cautions”, as he calls them.

As far as he is concerned, according to the opinion of his confessor and spiritual father, it could be applied to him what

it has been said by St. Theresa of Jesus of St. John of the Cross: “Celestial and divine man; one of the most pure living souls in the Church”.

The Preacher

Fr. Calabria was not a fashionable preacher and he did not dedicate himself specifically to style preaching; however, when he was Assistant in St. Stephen and more as the Rector of St. Benedict (1907-1911) and in the first years of the Opera, he did not refuse to preach Missions, Triduum, Novenas, Spiritual Exercises, etc.

He had some preaching patterns in many notebooks, hand written, fruit of meditations and holy readings, mixed with examples and bible quotes, which showed how much he loved the word of God.

The preferred topics of his sermons were: the ugliness of sin and the Four Last Things: death, judgment, hell, heaven; he was very much attracted by preaching about death. Also as a theology student, for the training sermons in the Seminary, when it was his turn, it was already known that, whatever the theme assigned to him was he would end up talking about the death.

He used to keep a skull near him; and for long time he kept in a cabinet of his house a complete skeleton (which he got from the Military Hospital), which he used to call “the

Professor", and showed to some visitors, in view of some beneficial spiritual reactions.

The thought of death was so familiar to him, that sometimes he spoke about it even in less appropriate circumstances. One day, for example, he had been invited by a well to do family to bless their newly built house. He was requested to give an opinion about the new edifice; he observed: "It has a defect". "Which one?" they asked.

"It has the door"

And, since they were looking at each other without understanding, he continued: "Yes, because a day will come when people will have to go out and will not enter anymore".

Those people were disappointed, also because the defect... had no remedy at all.

From his preaching activity, he was able to derive anecdotes and episodes to humiliate himself and teach others.

When he went to Arzignano, in the diocese of Vicenza, that priest, who knew about his arrival, gathered all the people in the Cathedral and invited him to say few words. After the sermon while the mother of the Parish Priest was serving him some coffee, Fr. Calabria expressed his sincere satisfaction for seeing the Cathedral full of people; he meant to appreciate the faith of the people and the zeal of the pastors. And the woman with extreme simplicity, wanted to explain: "You, know, Sir, this church goes full for every rag of a priest who comes here". And he amused in repeating this spontaneous answer.

Another time, in a small town of the diocese of Verona, he made a sermon about humility. Back in the priest's house, he was congratulated by the Parish Priest: “Very nice sermon! But you have it written, too, isn't it?!” And he meant that what is important about humility is to practice, not only to preach about it.

Who was talking to him this way was a much esteemed moralist in the diocese.

But Father Calabria used to talk from the abundance of his heart, after praying, meditating and practicing: that's why he was so efficacious.

But not everybody liked his preaching and his way of delivering.

In the Parish of the Most Holy Apostles, it was scheduled, one day, a preaching course for ladies, in preparation of the Holy Easter.

Few days before the start, the preacher got sick and informed that he couldn't make it.

Some ladies, seeing Fr. John in the sacristy of the church of the Most Holy Apostles, invite him to substitute the sick preacher.

Fr. John, caught by surprise, tries to excuse himself, but they insist: “don't say no; please, come, Reverend; everybody is waiting for you and praying for you, through us”. He was moved more by the thought of doing some good than by the pressure of the ladies, and he accepted.

The day after, in the house of the friend, Count Francis Perez, while waiting for him, he heard somebody talking in the adjacent room: some female voices!

“Do you know who is preaching the exercises?”

“Who?”

“Fr. Calabria!”

“Fr. Calabria? All mouth and eyes expression! Death! Hell!... No, no for Heaven's sake!”

The arrival of the Count forbade him to hear the rest, but he had heard enough. Of course, he continued the preaching; but later on he commented with his Religious: “How could you believe praises!”

CHAPTER 7

ST. ZENO IN MONTE

The House Becomes Small

In the small house of Case Rotte Alley life goes on orderly and quietly. The Good Boys attend the nearby Municipal Schools of St. Mary in Organo and, for their devotions, the nearer church of St. John in Valle. They are assisted by the young Attilio Negrini and by Fr. Diodato Desenzani, who, still committed to the ministry by helping the Vicar, Fr. Bonometti, gives himself, body and soul, to the assistance of the poor boys, being their director, teacher, cook, etc.

Fr. John Calabria is always in St. Benedict. He visits his sons almost every day: he speaks to them of God, then he goes back to speak to God about them.

He had a programme of life according to the Gospel. He will reveal later on to his sons that the Gospel always left in him a great impression, especially some sentences. For example, the exhortation of Jesus to give freely what freely has been received: “You received without payment; give without payment” (Mt 10: 8); the question asked by Jesus to the

Apostles during the Last Supper: “When I sent you out without a purse, bag or staff, did you lack anything?” “No, not a thing, was the answer of the Apostles” (Lk 22: 35); the page of chapter six of St. Mathew on God's Providence: “Do not be worried about what you will eat or how you will dress up...; seek first the kingdom of God and its justice: you'll have the rest in addition”.

These passages fascinated him since he was a theology student; now that he is a priest, preacher of the Gospel, like Jesus, he wants to live it and translate it into works, more than into words.

The memory of that sleepless night, when he “discovered” the Gospel, never left him. It was a night full of light, like a revelation just for him, only for him and he will conform all his life to it.

Let's hear how Mgr. Chiot describes it, during the commemoration of the thirtieth day of his death:

«*It belongs to the first year of the apostolate of Fr. John Calabria a radiant episode, like the little flowers of St. Francis.*

Fr. John Calabria sent me a note: “Wait for me tomorrow at about 10 o'clock: I really need to talk to you”.

He came exactly on time. I asked him: “Anything wrong?... Your note made me anxious”.

“*Nothing wrong; on the contrary, I have to tell you a great thing*”.

“*A great thing?!...*”

“I read the whole Gospel”.

“*That's all? Who is the priest who did not read the Gospel?*”

“*Let me explain; I read the Gospel, too, and I preached it; but the other night, after a bitter day, I was not able to sleep; I took the Gospel and I read it all, with the Acts of the Apostles, all in one night. And I felt a strange sensation: what a great thing is the Gospel!... I felt delighted, stunned, listen...listen...*”

And he kept turning pages at random, with pencil marks on the borders. “Listen... Do not worry about the food: the birds do not sow and do not reap and my Father feeds them. Do not worry about what to wear: the lily of the field does not weave but it is dressed better than a queen”.

In another page, he marked the Beatitudes, sublimation of man in the kingdom of God. He also showed me the marked sentence: “If you had so much faith as a grain of mustard, you may tell to this mountain: move farther there and the mountain will move at your will”.

He had also marked the paradoxes of the Gospel, called paradoxes because so in contrast with the principles of the world, to the point of seeming not feasible; but the saints, because of these paradoxes, have won the world.

When later on I read on the fronton of the Institute of St. Zeno the words full of faith in the Providence, which feeds and dresses each creature, I remembered that meeting. Fr. Calabria had discovered the Gospel».

The paternity of God completely conquered him, and the Gospel is the revelation of this. Men close their eyes to this light and work in the darkness to “add few inches to their height”. They put before the kingdom of God the city of Satan, forgetting “the only thing that is necessary”. And they do not find peace and do not taste any joy and live alone, because they deny themselves to love.

The light must shine; man must live the Gospel and practically feel the love and concern of God the Father for his adoptive children: let's seek the kingdom of God and its justice in the fulfilment of the daily duty, in the charity, in the life of grace and prayer; and that God, who feeds the birds and the fishes, who dresses the lilies of the field, will take care, according to his word, of the poor children of men.

And the Providence really takes care of the little house in Case Rotte Alley. They get whatever they need. Good souls are the kind milk vendor of Cisterna Square, Mrs. Piazzola, the greengrocers of Erbe Square, the old and sick ladies of the Shelter and the Hospital, who do away with sugar; these are the small, poor, “great” gifts of simple people, who give Fr. John the “sign” that the Opera belongs to God, that He wants it, and that He sustains it.

One morning, an old lady comes to St. Benedict; she is so poorly looking that Fr. John, even before she comes closer and starts talking, puts his hand in the pocket and brings out a coin to give it to her. “No, no, Reverend – she hastily said – do not give me anything: I will be the one who will give you a little

something for your boys!" And she put in his hand a thousand lire bill, wrapped in paper!

He really needed this money to face the requests from the suppliers. But he was still lacking seven hundred lire.

After a week, without him saying anything, the old lady comes back, bringing the needed seven hundred lire.

In another occasion, an old couple from Vicenza offer all their savings, thirty thousand lire, ready to accept the humiliation of going to the Poor's' Shelter (this is how rest houses for old people were then called).

Each Work of God, especially at the start, has its own collection of "little flowers" to be transmitted to the future generations. Oh, if men would desire to live by them, not only read about them!...

But not only the poor, the simple, the humble loved the joy of giving. There were also prosperous families, wealthy and noble men who were chosen by God to be his worthy instruments.

Among these, the first is the Count Francis Perez.

He would have loved to put all his riches and himself at the service of Fr. John Calabria, since the time he was in St. Stephen. But Fr. John always deferred. The hour of God did not arrive yet.

However, the number of the boys was increasing and the House was getting small. In August 1908, the little guests were already nineteen: there is no more space. It was necessary

to start moving somewhere else. Looking around, still in the area of St. John in Valle, they see a house, half demolished by fire, with a large courtyard, which could be used by them. Knowing that the lady owner lives in the Parish of St. Paul in Campo Marzio, Fr. John Calabria goes there to start the bargaining.

Somebody tells him that the lady is absent: she is in her villa in Montorio; so Fr. John Calabria decides to go to Montorio. Here they tell him that the lady is in Verona. He goes back to Verona and tells the domestic helper who receives him: “Don't make me walk for nothing: I know the lady is here, tell her I just shortly need to talk to her”.

It was not possible to hide any longer: he took a seat but he had to wait for an hour and a half before the lady made her appearance.

Fr. John explains to her the reason of the visit, mentioning the great charity she would do in selling her house for such a noble purpose as to gather and to educate children who needed everything. But she did not let him finish; at the mention of “charity”, thinking that he was going to ask for the house as a gift, very resentfully answered: “Reverend, don’t suggest me how to make charity; I am a Christian and I know how to make charity to whom and when I want; but I do not allow anybody to force me. Reverend, please, get out of my sight now and go away!”

There was nothing to reply and the poor priest left without resentment. He loved the design of God, imagining a

“sign” in it. “In fact – he will comment later on – if we went there, we were going to feel uncomfortable very soon”.

He also looked elsewhere, but without success either because the place was not suitable or because the owner did not want to sell.

The Providence – later on we will see this clearly – wanted him in St. Zeno in Monte.

St. Zeno in Monte

Starting this month of May, Fr. Desenzani, with the permission of Fr. Bonometti and the blessing of Cardinal Bacilieri, is completely dedicated to the Good Boys.

The prayers to the Immaculate Virgin Mary to find a suitable house already started since few months, became more insistent, especially after the failure with that lady of the free... charity.

One morning, Fr. Diodato and Fr. Bonometti were at the window of the little house, which looks at the valley; also the Count Perez was there. The topic of the conversation was the usual one: the need to transfer.

“'I'm tired of searching – Fr. Diodato was saying – God has to inspire us where to go, and may we put an end to this question!”

In a letter, dated April 30, 1908, addressed to Fr. Desenzani, Fr. John Calabria wrote:

"... Now we are bothered by the thought of the house. My God, how many plans we have! We want it beautiful, big, etc.

Let's stay quiet, trusting in the Divine Providence; and God will send it to us: big, comfortable, and beautiful; with the size, comfort and beauty he likes".

The 8th of May is a sad day. A short note says: "My dear Fr. Diodato, my mother is dying. Imagine my condition and my pain. Pray, so that I will fully accept the holy will of God. Make the Good Boys pray".

The following episode is a proof of how high were the mutual esteem and affection between mother and son: last page of a marvellous series, unknown to men but precious in the eyes of God.

The same day, seeing the mother very ill, Fr. John bent onto her and asked: "Mother, do you want to make confession? Do you want me to call for a Confessor?"

And the mother: "It's not necessary: you hear my confession".

Bent onto her, he heard her last confession, absolved her, recommended her soul and presented it to the "God of Saints... saint because of her suffering".

Only a week passed and a new proposal comes to life.

May 14, 1908 – "Dear Fr. Diodato... Somebody tells me that in St. Zeno in Monte there is a beautiful house. I'll go to see it this afternoon. What can we do? Wait and pray..."

That afternoon he could not do anything, because of other commitments. But the hour of the Providence was near.

May 18, 1908 – “Today, at about 5 p.m., I will be in St. John in Valle, to go and see the famous house of St. Zeno. We'll go (with the lawyer, Hon. Coris) with the certainty that, if it is meant for us, God will give it to us, even if it will cost 100 or 200 thousand lire; if not, let it be!”

It could seem foolhardy to think of St. Zeno in Monte, but nothing is impossible to faith. After having prayed a lot and asked for advice, Fr. John felt that St. Zeno in Monte was the land chosen by the Lord to transplant the already grown up “cabbage”. The transaction started and was fast concluded.

A historical information in 1760 reads: “St. Zeno in Monte is within the walls of Verona, on top of a hill, far from the crowd, where not only a healthy air can be perfectly breathed, but also the view of the city, divided by the Adige river, can be amply enjoyed, together with mountains and hills and a large extension of very beautiful countryside”. Tilled gardens surround it, crossed by long vines rows, quilted by olive trees, almond trees, cherry trees, apple trees fig trees and every fruit trees. And within that sea of green, dark cypress soar towards the sky. It is marvellous in spring time.

To the soldiers returning from the Crusades, those places looked like sweet memories of the country of Jesus. And they named Bethlehem the steep hill, perforated here and there by caves and dens, which then had kind of a savage and fantastic appearance, in the middle of such greenery. They also called Nazareth the hill in front, with a sweeter aspect, like the

hills of Galilee: they built there two temples dedicated to the Most Holy Virgen Mary. Over Nazareth, they built a smaller temple dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel, like putting forever the divine messenger at the orders of Mary.

On the other side of the green hill, in the valley full of olive trees, they saw a resemblance of the Mount of Olives: on top of it they built a Calvary. They called the valley “the Valley of the Lord” (*Vallis Dominica*); nowadays it is called Valdonega. East of the Bethlehem hill, they put up a church dedicated to the Holy Sepulchre and, a little under that, a church in honour of St. John the Baptist.

The North side of Verona, so, from East to West, became a little Palestine.

But a document, dated 1256, calls the small church on the hill of Bethlehem St. Zeno in Monte, officiated by some priests, like a parish. In 1435, giving up the parish, these priests passed the church to the Hermits of Fiesole, called Fiesolani or also Gerolimini. When the Pope Clement IX abolished these Hermits with Decree dated September 24, 1668, this church and the place were occupied, after short time, by the Clerics Regular “Somaschian”, founded by St. Jerome Emiliani. They remained there until the Napoleonic suppression in 1810, after having managed a school for nobles, considered “by travellers – as per the same historical information – the most suitable for the education of young people in all of Italy”. In fact, the document says further, “the school includes many rooms with a theatre, stables with horses, a soccer field, and other places for the pastime of the intern students”.

These good Clerics Regular, to be attuned to the holy and historical memories of the place, put up a Way of the Cross, along the road coming from St. John in Valle, and built also some comfortable stone ramp, later called the Holy Stairs. At the start of it, there is an inscription: “Be respectful of the Stairs. Visiting piously the Stations of the Way of the Cross, you will gain the indulgences of Jerusalem, the same way as you were in person in those Holy Places. Start here”.

After the revolutionary suppression, those places became first refuge of poor families, then barracks for Austrian soldiers, then Italian barracks, to be back to be a shelter of very poor people, until the time we are talking about.

But the Lord was going to open a new page of history, through the humble and poor priest, Fr. John Calabria, with the cooperation of the most pious Francis from the Counts Perez family.

The Earl Francis Perez

We already met this name many times. It is time to say something more about him, though short.

The Count Francis Mary Perez, was the sixth of the ten children of the Count Cavalier Anthony Louis Nicolo and the Marquess Anne Mary Da Lisca. He was born in Verona on July 9, 1861.

The origins of the family are not, as the name may suggest, Spanish, but from Corsica: from the small town of Pere, in the District Sarrola-Carcopino, few miles North of Aiaccio.

It was an illustrious family, because of the military actions, especially against the Turks in the XVI Century, and it was not less illustrious for the many charities and religious works and for the love of deep studies and for the honesty in public administrations. Many from this family, men and women consecrated themselves to the Lord. Close to us were the Scholar Fr. Paul, Rosminian, and Fr. Louis, Oratorian, uncles of Francis.

He got his degree in Law in Padova in 1885, practiced law and even was, though shortly, Vice Lower Court Judge.

He knew F. John Calabria since he was living in Riva San Lorenzo 7, with the mother, and more when, still a theology student, he went to live in the stable of the Pompei-Perez Palace, owned by the Count John, his elder brother.

He joined Fr. John in the “charitable institution for the comfort of poor sick people” and helped him in all his charity and apostolic works, when John Calabria was a theology student and then a young priest, putting at his disposal his own patrimony. It was the Count Francis who faced all the expenses for the purchase of St. Zeno in Monte.

At the base of true charity is the love for justice and he knew how to use justice in the performance of his duties and also – which is more difficult – with his subordinates. The contracts he had with farmers, were always sent for scrutiny to

a wise and competent person because he wanted that they reflected his Christian and catholic faith; these contracts were “models of perfect justice and of large spirit of charity”.

He kept himself uncontaminated from the mundane spirit, and free from any earthly bond, guided also by the example of the uncles and his many forefathers, he strongly wished to consecrate himself totally to God. His uncle, Fr. Paul, wanted him to become a Rosminian, but, since long time, he had already made his choice; he was just waiting for the invitation of the great King to seat at the banquet, rich of holy poverty, of the Divine Providence.

In the afternoon of November 11, l908, while he was in his farm in Zevio, he went out for a ride with his sisters, on a two wheels carriage. Suddenly, because of a wrong manoeuvre of the driver, the horse reared up, overthrowing carriage and masters. The sisters got out of it only a little scared and some bruises; instead he had his leg caught under the carriage and suffered a broken bone. He remained four hours on the ground, before being assisted and brought to Zevio Hospital, in a carriage pulled by oxen.

He had to be operated on twice, but also the second operation was not too successful. He endured the operations with such a patience and calmness that the surgeon had to say: “But this man is a saint”.

He left the hospital after four months; he spent another four months in his estate and then, in August 1909, he bade farewell to the world and finally entered the Good Boys' House. He was forty-eight years old.

Before accepting him, Fr. John Calabria called all his collaborators for a meeting, and expressed his opinion about the matter: “The Count Francis Perez wants to enter the House, but I would not like, because I am afraid that, owning something, we may diminish the work of the Providence. But, when I told him about this fear of mine, he started crying and said: So, since I have some money, I cannot consecrate myself to the Lord?”

They decided together that that money the Count still had, after the purchase of St. Zeno in Monte, could have been used for the repairs and other carpentry works.

Total and Absolute Renunciation

Admitted in the House, the Count became teacher, overseer in the laboratory and gardener; in the early days he slept in the dormitory, together with the others. He loved poor food and wore used and modest cloths, which could not hide, anyway, his fine and aristocratic figure.

He preferred for himself the most humble occupations and the most repugnant to nature, and he did this with such a simplicity and dedication that his example moved to emulation. One of the first Brothers of the Congregation, Bro. Carlini, seeing the “Count” Perez taking care of so despised and avoided by the world occupations, was so moved and kept saying: “If a noble person can do it, why can't I?” and he put all efforts to imitate him.

He was so detached from the things of the world that, asked once by the Father if he was feeling any regret for the abandoned goods, he simply replied: “No, Father, never!” His devotion to Fr. John Calabria was total, attentive, up to his death. In the charity towards his companions and the boys, especially the most needy and repugnant, he was always first among everybody.

His piety, already developed in the outside world, found in the House the right way of growing and appearing wonderfully, without sacrificing his duties, especially in the assistance.

He was most obedient. Fr. John always esteemed him as a saint, to the point that, in those early times, he appointed him Master of the Novices of the newly born religious community. And he continued guiding him more and more in the ways of God, we think not without a special inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

In 1940, he nominated him “Door Keeper in Heaven”, “because – he said – since he was so obedient on earth, he will also be so in Heaven, opening the door to the Poor Servants”.

His death was really a death of a saint. He got sick about half November 1937, and received the last Sacraments on 23rd of the same month. Restored every morning by the Divine Eucharist, he had the last hours of his earthly life full of episodes and signs, proper of a death of a saint. It was the night between December 3 and 4.

To let him rest during the night, the Brother nurse, who was assisting him, at about 9 p.m. gave him a sedative injection; he received it with resigned will: “Into your hands, God, I entrust my soul”, but it was of no benefit.

The cough bothered him a lot, but he was praying. At midnight, he recited alone and with clear voice the *Angelus*. At about 1 a.m., to the Brother who was asking how he was, he answered: “I hear the Lord calling me” and three times he prayed: “Jesus, Joseph and Mary, I offer you my heart and my soul!” At about 1:30 he clearly recited the *Ave, Maris Stella* and prayed still with clear voice for Fr. John Calabria, the Brothers, the Opera, for his city and for the Bishop, for peace and the world.

At about 2: 15, seeing that he was deteriorating, the Brother suggested to call for a priest. He answered: “What for? Fr. John Calabria is already here...” (The Father, instead, was in Nazareth, sick himself). After saying this, he made the sign of the Cross, as he was receiving the blessing, then he thanked and said: “As you wish, Father, as you wish!” It was his usual way of showing humble obedience to Fr. John.

From 3:00 o'clock he suffered a lot; he had difficulties in breathing and continued saying with plaintive voice: “I can't take it! I can't take it anymore!” Then he had words of encouragement and continued praying.

“Forgive me, if in any way I offended you”, the Brother Nurse humbly said:

“There is nothing to forgive – he answered with difficulty I'm a poor miserable”.

“Pray for me”. The Brother still added.

“I will wait for you up there – he answered – but now continue your work with simplicity”.

In the meantime, a priest arrived and started the prayers for the agonizing. However, he seemed to be absorbed. Suddenly, he was heard saying clearly: “No, I'm not worthy of these roses; they are not for me!” And then: “Remember, man that you are dust and you will go back to dust”. And then again, with more effort: “I'm ready, I'm ready!” And quietly he entered in agony. It was 3:45 a.m.

One hour later, while the first bells were playing the strokes of the Hail Mary, Brother Francis of the Counts Perez, and Poor Servant of Divine Providence left forever the earth to go to Heaven at the age of seventy six and after twenty eight years of religious life.

It was the first Saturday of the month.

The funeral happened two days after, following the usual itinerary: XX September Street, Cantarane Street, Cemetery. Along the road, together with the boys and the Religious of the Institutes in Verona, many other citizens joined; these, attracted by something special, came to ask who was accompanied to the Cemetery; and so the sad gathering took form of a real procession.

If God wants, we hope that very soon the process for the exaltation of this true Servant of God will be opened; he

understood and practiced the evangelic advice: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell whatever you own, give it to the poor, then come and follow me".[34]

The First Disciple

While in Case Rotte Alley, during that month of May 1908, everybody was intensively praying for the purchase of St. Zeno in Monte, in St Benedict al Monte two souls were intensively praying to know the will of God about something of extreme importance.

Since the first encounter in February 1907, Fr. John took particular liking in the young student of the last year of secondary school, the harmonium player.

At home and outside they called him Gigio,[35] and we will call him so, too.

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[34] The process of Canonization of Bro. Francis Perez is in progress; on June 1, 2007 Pope Benedict XVI signed the Decree on the Heroic Virtues.

[35] His real name was Louis Adami, son of Angelo and Domenica Piazzi, born in Verona on March 17, 1891; he entered the Congregation on June 2, 1908. He was a cultured and pious priest, esteemed professor in the Seminary, dear to everybody and in love with the spirit of the Opera and with the education of the poor youth. He knew how to befriend them and dealt with them with grace and joyous efficacy. He founded "*L'Amico dei Buoni Fanciulli*" (The Friend of the Good Boys), monthly news-letter of the House, which he managed for many years. He died saintly on March 19, 1968.

Since the first moment they understood each other; to the love and the trust of the Father, the affection and the confidence of the son was the answer; he put himself in his hands, to be guided, for the good of his soul. And the Father guided him “with strength and sweetness” towards Jesus in the Eucharist and the interior life. During the intimacy of their meetings, he used to tell the young man: “The Lord sent me to St. Benedict just for you”.

God loves each of us singularly, totally, differently from each other. And this is the way his servants try to do. Whoever experienced the charity of the Father, can witness the very singular love and the preference with which he has been surrounded by the Father. Gigio is one of these.

After not so long a time that Fr. John Calabria came to St. Benedict al Monte, he whispered to the young student the proposal to join him forever; and when this hope seemed founded, he sent message through a third party, with a lot of prudence and sense of propriety. Not a word of insinuation or insistence, but only the care to “clearly know” the will of God.

In May 1908, F John told Gigio that he was going to pray in a very special way for him, during that month; he invited him to pray too, so that the Lord, through the Most Holy Virgin Mary, would suggest the decision he should take.

“At the end of May, I will tell you what I will feel in God: are you glad?”

“Yes, yes, do what you want; I trust in you”.

On April 30, l908, Fr. Calabria wrote a long letter to his able collaborator Fr. Diodato Desenzani, clearly expressing the moving spirit of the new Congregation; he suggests special prayers for the month of May, and then he asks the question: “What about Gigio? What do you think? Let's pray also for this!”

On May 25 he wrote in his diary: “It is the will of God that Gigio Adami comes with Fr. John and that will be his companion in everything; this I feel and probably that is why God sent me to St. Benedict”.

May goes away. The last Sunday, Fr. John Calabria calls Gigio; he opens a notebook where he wrote what the Lord had suggested and solemnly reads, with inner conviction: “It is the will of God that Gigio joins Fr. John forever”.

But Fr. John was not a man who imposed moral compulsions. To the persuading words, he added a word of invitation to think things over. This was his advice: the final decision was up to him, Gigio. “If you want, ask for advice from somebody else”, he told him.

It always was this way: in everything, with everybody; in the spirit of freedom and human dignity. Oh, the love he had for liberty! Jealous of his own and respectful of the liberty of every son of God: this could well be enough to make him great.

Gigio recognized in Fr. John, father of his soul, the man of God. He understood. He did not reply and did not say a word. He went home, talked to his parents for the proper permission, to be able to do the will of God. After few days, on June 2, Gigio, going out, informed his mother that that day he was not going

to be backing home for dinner, since he was definitely going to stay at the Case Rotte.

Costermano

As we already said before, the house in Case Rotte Alley became small and the summer heat increased the discomfort.

With the blessing of Fr. John, Fr. Diodato started looking for a house in the countryside. The Providence made one available near Costermano, in the Contrada Baesse.

On August 20, a group of Good Boys, the younger ones, put the household goods and the furnishings on two hand-carts and started to cover by foot the distance of twenty five kilometres from Verona to Costermano. The elder ones instead stayed in St. Zeno in Monte, to give a hand to the masons in the work of clearing and the re-adaptation of the building, alternating themselves in small groups, for a little vacation.

The family of the younger boys stayed in Costermano until November 5, living in an atmosphere of unforgettable peace, joy and brotherly charity. Those places were so apt to elevate the spirit and fortify the body, even in the simplicity of a poor life, really Franciscan.

Located on top of a hill, under Mount Baldo, opened to the Adige Valley, overlooking the Garda Lake, Costermano was really an attractive place. A short Latin poem of 1500 describes it as a little paradise on earth.

The priests and the good people of this place and the nearby towns were very glad to extend, in every way, a little charity towards those poor boys. Fr. John Calabria, who often went to see them, saw also in this a loving touch of the Divine Providence.

The small hitches and the inevitable few misunderstandings were not enough to diminish the enthusiasm, the gratitude to the Lord, the joy in their hearts. One time, Fr John brought them on excursion to Garda. At about noon to find a suitable place to eat the little food with his boys, he asked the parish priest of the place for some hospitality.

“Please – he asked – where can I bring the boys to eat a little?”

The old priest, bad informed about these boys and their guide, standing at the door of the presbytery and pointing at the best hotel in Garda:

“There, go there: to the hotel Terminus. It's a very good hotel and you will feel very well with your boys. My regards!”

The irony, the rudeness and the sudden turning of the back prevented any answer.

A meadow welcomed them, and under the olive trees, looking at the lake, they ate the little bread they brought in the knapsack; it tasted better, thinking of the...Terminus! The answer of the old priest made them laugh a lot!

Ceraino

One day, September 23, 1908, as destination for the excursion, in agreement with the Father, Ceraino was chosen, on the left bank of the Adige River, at about noon Fr. John Calabria with the Count Francis Perez also arrive there by train from Verona.

While the boys play in a meadow, the Father, gathered near him Fr. Desenzani, “Brother” Gigio and the Count Perez, walks with them to a nearby small hotel in that place.

In an isolated area after ordering a little beer, Fr. John brings out of the pocket a small notebook and, with the anxious attention of those present, starts reading, in an inspired way, some “Holy Norms” which must be observed, for their sanctification, by the members of the little House of the Good Boys.

They are not really Rules and he rightly calls them “Norms”; but they already show in embryo and indefinite lines, the outline of a life in common to take care of self sanctification and “for the care of the poor abandoned children”.

There is a “method of spiritual life”; honest intention is recommended, the fight against the ego, the charity; there is the proposal of Jesus on the Cross as model, his poverty and obedience, the complete separation also from the dearest affections, to find them again in God, in Paradise; the spiritual direction; the good example.

"These are the short and few regulations that I, poor and last priest, wrote with the only intention of helping us to live well down here and of being a pledge of eternal life. Oh, how good and holy is to live as one!" It is the conclusion and the finishing touch of the "Holy Norms".

We are not in Manresa or Fontecolombo;[36] however, in the deeply human climate of that little provincial hotel, the basis for an institution surpassing the human powers and intentions were laid down.

The Taking into Possession

Summer is over. The fields are getting naked. The last songs of the grape gatherers get lost in the air, now becoming almost cold: November is near.

The news from Verona keeps the spirits in suspense. It was known that some difficulties came out at the moment of purchase; it was clear that some tenants did not want to vacate the place.

St. Zeno in Monte, the steep hill immersed in green, the high cliff like a challenge to winds and storms, had been in those

[36] *Manresa*: the city in Spain where St. Ignatious of Loyola stopped to pray in 1522 and to reflect about the formulation of his Spiritual Exercises. *Fontecolombo*: is the place where St. Francis of Assisi wrote the Later Rule of 1223.

days of lovable rural exile, in the long strolls as well as in the forced rests, the recurrent topic of their talks; the young fantasy depicted it as wrapped in mystery and possessed by a fortress which had to be stormed and fought with by prayer, sacrifice, and trust in God.

Now the fortress was its inhabitants. There were many living up there, by the church, the old convent, and the adjacent caves. There were also two taverns and one of these carried the notice: “No admittance to whoever does not dance!”

After the contract, the good Rector of St. John in Valle, Fr. Bonometti, by order of Fr. John Calabria, went up there with Fr. Desenzani, to convince those poor people to vacate the place for the boys of Fr. Calabria. At the entrance of the compound, a little irresponsible boy, seeing the priest, greets him with: “Hi, ugly priest” and to the verbal offence he adds the act of spitting on him. Fr. Bonometti goes in, approaches those people, talks, discusses, and tries to convince: they will get every help, also regarding eventual late rentals. But they have to go: Fr. John Calabria needs the building for his boys.

Many accept to go spontaneously; others seem unshakable: they even decide to send a delegation to bargain with the Vicar of St. Benedict al Monte.

It was understandable, anyway. Also for them was not so easy to look for a cheap lodging, suitable to their possibilities and conditions. Also for them winter was fast approaching, with all its uncertainties.

But it had to be a delegation of women. It is more of their business, especially because, since they had to discuss with a priest, known to be so kind... maybe they could move him to pity more easily.

So they went: ready to cry, decided to shout: ready for everything. But, when they were in front of him, facing his humble, calm and reliable words, speaking of God and his Providence with such unction and persuasion, they too ended up to agree.

“It is the Lord who wants this Opera, for the benefit of the poor abandoned children, do you understand? I'm nothing else but a poor instrument. The Providence knows that you are here and will not abandon you; rather, it will help you to find a house elsewhere...”

“Do you hear what he's saying? – A woman exclaims – He is not the one who is telling us to go away: It is the Lord! What can we do?…”

“What can we do?... If it is it is the Lord!... At the least he can give us a good blessing, so that we could find a house!”

They knelt down. And the Father blessed them with that deep conviction he used to put in everything.

And the blessing came out efficacious, because, in a short while, also these other families, except two, that were not of any bother, found a new house, leaving St. Zeno in Monte to the peaceful and enthusiastic occupation of the Good Boys.

They left from Costermano on November 5; but they arrived in Verona in the afternoon and waited in vain for the

hand-carts with the household-goods: a broken wheel stopped them. For that night they found a temporary shelter here and there, with Fr. Desenzani, Fr. Bonometti, in St. Benedict al Monte, or with some benefactors.

The departure from Costermano, though wished, had left in their spirits a little of nostalgic sadness. The happy days spent there could not be easily forgotten. Also the good people of the place remained touched, specially the very good Lorenzini family, which gave hospitality to them.

The memory of that stay of the Good Boys did not fade away, either soon or after. After twenty five years, the people would have wanted to perpetuate that good memory with a marker, but Fr. John, who came to know about this, did not want; he was afraid of any form of publicity, seeing in it a potential cause of damage for the Opera of the Lord. But thirteen years later, after the insistence of that so good people, he agreed, on condition that nothing extraordinary would be organized for the occasion. He thought, anyway, that a poor marker on a poor house in the countryside would not be publicity... for the ruin of the Congregation.

The historic date of the taking into possession of St. Zeno in Monte is November 6, 1908.

The new longed house looked beautiful, big, and immense to the dreaming eyes of the little ones; but so much work was still needed before it could become comfortable and really beautiful house as it is now!

At about noon Fr. John Calabria also went up there, to share the joy and the table of his Good Boys: bread, cheese and water from a deep well.

He, too, now admires the gift of the Lord and gives thanks. He is touched. He feels that the Lord wants to execute new and great plans for his soul, for many souls. St. Zeno in Monte will be his Holy Mountain; for the others it will be the "city on the mountain", "lamp on the candlestick", "fountain" where people will come to drink; "holy and blessed land"!

Looking from the rock, he sees now his city. Verona is there, under his feet, under them, with the length of red roofs, in all her extension, almost kept in calm security at the feet of her hills, along the banks of her river. Her bell-towers, her towers, her chimneys show her, however, alert and active. The many churches speak of her faith; the many religious and beneficence Institutes speak of her charity. The walls and the old monuments remember her origin and the facts of her history.

Roman and catholic Verona was, regal and papal, saint and worrier, democratic and faithful.

Theodoric, Berengar, Pepin, Arduino put in Verona their throne; Lucius III and Urban III, their See; councils, conclaves and diets took place here. Otto and Barbarossa, Benedict VIII and St. Leo IX, Paschal II, Alexander III and Pious V gave her honour with their presence; Gregorius V was born here, too. Eugenius IV, Paul IV and Clement XIII lived here before ascending to the Pontifical Throne. Thirty-six Saint Bishops

made her illustrious together with a multitudes of other saints, known and unknown alike.

Cangrande wanted to make Verona the capital of Italy. Here the Lombard Union was born. French and German invaders experienced her jeers, her wise and vigilant expectation, and her strength. Up to now, the fortresses scattered here and there on the hills and the plain, make remembrance of her strategic importance; she is the door to the North; the balcony looking to South; the East and the West of the Valley of the Po River finds the shortest way through Verona.

The green of her hills, the majesty of her river, the fruitfulness of her countryside; the modesty, the goodness, the cordial hospitality of her inhabitants make Verona a peaceful, calm, and joyful city.

Rich in talents and celebrated by great people, "*Verona fidelis*" (faithful Verona magazine) never disowned the Faith of her Forefathers.

Her Patron Saint, the black Bishop St. Zeno, is glad and smiles, pleased and paternal,[37] guarding his city.

Also Fr. John looks now at "his" city with feelings of filial as well as paternal affection.

He feels like a devout son and lover of his Verona; he assimilated her spirit from his mother, from the contacts with

[37] It is alluded to the popular red painted marble sculpture of the XIII Century, which is in St. Zeno Major Basilica and called, for the particular expression of the jovial face of the Protector, "The Smiling St. Zeno".

Barbara and Masina, very typical old ladies, simple and kind, as the good Veronese people; he loves so much his dialect, that he uses it every time he can more than the Italian language. He grasped and made his own her sweetness and brightness, from which comes that gaiety which makes the air of Verona “the air of Mount Baldo”; and he expresses this Veronese spirit in jests and innocent witty words.

He feels he is a the son of his city. But when the flame of the apostolate and charity got hold of him, making him embrace in one beat the natural and moral miseries and the suffering of all the Veronese, he feels like being the father, consecrated and perfected by the priesthood.

The fact that the Lord put him up there, seemed to him like a divine order, as well as the duty to guard the city; to pray and make people pray specially for it; to preside, with special mandate to its destiny.

So, we think that it is impossible that he did not instinctively raise his hand and bless her. It was a second nature for him to bless!

For all the years he stayed in St. Zeno, since 1911 up to his death, he would not go to sleep until he blessed his city, his people, his brothers; his near and far away sons; Italy, the whole world...

The blessing of Fr. John Calabria! It was precious, wished, and longed for! It was a source of peace, strength, and joy. It was said it could perform miracles!… People came from far to receive his blessing!

The First Opera

The Opera in St. Zeno in Monte have been started by the Faccioli enterprise, of St. Stephen. But when the young ones came in, impatient to see their house finished, and Fr. Desenzani impatient more than anybody else, they wanted to help in the brick work... specially with the demolitions!

The impetuosity they displayed makes us think of a special assistance from the Providence, because no accident occurred. Anyway, in a very short time, they could get a beautiful dormitory, a school and other spacious premises.

The whole of the buildings had become, in the past years, a whole of poor houses, really unhealthy hovels, receptacles of plenty of parasites. It's enough to think that the actual church was then divided into three floors and about fifteen families were living there.

One of the first thoughts of the Father was to provide a Chapel for the House. The altar was donated by a good lady of St. Benedict al Monte, Mrs. Pastori, who took it from her villa in St. Leonard. On top of the altar, the statue of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Patroness and Protector of the Opera, was placed. On November 11 the first Mass was celebrated there, by Fr. Diodato Desenzani.

The House was dedicated to the “Father of the Orphans”, St. Jerome Emiliani, whose sons had lived there for more than a century; at the entrance a marker was

subsequently put up, which clearly said what kind of a house was that one. It carries the following words:

PERPETUAL OFFICES

Of the Good Boys' House "St. Jerome Emiliani"

ABSOLUTE MASTER, from whom everything must depend: OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.

MISTRESS: his Most Holy Mother, the Immaculate Virgin.

TREASURER: St. Jerome Emiliani.

CASHIER: Blessed Joseph Cottolengo.

COUNCILLORS: St. Joseph, St. Vincent de Paul, St. Cajetan of Thiene, and St. John Bosco.

SECRETARY: St. Joseph Calasanz.

THE MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE: Poor Servants.

In another area of the building, the Father had affixed the words of Jesus: “Everything is possible to the one who believes” (Mk. 9, 22).

With these “owners”, with such a “Board of Directors” and with the “capital” of faith, the House of St. Zeno in Monte started its “new management”.

It was not an easy management, because of the need to find space for new arrivals the Providence was sending in big numbers. The twenty soon became thirty; from thirty they jumped to eighty; from eighty to more than a hundred within the short time of a little more than a year.

All this, of course, alarmed the “good thinking people”, the common people, and specially people who, among their own qualities, are often more comfortable just criticizing in a way that, hiding under the name of prudence and zeal, it will easily become malicious whisper or insinuating disparagement. These people minded also to go sometimes to bother the Cardinal. But he could not, “from his window”, but admire the prudence, the obedience, the humility and the docility of Fr. John.

In fact, the Father did nothing if he did not know first the will of God through “signs”; and, after the “signs”, the word of his spiritual Father, and after this, the blessing of the Bishop. How could he go wrong?

A Complaint "Sui Generis" (Unique)

Since the start of the Opera, Fr. John Calabria asked the editors' offices of the city dailies... never to talk of him and his initiatives; and the catholic newspapers always kept faith to the wishes of the Father. But one day, an English journalist, thinking he was going to St. Zeno Major, goes instead to St. Zeno in Monte and visits the House. Back at home, he writes on his magazine the impressions he got from the charity work he admired... by mistake. A Vicenza newspaper carries the article. It brought excitement among the editors' offices of Verona, to the point that, from that day on, they felt no longer obliged by the old promise. But, for the affection they felt for Fr. Calabria, never allowed themselves to cross the boundaries of discretion.

But a city daily, not of Christian inspiration, *Verona del Popolo* (Verona of the People), wanted a day give an essay of dialectics and comic ability, at expense of the good initiatives of the Veronese Clergy, including Fr. Calabria.

Those were the years when to the moderate liberal Administration a radical-socialist Administration followed in the Municipality of Verona.

Those were the years when the Nuns were sent away from the Shelter and the Hospital; when in the Schools any religious sign and teaching were abolished; when a pure lay direction was given to the Institutes of the Derelicts, the Little Artisans and the Abandoned, removing the religious personnel.

Those were the years when they wanted to limit the sound of the bells only to three minutes; the years of the

formation of the atheistic circle, named after "Cajetan Trezza", the Veronese apostate priest; the years when they wanted to name the Episcopate Square after Louis Ferrer, the Barcelona anarchist; the years of the sacrilegious conferences of Podrecca, in the Ristori Theater, which caused the reaction of the best Veronese people, who, numbered thirty thousand, in the evening of May 29, 1909, in St. Anastasia, "filling up the basilica and the nearby streets, proclaimed the faith and the love of Verona to the Lady of Lourdes, with the words of Fr. Augustine Gemelli".[38]

The daily *Verona del Popolo* brings out its anticlerical article, exactly on May 29 and entitled it: "The Industry of the Faith".

That article, after having spoken and spoken ill, with easy irony, of Fr. Pasqualini and Fr. Fantozzi. two Veronese priests guilty only of doing real good for the youth, continues to present Fr. John Calabria and his Congregation as follows:

"Third, here comes Fr. Calabria, towards us with his neck bent at twelve degrees. Less noisy than the other two, more quiet, he put into practice that grain of experience which sounds: he who walks slowly, goes healthy and goes far.

"And so, he, since few years, practices the so called industry of the street children and in St. Zeno in Monte founded an establishment for which, among expropriations, demolitions, reconstructions, etc., he spent huge amounts of

[38] Fr. A. Gemelli (1878-1959) was an Italian physician, Franciscan friar and psychologist who was also the founder and chancellor of the Catholic University of Sacred Heart in Milan.

money, without considering what he is planning to spend in the future.

“People who are indifferent, curious and apathetic, say that all this is not made by the industrial talent of Fr. Calabria, who did nothing else but to squander all his money for the others; we, always right and impartial, especially with the opponents, vindicate Fr. John Calabria for his merits and we affirm that he, having always been black as the loose cloak of the devil, owns only to himself, his talent and his initiative if, with the street children, he created for himself a strong and enviable economic position.

“We know that Fr. Calabria had as associate a certain Besozzi, generally known as “Rabagas”, because he abundantly used this epithet against the socialists in his conferences. Also from this choice, the evident fine touch of Fr. Calabria comes out, who, with his lucky commercial alliance, hopes to give his industry an even more development and impulse. And we are sure about this.

“It came to our knowledge, from very good source that the Honorable Coris, Montresor and Campostrini are exerting big efforts, so that our good men would be nominated Knights of Labour. When everything will be done, we won't be the last in cheering a decoration so well deserved by men who are example and stimulus of the industrial class of our Verona”.

It is really clear why the article provoked a lot of fuss within the catholic environment or Verona.

Important people and friends priests rushed to St. Benedict al Monte to convince Fr. John to file an exemplary action, because of defamation. The Father thanked for the friendly attention, but he took time to think.

He asked around who the author of the article was; he asked himself what good could bring to his soul a right legal action; he thought and prayed and finally decided: he went then to the editor's office of the newspaper and asked to talk to that man.

“Are you the author of the article about me?”

“Yes, but...really...”

“Oh, do not worry, I did not come with bad intentions; I just came to thank you... You see, you did me a precious service... if, up to now, I was uncertain about the will of God for the Opera for the poor youth, your article clearly confirmed to me that God wants so; and that I must continue on this road. I came just for this: to thank you for this service.

“Somebody advised me to press for legal action; but I thought: with a legal action I could not bring any good to you and your soul, and I care a lot about this. So, instead of pressing for legal action, I decided to celebrate a Mass for you, tomorrow”.

The poor writer, who from the first words of Fr. Calabria was astounded and speechless, is now totally confused and embarrassed:

“Thanks... Forgive me... You know, it's just our work... But I had no bad intentions”.

The “lawsuit” ended with the most beautiful victory. That newspaper did not publish again anything against him and that man always felt for Fr. John and his Opera the biggest esteem and respect.

“I swear that I'll always be your friend” he promised, and he kept his word. In fact, he often came to visit him in St. Zeno in Monte, until Fr. John Calabria died.

The First Collaborators

The works of the Lord are always admirable. In sending boys, the Lord not only sent the material providence, but also thought of sending the necessary men.

After Fr. Diodato and Brother Gigio, the first who consecrated himself to the Congregation was Besozzi Maxim, who with Fr. John was maligned by the socialist daily.

This was chief worker of the Dockyard of Verona, Municipal Councillor of the catholic minority, and leader of the Veronese catholic movement. Fervent spirit, of strong and vigorous temperament, self taught person, of sharp intelligence, and with electrifying word. He was forty-seven: mature and qualified person, indeed.

He knew Fr. John Calabria in St. Benedict al Monte, through his own confessor.

In contact with Fr. John Calabria, being still single, he decided to give new direction to his life. He took the determination to consecrate himself to the Congregation started by Fr. John and he did not want to take time anymore.

In a little while he was going to ripen a right to a pension, which would have allowed him to enjoy in peace his work; the pension could also be providence for the Congregation he wanted to join. Neither he nor the Father wanted to delay for this reason the call of God. There was only an obstacle, and not a small one: the Cardinal.

His Eminence would not adjust to give up a so precious and influent element in the whole religious and social activity of the Diocese.

After having extensively heard the man after having deeply reflected, the Cardinal, too, gave his consent, with noble gesture.

Maxim Besozzi entered St. Zeno in Monte on February 2, 1909. Father John Calabria received him as a son. The newly arrived man gave Fr. John Calabria a little money he had, divesting himself of everything, signifying that, from that moment on he was putting himself totally in his hands.

From that moment on he becomes Brother Massimo and for St. Zeno in Monte he will be the valuable factotum of the Congregation. He will be the one who will direct the works and will start the style of life of the House, in its schedule, discipline, school and work.

He will be the factotum, but in close and intimate collaboration with Fr. John: the start of a tradition and the first example of one of the traits of the future Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence: the close cooperation between Priests and Brothers.

But Besozzi stayed with the Father only until l915. In that year he looked for a way of life closer to his aspirations among the Jesuits; but, after five years, he went back to the Good Boys' House and rendered his precious work in the Houses of Costozza and Este. He then left again in 1922 and joined the Benedictines in Praglia, where he saintly died on September 3, 1943.

After him, on May 2 of the same year 1909, John Marchi entered. He, too, a mature man at about forty, employed in the Insurance Company “La Cattolica” of Verona, generously left his job to be at the service to the poor youth. He becomes small, poor, up to being ingenuous, up to being absurd; he does not avoid hard-works, discomforts and voluntarily becomes a kind of a “slave” of the House. At a certain point his organism broke down and a serious exhaustion forced him to give up his dreams of a religious life and went back to a less uncomfortable life. After a short period in Costermano, where the Father sent him, he retired with the Parish Priest of San Vittore of Colognola, where he stayed until his very pious death, in 1933.

In July, Alexander Fenzi joined. He was a glazier by profession, but, because of his versatile talent, he was good in doing a lot of things. He had deep faith and piety, was very respectful towards the Superiors, very attached to Fr. John

Calabria, since the first time they met. He was witty, cheerful, always glad and good tempered: a real Veronese and Fr. John loved to talk with him about facts and people of Verona.

He died saintly in Negrar, after long sufferings, in 1937.

In August, the Count Francis Perez came in; we already talked about him.

On November 23, Alexander Podavini, shoe-maker, enters: a pure soul. During the twenty years he stayed in the House, he was always hard-working, pious, humble and shy: happy only to be of service. He died in l929.

Of the same time is also Peter Carlini, former officer of the Army, impetuous and fierce character who, however, wanted to dominate himself and imitate Brother Francis Perez, doing the most humble and humiliating services.

Others joined these brothers during that time, but some did not persevere while others left for different religious Congregations.

How were they Living?

The life of those first Brothers is really worthy to be remembered. Life of austere poverty, of renunciation, of sacrifice; life of piety and work: heroic life of pioneers of God.

They had to be pillars of a big edifice; they had to show the future generations how the works of the Lord are born and growind.

They did not wear, and up to now they don't, special attire. “Virtue must be our uniform”, Fr. John used to say. So they dressed up, and also now they dress up, as people of civil condition. When they had to go out for duty, Fr. John wanted them dressed with dignity; but at home they had to be contented to wear what the Providence had sent, but with the care of being neat and in order.

The food, for long time shared by the Brothers with the students, was very frugal. As it was the use of people of modest condition in those times, they had a lot of polenta[39] and a little of bread; soup, pasta or rice were served only at noontime; the meat then was kind of a luxury and was almost rare on the table of poor people.

In those times, the modern dietetic rules were not yet known, and also in St. Zeno in Monte the so called meals were not varied according to arranged in advance lists, but according to what the Providence decided, day by day, with its gifts.

The Providence, truly, never failed, even if there were difficult days, weeks and months, like, for example, during the First World War. Then during those hard times, the brothers

[39] Porridge made of maize meal etc. It was very cheap.

and the students were invited with insistence to pray also for this, to hasten the arrival of the providence.

"*Most Holy Providence of God, provide for us*", was the prayer, reciting all together the chaplet of the Providence, which is still in use in the Houses of the Congregation. And the Providence really provided, sometimes in sudden and unexpected way.

Sometimes it was the good Bro. Martin, lay collector of alms for the Capuchin Friars of Barana, who, with the permit of his Superiors, came to unload his heavy knapsacks in St. Zeno in Monte, for the Good Boys.

In the first months they were in St. Zeno in Monte, the place formerly called St. Mary in Bethlehem by the Crusaders, really looked like the Holy Grotto.

One, who lived there in those days, wrote in *L'Amico dei Buoni fanciulli* ("The Friend of the Good Boys", a monthly publication of the Good Boys' House – Verona) in January 1936: "Narrow house, windows without glass, walls without plaster, not-existing doors: all or almost all opened to the four winds, *in the cold and in the frost*.[40] The snow entered freely, as well as the rain. How poetic and... salubrious were those two big windows, sixteenth century style, without frame, breaking the light and the air!"

The lighting was provided by petroleum or acetylene.

[40] It is a verse of a Christmas song.

Those were difficult times, heroic times, but times of great enthusiasm and particular help from the Lord.

At four thirty during summer and at five in winter, the Brother had to wake up for the meditation. For the wake-up call of the boys, he had to be in the dormitory, for the maternal vigilance and assistance: to sweep the floors, remake the beds, help the youngest and the sick in cleaning: these were the early morning duties. Then, back to church for the prayers and the Holy Mass. Then to school, in the laboratory, in the pastime: always present, like a guardian angel; cheerful, solicitous, often shelling the Rosary, but always alert and careful in everything, without being noticed but without relaxing the attention for a second.

“Look around! Look around! Was the continuous admonition of the Father, if somebody was showing to allow himself to too much relaxation. But, when he noticed the real fatigue, he used to send then somebody to substitute or made himself available to help.

Every day the same routine: from dawn to sunset, until the boys, gone to bed, were asleep. Then, it was the time when the Brother went again to church for the Visit to the Most Blessed Sacrament and the Spiritual Reading! Some also added the Way of the Cross or half an hour of Eucharistic adoration.

There was no need to prescribe penances or hair shirt or special fasting: a similar kind of life was already enough hard for the poor human nature.

Anyway, particular trials were not lacking and the Father used them to verify somebody's humility, to mortify the “reason”, as St. Phillip Neri used to say, so that they were prepared to everything.

This style of life is witness of their total commitment to the chosen cause, of their love of God and their complete trust in Fr. John.

Then, they tied themselves up to the Congregation with simple, annual and private vows. The first collective Profession happened during the feast of the Most Holy Trinity in 1909; but it covered only the intervening months between the feast of the Holy Trinity and the Immaculate Virgin Mary, the fixed date for the annual renewal. Many years passed before this humble but great act would get legal value before the Church; however, the generosity of the offer and its spirit were not less meritorious, especially because the Brothers were not receiving, in exchange, any legal guarantee of continuity and assistance from the Congregation they were serving.

In the first times, to the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, they added a fourth one: total trust in the Divine Providence, as far as the material goods were concerned.

Fr. Desenzani did not feel like accepting this new way of life. The Lord was preparing for him a new field of apostolate.

Internal Growth of the House

As soon as they took possession of the House, they needed to settle themselves, though temporarily; but it was always necessary to make space to those who everyday were knocking at the door.

A main thought then kept the Father busy: the set-up of the church. For this purpose, he was pressed also, but there was no need, by his old tutor, Fr. Scapini: “Father John Calabria, do not forget that you have to rebuild soon the church! It is alright to prepare the house for the boys, but, at the same time, you must prepare the house of the Lord”.

So, as some masons were building dormitories and schools, others were uninterruptedly working in recovering the church.

Following the guide-lines of old designs, it was easy to rebuild the outside, with its big and small windows and the central rose-window. Also the pronaos was brought back to its original form, with almost all original materials. Regarding the inside, the simplicity of the line was easily identified, with the demolition of the partitions and of the lofts; also the arch of the Romanic-Byzantine apse appeared in some fragments of its original beautiful simplicity. The apse, however, had completely disappeared; of the original altar only few stones were found.

The works went on assiduously, but the finances were scarce; it seemed that they were going to stop in a moment. Fr. Scapini was insisting: “I recommend you to restore the church;

do not be doubtful, the Lord will help you. Think of the church, first of all; think of the church!"

Fr. John prayed and, with his colourful talk, emanating from his strong and well founded faith, urged the Brothers to trust in that God who, with such a generosity fills the earth with the light of the sun, a lot more precious than our poor money.

And the Lord showed with a "sign" that he liked the undertaken work.

Coming down, one day, from St. Zeno in Monte to St. Benedict, on Umberto Bridge, Fr. John Calabria meets a gentleman well known to him: Francis Baio.

"Just you! – says the man – I was just coming to see you in St. Zeno in Monte. Last night my wife did not sleep and did not let me sleep, because of you!" And since the Father was showing a legitimate curiosity to know what his part in this matter was, the other continued:

"You see, sometime ago, we decided, my wife and I, to assign to you a certain amount, but we had no intention to give it to you so soon. We were thinking to give it upon our death. But yesterday my wife started thinking that we should give that amount immediately. – Because, she said, Fr. John needs it now. – I did not answer immediately; but in the night, bothered by the same thought, she could hardly sleep and, now and then, she kept bothering me, too, with the story of the money. Just to be able to sleep, I had to promise that, right today I would have brought you the money. And now the Lord makes me

meet you here on the bridge. Here's the money: it's a bank book with thirty thousand lire".

"It's really the Providence!" Fr. John confirmed; and told Mr. Baio how the need was pressing him to finish the renovation of the church.

The church could soon be finished. Without any luxury: the floor in rough stone, the altar with soft stone and the balustrade with tufa. From the back of the apse, a marble statue of the Immaculate Virgin Mary towers above, until now, with its maybe disproportionate size, the whole church. She is the "Owner" of the Good Boys' House.

The Way of the Cross, in bass-relief, and the monumental pulpit were also made with soft stone; the windows were in coloured glass, tied up with lead.

The church was modest, but what a propriety and dignity! The time and the Providence will work then to make it more beautiful and dignified; but for now it was already enough that way.

The inauguration happened on the Assumption feast and coincided with the first communion of a big group of boys of the House. At the Gospel, the Father made a sermon, overflowing with fervour, which has been kept.

A new harmonium accompanied the songs and beautiful ostensory added splendour to the solemnity of the Eucharistic Benediction in the afternoon.

Friends were not missing that day, around Fr. John Calabria, and among them, was the former Parish Priest of St. Stephen, Fr. Louis Masetti.

The construction works are Stopped

The works in the church, accompanied by the "signs" of the Providence and the always bigger and urgent needs to provide to many young boys, who asked to be admitted, persuaded Fr. John, after praying, meditating and asking for advice, to prepare a project of amplification with new constructions: more classrooms are needed, dormitories and specially work-rooms.

Besides the existing building, a big vegetable garden and, down the hill, a triangular piece of land could very well contain the needed constructions.

A comprehensive project is soon done by a very good engineer Umberto Festa, very close friend of Fr. John Calabria.

The works start but, this time, it seems like the Providence has other plans to fulfil: limiting the contributions, it wants to try the faith and the humility of its Servant and of his collaborators. At a certain point, also the contractor Faccioli, man of faith and courage, cannot go on alone, facing all expenses.

On July 15, 1911, the works stop. It was a day of mourning. The Father announced it to the Brothers and the boys with heartfelt words, inviting to be good, "because, if the

Providence is missing, maybe it is because of our sins". The night between July 15 and 16, Fr. John, the Brothers and some young boys prostrated themselves in prayer for an Hour of Adoration, asking for light and help.

After a long period of stoppage, the works started again but moderately, almost in a minor key, to be completed four years later, in 1915.

But, in the meantime, the professional activities went on the same in improvised areas: modestly, but under the guidance of an expert and upright chief-instructors.

So, the boot shop, the carpentry, the tailoring shop were born, together with the printing work, with an annexed book-binding shop, the school for blacksmiths' fitters with the addition, little by little, of a machines department.

The "Little Institution"

After sometime, since the admittance of Bro. Maxim Besozzi, Fr. John Calabria proposed a programme of gradual development of laboratories, among them a printing works department with the possibility of printing also a news-letter. Such a program, difficult to carry out because of the big cost involved, was facilitated by the Providence, through a friend priest, Fr. Joseph Zanetti.

The zealous Veronese priest had founded the "Little Institution" for the free diffusion of the good press.

They were leaflets of practical apologetics, catechism, ascetics and news about actual topics, which he largely circulated among the people, especially at the churches' doors, through zealots.

He also published a weekly leaflet, called “The Redeemer”, especially to fight the attacks of the radical and Masonic socialism, which was spreading a lot of evil with “The Donkey”. Priests and laymen, with tested doctrine and high apostolic spirit, cooperated with him; and the Cardinal blessed and encouraged the initiative.

A friend of Fr. John, Fr. Zanetti thought that it could have been of common benefit to transfer his printing works from St. Cosimo Sreet, where it was located, to St. Zeno in Monte; he could have saved on rentals and Fr. John could have found work for his boys.

They discussed about it and shortly they planned the realization. On December 31, 1909, everything had already been finalized.

It was not excluded that, near the “Little Institution” also a Typographic School could be developed independently; and Fr. John reached this goal, in his largeness of sight, since he had at heart the apostolate through the press.

In fact, in 1910, Fr. John freed himself from the “Little Institution”, still continuing the apostolate, by starting the Typographic School for the students. Mr. Apollonio, owner of the printing works (by the same name) located in Erbe Square, at the start of Nuova Street, left corner, had the merit of this.

Mr. Apollonio gifted the school with two typographic machines and some cases of press characters.

Fr. Battisti will greatly develop the Typographic School in 1914, by buying two new machines and different new characters. He had the idea of printing an altar Missal, in agreement with the editors Cinquetti from Verona and Gallo from Vicenza. But he was able to print only the Prefaces and the Canon. The war stopped everything, because of lack of proper paper.

But, during the war 1915-18 the publication prospered: Sundays' readings, distributed weekly in many thousand copies; images and cards with thoughts of peace, repentance and earnest prayers; leaflets and pamphlets with the messages of the Pope, particularly "The Pope and the War", with a continuously detailed documentation of what the Pope Benedict XV was doing for the peace and the good of all the people.

All this was for free. The costs were sometimes quite considerable, but he didn't care; he was ready and able to face sacrifices in the food for the body, but he did not want to deny to the soldiers and all the people this food for the soul. But then, there was the Providence!

All these common and continuous publications started catching undue attention and provoking some suspicions. In one instance, somebody thought of finding almost a crime of defeatism in a published card with the following words printed in it: "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace!"

He was called to the police Headquarters to be questioned. Fr. John defended himself very simply: “Since two thousand years ago the Church repeats this invocation every day in her missal!”

Fr. Diodato Desenzani Leaves the Good Boys' House

In 1911, the growth and the internal consolidation of the House exhibited well for its future. However, the Father's prudence, who wanted to conform to the will of God, always imposed caution and patience.

Fr. Diodato always felt in his heart the old ideals of the “White Lily”, that is a Congregation outstretched towards an international brotherhood. So he wished for the House a jump towards the whole world; in America, for instance. It seemed to him that there the Opera could have been more easily started, consolidated and developed.

For the Father, it was too early.

Fr. Diodato wanted to try, test the ground. The Father did not stop him.

On March 22, 1911, Father Diodato, boarding a ship for emigrants as substitute Chaplain, was able to sail from Genoa to Buenos Aires.

Fr. John Calabria, now, got the permission to leave St. Benedict in the city to stay permanently in St. Zeno in Monte;

the economic administration of the House, with the management of the workshops, was taken over by Bro. Maxim Besozzi.

When, after few months, Fr. Diodato came back, he did not feel any more comfortable in the new set-up and, maybe because of this, he insisted to open a branch of the House in Argentina. But, since the Cardinal was not very much in favour of such a bold step, unless at least three years had passed, asked then and obtained from the Father to open in St. John in Valle a House for those young men who, already dismissed from St. Zeno in Monte, could not yet find a definite settlement.

However, this initiative did not prosper and the Cardinal advised Fr. Diodato to accept the new experience as Assistant Vicar in his native Parish of St. Paul in Campo Marzio.

Fr. Diodato humbly obeyed; but after about one year he asked and obtained permission from the Cardinal to join the Foreign Missions of Milan: in August l914 he left for Hyderabad, in India.

If events brought him far physically, his spirit and his heart were always united with Fr. John and the Good Boys' House in St. Zeno in Monte. He felt he was one with the Congregation, the way “the skin is one with the body”. He had left with the blessings of Fr. John and with the clear resolve to prepare the way for the “Brothers” of the Good Boys' House.

The Father, in the meantime, even if he left the Rectory of St. Benedict al Monte, did not abandon his apostolic activity, especially for the benefit of the sick.

Often, he went out for preaching or to visit sick, or to go to the Hospital, the civil or the military one or to the Shelter. In order not to disturb the Brothers during their busy working schedule, he used to go and come back alone, also late in the night.

One night, coming back from assistance to a seriously sick person, going up the Holy Stairs, he saw in a corner two guys, acting suspiciously. His heart-beat went faster, but he did not slow down or went back where he was coming from: he just recommended himself to the Lord.

It was necessary. Going ahead he heard, in fact, these reassuring, but still dangerously meaningful words: “Leave him alone, poor guy! Don’t you see that he is Fr. Calabria?!” But since then, in the evening, Fr. Calabria always went out accompanied by somebody.

The intense work and the growing needs required new personnel; not only laymen: priests were needed. But, where to find them?

The House was not yet capable to look for priests, even if the Father had already started to cultivate vocations. Fr. John, however, was certain that the Lord would have taken care of that. Wasn't He, who had wanted the Opera? Wasn't He, who sent souls who needed help? More wasn't He, who sent the needed material help? So, wasn't He going to provide the personnel, when he, poor priest, “lacking in everything among everybody” was not able to provide at all?

Yes, he knew the Lord was going to take care of this. And the Lord did.

The Servant of God, Fr. Joseph Ambrosini

Fr. Ambrosini, fourth among thirteen children, was born in Soave, Verona, on February 4, 1889, from Louis and Marianna Verzini. In 1889 he transferred to St. Boniface with his family, in the diocese of Vicenza. He enrolled and attended at the Maffei Higher Secondary School in Verona and got the school-leaving certificate in 1907. He entered the Vicenza Seminary and was ordained priest on July 30, I911.

Fr. Joseph Ambrosini had the first personal meeting with the Father when he was still a theology student, and was in Verona to perform his military duties. St. Zeno in Monte became his chosen destination and the sanctuary of his ardent Communions, for which he would fast until midday, notwithstanding the strenuous military trainings; Fr. John became his spiritual Director.

From these visits and meetings, he developed the desire to consecrate himself to the Congregation.

He was ordained priest in Vicenza in 1911 at the age of a little bit more than twenty two; he soon dedicated himself to the apostolate of the parochial ministry, as an assistant in the big parish of Arzignano, manifesting in a short time an example of admirable piety, of amiability and charity.

A first request to the Bishop to let him enter the Good Boys' House given on March 19, 1912 was turned down. Few days later he got lung problems, with expectoration of blood from some parts of the respiratory tract, due maybe to the exhausting military life and the apostolate, and he was then relieved from his active service to the diocese.

Gone back to his family and after having recovered a bit, on June 18, 1912, as it was his desire, he could spend some time in the House.

His health condition was not getting that much better, in September, the Father made Bro. Besozzi accompany him to Lourdes. But he didn't feel like asking for the healing grace: his soul was ready to offer the extreme sacrifice.

Therefore, he dedicated himself to the various tasks assigned to him by the Father. He did them with new ardour, winning always all the admiration and devotion for his angelic piety and radiant aspect.

In a morning, at the end of September, as he was celebrating mass at the altar, a little after the consecration, he felt like fainting and he had to be taken to bed, while the Father finished the interrupted mass.

The family, where he had to go back to, did everything possible to save him. He was also confined at the Sanatorium of Sortenna, but in January of 1913 he was back home, still sick and destined to his coming end.

That month his father had a dream. It seemed he was in the garden with his son, while a lavish train filled with golden

gifted carriages suddenly turned up, echoing angelic harmonies. In the first coach, a Bishop was officiating adorned with shining vestments of gold and gems. The train stopped in front of the father, enrapturing him with songs and sounds of paradise.

Fr. Joseph's father was not easily influenced by suggestions.

Of the thirteen sons, only Father Joseph stayed with him and also for this reason he has opposed by all means the priestly vocation; but could not help telling about his dream.

Fr. Joseph listened but remained silent. After about two months, one day, he called his father aside and told him: “Now papa, the hour has come that your dream will come true”.

It was March 29, 1913, two days after, he died. Buried in the family tomb, in the St. Boniface cemetery, people showed great veneration and the reputation of sanctity grew to the point that on March 31, 1958, the canonical process for his Beatification in Vicenza was opened; on June 11, 1963, his body was transferred to the crypt of Villanova; on March 31, 1978, the apostolic process started in Rome.

On his last dialogue he had with Fr. Calabria, in a faint voice he said:

“I asked the Lord that he give full resignation to my dear parents... poor ones! They've prepared everything so that in this adjacent room a mass will be celebrated at seven o'clock tomorrow morning. But at that time I'll be in Paradise!”.

He had difficulty in breathing. Fr. John let him rest for awhile then, encouraged by the angelic serenity of that beautiful soul, and pointed out to him:

“But if you die, you'll leave me alone, with many boys to take care of and to guide”.

“Oh, don’t be afraid, Fr. John – he answered – from Paradise I'll send you another one in my place.

The three predictions had to come true: at seven o'clock in the morning, he had already expired: the parents who were inconsolable before, now felt being enveloped by a mysterious peace; a year after, a young priest from the Vicenza Diocese, whom he met and talked to, who looked just like him physically and spiritually, took his place in the Good Boys' House in 1914.

That priest is Fr. Louis Pedrollo, who for many years was a faithful collaborator and vicar of the Father and his first successor as General Superior of the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence.

Fr. John Baptist Battisti

To substitute Fr. Desenzani, the Lord sent a priest, who had already been in the house to give at least once a month retreats to the Brothers and boys together: He was Fr. Battisti. We have already mentioned him few pages back.

He was the chaplain of the Maternity Hospital, but understanding that he could make better use of his energy and

talents in a house like that of Fr. Calabria, he asked and obtained to be the chaplain of the Good Boys' House on October 10, 1913.

As a task given by the Father, he took care of the assistance to the Sisters: when Bro. Besozzi left, he took his place in the treasurer's office, and was able to replace him in the organization of the new laboratories, especially of the printing works for which he had a distinct inclination.

We will find him in Este and therefore at the Sanctuary Our Lady of Campagna always with that distinct strong personality and his tenacious more than fortunate initiatives. He had a profound piety and was sincerely devoted to the Father. He died in December of 1926.

The Mount of Temptation

The slow but sure success of the Good Boys' House was not certainly in the liking of the enemy of every good and so he started to persecute the Father with all sorts of temptations.

First of all he was made to believe to be in contradiction with his Superiors, that he acted on his own, that he was a rebel.

After that, he afflicted him with a thousand anxiety and anguishes and scruples of not being in God's grace; such that it seemed to him that he was not worthy to celebrate the Holy Mass, and that he couldn't do it unless he went to confession.

There were then sleepless nights that the enemy caused him, perturbed by shady apparitions or temptations of despair. It seemed to him that the whole house was invaded by the demon and he would want to escape, leave it and never to return.

Night and day, the demon persecutes him and he cannot find peace in the house, or in the church and in prayers.

In the midst of this furious war, provoked by the devil, the figure of Fr. Natale of Jesus, his confessor, rises like a giant.

“With all certainty and confidence, and in the name of Jesus, who would like to use you in his infinite mercy to accomplish great things for His Church, I can guarantee that you are not disobedient to your Superiors or rebel or in conflict with them, because Jesus wants it this way” (Letter January 10, 1912).

“The Psalmist speaks of the mercy and bounty of Jesus: His mercy is boundless. Therefore, why give up hope of being forgiven? Don’t you know that to lose hope in the forgiveness is a greater offense to the Blessed Jesus than all your sins? Doesn't the same Psalmist say: God does not despise the contrite and humble heart? If you have sinned ask for Jesus' forgiveness and without continuously going to confession you can continue to celebrate the Holy Mass and practice all acts of piety as Jesus would like.

“For obedience, I'll give you the order to be at peace, quiet and tranquil, and leave all your responsibilities, all your

sins to be charged to my conscience, because I have to answer in front of God for what it concerns your soul.

“For God's sake don’t let the demon win... (Letter September 21, 1913)

“For God's sake and for His love, don’t stay away from the House, this House of God, if it is not for an important concern, like the ministry and the affairs of the House of the Divine Providence.

“I tell you with certainty: all your physical and moral troubles are caused by Satan, the implacable enemy of this House and against Fr. John, who is so loved by Jesus, not for his own merits, but because he is an instrument in God's hands to fulfil works for the good of God's Church, which were never done before by anyone.

“Remember well: every time you are not in the House without a good reason and without conformity to the Divine Will, it is a triumph of our enemy, Satan who will boisterously laugh at this.

“Before leaving the house, look always for counsel, in front of the Blessed Sacrament (Letter of January 30, 1913).

“... St. Zeno in Monte is the place of your salvation and sanctification where Jesus will give you powerful and miraculous means for the salvation of *innumerable souls*” (Letter of May 26, 1914).

The great temptations ceased at about that time. But naturally, the terrible struggle will not stop.

During all his life, until the end, Fr. John Calabria will be torn by this inexorable enemy of the souls, but God will watch over him. As the song of the Psalmist says: "*He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler... You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day*" (Ps 91).

The World War 1915 - 1918

Taking upon himself "the heavy cross", on August 4, 1903, the meek and strong St. Pius X rose to the papal throne. From the summit of his post he had to contemplate a world distraught by the fratricide wars, by revolutionary anarchy and by religious persecution; a world threatened by deceitful doctrines and by the profound decadence of customs.

He knows and understands more and more that only from Christ, his Church, and His Gospel, can salvation be obtained and he launches his cry with this program: "Restore everything in Christ".

And the reform really starts from the Church; in its legislation, organization, liturgy, claiming the freedom from any civil power.

He wanted a saint clergy, cultured, apostolic; he invites the faithful to catechism, the Eucharist, the social and political action.

He attacks the masonry and modernism as the two great and dangerous evils of the time; he distributes the treasures of his intelligence, of his goodness and of his sanctity to those around him and those who approach him.

The world which before was sceptical and mocking, and then astounded, ends up admiring him and being overwhelmed but without taking in his admonitions and teachings. It could no longer be the world referred to by Christ when He said: “Positioned in evil”.

And so the world of his time could not eliminate the interested ego, extinguish the flame of hatred, and find again the path towards peace and fraternity.

The Holy Father has the exact perception of it. With his strained soul, his sensitive heart, he is like an antenna that picks up the slightest vibrations of the great heart of the world that is heading towards its destruction; it is outlined at the horizon a “biggest war” never seen before.

His secretary of state is astonished by these sinister previsions: but he insists: “The war is near. Blessed are those who go to faraway lands; they will not see the war!”

On June 28, 1914, the crime of Sarajevo[41] was the spark of a great fire.

The first victim was he, the great and holy Pontiff!

[41] Sarajevo is the site of the assassination of the Archduke of Austria Francis Ferdinand and his wife Sophie Chotek that sparked World War I.

The war between Austria and Serbia spreads: Russia, Germany, France, and England intervene; Turkey and Japan...

What will Italy do? Opinions differ in the country: neutrality or intervention?

Beyond these opinions and possible reasons, Father John Calabria sees in the war a big punishment from God; he prays and let others pray so that war would not spread any longer, but be stopped and peace be restored.

The events will turn to worst. Italy comes out from its neutrality and on May 24, 1915 it goes to war.

Then, living becomes quite difficult for a House entrusted to charity, but Fr. John Calabria never dwindles in his faith and trust in God: “God knows the Congregation and knows the times”.

The provisions are becoming scarce; the brothers leave to the front; “Go ahead until it is possible to do so; go ahead! The Lord will provide”.

The activity is lessened; the remaining Brothers doubled their energies to face up everything, so that the House could continue: closing it would mean adding up to the misfortunes of many poor children, and abandoning to unknown destiny many poor derelict boys.

When the mobilization became almost general and threatened to take away everybody, then the preoccupation was to save whatever could be saved; like those Brothers who were already rejected once and could definitely stay by his side.

The gathered poor children are also the children of Italy; they too, need to be defended and freed from the dangers of the soul and body. One Brother or two would be enough, of those who could not do much for the country; but could do much for the souls.

For one he could get accordance with the law, the exemption from military service; but for another, the thing was not that easy.

He was rejected for three times: he had to submit himself for the fourth visit. The Father fears; he does everything to recommend him to the medical officer of the district, he obtains that he'll be sent for another visit to the military Hospital. He rushes then to the commandant of the Hospital and found in him in his office surrounded by medical officials. With simplicity, he presented the reason for his coming and concluded: “See if you can definitely reject him”.

The official, an upright and impartial man, being sensitive also due to the presence of his colleagues, though holding Fr. John Calabria in profound esteem and affection, sends him away in a harsh and decisive way:

“Listen Fr. Calabria; you know how much I like you and how I would be happy to meet your requests, but I won't commit injustices to anyone! You can leave now”.

Fr. John left so humiliated, trusting that the Lord would not leave without rewarding such a great humiliation.

In fact, the high official was not happy with that quite rude voice.

He knew very well about the humanitarian work of the Father; he understood that it was not that Brother, who was rejected three times, the one who could save Italy; that in the end, there could be a justified pretext so as not to impair that holy Work. On the other hand, the problem was complicated for the fact that the dear priest talked to him so openly in front of his colleagues.

He talked about it with his wife and daughter during breakfast. From the words of those wise ladies he found peace in his soul; in the calmness he found sufficient enlightenment to think of a solution.

He called for his immediate subordinate and requested him to substitute him the day after for the medical check-up of the recalled reservists; in discharging him, he also found a way to tell him that among others, a certain Adami Louis “a brother of Fr. Calabria” was coming; he should see if it was the case to... accommodate that holy man.

The Lieutenant Colonel, a Hebrew, a very good officer, understood everything at once. The Brother, of course, was able to come out of that visit, rejected.

Thirty years passed, and another “useless massacre” would stain the roads of the world with blood. To the political struggle, the ideological struggle and racial persecution will be added. A daughter of the already dead Lieutenant Colonel, persecuted for belonging to the Hebrew race, found her safety precisely through the charity of Fr. Calabria. God's goodness keeps account of everything, it pays everything.

The efficiency of the Good Boys' House, in those difficult days, did not provide only for the good of the abandoned children; many mobilized theology students and priests found in the home, during their free time, a secure and cordial refuge, a place where they could keep their piety and apostolic zeal alive.

In fact, the Father gave them the possibility to preach, hear confessions, explain the catechism, celebrate mass, etc.; and they could voluntarily go to that house of God even if it entailed a sacrifice, since they felt at ease in that place. They found a good Father in Fr. John Calabria; he was the enlightened guide, the best protector and the one who strengthened their vocation.

They were Bishops, Rectors of seminary who would recommend to the House and entrusted to Fr. John their theology students and their priests.

The Lord made use of the war to make people aware of the Congregation and the Father.

Yet, there was a time when also the House was being suspected of being “pro-Austrian”. And here is how.

When the war broke-out between Germany and France, there was a labourer working as an assembly mechanic in a big manufacturing company, and he was an Alsatian, who, therefore, was supposed to be put in internment as a subject of an enemy country.

The owner of the establishment who had him in high regards turned to Fr. John and asked him if he could

accommodate this labourer in the House. Father John Calabria agrees in his simple charity, and so Eugenio the Alsatian was accepted and made to work in the mechanical laboratory. He was a technically experienced person, a serious and religious man, such that he felt his duty to participate in the Holy Mass and other holy ceremonies, though he belonged to the Protestant Religion.

The Father gave him the freedom when it concerned religion; not only he exhorted him, since the first day, to refrain from discussions with anybody in regards with religious questions; but the Father did not ever put any pressure to convert the guest; his apostolic zeal did not becloud his profound respect for religious freedom.

Meanwhile, an ordinance came out compelling anybody to hand over to the authority the carrier-pigeons they had in possession. Fr. John, thinking of complying to the substance of the law, placed them within the confines of the bell tower.

One day, some policemen showed up in St. Zeno in Monte with a list of detailed and quite serious charges: there was a German in the House: During night time, light signals emanated from the House, in the House there were some carrier-pigeons.

These charges were sufficient enough to bring him to trial: the trial was done.

The first and the last charges, that anybody could deny, were presented by a person who was often in the House. He

harboured a professional jealousy towards Eugenio, the Alsatian.

Eugenio was interned in Puglia; the carrier-pigeons were sequestered and Fr. John Calabria paid the imposed fine for non compliance.

With regards to the luminous signals at night, it was easy to prove that it was the unintended switching on and off of a night lamp which was not totally shielded.

And everything ended well, also because the moral stature of the Father surpassed any suspicion.

The bellicose events with their changing fortune still made Fr. John consistent with his appeal for prayers and penance, confident for the country's destiny.

A medical doctor who knew and respected Fr. John since he was a theology student, lending a hand in the military hospital and now considered the rare visits of Fr. John, a priest, in his house like an angel's apparition, during the tragic days of Caporetto,[42] had packed his furniture, for any eventuality.

After the danger was over, Fr. John knew of the taken precaution. “But why – he said – did you not tell me about this?

[42] The Battle of Caporetto (*Karfreit* in German language) took place from 24 October to 19 November 1917 on the Austro-Italian front of World War I. Austro-Hungarian forces, reinforced by German units, were able to break into the Italian front line and rout the Italian army, which had practically no mobile reserves. Italian army answered with the Battle of the Piave River (June 15-23, 1918); it was a decisive victory for the Italian army during World War I.

I could have told you not to do it because the Austrians were not going to come!”

From 16 to 19 of September 1918, he called for a solemn Eucharistic Triduum of priests. Jesus in the Eucharist was solemnly exposed on the altar day and night; Masses, Adorations, Sacred Functions were alternated in those days; four hundred priests participated in and thirty three masses were celebrated. After the Triduum, he wanted a solemn mass for the souls of the victims of war.

Exactly on the same day that the Triduum started, Austria was beginning to take the first steps to the armistice. Mere chance of coincidence? We do not want to make a judgment but we just like to state this unquestionable fact.

It is easy to imagine the Father's joy for the end of the war. A solemn ceremony of thanksgiving as it was promised completed the long expectation, giving back to God what was due to God.

San Benedetto

When in 1911, the laboratories started in St. Zeno in Monte, the planner made an error of evaluation in laying the foundations: they did not consider the prescribed distances from the border to the neighbouring estate.

The owner, rightly damaged, brought a legal action, which then became more serious, when some windows were opened on the elevated wall.

During the course of the legal action, however, they came to an arrangement and the owner was pleased with a modest indemnity.

But Fr. John, since then, foresaw that that estate and the Villa in it would belong to the House one day and he would call it “St. Benedict”.

That Villa reminded him of his boyhood years, when he used to bring the ironed laundry clothes done by his mother, and used to sit, tired, halfway to the top. He was fond of the place. But where did he get the certainty that he would get that place? And why would he call it St. Benedict?

During his Rectorship in St. Benedict al Monte, he came to know about the “Jubilee medal of St. Benedict”, minted in 1880 by the Abbot of Montecassino, an occasion of the celebration of the XIV centennial of the birth of the great patriarch of the West.

Knowing the supernatural and natural benefits attributed to it, he propagated it and wanted to treasure some himself.

Now, after the controversy regarding the windows, one day, Fr. John together with some Brothers and among them, Bro. Perez, standing at the border of the Grotto, threw a medal of St. Benedict on the ground below, praying the saint to make it in such a way that the farm will be in the possession of the House the soonest possible time. Three years later, in 1914, the grace was fulfilled. Coming to know that the owner was willing to sell the land, Fr. John thought of buying it; but he thought it

opportune to assign a third party to intervene for him, because he feared that the vendor would take advantage of this good opportunity to ask for a higher price.

The matter turned out a success and the land and the House took the name St. Benedict.

CHAPTER 8

THE SISTERS

The First Helpers

If in the Hospital and in the barracks, Fr. John Calabria realized that adults would always be children needing maternal care, he realized that it was more so with his children!

The memory of his childhood, solely warmed by his mother's heart, made him more conscious of the need to have eye and heart of a mother towards his little ones.

But an eye and a heart were not enough; there was a need of a woman's hands, for chores more proper with the mission of a mother, of a woman of the House like washing, cooking, sewing, etc.

He remembered then the good "Sisters of Mercy" whom he knew since the time of his military life and whom he met in tens in his encounters with the sick and the elders in the Hospitals of the city.

The Institute, born in Verona, in those days had about seventy years of life. The founder had been Carlo Steeb, a former Lutheran of Tubinga, who came to Verona in 1791 when he was about eighteen years old, to learn the Italian language and get some practice in the knitting business; instead he found the light of the true faith and the way to priesthood. [43]

He was spiritual son of Fr. Pietro Leonardi,[44] another fine figure of Veronese apostle, and he had in his turn, as spiritual daughter Luigia Poloni, an unusually superior lady, worthy of the biblical eulogy of the "strong woman", who had

[43] Carlo Steeb died in 1856 and was beatified in 1975.
[44] Founder of the religious Congregation "Daughters of Jesus".

been prepared by the Providence to work hand in hand to the birth of the “Sisters of Mercy”.

When Fr. John thought of them in January of 1910 for the assistance which he saw it was necessary for his Good Boys, they already had a good start and had different houses all over Italy. The Superior General was Sr. Lavinia Mondin, a woman with a big heart and worthy of the position that was entrusted to her. She was a little hesitant on this in the beginning but when, talking to her nuns about the wishes of Fr. Calabria, she saw that not just a few were ready to give themselves to a work which was close to heroism, for the overbearing work and the dedication required, she saw in it God's will and accepted.

She choose three nuns and a novice who with the permission of their ecclesiastical superior, discreetly requested by Fr. John took a room in a house of Benefice of the Vicariate of San Giovanni in Valle, generously offered for the said purpose by Fr. Bonometti.

The First Sisters

The good Sisters of Mercy had started to help Fr. John Calabria since the days in St. Benedict al Monte. All the clothes to be repaired were brought to the Mother House and this continued also when the Good Boys settled in St. Zeno in Monte; and while the seamstresses were tidying up the bundle of clothes in their House, some nurses went up to St. Zeno in Monte to cure the children up there. They were all generous:

the Father cherished an everlasting memory of them and called them “Heroic” those virtuous collaborators.

But the services given by these Sisters in the small House of St. John in Valle did not last long.

Nearly few months after, Mgr. Ciccarelli, the Ecclesiastical Superior, went to St. Zeno in Monte: “Father John Calabria, with my great regret I have to tell you that the Cardinal does not want the nuns to be so free and out of their place”.

The Father did not get upset; he thanked him for what he had done and at once went to the Cardinal.

His Eminence repeated the same things, Fr. John did not object; he only asked: “What if some good women would be together for these services, will you be glad?”

“I will approve and bless it”, the Cardinal answered.

The Congregation of the Sisters, of the future Poor Servants of the Divine Providence took the legitimate “way”, from that moment, with the Lord's blessing.

Anyway, the good Sisters of Mercy did not stop helping the Good Boys' House, and even though they were back in their convent, they continued to give a helping hand for many and various works, showing even more their charity and their Christian empathy towards the Opera.

Meanwhile, the Providence was laying in the soul of a good woman, Angelina De Battisti, the desire to consecrate herself to the House.

On April 17, 1910, leaving behind everything, she placed herself at the Father's disposal, coming to live in the House which had already been occupied by the Sisters of Mercy.

She was forty nine years old and single, when she consecrated herself to the Opera. From the modest family, especially from her father, she was filled with love for work and piety. She was educated by the Sisters Daughters of the Sacred Heart, called in Verona Seghetti, and when she was a little grown up she put herself under the guidance of that holy Stigmatine Fr. Gradinati, a man of great spirit, whose confessional was sought after by many beautiful souls, who wished to be perfect. Under this holy religious, Angelina De Battisti had led in the world a life totally dedicated to God and the good of her neighbours.

Safeguard and source of her virginity were a simple spirit and good morals. All these were reflected also in her language, showing an evangelical and gentle zest. Her love towards God and towards her neighbours could be seen with an unquenchable desire to do good to the souls, becoming saintly industrious to give them to God. It was said, for example, that during the time she was in the Sanctuary of the Madonna di Campagna, coming out to do some shopping, she would often meet a man, not from that place, that everybody pointed out as a non practicing Catholic. Coming to know of it, every time she met him she would greet him with great simplicity and respect, and putting together prayers and mortifications she was able to conquer in his deathbed his soul to the Lord.

The manner she passed under the spiritual guidance of Fr. John Calabria has the trace of one of the “little flowers”.

For some time the good Fr. Gradinati had the illness that would lead him to his tomb: a slow tracheal consumption.

One day this simple soul came near him and told him: “Father, I feel that sooner or later you will leave me to go to Paradise; so to whom will I entrust myself?”

The good religious reflected for a moment, then: “The first name that the Lord will make you think of – he answered – will be the name of the person who will guide you”.

And the first name that came to Angelina's mind was the name of “Fr Calabria”, and Fr. Gradinati, approving it said: “Do whatever He will tell you”.

A little after, Fr. Gradinati died and Angelina De Battisti placed herself in the hands of Fr. John Calabria.

A year later, entering the small house of St. John in Valle, at the service of the Good Boys, she became the small seed of the “Sisters of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence”.

The elder “Sisters” still remember her for her great piety and charity and for her devotion to the Father, to whom she obeyed up to being scrupulous.

Now it is time to know a little more the good Masina. The poor lady was alone in St. Benedict al Monte after the death of Fr. John's mother. The Father tried to convince her to go to live with De Battisti, but the poor good old lady was unyielding, she did not want to hear anything about it.

Now and then, the Father would throw her a question of this type: “Masina, would you come and stay in St. Zeno in Monte?” “Not me, dear, I will not go – was the firm reply –. Will I be under Angelina De Battisti? Me, no my dear. If you'll take me up, I'll tumble myself down”.

She was jealous of her freedom, maybe also a bit jealous of her affection for Fr. John. In fact, we will remember, before definitively leaving her, what the Father told about her, when she was dying in the Hospital.

“Masina – He asked her – are you sorry to die?”

“Very much, dear John”.

“Why, Masina? You'll go to Paradise...”

“But I will not see you any more...” she answered with tears in her eyes.

With the passing of time, other sisters joined Angelina De Battisti. And in 1911, on December 13, the first seven took their simple and private vows of Chastity, Poverty and Obedience from the hands of the Father; thus dedicating themselves totally to the Opera.

The Father gave them St. John Mary Vianney as their Patron, who at that time, was just blessed.

In March 1914, the “Sisters” were nine. They no longer stayed in the House of St. John in Valle, but in another small house above the Giusti Garden, very near St. Zeno in Monte, which was named “House of Nazareth”.

The “Sisters” were: Angelina De Battisti, Countess Lavinia Perez, Adele Carli, Laura Fozzati, Angelina Dresda, Maria Meneghini, the noble Mary Olian Fannio, Natalia Fainelli and Maria Galbusera. The “Pillars”, as how Fr. John would call them.

We will say something in particular about three of them, already dead.

The Young Countess Lavinia Perez

In August 1909, when the Count Francis Perez decided to leave the world to definitively live with Fr. John Calabria in St. Zeno in Monte, poor among the poor, rather servant of the poor, for his sister, the young Countess Lavinia Perez, it was like a lightning explosion in a serene sky.

It wasn't like she didn't disregard the religiosity and charity of the brother, but what he was about to do seemed so out of proportion!

How could the Count Francis have withstood a life, which was being lived then in the Good Boys' House? He who had a very delicate complexion, giving up all the facilities he was used to, due to his wealthy status?

It was not possible that her brother could have made a spontaneous choice of this kind of life with a straight mind. Maybe there had been an external pressure, a wrong advice, a rash suggestion. For sure, Fr. John was part of this, also for the mere fact of having accepted a determination that, though taken voluntarily could not have been accommodated by

somebody who knew the Count Francis for so many years together with all his life and family.

She would be the one to go to Fr. Calabria!

Wasn't it the family doctor himself who affirmed that such determination had been rashly done? Because of his medical disorder he would not resist even for a year! It was therefore, like a death sentence.

One day, the young Countess really went to St. Zeno in Monte, prepared to fight it out.

Maybe she herself did not have the intention to win; but she was decided to show all her disapproval, to raise her protest for what it had been decided without her.

And she did, with such a dialectics which was not only feminine but also fraternal which, therefore, came from the heart rather than from the mind. The Father listened in silence. When he understood that she was finished, he lifted his eyes, those particular eyes that could see truly far; and raising his arms:

“What do I see!…” he said

“What do you see, Father?” the young Countess asked, amazed by that gesture.

“I see”, the Father continued, “I see the young Countess Lavinia Perez will enter the Opera, like her brother Francis!”

“This will never happen!” she readily cut him short with angry voice; and politely but firmly, she left.

A year passed. In the autumn of 1910, the young Countess Lavinia Perez went up again to St. Zeno in Monte.

“Father, she said with humility and modesty, I ask that I be accepted, in charity, into the Opera”.

The young Countess was dressed modestly, but properly, according to her social status; she was rich, very much esteemed; therefore, she did not come to beg for a place to stay away from financial difficulties or worldly delusions. No, No; she felt being called by God to a more perfect life, in a Congregation which was not ecclesiastically instituted yet, very poor, and very humble.

How different was now her attitude, spirit, word! It was a complete transformation from the haughtiness of the previous year. But the Father wanted a proof.

“Countess, I need a favour from you”.

“Tell me, Father!”

“I would like you to go to Bra Square, to buy a broom and, passing through Nuova Street, bring it to me”.

Maybe she became pale; certainly she hesitated a little, then:

“I'll go Father!” she said.

And she brought the broom.

If you don't know, Bra Square with its “Listone” (pavement) and Nuova street with its various shops, are with Erbe Square, the centre of the City of Verona; a place of

meeting people, of business, and of strolling. To go through Nuova street or stroll along the Listone means to be seen by everybody in the elegant city.

For the young Countess, walking along those places with a broom on hand really was saying goodbye to the world!

She was accepted; she lived there, sister among sisters, for the rest of her days: she spontaneously embraced the most austere poverty, in a very small house where means of comfort were missing and where food was more than simple. Still, one day she was seen eating cooked polenta with cheese with such a good feeling; she said: “I've never spent so happy days like these”.

The Father also told of a beautiful episode, worthy of the “Little Flowers”, about the obedience of Sister Lavinia.

It was the last one of her life, because it happened on her deathbed. She was in agony and the Father came down to bless her and greet her for the last time. She was no longer speaking; she could no longer open her eyes. He called her. It was in vain. Then Fr. Calabria said to her: “In the name of saint obedience, open your eyes”. Sister Lavinia with a great effort opened her eyes, and soon afterwards she closed them.[45]

She died doing an act of obedience. It was on November 4, 1918 while all the bells of the city were happily ringing for the end of the war.

[45] See: Congregation PSDP, *Il Servo di Dio don Giovanni Calabria e i suoi novizi*, Chronicles of the Novitiate, for private circulation; chronicle of October 23, 1940, p. 65.

Maria Fannio

She came to the house on Christmas Eve of 1912. Even if she was a Veronese by birth, she lived in Padova since she was three years old and here, through a pious priest from Padova she knew about the Father and the Opera.

Her parents, belonging to a noble family, were nobler for their virtues and piety and from them she got that kind of education that always distinguished her for her finesse, for her exquisite charity, for a complex of virtues and qualities which show her superior soul.

Even Fr. John held her in great esteem and to her, first of all, gave the task of making an outline of the Rules for the Sisters.

"One could feel her soul full of God – writes a sister who stayed with her for some years –. Humility was for her, I would say, almost natural: the last place was her most preferred and chosen place; the most humble duties were her choice, even when she was a superior; she was more comfortable wearing the poorest garments.

"Never a rude word. The finesse of her charity had something edifying and most beautiful: she reached everything and everyone, without taking herself into any consideration.

"We knew that she was suffering inside her, but how she tried to hide it! For her, the suffering, for us the sweetest

smile. How she gave me encouragement in my difficulties, how she helped me during my trials!"

In fact, she suffered great pains, scruples and uncertainties; but because of her great faith and humble submissiveness, one word was enough to appease her.

She had all the qualities to be a Superior, and she truly was one, but only for two years, because the internal sufferings made more acute by her responsibilities, forced the Superiors to substitute her.

Her anxieties and spiritual sufferings stopped some months before her death which was serene and sweet like that of saintly souls.

Maria Galbusera

Maria Galbusera was born in Milan in 1874 from, very pious and rich parents, twelfth of sixteen children. She had a receptive, frank, jolly, decisive character; intelligent and cultured, with a very sensitive heart.

As elementary teacher, she taught in a rural elementary school for three years; then she became an assistant in the Superior School "A. Manzoni" of Milan.

At twenty nine years of age, it seemed that she was decided to enter the “Daughters of Charity” where one of the sisters already was; but since one of her brothers became a widower with four young children, she felt she had to be near them to take the place of their mother. She settled in Verona and stayed there until 1913 when, stricken by serious physical and moral trials, she went to stay with her brother, Parish Priest of Montorfano, near Como.

During her stay in Verona, she showed what she really was: full of charity and apostolic zeal, with a great spirit of prayer and mortification. She visited the Hospitals, Prisons and the “Reformed”, having in these last two places, conferences for the inmates. She felt a great compassion for the children and the abandoned young girls and those inclined to evil things; many times she reduced her personal belongings almost to zero in helping the neighbour most in need.

She used to pray on the bare pavement, she denied herself the needed rest; she endured thirst and “to be used to everything”, she often fed herself with the children's leftovers. She denied herself of that simple relaxation of playing the piano, which she knew how to play very well.

During the days of sufferings and loneliness, while she was with her priest brother, she wrote to Sister Elizabeth, her sister: “I wait for what I have to do in the way of the Lord”. At once, the sister answered, inviting her again to join the “Daughters of Charity” but her letter, for unknown reasons, arrived a month later.

Meanwhile, remembering of having heard in Verona about Fr. Calabria, his spirit and his programme, through the advice of her confessor and her mother's permission, she asked to be admitted among the “Sisters”. She was accepted and went back to Verona.

She presented herself to Fr. Calabria properly dressed, rather with some elegance, and the Father wanted to put her to the test at once, as he did with the young countess Perez. He asked her to go the way she was dressed, with a cute hat and the small umbrella for the sun, to St John in Valle to buy five cents of wood. She left with simplicity and spontaneity; and she came back with a small bundle of wood under her arms.

Her days were days of trials and sufferings. Satan was shuddering and always tormented her with thoughts of dear ones. Stomach pains and prolonged insomnia continuously haunted her. She never had consolations or sweet spiritual experience; but she didn't lose her cheerful spirit and contented heart, to the point that she joked about her own sufferings.

Fifteen days before her entrance onto the Opera, she wrote to her Sister Mercedes: “Oh, sister! I'm very happy to have done what I did, but above all I'm happy because His will had been fulfilled; more I can say that I'm happy just for this reason... God has my soul in His hands and hundred times a day He turns it again and again under the sun and the shadow the way He likes it. I found a family and sisters who bear with me so much that I'm disconcerted… I always fear this much goodness bestowed on me...”

In 1914 the Father made her Superior of the Community of the Sisters, and he ordered her, for obedience to set up the spirit and direction, improving the outline of the Rules already drawn out by Sister Fannio.

She had the makings of a Foundress, but the Lord wanted her to be with Him sooner. She had lived and had suffered enough; she had already perfected and prepared her soul for the eternal reward, and on April 1, 1917 she flew to heaven.

For some days a slight infection on her lower lips had been noticed, but she didn't give this thing much importance. Very soon, instead, it developed into serious erysipelas, and no amount of medicine could heal it.

The Sisters wrapped her body in white linen; put a crown of roses on her head and an olive branch on her hands: it was Palm Sunday.

She left as inheritance some writings, a diary, letters of guidance and direction, from which a volume with high spiritual value had been taken out [46] and above all an example of a saintly life.[47]

At St. Benedict and Este

[46] "*Why be afraid?*" Opera don Calabria, Verona 1976.

[47] Her remains were transferred from the Verona cemetery to St. Toscana, in the chapel of the Mother House of the Poor Servants of the Divine Providence, Sisters, on November 11, 1975.

Also the “small house” overlooking Giusti Garden was beginning to be insufficient, and on the other hand, there was the need for a specific and particular activity of the increased number of the Sisters. The Father thought of moving the major part of the Sisters to St. Benedict, so that they attended to the children below eight years of age, whom the Providence was starting to send. They moved with Galbusera as their head and under the spiritual guidance of Fr. Battisti, on December 8, 1914.

The Lord blessed this initiative. The number of children increased to ninety in so short a time, from three to eight years old.

In 1920, the number of Sisters further increased, and with a new activity coming up in St. Benedict, they transferred to Este, in a big house left as an inheritance to the Father by a priest of the place.

In informing about their transfer, the Father reminded the Sisters that “the plant was still young and that it could suffer when transplanted; therefore, they should be very careful about it”.

On February 11, 1920, the Sisters, with the children they were assisting and some “gathered” women, who needed special attention and shelter, were finally settled. Soon to this activity of charity and assistance, it was added, with the permission from the Bishop, the perpetual Eucharistic Adoration of the internal church of the House dedicated to the Holy Redeemer. The inauguration, done with a solemn procession along the streets of the city, with a large

participation of the local clergy and the people, showed how welcomed such initiative was.

But the House of Este, as we will see, could not last long. In the second half of 1924, the Sisters went back to Verona; only a few stayed for the kitchen and wardrobe services. Others, requested by the Fatebenefratelli, went to give the same services to the Pilastroni Hospital in Brescia, staying there until May 1926. Finally, the others with the smaller children, settled down in the house placed at disposal by Mr. August Cavalleri, in the neighbourhood of the Sanctuary of Madonna di Campagna, near Verona, which had just been entrusted to the "Good Boys".

The Religious habit

Towards 1920, Fr. Battisti, to whom the spiritual direction of the Sisters was entrusted, thought that it was proper for them to have a uniform that would identify their being Religious; this, also to avoid the possible misunderstanding that some women, accepted in the Este House for charity, could be taken as Religious. Fr. John agreed with Fr. Battisti; but in its realization, even with the best intentions, Fr. Battisti was carried away by enthusiasm; what came out was a habit strikingly religious that bore a remarkable bright coloured symbol in front.

It was decided that the taking of the habit would be done on January 6, 1921. Fr. John himself performed the

ceremony, but he was so astonished by the introduced novelties, among these the new name given to each Sister.

He showed his disappointment after the celebration and knowing that the Church Authorities had not been consulted, he made sure that Fr. Battisti would refer all to the Bishop the following day; it was done, acquiring the necessary permissions for that family of Religious Sisters who already numbered twenty.

Nevertheless, Fr. John didn't yield to what had been done; in fact, in 1924, after Fr. Battisti's transfer from Este to the Madonna di Campagna Sanctuary, he took advantage of this opportunity to decide, with paternal energy, that the Sisters stop wearing the nun's habit, and in place of it, wear a simple and ordinary habit, almost similar to that secular, as was his intentions.

Santa Toscana

The Congregation of the Sisters, flowing from the Father's heart, grew in humility and silence, with great spirit of self denial and sacrifice, following step by step the development of the Good Boys' House.

And it is beautiful to say that the silent and hidden work carried out in the divisions separated by the cloister, stunningly radiated, gaining the gratitude of the young pupils of the

Houses, who, leaving the Institute, feel the need to thank, the Brothers together with the good Sisters.

In 1931 the Sisters were present in all the five Houses of the male branch, and their number rose to thirty-six. It was about time that they would have their own suitable House, capable to act as centre of guidance, admission, enlistment and formation, because such couldn't be the “Small House” at Giusti Garden. The Providence took care of it.

On the small hill called Costiglione, a little bit far from St. Zeno in Monte, at the beginning of the 14th century, Toscana of Crescenzi lived, with the husband Albert, a Veronese noble. She was from a place near Zevio, where she was born in 1290.

Since childhood she loved chastity in a particular way, but to please her parents she married the noble Veronese, not rich, but not lacking in virtue.

She had a saintly married life, dedicating herself, with the consent of her husband, to the most generous exercises of piety and charity, and when in 1318, still very young, she lost her husband, she totally consecrated herself to God, even if she continued to stay in her house.

Later on, she decided to stay in the Hospital of the Religious Hospitallers of St. John the Baptist, becoming a Religious of the Gerosolimitan Order and being an “angel of charity” for the sick.

Before she died in 1343, she asked that she be buried in front of the Gerosolimitan Hospital, in the middle of the road,

where the carriages pass, and not in any other place. She was buried there.

But the fame of sanctity which she had when she was alive continued even after her death, and the wonders which adorned her terrestrial path embellished her tomb. People's veneration for her grew day by day and this led the Ecclesiastical Authority, in September of the same year, to exhume her body and bury it in the Church of St. Sepulchre.

The people called her Saint. The liturgy of the Gerosolimitan Order since 1440 put a Mass in her honor; the Church of St. Sepulchre, since around 1500, started to be called St. Toscana.

The house and the oratory of the Saint on the hills of Costiglione were also, from the piety of the Veronese Church, dedicated to her worship; but this didn't last for long. In the time we are talking about only few external signs were left.

The Lord wanted that it would be given back to the divine praise and to the exercises of charity through Fr. John Calabria, who will have the joy of restoring another sacred place of Verona.

The house was acquired for the Sisters on July 14, 1931, the feast of St. Toscana; but they settled there on February 17, 1934, after the first restoration works.

The Canonical Foundation

Fr. John was never in a hurry about his things; he always acted with a certain slowness, that, to the superficial eyes, could seem a sort of indifference, of detachment from the same things. It is the detachment of the Saints, and the slowness of the one who knows how to wait for God's hours.

How he loved and thought of the Congregation and its ramifications, how he prayed and suffered for them, only those who shared with him his efforts and pains know it. He also had his own designs and wishes, conceived in prayers and sufferings, but everything he subjected to God's scrutiny, through his confessor, and he left to the Divine Providence the manifestation on how and when the fulfilment will come.

As it happened with the family of Brothers, so it was for the Sisters, he waited for the Lord's sign. In fact, he thought of giving them also a juridical physiognomy since the time of Este; but the hour had not yet come. It will come, after more than forty years from the start.

It was the Bishop of Verona himself, Mgr. Cardinal, who gave the go signal. The first Friday of March of 1951, maybe remembering that in the same day, nineteen years before, he received in his hand the first vows of the Father and his Religious and “attracted by the scent of virtue that for many years comes from the Houses of the Poor Servants of the Divine Providence”, Sisters, he expressed to the Father the wish to proceed with the juridical acknowledgement of the Sisters, and therefore, to endeavour the preparation, the soonest possible time, of a scheme of Constitutions.

It was God's sign.

A year after, on March 25, 1952, with regular decree, the Bishop set up the new Congregation of the Poor Servants of the Divine Providence, Sisters approving its Constitutions.

The Sisters in the Mind of Fr. Calabria

With the canonical foundation, the “Poor Servants of the Divine Providence”, Sisters, acquired a juridical personality with its own regulations and purposes, according to the juridical praxis of the Church.

But all this, which can be defined as the “body” of the Congregation, must be verified by the “spirit”, which is its soul.

The Father knew all these, and one day, long before the approval, in front of his Crucifix, to find himself tranquil on his deathbed and in the Divine Tribunal, he wrote some things, “to set... the plan, the spirit and the programme for the Sisters”.

In his sincere humility, he doesn't call them his creature, he goes higher, but the Lord knows the wail and the constant prayers, the sleepless nights, and the vigilant attentions. He has the right, the duty to write what the Lord tells him in the intimacy of his dialogues with Him, for His glory, and for the good of the souls.

And so, he reminded the Sisters that they were born in the same way with the Congregation of the Brothers, with the same programme; that God inspired them to assist the male branch, “to perform in the various Houses the tasks more identified with woman: kitchen, wardrobe, laundry; and that

therefore, even conforming themselves to the needs and prescriptions of the Sacred Canons, they should not consider themselves apart, detached and different from the Opera of the Brothers; the Sisters as well have the same founder, who is God, the same Father who represents God as guidance and Superior of the whole Congregation, the same spirit, the same goals and rules of life, the same programme". They should feel honoured to serve the Lord in the Priests and in the Brothers. But at the same time he feels the duty to write: "For what I know and can, I recommend the observance of the cloister and maximum discretion in dealing with them".

"If the Sisters will be faithful to this spirit – he continues – the Divine Providence will entrust to them other works of charity and of apostolate,[48] especially in favour of girls and young ladies poor and abandoned or in any way in danger, but always having as the primary aim, assisting in the Houses of the Poor Servants".

He saw in these two Congregations, only one; like two branches of the same tree that draws from the same source the sap for its life and for its fruits.

[48] In fact the Poor Servants, Sisters, have taken also the works of direct apostolate in the parishes, and from 1974 they settled also in Latin America. And today the Sisters are present in nine countries: Italy, Romania, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Angola, India and Philippines.

It is not a bond of servitude, but condition of life; not juridical interference, but communion of spirit; in respecting the letter vivified by the divine breath, that had brought them into life and made them prosper.

Maria Galbusera, the noble Olian Fannio and the others who followed in the direction of the humble Family of the Sisters understood it. For them, it could not be different, since they were born and grew under the influence of the same Founder.

The continuity of this spirit constitutes for them the "reflection of the holy will of God and the valve of salvation" of their Congregation.

CHAPTER 9

THE FIRST NEW HOUSES

Costozza

Vicenza, the smiling city of the Berici Mounts, had given Fr. John Calabria his first two priests of the Congregation: Fr. Ambrosini and Fr. Pedrollo. To Vicenza, therefore, it was right to reserve the honour to be given from the Father the first opportunity and the possibility of new developments.

In July of 1917, during the war, the Bishop of Vicenza, His Excellency Mgr. Ferdinand Rodolfi, wrote to the Father: “How much need there is for the Congregation of the Good Boys also in Vicenza, dear Fr. John! How the streets are more and more full of children! Isn't it possible to open also here a shelter?”

The relationship between the Bishop and the Father had started when Fr. Ambrosini came to the House, and it was strengthened with the coming of the other Priest from Vicenza, “sent to him from Paradise” by the same Fr. Ambrosini. Now it seemed that even this one wanted to go to heaven, but God had other plans.

After receiving the letter from the Bishop, the Father placed it at the foot of the Crucifix as he did with other important letters, “giving way for reflection and prayers”.

He was not surprised for the proposal; with the coming of Fr. Ambrosini and then of the other priest who was dear to him, he already foresaw a “sign” that the Lord had had on Vicenza “some beautiful designs”. But it is needed to wait for his signs and follow his will, “because this Opera has its roots in Heaven”.

Indeed he had already calculated that that priest “sent to him by Fr. Ambrosini” was able to start in his Diocese of origin something similar to the activity already realized in Verona. But, alas, he was now seriously ill, as it was the first, and he looked to be “mature for the Paradise”.

He writes all this to the Bishop as a response to his letter and recommends the sick to prayers of the Prelate, who also liked him. On his part, the Bishop mentions a house, offered by the Municipality that could eventually serve the purpose, even if, maybe, it is not the best solution. Fr. John sends someone to look into it, but since the place is not really that suitable, and since for the moment he doesn't have the right priest, the opening of a House is postponed until the time the Lord will like it.

The right time came with the end of the war.

Two months passed after the end of hostilities, when a good man of Vicenza, the Hon. Cajetan Rossi, as a consequence of the evangelical order “what you have in excess, give it to the poor”, and in honour of the memory of his son Roberto, he offered to the Bishop his “very pleasant” Villa of Costozza for a good work.

The Bishop wrote the Father immediately about it, seeing in it the fulfilment of the common desires.

On February 11, 1919 Fr. John and Fr. Pedrollo, completely recovered since more than a year, and the Hon. Rossi proceeded to Costozza to see the place. The villa was still occupied by a field hospital and a number of refugees. Everybody liked it, and the Father heartily thanked the generous donor.

He went then to thank also the Bishop, but showing his hesitancy to start a work in an estate of which he didn't have full ownership.

“It is not for the property – he said – but for the freedom”. In fact, being used to follow the inspiration of God, it seemed to him to be hampered: but the Bishop was firm in his decision. He granted him ample guaranties and understanding the thought and spirit of the Father, he started immediately to negotiate for an agreement that was drawn up the following eighth of July.

The Father accepted the agreement as an experiment. He also accepted that the new House be named: “Villa Roberto”, according to the wish expressed to the Bishop by the donor as a condition, and that a tablet as a remembrance were placed on a wall in the internal part of the building.

These things were beyond his spirit and his programme: only God and His Providence must appear and be glorified in all the activities of the Congregation. But, full of tact and understanding, he didn't object, so as not to hurt the feelings of a father, exacerbated for the recent, tragic loss of his son.

The building complex would have been called “Good Boys' House of St. Cajetan”. The Father had a particular devotion to the Saint of the Providence, whose life had been inspired to live like the Apostles and whom he had put among the “Advisers” of the House in Verona, and who was originally from Vicenza.

The works of repair started; help of the Providence at once came for the primary needs of furniture, equipment and household effects for about eighty boys.

On August 7, feast of St. Cajetan, the birthday of the Bishop and name-day of the Hon. Rossi, the House was "officially" inaugurated with the Mass of the Father, followed with the Mass of Fr. Pedrollo. On top of the altar of the temporary chapel was the Immaculate, the "Patroness" to whom later the church would be dedicated.

The word "officially" should not be deceiving: everything was carried out according to the ways of Fr. John "a small hole and a small den". Of course, there was a priest sent by the Bishop to represent him, there were few friends of the House and Brothers from Verona, but there were no speeches and toasts, or ribbons to cut; everything without fanfare and in a private manner.

For the occasion, instead, the Father wanted to accept a boy, by the name of Cajetan, orphan of both parents, recommended by the Bishop.

On August 5, Fr. Pedrollo left from Verona with the dearest Brother Alexander Fenzi to go to Costozza to prepare in evangelical poverty and simplicity everything for the day after; with his blessing the Father gave them two hundred lire: "The House of Verona – he told them smiling – started with fifty lire!..."

It was therefore a real "capital" what he was giving to them!

The activity of the house definitely started on November 21, feast of the Presentation of Mary to the Temple.

At first it was an agricultural colony; after a couple of years the Professional Schools started.

As the Father foresaw the fact of non full ownership made its development more difficult and toilsome; nevertheless, the desire of both parties to promote the Glory of God and be of help to the poor children, weaken these difficulties.

A Brother who left a deep trace in Costozza was Brother Francis dal Degan.

He was from a rich family of Belfiore d'Adige and employed in the post office of his town; at the age of thirty two in 1919, he was driven by the desire to sanctify himself, and embrace a life of poverty and sacrifice, as it was lived in St. Zeno in Monte.

After few months, he was sent to the new House of Costozza in charge of the kitchen; he was then in-charge of the economy of the House and later on also the Steward General of the Congregation.

For his personal prestige, he drew admiration and benevolence from many persons and benefactors of the Congregation, so that, until now, many remember him with veneration and regret.

He returned to Costozza and stayed there until the eve of his death. He had a great part in the construction work of the church and the laboratories, which he then always followed up and developed; imparting on them an impulse of a considerable work.

He provided for a mountain residence for that House, at Gallio on the Asiago plateau, where, in August 1951, he got sick. He was brought to the Negrar Hospital, but in a few days, he flew to Heaven to receive the prize of being a good and faithful servant.

Beside him it is worth remembering also Fr. Anacleto Tibaldo.

As a young priest of twenty-seven years of age, he was sent to Costozza as Superior in November 1939. His thin, almost pale figure contained an ardent and strong-willed soul. During the five years, he was in that House he knew how to transfuse to the young fellows and the Brothers the fire of his apostolic spirit and the desire for sanctity.

He got an inexorable sickness for seven consecutive years of hopes and delusions, alternating each other; going from one hospital to the other, he had to consume his holocaust.

His bed was a pulpit and an altar; “he always seemed like celebrating a solemn sacrifice”, they wrote of him.

He died a saintly death and in full consciousness during the night between 10 and 11 November 1951.

Este

It was the end of the year 1917.

One day, a tall priest, about sixty years old, with his Paduan accent, presents himself in St. Zeno in Monte and asks to visit the House. Fr. John agrees to accompany him everywhere. He doesn't say who he is, and the Father does not ask either.

After the visit, Fr. John accompanies him towards the exit and greets him. Only then did the priest come out of his self restraint: “I came – he said – to see Fr. Calabria, and you accompany me to the exit?”

The Father made him see that he was Fr. Calabria in person! He was surprised; he didn't say many other things, but in greeting him, he exhorted him to pray, and then he left without revealing his name.

After a month, the Father received a letter from the priest Abbot of the Este Dome, wherein he told him of the death of a priest, Fr. Angelo Pelà, who made Fr. Calabria his sole heir. Attached to the testament was a letter of the deceased, wherein he begged the Father, “for God's glory and the health of the souls”, to accept his last will.

It was about a land of over three hectares, with two buildings for a total of thirty-three rooms, and a usufruct from a land owned by the State property. The main building had been constructed with the contribution from the citizens of Este, so that it could be used as the recreational Patronage Institute for the male youth of Este.[49]

[49] Usufruct: the right of enjoying the use and advantages of another’s property short of destruction or waste of its substance.

The one who conceived and organized that work was precisely Fr. Angelo Pelà, priest with commendable initiatives and various activities. In them he lavished, together with his heart full of ardour, all his patrimony. But unfortunately, with his death, if the capital was big and visible, there were also outstanding accounts with related financial complications.

Fr. John, who often said that about temporal things "through the grace of God" he knew nothing, nor would like to understand them, entrusted the on-the-spot investigation and the accomplishment of this matter to Fr. Battisti, particularly to verify if there were documents that, at present or in the future, in some way could dispute the inheritance and if, once in possession of the same inheritance, there would be a bond about the activities to be developed or a full freedom of action.

A letter, actually, attached to the testament linked in some way the future action. It read:

"For the glory of God and the health of the souls I ask you to accept what I had decided now in my testament, by keeping the Institution as I did, trying to develop it with Professional Schools, always to the advantage of the youth of Este".

For the Father who was so jealous of his freedom, that small paragraph was a nightmare; he prayed a lot and asked for advice from persons with expertise. Everybody agreed that it was just a recommendation, of a simple desire, that it did not bond in conscience; but a brother of the deceased, himself a priest, consulted by Fr. John, didn't provide him that light he needed to be able to be tranquil; and the Father was by now at

a point of giving everything up. But he was being persuaded again and again by the priest of the place, by the Bishop of Padua, by the relatives of the deceased, by many persons from Este and Verona; in the end also His Eminence Cardinal Bacilieri came in, who listened to the judgment of competence of Mgr. Joseph Manzini; he advised him to accept it, and he accepted it.

By accepting, Fr. John knew he was doing the will of God and, with the providences that were already coming in, he was thinking of developing a charitable institution, opening for the Good Boys' House a new field of a saintly activity.

Even if nobody obliged him to do it, the Father was ready to maintain the Patronage; but the two local parish priests of the Cathedral and the Graces, soon took care of having one each in their areas, so that it appeared useless and almost a counter action to give life to a third one; the more, it was always a preoccupation for Fr. Calabria, not to interfere with the activity of other organizations or persons.

The House stood within the confines of the parish of the Cathedral. As soon as the building had been vacated by the military hospital, which occupied it since wartime, Fr. John sent there about twenty sisters with a hundred boys. It was already then in 1920.

In spite of any benevolence, difficulties were not lacking; some selfish opposition came about. Such difficulties multiplied with the death of parish priest Mgr. Dalla Valle, on June 11, 1921. The new parish priest, in fact, did not have all that consideration to the Congregation the way his predecessor

had, above all because it seemed to him that the perpetual Adoration instituted by Fr. Calabria in the new foundation, turned the parishioners away from the sacred ceremonies in the parish.

The Father, always submissive on the unnecessary things, with tact and prudence abolished the perpetual Adoration and then recalled the Sisters to Verona with the younger children, and substituted them with the Brothers; finally changed the Superior.

But all this was not enough to calm the waters down; time passed and one day the Father was called by the Bishop of Padua; he was told that “those of Este were making claims”.

Father John thought that it was all about that letter attached to the testament and assumed that the dispute concerned the non reactivation of the Patronage. For a moment, he felt calm.

The good opportunity of a new legate for the School of Trade and Arts in Este seemed to be the key to stop every controversy. But it was not possible to accept that either and the difficulties continued.

Evidently, the Bishop was having new ideas. In his dialogue with the Father he did not say it openly; but he vaguely admitted that maybe he himself made a mistake, and proposed to Fr. John to make a testament he himself, leaving the Este property, after his death, to the Bishop of Padua. But the Father didn't feel the duty to comply with this invitation; he didn't see any reason for it.

Those of Este asked then that the case should be examined by a competent person chosen by the Bishop, and the Bishop, in agreement with the parish priest of the Cathedral, chose Mgr. Joseph Manzini of Verona, a superior man esteemed and venerated by everybody. They chose him also as an act of benevolence towards the Father.

Mgr. Manzini studied the case and gave his verdict: the inheritance is legitimate; Fr. Calabria is the legitimate owner of what Fr. Angelo Pelà had left.

The fundamental motive of these difficulties was practically this: to finance his charitable undertakings, Fr. Pelà didn't use only his money, but also resorted to, as we have seen, a public subscription. It is true that the amount collected through that means was a small part compared to the whole, but that small amount was enough to give credit to the objection that Fr. Pelà had gone beyond his right, when in his testament he disposed of the whole Patronage as his own property.

The question was delicate in its juridical terms and for the moral implications; in this lays the hesitancy of Fr. John, the alternatives of the Bishop of Padua and the differences in judgments which were issued out by those whom the question was entrusted for a definition. The thing, in fact, was far to be concluded with the extrajudicial opinion of Mgr. Manzini.

The Bishop of Padua, actually accepted favorably that authoritative verdict; but the others didn't accept it and they even were ready to bring the case to Rome for a “clarification”, through administrative way.

At this point, the Father declared that he was ready to give up everything; he didn't want any controversy or fights. He had accepted for obedience, to do good and not for the love of the property or other reasons. He would have continued to remain and do everything the Lord wanted, for the good also of the Youth of Este, but in peace, in harmony of the spirits, in full agreement among everybody, for love and honour of God, and not for personal or parochial interest. No, no; he spontaneously would withdraw!

Again, the obedience stopped him. His Bishop and his confessor ordered him to stay. If matter would have been brought to Rome, the interests of the House would have been protected. But just from Rome came a big surprise. The Sacred Congregation of the Council declared null and void the testament of Fr. Pelà, it unexpectedly ordered the Father to "give back" everything to the Bishop of Padua, considered the legitimate proprietor of the Institution and everything connected with it.

It was a hard blow for Fr. John; but not for his attachment to things or for his hurt feelings, but for the fact that the thing had been referred to Rome, and treated legally, while for him it would have been enough just a word from the Ecclesiastical Authority, by which, before, he had been recognized the legitimate proprietor.

He wrote to the Bishop: "... The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord".

The sorrows were not over yet. Many others had come at the moment of leaving the House. But in the tribulations of

those days, one thing sustained and comforted him then: having acted in obedience and for the love of God.

Here's what he wrote in January 24, 1928, at the closure of the House of Este:

“The matter of Este brought about sad consequences: at Este in our opinion, the clear light of the sun was interpreted in the wrong way... Let's see what the Lord will bring out of this.

“My conscience is serene and tranquil because, with God's grace, we acted under the full obedience to our Superiors. On our part, let's pray so that only the holy will of God will be done”.

For him, Este was a big melting pot and remained “an open obligation to pay” as he affirmed until the last years of his life.

Madonna di Campagna

In February 1923 the Church of Verona was widowed from her Pastor, the Cardinal Bacilieri.

With him, Verona lost a great son and father and pastor: Fr. Calabria and the House lost a friend, though he had a dissimulated churlish appearance and calculated discretion. There are sure signs that he loved the Opera and held in great esteem the Father and his virtue.

One day, talking to two priests about pilgrimages and pilgrims, many of them, he said are prevalently pushed by the

desire to see miracles. “But they just have to look at St. Zeno in Monte – he exclaimed – there is a living miracle there!”

The same judgment was personally confirmed to Fr. John on April 30, 1918, at the conclusion of the solemn commemoration of the beatification of Cottolengo, celebrated in Good Boys' House. “I thank you – he told the Father, touched –, for this half an hour I spent with you. It is really a miracle of God, the Congregation! I bless you”.

Another time, to a priest who wanted to go into an undertaking which was excessively risky, saying that there was a real need to trust in the Divine Providence, he wittily observed: “But don’t you know, Reverend, that the Divine Providence was mortgaged by Fr. Calabria?”

When he died, as a sign of his benevolence, he left in his testament a small amount also for Fr. John. It was the last, posthumous sign of his love.

Cardinale Bacilieri was succeeded by Mgr. Jerome Cardinale from Genoa.

He showed at once to know and to appreciate the work and the person of Fr. John. It is enough to say that, the Sunday after his official entry in the Diocese, on August 15 of the same year 1923, he went for a private visit to the House, where he gave the Eucharistic Blessing, giving thus the first proof of his sympathy and benevolence. The Father defined him “the Bishop of Providence”, exhorting his people to thank the Lord and trust much in the future of the Opera.

The new Bishop was very devoted to the Our Lady; now examining attentively the situation and the life of the Diocese; he noticed that the Sanctuary of Madonna di Campagna, a few kilometres away at the East of the City, was not given enough importance for the public piety. The people were frequent devotees of the place, but the care of the sacred place and the spiritual assistance were entrusted only to one priest.

Near the Sanctuary, in the house made available by Mr. Augusto Cavalleri, the Sisters and the boys coming from Este already found room. Fr. John would sometimes go and see them and in these occasions, he never failed to make a short visit to Our Lady, in her Sanctuary. How many times, during the war, he went there on a pilgrimage with his Good Boys, to beg for peace, in spirit of penance!

The Sanctuary, in fact, work of the sixteenth century, of the architect Sammicheli,[50] keeps, painted in fresco, a beautiful image of Our Lady with Baby Jesus, which dates back to the fourteenth century... and carries the title of Our Lady of Peace.

But at the start, it was called the Madonna of the Open space, by the place where the Sanctuary stood; and then of the Graces, for the marvellous facts that had happened there and that convinced the authorities to transfer the image to the actual place and to build a monumental temple. The transfer

50 Michele Sammicheli (1484-1559), was a very famous Venetian architect, born in San Michele, a quarter of Verona, which at the time was part of the Venetian *terra ferma*.

was done on April 21, 1559 and a little after the works for the sanctuary started.

The temple was completed towards 1586. In the main and central part it has a circular form outside and octagonal form inside, surmounted by a big and magnificent dome; the back part, in a form of a cross, is also crowned by a cupola, where the miraculous icon is kept.

From the partition that unites the two distinct parts of the temple, for many years the stuffed skin of a mastodon crocodile, was hanging: a Vow, it is said, of a certain Countess Malaspina. Since many, during the days of the regular feast, used to visit the church more to admire that monstrous reptile, than to pray, the Father, in 1926, taking advantage of the miserable state in which that relic was reduced to, insisted that the municipality of Verona, owner of the Sanctuary, repair it. Then he opposed that it be placed back inside the sanctuary, instead they displayed it in an adjacent place to the church.

The people called the sanctuary with the name of Madonna di Campagna (Madonna of Countryside), a name which until today is more commonly known, but the official title is that of Our Lady of Peace, title that was given, it seems, by the Republic of Venice, for the peace pact agreed upon between Venice and Rome in April 1607.

Entrusting the Sanctuary to the Father, in the year 1924, the Bishop was certain that the devotion to Our Lady would gain, for a greater advantage to the souls. [51]

At first, Fr. John assigned Fr. Battisti as rector, whom we met at Este; after his death, he put as rector of the Sanctuary Fr. Albano Bussinello.

With a soul of an apostle and an artist, with the consent and blessing of the Father, with great trust and confidence in the Divine Providence and in most Holy Mary, in so short a time Fr. Bussinello gave such a thrust and honour to the Sanctuary, that it went far beyond the hopes of the Bishop.

Of great virtue and energy, Fr. Albano had been the Director in St. Zeno in Monte and in Este; he conceptualized and was the first to carry out the Division of the Aspirant Brothers; he introduced as an educative matter the musical band, that he himself directed; he built the mountain lodging house of Camposilvano; was the spiritual director of the Sisters, Master of the Novices and the first Parish Priest of the Sanctuary.

Notwithstanding the various external activities, he found time and ways to indulge in intellectual tasks, very challenging in contents and size: he left valuable ascetic and catechism works and historic and poetic essays.

He died a saintly death in the nursing home of his brother doctor in Garda on September 2, 1948. He entered the

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[51] The Bishop's Decree for the assignment is dated March 5, 1927.

House in 1924, already a priest, after being a zealous and esteemed priest of the Diocese.

Near the Sanctuary, the charity also flourished since the children of Este found there a place and a foresight. They stayed there until 1944 when due to its nearness to the Venice-Milan railroad and the consequent danger of aerial bombings they transferred to a house given at their disposal by the charity of the benefactors of Ronco at Adige, where they stayed until the end of the war. However, the house near the Sanctuary continued to host “Good Boys” alternating the Elementary and Middle School, according to the contingent needs.

As the population continued always to increase, the Bishop, Mgr. Cardinal, set up a Parish in the Sanctuary on July 16, 1947. The apostolate was more intensified, with considerable spiritual fruits.

Reflecting on the light of its own spirit, the Congregation understood that the flourishing parish could then be entrusted to other hands and so it was given back to the Diocese on September 18, 1970.

To continue the presence of the Congregation, the Poor Servants, Sisters, continued to manage the Nursery School until 2004.

CHAPTER 10

NAZARETH

St. Mary of Nazareth

In the first times of the Opera, a friend of the Father, then chaplain of a small town, going every Thursday to the city, never failed to make a brief visit to St. Zeno in Monte for a "spiritual bath", as he used to call his meetings with Fr. John Calabria.

In one of these Thursdays, a bright and sunny day, walking with the Father in the vast terrace of the House, he

heard him repeating for the umpteenth time the usual phrases which were his dominant thought: “The Opera belong to the Lord!! The Opera is great; it will have great development...”

But that Thursday, Fr. John added something new: “Look – he said, pointing at that antique small church of St. Mary of Nazareth, on the opposite hill – look, we have to reach until there”. Was it prediction or simple aspiration?

Twenty years after, on the Christmas night of 1930, inside the crypt of that antique church, a priest of the Congregation was celebrating the Holy Mass; around him the touched Good Boys students with signs of priestly vocation, because for them the Father had wished and obtained that place from the Lord.

As we have already said, St. Mary of Nazareth was one of the many churches constructed by the Veronese Crusaders upon their return from the Holy Land. The Bishops of Verona, since the beginning of the 13th century had chosen the place as their summer residence. In 1528, the Bishop John Mathew Giberti, a great reformer, very good friend of St. Cajetan Thiene and his follower in the spirit assigned the place as a temporary house to the spiritual sons of the Saint. The Saint himself lived there, during his visits to his Religious from 1531 to 1541.

St. Cajetan Thiene had been in Verona many other times, but when he stayed in Nazareth, he and his sons, the good they did around was so great that Verona seemed to have become “a cloister of religious”. In 1541, the Clerics Regular left and Nazareth became again the summer residence of the

Bishops of Verona. In it on December 30, 1543, the great Giberti ended his days.

Later on, it was given to the Capuchins for sometimes, and for a year the Children of Mary Immaculate, founded by the Blessed Lodovico Pavoni, stayed there. Then, it became again summer residence of the Bishops up to Card. Bacillieri; but, not so well maintained as before, very soon it was abandoned. It was then rented to private families, who completed the work of time, reducing everything in a miserable condition.

Another time again, the Providence elected his faithful and zealous servant to restore and bring back to worship one of the most beautiful Roman-Gothic churches of Verona.

A wealthy person, who knew the wishes of the Father, one day offered spontaneously to him the necessary amount for the purchase. The Father, afraid to spend the amount earlier for other necessities, didn't want the money right there and then and said that it would have been better to bring it at the specified time for the deed.

The preliminaries started. The day for the signing of the contract had been decided upon, but that person, following the interested advice of somebody else, sent a word to Fr. John that "*sapientis est mutare consilium*",[52] and he had destined the already promised amount for other purposes.

The Father was not alarmed: if the Lord wanted that Nazareth would go to the Congregation, the way he sent the

[52] It is proper for a wise man to change idea.

first benefactor, he would inspire another one; he did not cancel anything of what he had already committed.

Meanwhile, another pious person believed it was his duty to secretly inform of the plan to sell the Sacred Congregation of the Council, insinuating that the stipulated price was less than the real value. The Sacred Congregation then sent an engineer to evaluate the property, but the price came out exactly how it was evaluated in the sales contract.

Everything was well: but... how about the money?

The money had to wait until two days before the expiration. The matter preoccupied the Bishop no end. It was not the same for Fr. Calabria. Indeed on the agreed day the Providence did not fail.

For this, the Lord had inspired the good lady Decia Marcati of Cologna Veneta; she then continued to be a great benefactress of Nazareth and the whole Opera. With her, we have to remember her housekeeper, who for a long time imposed upon herself heavy sacrifices, just to help the Opera of the Lord.

Remarkable benefactresses of Nazareth and the Opera were also two sisters from Verona, who had at heart the activity for the formation of priests: the Zoppellari sisters.

When, in the Christmas night of 1930, the Good Boys' students settled themselves on the hill of Nazareth, they found that everything had to be done. The Father gave an order: for August 7 of the coming year, feast of St. Cajetan, the church must be properly restored to worship. It was frightening to

think about it: without means; with time restraint; with a task that required attentive care and specialized workers.

Sweetly, but firmly, the Father insisted: It had to be done. And it was done.

On August 7, 1931, the fourth centennial of the coming of St. Cajetan to Nazareth, the church was reopened for worship and was solemnly consecrated by His Excellency Mgr. Jerome Cardinale, co-citizen of the illustrious Bishop Giberti and his successor on Veronese See.

It was not completely restored, but the faith of the Father and his collaborators, the help of the benefactors; the intelligent and loving care of Eng. Stefano De Stefani would have soon finished the work, a real jewel, which soothes the eyes and where the soul feels invited to pray.

The Good Boys Students

The Lord had led the Father by hand to take interest of the poor abandoned boys. For them he looked for collaborators, built houses, constructed schools and workshops, so they could become men, self-sufficient and useful to the community.

But the priestly soul of Fr. Calabria couldn't stop here. He knew that the real renewal comes from Christ, from the Grace, from the Gospel, from the Church; from the priest, therefore, who represents and personifies Christ, who is a minister of Grace and proclaims the Gospel.

He thought, therefore, since the beginning, to cultivate vocations among those poor young boys whom he gathered, who felt a voice in their heart, like what he felt one day a long time ago: the voice of God who called them to the priesthood, to the altar, to the apostolate.

The voice called, urged; but the invitation could seem an illusion, because of the shortage of the necessary means.

But no; the Providence had arranged everything, so that he, the Father, could find a way to attend to them in a very particular way, as other did think of him, one day.

Therefore, he will take care of them, will accompany them until the end of the Higher Secondary School and there, he will let them free to enter the seminary, or other Institutions, without asking anything for himself.

He was not driven to help for a legitimate interest, for the future of His Congregation; he didn't impose any condition. No.

He was the man of God, who looked for God in everything and served God according to what the divine wisdom and goodness had been preparing; not only for him but also for the others. As far as he was concerned, he understood that he had to give priests to God: for the souls, and for the Church. “The whole world belongs to God”, he always repeated and in God's house there are so many tasks.

He was in love with freedom, the real freedom of the children of God; he was fascinated with the catholicity, and the universality. If it would not offend him to use the term, we

would like to say that he “hated” the meanness, the parochialism, the short sightedness of particularistic interests: he loathed them!

Only God, God in everything, always God: the Infinite God! All the rest had no reason to be but as an instrument.

In this light, the Opera of the Good Boys, of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence was for him in the same level as any other religious family, as any diocese, any other field of apostolate.

Jesuits and Franciscans, various Missionary Institutes, other Orders and Congregations of active or contemplative lives, together with quite a number of diocesan Bishops will be indebted to him for this wide vision of his, disinterested catholic.

Even this was, beside all, a way of showing to the world God's Providence: it is not a small thing to give free education to the young until the completion of classical studies.

In the Rules of his Congregation, he will set, among the special purposes that of “cultivating the ecclesiastical and religious vocations, also of adults, among the poor boys, who aspire for priesthood or religious status”.

In crucial moments, he will bother that the freedom of choice will be respected, which was always, in his heart, because he felt it was wanted by God. And also this he wanted codified: “The students, having completed the Higher Secondary School and philosophy, are free to enter the

Seminary of their dioceses for the study of theology or to follow any other vocation".

Their Formation

The first students lived in St. Zeno in Monte, in a section separated from the other Good Boys, under the special watchful eye of the Father, with their own schedule and discipline. [53]

To them were entrusted in a particular way the care of the church hand the decorum of the sacred ceremonies; they had to be good example for all, in everything. They were separated even in recreation. They were like the others only in the poverty of food, clothes, and place. These were moments of sacrifice for everybody.

They stayed in St. Zeno in Monte until 1920, when vacated the house in St. Benedict, due to the transfer of the Sisters to Este, they went to the said house, and stayed there until 1930, the year marked by the Divine Providence, to give them Nazareth in heritage.

The Father had always followed with a particular concern the students' division. He was frequently in their midst;

[53] The first rules for the young men who wanted to consecrate themselves to the Congregation as priests, were written by the Father in 1910. With the passing of time it always became clearer to him the more evangelical concept of "giving priests to the Church".

he often went to St. Benedict and to Nazareth, staying there for whole days and also sleeping there. He was in close contact with the Director and he willingly received the students; he went to their study and in the courtyard to know them, to study them; he talked to them inside and outside the church, to mould them in that evangelical spirit which overflowed from his soul.

Not aspiring for his own advantage and wanting to prepare priests only for the Church of God, it was needed to strive to form them to universal and catholic spirit, capable of adapting to every environment and to every mission.

And who could suggest to him this direction, this education, if not the One who first had personally taken care of the formation of the first priests, our Lord Jesus Christ? He found once again in the Gospel what he was looking for; in Jesus the Teacher, and in the Apostles the lasting alive example of "his" priests "not his". They must be "apostolic priests".

"Apostolic priests" meant for him, above all, saintly priests "full of Holy Spirit", to be the "light and salt" of the earth, in love with Christ, to Him unconditionally surrendered, to do as Paul of Tarsus did, what He will like; "therefore, ready for everything".

This is the model, this is the ideal program: men of faith and piety, true "ministers of Christ and administrators of His mysteries"; men crucified to the world for chastity, poverty, obedience; lovers of truth, but far from disputes; in peace and in charity with everybody and open to distant brothers; witnesses of the paternity of God, through the surrender to the

Providence, without any worry of human protections: therefore, men of prayer, before action.

Again and always, the Gospel suggested him the tune and reason for the development of this "branch" of the Congregation, which he considered so delicate and important as not to waver in defining it "the heart of the Opera" itself.

The problem of priests will be considered and dealt by him, always with great sensitivity and delicacy, with a very particular interest, that merited a sector which is fundamental for the Church.

He will fix this constant direction, lived, practiced and inculcated with all his strength to those who were around him, in a "decisive hour", in two golden books: *Form of Apostolic Living* and *Restore Everything in Christ*,[54] which with praise, encouragement and the blessing of the Holy Father, should have got enormous consent.

While the branch of the Brothers develops and grows, Fr. John thinks of launching the programmatic lines for the priest, who will be closely associated with the Brother in the apostolate and constitute with him a single unit, like the soul and body forming one person.

As it appears in a letter to Fr. Natale, Fr. John thinks of his priests like this: "Jesus wants that I keep with me apostolic priests, ready for everything, who live surrendered to the

[54] *Apostolica Vivendi Forma*, Verona 1945: only the VI edition (1963) is available; *Instaurare omnia in Christo,* Verona 1953: only the IV edition (1965) is available.

Divine Providence, that for free will carry their ministry, who will look for souls, and would not fear for their food and clothes, because the Heavenly Father will think about it".

The First Fruit

Among the first candidates to Priesthood was one who was waiting for years: the young higher secondary school student of St. Benedict al Monte, Louis Adami.

The doors of the Seminary of Verona were tight closed for those who were not intern students of sacred Theology. But to the Father, encouraged also by his Spiritual Director, the will of God appeared clear: those who would like to consecrate themselves to the Congregation had to attend to their priestly formation within the circle of the Congregation itself.

"As for me – he said – I think that the priests of the House must be formed in the house"; and to that first disciple he asked one day: "Are you willing to wait? If you want, I will let you free to go to the seminary; but I think the more sure way is this: form yourself in the House. Are you willing to wait for four, five and ten years?"

That young man was willing to wait, and the Providence, that prepares everything "secretly" to manifest itself "in the opportune time", provided everything for good.

In the autumn of 1919, the spiritual retreat was preached by Mgr. Joshua Cattarossi, Bishop of Feltre, and Belluno. He occasionally met Fr. Calabria in Verona, right after the war, and between the two a cordial and profound friendship came about, fruit of reciprocal admiration and esteem.

During the days of his preaching, Fr. Calabria found the way to reveal to the holy Bishop his ideals concerning the priests and his desire to pursue vocations of poor people, to draw out from them holy priests “for the Church”. The Bishop listened admiringly, but not surprised, because he himself felt in his heart the same throbs and was dreaming about the same projects.

Fr. John then, so reassured, turned to the Bishop of Vicenza, disclosing to him his projects and asking for the Ordination of the candidate. But not having that Prelate accepted the proposal, the Father turned to Mgr. Cattarossi.

He was very happy to help Fr. John in taking away that difficulty; also because, having consulted on this matter the Prefect of the Sacred Consistorial Congregation, the answer was that every Bishop had the full authority to ordain anybody he thought he was duly prepared.

In 1921 two students left the Good Boys' House to go to Feltre, guests of that Seminary. One of them was the one who had waited for so long time. The waiting time was not spent lazily, so that in Feltre, after one exam on sacred subjects, soon the Bishop considered him fit to receive the Sacred Orders.

In a short time, a little bit more than three months, after having done the due prescriptions, “Brother Gigio” (Louis Adami) became a priest.

The thing provoked surprise inside the Curia of Verona, and specially the Cardinal spoke about it to the Parish Priest of St. George in Braida, his future Auxiliary, because he had written down the “credentials” in a laudatory form. He even threatened not to receive the new priest in the Diocese!

But then, all was kindly resolved by Fr. Francis D' Alfonso, Jesuit, who was giving the Spiritual Retreat in the House, in September of that year.

By the end of the same month, the new priest returned to Feltre, together with two theology students and this time they lived in the Patronage for the youth. But the thing didn't last because the apostolate didn't give the results hoped for; and the Father called them back.

The settlement of the theology students, who wanted to stay in the House, became one of the more pestering problems of Fr. John Calabria; but still and again the Providence came along in the person of Cardinal La Fontaine, the Patriarch of Venice, who offered a solution in the lagoon city.

The esteem and faith of this holy Cardinal towards the Father was such that he wrote him that he trusted completely whatever he would tell him. When there were some difficult cases or doubts, especially regarding the priestly vocation, he would often say: “Here, we have to consult Fr. Calabria!”

Sometimes, he would send the subjects themselves for examination or trial or to educate them; feeling so sure about the Father's judgment or his formation school.

The generous offer of the Cardinal had, however, to remain as an act of benevolence, because the Lord had already said his “enough” to the awaited final solution to the matter.

The coming of the new Bishop, Mgr. Jerome Cardinale, on August 15, 1923, marked the start of a new page. In fact, the day after his entry in the Diocese, receiving the respectful visit of the Father, the new Bishop kept him for a long and cordial dialogue, and told him he was willing to ordain the theology students incardinating them in the Diocese, still leaving them at the complete disposal of the Congregation.

All of a sudden, the more serious obstacle crumbled.

Exactly in this occasion Fr. John Calabria called the one hundred thirtieth successor of St. Zeno “the Bishop of the Providence”.

CHAPTER 11

THE CONGREGATION OF THE POOR SERVANTS OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

The First Rules

When, in summer 1908, in the small restaurant of Ceraino, in between a sip of beer and a bite of bread and salami, Fr. John Calabria read to his first collaborators the first "Holy Norms" to be observed for self sanctification, we do not know if he was already thinking of laying the foundations of a religious Institute.

Still those first, short, simple norms can be compared to some sketches, as by almost unintentionally, as by instinct, by an artist, who, later on, will develop a motif to make a masterpiece.

These norms offer the first features of that "very special physiognomy of the Opera" which was "born from the Sacred Side of Jesus on the Cross" and which he, "poor among poor", submissively received as a "rag", as "clay", "ready for everything", becoming the "Casante" (guardian) of God's edifice.

Those Norms were fruit of prayers and sufferings, too; but how many more prayers and sufferings, how much time and work, before putting definitely together the exact features of the Congregation which will come out, with "the pure and genuine spirit" which will animate, support and increase it!

Already in 1909 and then in 1910, there are retouches, amplifications and clarifications. Fr. John already foresees the Opera as a community of men and spirits, which endures in the time and widens in the space, "if the rule and the programme will be observed".

These are short copy-books, written in his peculiar nervous handwriting, often illegible, with some corrections and cross references. In 1911 he made a hectographed text, which we bring here in summary, because it seems to us as a result of an experience and the arrival point of an interior and reflected upon intense activity.

In his humility and love for reality, he sees a miraculous event in the start and growth of the House; and so he starts: "The goal, for which the Divine Providence put us together in such a prodigious manner, is threefold: 1) So that we attend more and more to our sanctification; 2) so that, *as many rags* in the hands of our great Master Jesus, we commit ourselves

totally to the good of the poor abandoned children, who, for lack of a paternal guidance and unfortunately living in such a corrupt society, are on the way of losing their souls; 3) to show the world of today, so muddled in the earth and which does not measure and does not trust in anything but money, which neglects and forgets the souls and heaven, *that God exists, that He thinks and takes care* of his creatures, and that things and earthly goods will be given to us in addition; but at one condition: that first we seek the kingdom of God and its justice".

"My dear Brothers, heaven and earth will pass away, but the word of God stays forever".

Having so set the goal, he dictates about thirty pages of ascetic and disciplinary norms for its carrying out. But before starting to write them, he feels the need to insist on the first point, remembering the warning of the Divine Redeemer: "What will it profit men if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?"

"My dear Brothers, the main goal, towards which we must always keep our sight, is the salvation of our soul; the salvation of our soul, the salvation of our soul comes before everything else…"

But his soul, who longs for the absolute, goes higher and higher and specifies:

The self sanctification and the care to the abandoned creatures "which God wants from us, and other works, which He will suggest to us time by time and will be united to the first"

are just means, not the aim. The final goal is the greater glory of God, which will be obtained showing his alive and real presence in the world, demonstrated by the Divine Providence.

And so, "this Opera has to be founded on the observance of the evangelical Counsels and live in total trust in the Divine Providence. Nothing asking, praying a lot; nobody has to pay; any kind of advertising must be forbidden; no conferences, no lucky dip; no public thanksgivings. God does not need these things; He will take care of this Opera, which totally belongs to Him: let's look for souls, souls! If we use only human means, if we trust only in the help and protection of men, the Congregation will suddenly cease belonging to God".

To look for the poorest, those who cannot pay; to ask nothing from anyone; not to count on human protection; to leave everything to the Divine Providence: these are fundamental points, already heroic in themselves. But it is not enough.

"The nature of this holy Opera – It is read furthermore – it is not to possess anything, neither to invest money for profit. Everything we have, sent by God, must be spent and given. Souls, souls, and souls!"

"Do not beg for help or human protection: souls, souls; and you will see again the miracles of the first days of the Church. Love, look for, long for souls and I assure you that everything else, which bothers us a lot, will come out even from stones".

God! Kingdom of God! Souls, souls! In the most absolute and extreme detachment from whatever the human nature still looks for. Is it a holy utopia or the mystical exaltation of a fanatic mind?

All this may seem this way, if we consider utopian and paradoxical the Gospel, which had shaped all his life.

“My fields, my possessions – he will often say jokingly – are all in Copenhagen; but debits and income are always the same, and so I do not get anything”.

For him “the words of the Holy Gospel have an *almost consecrating* value: they perform what they mean. These are words to be lived on”. To these words “we may be unfaithful... not so the Lord”.

“God will allow, testing our faith, some little critical times. Dear brothers, in these times we will need more faith, more faith, so God will show himself more, later on... But if the time of trial would last longer, then we must humiliate ourselves and examine ourselves seriously, with new and stronger resolve, sure that, if the Divine Providence is lacking, it is happening for our fault”.

He is a giant of faith! For him the supernatural is disconcertingly natural.

Was he thinking, writing these Rules in 1911, about the foundation of a real religious Institution? It is probable.

In fact, he speaks of “one year of trial” to be spent “under the guidance of the Master Brother”, in order to become real Brothers; he speaks of “simple vows of obedience,

chastity and poverty and surrender in the hands of the Divine Providence", to be taken "on the feast day of our dear Mother, the Immaculate Virgin"; and he notes: "The members of the House will be *secular religious*".

But what he cares most now is "the spirit" which must mould "also the smallest action"; this spirit is of "maximum necessity", to guarantee the "spreading and the steadiness of this holy Opera"; that genuine spirit of faith which will make him say that "everything is great in the House of the Lord: the Brother who uses the broom, as well as the priest who celebrates at the altar".

The Rules of 1920

After thirteen years of life, the Opera could have been considered well tested: it had been strengthened and cemented by the war; it had widened its size; also the sceptics and indifferent people had started to look at it with sympathy. Cardinal Bacilieri himself had now high esteem for Fr. John Calabria and his Congregation; but still, to be coherent to the prescriptions of the Code, he did not open the doors of his Seminary to his theology students. Maybe he was waiting, as a day he told him, for a clearer specification of that organism on its way to growth.

In 1920, Fr. John writes some more elaborated Rules, more detailed, more related to the Rules or Constitutions of the Religious Congregations. But the spirit is always the same.

We do not want to go on particular details, but only to give prominence to some salient points.

We have to make a special mention to the small chapter about charity, which had to be, in his programme, “the special badge” of the members of the Opera.

It surely was *his* badge.

If we did not know the absolute value of the concept of “person”, we would dare to say that he was the “personified” charity. It is definitely sure that, the more the man, the saint, lives again Christ in himself, the more he gets closer to God, who is love. Father Calabria aimed at this ideal.

“I would like to die with this last word on my lips: ‘Charity’!” He said one evening of May of 1919.

In 1916 he printed and posted up in the refectory some bills with the most beautiful quotes about charity from the Bible. In a day of general cleaning these bills were temporarily removed from the wall; he noticed it immediately, entering the refectory and with a voice tone he used to say very important things, he called the Brother in charge and ordered him to post them up immediately.

“I would like that ‘Charity’ be written in gold characters on all the walls of this House”, he said in another occasion.

It was the charity which generated the very original feature of the Congregation: “the total parity among members, Priests and Brothers; equal in everything, on the same level, being as one, in full cooperation, the ones and the others

capable to cover every task... united all in sweet bond of love and fraternal charity, so to form '*one heart and one soul*' ".

These fundamental lines in the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence, codified by the Church in 1949, find their anticipation in all the previous norms.

Since 1909 he wrote these words: "My dear brothers, I cannot find enough words to recommend to you the mutual compassion: we all have defects and we all must bear with each other; one of the biggest dangers of our House could be the discord; let's be *one heart and one soul*, always in the same mood, calm and quiet always and in everything; let Blessed Jesus be *our model*, and let the creatures given to us by the Divine Providence be *our masters*".

Another basic point, which belongs to the pure and genuine spirit of the Congregation, is so summarized: "The members of this Congregation must distinguish themselves in a very special way by the attachment and filial dependence to the Superior; he is the sentry assigned by Blessed Jesus to be the guard and custodian of his House. They must see in him the Father, the brother, the friend... They must consider him as the canal through which the pure and genuine spirit of the House passes, because he is its depositary".

"And then, they must have great faith in his suggestions, because the Lord is helping him with very special light and grace".

In a morning of December 1942, after a night spent in great sufferings, immediately after the celebration of the Holy

Mass, “as if I were on the death-bed”, he wrote these words: “This Opera is great in the designs of God, sign of the times, and from it so much glory to God will come, and it will save many souls if it will always keep its spirit pure and genuine, totally trusting in the Divine Providence, always listening particularly to the Casante (guardian), present and future one, who will have from the Spirit very special light and graces to lead it”.

It will be also on this aspect, on the devotion to the Casante, that Satan, “worst enemy of the Congregation” will cause a serious offensive.

Religious of the 20th Century

Besides the Rules of 1920, there are other proofs that he is thinking of a Religious Family. “... Please, pray, so that the new Congregation will be approved; we are already way ahead and, of course Satan is “enraged...” (Letter to Desenzani, dated on November 15, 1920). The developments of the Congregation, the many “signs” of the Lord about it, the word of the “Father of his soul”, the Fr. Natale of Jesus, confirm to him more and more the conviction that the Opera must last and that there is the need to guarantee its continuity, according to the will of the Lord.

The new Congregation, so, must have its own special physiognomy and structure, sign of the times, different from all other existing Congregations.

The shapeless mass which can be seen in these first lines of Rules will be little by little taking form, until it will appear with definite and precise shapes.

Thirty years will pass, before this will come true; and in the middle of these years a terrible storm will break out, to the point that the Congregation would have been miserably wrecked, if it were not the work of the Lord; instead, in the designs of the Divine Providence, this storm had the duty to bring this frail “ship” to the assigned port.

During these thirty years, the navigation goes on slowly, almost in zigzag, towards directions which, sometimes, seem contrasting.

At first, it seems going towards being a lay Institute; then it changes towards a mixed form; then it goes surely towards being a clerical Congregation. Clerical, lay and mixed Congregation are juridical terms that the Canon Law used in order to express well defined realities. But in the mind of Fr. Calabria there was a new intuition, totally evangelical, which was not yet paralleled by the Canon Law of the Church.

To use an evangelical comparison, we will compare these stages with the ones of the miracle of the blind man of Bethsaida, who sees a light little by little, at first seeing only vaguely, without distinguishing a man from a tree. Also in this case, it is Jesus who guides his servant, without forcing his personality, without making up for the technical deficiencies of his juridical knowledge; using him the way he is, showing his wisdom and power, together with the docility and goodness of the instrument.

The hard navigation is also demonstrated by the terms used in his first Rules; to the same Bishop of Verona, when he was getting the first diocesan approval, he simply confessed that he did not know the exact value of some juridical terms.

However, this tells us clearly that he was looking far, to a not yet very definite point; but he was foreseeing it, like a singular landing place, prepared by the Lord for this very special Opera, wanted by Him, "for the present times".

At the start of the Opera, in fact, he surrounds himself with lay people, called "Brothers", "Religious of the 20th Century". They do not wear any specific uniform: their uniform must be the virtue, more, "a special spirit and virtue, which will make them suffer any pain, for the greater glory of God and for the good of the souls", "a very special army, ready to fight the holy wars, under the flag of Blessed Jesus".

However, some priests join the Brothers contemporaneously; and among the first "Brothers" there is one who is preparing himself to become a priest "of Fr. John"; he is the future Fr. Louis Adami. Fr. John cultivates ecclesiastic vocations, and since then[55] he establishes that always there are some of them to be cultivated in the spirit of the Opera and, if they will like, with the intention of being part of it.

In the Rules of 1920 it was written that the Congregation had to be formed by "Real secular Brothers"; that a Brother had to be elected a head, according to the Statute;

[55] Year 1910: "Rules for the candidates who desire to consecrate themselves in the Congregation".

that this “head” had to be the director of the House; and that the duty of the priest had to be the supervision of the spiritual activity of the House, in agreement with the “Brother head”. The statute, anyway; says that both Brothers and Priests can be directors of the branch Houses.

In another article he says again: “I remind you that I want that the Congregation will be constituted by ‘seculars’ with the spirit of priests and Religious. This is the will of God for the present gloomy times. The priest will take care of the spiritual part, forming also the Brothers to the spiritual dimension”. In another place, he informs that the Master of the Novices must be a Brother; the duty of the priest is only to verify the vocation.

But, Superior of the whole Opera will be a priest, “assisted by four or five Brothers, who will be his *Counsellors*”.

As it can be seen, it is still a very imprecise and shapeless matter, just sketched; only its spirit is alive, vital, consistent, and wonderful. And the spirit is what matters most. The letter kills, if you stop at it: it is a double-edged weapon.

Some articles of these old Rules may seem contradictory, but they show such an intention and they hide such a spirit that, when the time wanted by God will come, purified by the test and the cross of a continued suffering, when the pure and shining sun will rise, everything will be purged and renewed, and the Congregation will receive its “Confirmation” in the “pure and genuine spirit, put by the Divine Founder since the beginning”.

The Aspirant Brothers

Since the start of the Congregation, Fr. John Calabria recommended to Fr. Diodato, as we find written in a letter dated February 16, 1908, to pray to the Lord, so that he would send good farmers for the growing crops.

The thought of having lay Brothers in the Congregation is always inside him, and the Lord will grant his wish, while, little by little, the Congregation will grow, with the increase of the number of the gathered children.

Apart from the special vocations of already mature people, whom the Lord sent to him, like count Francis Perez, Maxim Besozzi, John Marchi, Alexander Podavini, Alexander Fenzi and others, he wanted that whoever was in charge of the education, should study the nature of the young boys and point out to him those who, for good reasons, could possess readiness and qualities to give way to a vocation, either to the priesthood or to a lay religious life.

Convinced more than ever that the Congregation was in need of both kinds of vocations, he immediately planted in good soil the seeds of a long-term plan, in favour of students to be addressed to the priesthood and of lay Brothers, capable to work and manage the various branches of the Opera, particularly suitable to these vocations.

He loved personally to follow up the signalled elements, still leaving them in their environment and under the guidance of their superior. In 1909, a small group came up, almost as a little rivulet of a bigger river, which he sent, for the studies, to

the diocesan seminary. Instead, he preferred to cultivate the Brothers inside the normal place of growth, together with the other young men to be able to better mould their character, putting those who seemed more suitable together with the already mature Brothers, in order to get from them the spirit and the lifestyle.

For their specific religious formation, he entrusted them first to the delicate care of the saintly Brother Francis Perez. Under his guidance, they were educated to prayer, to meditation, the knowledge of the Rules and, after reaching a sufficient human and religious maturity, they were allowed to take the private profession of the evangelical counsels, the three vows, with the addition of a fourth one: the total trust in the Divine Providence.

Growing little by little the group of the Aspirants to the religious life in the Congregation, and since Brother Francis had to give up his duty, due to his age and poor health, Brother Ignatius Faccia was called for this special task, and under him the Aspirant-Brothers Section was born, with an ecclesiastical and missionary openness proper to those times, getting inspiration from the great innovative spirit of Pope Pious XI.

The Aspirants Section had, still in St. Zeno in Monte, its own separated quarters. Study, dormitory and refectory were in only one room, waiting for a better accommodation. And this came true the day before Christmas of 1930, when the Students Section was transferred to Nazareth hill and left empty the St. Benedict House, which was precisely occupied by the Aspirants.

Fr. Louis Pedrollo was called to direct the Section, and he brought it shortly to an excellent level of formation, very well suitable to the spirit of the new Congregation on its way to the diocesan approval. A responsible Brother was always put beside Fr. Louis. From that Section, visibly blessed by the Lord, a great number of Brothers for the Congregation came out, during many years. Others, in that environment of strong spirituality and rich technical and cultural training, found in themselves other vocations, especially to the marriage life and the family; going back to the world, they gave precious proof of the formation they received in various local ecclesiastical communities.

The Diocesan Approval

The first suggestion to go back to the idea of the diocesan approval for his Congregation, was given to Fr. John Calabria, around the year 1922, by the Barefooted Carmelite Fr. Adeodato Piazza, in charge of the Sacred Congregation of the Religious, then Cardinal of the Saint Roman Church and, lastly, first and only Protector of the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence.

Fr. John had preached the Retreat to Fr. Piazza for the priestly ordination; and then there was also Fr. Natale of Jesus, a very active tie of uniting charity between Fr. John and the Carmelites.

Fr. John received positively the suggestion and, sending to His Eminence Card. Bacilieri his greetings for his name-day, took the opportunity to hint at the wish for an ecclesiastical approval of the Congregation. The Cardinal answered, on September 1, 1922, that, before giving his opinion, he would have wanted to see the programme of the Institute.

The Father didn't let him talk twice, and sent it to him immediately.

Five months later the Cardinal died and nobody knew what happened to the programme sent to him.

It was the new Bishop who, in 1924, asked Fr. Calabria for another scheme of Rules, promising he was going to study them, in order to come to the juridical approval of the Congregation.

But also this scheme was in danger of ending up like the first one; in fact, it stayed inside the Bishop's drawer until the end of 1929. The many and pressing problems of the Diocese had kept him so busy that he had no time at all to study it.

But the Father was in a hurry to get a definition. Twenty years had already passed since the Congregation was born and grew, bringing so many fruits of good work. So he asked Fr. Pedrollo to come from Costozza to St. Zeno in Monte, with the specific duty of studying and preparing the Rules for the approval. The Bishop gave back the book already given to him. Fr. Pedrollo, together with other three priests of the House and one Brother, among the most senior and authoritative, re-examined that first text and wrote down the definitive scheme.

The juridical terms rightly cover a little, in the modern Constitutions, that spiritual air so present in the old Rules, when holy men of God wrote what the Spirit was dictating, without pre-arranged outlines, without legal bottle-necks already in place. Also the Rules of the Father had to go under this inevitable and logical restriction. The scheme, so, came out with the old trace, but rather limited, as far as the thoughts of the Father were concerned. However, the main vein is authentic: the same goals, the same spirit, the same old "novelties" about the parity among members and the government of the Institute: "new ideas on old foundations", as the Father loved to say.

For example, in the first Rules the precedence among members was not even mentioned; in this scheme, to follow the Code, it was inserted. Father Calabria will insist to the end to avoid its inclusion in the Rules, but to no avail. "Not to be bothered by precedence, I think – he wrote – it is more in line with the family spirit we must cherish among ourselves; in particular cases, if needed, the Superior will give special instructions; I feel, this way, that we will be able to practice better what is written in the Holy Gospel: *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all* (Mk 9: 35).

The Gospel was the code he was continuously referring to, in the likes of the biblical deer, he was thirsty for water coming from the spring!

The drawing up and the reviewing took rather long time; it went on until the end of 1931. Now and then, the Bishop shook his head and was quite perplexed for what was "new"

and not in line with the Code. But he was hesitant to peremptorily reject it: he had in great esteem the man of God, and the positive experience of the Congregation for the past twenty years could not be easily forgotten.

To make things faster, a request came from Rome, from the Cardinal Vicar, His Eminence Marchetti Selvaggiani, for three priests of the Congregation, to be devoted to the assistance of the faithful in the suburbs of Rome. The Veronese Fr. Giulio Bevilacqua, an Oratorian priest later made Cardinal by the Pope Paul VI, who had then a sensitive position in Rome, suggested to the Cardinal that request.

The Father accepted but had a condition that first the Congregation had to be approved; the Cardinal urged then the Sacred Congregation of the Religious to ask the Bishop of Verona for that approval.

It was already the end of January 1932.

The Bishop, very devout of the Virgin Mary, wanted to set the approval date for the next February 11, feast of the Apparition of the Virgin in Lourdes; and he found the Father very agreeable, since he considered the Immaculate Virgin Mary the Owner of the Opera.

However, the legal mind of the Bishop could not find rest, and, the day before the Immaculate, the evening of February 10, he called to his residence the priests in charge of compiling the Constitution, just to read to them a paragraph of the Code, where it was clearly said that in clerical

Congregations, lay Brothers were not allowed to be part of the management of the same Congregation.

For sure, this paragraph was going to bother those becoming Religious.

A compromise was thought of: the Congregation would be approved, but the Constitution would still be kept "*sub judice*" (under study). And that was it.

The birth, so, of the new Congregation, was tied up with the feast of the Immaculate of Lourdes, celestial rainbow, "sign of alliance" sent by God to shine as a promise of certain peace, before the clouds would start to gather.

The Last Steps

The day after the approval, the Bishop called again the priests compilers of the Constitutions, to talk again about that hot point. The words of the Bishop seemed reassuring, but, really, the Constitutions were not promulgated.

In Rome, in the meantime, pressures were made to have the priests there and a deadline was set: March 6, Passion Sunday, the priests had to be there.

Then, March 4 was set, first Friday of the Month, for the approval of the Constitutions and the taking of the first Vows.

The obstacle to be overcome was still the Code, which the Bishop rightly, felt bound to; and he wanted to look for backers. Privately he asked for an opinion regarding the

controversial point from the Sacred Congregation for the Religious; and the answer, requested in such scholarly terms, couldn't have been but one, the same as per Code: *in a clerical Congregation, the laymen cannot participate in the management. They could be allowed, with due precautions, only in the case of a mixed Congregation*.

This answer was brought to the Father by the Bishop himself, on Saturday, February 27, while everybody was attending the Retreat in preparation to the Vows.

Again, a sense of uneasiness and perturbation got hold of those few priests, to whom the Father felt the duty to share the news, looking also for advice. They agreed that the Father should write a letter of answer to the Bishop, clearly expressing his point of view. Father Calabria did it.

He could not destroy in a moment for twenty years of perfect communion with the Brothers, the first who faced all the weight of the tiring, exhausting, heroic start; in these Brothers he saw the hand of the Lord who wanted them and the Spirit who motivated them. The experience, the generosity, the dedication of those first collaborators and, after them, others who consecrated themselves to the Congregation, could not just be put in a corner and not to be rewarded with that investiture, which was wished for by everybody.

It was true, he had dreamt of a clerical Congregation, because the Lord made him understand that he was planning for him great and special designs, for the formation and the sanctification of the clergy; but if the mixed Congregation reflected better image for the Congregation, still saying that did

not know the exact meaning of “mixed Congregation”, he declared, however, to have no objection to the approval in this way.

He thought of giving the letter to the Bishop the following day, but the Bishop anticipated him.

Poor good Bishop, he couldn’t find peace! He wanted to solve the question, without disappointing his Fr. John, but, on the other end, he couldn’t go against, just like that, to the Hierarchy’s dispositions.

The Father read the letter to His Excellency and then he asked the Bishop to listen to some priests, among the elders. The Bishop agreed, but insisted that he was not going to approve but a clerical Congregation. And he left, leaving everything in... high waters.

The evening of the same day, Fr. John Calabria wanted that, in the presence of his spiritual Father, the older Priests and Brothers gathered to discuss together, in the name of the Lord, some alternatives to this laborious “landing”.

The conclusions were perfectly in agreement with the idea of the Father: if the mixed Congregation reflected better the way of life they were practicing until that moment, the Constitutions for a mixed Congregation had to be approved.

The following day, the Bishop was informed about these conclusions. But, because of the respect and the devotion of the Father for the Bishop’s authority, they expressed them in form of a wish: everything was still up to the Bishop.

The Bishop understood that, to those men who had lived and had planned their lives in the spirit of the Lord, above the cold legal schemes, one or the other denomination was of little importance, as far as the spirit was kept intact; that spirit of unity and fraternal charity, which until then had kept them together, without any regret, and which they wished to strengthen more with an official consecration: the approval of the Church.

The Bishop understood all of this and felt heavily undecided. He had great esteem and respect for the Father, he admired his principles and the kind of life he had started, but it seemed to him that he was going to be more favourable to the good of the Opera by approving it as clerical Congregation. He thought that the Brother could still live as before, and give their active contribution with advice and experience, without necessarily being part of the management. In short, he thought that his interpretation was the best and so he found himself fought on two fronts, and he did not know where to give up.

The Bishop was, also in this case, an instrument of the Lord: he really was the “Bishop of the Providence”. A day will come, still after a long and painful labour, when the wisdom and the far-sightedness of the Holy Mother Church would reconcile the opinions of the ones and the others and together all would rejoice in learning about the final verdict.

But now it was necessary to suffer: “in pain you will give birth”; and the creature to be born must be a perfect one.

Facing these expressed wishes, the Bishop had a sudden outburst: he had already imagined the answer.

Well then, remove the word “clerical”, remove all the articles enumerating all the pertinent privileges; let “mixed” be approved, but, let it be clear to all that he was doing this against his will and that he would leave in the diocesan see a classified document, worth of the condemnation of the Congregation but of justification for himself.

The result of this audience couldn’t really be liked by the delicate and sincere respect of the Father. He immediately said that the Congregation could not be born in that way and decided, out of respect for the Bishop, to accept the approval of the Constitutions for a clerical Congregation, leaving to the Divine Providence its future.

On Friday, March 4, first Friday of the month, the Bishop wanted to accept personally the first Vows of the priests, postponing the Vows of the Brothers to the feast of St. Joseph.

The port was reached, but it was not the one marked in the nautical maps of God. Very soon a big storm will pull away the frail boat from the moorings, sending it adrift, towards the wreck. It was instead a mysterious way to set out again the navigation towards the appointed port, under the hand of the Divine Helmsman.

CHAPTER 12

IN THE ETERNAL CITY

The Rome Mystery

Rome is the Church, is the Christ.

Human and divine are united without mingling; they are distinct without being separated.

Jerusalem and Babylon, the city of God and the city of Man: this is Rome.

The destiny of Rome is in the hands of God. Peter and Paul, Genseric[56] and Charles V[57] are all God's instruments for her exaltation and for her purification.

Rome must continue to exist; must continue to teach, to save. Until the end. For all the people. It is in God's plan.

You cannot stay indifferent thinking of Rome: "Who is not for me, is against me…" Either you love or hate.

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[56] Genseric (389-477) was a king of Vandals; he invaded Rome in 455 (sack of Rome).

[57] Charles V Habsburg (1500-1558) was a king of Spain and an emperor of the Sacred Roman Empire; his soldiers, the *Landschenechte*, invaded Rome in 1527 (sack of Rome).

Either you are building with Rome, or you are destroying without her. She herself needs to be continuously renovated.

Fr. John Calabria saw Rome in such a light.

We know the evolution of his feelings towards this city. He had been there for the first time in 1925, as a pilgrim; he went back there in 1934, for the canonization of Fr. John Bosco, bringing the outline of a plan, to be submitted to the Pope, for the sanctification of the clergy; but he did not give it. During these visits he saw "plenty of things, good and bad ones".

But for him, Rome was still the "centre of Catholicism", where the Providence had decided to put the "See" of Christ's Vicar, the Pope, Teacher of truth. She still was the "centre of Christianity", which "we can say the whole world looks at...; because of this, here, we have more responsibility than anywhere else": to be "living Gospels... to show the world a Christianity which renovates itself, imitating the life of the Apostles and of the first Christians".

Rome, counting only about 200.000 inhabitants at the time of the famous Breach,[58] in 1932, it reached almost a million people.

While the city, before 1870, was practically closed within her ancient quarters, after the '70 the need was felt to extend the boundaries outside the walls, adding Districts in the Suburbs and also in the Roman Plain, because of the migratory inflow. Moreover, in the years 1930-1935, to the migratory phenomenon it was added the decentralization of that part of

[58] See the breach of Porta Pia (1870), on chapter 1, Some Historical Notes.

population who left the quarters destroyed for the embellishment of the capital.

The problem seemed complicated. How was it possible to provide religiously and morally to a population five times bigger within an area fifteen times wider? Priests were needed and churches.

The vast and daring mind of Pious XI created, with "*Motu Proprio*" dated August 5, 1930, the "Pontifical Society for the Preservation of Faith and the Construction of New Churches in Rome".

The Cardinal Francisco Marchetti-Selvaggiani was then the Pope's Vicar for the diocese of Rome: to him the Pope entrusted the new institution.

The great passion and zeal put by the Cardinal in performing this duty are witnessed by about fifty new churches which he, in less than twenty years, built and opened to public worship in the Suburbs of Rome and in the Roman Plain, and by more than a hundred twenty educational and assistance institutions he annexed to the churches.

But the walls were not enough, the sacred furnishings were not enough: men were needed, and missionaries, the evangelical workers!

Rome looked like a besieged camp; a belt of poor people was pressing around her. They looked like the crowds of Capernaum, of Bethsaida, the crowds of the cities of Judea, Galilee, Samaria, who were waiting for the passing by of Christ, in order to be cured of their various diseases.

Primavalle, Gordiani, Pietralata, Tor Marancia!... How these places were similar to the villages and cities of Galilee, with their low and dirty agglomerates, the narrow and obstructed lanes, the rolling in the dust of the ragged and snotty-nosed children!

The Christ was expected here, too; He was needed. But Christ had to be looked for, hoping that he would break once again the bread of truth and life, that he would once again bring consolation to the hearts, lighten the minds, straighten the ideals, clean the souls and revive them!

Rome could not do all this by herself. The Cardinal then ran to the old Religious Orders, to the new Congregations, asking them to send “workers” to the diocese of the Vicar of Christ.

Under the papacy of Leo XIII, St. Pious X and Benedict XV, the solution of this problem had already started; but now the needs were growing, we can say, with geometric progression and it was not easy to take care well of everything.

We already said that the Father too was requested to send his Religious.

It was the Providence. The call to Rome was the occasion for the first approval. It was really in the plans of God.

"Like the Apostles"

On March 4, 1932, just after having taken the holy Vows, a squad of three priests and one brother left towards Rome "like the Apostles".

Like the Apostles one day went to evangelize the world "without staff, without purse, without bag..." in the same way, they were going, trusting in the Divine Providence, without any human support or protection.

Going to Rome, for those four Religious, men born and grown up in small and poor towns of the Venetian land and in the enclosure of the House of the Lord, it was like going to the world's end! Still they left, carrying their poor things, but with a lot of faith. They did not even bring any food for the trip and with a little money in their pockets.

They were called crazy in Verona; and crazy they were called in Rome. And not really to be true to the saying: "Veronese, all crazy".

They were going as the Father sent them, glad if, as the Apostles, they would have been found worthy to suffer for the Gospel.

A good person paid for the ticket; along the trip somebody shared food with them. In Rome, the Calasantian Sisters gave them food, drinks and some blankets, to make the floor less hard and less sharp the cold of the night.

The letter that the Father gave them as testament is simply wonderful, and we cannot avoid reporting it here.

To Rome as to the Calvary

"To my dearest and most loved priests who are going to Rome, to perform one of the greatest designs that the Divine Providence has given to the Congregation of the Poor Servants of the Divine Providence.

Dearest in Jesus Christ,

With your departure, we find ourselves facing a fact clear and precise like the light of the sun, which shows how the Divine Providence looks at this Congregation, at this new Congregation in a very particular way and how it goes gradually performing the great designs it has since eternity. Meditate well that it is just the Lord who singled you out among thousands and thousands to be sent to the city of Saints, of Martyrs, of the Christ's Vicar on earth. Your departure is indeed a call almost extraordinary, a reality, a touching happening, which must call everybody to make serious reflections about the greatness of the Congregation, which we all have the fortune to belong to, and, at the same time, to consider the great responsibility given to you who leave and to us who stay.

Dearest, I always told and repeated to you, during these years, that the Congregation is great, that God has big plans to actuate and these plans will be a reality only if we are instruments docile, humble, like rags, without head, like clay, and this I say and repeat now that you are leaving me, and give to you as a testament from me. Surely, when I was thinking of you, I had no hint that the Providence wanted you in Rome, and so soon; in Rome, centre of the Catholic Church. I surely did not

think that the divine Providence just after the erection of the Congregation would manifest other plans of no less importance, which will be completed in sufferings, fight, pain, because, let's remember well, only in sufferings and in the cross this plant of the Lord will get its sap to grow flowers and fruits, fruits of God's glory and good to the souls.

Dearest Brethren, you are going to Rome. Remember that it is Jesus himself who is sending you, the same Jesus who one day, sent his Apostles to the world to preach but, first of all, to practise the Holy Gospel. I assure you that when, as a young priest, I read that passage about how the Apostles, sent by the Redeemer, had to go without staff, without bags, with great trust in God, those words impressed me no end and I always kept them inside my heart. Go, then, but go in the same way the Apostles went: without any thought about material things, without any worry. Look: this is your uniform. God will never abandon you, you will always be rich in your poverty, and, if it will be necessary, God will perform also miracles for you.

Bring to Rome the spirit of our Congregation, the one and only thought should be: the Kingdom of God, and the salvation of souls. Be the living Gospel; and practise, before you preach. The Gospel has to be literally applied by you: this has to be your exclusive patrimony, the secret to do great things.

I feel right now all that I have to suffer and what you have to suffer because of Satan, who frets, who frets, and I do not know how far can he go.

Dearest, let's hold on tight to the Crucifix and let's ask for his help, together with the protection of the Virgin of

Sorrows, and go ahead. Your trip to Rome is not a pleasure trip, it is a trip to the Calvary, and when you'll be there, you have to stay always on the Calvary: this is the condition for the blessing of God on your ministry... Continue looking at the Apostles, the Saints and the Martyrs: this is the only way for you to perform and do the divine will. Don't do anything without prayer and advice. Whatever you say or do has to be felt first inside of you and practised.

Go to Rome and stay in Rome, how the Apostles, the Saints and the Martyrs went and stayed. Remember that you will bring souls to God through sufferings, charity and only charity. When you cannot talk to the souls, then talk to God about your souls (meaning, the souls entrusted to you). Never stop at the bark, look for the marrow, and think that these souls have been redeemed by the Blood of the Lord.

Your trip and your staying in Rome be under the protection of the blessed Virgin, St. Joseph, St. Theresa of the Child Jesus and the Pope Pious X.

And now my loving greetings, my blessings, while I recommend myself to your prayers; do not forget the obedience and the union with the Mother House; and I leave you now with the wish that we will be all together in Paradise" (Date of the letter: February 21, 1932).

And so the Poor Servants of the Divine Providence started their mission in Rome. This was the will of the Father: this was the will of God.

An Open Door

Not always the Saints are prophets, or all the prophets are Saints. However, they have a point in common: the poetry; the flight towards open spaces, towards new conquests.

Father John was himself a poet.

He was a lover of the Gospel, the whole Gospel: of the Gospel as life.

He felt his heart full of it, overflowing! In him there was the urgency to proclaim it, to communicate it. He extolled it with the words, sang it with works, he wanted it lived by himself and his sons, literally, "*sine glossa*" (without explanations or annotations).

The activity of the abandoned children, the cultivation of the poor and adults' vocations, the poor, the sick were "doors" for the spreading of the Gospel, means of propagation of the evangelical spirit.

The ideal is always beyond the reality. It seemed that nothing satisfied him; he always felt a transcendent urgency for "new and great plans" to be carried out.

Also the call to Rome was for him an open door.

"In the plans of God – he wrote to his dear sons in Rome, on December 8, 1936 – you went to Rome and you passed through the door of the Parish, but it was a door; remember that the Lord, specially now, wants to perform great things, and he will, if we will live with the divine grace, the way the Apostles did".

The first Parish assigned to the Congregation was the Parish of St. Philip Neri in the Pineta Sacchetti. For many years the hard work of the Poor Servants brought it out from the terrible condition it was in 1932; then it was given back to the Diocese in 1969.

The Parish of Primavalle, once included in the Parish of St. Philip with the Suburb of Primavalle, became later on an independent Parish and it is still assigned to the Congregation.

Other two places were entrusted to the Congregation: Tor Marancia and the Suburb of Gordiani. After many years, in different moments, these two parishes, with a new image, were surrendered to the Diocese of Rome: Tor Marancia in 1956 and the Suburb of Gordiani in 1988.

In 1943, a House for poor and abandoned children, like the one in St. Zeno in Monte, was opened in Primavalle. But also this was not enough.

"There are other plans, – the Father wrote in this instance – which you will carry out if you will persevere in this only thought; o seek the Holy Kingdom of God, abandoning yourselves in the loving arms of the Divine Providence".

Anyway, Rome will always remain an "open door".

Villa San Sebastiano

The year 1932 marked for the new Congregation another event, not lacking in particular interest.

In 1931, a town in Abruzzo, in the province of L'Aquila and in the Diocese of Avezzano, Villa San Sebastiano, with one thousand three hundred people, for one of those positions taken sometimes by the rural populations, especially in the mountains, risking everything, including their own souls, became almost totally protestant.

The reason for this misdeed was the attachment to a parish priest, zealous and good, whom the Bishop, for his valid reasons, wanted to transfer. First they threatened to call the Protestants, if the parish priest was removed, then they did it, as soon as the Bishop made clear that he could not back out of his decision.

In town there were already some families, migrated and secretly protestant, who kept relations with the Wesleyan Methodists of Rome. And these, taking advantage of a delicate situation kindled the fire of the passions and arranged the gloomy barter.

The Wesleyans, strong in means and organization, did not wait for a second call and wisely sent to Villa San Sebastiano, as pastor, an apostate priest who, with ingratiating unctuousness, was able to convince almost the whole population; some families, however, laudably held out with faith.

The precarious situation became worse when the town, without parish priest and seduced by a false pastor, became target of a very big material assistance campaign and when the protestant temple was built with an annex of rooms especially

dedicated to attract the youth. And so, the Protestants reigned without any opposition for about seven or eight months.

The situation was difficult and almost hopeless; the Bishop, Mgr. Pious Bagnoli, Barefooted Carmelite, thought that the best solution was to entrust the parish in trouble to some Religious, who would try to heal the environment and gain back those poor souls. Knowing that the Poor Servants were doing so well in the suburbs of Rome, he went personally to Fr. John Calabria, in Verona, and prayed and implored him to give him a hand.

It was not an easy decision, especially for the material lack of personnel; nevertheless, the Father could not deny his help; he asked for some time to pray, seek advice, reflect: and in October 1932 he sent to Villa San Sebastiano one priest and two Brothers.

The apostasy in this place did not stay as a simple local episode. The fact that in the heart of Italy, by the ‘doors, we may say, of Rome, a town had almost totally become protestant, was an argument for controversy; it was almost like a challenge, specially when the Protestants were planning to build their temple, with a Theology University, right in Monte Mario, almost overlooking St. Peter and the Vatican.

The challenge, if we can call it this way, was taken, but in the style of the Gospel.

To the silent and long-lasting work of the Poor Servants, it came side by side the dismantling and powerful action of the Jesuit Fathers of Via degli Astalli, helped by the very good

laymen of the Congregation of the Perseverance Retreats, all sustained and encouraged by the concern and the charity of the Sovereign Pontiff Pious XI.

Religious conferences, Missions to the people, assistance and education works, propitiatory sacred ceremonies, catechism schools, organization of the still faithful laity: these were the means used with joint effort, contributing to the slow but successful work of enlightenment.

A conversion, which made a great impact and did great good, was that of a certain Raffaele Costantini, called the pope of the Villa's protestants. He was a very convinced protestant and had in strong terms declared that he wanted to die within his faith community. He fell seriously ill: sign of near death. The Parish faithful, headed by the parish priest, went then in pilgrimage to the sanctuary of the Madona di Pietracquaria and prayed for his conversion.

The Mother of Mercy performed the miracle. One day, Costantini spontaneously called the parish priest, abjured, received the holy sacraments and died as a good catholic, like he had been before.

Another conversion, which helped in thinning the number of these wandering people, was no less than that of the Pastor Carlo Zardi, whose abjuration happened solemnly in the church of Villa San Sebastiano, in the presence of the Bishop.

During that period of apostolic work, Fr. John did not fail to visit his sons and stayed with them for one day and night. The so delicate situation of the moment made him suffer a lot.

He did not lose any moment of peace and calm, as though he was feeling in himself all the sly fight the enemy was engaging against those souls.

The Poor Servants stayed in Villa until October 1939. After seven years of tireless work, they could leave the place satisfied: if when they arrived the Catholics were a small minority, when they left the protestants were the lean minority: they thanked the Providence for these happy results; the Providence had also used them, to bring that town back to be reunited to the Mother Church.

CHAPTER 13

THE SACRED HEART HOSPITAL

The bulletin "Apostolate for the Sick"

The sick persons were a privileged portion of Fr. Calabria's apostolate: they were suffering members of the body of Christ. He too, knew the pain and maybe for this reason his first cares were for any kind of suffering people, specially the sick ones.

Also, when the Lord addressed him towards the abandoned youth, through providential roads, he never forgot his dear "sick people". How many times the Hospital Wards saw him around! And not only the Hospitals in Verona but also many houses of sick people wished to see him and were comforted by his presence!

One day, around 1925, he came to know, through the newspaper "L'Osservatore Romano", about a very simple apostolate for sick people, which he liked very much: it was about a month's contact with the sick people, through a "*Monthly Letter*" of comfort, inviting them to accept their sufferings from the hands of the Lord, to suffer together with Jesus on the Cross and to offer everything, through the hands of the Virgin Mary, for the good of the Church and the souls;

this movement, furthermore, organizes a yearly "Day" for the sick people.

He immediately got in contact with the leaders of the International Centre of Bloemendaal (Holland) and started in 1931, with the blessing of the Bishop, the "Italian National Centre for the Apostolate to the Sick People" with the seat in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Peace in Verona, assigning Fr. Bussinello, Rector of the Sanctuary, to head it. He compiled the "*Monthly Letter*" for the sick people, where also the Father, now and then, liked to pour out his soul, full of faith and overflowing with hope. During the "Days" then, which were celebrated every year for them in the Sanctuary, the Father went to bring the comfort of his persuasive word and of his longed for blessing.

In this way he continued an apostolate, so close to his heart, rather broadening its radius and increasing the contacts.

But the Providence was preparing for his merciful servant a bigger joy.

The House of the Sacred Heart

A zealous and holy priest of Valpolicella,[59] Fr. Angelo Sempreboni, archpriest of Negrar, had started in his town a welfare centre, called "Sacred Heart's House" and had

[59] Valpolicella is a viticultural valley of the province of Verona, Italy, east of Lake Garda. The hilly agricultural and marble-quarrying region of small holdings north of the Adige is famous for wine production.

organized there a small rest house for the elderly, and nearby a modest infirmary.

At his death, which happened in 1932, he made testamentary disposition so that the Sacred Heart's House could be assigned to the parish priest, his successor, and could so stay forever as a property of the beloved parish. However, in practice, the successor, after weighing carefully the pros and cons, thought it was not a good thing to accept burden, which seemed to him too binding and expressed this opinion to the superior authority.

The matter stagnated between yes and no and threatened to become painful for the relatives; moreover, to complicate matters, also the municipal authority intervened, laying some claims.

At this point, somebody suggested to the heir to turn to Fr. Calabria. The Father weighed the matter in the Lord's spirit, asked for advice and decided to accept the offer. But it was also necessary to listen to the opinion of the Bishop and obtain his clearance.

The suggested solution not only met the Bishop's approval, but it was a reason of joy, because for him it was a great relief; and "fervently thanking the beloved Congregation of the Poor Servants of the Divine Providence" he invoked on the Congregation which was coming up, the blessing of the Lord.

The document of the start, with the blessing of the Bishop, is dated December 18, 1933. It was like a gift from the

Infant Jesus. A gift certainly very much welcome to the Father, a special gift; an institution for sick people and the poor, just as it was in his ideals.

Divine Cell

There were then only about thirty people in the rest house: twenty five guests, men and women, assisted by five Little Sisters of the Sacred Family. The Father, under his responsibility, sent one of the first Brothers of the Congregation to manage it; this Brother, though holding the school-leaving certificate and enrolled in the University, adapted himself to the most humble services in the House of St. Zeno in Monte.

The modest building and the narrow borders of the new institution were not giving much hope for a future development; but, just after four years, the Divine Providence helped in buying a nearby building, which was transformed as a rest house for the men, with about sixty beds.

After three years, another step forward; the small church is extended and an adjacent plot is bought. The people assisted were about a hundred.

In the meantime, the former university student went back to study, but medicine instead of classical studies; and it could be very enlightening to know in details how he could, when he was 39, guided and encouraged by Fr. John, went back to study, achieved in a so short time a brilliant degree and got through, almost immediately, to State exams for the clearance

to practice the profession. We are talking of Doctor Antonio Consolaro, who died in Negrar on November 28, 1979.

When the Providence wants, everything is possible for the one who believes. After a short period as a country doctor in a big town in the province of Verona, due to war, the new doctor went back to Negrar and opened an out-patients' department.

In 1944, the small out-patients' department was already a Hospital, with an operating room, managed by a very gifted surgeon, friend of the Opera.

Fr. John used to go often to Negrar, especially during the days he was suffering most, to have near him the Brother doctor, and to fertilize with his pains this initiative, so dear to his heart.

He foresaw grandiose developments, pointed to places where the activity could be further extended, also where it seemed impossible, due to the reluctance of the owners to sell. It was then but natural that also in Negrar the usual "mine", now famous, would be used: the St. Benedict medal; under which – humble and great – was hidden the gigantic faith of the one who was using it.

Today in Negrar, not so far from the original small house, on a vast land full of grape and cherry trees, a grandiose complex flourished, for the benefit of people who are looking for a place of peace.

After a continuous development of many years, the complex embraces different facilities: the "S. Heart and Fr.

Calabria Hospital" with a department also for long-term patients; the "Bro. Francis Perez House" for maladjusted people, with a department also for priests and religious; the "Bro. Pietro Nogarè House", which is a residence with health and social care for non-self sufficient people, with a service of rehabilitation; and finally the "Fr. Calabria Foundation for Tropical Diseases".

Doctors and nurses, Religious of the Congregation, side by side with lay doctors and paramedics for the different specializations, transformed the original modest "Sacred Heart House" into a Hospital Centre, praised for its technical equipments and more for its spirit of true Christian charity.

Together with the Poor Servants, the good Little Sisters of the Sacred Family continue to give their intelligent and caring work; belonging to a Veronese Institution, they were founded by the saintly parish Priest of Castelletto at Garda, Blessed Joseph Nascimbeni, by the end of last century.

The previsions of the Father became true; but maybe the design is not yet complete.

The UMMI

Since 1941, the Sacred Heart Hospital is also the main office of the UMMI (Italian Medical-Missionary Union). Here is its story in short.

At its start we find Fr. Desenzani.[60] He was definitely its inventor.

In 1933, when he was in Italy to be cured of malaria, he thought starting an association, in order to mobilize doctors for the benefit of the Missions, with the dual purpose of helping the Missionaries with medical equipment and also of forming and assisting a medical corps, ready to go to the Missions, to provide their technical and humanitarian work.

He was in Verona at this time, guest of the Good Boys' House, were he had already worked for so long. He then contacted some Veronese doctors to whom he told of his projects, and he found in them ready and practical adhesion.

It was the first time that this problem was discussed in Italy; and with the intention to make it known to all the Italian doctors, the association was rightly called "Italian Medical-Missionary Union".

In May 1934, Fr. Desenzani had already in his hands the clearance from the Interiors' Ministry for its constitution.

But the sown seed stayed, we can say, underground until 1938, so because Fr. Desenzani had to go again to India in November 1934.

He came back to Italy in 1936, to graduate in Medicine, and tried to pull together the strings, which in the meantime had become a little loose; he encouraged the spirits of the associates, to reach a concrete plan; finally, in December 1937,

[60] Fr. Diodato Desenzani, the first collaborator of Fr. J. Calabria (see at chapter. 6).

the Lord sent one who could be the real organizer, animator and moving spirit of the Union: the Doctor Attilio Riccardi.

Dr. Riccardi, bringing the contribution of his experience and his love for the Missions, starts to put together a network of UMMI Centres, to promote the idea and to gather materials from all over Italy.

The movement meets sympathies and approvals and therefore a brilliant success awaits the UMMI; but, after this progress, we register a pause of obscurity.

In fact, Fr. Desenzani, once graduated in Medicine in Padua University in April 1937 – when he was 61 years old – goes back to India; Dr. Riccardi feels the call to the religious life and, in September of the same year, enters the Novitiate of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence.

The year 1938 saw a very important step.

During the Council meeting of May 1, the Councillors approved the proposal of Fr. Desenzani to put the UMMI under the shield of the Good Boys' House of Fr. Calabria.

This was the first official contact between the UMMI and the Congregation of the Poor Servants of the Divine Providence; but the Father, after having prayed and reflected, as it was his usual way, still blessing with all his heart the started medical missionary union, refuses the idea, because it was not possible to assume it.

In 1940, Dr. Riccardi, after finishing the Novitiate year and taken his religious Profession as a Poor Servant, with the permission of the Father, went back to take care of the UMMI

with new fervour and continued until his death, in March 1944, to collect and send materials, to organize and manage courses of medical-surgery practice for the Missionaries, to bring almost to completion a medical manual for the Missions, to extend more and more the UMMI, to the point that also the Pontifical Congregation for the Propagation of Faith took good interest in its activities.

But the parenthesis of his Novitiate year made clear that, without him, the UMMI would die; so, now that he was a member of the Congregation of the Poor Servants of the Divine Providence, the opportunity came to request not only for a simple moral support for the Union, but the Congregation should have incorporated it as its own, keeping the programme envisioned at its start and growth.

In November 1940, the UMMI Board presented formal request to Fr. Calabria. Fr. Calabria hesitates, but finally, on June 1, 1941, he accepts to incorporate the Italian Medical Missionary Union into the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence.

The war first, then the death of its most valid and loving supporter, forced the UMMI to slow down. Why? What did the Lord really want?

Missionaries Religious Doctors

Once the UMMI, born and developed in the shadows of the Good Boys' House, was inside the Congregation, the Father

immediately thought that the Union could address its activities also to prepare lay missionaries doctors, consecrated to God by holy vows, within the Congregation of the Poor Servants. He meant, in this way, to bring a great contribution to the solution of the medical-missionary problem.

"Ingenious idea, inspired by God", Fr. Gemelli[61] defined it, writing to Fr. Calabria: "wonderful programme" capable of solving the medical-missionary problem and overcoming the not so small difficulties of the same programme.

In May 1947, the Father, contrary to his usual ways, felt the inspiration to write and spread "a great appeal to all people of good will, who, with the grace of God, had the wish to consecrate themselves to the Congregation as Religious, in order to give all their activity to the UMMI, both here as well as in the Missions".

With this, he did not want to restrict the Union's activity or change its direction; no; the field is always open also for those who do not feel like embracing the religious life: the UMMI will give its work and assistance also for these ones, and from now on he will do everything so that in Negrar, in the Sacred Heart Hospital, a division will start for the technical and religious preparation of the ones and the others.

The Father did not have the joy to see an enthusiastic answer to his "fervent call", but this was not a reason for the UMMI to slow down its activities.

[61] See at chapter 7, "A complaint 'sui generis' ".

The Brother Dr. Riccardi, dying, promised the Father to send another one in his place, and he kept his word. In fact, from the generous countryside of Imola, in 1947, the university student Fabio Ferdori, graduating in Pharmacy, newly ordained priest, entered the Congregation. As soon as he became a doctor, he was asked by his Superiors to take command of the UMMI, which, in the meantime, had continued its activity in the best possible way.

Fr. Ferdori gave himself, body and soul, to the work, even material, of the UMMI, with a self sacrifice superior to the common human endurance.

He possessed a rare intelligence and initiative spirit, gave life to an equipped laboratory to make medicines to be sent to the various missions in the world. But once again the UMMI was hardly hit by the tragic death of Fr. Fabio. It was just during the preparation of new medicines that a sudden poisoning killed him, Bro. Ettore Scapini and another lay collaborator. The death was instantaneous. It was May 22, 1959.

Fr. Fabio, called to the Lord in the full vigour of his years and the missionary enthusiasm, left an unforgettable memory of self-denial and spirit of charity, true Poor Servant, missionary and scientist.

But, nevertheless, the UMMI continued its precious activity and still does.

The thank you letters, the gratitude testimonials, the blessings it always receives, are the most beautiful

demonstrations of the vitality of the UMMI and of the good work it goes sowing.

The Brother Dr. Attilio Riccardi

It will not be bad, at this point, if we draw a short profile of the Brother Dr. Attilio Riccardi.

He was born in Montefranco, Terni, on March 1, 1912. His father was a captain of the customs' police and, because of this, he was frequently transferred.

When he was 5 years old, Attilio was in Lecce and here, four years after, he received his first Communion. Then he went to Ravaldino, in the province of Forlì.

The education received and his character brought him to the recreation place of "St. Louis"; then he became Aspirants' Delegate and then President of the Catholic Youth Club "Blessed Lambertenghi".

He had a jovial, tranquil and always smiling personality; he gladly made himself little with the little ones, to make them play, playing with them; but he was also animator of the youth, especially in the Company of amateur actors, where he distinguished himself as an effective comedian and a fairly good singer.

In 1929, when he was 17, he took the scientific school-leaving examination, with the average grade of 7.5 in Forlì, and

then he enrolled in the Medicine Faculty of the Bologna University.

From this moment on, he does not hide his medico-missionary vocation he always felt since the early years; because of his ideals, he starts a thorough preparation of study, apostolate and life.

In fact, he lives in a poor pension house, preparing his meals by himself; the FUCI (University Association of Catholic Inspiration), the Marian Congregation, the Students Missionary League and the Gospel Groups are all the fields of his apostolate, prayer, example and action; the St. Vincent Conference the field of his charity: he has been seen everyday, for three months, assisting a poor man sick of phthisis, until he died.

In spite of his slimness and his physical troubles, his jovial serenity and his apostolic fervour never failed.

After the doctorate, in 1935 – when he was only 22 – he practised the profession for two years, first as district doctor and then as an assistant surgeon in the civil Hospital of Recanati; finally he obtained the specialization in tropical diseases, in Modena.

Both in the first and in the second thesis for the doctorate, he explored missionary subjects: “The Missionaries diseases and means of prevention”, “Medical Remarks on a group of Italian Missionaries in Oriental Africa”. In both he graduated with full honors.

He knew about the UMMI in 1937 and he got immediately in contact with Fr. Desenzani, offering himself as missionary doctor in India.

For this, he went to Verona and lived humbly among the Brothers the Good Boys' House in St. Zeno in Monte. Here he developed his vocation as Poor Servant, with the aspiration of becoming one day religious missionary doctor.

After his religious profession, he was assigned to the Sacred Heart Hospital, with the specific duty of attending to the UMMI.

Everywhere he went, doctor Riccardi left the deep sign of his sanctity, as it is demonstrated by whoever knew and approached him.

The Bishop of Forlì, Mgr. Joseph Rolla, did not hesitate to write to the Father: "Many times I approached Dr. Attilio Riccardi. The impression I got has always been very strong: a simple, devout and humble soul. Even if he graduated as a doctor when he was only 22, the knowledge of his science was miraculously deep. Probably, he drew from the light of divine wisdom, which shines in right and pure souls".

His Superiors and Companions remember him as a patient and smiling apostle of any kind of sick person, particularly of the patients of the rest house.

After about five years of sickness, he died in Negrar, in the Sacred Heart Hospital, on March 24, 1944, when he was 32, the way the saints die: innocent and humble, as he had always lived.

CHAPTER 14

THE MISSIONS

The Missionary Ideal

The missionary ideal was in the Congregation since the first moments; we find mention of it in the Norms' notebook of 1909.

Many young men of the Students section of the Congregation, educated in the spirit of the House, entered some Institutes and missionary congregations.

Many times, the Father, visiting the students, gave to one or the other he knew for being promoters of the ideal, his offer for the missions. We have, regarding this, a nice episode of 1925 which we do not want to miss.

One day, the Father had an urgent need of three thousand lire for the following day; he went down from St. Zeno in Monte to St. Benedict, where the Students were, to ask them to pray; he even said that he wanted the Blessed Sacrament exposed for adoration in the evening and that they had to pray hard so that he could receive from the Lord the needed amount. And he added: "If the three thousand lire will come in, but it has to be three thousand and not two thousand nine hundred ninety-nine, then – he told a student he knew was

aspiring to become missionary in Africa – I will give you a hundred lire for your little Negroes".

The day after, the Father found in the mail a letter from Rome, from an unknown person, an engineer, who warmly implored to pray for him and inside the envelope, just to reciprocate this spiritual charity, he put a three thousand lire check.

But the ineffable goodness of the Divine Providence did not want to be less generous than its servant. He had promised one hundred lire for the little Negroes, if he had received what he needed; but he needed the whole three thousand lire, not two thousand nine hundred.

The Father kept the providential letter and continued the examination of the mail. Among others, there was one from two newlyweds, who were sending one hundred lire to Fr. Calabria, asking for his blessing.

This holy fire for the Missions was therefore continuously kept burning.

Also Fr. Deodato Desenzani was contributing from far and near, as we'll see soon.

In 1933, jubilee year of the Redemption, to Good Boys' House had already become the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence. The missionary ideal, nourished by in-house sources, had produced until then only fruits in someone else's vineyard; it starts now to sprout in its own field, promising a rich harvest.

"After many prayers and sufferings, offered to the Lord for this purpose" the Father expresses the wish to institute "with the spirit of the Congregation, a small Cenacle, where missionary vocations could be prepared and developed". He submits this project to his spiritual Father and to the Bishop of Verona, to receive their opinion and blessings; the Bishops answers, approving and blessing the design.

He then writes a letter also to Propaganda Fide, which also answers with praises and wishes of prosperity.

It seems to him that he now has all the premises to start; instead it was in the plans of the Providence that the so long cherished wish, prepared with sufferings, couldn't be put, for the time being, in full effect. The huge storm, which was looming ahead in the horizon, was going to wreck the just launched small boat, even before it left its moorings.

Fr. Desenzani and the India Missions

Father Desenzani remained always spiritually united to the Good Boys' House. The House had been his fixed idea during the first years of his priesthood and for its actuation he gave himself, body and soul, to Fr. John Calabria, in the early times of its foundation.

If the reader remembers, he had gone missionary in India, a Mission assigned to the Institute for Foreign Missions (P.I.M.E.) of Milan.[62]

Back in Italy for a period of rest after six years of that life, he prefers to stay in the Good Boys' House and naturally he feels the duty to plead with Fr. John about the cause of the Missions; moreover, he requests that some Brothers be sent to India with him.

The Father expresses his feelings to him: if God wants, in due time, he would not be against cooperating with the Institute for Foreign Missions of Milan, sending a small group of Brothers to be assigned, according to the Congregation's spirit, to the service of the most forsaken people.

Fr. Desenzani was so happy to hear these words from Fr. John and wanted immediately to inform his superiors about this.

When he went back to India, he started turning every stone! It started then, between the Good Boys' House and the Missionary Institute, an exchange of letters, which intensified more and more, especially with Mgr. Dionigi Vismara, Bishop of Hyderabad and Superior of our Desenzani.

But before their wishes became true, many other years had to pass. Rather, there was a time, in 1925, that the dream of the departure of our Congregation's Brothers to India seemed to be vanished or at least postponed... to no date; but the tenacious Missionary did not give up: in 1930 he was able

[62] Fr. Diodato Desenzani left to India on August 25, 1914.

to establish in his mission of Bezwada (the former name of Vjayawada city in Andhra Pradesh), in the Kistna (or Khrishna) district, a House for Good Boys and another for Good Girls.

He immediately wrote to the Father about this, offering him their paternity, and he gladly accepted.

In 1933, again guest in St. Zeno in Monte, where he feels at home, he continues to plead, together with his Superiors, for the cause of the Missions, with the Father and the Brothers.

While Fr. Desenzani was in Italy, the Diocese of Hyderabad was dismembered and just the territory of Kistna, where Fr. Desenzani had the Good Boys' Houses, was detached. Since Mgr. Vismara stayed as Bishop of Hyderabad, Fr. Desenzani went under a new superior.

But this new superior had not yet been appointed; so Fr. Desenzani gets in contact with the General Superior of his Institute, suggesting the eventuality of an arrival of the Poor Servants in Bezwada. He is eager to give them the two Houses of the Good Boys.

His concern is so pressing, that Fr. Manna, PIME's General Superior, writing to him, asks him how he could satisfy "two Lovers"; but, in the meantime, he advises him to wait, also because of the precarious situation of the new ecclesiastic circumscription.

At the start of 1934, Fr. John writes to both the Bishops, of Hyderabad and Kistna, offering to one of them four Brothers, to be assigned to missionary work for the poor people.

Mgr. Grassi, the new Bishop of Kistna, tactfully, leaves the choice to Mgr. Vismara, wishing that he too could one day draw from the same source.

In the meantime, the Father writes to his sons, inviting Priests and Brothers to talk to him, if they had intention to dedicate themselves to the missionary apostolate, "leaving then to the Providence to go or not".

Many answered enthusiastically, bringing great consolation to his heart. Naturally, not everybody could be accommodated; but this was a very good start.

On the feast of St. John the Baptist, he himself wanted to read "the names of the lucky, privileged people that the Divine Providence has chosen since eternity to be the first in our Congregation to go and bring the light of the holy Gospel, to bring the divine programme 'Quaerite' (seek first) into the lands of the pagans" (Let. 10).

The departure was set for November 9, with embarkation in Venice.

On the evening of the 8th, in the small church of St. Zeno in Monte, the Father blessed his departing sons, giving them the Crucifix, addressing them with emotionally vibrant words; he exchanged with them the farewell embrace and kiss and gave them his large, solemn and paternal blessing.

On the evening of November 9, 1934, greeted and blessed again by the Father, who, together with his closest collaborators, wanted to go to Venice and even boarded the ship, the four Brothers sailed towards the Missions in India.

And so started the “great undertaking”, which, in the designs of God, had to remain a proof of the Father’s missionary zeal and of his deep desire to dedicate himself to the Missions, through his Congregation.

In the Mission Land

After a rather difficult trip, the Missionary Brothers arrived in Bombay on November 21, feast of the Presentation of Most Holy Mary to the Temple.

The following day, they were in Secunderabad and, after three days, in Hyderabad, where they took room in the Seminary, in order to practice the English language and start contact with their new world.

After about two months, they returned to Secunderabad, where they stayed in the House of St. Mary School, taking charge of the annexed laboratories.

For about one year things went well: the Brothers were glad and so were the Superiors of the Mission: they wrote, praising their piety and self-denial spirit and asked for more and possibly for at least one priest.

Then there were inevitable environmental difficulties; the complication of the Italia-Abyssinian war came about, while inside the Congregation itself it was developing the delicate situation we are going to see shortly. The faraway Missions felt the blow.

Each work of God is a mystical body: each body, to live healthy and industrious, needs that each of its parts be efficient, that a perfect harmony and a perfect balance exist between the motor centres and the peripheral organs, that the vital lymph freely flows to nourish every part, including the farthest and the most exposed.

"As I told you so many times – the Father wrote in that time – I do not fear the external struggles that can arise against the Congregation. I only fear the internal disunion, the lack of charity, the division between father and sons, between brothers and brothers: I really fear these situations because this would be the ruin of the Opera of God... Be ready for everything, like rags, like clay; ready also to make every sacrifice, generously, to support the desires of the poor Casante (Custodian). Only then I'll be peaceful in the running of the Congregation that costs, as you know, so many pains and troubles" (Let. 11).

Poor Father! He knew that something near him was creaking. Also, from far, the news were not so consoling anymore.

We are already in June 1936: since more than a year the Congregation is under Apostolic Visitation. The Apostolic Visitor, considered the situation of the Missions, after meetings with Propaganda Fide and an exchange of correspondence with India, since no satisfactory solution was possible, decides to recall the Brothers in Italy.

Return

By the end of August, the ship Vittoria brought back to Italy the Brothers, leaving them on the Genoa wharf.

Their look showed tiredness, the effort and specially the emotion of the latest hours.

In fact, only few days before their departure from India, they came to know of the Apostolic Visitation and they had been recalled not by the Father, but by the Visitor. Ignoring any precedent and having no canon law knowledge, they did not understand what was the meaning of all this. Their eyes were full of the images of India and their heart overflowed with nostalgia for the Mission they had left.

Too early their dream, for so long entertained and only for so short obtained, had already vanished.

But the Father's charity, his great heart and his word comforted and sustained them.

However, the Missions still were, for them and all, a never lowered flag, sensible to the blowing of faraway lands; an always open "wound", still reddish with charity for the brothers who "seat in the darkness and the shadows of death"; a wound which the sun and wind of our land cannot heal.

To make the missionary flag vibrate and palpitate, now and then an appeal from overseas country came: Persia, Bengal, Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay...

These voices were sadly turned down... But the Father gave assurance that "from the 'small group' the Lord will form

an ‘army composed of numerous soldiers’ who will spread out along the roads of the earth to collect souls for the holy Kingdom of God” (Let. 20); that the Congregation “must live, walk, go on till the ends of the earth, till the end of the world” (Let. 63), but only if the Poor Servant will be faithful to their vocation.

CHAPTER 15

THE GREAT STORM

The True Physiognomy of the Congregation

The soul of Fr. John Calabria was above all a soul of a priest. He was born to be a priest; and he wanted to be a priest according to the Heart of Christ.

From the Gospel he learned the greatness of the priest's mission: "light of the world and salt of the earth". He saw the Church's fate, the world's destinies, the humanity's salvation, all tied up to the priest, as to Christ. From this, his longing comes, "the most ardent beat" of his heart, since the first years: to form apostolic priests, "flying squad at Church's service", "a reserve army" ready to the orders of the Bishops and the Pope.

Son of his time, interpreter and forerunner of the new times, he saw in the layman the co-partner and almost the indispensable complement of the priestly ministry, not only a simple subordinated auxiliary. He saw him like an abreast rail to form together with the priest the railway line to salvation. Priests and laymen were seen by him as "body and soul" of the same person.

He saw them in this way since his youth, when he, layman, discovered a world to be evangelized and a way of

evangelization, which the priest could not always reach: the barracks, the ghetto, the hospital, the road...; in the small, daily, immediate contact, through words, charity and examples.

He still saw them in the same way when, already a priest, he put the foundations of the Opera of God, like "one tree" with different branches; "equal in everything, on the same level, composing one whole in full cooperation"; "still always saving the dignity of the sacred ordination".[63]

He was not afraid that, because of this, the priest would be lowered and the layman would grow proud. He said that "a truly spiritual layman will never lose the respect and the deference due to the God's ministers".

In this parity, he saw "the fundamental peculiarity" of the new religious family which was going to be born.

"If not for this – he wrote to the Bishop – the reason for being of this new Opera of the Lord would cease: there are many more others which do already so well. This – he continued – Is the particular physiognomy the Lord wanted for this Congregation, during these times of special needs". [64]

The work field had to be wide, as wide as the whole world; and it had to embrace all the areas of apostolate, for the many needs of the souls, to be brought to God, through Christ.

"The work field – we read in the mentioned writing – has not to be limited to the poor and abandoned youth, like at

[63] Cfr. Memorandum, * 4962/A, 17.12.1947; and Memorandum to Mgr. Girolamo Cardinale, * 5890, 20.11.1934.
[64] Ibid.

the start, but it has to be spread as soon as the Divine Providence will show new designs to embrace, according to the programme: Institutes, outside laboratories, prisons, infirmaries, shelters, schools, patronages, etc."

Because of this, he envisioned that also the Brothers had to be trained and qualified technically, in order to be used not only in small apostolate, but also to take the direction of certain works. "In the assignment of duties – we still read in the mentioned note to the Bishop – the Brother who has qualities cannot be excluded from managerial positions, especially in certain duties, more attuned to his condition than that of a priest".

And so, it was necessary that the Brothers could be part of the General Council, to bring the direct contribution of their experience and expertise in the problems to be discussed.

But all this was not accepted then; and this brought discomfort and disagreement, as we already saw.

Far Inklings

In 1929, the Father asked the Bishop of Verona to approve some "Holy Norms" for the "Good Boys Apostolic Institute", as he had called the Students Section, to express the apostolic formation he wanted to give them; and on March 25, 1930, he gave them to the students with the following preface:

"My beloved children, I do not know what words I should use giving you this booklet, which contains the secret of

your sanctification. You are the sons of the Providence in a very particular way: for you this good Mother has big and special designs to bring about and she definitely will, if you will be faithful in the exact observance of these holy norms, which I now give you, as my testament, in the name of Blessed Jesus".

"Dear children, the grace Jesus gave you is great, rather, very much great, putting you in this holy Institute, which, by its name "Apostolic", tells you what you must be".

Two short Appendixes were added to the Norms: Method for conscience report and Principal Norms of civility. Later on, he added a third one: Particular Norms for priests and theology students.

These Norms looked like Constitutions, but there was no objection yet then against them; also because there were no real and proper Constitutions yet. In them, some special prerogatives, almost of excellence, attached to the Apostolic Institute, were emphasized; but they were just a reflex of the high opinion the Father had towards the priests and, indirectly, towards the Institute entrusted to form them.

When the students were transferred to Nazareth and the Apostolic Institute received encouraging impulse and vitality, the Father was extremely happy and talked about it with satisfaction at home and outside, expecting from Nazareth many fruits for the Opera and for the Church.

This very authoritative satisfaction brought some euphoria in the Institute, where it was thought to increase its delicate function; but, or for the fact in itself, or for the adopted

way, it happened that, against the will of everybody, the "fundamental prerogative" of the Congregation came out cracked: the unity and parity among its members.

To deepen this crack, the approval of the first Constitutions intervened, excluding the Brothers not only from the Congregation's government, but also from minor positions; while the Apostolic Institute was appointed to such duties to make it appear almost a Congregation inside the Congregation: "soul of the Congregation", seat of the Novitiate and, hopefully, residence of the General Superior.

The priests were called by the Constitution "principal vital element of the Congregation", while the Brothers, from the level of "absolute parity", as the Father had always envisioned, were, though with good words, lowered to a subordinate and dependent position.

It is clear that all this could not contribute to the harmony, unity and peace.

The unhappiest were some Brothers who, more than anybody else were involved in the situation; and their displeasure was shared by some older priests. But the storm was not coming from them.

The Father saw, understood, guessed and, in the softness of his soul, he shared their suffering. In his charity, he multiplied for them acts of esteem and solicitous attentions; he used them more and more, without going against the Constitutions; exhorting them to trust in God, who would flow

everything together to good and, in the proper time, would put again in order everything.

He did not know when and how, but he knew that it could not go on this way and that God was going to intervene to “bring back the Congregation on the right rails”.

To level things, he tried to stay as much as possible, day and night, where also the theology students and some priests were with the seminarians. He wanted to balance that hidden antagonism which was coming out and threatened to deepen.

In vain; he was not understood. On the contrary, he was suspected and watched. Everything he said or did was noted down, marked and secretly brought to the Bishop, almost to prove that the Father was going far from the path established by the Church in the holy Constitutions.

The Bishop, wavering between opposite feelings, thought he could valuate better the situation and get out of a scrape through a typically diplomatic move. Taking occasion from the pastoral visitation for the whole diocese, just announced, he did it immediately (June 1933) for the Congregation, using, for this purpose, Mgr. Louis Zenati, a church dignitary expert in the law of the Religious and already versed about the problems of the Congregation, because he took part, together with a Father’s representative, in the revision of the Constitutions, before their approval.

Seeing the way the visitation was conducted, it was not difficult to understand that it was more of a real investigation, from which also the image of the Father was not exempted.

But, since nothing of relevance came out regarding the situation, the Bishop closed the visit within a climate which looked like a perfect harmony. But the impression of those who loved Fr. John and were obediently and closely following him, was tremendous. For him it was like a stab in his heart.

They could also hope that all would finish there, and the disturbing wind would subside, after having blown in vain. And instead, no; it continued blowing, until it provoked the big storm of the Apostolic Visitation.

Rough Sea

In October of that year (1933), the Father called for a meeting of priests and Brothers among the oldest and most authoritative; also Fr. Natale of Jesus was present. Purpose of the meeting was to dissipate the misunderstandings and restore unity through a fraternal exchange of opinions. An agreement was reached, but only apparently.

In June 1934, the Father, as it was his habit, proposed a theme to the students: they should express their feelings for being in the house of the Lord. He was not expecting the picture that the writing of such a theme brought out under his eyes; how far were from him the spirits of those young students!

He felt such a great sorrow that he retired in Costozza first and then in Pacengo at Lake Garda, in the villa of his friend, Atty. Giuli, stating that he could not govern any longer.

The Bishop, asked again to intervene, expressed the wish to talk to the Father.

It seemed that this meeting brought a more sincere closeness to the faraway members. It was just an illusion.

With no doubt, the Devil was working on the weakness of the poor man nature. Maybe the intentions were rather holy, but the used means were slaughtering the Father's heart.

Trusting the appearances, he, with the assistance of his Council, decreed some changes for the realization of a project he was already thinking of since more than a year: those changes were meant to be beneficial to the cause of peace and unity.

Instead, the storm exploded in all its violence.

And it started with the preacher of the Retreat, in October, who thundered against certain founders... He changed tune, after an elder priest clarified matters to him. In a subsequent meeting with the Father, he expressed to him all the accusations he had heard about; he said that he understood that his accusers were set to make an appeal to Rome. Maybe they would not go so far, because he prospected to them the possible very serious consequences. He also suggested some measures.

It didn't take too long. One evening, the beloved friend of the father, Mgr. Giuseppe Manzini, went to St. Zeno in Monte, sent by the Bishop, to inform Fr. John that the Congregation for the Religious had forwarded to His Excellency

a memorandum, with specific accusations against him, with the order to investigate, provide and refer.

The appeal, so, had been sent.

It was like a crash for the Father's heart; he was stricken to death. He remembered then a dream he sometime before had. It seemed to him to see a clean lake; the fishes wriggled inside lively and calm. Suddenly, like being upset by a mysterious poison, the lake grew dim and a voice was heard: "You cannot fish", and the fishes, small and big, came afloat, poisoned to death.

Only by meditating the Passion of the Lord he could find comfort.

However, it was not right to be just silent. He did not betray the Opera of the Lord and he did not exclude himself from the observance of the Holy Spirit, by his closest co-operators since more than twenty years; he had no intention of lowering anybody, specially the priests, and in fact he did not; but he strove to teach to everybody, with words and writings, the humility, the charity, the unity; whatever he did and decided, he always did it in unity with the lawful Council, without unconstitutional interferences, following the words of the Superiors and with their blessings.

It was a very bitter cup that some of his children prepared for him, involving Rome: a cup he could not gulp down without first writing his defence, for love of the truth, not to betray the Opera entrusted to him by the Lord.

“In front of the Lord, who knows everything – he writes – and who will soon judge me, as if I were on my death bed, with full conscience about what I’m going to say, I feel to state to Your Excellency as follows...”.

And, after having premised five points about the true physiognomy and nature of the Opera, the way he always meant and tried to actuate, he demolishes, one by one, all the accusations against him, with his characteristic charity, but also with strength and insight.

“After so many years of work and sufferings, following the programme, I was not expecting a so painful trial like the one which is now hurting me and the Opera of the Lord, and a so serious trial, the way it has been manifested in its naked reality during these last times.

“Not from outside, but from inside; by the most beloved sons the heart of the Father has been wounded!”

He suffers in silence, especially with outsiders; and he invites the close friend to do the same, in order to avoid scandals and save charity.

He would like to give up now. The present situation, the poisoned atmosphere, the shaken health advise him to do so. To stay, he needs “obedient, humble Religious, without own head, who let themselves be guided by the person in charge, in the name of God”. But it is not enough; he asks now something more.

“I absolutely need the complete trust from my Superiors, that I will be given breathing-space and freedom of

action, always according to the holy Constitutions, of which I must be the sole responsible interpreter in front of the Authorities".

He feels he is totally the man of God, who one day fully accepted, without compromises, the responsibility to follow his God, his Lord, in the realization of His Opera.

It comes back here, practically, the concept and the definition of the "Casante" (Guardian), depositary of the pure and genuine spirit, which must characterize the Congregation; everybody must depend on him in everything, because he is favoured with "light and very special graces to govern it".

"But – he continues – If this cannot be or it is not felt proper, I must retire from the governing position and get ready for my not so far death, in concealment, in suffering, praying for the Congregation and for whoever will take up its government".

"This firm decision of mine, lengthy weighed at the feet of my Crucifix, I dare to express in all sincerity to you most reverend Excellency, to unload my conscience in front of God who will judge us. Only God knows and can appraise the pains I'm suffering since this storm exploded; I offer them for the Congregation as well as for my sins, which I'm sure are responsible for this storm".

He said everything and has nothing else to add. Only one thing is missing, so that "the true and right light" be done, both in Verona and in Rome; for this he adds a *post-scriptum*:

“Please, Most Reverend Excellency, be kind to attach this short self-defence to the Report you will send to Rome”.

The Apostolic Visitation

The self-defence was not sent; and Rome had to wait for other four months for the report of the Bishop. When it arrived, it was full of deference, indeed, for the persons, but it did not give any indication about the adequate measures which Rome had been waiting for.

In the meantime, the departure of the Brothers to the Missions sharpened the displeasure. Yes, the Bishop had largely and paternally blessed them, but privately he also expressed to somebody his doubts and fears.

Two years had already passed since the approval of the Congregation; its vitality looked more and more shaken. How could it have flourishing life if it was not born according to the intentions of the “Divine Founder”? While the Man of God had made everything, from the start, “not to put his hands in it”, others, still with the best of intentions, meddled too much; and the “creature” suffered and continued to suffer for this; it could not move forward, it could not grow, had difficulty in breathing and its heart was sick.

The delays of the Bishop forced Rome to intervene, calling off any profession, any ordination and any new entrance; and the not so exhaustive report provoked, by the end of February, the Apostolic Visitation. Apostolic Visitor was

nominated the Most Reverend Abbot Benedictine Emmanuel Caronti of the St. John the Evangelist Abbey in Parma.

In the most crucial moments of crisis, in fact, after the appeal to Rome, he had being informed by Mgr. Manzini about the situation of the Congregation. He had studied the matter, and considered the difficulty of the Bishop to intervene, even after the warrant, he went to Rome, where he was known and esteemed in the Congregation for Religious. He was even able to get the whole file about the Poor Servants from the Congregation.

During the meetings there, it was suggested to him the eventuality of an official mandate, if things could not have been sorted out through the Bishop. And this happened.

The Visitation started on March 3, 1935.

Since the first meeting with the Father, the Visitor realized the fatal misunderstandings, which were originated without any bad intentions, but the most sincere good faith: the ones who brought up difficulties were moved by high ideals which, they thought, were in accordance with the convictions of the Father. After having sorted out everything with a diligent study, the Father Abbot fully understood the pure and genuine spirit of the Congregation, the way it was traced by Fr. John Calabria; enlightened by the Lord, he completely approved his work and moved to free the way from any difficulty.

Instead of using judicial measures, he acted as a father: he invited somebody to retire and others to review their own ideas. Obediently followed by everybody, he was able to

smooth things without provoking discontent or anger: some left, some stayed, all finding their own path and made good in the mystical vineyard. The very few partings, done in the most sincere charity, did not bear painful cuts or left any bitterness: the closeness ties stayed unaltered; who left could always come back as welcome guest in the house of the Father. Moreover, some even had the opportunity to be useful to the Congregation, becoming worthy instruments of the Providence.

The Abbot Caronti confirmed the Father in his position, supporting him by the strength of his authority. Finished in few months his mandate, he could have closed his Visitation; still, for his good reasons, he thought better to extend it for few years, also to mature the desired return to the original design about the parity of the Religious and to prepare the way to the Pontifical Approval. And it happened. The Father, on his part, saw in the Visitor the “messenger of God”; and he called him the “second Father of the Opera”.

When he received his letters, he kissed them and read them at the feet of his Crucifix and considered them as the expression of the holy will of God.

CHAPTER 16

DEVELOPMENT OF THE OPERA DURING THE APOSTOLIC VISITATION

St. Pancratius

During the summer of 1935, a pious person offered a house to Fr. Calabria, with the land, in the suburbs of St. Pancratius, near the river Adige.

Nazareth was deserted: by the Apostolic Visitor's order, the students were sent home; he reserved to himself the freedom of choice to accept them again.

This offer gave the Father the opportunity to think about reorganizing some of the houses, including Nazareth, reserving the new house to the smaller boys, who were then staying at Madonna di Campagna. Everything was agreed upon by the Visitor and the Bishop.

But two days before the opening, set on December 8, the Bishop thought of it over and did not feel like issuing the decree of foundation; he had his fears of possible complications.

The Father suffered for this: he never did anything without the Bishop!

He had a letter written immediately and with urgency to the Visitor; but before the letter reached destination, the Father Abbot, obeying an inner tenacious inspiration, went to Verona and knowing about the matter, he himself went to the Bishop. The Bishop found peace in that dialogue and gave his blessing to this new activity.

After various activities and a closure period due to the war, the House gave hospitality for many years to a group of aged people and others who had particular needs from the psychic point of view, fondly aided by the Brothers of the Congregation.[65]

Tor Marancia

The good apostolic work done by the Poor Servants of Divine Providence in the very popular area of Primavalle pushed the Ecclesiastical Superiors in Rome to turn once again their attention to the priests of Fr. Calabria, to provide for the spiritual needs of another area of the city: Tor Marancia.

Smaller and less populated than the other Parish entrusted to the Congregation, but it was not, for this, less in

[65] In 1984 the Bro. Perez House was built for them at Negrar, part of the Hospital S. Heart-Fr. Calabria.

need of grace. Six thousand souls, who had been waiting for a priest for three years.

In an unhealthy and isolated position, it became the shelter of moral and material miseries, “the cancer” of Rome, called also “Shanghai”. There was a need for courage aside from apostolic zeal to go and perform the ministry in those conditions. But the Lord had already chosen His minister.

One day the Father Visitor went to St. Philip Neri at the Pineta Sacchetti and stayed for lunch. It was not the first time; the Father Abbot used often to go there.

The usual modest lunch was exceedingly cordial and merry. The *Father Curate*[66] was a good company and the Father Abbot amiably followed suit; even among the others some were receptive, jovial, playful character; for example, Fr. Alessandro Rosa. That day he seemed to be in the right mood and helped the *Father Curate* so that the conversation could not die down. In short, a healthy good humour reigned.

The Father Visitor let them be: he considered them a little bit like young men: pleasant, good, full of zeal, a little bit childish, but he knew he could count on them, even asking them for sacrifices; and the thing he came to ask for was something more than a simple sacrifice.

Towards the end of the meal, he started with a quiet tone to praise them for what they did in Primavalle and to tell them that even the Superiors were happy about it, but there were other areas which needed to feel the influence of grace

[66] The Parish Priest.

and Christian charity. Poor areas, very poor, abandoned: and he started enumerating them.

There was silence at dinner table, everybody was paying attention and curious where the talk would lead to. The Father Abbot extensively described the environment of Tor Marancia, and finally told them that the Superiors thought of entrusting it to the Congregation, and that he, in agreement with the Father, came precisely to designate the chosen one for that new area.

The silence was too much. Also Father Rosa, the most reluctant to keep quiet, was very attentive, while his face was losing its usual colouring.

"One of you therefore – continued the Father Visitor – will have to leave his post, to go as soon as possible to that new field of work. The Father Abbot intentionally spoke without looking at his listeners; and now, with his head bent a bit forward and his hands, with intertwined fingers, on top of the table, he seemed like waiting for something from them, before pronouncing the chosen name.

The silence was interrupted by the *Father Curate* to simply ask, but not without interest, in his Venetian dialect: "And who is that man?" The moment that passed made everybody hold their breath. "Fr. Alessandro Rosa", the Father Abbot slowly said lifting his head; and he looked at him.

Fr. Rosa turned pale but didn't say a word. He was going to martyrdom.

Fr. Alessandro Rosa

Intelligent, open, exuberant, after having had his first experiences of apostolate in helping an old Parish Priest in the countryside, was sent to Rome, to Primavalle. He stayed there for one year, happy to pour out his priestly zeal and the riches of his heart among poor people. Now the Lord assigned him to the poorest.

He went to Tor Marancia on May 1, 1936, the first Friday of the month, accompanied by the Parish Priest of San Philip Neri and two religious aspirants.

The cleared area in front of the small church was crowded with curious people: women, young men, few men and many children. Badly dressed and malnourished, dirty and dishevelled, with their faces marked by misery; some had an indifferent behaviour, but many of them had an arrogant expression, some even hostile; finally somebody, had an expression of compassion and also of love and esteem.

When the four appeared, they were met by jeers, laughter, yelling that became louder and louder; then some hissing and stones.

How different from their own towns that welcome to the priest! Bells that filled the air with feast, applauses, cheers...

Here, after the jeers and the hissings, the new pastor got a stone on his breast and a spit on his face!

He celebrated the mass in a church which seemed to be a market place: people coming and going, children shouting and

women's talking, calling each other in a loud voice, laughter... At the altar the celebrant was officiating with tears in his eyes and with a heavy heart: he prayed with Jesus: "Forgive them..."

He was in Tor Marancia for six years; and he died there. Six years of heroism, supported by the indomitable optimism and by boundless charity. He understood those poor people, more ignorant than bad, and they understood him.

Now and then, though, he felt the need to go to St. Philip at the Pineta to "breathe", to "lift himself up a bit", and to "restore himself".

With his brothers, at the meal table, he would explode in humour, narrating anecdotes and true to life facts, which amused everybody; now and then he would come out with a typical phrase, which his brothers remember very well, and he laughed with that round and rosy face, while the others pretended, by laughing heartily to be scandalized.

The war, which limited the aliments, had further burdened these poor people, and he literally removed the bread from his mouth to give to his spiritual children. His table didn't know almost ever, bread, milk, meat. He even gave away his bed. The physical body could not but suffer for it.

One day, when he went to St. Philip, he didn't have that usual exuberance: he expressed the desire to see a doctor.

Few days after, after the Holy Mass, suddenly he fell to the ground, lifeless. It was March 7, 1942, first Saturday of the month.

Never was seen in Tor Marancia a funeral like this one! Those people, that one day had welcomed him mockingly, now accompanied him to the cemetery, really crying for him as a father, a brother, and a friend.

His Excellency, Mgr. Louis Traglia, Vice Administrator of Rome, giving him the funeral eulogy justly compared him to a good pastor, who gave his life for his sheep. And as a spontaneous comment to this, a plebiscitary manifestation of mourning, he said to those around him: “I would like to have a funeral like this!”

Today the village of old doesn’t exist anymore. The area has taken a civil and proper aspect, and the parish has been entrusted to the care of the Diocesan Clergy; but Fr. Rosa is always remembered and missed. And fresh flowers were always found at his tomb, until his body was brought to Ronco at the Adige (Verona), his birthplace, after many years.

Borgata Gordiani

In 1937, for the third time, Rome asked Fr. Calabria for priests for the outskirts. The Borgata Gordiani, between Casilina and Prenestina streets a suburban village inhabited by poor people was in need of religious assistance.

The Pontifical Congregation for the Preservation of Faith had turned its attention again to the Poor Servants of Divine Providence. Since it concerned a “depressed area”, Fr.

John accepted it. In fact it was a poor village, populated, extensive; an island of houses, surrounded by a sea of greenery.

The Holy Heart Missionary Sisters of St. Francesca Cabrini were already working there with good fruits.

The first priest the Father sent was staying with the Parish Priest of Tor Pignattara and officiated in the chapel of the sisters, near the borders of the village. Finished the church and the house, on the feast of Christ the King, two priests, assisted by a Brother, started the real and proper parochial ministry.

Fifteen years would pass before the village could be lawfully erected into a Parish. During these years, the war and post-war events will make Borgata Gordiani one of the most abandoned areas of the outskirts of Rome; a reign of misery and diseases where the Poor Servants did all they could, throwing all their energies in a bottomless pit.

Also this village gradually disappeared, giving way for more civil and clean houses. On a less miserable place, the grace could better root and bear fruits.[67]

Roncà

Still in 1937 the Divine Providence offered to the Congregation a villa; twenty years before it had been already

[67] The Borgata Gordiani Parish was given back to the Diocese of Rome on November 6, 1988.

promised to the Father; but then it had been used for other purposes.

It was a habit of Fr. Calabria, for disinterestedness and to save charity, to refuse every testament which entailed disputes, division of spirits and discontents: neither had he looked for these things.

In the first years of the Congregation, for example, a lady from Lazise sul Garda, got sick, asked for the Father for confession. He went by carriage. Meanwhile, the lady got worse and called for the Parish Priest. After having provided for her conscience, in the presence of the Parish Priest, of witnesses and the Notary Public, the lady dictated her last will in favour of Fr. John; but, while the Notary was rereading it, before the signature, the lady died.

The relatives took advantage of the consequent invalidity of the testament. Only as homage to the so clear will of the deceased, gave a modest amount of money to the Father. The Father didn't claim any rights.

When he was again offered the villa in Roncà, he wrote his children: "The dear house in Roncà could have been given to the Congregation twenty years ago; instead it was given to others. I left it in the hands of the Lord. See how we should abandon ourselves to the Lord: if we meet his requirements nothing can stop, little by little, the divine designs".

In the Villa Piccinali, located at the boundaries of the Municipality of Roncà in a pleasant and smiling position, he immediately saw a place of recollection and peace, and he

destined it as the seat of Novitiate, calling it the St. Joseph House.

Here, he often came to look for peace, rest, respite from his innumerable sufferings. Here, it could be said, will give the last touch to the definitive Constitutions.

Near the Novitiate soon also rose a Good Boys' House for the young boys below twelve.

When in 1955, the Novitiate, was transferred to the Mother House, the House in Roncà became the place of formation, receiving young boys of the sixth-eight standards. [68]

Saint Pius V, House in Primavalle, Rome.

One day, the Father asked a young priest. "If you'll notice a precious stone, sunk in the mud, what would you do?" "I would get it", the priest answered. It was the answer he wanted; the answer that he lived. He was looking for "gems", "precious stones", of "millions" of "billions", abandoned, neglected by many, sunk in the mud of the worldly life.

He knew that also in Rome these "values" were not missing, but there were in abundance. He knew it in a particular way through the reports of his children, grouped in the frontline in the suburb areas in which were the hamlets.

[68] Decreasing little by little the number of students, the House in Roncà was closed in 1969.

"I feel that the Lord wants a house also in Rome for the abandoned creatures", he writes in 1941 to the Parish Priest of St. Philip Neri in the Pineta Sacchetti.

Some weeks later, the Parish Priest of St. Philip was approached by an unknown person, who offered him a remarkable amount for the realization of an activity in favour of the poor young boys.

It was the sign of the Providence, which Fr. John had anticipated and almost predicted. It was the door opened for the fulfilment of one of the divine designs that the Providence wanted to carry out in Rome.

It will not be easy, nevertheless, for the Father to accept the offer; he would want to make sure in prayers and in sufferings that the things come from God, and only when he will be certain of it, he would give the go signal to the dreamed activity for the good of the abandoned creatures in the Eternal City.

Soon also Rome had her Good Boys' House, very poor (it was wartime) but open to all kinds of hopeless cases. It was prepared in a very short time and inaugurated in January 1943.

The Good Boys' Patronage in Verona

The problem of the needy infancy, which is present all the times, was presented again with urgency during the war and right after, for the vastness and profundity of the wounds caused by the enormous conflict.

Crowds of children ran around the city. Some, imbued with subversive spirit, overexcited by the easy film heroes or cartoons, imitated their actions, intolerant of discipline, almost completely turned away from the traditional ways of life, which the war had swept away, shattered, uprooted.

It is needed to look for this youth, disoriented, bewildered, without restraint and without guide: they must be met through the proper institutions, with a wide scope, but above all with an apostolic heart.

While many are taken by a sense of discouragement, a handful of generous souls, believers and full of trust, do not want to miss the present opportunity, pregnant with new sprouts.

So, the Cities, the Villages and the Republics of the Boys are born.

Among the thoughtful and generous souls is Fr. John.

He too had watched the sad situation with the anxiety of a father: he worried for the young lives during the war, now he was more worried for their souls.

After having prayed and suffered, after asking for advices he decided to open the doors of St. Zeno in Monte to many young boys who, due to lack of schools – almost all bombed – were heading for more serious dangers.

Thirty, ninety, one hundred fifty, two hundred: everyday the boys grew and filled the house, the courtyards, the classrooms, receiving bread, a good word, a wholesome recreation, far from the dangers of the road.

But the place is small, the pre-existing activities were suffocated. And outside, there are many more needy young kids. There is a need for a more suitable place, more accessible, just for them.

He prays, searches, looks around, and the Providence comes, making available the building of the former GIL,[69] in one of the most beautiful areas of the City. The building, though gravely damaged by the bombings, can partly be utilized.

The Good Boys' Patronage, in street Porta Nuova, is thus born.

It will not be a boarding school. This already existed in St. Zeno in Monte, and it had to continue to exist for the cases of the most abandoned.

But Fr. Calabria understood that the boarding school, when it is not really indispensable, had outgrown its time. The social custom, the educational methods had developed. There was the need for the students to have a real contact with the realities of the world. Therefore, when he sent the first Religious to open the semi-boarding school among the ruins of the former palace GIL, he exhorted: "Don't make a duplicate of St. Zeno in Monte".

Transplanted later on in the industrial area of Verona, on a wider land and in new functional buildings, the seed grew and developed into a huge plant: a modern Centre of

[69] GIL: Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (Italian Youth of Lictorium). Lictorium is a fascist symbol.

Professional Formation, which daily accepts hundreds of boys and educated various young generations.

In the last times, a very useful and urgent activity in favour of the physical and mentally handicapped was developed, promoting new and fruitful ways, experimenting also the valid contribution of extern volunteer collaborators.

These activities continued for many years with a precious service to many generations of students. On March 4, 2002 all the activities were transferred to the Multifunctional Centre of St. Mark, with services to vocational training, rehabilitation, Medical Centre, Sports and residences for the adult handicap. Also some public institutions are collaborating with the Calabrian Congregation in this Centre.

The Dall'Oca Village

In the suburbs of Verona in 1939 a small hamlet rose, wanted and financed by the Veronese painter Angelo Dall'Oca Bianca for the purpose of gathering very poor people, many of them coming from the shanties drawn from the casemates of the city's fortifications.

When the first Parish Priest, after some years, decided to give up the Parish, the Bishop felt the inspiration to propose its care to Fr. Calabria and spoke to him about it. It was an act of faith and esteem; it was a sign of predilection from the Lord; in fact it had to deal with the poor: God's favourite, the gems of the Opera. The Father willingly accepted.

The Father's charity and the zeal of his sons have contributed to the spiritual growth of that Parish, where many beautiful initiatives bloomed and intense manifold activities developed. The Village, now called Borgonuovo (New Village), reached a discreet social and pastoral maturity and was handed back to the Diocesan Clergy in 1976.

The Re-educating the Minors

A truly loving heart, doesn't know the boundaries of charity, because man's miseries are boundless. Other young boys, particularly needy excite more beats of paternal affection: young boys already victims of traps set to them or in danger of falling miserably for their inexperienced age, the deceits of the environment and the natural temperament.

Also these had to be saved, helped and educated for a healthy physical and moral equilibrium.

Father Calabria already attempted a similar apostolate, many years before, lending his Brothers to a civic institution for the assistance of the juvenile offenders: a hard apostolate, difficult, which did not last long.

Now, the problem reappeared urgently: souls, the most in need to be saved; from whom, humanly, there was really nothing to hope for. But they were souls and there was the need to think of them.

Even here the Providence came to help. A good person placed at his disposal a villa on the hill of St. Mattia, overlooking

the city and he put together small groups of young boys in need of special care, willingly accepting help and collaboration from any qualified External Brother.

The House in St. Mattia, rented for ten years, after the contract expired, sheltered its guests in a section of the Mother House, after having done marvellous good work in the midst of young boys who, rescued from the reformatory, generally obtained good results.

CHAPTER 17

THE HOUSE IN MAGUZZANO

The Abbey of Maguzzano

Maguzzano is a small hamlet of Lonato, in the province of Brescia and diocese of Verona, on a pleasant hill, southwest of the Lake Garda, about a kilometre away from the lake.

In 1491, on a very antique "small abbey" of the 10th century, derived from a small monastry, destroyed and burned by the end of the previous century, a splendid Benedictine Abbey rose, that sooner became a gathering of exemplary monks and illustrious men.

The most distinguished personality, who was its guest in 1553, is the Cardinal Reginald Pole, cousin of Henry VIII of England and heir of the House of York, cultured man, and fine diplomat and of very upright manners.

He had great merits for the effort of bringing back Catholicism to his country England, and his enlightened work

contributed, indirectly, through the Veronese Ormaneto, his Curial Officer, to the reforms of the Council of Trent. [70]

The Abbey of Maguzzano, that at about that time had its period of splendour, as a centre of intense diplomatic activity and as a meeting place of authoritative personalities, by the end of 1500, diminished little by little its importance, though continuously being a flourishing Abbey until the Napoleonic suppression of 1797.

More than a century had to pass, before the cloisters of the Abbey, saw again under their roofs, silent and prayerful monks.

In fact, in 1904, the Reformed Cistercians (Trappists) settled there; they left Algeria for fear that the persecution against the Religious, raging then in France, due to the destructive laws of President Combes, would also spread to the Colonies.

After a bit of more than thirty years, also the Trappists Fathers want to leave; Fr. John Calabria providentially learns of it and obtains, without asking for it, an almost pre-emption right, since those Fathers spontaneously committed to deal with him first, rather than with any other buyer.

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[70] Nicolò Ormaneto, Veronese, was the Archpriest of Bovolone, in his diocese of birth, from 1543 to 1570; in this period he was fore a while in the household of Card. Pole. Then he was Bishop of Padua and later the Apostolic Nuncio in Spain, where he died in 1577.

And so, in November 1935, he addresses one of his letters to Father Abbot Visitor in which he expresses his desire to carry out in Maguzzano a priestly work and asks how to go about it.

"Difficulties will not be lacking – he writes – but if the Lord wants, such difficulties will always smooth over".

The Labour of a new Foundation

In one of his first visits to the Abbey of Maguzzano, the Father had secretly places his "mines": two small medals of St. Benedict. He never doubted about their effect, but they were not enough: or better, they could be effective, but on condition of many tribulations. Besides, every new creature of the Opera, especially the most important, the dearest to his heart, always coasted him tears of blood.

The meetings and the negotiations lasted for months and months, in an alternating flash of light and sudden shadows. It would be long and tedious to tell the details of this deal. It's enough to say that the Providence provoked the principal benefactress exactly from the area of the lake and for this he used the help of a priest who knew the Father and his intentions very well. Another providential help came in a moment of dark uncertainties: the personal intervention of the Abbot of Aiguebelle (the Mother House of the Trappists of Maguzzano, in France) who wanted Fr. John to be preferred to

other possible buyers, and wanted to quicken the conclusion of the contract.

Such conclusion seemed final in March 1938. Instead, other painful postponements and trepidations had to pass before the final agreement. Other Institutes had already their eyes on that angle of peace and it seemed, at a certain moment, that Fr. John lost the game; then there were political and tax problems, financial difficulties, hesitancy of benefactors, uncertainties of the same Trappists: the way of the Cross is the path of God on earth: the Father also experienced this in this occasion, specially during long and painful nights. Satan snorted "with eyes of fire against the new creature of God",[71] but the victory belonged again to the Angel of Light. The troubled event happily ended on September 19, 1938.

The "Laus Perennis" and the "Catholica Unio"

Maguzzano opened its doors to the priests who wanted to strengthen their spiritual energy or for a merited and tranquil rest, after the efforts of the apostolate.

With the blessing of the Bishop, the "Laus Perennis Sacerdotalis" (Perpetual Priestly Praise), was therefore born, which the Father wanted for reparation to the sins and corruption of the world, and to contribute to the return of the separated brothers.

[71] Cfr. Letter to Abbot E. Caronti, *4855, 28.8.1938.

Regarding the reparation, he would consider it later on as one, of the specific tasks, entrusted to the Congregation, in relation, especially to the "horrible sacrileges" of the immediate post-war period.

The return of the separated brothers, instead, fascinated him since the beginning of his priesthood. Since then he considered it "as one of the ardent throbs of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus: *Ut omnes unum sint*" (that all maybe one), and he made it his own 'intimate throbe" which he will feel profoundly pulsating in his heart for all the long years of his life.

When around 1920 he came to know, through a short article in the L'Osservatore Romano, about Octave of Prayers for the Unity of the Churches promoted by Father Paul Watson, protestant pastor later on converted, and founder of the Franciscan Brothers for the Reparation, he welcomed with enthusiasm the initiative of this beautiful practice, which he extended then to all the Houses of the Congregation; and at once he wrote His Excellency Mgr. Andrea Caron, in Rome, so that his good intercession be used for the spreading of the Octave of Prayer, with the favour of the ecclesiastical authority, to the whole Church.

He had a great faith in the Pastors of the Church and gave them credit for their special charisma; much more in the Vicar of Christ! It seemed to him, in such a way, to quicken the time of the unification.

He didn't know that the Abbey of Maguzzano had been, long time before, a witness to the same saintly enthusiasms and

intentions in the person of the great Cardinal Pole and, although unaware, he was his ideal continuator.

The Lord, who knew his servant and searched into his heart, made him meet, in 1940, the “Catholica Unio”, a Pious Association, with its centre at Fribourg, approved and blessed by the Popes, which proposes to work for the return of the separated brothers, in a special way the Eastern Church.

He felt being pushed to know it better and be part of it: He applied personally and with the whole Congregation; the relationship intensified: at a certain point he felt to offer the Abbey of Maguzzano as a centre to spread and to propagate the “Catholica Unio” in Italy.

The offer could not but be accepted in Fribourg; rather it was accepted with enthusiasm, and it was proposed to him to take the responsibility of being the President of the Association in Italy.

Though feeling not up to the responsibility and not wanting to accept visible position, the desire to contribute to the return of the separated brothers is such in him, that he does not let the proposal be passed, but being advised and having received the encouragement from his Confessor and his Bishop, he accepted it, trusting in God with the same faith of the Apostle: “*Omnia possum in eo qui me confortat*” (I can do all things through him who strengthens me). On January 31, 1941, His Excellency Mgr. Mario Besson, Bishop of Lausanne, Geneva and Fribourg, and President General of the Catholic Union, wrote him officially nominating him as the National President for Italy.

But the Sacred Congregation for the Oriental Church, though having nothing to object about the person and the Congregation, rather assuring that it was the best choice, “for serious practical reasons” summoned Mgr. Besson to suspend every activity of the Catholica Unio in Italy.

The Father having received the communication from Mgr. Besson, accepted everything with faith and wrote one of his beautiful letters, meditated upon at the feet of his Crucifix, foreseeing “in the sad hour” that they were undergoing, “in the melting pot of immense sufferings” the maturing of “some special plans from the good God” for “the return of all dissident brothers”.

The House of Maguzzano welcomed many priests in need of spiritual recovery and rest to invigorate in prayers. It also welcomed for many years the young vocations of sixth-eight standards of the Congregation.

Now, conveniently equipped, it is a Centre for frequent spiritual meetings, Recollections and Retreats for priests, religious, laymen that with wide range of acceptance are proposed during the whole year.

Besides, during ‘90s the Abbacy of Maguzzano has become a Centre for Ecumenical meetings gradually extended also to Inter-religious Dialogue.

CHAPTER 18

A DECISIVE HOUR

In front of Politics

It was observed, by those who were near him for many years and for the most various reasons, that Fr. John Calabria did not stop, but for few minutes, to deal with the temporal subjects, which were proposed to him. After some starting words, with daring diversion, he was able to elude at once the argument, and with authoritative spontaneity bring his interlocutors "in more breathable air" [72] (comfortable talks): God, the souls, the Church, the Providence, and the Grace.

And yet, nobody ever left disappointed; everybody found something they needed, for the case discussed, for the proposed matter, whatever it could have been.

Imagine if Fr. John would lose himself in dealing with politics! We mean, of contingent and superficial politics.

And yet, in the years prior to the First World War, and right after, politics attracted in the squares and in theatres valued and very honest men of the Church, in strong debates

[72] Verse from the poem "Il 5 Maggio 1821" (On May 5, 1821) by Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873), one of the greatest Italian poets.

against those denying God and the Church; in the papers fiery polemics were brought up against the Masonic and lay radicalism and the brutal and materialistic socialism. Unfortunately, in Verona, the occasion to enter the fight was never lacking.

But he refrained from joining, also when it seemed to go against his interests: it was not in his spirit, or his nature, and therefore, could not be part of his own system.

During the war 1915-18, the Venetian priests were a bit watched and suspected to side with Austria; rather, a long list was made in Verona, after the withdrawal of Caporetto,[73] with Cardinal Bacilieri on top of the list; and in the air was the intention of internment for them. The courageous deed of the Cardinal, who in Villafranca spontaneously presented himself to pay homage to the King, against the custom of those times, saved the Cardinal, and also his priests.

Fr. Calabria was always above every suspicion; even if his innocent, but illegal carrier-pigeons had given him some nuisance.

Then the Fascism came. The Father had perceived at once, since its first appearance, the fatal way towards the suppression of freedom and the tendency to oppress Religion. The methods and men didn't inspire any trust.

Nevertheless, for that correct Christian manner which rests on Faith, he always saw the Lord in the constituted

[73] Cfr. Chapter 7, the War 1915-1918.

authority, above the ideas and persons. And this was what he taught always to everybody.

On Christmas and Easter he didn't fail to send to the Mayor or Podesta or to the Prefect, whatever their political affiliation was, his Christian greetings, taking the opportunity to introduce some good words and the assurance of his prayers and blessings.

He had little direct contacts with the highest civil authorities, but also those few times his speech was always inspired by supernatural values; in such cases, he didn't stop his habit of talking with extreme simplicity and conviction, sometimes expressing himself in dialect. Respectful admiration and amazement were always the effect of his evangelical behaviour.

Even his Religious could not entertain talks about politics, and he was strict on this.

"Do not get particularly excited about politics – he wrote them in 1942 –. As a matter of fact I forbid you to speak about it and to make discussions about it". "Our politics – he often said – is the politics of the holy Gospel: God and souls, our sanctification and that of our fellow creatures".[74]

An event happened to a young Brother driver, during the war, and this pointed out a lesson for this purpose.

The Brother was passing through, with a truck, the highway Venice-Milan, with a man who asked him for a ride.

[74] Let. 31, September 1942.

These were difficult days for the divisions of souls due to the uncertainty of the situation. That man started the conversation about the events of the day and didn't spare his judgment against the King, about Badoglio, Mussolini, etc. The Brother kept silent. So the other openly asked him what he thought of this. The Brother, educated at the school of the Father, answered in simplicity: "We are not made for war and we pray that peace may soon come". Then the man kept silent; and reaching Verona, he wanted to compel the Brother to accept a bottle. "Pay it to a poor, you'll do me a great favour", the Brother courteously answered; and without getting down, he proceeded with his way to the house.

"That's how we should behave", commented the Father.

The Interference of a Regime

It is known by all how the Fascism had penetrated with its influence, the whole Italian public life and naturally, like all the regimes that want to secure their future, its aims were focused in a special way towards the youth. Each young Italian had to become a young fascist, especially if student.

The Institutes administered by the Clergy or Religious were not spared by this intrusion, and also the Father had accepted it though trying to avoid as much as possible what was of less good and too heavy.

His personal prestige, the understanding and Christian sentiments of quite a lot of the hierarchies, and also... the uncomfortable position of St. Zeno in Monte, contributed to this.

For a certain time a Brother, formerly a non commissioned officer of the Army, could himself have the organization in his hands; when this was no longer possible, those who succeeded him always showed respect for the spirit and sacred tone of the environment, and were always laudably reserved with the young boys. Of this favourable situation, for sometime, also the young boys of the other Institutes could take advantage.

Still, the first enrolment of the "Good Boys" was done by the Prefect and the Federal in person! But it had to be more the moral good they themselves received than the "political" advantages which the authorities intended to get from that organization.

The newspaper "L'Arena" of April 28, 1935 was pleased to write: "The Prefect and the other authorities admired so much the magnificent work of Fr. Calabria, fruit of the highest faith, of self-denial, of will and sacrifices… Young boys, healthy in spirit and body, who can face the future with steadfastness, without being disheartened…"

Among the others the Prefect said: "I don't know if I must admire more the beauty and the magnificence of the place or the perfect organization of your formations".

When the Fascism fell, the Father, as he had been against applause, did not join the condemnation and absolutely prohibited his people to go, in any way, against the defeated: "It is not Christian to attack who is fallen",[75] he said with strength; and he did not allow that on *"L'Amico dei Buoni fanciulli*" (The Friend of Good Boys), an article be published easily condemning the defeated, which had been suggested by the Police-Headquarters.

In Front of the War

If it could be affirmed with certainty that not even a grain of incense had been burnt on the altar of partisan politics, it does not mean that he was disinterested in the events of the terrestrial city; only that he brought everything in the supernatural level and transferred to God and souls' interest.

The political and military upheavals that were in Europe after the end of the First World War, which would bring the second universal conflict, were not strange to him.

From the top of his beautiful St. Zeno in Monte, "at the feet of his Crucifix", like from a free and impartial observatory, he saw, followed and often foresaw the facts which were going to happen later on.

"The present time is very serious – he wrote on February 2, 1933 to his children –. We do not know what the

[75] From "*L'Amico dei Buoni Fanciulli*", the monthly Bulletin of the Congregation.

Providence reserves for us. The storm is getting bigger and we can foresee the exit that is as much disastrous as men do not care about it. Even the good ones and also religious and priests do not worry about and they continue to live like the people in the time of Noah. They lived unmindful of the warnings and of the threats from the Lord".[76]

From this time on, he didn't cease to call again the attention of the seriousness of the hour, of its importance, of its decisive weight that it would cast in the future.

In 1937, he had a leaflet printed to be distributed in thousands of copies, with the title: "Take and read", and with its subtitles very eloquent: "A warning… maybe the last" – "Fatal contradictions" – "Criminal connivances" – "There is no other salvation"... "Listen to His voice..."

In this leaflet he denounces the penetrating propaganda of the people "without God", citing the examples of Spain, Russia, Mexico, and Germany.

"What to do", he asks. "One cannot but be worried to see the torrent of mud and blood which is approaching".

Yet – he pressed – the Pope had spoken; but the world has done everything to drown his voice. "Many deceive themselves of being Christians Catholics, because they go to some "Open Mass", included as variation of a programme; or to a "solemn blessing" of some trifles!"

[76] Let. 5, February 2, 1933. In the first edition of 1956, this letter is dated: 6.10.1933.

The hints to the hypocrisies of that time were very clear but nobody protested. And he, after having listed the “fatal contradictions” of the prevailing hypocrisy, which disregarded “justice and the love of God”, continues:

“Dear brothers to whom these poor word might come: Is it not true that the more active allies of the Kremlin are ourselves small Christians of this kind?... And don’t you see that it is really like this, with your fading Christian profession, that you preclude the yearning of the Pope, and suffocate the powerful call of his Encyclicals of last Easter? The Encyclical against the atheist communism, against the sly Mexican peace, and the insult of the Nordic neo paganism! That this may not be the last voice, the extreme calling of the grace! That the baptism of blood would not come also for us! And then?”

In April 1943 he again proposed a “Programme of Christian Life” to contribute to appease “the divine justice”.

For him, true follower of the Gospel, war was an absurdity. “There are other better ways for understanding among men”, he said. And to the ones who wanted to justify the Ethiopian undertaking with the excuse of the civilization and evangelization that could spring forth: “It is not with the arms – he answered – that the Gospel is brought to the world”.

The day after the proclamation of the Empire a commentary was heard from him: “Empire of soaked paper”. In fact, he thought with the Prophet: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain”.

As he did in occasion of the first world war, also during the African conflict, and more so during the approaching of the Second World War, he intensified the appeal for prayer and penance, for the reformed life and costumes.

In the year 1942, when for many it seemed that the war could soon be resolved with the victory of those who started it, he wrote: "What will the future prepare us for, my dear brothers? We do not know. The power of the evil is certainly satanically organized and plotting "*Adversus Dominum ed adversus Christum eius*" (against the Lord and his Anointed). People do not want God; they want to undermine his reign that is the Church, from its fundamentals, denying the supernatural, turning all its values over..."[77]

He saw the war not as a simple collision of arms, provoked by material interests more or less confessed, but like a "general perturbation, a huge impact of wrong principles and systems that have unhinged men drawing them out of the unchangeable eternal principles of the order".

But he saw also in the war "a particular time of the Lord, the hour of one of his great calling for everybody". [78]

"Sad and dark hour" therefore, "the war", "the hour of Satan"; but also "the hour of God" for those who would like to understand it; "hour of great mercy".

[77] Let. 31, Spiritual Retreat 1942.
[78] Let. 36, May 1944.

During the Conflict

The war broke out and Fr. John Calabria saw in it the anxieties, the events and the ruins. His heart seemed burdened by the nightmare of the whole insane humanity that was tearing itself to pieces, stricken by hate and victim of Satan.

If the partisan politics was absolutely forbidden from his conversation and from his houses, instead he followed attentively the war events and wanted that his sons follow them as well, through the official reports on the radio, to draw from it points of Christian and human solidarity with the suffering brothers.

But even here, he didn't want any discussion, easy to degenerate. The constant exhortation was: "Let us pray! Let's make ourselves saints!"

He wanted that the emergency regulations of the authority would be scrupulously observed and practiced.

The sad events of the country, especially from the moment of the landing in Sicily, touched his innermost soul.

He shared with his sons the risks and dangers. Aside from some short visits to Negrar or Roncà, for an indispensable rest for his shaken body and for the recollection sought by his meditative soul. For everybody he had words of encouragement, and to the Brothers: "Do your duty – he used to say – and not a hair would be twisted". And so it was.

During the armistice of 1943 his sons wanted to sing a Te Deum of thanksgiving, but he didn't share their joy; for him the yearned peace was still far behind. And he was right.

The thought and the desire for peace were continuously in his mind; how he wished, how he tried to hasten it up with his prayers and sufferings!

During the establishment of the Salò Republic, to those who asked him for advice regarding the military duties, he did not doubt to declare that the constituted authority must be obeyed; besides, whoever had the intention to evade the calling and to be with the Partisans, did not need to worry for being condemned; he left to everyone the responsibility of risk, calling everybody to respect the law of God, anyway they understood the interests of the Nation.

To a person who asked him in writing about the delicate question of the moment, he answered: "Love your country, as Jesus loved His. Obey your parish priest. Pray for me".

The advancing of the allied troops, the resistance to the death on the Gothic line and the consequent break through, the new resistance line on the river PO, still useless, made Verona as the extreme bulwark of German and Fascist defence. If the defeat seemed then inevitable, the desperate tentative to delay it were multiplied in the hope of a future counterattack.

The partisan guerrilla warfare and the consequent retaliations multiplied hate and the mourning among brothers. The one after the other aerial bombings on the city were dreadful, sowing ruins, terror and death.

The people of Verona looked up to Fr. Calabria, counted on his prayers, and trusted his blessings. And he blessed, comforted, and encouraged.

When he reached some towns or damaged places, the evangelical scenes were repeated. People would crowd around him, making so many requests for prayers and blessings for the beloved ones who were far away: at the front, in the prison camps, dispersed, or dead. Children to be blessed were brought. He was asked by everybody when peace would be back.

And he, not able to evade, for what he could do, to this siege, exhorted them to live the Christian life, to turn nearer to God, to reform the ways of life: then peace would not be delayed in coming.

Active Piety

In the sad days that followed the armistice of 1943, he helped the soldiers in any way, so that they could escape the retaliations. He opened his doors to the political persecuted Italians and foreigners, and to the Jews.

After the tragic process of the hierarchs in Verona, one day, coming from the Convent of Barefooted, he went to the tombs of the executed by firing squad to pray.

He accepted with enthusiasm the proposal to take home a group of young Ukrainians, who came to Italy among the troops, after the failure of the Russian campaign. In fact, he

gathered about fifteen. Many of them, of Orthodox Religion, on Easter of 1944, asked to embrace the Catholic Church. “Who knows – he said – maybe this is a sign from the Lord, because He wants us to go to Russia one day!”

But, he did not do anything to impose the Catholic faith to them; instead he always recommended to his followers to respect their religious conviction.

He suffered much when one of this small Russian, escaping from the House, went back to an adventurous life, “mascot” of a Regiment. After a short time, this poor guy died due to a tragic road accident in one of the many streets of Italy.

During the hardest time of the war in Verona and its surrounding, he opened his refuges to the outsiders: in the House of Nazareth he welcomed the Venerable Vicar General of the Diocese, some Religious women of a new Congregation, founded by Fr. Philip Bardellini of the Philippians Fathers, united so much to him in charity, and the family of a doctor, who lost everything owing to the destruction of his house.

The Good Boys of St. Zeno in Monte, meantime, were evacuated to Camposilvano, those of Madona di Campagna to Ronco and the students of Nazareth to Castelcerino, a hamlet of the Soave Municipality.

During the days of the liberation, he gave hospitality, in St. Zeno in Monte, to some Germans, who asked him so as not to be involved, without their fault, in the bloody retaliations of those days.

His charity and active piety did not stop here. It would be long and difficult to gather all the manifestations. It was the Providence itself that gave him the possibility to help the neighbours by all means. It is enough to say that, contrary to what happened during the First World War, the material providence was abundant enough to be shared in a large way with the neediest brothers.

A Providential... Bomb

In one of the most critical moments of the civil war, it seemed that the Lord wanted to help His servant to remain above the confrontation, free also from smallest suspicions, in a halo of supernatural charity.

The means the Lord used was very original and out of ordinary: certainly not according to our taste: a bomb!

On the night between 10 and 11 October 1944, one of the most destructive aerial bombing raged the city of Verona.

St. Zeno in Monte was also hit. A number of bombs blasted in full the typography, pulverizing the larch benches in the compositors' room, vanishing into thin air quintals of lead, destroying one linotype and damaging the other which became useless.

Another big bomb, of two quintals and a half, instead, hit a room near the old theatre, went through another and collapsed in the paper stockroom, in the typography, without exploding: an insignificant chip of wood, providentially

infiltrated through the fuse, had prevented the striker, after the spring got released, from hitting the detonator, with a distance of only one millimetre!

The alarm signals didn't function that night, so that the Good Boys and the Religious, awakened by the thundering sound of airplanes and crashing of the bombing, were forced to run to the refuge in the dark and under the falling bombs. Nobody was wounded or bruised; a boy was hit in the head by a glass sheet, but he didn't get even a scratch.

The grace was attributed to the maternal protection of Mary, whose feast happened to be on that day, and to Saint Joseph, who from his intact niche above, was watching over exactly where the Good Boys had to pass to go to the shelter.

In front of the disastrous effect of the bombs, the Father, though grieving about it, didn't show being perturbed: "The material disaster is nothing, less than a venial sin! – he said –. This is His House, He will take care of its construction making it more beautiful. It is sin I fear! Worst than one hundred thousand bombs, especially in this House. If we seek the Kingdom of God, the trial is not a punishment, but a gift".

Later on, thinking it over, he told somebody: "Who knows for what purpose… Maybe because of some disorderliness in the typography; better yet, to avoid perhaps other serious harm..."

On the same day some fascists, accompanied by German comrades, went to St. Zeno in Monte to ask (and to ask meant to impose) to print a leaflet of Black Brigades.

Without long explanations, the militiamen were led to see the disaster that spoke for itself. And so, it was avoided the appearance of being collaborators which, though regretted, could have been inevitable without the bomb.

Incident in a St. Zeno in Monte

A day in February 1940, in the Refectory of Roncà, Father Calabria said: “But look what a strange dream I had last night: it seemed I saw a House in St. Zeno in Monte assaulted by the Fascists”. Since everybody was silent, without answering, he repeated it another time.

A Brother, rather simple, who was there, also wanted to narrate his dream of the past night. The Father, with modest simplicity, but against his habit, wanted to clarify that his was not just like any other dream; but the Brother, without knowing the difference between his dreams and those of the Father, instead insisted in saying that one can have so many dreams… The Father then kept silent, pensive; somebody noticed it.

In another occasion, in December 1942, talking with his Vicar Fr. Pedrollo, he said: “I think that if some enemies would come up here… the Angel of the Lord would make them withdraw”.

The eve of Liberation came. On April 24, 1945 the revolt spread throughout Northern Italy; the perils, the ambushes, the surprise attacks multiplied everywhere, making in a short span

of time, very fluctuating the fates of the opposite combatant groups.

Even in Verona, in the city, in the hills, in the suburbs, the crackling of the machineguns and of the rifles were heard here and there, with intense and now infrequent rhythm, mixed with the dull explosion of hand grenades, alternated by the unsafe silence, followed by more deafening explosions provoked by the sappers or the fleeing enemy; while from the plain the thundering sound of artillery came, preparing the advance.

The Allies were already pressing; the hours for the fascists and the Germans were counted: but they made it hard for everybody, they wanted to fight the advance out until the end; and they had to look over their shoulders for the partisans who were coming down the mountains in great numbers and were coming out from their hiding-places in the city.

The bridges were mined and in a little while would be blown up; even the deposits of the ammunitions and petrol would have been exploded, adding terror upon terror.

On the hill of St. Zeno many people were pillaging the military warehouse, left unguarded, when crackling of musketry can be heard from a short distance. It is about an episode of guerrilla warfare between the German and fascists troops against the partisans.

The shots provoked among the plunderers a general escape. The big door of the Good Boys House is closed, but it has been opened with the threat of resorting to force, and so

the fugitives enter the courtyard and run to hide in the caves of the hills.

The escape of those men attracts the attention of the militiamen, who try to catch them. But when they are in front of the House, the main door is already closed. They turn then to the porter's lodge, violently knocking and firing some shots from their guns through the door.

As soon as the door is opened, some of them rash through the courtyard, pursuing those who fled, others enter the Church with machineguns in their hands and, without any respect for the sacred place, shouting and threatening, sent out the Brothers who were gathered there to pray the Rosary.

Then they make the elders lined up against the wall, hands up, asking them for their religious identification card, for fear that among them some suspected elements were in hiding.

Also, in the big courtyard there were Brothers with some boys who were praying, and these also the invaders, livid and shouting, threatened with retaliation if they would not hand over the partisans who were suspected of being in hiding in the house.

Things were becoming worst; when from the group of Brothers lining up in front of the Church the Steward breaks off, to follow some of those furious men, who now are moving towards the kitchen and the laboratories. But, while he is about to reach the courtyard, a German who is stationed there and takes him as a fleeing partisan, is going to deal him a lethal blow in the head with the back of the gun.

The Providence wants that just at this point a Trentine priest from the House, who speaks German, comes with well-timed and resolute intervention to stop the insane act and clear the situation, helped in this by a Monsignor, a guest of the House, who also knows the German language.

But to tone down the arrogance of these violent men maybe it had the major effectiveness the thundering explosions with which the Germans, in the meantime, were blowing bridges of the river Adige, thus proclaiming to friends and foes that they were definitely retreating.

To calm more the souls there was the experience of a Good Boy from Ancona, who had a black ribbon with five white stars in his button-hole: five dead under a bombing of the allies: an entire family!

The situation, which was becoming more tragic in many ways, was so happily resolved without any damage to people or properties, though the fear had been great, so great for somebody that a manservant of the House didn't hesitate, to hide, to throw himself from the terrace to the typography, with a jump of six meters. But he was even unhurt.

A Vow

On September 8, 1943, as it was the custom, the Madonna of the People was being solemnized in the Verona Cathedral. The casual coincidence with the proclamation of armistice, which opens the hearts of many to the hope of an

incoming peace, but for pensive men foretells uncertain days and sadness, suggests to the Bishop to make a votive promise: to build a temple of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, "as a witness of the filial gratitude of Verona for the utmost protection, that in this sad situations the Madonna would take pleasure to give to our City and Country".

Fr. John Calabria didn't want to do less; and promised that the Congregation would also have done something to assure the safety of the Opera and of Verona.

On that day, he just had followed the impulse but without concretizing it.[79] After about ten months, with the approaching of the feast of the most Precious Blood, which he was very devoted to and which seemed to him to be like the summary of all the feasts of Our Lord, he welcomed the suggestion of his Vicar, to celebrate yearly in the various houses of the Congregation the Feast of the Most Precious Blood and to consider this solemnity as the fulfilment of the promise he made before.

"You will have this day as a solemn memory – he wrote in the promise, with the words of the Liturgy – and you will celebrate it in solemnity to the Lord for all generations with everlasting veneration" (Cfr. Ex 12: 17).

After the promise, he had printed hundreds of posters with the portrait of the divine Lamb in guise of having been

[79] On the contrary, in the Archives of Verona there is a document with the promise in five points and the signatures of Fr. J. Calabria and five witnesses; see the book *"My Beloved Brothers…"*, Ish Kripa Indian Delegation, Bangalore 2011, Solemn Promise, 9 September 1943, p. 158.

killed, with the writings dictated by the Patriarch of Venice, His Eminence Cardinal Piazza: “Long Live the Blood of Jesus” – “The exterminating Angel is passing again in the world today and repeats in vast dimension his mission of justice. Oh, mark with the blood of the Lamb the door of the houses, the door of the souls, of the families, of the nations. Only with this pact we will be able to be saved from the extermination that has its epilogue in the eternity; only with this pact the future of the world will be saved from the extreme ruin”.

This image was posted in all the houses of the Congregation, and the Father had it distributed to those who were pleased to have it and requested for it.

The devastations of Verona and the accident of the typography of St. Zeno in Monte exempted them from the promise made: but the Father, for his personal devotion to the most Precious Blood said: “We will do the feast just the same.” [80]

In fact, he wanted to see in the devastations of Verona just a sage of what could have had happened, and in the accident of the typography he even saw “a grace, a gift from our Absolute Owner, Blessed Jesus – as he wrote to his sons – because in this way, he spared us from a danger that could have brought serious consequences to the whole Congregation”.

[80] The celebration of this feast was stopped when it was suppressed by the liturgical reform of the Post-Council.

Of the same opinion was also the Bishop, in reference to the vow made by him for the Diocese and also the votive temple became a reality.

CHAPTER 19

"MY CHURCH"

Devotion to the Pope and the Bishop

The Pope, the Vicar of Jesus Christ, the sweet Jesus on Earth,[81] had always been in his heart, the mouth and pen of the venerable Fr. John Calabria.

He was eager to hear the Holy Father's word, and made it his own, he propagated it; he knew how to perceive in it a special "inspiration" and made it be known. He suffered, because it was not sufficiently heard and put into practice. The Pope's interests were also his interests for the Church, for the wanderers, for the humanity, for all the urgent needs in the threshold of time.

He often spoke of the Pope, and didn't fail to mention about him with insistence in his writings to the Brothers. He prayed and made them pray for Him.

How many Masses he celebrated for the Pope!

During the sad days of the two wars, in sufferings and persecutions that afflicted the Church, he lived in close

[81] Expression of St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380).

communion with the Pope, making the preoccupations and the sufferings of the Pontiff his own.

When, in July 1943, Rome was bombed, he wrote to the Holy Father at once a letter of mourning, offering his Houses to the most in need children.

When, in the following September, there was the dangerous rumour that the Pope would be deported by the Germans, he called in his houses for special prayers for Him. Again he made everybody pray in June of the following year, when the imminent siege of Rome loomed ahead.

How he suffered and felt united to the Pope in the days of the arrest and the trial of Cardinal Mindszenty and Cardinal Stepinac! And for all the oppressions of the Church and the Catholics, happening in whatever part of the world!

He was anxious, offered days, prayers, sufferings and exhorted his sons to do the same, when the news about the Pope's health became alarming.

He died on the same day, the Holy Father Pius XII recovered miraculously from the serious illness affecting him; and the public opinion and the conviction of many was that Fr. Calabria offered his life for the Pope, since, when he got the news of the Pope's illness, he said, "If the Lord would like to accept my life, I'll voluntarily offer it".

The spontaneous popular intuition can stay as a good witness to a truth that sprang from the single events and from the tone of a life all for God, through the Hierarchy.

When, in September 1944, the Holy Father came down in St. Peter's for a penitential procession, Fr. John was enthusiastic of this, he recognized in this act a very special inspiration, wishing that everybody would take it as an example; and with faith he wished that for the prayers and the penance of the Pope, the Lord's appeasement could have happened more easily and that peace would not be far behind.

How with much filial love he asked for the blessing of the Pope and how he considered it effective!

Jubilees, dogmatic definitions, canonizations, encyclicals filled him with inner joy and gratitude, and exhorted to thank the Lord and to take advantage of them.

Three times he went to Rome, and one was just to submit to the Pope a project for sanctification of the priests; but for his humility and for his coyness and emotional temperament, he never asked for private audiences: and for the same reasons, he resorted many times to write Rome at other circumstances.

Only one time, during the time of Pius XI, he was received in a particular audience of kissing the hand and to receive a special blessing. But what an effort!

He loved Rome for being "the City of Saints, the Martyrs and the Vicar of Christ", "the Centre of Christianity", but deprecated all the profanities and vanities which disfigured her and feared the dangers he perceived, being so sensitive and delicate, so reserved and stranger to noise and self-showing.

Like for the Pope, he felt the same for his Bishop, for the whole hierarchy: such respect, such humble subjection, devotion and faith for their word, for their writings, for their blessing! Their portraits, with their best wishes words, were put in places of honour; not for showing off, but for living faith.

"Nothing without the Bishop" he repeated with the words of St. Cyprian, particularly in occasion of decisions, initiatives, new works and the like.

Since the beginning, and always, with heroic consistency, he was ready at a sign from the Bishop, like Abraham in Mt Moria, to sacrifice his one and beloved creature, the Opera of the Good Boys. His attitude during the agonizing days of the first approval of the Congregation will remain a monument of his faith in God and in the authority of the Successor of the Apostles

That his devotion to the Angel of the Diocese was without flaws, it can be seen from the esteem, veneration, the admiration the Bishop himself had for him. We could see an edifying and multicoloured florilegium of attentions and reciprocal kindness, to show how much they esteemed each other, and we could call it "florilegium of charity".

The painful events of the war gave him the opportunity to show his soul, as he did with the Pope, also with the Bishop.

He sustained all the spiritual and material initiatives of the Prelate, warmly endorsing them to everybody, and offering his Houses and his Religious where they could have been useful. When the Seminary was seriously hit by the bomb and the

Rector found dead among the rubble, he ran to the Bishop to express all his condolences and to comfort him.

On April 23, 1945, when the communications from one part and the other of the city were almost cut due to the mined bridges, he wrote to His Excellency a short letter to express “the demonstration of his special attachment”.

After the war, the ties were strengthened even more.

They were two great and noble figures, who met each other in a historical moment of their lives, they walked together a long stretch, spacing on the same sky, that of faith and piety; they loved each other, and if in a decisive crossroad they were not in agreement with each, more for the fault of things rather than of their will, this fact didn’t stop them to walk together and love each other; the Lord, rewarding both of them for the faith, humility and charity, let them reach, though lengthening the way, the desired goal.

They left the earth in a span of few days, from each other, when their tasks were practically finished.

“My Church”

He wrote one day to Cardinal Schuster:

“I engraved the words one day you told me: ‘The canonical vest is there, the spirit is missing!’ And because I spoke to you with all trust, I also want to tell you that since years, with increasing insistence, I feel resound deep in my

heart the cry of Jesus: “My Church!” Sometimes it seems to me that there is no faith, definitely there is a lot of wrongdoing, we are so far from the sanctity, which we should aim at, so it seems to me that the Heart of Jesus is very hurt. And I ask myself: can one remain silent, let it pass, or rather one has to talk, shout, until also the most recalcitrant and distracted could hear, be shaken and reformed themselves?”

“Evidently the reformation of the Christian people is not possible if first of all there is no real, sincere, constant reformation on our part. The times, the actual hour, the turmoil that happened ask for it and woe if it does not come from us, and soon.”[82] “But to this it is not enough to take care only of the branches, there is the need to reach the trunk and the roots: you understand me”. [83]

He was thinking of the Church incarnated in the Apostles and the first Christians, “light of the world, salt of the earth”, and it seemed to him that in twenty centuries of life, too many incrustations had come to weaken the light, and dissipate its “taste”.

“The light is lit – he said – but how much dust is imposed on the glasses!,,, There is the need to clean the lamp again!”

With the Holy Cardinal he had started on this theme a close and very interesting correspondence.

“It is a cry that has to be heard”, the Eminent Prelate writes him, who, though admiring the Church “in her whole...

[82] Doc. 4701 – 21-11-1948. Arch. Poor Servants of Divine Providence.
[83] Doc. 5045 – Holy Thursday, 1950. Arch. PSDP.

holy", rich with "many and many thousands of real saintly souls", sees her in a critical period of transition, assaulted by her enemies inside and out, in a very serious and difficult situation".

Therefore, it is necessary to pray, pray and sacrifice oneself for the Church and for the Pope, because "the password and the programme" of the reform has to start "from the Vatican Hill".

"It is necessary that the Lord would give light and strength to his Vicar. Without him nothing can be and must be done". "There is the need to pray much, so much for the Pope!"

The two men of God understood each other perfectly and together: they challenged each other to look for the ways of God, for the good of the Church.

"What can I do for the Church?" the holy Cardinal asked the Father. "If the Lord brings me with him in Heaven, I will do nothing but pray for all eternity for the Church and for her apostles on earth".

He wrote again: "God appreciates generous victims 'pro Ecclesia'. I believe that now the Lord is giving you this special mission: to suffer for the Church... Now the Church is undergoing a period of martyrdom in the East and of dangerous crises in the West. Only prayer and sanctity can help her in this moment".

Both were afraid of politics, of outward appearance, of opportunism, of the overwhelming rigidity of the law and the dogmatic fixity of certain conventions.

Both looked up to Rome, where, “the entire ecclesiastical life is focused”, and to the Pope, for an opportune renewal.

The Father, convinced and fully understanding the redemptive and saving mission of the Church for all men, her distinct missionary structure, deplored every localism, every burdening bureaucracy, every compromise with the “less evil”, every obstacle that would block or delay the fulfilment of the divine designs.

He staked on the supernatural, and it seemed to him that too many human considerations could prevent the Spirit to spread and work.

The only things of value to him – the only important ones – were faith and charity, the Gospel and the grace, the paternity of God, the priestly sanctity and the apostolic spirit of the first Christians, the struggle against sin and the conquest of separated brothers; and he waved these concepts like many flags to summon people inside and outside: flags which he showed and entrusted to the Christians of goodwill, extremely happy if others made them their own, pick them in their hands and waved them to the wind of the spirit of God.

In the “Brotherly Christian Help” (F.A.C.) of Fr. Arnaboldi he saw Jesus: “The FAC is Jesus, Jesus is FAC” he told him to confirm him in the undertaken work.

“The Movement for a Better World is wanted by God”: he told Fr. Lombardi since the first days of 1949.

He blessed and encouraged the moralizing work of Mgr. Peyron. He was a priest from Turin who had started a movement of the fashion aesthetical worthiness, as a message of beauty and Christian goodness.

He approved and blessed the statutes of the *Missionary Priests with evangelical spirit* of His Excellency Mgr. Bernareggi, Bishop of Bergamo.

Each of these initiatives and others still, meant to spread the spirit of Jesus, to bring Jesus to the world, will find him consenting, blessing and participating with prayers and sufferings.

He had only one thing in mind: that God, that Christ and His Church would triumph, for the good of the souls and the society.

For this reason many and many would go to him, because in him they saw the apostle of charity, the teacher of the priestly sanctity, the man of the Gospel.

New Order

The slogan made by men of politics[84] to justify their wicked ways, was at once taken by the Father and made his own for the supernatural renewal.

[84] The German term *Neuordnung* (New Order), created by the theorists of Nazism and translated in Italian with *Ordine Nuovo*, spread in Italy by the

"They speak about a 'new order' – he wrote to his sons on Christmas in 1940 –; we too need to feel the need to cooperate with it. But let us remember, my dear that, as always in the past, also in the present time the true new order will be made by the Saints".[85]

"Man will not make the true new order – he writes in August of the following year –. The Lord will do it and the Lord won't use the learned, the rich, the strong, the powerful people, but only the Saints".[86]

On Palm Sunday in 1945: "Only God is powerful to draw good out of evil and He wants to do this; He wants to speed up this hour and express His kindness. It is an hour of blood and death and He wants to turn it into an hour of salvation and life: enough for Him to find apt instruments for His Providence. And the instruments are we, Christians if we begin to live well".

"After this crash, after a cessation of this war, men and scholars will seek a way out of these problems of salvation and life; we know that only Jesus is the way, the truth and life".

"The scholars will look at us, the separated brothers, the idol worshippers and the whole world seeking life and light. What a terrible responsibility would be ours if they seeing our examples, our way of living against gospel and God's law, would return to their idols, to their own ideas and say: 'But this is a

fascist propaganda. The Father gave this fashionable word a profound evangelical meaning.

[85] Let. 25.

[86] Let 26, Octave of the Assumption of B.V.M, 1941.

comedy; they say they are Christians, following Christ and His doctrines but in practice they live like us and often worse; better our Buddha, our Mohammed…' "[87]

The quotation was long, but necessary, to understand how he felt the greatness, the seriousness and importance of the hour he was living, and that which was approaching with the rushing of the events.

From this time, from the years of the war, we can say that a new period starts for the Father.

It almost seems that he wants to get out of his "*small hole and small den*", from his self-restraint, to write, in public and in private, to exhort for a renewal of spirits and consciences, or a return to the genuine sources of the Gospel and the apostolic era.

In fact, he started contacting Bishops, Cardinals, priests, religious of apostolic spirit, qualified laymen, who were all concerned for the uncertain fortunes of the poor humanity and pushed by the yearning of Christian palingenesy (general renewal) of the world, in the more suitable time for an action of the Spirit.

There was in him almost an anxiety which pushes him, a burning desire to hasten the times, not to waste the time that passes.

He would like to write to the heads of the nations, heads of Religions, even to the Patriarch Sergius of Moscow. He feels

[87] Let 40, Palm Sunday, 25.3.1945.

that the Lord wants it; he doesn't say it by himself, behind him was his confessor, there are wise and honest persons, who knowing his moral greatness, the weight his words can have, or his writings, exhort and encourage him to write and talk. And he, so coy, so reluctant to show himself, would have the impression of resisting the will of God if he would not do it.

And so the books come, which are the condensed fruit of his thoughts and his apostolic ardour, of his mind and his heart:

Apostolica Vivendi Forma (Form of Apostolic Living) (1945) - *Amare* (To love) (1946) - *Perche' non scenda la notte sul mondo* (So that the night will not descend on the world) (1950) - *Instaurare Omnia in Christo* (Restore everything in Christ) (1953). [88]

They are like many appeals of revolt for everybody: priests, religious, laymen.

God, Christ, faith, grace, eternal life, charity, sanctity... are the fundamental themes that are dealt with lucid realism, with testimonies from the Sacred Scriptures, supported with humility and wisdom by the words of the Pope, the Bishops, and the responsibles of the lay apostolate.

Aside from these, there are articles, pamphlets, leaflets that confirm, specify and spread the fundamental concepts.

[88] These Works, written in collaboration with the journalist priest Fr. Venanzio Bini, were published in the "Regnum Dei Editrice" by the Mother House of the Congregation.

There is the breath of the air of renewal, of healthy attitude towards the times, of the truthful attachment to the Church and to the Pope, from whom comes to Fr. Calabria the encouraging and blessed gratitude.

But the reform – Fr. Calabria says and repeats – must start from the house of God, "from us, priests and religious, salt and light of the earth". The renewal of the priests, the laying down of their mission "according to the new era" should have happened since the years in the seminary.

During the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in 1945, he offers the Bishop his House in Maguzzano, so that a part of it could be used, if he so believes, like a novitiate for the young seminarians, before entering the Sacred Theology. "Then, when they will become priests – he writes – they will always have in the House a place where they can, in certain moments, find help, advice, and comfort".[89]

Fr. Bevilacqua has defined his books: "hard, crude and obstinate" pages, because they do nothing but draw attention to the essentials: "primacy of God – adoration of God first and then the devotions – Holy Scriptures first then human witnesses – the spirit first then the body – eternity first then the time – the thought first and then the sentiments – trust first and then fear – the truth first and then diplomacy – prayer first and then the action – faith first and then the money – the Providence first and then the security – work first then the capital – the poor

[89] Let. to Mgr. Girolamo Cardinale, *8924, Feast of S. Heart, 8.6.1945.

first and then the rich – the family first and then the State":[90] this is the "soul" of his message. Consistent message of forty years of experience in life, message that comes from the heart, dictated by love, ripped from his humility, with true characters that will not fail.

In front of Mystical Phenomena

One of the phenomena that had marked the years of war and right after the war, and had endangered the purity of faith and the sanctity of customs was the phenomenon of false mysticism.

Apparitions, revelations, prophecies, mystic faith were reported in the newspapers of the time with tremendous frequency. Messages of salvation of privileged souls, charismatic souls, prophets of the new times, swarmed everywhere.

Under the depressing material life in the days of the conflict, in the desolate reality created by the belligerent fury, in the nightmare of the dark days of the post war threat, the religious instinct and of conservation were more or less addressed towards the supernatural, and awaiting a relief from above, the help, the liberation. Too many delusions, many uncertainties, many nightmares were borne. The environment

[90] Fr. Giulio Bevilacqua, *Preface* to the book of Calabria-Bini, *Instaurare omnia in Christo*, Press factory Buoni Fanciulli, Verona 1953, p. X.

was full of waiting. A climate of expectation: “Look, here he is. There is the Christ!”

In vain, Jesus had admonished not to believe. The crowd listened to all the voices, running to all the apparitions. And with the crowd, also Priest and Religious…

There was a need to react, say a firm word and clarify. Many among the good people, were bothered and called for an authoritative word, fruit of sanctity and experience; and they turned to him, Fr. Calabria. And he told them this word, supporting it with personal examples.

In a convent, a nun had the stigmata, was perspiring blood... poor people and hysteria were conspiring with her.

About another nun, in another convent, it was said that she participated in the agony and sweat of blood of Jesus…: some pins hidden under the garments had well deceived also men more famous and educated than him; but, evidently, less wise and prudent. He had to undergo a lot of trouble, because he didn’t believe!

One day, a priest wanted to take to him a privileged soul, a “Jasmine of Jesus”, together with others who were called “Violet”, “Little Rose”. To judge them, it was enough for him to see their behaviour on the road that from the walls of the city lead to St. Zeno in Monte. The reception was rather cold and it was limited to an exhortation to live as good Christians.

Another case. A woman who said to have had “special revelations” and who had “spoken directly to Jesus”, was brought to him. In his presence, suddenly, the woman’s face

turns pale, loses her senses, with eyes fixed above... “Now she is speaking directly to the Lord”, said the person who accompanied her. Fr. John left them there and went out.

“Tricks, hysteria and the demon go together often in these cases of pseudo mysticism”, the Father explained in his conversation. “And the demon frequently works on this poor sick nature”. Unfortunately, often they start with “I believe in God” and end up with “the resurrection of the body”.[91] And the sad examples, unluckily, were there to confirm the caustic metaphor.

But he knew how to distinguish. At the first news of the weeping Madonna in Syracuse, being an expert by what we had mentioned above: “There is a need to go slow”, he commented. Then, after some days: “Against my usual doubts – he said – this manifestation disturbs me. And the tears of the Madonna bother me”.

But he did not pass a rash judgment; and only after the declaration of the Sicilian Episcopate he made printed pictures to be distributed, with a text written by him, which said: “May the dear celestial Mother dry our tears or change them into precious gems for the Holy Paradise”.

These were the days of his great pains.

[91] See a hint also in the Let. 69, 1.7.1951, p. 329.

The External Brothers

"The Religious of the 20th Century" Fr. John Calabria baptized his Brothers since the beginning of the Opera. He always had a clear vision that the future had in store great things for the laity.

The fact that he grew in the 19th Century, following with attentive eye the development of the great catholic social religious movement, certainly contributed to the formation of his mentality.

These were the years that were the prelude to the affirmation of the inalienable rights of the Church to the sanctifying and apostolic action through the laity, the years that would have led to the Catholic Action and the "Provida Mater",[92] and in which the new era of the world was maturing.

"In the decisive hour", to contribute to the "new order", the Father understood that beside the "intern" Brothers, there should rise the "twin brothers who, imbued with the same spirit and moved by identical ideals, could silently work, with decisiveness, in the environment of their familiar, professional and labour fields, for a practical recall to the genuine springs of the Gospel".

[92] The *Provida Mater* is the Apostolic Constitution of Pius XII, promulgated on February 2, 1947. With this document the Church officially recognized the existence of the Secular Institutes, and regulated their nature and life.

"*Bonum est diffusivum sui*": the good communicates by itself: many times Fr. John repeated this to his sons, to keep in them the love for humility and staying in hiding! "They will come to look for us", he also said' he also said; saying this, unconsciously he was working a panegyric of himself, because notwithstanding his "small hole and small den", for that good scent of Christ that came from his person, many since the first years of the Congregation, went to him and to him they turned to for counsel and direction; even qualified persons in the laity camp: lawyers, doctors and professors.

To those who approached him, he transmitted his spirit, his strength: the "*Quaerite primum Regnum Dei*" (Seek first the Kingdom of God); and with this, the live faith, the boundless charity.

Many remained faithful to him and did not only appreciate his programme but they tried also to concretize it in their family and social environment.

He saw in it a "sign".

In September 1944, he prepared a scheme of Statutes for these souls that, was completed in 1946 and it was approved and blessed by the Bishop of Verona.

He sees in the "Family" of the External Brothers an "institution right for the times in which we live", to contribute to enlighten and heal the world, "is becoming pagan with a paganism worst than the ancient times", to contribute to "bring Christ to the society and show His real face, not covered by our

egoism, by our attachments to the false goods of the world, to the riches and the pleasures of the vita".

Therefore they have to be "living Gospel", and draw from the spring of the Congregation the means of their own sanctification, radiating outside that spirit which must be its mark: the unconditional faith in God's paternity.

All this must be lived in humility, in simplicity, "even if we have talents and titles", in the spirit of mortification, with the strength that comes from the Eucharist and from the supernatural life.

The External Brothers shall live with the religious spirit without being Religious, with the programme of boundless charity that is carried on "above the struggle", promoting the "mutual understanding", making "work of reconciliation and Christian concord"; "with the sole aim of pleasing God".

Through them, he dreams about a "meeting of souls", who gathers to pray, to know each other and agree upon an increasing Christian mark of the individual, social and political life. He is represented in this like an ideal continuator of the Great Saints and Founders of the most difficult centuries of the Church in their fraternal work of peace, for Christian reparation and restoration of society.

The Family of the External Brothers,[93] already tried out by time and in the effort of renewal that the actual world asks

[93] In 1987 the first 10 ladies became members of the Family of External Brothers, which in the new Statute is called the "Family of External Brothers and Sisters". Now the Family is present also in Latin America and Africa.

of them, has given and continues to give good fruits of sanctification and evangelical apostolate, in the spirit that the Father had instilled in it.

CHAPTER 20

THE DECRETUM LAUDIS[94]

An Aurora Borealis

We believe we sufficiently pointed out before how much the Father suffered due to the storm that started inside the Opera and provoked the Apostolic Visitation. Remembering it now, we would like to make a link to that time and those sufferings, taking again the fundamental theme: the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence, development of the seed sown in 1907, vital and fecund fruit for the realization of the divine designs.

When, in March 1935, Abbot Emmanuel Caronti started the Apostolic Visitation, he found in his hands a creature that seemed to be gasping for breath. Also the indications received for the solution of the crisis did not seem to lead to a positive development.

But the esteem he had for Fr. Calabria made him do everything to save the Congregation.

[94] Decree of Praise; it is the name of the document of the pontifical approval of the Congregation.

In fact, a little more than two years, it could be said that the things were in place, such that in August of 1937 the Father Visitor could write to Fr. John from Rome: “I write you with a soul full of joy and gratitude to the Lord, because I can tell you two good news”; and he said that he had dealt with depth some questions, among which the Constitutions and the Decretum Laudis, in a long conversation with his Excellency Mgr. Pasetto, Secretary of the Holy Congregation of the Religious.

“I – The Constitutions

I have had the official task of the revision... I will do everything with all possible devotion, according to the directions your Paternity had set. And before presenting it to the Holy See, we will discuss together.

“II – Decretum Laudis

With the presentation of the Constitutions we will request for the approval “*ad septennium*” (seven years). The decree will take care of this that will put the Congregation immediately under the Holy See”.

How much spiritual joy the Father felt for this letter, it is easy to imagine.

It was the proclamation that the most loved creature, generated with unceasing difficulties and having seen it distressingly on the edge of the tomb, returned now to live with that “pure and genuine spirit”, taking again that “peculiar

physiognomy" that the "Divine Founder Jesus" had marked on it.

But if the birth was laborious and slow, the rebirth then would be the fruit of a patient waiting, suffered, almost agonizing.

The joyous announcement, like a radiant dawn that comes before the light, was suddenly dimmed, and instead it turned out to be an "aurora borealis", which left behind it more darkness and cold than before.

Five more years had to pass, before it was taken like a sure fact, near, certain; and another five for its concretization.

A year of… Disappointed Hopes

All the goodwill and the commitment of the Father Visitor to look into the Constitutions again and to draw up a definitive text, were all miscarried, submerged in the numerous daily commitments which involved his responsibility as Abbot General of the Subiaco Congregation of the Benedictine Fathers and those extraordinary tasks that the Holy See every now and then entrusted to him. But in 1943 the hopes were rekindled.

In April of that year the Abbot in fact starts to ask again for the necessary documents of *Decretum Laudis*. In June, he writes from the Abbey of St. Andrew Apostle, of Genoa-Cornigliano, notifying his next visit to Verona with the elaborated text of the Constitutions, so the Father could see it, amend it and retouch it as he wishes.

Having the text, the Father retreated “in the restful solitude of the dear Novitiate, with the aim – he writes Abbot Caronti – to see again in silence, in prayer and in physical and moral suffering, for the mercy of the Lord my invisible partner, the holy Constitutions, like what you told me to do”.[95] And in fact he compiles a series of important “annotations” as “he feels to do in the Lord”, “so that the Congregation would truly be such as our Great Master wants it”.

To the programmatic points already known about the spirit of abandonment to the Divine Providence, the equality of the members, the unselfishness and the catholicity of the Congregation, the preference for the poorest and abandoned, it is now added not new concept in practice but new in the letter: it seems to him to feel “with particular insistence”, that the name “Congregation” has to be substituted with that of “Family”, to further emphasize the spirit that must reign: perfect brotherhood of the Religious among themselves, ties as sons among the Religious towards the Superiors, and specially towards “the Casante” (the Superior General) who, therefore, must have as much as possible a stable and continuous character, like the father of the family must have and like the Abbot of the Benedictine family has.

If these concepts of his cannot be completely welcomed and translated into formal Constitutions, nevertheless they would come out alive and visible in the spirit of the Rules.

[95] Let. to Abb. E. Caronti, * 4801, Roncà, 24.7.1943.

Regarding the stability of the Superior General, it was granted with benevolence that the duration of his office instead of six years as it is usually in the religious Congregations, would be twelve years, with the possibility also of an immediate re-election. [96]

Towards the end of September, the Father Visitor writes that he is about to give the last hand to the Constitutions, and already in December he informs: "The work of the Constitutions, is finished and I tried to put into it what is in his desires. I would like you to see them before I submit them. But how do we go about it now? But the Lord will help us".

"Very important", Fr. John put down on the envelope.

Then Silence.

It was not easy to travel during those days. The whole of Italy was a front, for the frequent bombings that tormented it; even the postal service was unreliable.

The hurricane of the war had extinguished the flame lighted with such an effort. But not only the war…

In the letter written from Subiaco towards the end of September, wherein the Abbot Father said that he was about to give the last touch to the Constitutions, he added: "Having now received all the observations also from the priests of..." Fr.

[96] The IV General Chapter, celebrated in 1972, accepting the orientations of the II Vatican Council, and the evolution of the mentality about the alternation in the directive positions, deliberated that the office of the Superior General will last for six years, with the possibility of re-election.

Calabria will learn four years later that just these "observations" led the Father Visitor to delay.

Probably they were simple personal impressions.

However, to the Apostolic Visitor they gave the impression of "serious difficulties" and he thought it opportune "*quieta non movere*".[97]

We repeat, the war favoured the delay and also this time the hopes were deluded.

Towards... the "Confirmation"

The war, which in its fury had destroyed bridges, railways, streets, and had sown and accumulated ruins everywhere, necessarily delayed the encounter of men among them. Therefore, the Father Visitor could not go to Fr. John as before, and his Religious; and therefore, was not sufficiently aware of the internal climate of the Congregation: the moods, the relations or existing and possible reactions. Being aware of the old and recent past, he thought it was opportune to proceed with utmost caution.

The progress, however, obtained during the years of the Apostolic Visit, gave him an optimistic impression, so, as soon as it was possible to meet with Fr. John, he assured him of his

[97] "Don't make changes when things are tranquil". The Visitor is speaking of the observations of some priest of Rome (Cfr. *"My Beloved Brothers…"*, Appendix, p. 434 d, and the reply of Fr. Calabria, p. 439).

unchanged interest to bring out the conclusion of the Visitation and obtain the *Decretum Laudis*.

"The Confirmation is near!" he announced on Christmas 1946.

The Confirmation; yes, the *Decretum Laudis* would have been "the confirmation" of a way of life that was lasting since forty years.

The Father likes the phrase enough, and he makes it his own, to such an extent that he considers it almost the reason to live, but he fears that he won't see that longed for day.

"I don't know... if my sins are the obstacle – he writes the Father visitor on May 1, 1947 – I tell you nevertheless that from my part, with the grace of God, though poor and miserable, zero and in misery, I think I have protected and said all that the Divine Founder Jesus wanted, and of this I have had and I have particular signs, and this consoles me and will console me in my deathbed".

He seems a mother, ready also to give life, as long as her creature lives completely and perfectly, as she conceived and brought up in the Lord.

There is almost a skirmish among these two men in this era: a skirmish led with prudence and charity, without lacking in reciprocal esteem and veneration. One would like to please the friend, whose trepidation and avidity he perceives; but he fears that, pleasing him would give him new bitter occasions, while in the long and patient waiting he sees the best remedy for the past ills and the best possible prevention for those in the

future; the other, totally abandoned in God, very respectful towards the dignity, the authority and the freedom of the Visitor, while feeling pushed by zeal to act, on the other hand, he feels the hands tied up to wait more from God than from himself and men, for the moment of clarifying light.

Maybe both are waiting for a sign.

The sign, rather the end of a skein, as it could be better defined such now, really came from the Apostolic See, whence rightly the unravelled skein has to be brought back to its weaver, to be worked on and tested.

In summer 1947, the Holy Father Pius XII saw with sympathy the initiative of a Religious of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence, desirous to organize a work in the suburbs of Rome to aid the boys exposed to the most serious dangers. For the esteem and trust that he worthily felt towards the Congregation, the August Pontiff invited the same, through the Secretary of State, to assume its paternity; he, with his open handed charity, would have voluntarily helped the institution.

Obstacles met in the actuation of the project led the Father to present to higher authorities the uncertain juridical position wherein the Congregation was in, and the difficulties he had for its settlement.

The benevolence of the Holy Father towards the Congregation, more precisely towards the person of Fr. John effectively influenced the happy attainment of the goal of the Apostolic Visit, with the consequent resumption of the direct negotiations to obtain the *Decretum Laudis*.

The “confirmation” was really very near.

The Port

Now a saintly impatience to arrive to the end is affecting him, to assume “the full stability of the Congregation”. By this time it seems “necessary to define the special physiognomy, the Divine Founder wanted from the beginning”.

A Religious of his choice, who in Rome follows the development of the matter, believes he is able to present to the competent authorities and to the same August Pontiff, the urgency that the Father has to arrive at a happy conclusion.

Fr. John was surrounded by esteem and benevolence, and therefore, also the Sacred Congregation for Religious, after the promulgation of the Decree at the end of the Apostolic Visit, writes to the Bishop of Verona to have the documents in relation to the accomplishment of the file, and is set to study deeply the text of the Constitutions, reorganized according to the genuine intention of the Father.

It is no longer the clerical Congregation, wherein the laity are considered of secondary importance, and where the government is entirely in the hands of the priests.

It is not a lay Congregation, where the priest assumes the role of a simple chaplain; not even a mixed Congregation, wherein the government is assumed also by a priest, but under certain conditions.

He asks that his would be a Clerical Congregation, capable to take in the laymen in full cooperation with the priest, without class division, “save always the priestly dignity”, in full equality also in direction, though reserving always to a Priest the responsibility of being the Superior General.

The work of revision and compilation of the new Constitutions goes on for the whole 1948, and only for Easter 1949 it will be ready.

On April 22 in the Palace of the Congregations in St. Callixtus Square in Rome, the Plenary Assembly of the Most Eminent Cardinals in charge of the Sacred Congregation for Religious, “after having duly studied the matter”, entrust to His Eminence Cardinal Louis Lavitrano, Prefect of the same Sacred Congregation, the responsibility to submit their conclusions to the Holy Father.

Petitioner and Spokesman of the cause was the Cardinal Adeodatus John Piazza, the one who had suggested for the first time to the Father the idea of the approval of his Religious Family.

In the audience with the Cardinal Prefect, the Pope was pleased to “praise and recommend with words highly favourable the aforementioned Institute as a Clerical Congregation with simple votes”; and he was also pleased “to approve and confirm the Constitutions, for a period of seven years on experimental basis”.

On the same date of the audience – April 25 – the long desired and laboriously gained Decree of Praise was drafted by the Sacred Congregation.

The “Confirmation” was finally granted.

CHAPTER 21

EXPANSION OF THE OPERA AFTER THE DECRETUM LAUDIS

Milan

Even the great Lombard Metropolis, as all the big cities of Italy, especially the industrialized ones, even before the last war found itself with broader perimeter and with increasing population.

Its great possibilities, due to the nature of its people, its geographical position, its structures and traditions, attracted from every part of the north and above all from the southern part of Italy multitudes eager to settlement, bread, jobs and success in life.

Milan, "the Grand Milan" was visibly growing.

Where there are men, there are souls in need of God. Beside the houses of men, the houses of God were necessary; and so, also in Milan, on the initiative and impulse of the Blessed Cardinal Schuster, the “Committee for New Temples”, provided the building and equipment of fourteen new churches in the outskirts of the city.

One of these, the first, was built on the East border of the Metropolis, by the Lambro Park, neighbouring Crescenzago: San Giuseppe dei Morenti (St. Joseph of the dying people).

It was consecrated by the same Cardinal Schuster on November 1, 1941, with the specific goal to have there a place to pray for the agonizing persons of the world, for the dead, especially the victims of the on going war.

Within its limits, in the southeast boundary, just by the edge of the park, in Cimiano, there was an ancient small Church of the 16th century, dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua, with annexed building, already used by the Jesuit Fathers as a house for exercises for the noble men of Milan; it became later the property of the Municipality of Milan.

At the time of the last war, the building complex with the adjacent land was the seat, for many years, of the Women's Agrarian School in Milan.

In 1943, owing to the known political events, the building, though remaining as part of the School, was occupied by many homeless families.

But the Agrarian School would not return any longer, having found somewhere else a more suitable centre: in its place, the Providence would have called His Poor Servants, to organize and manage a scholastic and welfare complex of wide proportion.

Such activity was a bit the fruit of the holy friendship that bound the beautiful souls of Cardinal Schuster and Fr. John Calabria.

On December 9, 1949 the Archbishop of Milan went to Verona to visit for the first time the Father and his Opera; on February 11, 1950, almost two months after, a small vanguard of Poor Servants – a Priest and a Brother – had already taken room in Cimiano.

Due to the tightness of space and means the first times were not easy. Precisely referring to these difficulties, one time the Father wrote: “In Cimiano as in Bethlehem”.

In the Pentecost of 1951, the Father wanted to go to Milan to thank the Cardinal and bring personally his blessing to the new activity.

His blessing and that of the Holy Cardinal were certainly deposit of grace and blessings from God's part for the future of Cimiano, where the Poor Servants administered for a long time an elementary school and a professional school, and performed priestly ministry in the new parish under the title of St. Jerome Emiliani. With the development of the educative and welfare activity and their relative buildings, came hand in hand the construction of a beautiful and grandiose church, inaugurated in 1965.

Subsequently, the Congregation, always caring for the poor, its needs and dignity, opened itself to a fruitful educational action in favour of psychologically imbalance boys and young men.

In 1991 the Congregation of Sacred Family of Nazareth of Fr. John Piamarta (Artigianelli) took over the Professional

School of Cimiano. In 1993 the same Congregation took over the pastoral activity of St. Jerome Emiliani Parish.

In the same year the Calabrian Community with rehabilitation and educational activity in favour of handicapped boys moved to the Vismara-Don Calabria Centre, at southern zone of Milan. There the Community started a work in the field of sport and youth pastoral; besides, the activity in favour of handicapped boys was enriched with the services of rehabilitation, social education, lodging community for adult disabled, and for young with judiciary problems.

Ferrara

The strong Estense City born by the banks of the big river Po, tormented through the centuries like all other cities looking for freedom, warm and severe, prolific and industrious, rebellious and kind, Ferrara, in the person of Archbishop Mgr. Francis Rossi, looked up to Fr. Calabria since 1927.

The echo and fame of how much the Father was performing in Verona, how much he did in Este and somewhere else, reached until there, and his presence, of his Congregation, his sons, were wanted and requested.

But the times were not yet ripe.

The Opera had a slow growth and the scarcity of the personnel was such that it was difficult to provide for the needs of the moment. The approaches and negotiations then failed

within the short period of six months, and there was no further mention for more than twenty years.

In 1949, the new Archbishop Mgr. Ruggero Bovelli, turned again his sight towards Verona. The saintly souls meet and understand each other easily, and between Fr. Calabria and Archbishop Bovelli there was already an understanding of the present problems, of the needs of the times and of the Church.

Mgr. Bovelli knew very well his Archdiocese, he had a good control of it, and for this, he was a sober and measured realist; he knew how to examine thoroughly the strengths and the moments and he didn't ask for more than what he knew he could get.

The long and ruthless struggle fought against the Church by the anticlerical of all kinds, especially in Emilia and Romagna, had left also in Ferrara its fatal effects. But if it was able to damage faith in many souls, it was not able to suppress the gift of natural bounty of those people. Ferrara dwellers have a good heart: the heart of these people is great.

They love each other and appreciate whoever helps others. Charity, unselfishness and sacrifice will probably be the way by which the Lord would renew in Ferrara the religious fervour of the better times.

In the post-war years Mgr. Bovelli many times had requested Fr. Calabria the work of his Religious in favour of the youth of his Archdiocese. The Father always answered: “Let the Lord do it; when the Lord wants, we will also go to Ferrara”.

Nearing the Holy Year, the good Archbishop repeats the request. He wants to carry out in the Jubilee Year, in the antique Villa of the Seminary, in Aguscello, three kilometres from the city, the work which is so much in his heart. For it he also involved the Holy Father from whom he had received encouragement, blessing, help and suggestion to turn to, for its fulfilment, to Fr. Calabria.

It had to be the monument that Ferrara built in memory of the Holy Year.

The Father encourages the Archbishop to start at once the preparation, “in the certainty that the Lord will meet halfway through us or the others”.

The words of Fr. John give confidence and spur to the Archbishop, who starts the work. In June 1950, almost everything is ready and Mgr. Bovelli goes back to Verona to insist, to ask for the almost promised help.

The Father is very sick; but he can talk with the Archbishop and to his repeated humble request he answers: “We cannot refuse Ferrara... Let us refer again the matter to the Divine Providence”.

The Archbishop did not want more, it was more than sufficient which the Father meant; it is enough and he is happy. He goes, taking in his heart the gladness of that promise and the pain of a vision of suffering, which maybe he never contemplated upon before.

Returning to the house, he officially works the application, already certain of its acceptance.

In fact, it was accepted, but what an effort! Not for other reason but the lack of personnel, never sufficient for the growing needs.

Nevertheless, the Holy Year passed without seeing the beginnings of the new work. The day chosen by the Providence was May 8, 1951, but the proper activity started only in August. The new House was called “The Boy’s City”.

During the great flood of Polesine caused by the river Po – November of the same year – the House opened its doors to many young boys without roofs; and to the Sons of Fr. Calabria the Archbishop wanted to entrust also the administration of the Welfare Centre of St. Monica, in the City centre, where other young victims of the flood were gathered.

This was also a “peculiar” way of the Providence to introduce the Congregation of the Poor Servants.

In June of the following year then, when the antique Convent of Santa Monica was vacated due to the last flood, the Archbishop offered the Father, also this house, to continue the youth apostolate work, undertaken in the days of misfortune, to the advantage now, of the youth of that popular district of the city.

The Father accepted the offer with enthusiasm because, since the opening of the first house, he did not consider it as a

simple filial house of the Congregation, but absolutely “almost a fertile mother of new creatures”.[98]

Milan and Ferrara were the Father's chosen creatures because they were born in the time of his great pains, and how he went to Milan, the same, in an interval of his hardest sufferings, he also went to Ferrara, to congratulate, encourage and bless his Sons.

St. James of Vago

He who passes on the road from Verona to Venice, after St. Martin Buon Albergo, near a hamlet of the municipality of Lavagno, named Vago, can see on the left a so impressive hill, due to soaring cypresses, firs and cedars, descending gradually towards the plane with lines of vines, cultivated camps and meadows.

Among the sparse greenery on the hill a villa is visible, and besides a solemn, great Roman Gothic apse with a bell-tower; the background of the nearby hills and of the far mountains, the sea of green meadows which surround it and the absorbing peace that inspires, makes it the object of nostalgic desire for those who pass by.

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[98] The house in St. Monica was closed, due to lack of religious personnel and given back to the Archdiocese in September 1975, after having done so much good in favour of the poorest children. The activity of the Congregation was concentrated in the Boy’s City.

This is the Grigliano hill, with the Church of St. James the Apostle that keeps, as it is believed, some relics of St. James the Major.

The Church dates back to the end of 14th century and stood on the place of a more antique Church which was destroyed. The project started with five grandiose naves but the construction stopped in the apse; however it was well refined and decorated with valuable frescoes and other works of art.

In 1413, the municipality of Verona, which had the legal patronage of St. James Church, called the Benedictine Monks of St. Giustina Abbay of Padua to officiate the Church; in Verona, they were staying in the Church of Sts. Nazarius and Celsus.

Forty years later, instead, there were the Regular canons of St. Augustine, and a little after the Olivetans of St. Mary in Organo who remained until 1767. Subsequently, it passed to the secular clergy and finally to the Congregation of the Filippini Fathers.

When these Fathers were abolished in 1810, by the occupying French government, the Grigliano went to private hands.

The last owners, after giving the Church and the adjacent villa, through a radical work of restoration, a character more in accordance to the place, thought of entrusting the complex with its adjacent beautiful park to Fr. Calabria, with the proposal to turn it into a hospital.

The Father then didn't accept it, but in 1949, when the offer was repeated, he saw a “sign” to fulfil those “meeting of souls”, which for a long time he had desired as an effective contribution to the solution of the serious social-religious problems of the present time; and he accepted.

The taking of possession happened on July 25, 1951, feast of St. James, the Apostle.

The very first “Meeting” of study entitled “For the truth in charity”, took place only in November 1953.

The House was opened, moreover, to many other useful meetings, more distinctively spiritual, like Recollections, Retreats, Meetings of laymen and priests. Later it became the “House of Meeting” for adults and the house for the youth group “Spazio Fiorito Mariano” (Marian Space Full of Flowers), both founded by Bro. Vittorino Faccia PSDP.

This activity still continues and remains as an open cenacle ready for what the Lord would want to prepare for the good of the souls.

Grottaferrata

The Holy Year wanted to give still another gift to the Father and the Congregation.

In fact, in that year, it was offered to the Parish Priest of the Borgata Giordiani, in Rome, by a charitable person of the capital, a villa in the Castelli Romani, in Grottaferrata, so that

he could transform it in a way he thought it opportune for the good of the parish.

It became at once a place to stay for the young boys and girls, in separate shifts, during the summer months; and it welcomed also groups of men, women and young people of both sexes, of the Roman Parishes entrusted to the Poor Servants, for the Recollection days and short courses of spiritual Retreat.

In 1953, the house also accommodated young boys of the six-eight standards, with probable priestly vocation, especially coming from the central-southern part of Italy.

The Father did not see it; if his health would allow him to return to Rome, as he often desired, Grottaferrata would have been an ideal home for him, a little bit far as it is from Rome, in a pleasant and tranquil location.

The house had great development, and many "vocations for the Church" found in it the spiritual and material help. The Congregation also built a beautiful church for the faithful, which was erected as parish church on September 1, 1966 bearing the title of St. Pius X by the Bishop of Albano Laziale. The house was then used for other purposes and the vocational activity ceased in 1969.

The Religious Congregation having withdrawn, the Parish was handed over to the diocesan clergy in October 1975.

CHAPTER 22

TOWARDS THE END OF THE DAY

The hour of the: "Nunc dimittis" (Give leave to go)

More than forty years had already passed since that foggy evening when six “Good Boys” took possession of the small house in Case Rotte Alley, forty years of continuous physical and moral sufferings.

The *Works* and the *Souls* really cost him a lot!

Sister Maria Galbusera, with the intuition of her female spirit, refined by sufferings and interior light, understood him immediately. “The Father was born to suffer”; and she gives us, with these words, one of his most complete pictures. He was above all, man of suffering, because gifted with a very sensitive nature, able to understand other's suffering, capable therefore to understand and help.

Besides, he himself knew from the beginning where he was heading to: “Pray, so that I may understand the great gift of the suffering”, he wrote to a friend.

To the personal experience, he added the knowledge of the origin and growth of all the works of God; and he never

doubted that his work was a work of God. His spiritual Father never deceived him about what he had to expect.

They had been forty fruitful years, forty years of "workshop". "I'm in a workshop" he often said, when he was in pain.

The Congregation had then sixteen houses and about a hundred religious.

Maybe this was not a lot, compared to other Congregations. But he was never preoccupied with numbers; his Congregation had to grow in humility and poverty.

"I am not attracted by the quantity, but by the quality. The few will make the many. A Brother, a Priest who has the pure and genuine spirit of the Opera supplies hundreds and even more".[99]

"The Opera will be great if it is small, will be rich if it is poor and will have God's protection if it is away from seeking human security".[100]

This was important to him, that it had to be totally a work of God and not of men; from this he drew reasons for its greatness. His countless and repeated statements, exhortations and expectations say how great he thought it was; knowing, however, that it was nothing else but "zero and misery".

[99] Let. 32, Holy Lent 1943.
[100] Let. 50, Pentecost, May 25, 1947.

Those sixteen Houses, however, represented a little the universality of his apostolic spirit; near the houses for the orphans, a hospital and rest houses arose, together with formation houses for poor aspirants to the priesthood and needy parishes, the Apostolate for Sick and that for the non-Catholic Brothers, the Priestly Activity and the missionary Apostolate of the UMMI... And other activities were in the works, suitable “for the present times”.

However, all these had no value for him, if the concept of the “pure and genuine spirit” had not been saved, restored and put again on the “right track”

This was above all, the “sacred patrimony” to be kept intact and to be transmitted; the “hidden treasure” chosen as programme of life, ferment of works, leaven for the “present hour”; “fountain of living water” where people “will come to drink” from the days to come.

He had been “called” twice by the Lord during his life: to the priesthood and to the Congregation of the Poor Servants. To both calls he answered without hesitation, without conditions, no matter the price.

The hour of the third “call” was getting closer. The temptation to put down the shovel could well come to the tired worker.

Few years before, in fact, he had said: “It seems to me that I hear a voice telling: This is the last page of your book!”

Wasn't all already done? Didn't the Congregation already receive its "Confirmation"? Wasn't this the last duty given to him by the Lord?

“Remember – Father Natale of Jesus wrote him in May 1933 – that the actual Rules of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence are not according to their spirit, not even to the will of the Divine Providence...; when the moment will come for the approval of the Holy Congregation for Religious, they shall be modified and reorganized, according to the spirit of the Good Boys' House”.

And again in 1937: “Remember that the Institute of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence is not yet in accordance with the Divine Will of the Most Holy Trinity”.

We already saw how much he troubled to keep this conformity.

So, what was now, left to be done?

The last touch of the Divine Artist was still missing, not for the Work but for the Worker, in order to be found “in conformity to the image of His Son” when “the great call” would come.

“The work” will not be easy or short; and it will be performed in secret, in hiding”.

There will be a long twilight before the “night without darkness”; and only when the “operation” will be over the patient himself will give testimony of the goodness of the work done.

The Start of the Painful Days

In January 1950 a period of special sufferings starts for the Father.

To the nausea, sleepless nights, headaches, the after-effects of an old phlebitis, to the many other sicknesses which accompanied him all his life, due to his very delicate nervous system and his very sensible heart, inner sufferings are now added, which sometimes make him say: "I did nothing... My hands are empty... I looked only for myself... my comforts..."

Some other times, he is bothered and shaken by little negligence, mishaps, and unforeseen events. His nature feels these things and then he humiliates himself, asking forgiveness; he is afraid he gave bad example.

Still, he is always fully convinced of the importance of his mission as Superior General and urges everybody to listen to him, to respect him, "*intuitu Operae*", for the sake of the Opera.

But then, he is afraid that everything is an effect of his pride and he wants the assurance that it is not so, because everything he says is inspired by the words of his beloved Father Natale of Jesus.

To confirm himself of the rectitude of what he stated: "I have no reason – he says – to entertain words of pride. Fr. Calabria has done nothing. The Congregation of the Poor Servants belongs to Jesus. And the spirit of Jesus animates it. And Jesus finds use of my ignorance so that his action would be

evident and people would say: Ah! If Fr. Calabria is there, there is the hand of God".[101]

One time, long time before, he had a dream which gave him great joy, confirming him in the conviction of the Opera's greatness, compared to his personal worthlessness.

"I was – he narrated – in front of the Church of St. Anastasia and a big crowd was thronging in order to enter. I ask:

− What is going on?

− Fr. Bosco is preaching – I'm answered.

− Is Fr. Bosco preaching?

So I will enter, too. And I saw him, Fr. Bosco, very clearly: on his forties.

As soon as he finished preaching, Fr. Bosco comes down from the pulpit and I see that he comes towards me.

− Oh, Fr. Bosco!

− Oh, Fr. Calabria!

− Ah, Fr. Bosco, Fr. Bosco, I am a zero and misery!

− Zero and misery? Very good conditions! Good conditions indeed!

And he left me.

[101] No quotation in the original.

I woke up, immediately feeling at peace. I immediately called the Brother Nurse and I told him: quick, write down: *Zero and misery, good conditions*!"

Since then, this sentence became a motto for him, often repeating it to himself and to others, getting back a sense of glad confidence.

"The terrible nights" follow, one after the other. "What would Jesus want?" he asks himself.

Towards Easter the pains increased. And a very new thing: for few days he cannot pray the Breviary, if not only in part. "I am exhausted… I am exhausted… But the will of God be done".

Now he thinks he cannot do anything more for the Opera, but to suffer.

"And I hope – he says – that my sufferings will be accepted by God". The thought of the "Great Opera" is always in his mind and the present sufferings give him more signs of its greatness.

"I feel the need to be helped... I think the Lord wants you to help me..." The absence of Father Natale of Jesus, his old and holy confessor, already dead since few years, has part in making more acute the moral suffering of the abandonment.

Around him, there is a contest of charity, generosity and self-denial; and he understands the sacrifice, the sorrow the

fatigue of his sons: “I'm sorry. I'm giving you some pain, to sadden you; I'll try to dissimulate just not to sadden you”.[102]

During all this time, he never stayed bedridden and always celebrated the Holy Mass; he was able to attend, though partly, to the correspondence, to receive some visitors and follow the negotiations for the opening of the Milan and Ferrara houses.

But around May, his conditions get more serious and he is forced, sometimes, to stay in bed without celebrating the Holy Mass.

He then expresses the wish at least to attend the Mass celebrated in his room, and his sons rush to satisfy his wish by rotation of Holy Masses celebrated in the various Houses, so that every day there will be a Mass celebrated for him.

How this solidarity of love and prayer comforted him!

The call to prayer for “his poor soul”, to be able to face the “great rendering of accounts”, had been constant in his life. When he said: “sustain me”, “be my breath”, he meant specifically the help and the comfort of the prayer.

Together with the spiritual help, also the medical assistance, with the most loving care is increased; but the conditions do not improve, and the doctors are worried about this.

Some think that the Father may get easily better far from there, in a more quiet and relaxing place; some try to

[102] Passim, from witnesses and conversations.

advance the information mentioned, just to explore his reactions.

This was another reason of great moral pain. Just a little mention was enough to make him understand a lot; and sometimes he anticipated and guessed it.

In the meantime, also his sight was getting weaker, creating the fear that he might lose it permanently.

Famous doctors are consulted; their diagnosis raises the preoccupations: his physical conditions together with the trials perturb everybody close to him.

The invisible enemy comes back

And more there is a coming back of old days: the days when Father Natale of Jesus wrote him with his usual vivacity, both incisive and gladdening. “Remember that the devil is one of your most terrible enemies, if he could, he would throw you in the Adige River, and it would be for him a great victory and triumph”; or he assured him that all his physical and moral troubles were caused by Satan, “the worst enemy against Fr. John, because he is so much loved by Jesus and because he is an instrument in the hands of God to perform works for the good of the Church of God”.

“I feel anguish... darkness... I seem to be without faith... I don't feel anything... I don't know how to pray... I can't”.

“What the Lord wants... let it be! I accept everything as expiation for my sins, for the Congregation, for the world...”

And then, images or less good words come to his mind, but without touching his will. But he, so delicate, has a horror. “Oh God... oh God...” he cries.

They try to comfort him: “Your day is a continuous prayer – they tell him –. Your sufferings are a continuation of your Mass”.

And then he is again assaulted by pains and fears about the propriety of celebrating, blessing, administering the Sacraments. He also thinks that he has incurred in the censures of the Church.

These are unimaginable sufferings!

Other times, he thinks he's going crazy; he thinks he is saying things contrary to what he always said and preached about.

One day, he wants to make a kind of a public confession: he calls his “partners in charity”, as he used to call his closest collaborators, and in the choir area of the church, in front of the Tabernacle, he would softly say, like praying:

“I ask for forgiveness to the Lord for all my shortcomings against the holy Law of God. During these last times, in certain moments of darkness, of anguish, of great sufferings, knowing or not knowing what I was doing...Please, remember the first words of the Father, those written in the booklet, not the latest ones. The first words contain the pure and genuine spirit of the Congregation for the sanctification of my soul, of your souls, of

all souls... Oh Jesus, burning with love, I wish I never offended you..."[103]

There is a very afflicted and painful tone, revealing an inner sorrow that makes all, the present cry.

But the fight has no respite. On his exhausted and tired body, some days his vivid intelligence is almost darkened and his will is weakened, to the point of having difficulty in receiving food.

Only the obedience, the insistence and the charity of his sons force him to eat the intake of needed food.

He is like the poor Job, abandoned to the fury of a mysterious power by that Eternal Wisdom who knows how to bring light out of darkness.

"There is a wall of division between me and Jesus; it seems like he is rejecting me... For all eternity... O God! O God!... There is nothing, there is nothing!... there is nothing else left for me!..."

Whoever is near him, tries to instil faith in him:

"Who knows the value of every minute you spend in the eyes of God!... The value for your soul, for the Opera, for the Church, for the world!..."

"When you say so – he answers – it seems to me that another voice tells me: No, the truth is the contrary!"

[103] Many witnesses are gathered in the Chronicle handwritten by Fr. Louis Pedrollo, *Cronistoria*, Archives PSDP.

It is like gusts of black fog that wrap him up; bottomless pits of desolation engulf him.

The rare pauses make him suffer more, while they reveal him as the Father of old, of always, to his sons; full of faith and trust in God; preoccupied about his own and others' sanctification, the purity of the Opera's spirit, its growth as well as its internal structure.

However, in October, after having prayed so much to the Holy Spirit and having offered all his sufferings to the Lord, reflecting about his great responsibility and the condition of his weak health, he puts himself in front of the Crucifix and writes down the transfer of powers on everything to Fr. Louis Pedrollo, his general Vicar, “until new disposition”.

A Respite

From November 1950 to the end of April l951 it had been a continuous Gethsemane.

The moralist, Mgr, Angelo Grazioli, of the Verona Seminary, had no doubt comparing the Father's sufferings with those of St. Alfonso Maria de’ Liguori during his last years; “victim for the Church” as the Cardinal Schuster from Milan had called him.

The very pious Cardinal went to visit him in October and had with him a long and cordial conversation.

The Father had wished to see him, because of the great trust he had in him and because of that affinity of spirit and purposes which existed between them; he wanted from him a word, like an anchor from which he could cling during his most dark and stormy moments: “The word of Your Eminence – he told him – will be for me like the word of Jesus”.

The Cardinal came and talked to him, and after he continued sending him his words in writing: “I think that the hand of the Lord is present in these sufferings. When he wants to use a soul he crushes him...” “It seems to me that I can apply here the passage of Isaiah (53, 10): ‘It was the will of the Lord to crush him in pain. When you make his life an offering… he shall see his offspring and shall prolong his days...’ ”.

In the second half of October, his general conditions, though with some short respite, became more serious, until May 1951.

On Pentecost, man's hand through right medical treatments and God's hand made the miracle: it seemed like he was waking up from a long sleep; and, as nothing extraordinary had happened, he took back the management of the Congregation and went back to his life style before the long sickness.

He follows with special interest the works in Milan and Ferrara and in the villa of St. James of Vago; he looks with particular attention and sympathy at the Fr. Lombardi's movement, he writes to him, prays for him, dedicating to this purpose entire days.

He thinks of the Pope, the Church, of the priestly sanctity, of the great problem of the separated Brothers, of the Missions…

And all this activity, performed with his style, with private letters and circulars to the religious, meetings with experts who come to visit him, through prayers and daily offerings, shows a condition we may define "good" in health. It will last for the rest of 1951 and he can happily celebrate his 50th year in the priesthood.

1952 is characterized by high and low moments, bringing fear that the terrible 1950 days may come back. He realizes this, too, therefore, he appeals to the group of his closest friends, so that they would help him in a very special way with their prayers and attentions. These are his "auxiliary Brothers" from whom he receives special comfort.

The Painful Days are Back

He felt so much the need to be surrounded by affection, sweetness and charity, of seeing around him devout and obedient sons, eager to listen to him and depend on him in everything.

"It's better to do nothing staying with the Father – he said – than to do miracles without him".

The year 1952 brought him some interior grief also from somebody, whom he had all the right to expect comfort from.

More than this, one of his most beloved priests, falling, broke his femur; an External Brother fell victim of a train accident. Painful stabs on his very sensitive heart.

One morning, on December 23, 1952, Fr. Pedrollo is called by one of the nurse-Brothers, to go immediately to the Father: he finds him still with his body abandoned on the armchair, victim of a painful crisis, with headache and sense of dizziness. But he is serene.

“I offer my life to the Opera, to the Church, to the persecuted” he says.

A bloodletting is performed on him and he is brought to bed.

He passes well the night, resting: in the morning, Christmas eve he wishes to celebrate the Holy Mass. After a little perplexity from the doctor who assists him, he gets the permission; he celebrates without fatigue and consequences.

Also the day passes well, so that, on Christmas day, he has the consolation to celebrate all the three Masses, without feeling any discomfort.

The good days go on until half of April; only some little clouds appear now and then to darken the clear sky.

At about the end of the month, the most fearful interior sufferings start again. To these, always new and more serious physical troubles are added.

In the first days of November, a car accident eliminates a young priest. Each mourning, though enlightened by faith, is

a hard blow for him, because of the intense love he feels towards his spiritual sons and all those who stay around him and the Opera.

If at the start of the year the clouds have been rare, now by the end of the year the clear skies are rare. His sky rather looks always darker and more threatening: “Darkness came over…”

“Let's keep under control these three months”, he said in September.

On December 9, 1953, in the morning, the reverend Fr. Rossi Attilio, who, during these last years is closer to him and dearly follows and assists him, finds out that the Father's breathing is short and troubled, and his face is cyanotic: it seems he is in a coma.

Fr. Louis is urgently called and the doctors are informed.

He stays this way up to about 10:00 a.m. then he has a little recovery and recognizes whoever is near him. He is examined, but he doesn't show reasons to be preoccupied, rather he seems to stay calm. But, at around 8:00 p.m. a new crisis puts the House on alarm. The pulse reaches 120 beats and is irregular, the breathing becomes short and serious again, a trembling shakes him and it seems that the catarrh chokes him.

They ask him then if he wishes to receive the absolution and the Last Sacrament: “Yes, yes, do it”, he answers.

He consciously receives both; and to people who suggest joining his sufferings with those of Jesus, to think of the Virgin of Tears, he shows all the pain of his troubled soul:

“These are nice words, they comfort me; but is it true?... My sins... I did nothing good...”

They ask for his blessing: helped by Fr. Pedrollo, who guides his hand, he blesses everybody near and far away.

But the hour set by God in his secret plans did not come yet. His precious existence had to be prolonged for another year.

The following day, the telegram sent by the Holy Father arrives.

“His Holiness wishes to comfort with paternal prayers the venerable patient Fr. Calabria and heartily sends to the well-deserving Son, apostle of charity, invoking the maternal favours of the Immaculate Virgin, large particular blessing”.

They read it to him, omitting the words “apostle of charity”. And he starts to pray for the Pope.

For the whole month it was a succession of small alarms, while the pains of spirit never abandoned him.

In early January and then again around the middle of the month, a new trouble rouses some preoccupations, aside from making him suffer.

It's really like a “daily death” and it is a wonder how he, who is now eighty years old, is able to face all these trials and pains without giving up, without crashing.

On Holy Thursday 1954, a new event made his faithful Fr. Pedrollo run night time to the Hospital of Negrar, where the Father was staying.

Staying in bed, just before sleeping, a cough's attack had threatened to choke him, taking away his consciousness and raising the fear of an exacerbation of pulmonary problems, earlier noticed. But also this time, against the just fears of the doctors, the crisis was overcome without serious consequences.

1954 will really be the year of his holocaust and the Lord will continue to purify his soul with new and more excruciating sufferings.

Light and Darkness

“I'm torn between light and darkness” he said one day to Fr. Pedrollo.

His spirit was like a sea in a storm; he thought that any time he could be overpowered and drowned.

Deep inside his soul, like inside the boat, Jesus was sleeping and was giving no sign to wake up. He slept but He knew.

He slept, but he was there.

“Stay calm, you are in the grace of God, Jesus loves you so much, he's looking after you, with an eye of preference and he will never abandon you”, Father Natale of Jesus wrote this to him forty years before.

Father Natale isn't here anymore, but God will not abandon him.

“Jesus carries you and you are carrying Jesus”, a Religious who came to know of his trials wrote to him in those days.

Yea, he was carrying Jesus, the light, like a lamp which gives light, staying in the dark.

He was light himself, and was blinded by it. This was the way it should be: and the more the lamp was burning, the more his darkness deepened.

Still, during those days of darkness, of loneliness, of anguish, when the life was for him unbearable boredom, and he felt rejected and abandoned by God, he knew how to come out of him and for others, with bright and vital words.

“Suffering is a mystery of love”. “Jesus, let me be just a Jesus, according to the spirit of your Opera”. “To suffer is a Key to open. The way of the cross is the surest and the most certain way, which brings us to eternal life. Let's try, with the grace of God, to walk along this way”.

The appeal to pray is constant: “I recommend you to pray to Our Lady a lot, Our Lady of Tears, according to my intention and for the Opera”. “It's urgent to pray much for your Father and for the Congregation of the Poor Servants”. “Pray much for me so that the Lord will give me his light and his mercy”. “Pray much, much, much for your suffering Father, so that I may understand and treasure the sufferings, the way Jesus wants”

The thought then of the greatness of the Opera, as a creation of God, never abandoned him.

“Everything is failing – he says – the memory, the names, the events, the sights; now I’m only concentrating on these two thoughts: the present hour and the Congregation.

It brought also no little surprise to see that, in the night of the spirit which was wrapping him up, he was able to give answers that fully satisfied the souls of qualified people, who had the opportunity to approach him to ask for light and advice.

“He gave me the answer to a problem which was bothering me since twenty years and nobody was ever able to appease me”, an eminent person who visited him at that time, said.

One of the biggest sufferings he felt, during his long trial, was the fear that his aridity was caused by his lack of correspondence to the graces of the Lord and the absence of a sensitive devotion could mean a decrease of the same graces. But, when they were able to convince him that his trials had value in the hands of God and that God was going to put them to use, through the Opera, for special designs of salvation, then he was comforted, still with his conscience of his “zero and misery”, which made him exclaim: “I'm the one who knows what is boiling in my pot!”

What is really important is to do the will of God, to sanctify oneself and thus to be saved: this is all; and what has been the first thought of the first Rules, comes back now, in the twilight hour, almost a prelude of a dawn without sunset.

“The Lord united me to my beloved Brothers to perform his ways and his divine designs”.

“My dear Mother, Virgin Mary, give us the grace to well understand and to deepen the knowledge of the sufferings of the Father for his soul, for the Opera and the whole world”.

These are flashes, complaisant flickering of the lamp he keeps high and which, lighting up the sons, lights up the Father, too.

And when the last flicker, damaging the last veil which will fall worn-out, will light him up totally, in that light, he will see the Light, forever.

The Angels of Comfort

In his long and dark Gethsemane he had been always surrounded by his faithful “Partisans of the charity”, by his “Auxiliary Brothers”. And we cannot say that, like the Apostles, they fell asleep.

It's really inexplicable how some of them could have endured the sleep and the tiredness for weeks and for months, without giving up.

“When the tribulation comes from God, when God wants to put a soul really on trial, no human consolation could be of help”, the Cardinal Schuster had told him.

“Certain wounds can be cured only by the one who provoked them” this holy Cardinal wrote him in May of the previous year.

“The best sign of the presence of God in a soul is when He makes a wound so deep in a human being, that only God's sword can reach that depth”.

Fr. John Calabria fully lived the mystery of Christ, who cries and begs the Father to remove the chalice without drinking from it, showing all the repugnance and all the submissiveness like his Master, as much as a creature could reach its Creator.

Three times Jesus went to ask for comfort from his Disciples; thirty times thirty the Father had to look for it because of his weakness; but, as the Christ, he still said “not my will but yours be done!”

“I would like to be that Angel who in Gethsemane comforted the Lord during his agony” the pious Milanese Cardinal wrote him. “What did the Angel say to comfort Jesus in Gethsemane? He showed him the wonderful fruits of his Passion; so that He willingly accepted the Cross. I say the same to our venerable Fr. John...”

“It is the Lord who wants to test his souls, I'm sorry to say these things to Fr. Calabria, but it is true: the way the Holy Old Man Simeon did to Mary”.

“Blessed are you because you are under God's press!... I believe that the Lord now is giving you this special mission: to suffer for the Church... What a privilege is that of suffering! God gives it only to his few closest friends”.

The first days of October 1953, he writes him: “To the good Father, whom the Lord is bringing to eighty years, through

a good old age, I send my wishes, prayers and the Holy Mass, which I will offer for you this Friday. It is clear that the Lord did not fully complete yet in you his divine design for the good of the Church and his Congregation. This must spiritually live of the inheritance the Father will leave. The Lord is still keeping you, so that this inheritance could be more abundant, more acceptable to God, more useful to your disciples".

What benefit he was able to draw for his spirit from these holy words, exhortations and promises! He wanted somebody to read them again to him; he kissed them.

The saintly Cardinal, after having dictated the funeral epigraph for his great Friend, during the crisis of December 1953, as per request from the Religious Congregation, he left first and went to receive his award, in August 1954, leaving behind the Father, still sailing in his dark and stormy sea for other three months.

During his last twenty months of life, the Lord has sent another person near the Father, to support and comfort him; that Religious of another Congregation we already mentioned before.

We do not know how this religious came to know about the sufferings of Father John Calabria. What we know is that in May 1953, when his physical and moral sufferings started to hurt him, the Father received this letter from Florence:

"My Father, in Jesus, from now on may you always see me by your side, I am near you kneeling down in spirit, the humble priest of your present sacrifice, to offer you to Jesus,

and Jesus to you. I intensify my prayers for you, good Father, because these are the most precious moments of your life...

O my Father, Jesus takes pleasure in your physical and moral pain; indeed it is for this that you are *consecrated* Father for ever of a multitude of souls: you are generating for God so many souls... You will beget in pain!... O my Father, I love you so much and I would remove from you every pain; but God, who loves you with eternal Love, still wants you for a little more on the naked cross! Receive the words of the Most Holy Virgin: 'I'm looking at you, son, and see how big is your bitterness, your pain, your loneliness. But I also see the readiness of your heart and I'm happy about it! I see that I can still pour out a little of the bitterness and loneliness of our loving Hearts into your little heart. And I will not spare you, until my bitterness and my crying would not have filled up completely the Chalice of your littleness. Then, I'll be happier, because I will see in you every detail of the image of my Son, crucified for the love of mankind.

Come, son, rest now on my hands and in my heart – with trust, love, filial and total abandonment – because all this is too great for your littleness!' Beloved Father, the last three days of this month I will celebrate the Mass in honour of the Virgin Mary for you; I will offer it for my dear Fr. Calabria; stay close to me always; stay serene. Believe! You must live in the greatest interior peace, because you are so much loved by God!"

After this letter, another and another…

In a little more than one year there are about fifteen letters.

The Father was surprised and puzzled at first, but not annoyed; because, on the contrary, the mysterious letters were bringing a great balsam to the open spiritual wounds. He found in them the echo of the messages of Father Natale of Jesus; he longed for them: they were a support, a spur, and comfort.

There was a need for them, because the old enemy was again acting with cruelty.

“Your inner status, your darkness, your fears, the physical weakness and whatever prostrates your body; whatever oppresses you, whether it comes from demons or from men or from Heaven: everything is caused by love. Love of God, love of Mary, for a design of a saving love, for the glory of God.

Father, it is Jesus who wants you this way! – This friend and consoling brother writes again – It is the divinely cruel love of the One who loves you with very special preference and wants you to be similar – soul and body – to himself on the Cross. Love is strong and ruthless like death... You are the sweetest throb of the maternal Heart of Mary. The Holy Virgin put you in charge of lighting and heating this poor world wrapped up in darkness and intense cold... because of this, she keeps you in the darkness and in the cold, so that you will be intimately associated to Jesus and Mary's Passion. The Holy Virgin has a great design of love for you...

The Love of God is the priest who is burning inside you like holocaust. Jesus still suffers, still implores, sacrifices himself, expiates, mends, asks for, and is in you. God cannot back-out now from the glorious going forward he is doing

through you, He can't and He must not retreat from His ineffable purpose of conquest: we are talking of souls... who are in equilibrium between eternal life and death... we are talking of hidden Church..."

It is a wise language, enlightened by a divine psychology. They are words which are able to provoke dizziness, balanced by a crushing and terrifying truth. Appeals for a mission he saw forty years before, and embraced by him with humility and faith, on the word of his spiritual father: "Never forget – Father Natale of Jesus wrote him in 1914 – that St. Zeno in Monte is your Calvary. On top of which Jesus wants you to be sacrificed, for His glory, for the salvation of many souls, millions of souls, and for the sanctification of your own soul".

In that confirmation, the Father should have found reason to be encouraged. Instead, the divine Wisdom arranged that the words of the far away friend would not have, in his heart wrapped in pain, that correspondence which usually he felt when he thought of his sufferings, tied up to a design of a divine plan.

It seems that the doubts, the uncertainties, the distrusts submerge more and more their roots inside his always more tired mind: and then here comes his consoler to reassure him, with the solemn authority he already had seen from Father Natale.

"I assure you, absolutely and formally, that you are dear, loved and precious to the Heart of God! In spite of all the contrary evidence you see in your darkness, God is completing

in you the masterpiece of his Grace and mercy: for the glory and honour of God! My dear Father, Father dear to the Heart of the Virgin Mother... Father, believe what I'm telling you: glorify the Lord in allowing him to carry you, as a blind, by his hand...”

The Angel has spoken, comforting him; what is left is to generously embrace the Cross and walk towards the Calvary: the final hour is not far.

CHAPTER 23

THE FINAL HOLOCAUST

On the Mountain of Sacrifice

After the crisis of Holy Thursday, which brought him near to death, he wanted to ask his loved ones if it was the will of God for him to still stay in Negrar, or instead go back to Verona: he felt that the veil of his body was going to be torn.

Maybe the words of Father Natale were ringing in his ears: “St. Zeno is the place of your holocaust”.

Where he was now he was feeling good; he was taken care of, was not disturbed... and besides, he was afraid to travel... He asked then Fr. Pedrollo to order him to face that travel out of obedience; and on April 26 he leaves Negrar to go to Verona.

Months passed in the depressing alternative of short calm pauses and great agitations. After the deadly stroke, it seems he is physically recovering; but maybe to suffer more.

What constitutes the most refined and burning martyrdom are exactly the continuous moral trials. He feels lonely, in the night, surrounded by the “failures” of his “poor life”: a total failure, a terrifying distress.

“I dressed myself with the peacock's feathers… I only looked for myself... I lived a purely natural life... I neglected my duties... My God!... How far I feel I'm far from God, whom I loved so much!... Always separated from my beloved sons!...”[104]

No more deep feelings of faith! No more sense of total abandonment, before so easy and usual! The feeling of love itself is transformed into a feeling of dislike!

There is enough to become crazy, indeed.

Poor Father! He gropes like a blind, like a person who is going to drown, looking for a hold, for a safety board; everything slips away, everything slides away like pushed by a mocking and evil superior force, leaving him out of breath, the heart more and more lacerated and the spirit more and more in deep darkness! Even though in a not so far time – and he remembers this – how many souls came to St. Zeno in Monte to look for, and find, peace from him, from the Casante (Custodian) of the Opera! And he explained to them the difference of faith and the sense of faith, between the virtue of charity and the correspondent feeling, which not necessarily go together. No more, now: now he is also like a person who has eyes but does not see.

The cries for help, the urgent messages, especially to Fr. Pedrollo, to pray, to sustain him, multiply. These are appeals that tear the heart apart.

[104] Many witnesses are gathered in the Chronicle of Fr. L. Pedrollo, above quoted.

“I'm at the end of everything... I shout! I shout! Very bad night... I'm suffering too much... Only Jesus and the Virgin Mother can sustain and console me. Dear Father Louis, please, I beg you to pray really much for me, so poor and miserable, so that I could find mercy and pardon from God... I'm in an extreme anguish, I arouse much pity...”[105]

These are often autobiographical notes, or written by somebody near him, and sometimes he personally adds something, aside from his signature, an invocation, a question, an exhortation.

“What will happen to me, poor man?... I need a miracle I do not deserve... It is imperative, imperative, and imperative to pray for me... New events, serious ones!... My beloved Fr. Louis, I'm in anguish for eternity... Come as soon as you can... There is nothing else for me, poor one...”

They seem like messages in bottles, sent adrift by a shipwrecked person in the boundless ocean with no more hope, with no other strength but to cry.

Whoever visited him, in this time, in his room or passed under his windows could sometimes grasp a cry, an excited talk; the flesh in pain was trembling; the soul, afraid and dismayed, was reacting with the last wriggles of energy.

By the end of August, the Cardinal Schuster died; by the middle of September, that Religious who sustained him so

[105] Note to Fr. L. Pedrollo, *5880, 18.5.1954; others followed after some days.

much with his letters came to visit him; he will not see him anymore.

The voices of men, one by one, become silent: God wants to be alone now for the last coat, for the final touch.

That's why he wrote one day: “The victim is going to be sacrificed... what a suffering!”[106] How many times he offered himself as a victim. Now he was in his Gethsemane.

The Last Sowing

On September 30, with much effort and reluctance, he went to Nazareth, where the second shift of the Retreat had just started: he was so much expected and longed for.

He never failed to make his voice heard during those holy days, to which he always attributed a very great importance; but that day it seemed he did not want to get out of the car. Finally, he went to the church and from the door he said, with much pain, few words:

“I commend myself to the charity of your prayers – he said – so that I could do the will of God, at all costs. Do not forget the pure and genuine spirit Jesus wanted since the beginning. Each activity must have impressed the stamp of the spirit of the Poor Servants. That's how you will do great things! I end the way I started: pray for me”.

[106] Doc. 243, 31.7.1950, Archives PSDP:

He recited a Hail Mary and blessed everybody; in the square, they all were around him to kiss his hand; for many it would have been the last kiss; some would not have seen him again.

The following day, with the same effort, he went to Roncà; the Novices were there, themselves having their Retreat.

To them, staying in the car he recommended to be the Novices forever; and Fr. Pedrollo, in his behalf, repeated the exhortations the Father gave the day before in Nazareth. He blessed everybody and went back.

He felt gladder.

On October 2, knowing about the death of an old benefactor of Ronco all' Adige, he goes there to express his condolences to the family and takes the opportunity to say few words, still staying in the car to the Good Boys of the Ronco House.

On the way back, in Zevio, in front of the cross – erected upon his suggestion by the Count Francis Perez – Fr. Pedrollo stops the car for a prayer; but asked where they were, the Father wanted to proceed immediately: maybe he was afraid that he would have felt a sense of vanity, remembering his well done work.

At the end of the Retreat, after having, as it was his habit, thought and prayed at the feet of his Crucifix, he signs his last letters of obedience to the Religious.

October passes, more or less fairly well.

By the end of the month, the Lord gives him the joy of granting him an old wish: to have a bell on the empty bell-tower.

At the end of May, a friend of the Opera, who knew his wish, promised that she would have fulfilled it if the Virgin Mary would help her to save her firm, which was in danger, together with about a hundred families of workers, who would be without a job.

The Virgin granted her prayer and the bell, by the end of October arrived, heavy not only because of its eighteen quintals, but for the commitments it would have to keep: it had to commemorate the Marian Year, the Canonization of Pious X, the charity of the Blessed Mother towards many hundred of workers, the granted wish of the Father, the day of its baptism, the proclamation of the feast of Mary Queen... and it had finally to be an invitation to peace!

In fact, it carries the inscription: “In honour of the Immaculate Queen of Peace! Amen”.

Its first notes ran the Verona sky at noon of November 1, when the Father, from his study, pushed the start electric button.

From now on its tolls, in low “C”, while will struck the most important hours of the day, together with the many hundred bells of the city, will also have the job to announce to the people of Verona the happy and sad hours of the Good Boys' House.

At this time, the general physical condition of the Father does not give serious preoccupations, but his soul seems deep in a motionless and dark air.

No consolation, no comfort, no reaction, he seems to be absent from everything and everybody, desperately alone.

In this air heavy with temptation, the tip of his soul, now and then, breaks through the siege wall and comes out above the thick fog, to get some divine oxygen, to resist, to save himself, to survive.

One morning, he was suffering much and one of the Auxiliary Brothers, just to put to a test the moral coefficient of resistance and life he still had, asked him:

“But, if you were well, don’t you think that you would still have other things to do?”

The answer is great, purely and totally his: the answer of a life time: “Oh yes! Fr. Louis just told me that the works have to be bought with suffering! And I'm paying the price”.

He was “working”; he was still working for the whole Opera.

With his sufferings, as he said many times, he was now “manuring” in a very special way the last seed, sown just few days before. The transformation and the development of the Good Boys Patronage of Porta Nuova, which would have allowed, with the creation of a big Center for professional training in the City, to cut down some people in St. Zeno in Monte, to make it that peace and prayer oasis he was longing for and dreaming about since long time.

“I Feel the Lord Loves Me Very Much”

November mines a little everyday his physical health. He resisted for so long to the various attacks that the doctors are surprised.

Also his trips outside the house become rarer.

Almost every afternoon, also for obedience to the advice of the doctors, he used to go out by car; it was a great relief for him, used to an almost sedentary and retired life. Reached the destination, not always pre-arranged, he asked to stop, went down and walked for a little while.

Now he cannot do anymore these short walks; when he goes out, it is just to reach the votive Temple, near the train station of Porta Nuova, or he goes towards Poiano, to Our Lady dell'Altarol, where, staying inside the car he recites with the Brothers some prayers to the Holy Virgin.

And so on until about November 20.

During the night between November 21 and 22, he suffered a new crisis; in the morning he stayed in bed and did not celebrate the Mass: he will not celebrate anymore.

Almost as he had a presentiment of it, the morning of November 21 he celebrated Mass for these intentions: “For my soul, for the Congregation, and for the Church”, as we read written in his register. His last Mass was, therefore, a wonderful expression of his programme: his soul for the Church and the world.

The Brother doctors, who visited him in the morning, still admitting that, in those conditions, his life is a continuous miracle, are not excessively preoccupied.

He will go on until the end of the month, with these health conditions.

On Monday 29, while at about noon he tries to get up, he is prostrated by a pulmonary fit and has to stay in bed. His breathing become very slow, while his heart beat goes faster. The doctor's advice is to have always ready an oxygen cylinder. Fr. Pedrollo is near him, as much as he can to comfort him with his presence and his prayer.

He knows which words he prefers and likes more: “Lamb of God, who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on me!... O Mary, my beloved Mother, I entrust my body, the Congregation and my soul to you!... O Jesus, I have faith in you!... O Mary, I've faith in you... Everything is counted for your merit... As it is certain that you suffer, it is certain that you will go to Paradise... Blessed is anyone who endures temptation... I will be with them in trouble... I have been crucified with Christ”.[107]

On December 2, to make things worst, he is affected by an intestinal paresis.

In the morning of December 3, the radio informs the world about the sickness of the Pope.

[107] The three quotations of the Bible are taken from: Jas 1: 12; Ps 91: 15; Gal 2: 19.

One of the Auxiliary Brothers informs the Father: “Father, we have to pray for the Pope who is very sick!”

He tries to stretch his arms, and raising his eyes to heaven, says in a whisper: “I willingly offer my poor life” and recollects himself in prayer.

At about 1:30 p.m., Fr. Pedrollo finds him a little calmer; he was reciting the assuring words of a popular and familiar Marian song: “When I think of my fate, that I am a son of Mary, every anxiety, o beloved Mother, goes away from me!”

After a while, the Father falls asleep. He will not wake up any more on this earth.

Fr. Pedrollo comes back at 3.00 p.m. and then again at 4.00 p.m.: he always finds him asleep, like in a normal sleep. The Auxiliary Brothers are constantly by his bed.

Nothing suggests that he is nearing his end.

Only at 5:00 p.m. one of the Brothers doctors thinks it is better to wake him up from a so long sleep; and raising his hands and then his arms, he sees them falling down on the bed in an abandon, heavier than sleep: hemi paresis due to cerebral haemorrhage is the immediate diagnosis.

The alarm is spread.

The breathing of the Patient, in the meantime, has become very short, but his general aspect is that of a person quietly sleeping.

Fr. Pedrollo, with trembling voice, suggests him an act of contrition: “O Jesus, burning with love, I wish I never

offended you...", and gives him the absolution, then he repeats the Last Sacrament.

"His" bell and the bells of the whole city are playing the Ave Maria.

A bleeding is performed on him, but to no avail. Everything indicates that the end is very near.

After suggesting him the most holy names of Jesus and Mary, Fr. Pedrollo gives him the Papal Blessing and starts the soul commendation; his voice is trembling and sobs and cries are heard near the bed.

In church, in front of Jesus in the Sacrament, exposed because it is the first Friday of the month, Brothers and students are praying; they took turns the whole day, in adoration and prayer for him.

During the singing of the Litanies of the Sacred Heart, Fr. Pedrollo shows himself in church from the sacristy and with broken voice announces: "I'm coming to tell you... that our Father is dying!" At the end of the church, a boy makes a shout and faints.

The singing stops and the Litanies continue just being recited. A nightmare hangs over the heart of everybody.

The Bishop is informed, as well as the closest friends and the far away Houses.

From this moment on there is a continuous coming and going of Brothers, visitors, young boys near the bed of the Father, who is slowly dying.

The Bishop comes, his Auxiliary, the Sisters of the nearby Houses, his confessor...; it is a prayerful and touching procession.

Now and then they invite the Father to give his blessing, a faithful Auxiliary guides his hand, while Fr. Pedrollo suggests the words.

The Bishop, after having blessed him, asks him for prayers and goes out deeply sad and touched. His confessor,[108] will not leave him until he would die.

A last picture, during this continuous sequence, comes to complete the series and to seal a life full of exquisite charity: sometime before, the Father promised to a young priest of the House a chalice as a gift. His getting worse in those days didn't allow him to fulfil his promise. Now, somebody, remembering the words of the Father and wanting to fulfil them, while he is still alive, studies a way so that the promise would come true: he puts the chalice in the hands of the Father and the young priest receives it, kneeling and crying. Could have he received it in a more solemn and meaningful way?

Now and then they suggest him some prayers and invocations, suitable for the moment and very known to him: "Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit!... Jesus, Joseph and Mary, I offer you my heart and my soul!... assist me during

[108] He is Fr. Cherubino, a Discalced Carmelite, who succeeded Fr. Natale, already dead, as the Father's confessor. This pious Religious lived longer than Fr. Calabria and died on March 7, 1960, after having been witness in the Diocesan Process of Fr. John Calabria.

my last agony!… let my soul pass away in your peace!... Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, be Jesus for me, that is my Saviour!”

His pulse weakens more and more and his breathing is almost imperceptible.

The last invocations break a silence, which is becoming heavy.

Three more Hail Mary

A moment of suspension...

The Father is not breathing anymore.

It was one o-clock of December 4, l954, first Saturday of the month and the last of the Marian Year.

Our Lady, his celestial Patroness and Mother had come to take her “good and faithful servant” and devout son.

Inside the room, now full of people, Father Pedrollo recites touched and softly the “Come, Saints of God...”

With his heart crying, he tells the Brothers who would not yet like to accept and understand: “We lost a Father on earth, but we now have a new Saint and a very powerful intercessor in heaven! If we will live according to his spirit and we'll practice his teachings, He will not be dead, but will continue living among us”. Then, all together, they recited the “*De Profundis*”.

In their grief, they felt like wrapped up in an atmosphere of serenity and peace.

The one in front of them is not dead he is alive! Also his face says that; look, he is becoming brighter and brighter, relaxed, almost lit up...

At about 2.00 p.m. of the day before, before starting the sleep which had to bring him to his death, he told an Auxiliary Brother, who was near him: “See, I really think Jesus is coming to meet me,… and he will bless you, too”. A pause, and then: “Yes, I feel that the Lord is truly close to me and he loves me so much”.

Everything was now finished.

The inner flame, flickering, had burned up the lamp, completely lightening it, forever.

Apotheosis of Humility and Charity

“When I will die, I strongly forbid announcements in the papers, speeches, flowers. The coffin and the hearse must be like the ones of the most poor. The funeral has to be done in the House; and then, through the shortest way, without entering the City, but behind the walls, outside Porta Vescovo, to the Cemetery... As soon as I'll die, my poor corpse, after the legal recognition, has to be put inside the poor coffin and must not be exposed”, this is what Fr. John wrote, since 1933, in his Spiritual Testament.

And then, he reviewed it in l940, adding: “... I reconfirm, and pray my beloved executors... to be most faithful to my orders”, the same he said in February 1953.

Now, the Sons were going to obey the last will of the Father, with simplicity and humility; but they did not think of... the Mayor who, as soon as he heard of the death of the Father, rushed to St. Zeno in Monte, not only to present his condolences but also to beg the Congregation of the Poor Servants to grant the Municipality the honour to provide the funeral at its own expenses.

The Vicar, Fr. Pedrollo and one of the oldest Councillors, who had welcomed the Mayor, were perplexed: “We understand – they said that Fr. John doesn't belong only to us; but, if you don't mind, we would like to hear the Bishop's opinion, before taking a decision”.

Mgr. Cardinale advised them to give in to the wish of the Mayor and gave disposition that the funeral would be celebrated in the central and monumental church of St. Anastasia.

In front of the wishes of the Bishop... also Fr. John would have capitulated.

The Mayor issued then a very noble bulletin to the citizenry; and the Provincial President and Mayer of Negrar did the same. Mourning banners were put all over Verona.

The Blessed Corpse, arranged in the Chapel of the Crucifix, inside the church of St. Zeno in Monte, became object of fervent homage and prayer from a continuous procession of every class of people, until 4.00 p.m. of the following day, when he was brought, privately, to the St. Anastasia Church.

Along the way, people met at his passage stopped in devout prayer and many knelt down, making the sign of the Cross; a procession of more than a hundred cars accompanied the coffin.

At the entrance of the basilica there was a so thick crowd that they could hardly pass and bring in the Corpse.

From this moment until December 7, morning, nobody could count the tens of thousands of people who paraded for the last homage of a short prayer, a kiss and a salute. They came from every corner of the province and the Diocese, from the near and far away cities; people from every walk of life, whose flow, regulated by the National Police, the City Police and the Boys-Scouts, grew in impressive way.

Many, after so long time, felt the need to go back to the Sacraments; many were weeping for emotion; many were enraptured in front of a corpse which inspired serenity and light: peace descended in their hearts and their faces were shining.

Many noticed a very significant detail: the children's and innocents' homage: it seemed they did not want to leave him; they looked at him without any fear. They kissed him, through the crystal plate, as they were kissing a living person.

The funeral was a real apotheosis.

Never, before, Verona saw a so grand and spontaneous popular manifestation, so plebiscitary and heart-felt!

The civic, military, political and administration Authorities joined the ecclesiastical Authorities, the

representatives of the Orders and Religious Congregations for men and women.

The Rabbi Weiss Levi himself wanted to be at the funeral of the man who loved the Jews so much.

And then people, people, people, an overflowing crowd, silent, composed, in prayer: students who suspended their classes, workers in working attire, thick groups of faithful led by their Pastors, Priests and isolated Religious, Nuns, professionals, people from the noble class and common people...; and then his students, his former-students, his Religious, men and women coming from all the Houses...; without any hierarchic distinction, without any order pre-arranged by the common rules, everybody carried by his own faith, his own feelings, in order to feel, all and each, near Him, who equally, intensively and singularly loved all the souls, with no human distinctions.

It was an unforgettable showing of an enormous procession of people, who brought almost in triumph along a long way, through the main streets of the city, “his” city, the beloved and venerated Father.

The bells of the churches along the way sent clear the tolls of their bronzes and above all the solemn and grave tolls of the Rengo bell[109] were heard.

[109] Rengo is a dialect term derived from “Arengo" (assembly), used by the Veronese people to indicate the big bell of the Lamberti civic tower.

And yet the day was not so favourable to a ceremony such as this, because a cold wind mixed at intervals with sleet, whipped men and things.

Nevertheless, nothing could stop that huge crowd from rendering testimony to the humility and charity of this exceptional man.

Once again, God was exalting the humble and rewarding the mercy, through the voice of the people: *Vox populi, vox Dei* (the voice of the people is the voice of God).

Back to the big basilica, still small to contain that huge human river, the Vicar General of the Diocese sang the solemn Requiem Mass, pontifically assisted by H. E. Mgr. Girolamo Cardinale, who then imparted the absolution to the venerated corpse; and in the presence of the whole large Chapter of the Canons, Mgr. Andrea Pangrazio, the Auxiliary Bishop, wove the eulogy of Fr. John, remembering, with a superb synthesis, the personality, the spirit and the work of the Father.

In the evening, the corpse was brought again, privately, to St. Zeno in Monte to rest among his sons in that “holy and blessed land” which had been the arena of his struggle.

Who goes now to the church of the Mother House of the Congregation, entering through the side door that opens on the small courtyard, near the porter's lodge, finds himself in front of the devout Chapel of the Crucifix. Here, at the right, there is the sarcophagus, which contains the venerated remains. The dark green marble mass, slightly lighted by two copper lamps, has on the edge of the cover the lead motto of

the whole life of the Father: “Quaerite primum...: Seek first the Kingdom of God and its justice, and you'll have the rest in addition”; on the wall a Crucifix watches; under the image, a marble plate carries the epigraph, dictated in Latin by Cardinal Schuster, since a year before:

JOHANNES CALABRIA PRESBYTER SODAL. PAUP. SERV.

DIVINAE PROVIDENTIAE

CONDITOR

VITA SCRIPTIS ET PROVIDIS INSTITUTIS

PAUPERIBUS CONSULENS

DEI ECCLESIAE LUMEN EFFULSIT

ORTUS DIE VIII OCT. MDCCCLXXIII

TRANSIT AD PATREM DIE IV DEC. MCMLIV

“John Calabria, Priest – Founder of the Poor Servants or Divine Providence – who with the life, writings and providential institutions – helping the poor – shined like a luminous headlamp in the Church of God – Born on October 8, 1873 – he went back to the Father on December 4, 1954”.[110]

[110] Some adaptations were made in the church and in the chapel of the Crucifix on the occasion of the beatification (1988) and the canonization (1999).

St. Zeno in Monte, Holy Land

At the end of the Retreat in autumn 1952, the beloved Father, addressing the Religious, as it was his habit, after the usual but always new recommendations, added:

"And then, another word, that maybe I never said in many years; and the word is this: I was once at the bedside of an almost moribund priest, and he was my venerated and dear Father, Parish Priest of the Holy Apostles, Mgr. Giacomelli.

I was there, near, by his side and he was looking at me; and he told me these words: 'Oh Fr. John, you are in St. Zeno in Monte... St. Zeno in Monte: holy and blessed land'

Those words always stayed in my mind; I always remembered them, and now it seems that the Lord is telling me: Repeat them to your brothers, that St. Zeno in Monte is a holy and blessed land!"

The holy lyricism inside these words is clear to everybody, but the cold letters do not point out the tone and the voice with which these words were said.

The Poor Servants had the good idea to put them on tape; and, during special occasions, in the private celebrations of the Mother House, they take the legitimate satisfaction of listening to them again and making others, who never did, listen to them, too.

And it is not possible to listen, without quivering for innermost and deep emotion!

He's still alive in their midst; they see and hear him again. They still go to entrust to him their problems, their worries, their secrets; to open their souls, to pour out their hearts onto his big heart: at the feet of his tomb, in the silence of the Chapel of the Crucifix.

And they think, now more than ever, that St. Zeno in Monte is really a holy and blessed land!

And they also remember another word from him, now that they see a continuous pilgrimage of souls, coming to kneel down by his grave, like a restoring spring: “They will come here to drink!”

CHAPTER 24

THE MAN OF GOD

It does not seem useless to us, just at the end of our fatigue, to briefly draw the picture of Fr. Calabria, in a complete vision of the man, and the *man of God*.

The judgment about the holiness of Fr. John Calabria was confirmed by the Church through the Beatification, which happened in Verona on April 17, 1988 and the Canonization, which happened in Rome, St. Peter Square, on April 18, 1999, both by means of Pope Blessed John Paul II.

The Man…

Of robust constitution but of weak health, John Calabria showed since adolescence a sensible and nervous temperament, that poverty and indigence made even more delicate.

He himself used to say that he was a “sensitive plant”; and this was revealed, practically by his sensibility and the frequent affectionate expressions of his heart.

But the prevailing nervous constitution did not exclude hot-tempered impulsivity, temperamental warmth and willpower.

He was also shy, but this did not stop him in revealing a strong spirit of enterprise, while his modesty and reserved manners did not forbid him from showing a fine and delicate sense of humour. To the less familiar, this last characteristic of the man John Calabria was not easily evident, because the personal aspect, mostly reserved, still sweet and polite, did not encourage but a respectful and serious confidence. But to all those who were nearer and more associated with him, especially his sons, the peculiar joyful Veronese affability of Fr. Calabria appeared in utmost evidence. Plays upon phrases, odd questions, amusing sayings and anecdotes sprang out, sometimes in abundance, like from a spontaneous and genuine fountain.

But he never indulged in gaiety, though only seemingly careless; it was always very evident that for him even the good humour was just a way to approach the souls and give them the feeling or the inner joy which is proper of the children of God. But sometimes the witty saying and the cautious joke were used by him smartly and benevolently to correct a defect or to ease a situation heavy with embarrassment or tension.

We cannot anyway deny that his usual tone was that of a calm sadness, the origin of which was easily perceived as coming from rather high supernatural reasons than from his very frequent physical sufferings.

His walking was grave and collected, his gesture moderate and calm, always natural, even when it was hierarchically solemn; he had an acute and sprightly glance; his voice was rather veiled and with a profound tone; his pronunciation was almost hasty, with tendency to the French “r”.

His talks were rich of images, expressive in mimicry, eloquent in tone and in the voice inflection; he fixed his interlocutor or the audience with shining eyes, sometimes getting excited and always conquering and subduing with a peculiar sense of persuasion.

He never made display of his culture, but insisted and went back to the fundamental concepts with depth and clarity.

He had no inclination for the worldly businesses: they did not allure him; on the contrary, he considered his ignorance on this matter a “big grace from God”.

This was the man chosen by God to convey a message to the men of his time, to these men vainly proud of their science and of their power, foolishly lost in material goods, given to them by the technical progress.

This was the man who had been found “incapable” in the frame-maker shop, “absent-minded” in the training of the military life, “scarce among everybody” and “of short talent” on the school's benches, “unfit” for the priesthood.

But this man first despised, humiliated, neglected, who used to call himself “zero and misery”, was going to impose himself, little by little, to his slanderers and to become

“champion of evangelical charity”, “master of priestly life”, man of counsel, sower of peace and comfort.

Once more, the mysterious economy of God reveals itself in choosing “the foolish things to shame the wise”, “the weak things to shame the strong”, “what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are”, and in declaring once again, highly and strongly that “the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God”. “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” It is useless to reach what God does not want. However, if sincerely one seeks the Kingdom of God and its righteousness, all these things will be given as well.

The Man of God

The boy, insignificant in the eyes of men, had been instead looked upon by God, since eternity, with eyes of predilection, and called, in the proper time, with mysterious call: the priestly vocation.

He “had to be” a priest. And he did be a priest, because, since the beginning, he answered with ready, total and absolute consent of his will to the Divine will.

God attracted him and he let himself been willingly attracted.

God guided him by hand, and he let himself been guided.

Here are some evidences of his humble surrender, taken from the correspondence with Father Natale:

"Is it possible, reverend Father, that God would like to use me, so poor, ignorant and sinner?...

I'm afraid it is an illusion, I have great fears, I fear a lot; but I am a Priest, I am an Apostle of Jesus Christ. O my God, what a big word!...

Rev. Father, please pray, pray a lot, so that finally I could belong to Jesus and nothing could make me afraid... and I could suffer everything for him". [111]

"Rev. Father, I remind you, in the name of blessed Jesus, that I need that you help me to perform what the Lord wants from these four bones. I fear a lot... that there are great illusions and that, in all this, bad pride would come out. I cannot deny that I feel holy inspirations, that I feel the will of God... to start to have Priests in the Congregation, but what can I do? I do not know but say: a, a, a".[112]

"I'm starting the Holy Retreat, with the purpose to come out *either saint or dead*".[113]

"Since I started to understand something, I mean since my first knowledge, I felt I had to be a priest and, since my first years, I had great esteem and veneration for the priests. I became a priest, and then I started feeling the great dignity and the tremendous responsibility. *Sacerdos alter Christus* (the

[111] Doc. 4507, 19.6.1911, Archives PSDP.
[112] Doc. 4510, 22.8.1911, Archives PSDP.
[113] Doc. 4534, 24.9.1922, Archives PSDP.

priest is another Christ)... Jesus never left me; he spoke to me with inner inspirations, putting in my heart a very big love for the souls. Souls, souls! 'Give me souls', this is what I always heard and I especially hear right now. I told you of this intense feeling and you answered me that it really comes from Jesus; yes, I feel it, but I do not know how Jesus would come to me: certainly to make his mercy triumph and nothing else…

The blessed Jesus wants for himself the special management of the Opera he founded here in Verona… The Opera of the Good Boys is only but the first ring to which Jesus wants to tie up other works. But for this there is the need of Priests, who would feel what I feel and would be formed the same way, by the mercy of Jesus, I am formed, which is that everybody has to live abandoned to the Divine Providence, apostolic life, souls, souls!... Now I think the moment has come to put into practice the will of Jesus".[114]

"How much a God, who became man, did for the souls!... And I am his Minister... Father: *either dead or saint*: this is what I told Jesus".[115]

His "mystical life" is all here. His "pure and genuine spirit" he so much talked about to his sons, is all here.

[114] Doc. 4550, 12.12.1911, Archives PSDP.
[115] Doc. 4551, 1911, Archives PSDP.

His Message

In this pure and genuine spirit is the message that God gave him for the world. Multiple message, but concentric and unitary, which found the favourable ground to develop and to evolve itself into the Opera of the Good Boys and the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence, but also destined to the whole Church for the salvation of the world. It is the message of the Gospel, lived *sine glossa*, without much interpretation, with an unconditional trust in the paternity of God, through holy priests and laymen.

Nothing new; a call to the sources and to the eternal truths. Just a call.

We are going to get from the books, which represent his spirit,[116] from his Constitutions and the Letters to his Religious,[117] without continuously quoting, for fluency purpose, pieces and sentences that seem more suitable to give us "his" message.

And his message is first and foremost the exaltation of the Gospel, as the only valid solution to all the problems bothering the humanity.

For him, the Gospel is "the Divine Code for all men and especially for us" Christians, the word which does not pass and does not contradict itself, the remedy to all evils; we have to go back to this word, "without arbitrary interpretations, but trying

[116] *Apostolica Vivendi Forma*, *To Love*, *So that the Night Will Not Descend on the World*, *Instaurare omnia in Christo*. Cfr. Ch. 19, New Order.
[117] *My Beloved Brothers*…, above quoted (Cfr. Ch. 18, A Vow).

to penetrate the meaning and the pure and genuine spirit, to conform to it later on our judgment and our life"; because "we went too far from the principle and teachings of the holy Gospel! What a difference, sometimes, between what we believe and what we practice!" There is a big part of the Gospel we still have to put into practice: "we must be living Gospels in a world, which forgot the Gospel".

"For example, the Gospel speaks of God who is Father, who takes care of us much more than of the birds of the sky and the flowers of the field, so that He will never let us without the necessary food and clothes, on condition that we seek first the kingdom of God and its justice; what is our faith in God and then our trust in his holy and amiable Providence?"

The Gospel preaches us detachment from the earthly things, and urges us "not to amass riches which rust and worms consume and thieves disinter and steal; but to purchase treasures in heaven, for which we are created; it further teaches us that the present life, without Christ, loses all its charm; while, lived with Christ according to his Gospel, in coordination with the future life, it becomes the big and beautiful eve of an eternal feast".

The Gospel comforts us in the grief and the inevitable trials and sufferings, assuring us that afterwards "our sadness will turn into joy"; it sustains our faith and hope, showing us the absolute efficacy of prayer.

"The Gospel wants us to love one another, the way Jesus loved us, that is until the sacrifice of ourselves and our

things, and teaches us that the essence of the religion is just in charity, not with words, but with facts".

Always and Only the Gospel

He is completely attracted, fascinated and in love with the life of the Apostles and the first Christian communities; for him the Apostles are the prototype of the evangelical life, of the life started and preached by Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Wisdom of God made flesh: "*Jesus coepit facere et docere*", Jesus started doing and teaching (Acts 1,1). So much so that he identifies the Gospel with Jesus himself.

"The Gospel is not the word of a man, but of the Man-God. The Gospel, rather, is more than his word, is He, the Man-God; He identified the Word with himself; I would say that, for hypothesis, if we remove from the Gospel the didactic part, and leave the historical fact of Jesus in the Incarnation, in His Life, Passion and Resurrection, the Gospel would still exist and, and because of that great fact, it would carry, as a logical consequence, all the words pronounced by the divine mouth of the Nazarene".

"He is, therefore, the Gospel and the indivisible Gospel is He, with his Church, with his Peter, with his Sacraments, with his Cross".

That's why he so often exhorts his sons, Priests and Religious and the whole Christian community to the Sanctity, to the total practice of the Gospel, to be living Gospels.

In fact: Christ, Gospel and sanctity are synonyms for him and are the only cure for all the evils afflicting the world today and always.

"In my opinion only the sanctity can solve the grave social problems that upset this hour. Oh, if it is alive in us, as it was in the Apostles and early Christians, the thought of the Paternity of God, that is: God is Father and infinitely good and provident, and we are all brothers in Christ, that we must do to others what we wish them to do for us! There would be no egoisms, class fights, hatred, vengence, which have frequently their sad epilogue in the fraternal bloodshed...

Oh, how I pray and beseech the Holy Spirit – we again read in the same letter 67 – He may give to my poor words so much effectiveness to produce in all of us abundant fruits of grace and holiness!...

Never as now, has the world gone astray from God, groping about in the darkness of many errors and vices. Now, only the light of sanctity which radiates from us can illuminate the rout and show the way of the great return to Christ and to his Church" [118].

"After this destruction – he writes on the feast of the Palms of 1945 – after the cessation of this war, men and scholars will seek a way out of these problems for salvation and life; we know that only Jesus is 'the way, the truth and the life' ". [119]

[118] Let. 67, Holy Christmas 1949.
[119] Let. 40, Palm Sunday, March 25, 1945.

"From here begins our responsibility, the very grave duty of those who have received the divine mandate of teaching: '*Euntes, docete omnes gentes*!' Go and make disciples of all the nations! By words, and above all with example of a life fully in conformity with the principles and maxims of the Holy Gospel, lived and practiced as it is, *sine glossa*, that is without arbitrary defacement and futile comments, to be really another Christ and living Gospel".[120] Therefore, he dares writing: "It is urgent, very urgent to return to the practice of the Gospel and its pure source!"[121] This is his message!

Is this message absurd? Is this programme impossible?

"We believe it or not and then if we do not believe it we have to tear up the Gospel!"[122]

Is this an emergency message? Is it out of touch or time?

He repeated it for more than twenty years; he conformed himself to it for more than forty years; he had been fascinated by it fifty years before. The same words, the same principles, the same maxims accompanied him during all his life. This is the recall to eternal values, which are still relevant today, tomorrow and always.

[120] Let 67, Holy Christmas 1949.
[121] Let. 64, August 25, 1949.
[122] Let. 32, Holy Lent 1943.

His Special Vocation

An old aged priest of the Congregation, directly asked by the Fr. John about his style of life, answered: “Every bird has its flight and every man has his road”. The Father liked the answer; and we like it, too, because it tastes like the Scripture, and it serves us as a very good introduction to this paragraph.

Whoever would have wanted to make a prediction about the young Calabria, regarding the road prepared for him by the Lord, would have seen in him an apostle of the sick, for the love he felt for the sick and the zeal he displayed for them. He himself told us that when he was a soldier, he thought that his vocation was to be among the sons of St. Camillus de Lellis; but a holy priest of that Order, Father Sommavilla, told him: “No, wait: the Lord will show you his way”.

The Lord, in fact, brought him little by little to show interest on the poor and abandoned children and to found the “Good Boys' House”.

But this was only going to be “the foundation”, “the great field”, where the “Divine Farmer would scatter the many seeds he has in his hands, if the soil will be well ploughed and well cultivated. These seeds will grow and become many plants of different kinds, and each of them will produce big fruits”.

“I already told you other times..., in this House is not written: Boys; but God's Designs!”

Since 1909, and always afterwards, he saw in the work for the abandoned creatures and in the “other works” which

the Lord "kept suggesting little by little", *means* and not *ends* "for the greater glory of God", through an "absolute and total abandonment to God and to his Divine Providence".

Yes, this would have been his vocation and nothing else: to be an abandoned and obedient instrument in the hands of God, for the fulfilment of his designs!

The Divine Wisdom could not contradict itself. God chose Fr. John Calabria to be a transmitter of a special message of a concrete evangelical life, in the perfect abandonment to the Divine Providence and in the unshakable trust in God, the Father of all men. Well then, it was necessary that he first would fully live this message; and not only regarding the material things, but for everything the Divine Master would have liked to decide for his Servant.

"Jesus did and taught from the beginning" (Act.1,1); whoever wants to imitate him, cannot start in any other way.

Fr. Calabria, rather, would not even dream to take the pen one day and write letters and publish books, if other people did not push him to do it. He would have preferred to live inside his small hole, inside the small den ("*buseta e taneta*" in Veronese dialect) and let the Opera witness the spirit and the programme received from the Lord. In fact, the books, though inspired by him, will not carry his name, but they would appear as "sprung from the heart of the Congregation".[123] Because of his humility, he disguised himself as much as he could, so that

[123] As we saw, they were written in collaboration with Fr. Venanzio Bini (Cfr. Ch.19, New Order).

the Opera could be enhanced. He acted and wanted his Religious to act "*intuitu Operae*", to enhance the Opera, hiding themselves as much as possible, so that only this "creature of God would appear" and to God only could go honour and glory.

The Lord, calling him to dedicate himself for the abandoned children, especially in that late night of November 1897, made him understand immediately that he should have acted as a simple instrument, because the Lord himself would have taken care of them.

Since then, through Father Natale of Jesus, his confessor, the way had been shown to him; the path, not yet clearly traced, will become more and more definite and luminous while he will walk through it, until the time he will receive from the Church the final approval to his way of living and acting.

It is worth to point out the milestones of this special road, so that we could have an exact picture of how he meant "the absolute and total abandonment to God and his Divine Providence", just not to create a myth and make useless the content of his message.

The Stages of a Journey

When he went to Father Natale of Jesus, in that now famous November 1897, to tell him that the night before he had picked up by the door of his house a small boy, "son of nobody", who was asking for his help, and to ask the Father

what now he was supposed to do, he heard his answer: “Keep him and we'll see what the Lord wants”.

The helps which started to come very soon from friends, were interpreted by the Carmelite Father as a “sign” that the Lord liked the work of the Theology student Calabria.

Then, the priestly experiences of St. Stephen came and then those of St. Benedict al Monte: poor children, abandoned, to be sheltered and settled.

Father Natale understood more and more clearly the vocation of his spiritual son. He exhorted him to accept the Rectory of St. Benedict al Monte, in order to be freer in performing this special apostolate.

In St. Stephen and more in St. Benedict al Monte the young priest will see the Providence of God lovingly surrounding him, giving the necessary to him and his protégés.

At the same rate the Lord charms him with the wonderful pages of the holy Gospel, exalting the paternal care of God for his children of earth:

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear...; your Father knows that you need all these things. Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Mt 6: 25-33).

"Do not store up treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up treasures in heaven”. (Mt 6: 19-20)

“You received without payment; give without payment” (Mt l0: 8).

“He sent them out to proclaim the Kingdom of God… He said to them: ‘Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money’ ” (Lk 9: 2-3).

“When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything? They said: ‘No, not a thing’ ” (Lk 22: 35-36).

These words inebriated him and he read and meditated them also during the night.

At a certain moment, when he was in St. Benedict al Monte, he started a free monthly subscription, to allow also some people not so affluent to contribute to his good works. The subscription lasted a very short while; it was restricted to very few members and produced a total of three lire and twenty cents. It was not a big amount, not even in those days!

Gone up to St. Zeno in Monte, he made another experiment. Knowing that he was in need, someone asked him one day: “Fr. John, why don't you go to the Trentino region to beg? Others went there and made a fortune. You go, too!”

The suggestion didn't find him enthusiastic, still, for spirit of humility, and not to oppose an eventual plan of the Providence, he accepted to try. Therefore, called Fr. Desenzani, told him: “Let's go and try if we too have to seek for alms: the Lord will show us his will”.

They left. They arrived at Mezzolombardo, a small city at about thirty kilometres North-West of Trento and visited

three or four places, speaking about the Opera, of the poor youth gathered... They were able to get only some Austrian “crowns”.

The morning after, they started again going around, but they were approached by the local police who asked them if they had a regular permit to beg. They didn't think of that. So they were brought to the local Mayor, who, with haughty and distant manner, told them: “Reverends, in order to beg, you need the permit; for this time I'll issue one until noon. But remember well that at noon sharp you must leave this town and do not come back for any begging; or I'll have you arrested”.

The order was peremptory, and the Father and Fr. Diodato bound themselves to leave.

Out of the Town Hall, they paused lengthily in a church: the Father understood more and more that this was not his way.

A little after noon, they took a carriage to go to railway station for the return trip. They got the wrong carriage, and after a short while they had to go down. But, during the short ride, they learned from the driver that, at noon sharp, the Mayor had died victim of an apoplectic fit.

While, praying for his soul, they were waiting for a carriage, which could bring them to the railway, they were approached by an old man who, after having asked if they were priests, put in the hands of the Father some gold coins, fruit of his savings, for a worthy work.

The Father used to say, concluding the narration of the adventure, that, all in all, they had collected more or less what they had spent for the trip.

It was the confirmation that he had to live totally trusting in the Divine Providence.

Through these experiences, in humility and docility of spirit, he saw finally traced the norm of his and his spiritual sons' behaviour. He will then put it in the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence, receiving the approval of the Church after forty years of testing.

"The specific mission of the Poor Servants – we read in the Constitutions – is the seeking of the kingdom of God which, for us, becomes a reality in the commitment to revive in the world faith and trust in God, Father of all humans, through the total abandonment to his divine Providence, intensely lived and clearly witnessed in all personal and community events and in historical events of the world" (Const. 5).[124]

And again: "Our activities, both present and future to be legitimate and genuine, corresponding to the specific aim of the Congregation, shall always have the sign and the seal of 'Do not be anxious' " (Const. 30).

"No good deed, no person is to be excluded for the sole reason that means are lacking: these will not be lacking, if we receive with faith such persons and with faith we dedicate ourselves to this activity" (Ib.)

[124] We quote here and in the following passages the correspondent articles of the present Constitutions (Ed. 2010).

“The Lord in order to test our faith may permit trials. Therefore we must maintain our faith in Him more than ever because then the divine Providence will manifest itself all the more” (Const. 11).

“Should the period of trial persist we must humble ourselves and closely examine ourselves and form new resolute intentions to remove all within us that could impede the Divine Providence and to dedicate ourselves with increased generosity to the service of God through his poor, who are our real masters” (Ib.)

A little before, he said: “The Congregation should not possess estates, except those necessary for the free functioning of its activities. Thus also the Poor Servants should not accumulate money or other wealth with the hope of enjoying the fruit and create human security: all that Providence shall send, shall be spent for the poor the Lord has entrusted to us or given away in charity towards the needy” (Const. 10).

“If in the heart of the Congregation arises or is entrusted to it such activity that demands or possesses, for its normal functioning, some fixed material goods, it is up to the Superior General with his Council to decide on such exceptions, in the light of the spirit of the Congregation, which in every case has to be witnessed. The General Chapters have the function of verifying such exceptional decisions, so that the spirit may be guaranteed in every situation” (Const. 20).

Therefore, he concludes: “The spirit of faith and abandonment to the Providence of God the Father exclude from our part:

a) 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.

b) The doing of any kind of publicity either in view of material advantages or for the growth of the fame of the Congregation.

c) Promoting collections, seeking for benefits, lotteries and the like, public recognition and assuming any such attitude that can cast a shadow for the action of the divine Providence" (Const. 9).

Some exceptions are admitted in the Directory, the book of clarifications related to the Constitutions:

"The Poor Servants can accept gifts, but should not solicit them. So also they can accept strictly due pensions or assistance to those inmates from the public sectors, insurance and the like" (9 D).

The Sources of the Providence

The effort to constantly live in the grace of God rooted in the faith and trust in the Divine Providence, totally devoted to the service of the poor people, assiduous in prayer, is a "work" the world too often does not recognize, but it strains, weakens and wears out not less than any other occupation. This effort would have been, according to the Father, the best and continuous "magnet" of the Providence.

Among the many sentences written to his children, the Poor Servants, we select the most important:

"Dear Brothers, go on with '*my today*', day by day, always trusting in the help of the Providence, the loving mother, who will be nearer and more propitious to us, the more we'll be docile, humble and without head. Here in the Opera, the Providence does everything and will do a lot more if we will be of less obstruction and more generous in the exercise of the Christian virtues..."[125]

"The wealth, the fund of this Congregation is based on the love of God and the hate of sin".[126]

To one of his sons, puzzled by some events, he wrote: "... Preoccupations and anxieties really have to be despised... Oh, how the Providence of God will always watch over each and everyone if we will be totally abandoned between its loving arms!

Blessed are the trials which purify and sanctify us and… make us rich! Let's be poor and we'll be rich; small, and we'll be great; hidden, and God will look for us!"[127]

But, if, on principle, he excluded the interest-bearing securities, he did not neglect those livelihood means the Lord himself was sending, directly or indirectly: the trust in the Divine Providence was not supposed to provoke fatalism, like

[125] Doc. 5147, 5.1.1927, Archives PSDP.
[126] Doc. 5148, 12.3.1927, Archives PSDP.
[127] Doc. 5288, 1933, Archives PSDP.

that of a person waiting for manna from heaven and twiddling his thumbs.

Therefore, the work in the fields or in the workshops, in the various houses, could not be neglected; but Fr. John admonished: “I want that the activities in the workshops be without anxieties, without problems. We must commit ourselves, be diligent and cooperate to achieve good results... But be careful not to set us the goal of producing and producing more and more. The Providence will give us what we need and it will give it to us in proportion to our faith”.[128]

So, he was not an extreme fatalist. “The first Providence – he used to say – is our head on the neck; the Lord gave eyes and beak to the birds!”

He was not a defeatist: he did not refuse what was rightfully due to him; except when the charity made him renounce to claim it.

When he accepted the Sacred Heart House, in Negrar, with the annexed shelter and the prospected Hospital, he did it to favour those people who, in case of need, could not afford the big costs of staying in the normal hospitals, not excluding, rather foreseeing that he had to charge a low fee to the assisted people, for their illness.

Even if it was not his style asking and begging, he knew, in special occasions, how to discretely inform the benefactors about some serious and urgent need.

[128] Let. 5, February 2, 1933.

For example, when in 1936 the St. Zeno in Monte House had to be reinforced in its foundations with a huge work, because it was in danger of collapsing, he wrote on "The Friend of the Good Boys" a letter "to those who love and understand this very great Opera of the Lord".

"You know – he writes – how we live abandoned to the Divine Providence of the Lord, with the only foundation and patrimony: 'Seek first the Kingdom of God!' " And our life always went well and will go well in the Lord.

"Now we are in a new situation and, as Casante (Custodian), I cannot do anything else but follow the will of the Lord. And the will of the Lord is that I inform you about the new and extraordinary need we have to be helped".

If you think of the limited circulation of the magazine and the limited number of readers (all former students and friends of the Opera), it is clear the discretion of the Father in asking for help.

Another time, instead, in 1947, in order to help the needy youth of the post-war period, he wrote a letter which he sent not only to the friends of the Opera, but also to all the Parish Priests of the Diocese, still starting the assistance work, without waiting for the needed help.

Another time, in 1944, maybe to test the spirit of obedience and the docility of his Religious, and also to sample the Providence of God on the matter and, maybe, also to test the charity spirit of a well-to-do person, he said to a Brother: "Go to Mister X and ask him, on behalf of Fr. Calabria, to give

you the charity of his fields near...; if he will give, good, on the contrary, clean shoes. You just go!"

One day he made a hard test on a Superior of a House, who was asking for help from him:

"Here the Providence is trying us a lot and because of this, since I have nothing to give you, I'm sending this poor creature, who costs the Blood of a God; accept him in his name and out of love and the House will get a new mine..."[129]

These are his ways to interpret the "absolute and total abandonment to God and his Divine Providence". This was also a practical translation of his frequent refrain to his Religious: "ready for everything", also "to go door to door, if it is the will of God".

Exigent Coherence

He also wanted that the benefactors would follow the spirit of the Opera, regarding the abandonment to the Providence, the concealment in doing good and the spirit of faith in everything. He educated them to have feelings of gratitude towards the Lord, because they were chosen to be instruments of the Providence; and he did not accept offerings with publicity purpose or even only with a display connotation.

[129] Letter to Fr. Stanislao Pellizzer, who lives in the community of Este, * 5135, August 17, 1927.

He preferred to refuse offerings (sometime conspicuous) rather than give way to publicity.

What most mattered for him were faith and trust in God, and to demonstrate to the "fugitives from the Providence" "that the Divine Providence exists, that God is not a stranger but is a Father. He thinks of us on condition that we think about Him and we do our part, that is to say we try to look for the holy Kingdom of God".[130]

"Woe – he used to say – if we would start to say: We have this and that and we can quietly rest: it would be the end! The Congregation must be based on the trust in God and in his Divine Providence".

One day he said to the General Bursar Brother: "Do not forget that too many means will be the most dangerous temptation. Tell it to everybody! If we were saints, the whole world would look at us; if we lived according to our spirit, nothing could stop us! For the means, no bother at all!"

And another time: "If we did not have the spirit of Our Lord Jesus Christ, even if we had millions, or billions, we have nothing; on the contrary, it would be our ruin".

And he did not want that the Brothers speak of business, especially at the meals table; but if this happened and he was present, he used to come out with a typical sentence in Veronese dialect, just to stop not so spiritual talks or too much

[130] Let. 3, March 19, 1933.

animated conversations: “Who was the last hanged one in Verona?”

Yes, it is not that he didn't get worried when the debts went up and the creditors were asking for payment and some also threatened to stop the needed supplies for his boys. Especially in the early times and during the first world-war, the obsession to provide to many mouths everyday took the characteristic of a torture.

Sometimes, in the latest times, he used to say: “The ones who arrive now see everything done, everything beautiful; but during the earlier years… When in 1911-1912 the Providence was lacking, I went in circles in the terrace and in the garden and, looking at the road towards Porta Vescovo, I tried to attract the benefactors by breathing; and they came!”

One time, still during those early days, he sent a priest on the terrace to strike the buckets. The people thought that they were striking just to stop the swarming bees; instead, they were trying to attract the Providence. And the Providence came.

Other times he said: “I should strike the purse. They know, down there in Verona, that if I strike the purse – he said jokingly – the Providence would come. I strike here and they from far hear this and send me the Providence”.

This was also a funny way to make people understand that he could not stay indifferent or aboulic in front of the real and urgent needs which sometimes were pressing him.

These were, we could say, holy skills that the Man of God put together with that faith and trust in the Lord, that sanctity of life and loyalty to his duty, which he used to demand from himself and from his sons, as canals of Providence.

Once, in 1935, the occasion came to talk about the venerable Mgr. Serenelli, who was then ninety-three; the father narrated the following episode:

“About twenty years ago, the House had many needs. One morning I celebrated Mass to attract the Providence: I felt it had to come! Before noon, I started walking in the garden, next to the porter's lodge, waiting for it.

The bell rang and I'm informed that Mgr. Serenelli was there. I thought that, maybe, he wanted to recommend a boy. I go and this is what he said: ‘I thought that it is better to do something during life than after death. I have a little and I thought to give it to the Fr. Bosco Institute, but I felt I had to bring it to you. It seemed that Fr. Bosco was sending me here’. I thanked him – the Father continued to narrate – and I told him that, in fact, I was waiting for the Providence.

He gave me an envelope and left; inside the envelope were seventy thousand lire!”

Another time he narrated to the Novices: “In the early years of the Opera, one day that poverty and need were more pressing than usual, I went many times to the porter's lodge, to check the letter-box, to see if there was Providence.

I went there at nine, nothing; I went back at eleven, nothing… Then I gathered the Good Boys in church and I made

them recite the chaplet to the Divine Providence. After the prayer, I went again to the porter's lodge and finally I found some interest bonds for the value of five or six thousand lire. From that day on, the chaplet to the Divine Providence became a daily practice".

One late morning of 1937, the bursar tells him that in the afternoon he absolutely will need ten thousand lire for a commitment that cannot be put off. As usual, there is no cash in hand and ten thousand lire – we are in 1937 – are a conspicuous amount. But the Father doesn't get agitated; on the contrary, he sees again another good occasion to test the faith of his children. So, he sends the bursar to a young priest of the House, still fresh with the Sacred Oil of his Ordination, to take on himself the job to force the Providence with his prayers, knocking at the Tabernacle of Jesus.

The priest, with confident simplicity, obeys and knocks – literally – at the mystical little door. Suddenly, in the early afternoon, a friend of the Congregation arrives, and filially opens himself to the Father: he had promised an offering to the Lord, if he could have received a certain grace. But in the morning, thinking it over, he felt the strong inspiration to bring his offer immediately, like a thanksgiving in advance; the charity act would have so been more meritorious and would have expressed better his abandonment to the Divine will.

He gives the envelope to the Father and leaves, glad and confident. Inside the envelope – useless to say – were ten thousand lire.

Faith, Prayer and Providence

How many Masses the Father celebrated and wanted to be celebrated! How many prayers and hours of adoration to beseech the Divine Goodness! How many exhortations to his Religious to inculcate these very effective means of Providence!

And how happy he was when some of his sons reported to him episodes of this kind!

For example, one day, during the Second World War, there was no salt in a House. The Steward Brother sent then a fifth elementary boy to church to pray to beseech the Providence for it.

The boy goes, prays, but the salt doesn't arrive. The Brother then sends another, then another one... Meanwhile, at the door there is a poor person asking for the charity of a pinch of salt. The Brother goes to the kitchen and asks the nun. In the House there is as much salt as to have a glass filled of it: a trifle for a college with more than 100 persons, but it is more than sufficient for the poor, who is very happy and thankful. A little more after midday, a telephone call informs to go and get the “Providence”. The glassful of salt given to the poor has been replaced by the Lord with over ten kilos of that precious condiment.

How many episodes of this kind could be told!

Precisely, Fr. Calabria wanted to show the world that had forgotten God that God does not forget and does not

abandon his sons who trust in Him. The Opera had to be the living testimony of this reality.

One day, finding himself in the Novitiate of Roncà, he told the Steward Brother of that House: "Brother Morè, I told you many times to buy a small horse.[131] Is there any to be found here? Buy one!"

A Brother who was present informed him: "Father, if it is not needed, it is useless to buy one; until now we maintained one for nothing".

The Father became serious, and almost raising his voice: "You know, you don't keep one for nothing! The Lord does it; He would have thought of supporting it himself!"

The Lord! The Providence! Not man, human industry, separated from God, from faith and trust in God, from prayers to God!

And to that trusting prayer we have to add charity. "The Eucharist is the food of God for men – he said – the alms is the food of men for God".

Still in the Novitiate, one time, while he was at table, he asked the Steward Brother, as a relief:

− Brother Morè, how is the *society of the nail*?[132]

− Until I find where to plant – the Brother replied wittily – the work goes well.

[131] He said this to lighten the efforts of the Brother, who being a little bit old and going around with the bicycle could get tired.
[132] "To drive in a nail" means in popular language "to make a debt".

− Oh! Yes, "*Quaerite primum Regnum Dei, et haec omnia adjicientur*".

Then after a while:

− Many poor come here, isn't it, Brother Morè?

− Yes, Father; everyday five or six children come, dirty, with wounds, left by themselves, and then, sometimes, some old people.

− What are the ages of the boys?

− The eldest is about fourteen years old and the youngest eight.

The Father asked the Brother other information about their condition, and then concluded:

− We have to think of something, you know! Think of the way to assist them. It would be a beautiful wealth for the Novitiate! They are precious pearls..., it is necessary to pick them out of the mud... wash them and... sure: think and then tell me what could be done.

From this conversation came beside the Novitiate a Good Boys' House.

"Keep, hold him dear – one day he said to the Brothers of the Hospital of Negrar, entrusting to them a disabled boy – because, with faith, he is worth one billion".

"We have to think of the poor – he said –: they are entrusted to us. There is the need to love the poor, in them

Christ continues to live with us. The rich cannot say: Jesus was with me; but the poor can say it".

One time he saw passing by a little bit far from him, a poor old man:

− Grandfather! Grandfather! The Father called him.

− At your service, Reverend.

− Where are you going?

− I'm wandering around, sir!

− Wandering?

− Yes! Reverend; if I do not go a little bit here or there, I don't eat!

− Wait, wait... – the Father answered; and taken from his pocket ten lire, gave them to him. Then, while the other was leaving, with a profound sense of faith, together with sadness:

− He could be Jesus – said to those who accompanied him.

"Sow, sow! He, who sows, reaps!" He inculcated to his sons, more with examples than with words.

One day, without money and with so many needs, he went to the porter's lodge, and found fifty lire in the mailbox. The money could have been of great help. But he, taking with

him a priest from the House went to “sow” it among the poor of Torricelle.[133]

Doing this he had the trust that the Providence could give a bigger help.

In fact, another time, in 1942, having particular needs, he gathered all the Novices and told them: “You are Poor Servants and I have had the special thought of giving each of you small alms”. And from his wallet, he gave each one, including the Novice Master, ten lire; and left without giving any answer to the Novice Master, who was asking him what were them for.

After a while, returning among them, while they were at the table he said: “I came to refill; the Novitiate is a place for provisions. The Providence of God will protect us in a miraculous way. First, the suppliers provided us for sometime based on trust; now, no, they want to be paid at once; and the Providence of God is adjusting to the times. Each day, it can be said, the necessary money comes in. Just yesterday, a person requested me to accept an envelope: Inside there were five thousand lire. The Lord will protect us; and His words are infallible.

“But it doesn't mean that we do not have to do our part. You need to have the head on the shoulders”.

Coming out of the church, after the visit he said:

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[133] “Torricelle” were military small towers joint with the City walls for the defence of the City since the Middle Age. Later they became shelters for the poor.

− I gave you a small offering...

− Yes, they answered, ten lire.

− Here – he added – you made them bear fruit –. And gave to the Novice Master seven hundred fifty lire.

We would never end telling episodes of this kind: for the poor, for a family in need, for the Missions, for each House of the Congregation. Where he went for a visit or period of rest: He always sowed, he sowed everywhere.

One day, talking to Fr. Branzo, a saintly Veronese priest, he said:

− It is really true what Papini[134] said, that "money is the dung of devil.

− But, you also use it – the other objected.

− Yes – he replied – but only as manure.

"Don't worry about money – he told his sons –. Seek first the Kingdom of God... This is our riches, our strongbox!"

"Entrust ourselves to the Lord, ready for everything, also to go and look for alms from door to door".

"Besides, the Lord can turn a stone into bread. The Providence is a very generous lady, who passes benefiting everybody; only, she wants to find the door open: in case, we are the ones who put obstacles".

[134] Giovanni Papini (1881-1956) was an Italian journalist, essayist, literary critic, poet, and novelist.

" 'If riches increase, do not set your heart on them' (Ps 62: 11)… but use them".

In these episodes, sentences and in the articles of the Constitutions, there is the whole thought and the practice of Fr. John about the abandonment to the Divine Providence.

It is warning and example to men of our times; of all times.

His Pedagogy

To ask what was the educational system of Fr. Calabria is like asking what the educational system of Jesus was. Like for Him, also for Fr. Calabria it can be said: He did and taught (Acts 1: 1). Therefore, nothing is crystallized or systematic in the action and in the teachings of the Father, but only a life by his own tune, his own style, vital and pliable, everyday different, different for every soul, adapting, like the Divine Grace, to the infinite variety of temperaments and circumstances.[135]

Nevertheless, in the educative style of the Father there is a leading thread, a straight line, a catalyzing nucleus around which, it can be said, all his ideas and actions concentrate. Nothing is systematic and yet nothing is empirical. He didn't go groping. He had clear goals to reach and he knew the ways and means. With this, I do not want to talk of miraculous

[135] These points on the pedagogy of Fr. Calabria are from a report presented to the II General Chapter of the Congregation (1967-1968).

clairvoyance, but of a particularly sensible and penetrating nature improved by Grace, tempered by experience, accompanied by the humble docility to the Divine Will which the Providence little by little made him discover.

The mother idea of his every pedagogic purpose was this: God is the Father of all; all men are His sons; God loves each man, good or bad, with an infinite and personal love, of predilection; really like a mother of many sons, who is totally for each one in a complete self-giving and with an infinite multiform way of giving herself. Every man therefore, every child, poor, deformed, ignorant, with vices, or abandoned, has in himself, like in germ, a divine vocation, which blossoms since the beginning from the love of God and is gradually fulfilled as time goes by.

The task of the educator is to discover this divine vocation, different for everyone, and put himself humbly in contact with God to help the child in developing it and bringing it to its fulfilment.

The educator is the collaborator of God, and since God is love, also the educator loves. I would say there is nothing more to say when it is said that the educative system of the Father was love. More than teaching to educate, he educated; and more than educating, he loved. In this is the secret of that profound attachment, almost jealous, of many former pupils to the Father. They will forget discomforts and poverty, discipline and sometimes awkward treatment by the first educators, to remember only one thing, like a star shining in darkness: the love of the Father for them.

And the Father lived the love in the highest level, the supernatural one: he loved the soul of the child and loved for the love of God. In this warm supernatural climate, three teachings spring forth from the long life of the Father:

a) If the goal of education is to bring the youth to God, if God is the principal agent of education, the educator must sanctify himself to be able to be the right instrument. The more the educator is a saint, that is near God and permeated by God, the more his work will be effective. Fr. John didn't know the pedagogical techniques of certain modern schools. But if he would have known, he would have shaken his head, not to despise, he who was so humble, but for distrust. The technique, though refined, will never substitute the profound educative charge that emanates from a holy educator. The educator full of God cannot but educate in profundity. Therefore, the Father wanted from his educators the maximum effort towards the interior life, considering it the soul, the heart and the motor of educative work.

b) The horror of sin. The Father spoke of sin infinite times, with apocalyptic accents and sorrowful vibrations. A former pupil of Rome who had never seen the Father, listening to the taped speech of the Father, wrote: it must have been terrible to listen to the Father when he talked of sin.

c) Another idea of the Father comes from the previous ones: the House belongs to the Lord; He wanted it and He supports it. The Providence is the watchful eye God turns to His children so that they would have what is necessary in life. Therefore, sin closes the hand of the Providence generosity; if

Providence is lacking, there is sin among us. Let us remove sin and the Providence will come.

It is not the novelty of these concepts that strikes, rather the blind faith in them which he had and knew how to instil them into the people. From this, a very warm and supernatural climate comes, that pervaded his educative work and the same way he wanted from his collaborators.

His Zeal for the Souls

"The Poor Servant's vocation leads him to a continual search and option of the most needy: the outcast, the weak, the sick… those who live in ignorance and disordered moral life – it is said in the Constitutions –. Our religious will regard these children of God as the precious gems and wealth of the Congregation" (Const. 19).

"Souls, souls! This is our programme!"[136]

In fact the poor, old, sick; the abandoned youth, juvenile offenders, prisoners and the ex-prisoners; the separated Brothers, the Jews and the believers of other religions; the poor vocations and the priests in need; the parishes, the qualified laity, the good press…: were all fields of apostolate in which he and his sons were continuously practicing.

"Souls! My God, what a great word this is, particularly for us priests, ministers of God who became man. He has given

[136] Let. 54, Christmas 1947; the expression is present in many other letters.

his life for us, to save souls in the middle of a flood of pains; with the most dreadful death. And He continuously sacrifices himself for souls' sake on our altars. Woe to us, particularly to us, if we do not keep in our minds and in our hearts this thought. Woe to us if we do not have this love for souls in particular for the poorest, the most abandoned, the most rejected, for the poor sinners who were a special object of the love of the Lord… Oh, my dearest, I recommend to you the souls, the health of souls!

To support a soul is to support a world, a saint said; and another saint, Saint Charles said that one soul is a diocese wide enough for a Bishop.

My God, how many souls are out, far from God, in need of everything, because they do not receive those great and divine riches we priests have! What great responsibility! '*Sanguinem eorum de manu tua requiram!*' (Of their death I will ask account from you; Ez 3: 20). How I tremble because of this sentence that comes from the Holy Scriptures!"[137]

"In order to heal the variety of diseases and to heal the bodies – we find it written elsewhere – hospitals and clinics are opened and everything that is possible is being done. And in order to heal the souls, to save these our brothers, will we not think about, especially when we have in our hands the most efficient means?" It is not important if "they are God's enemies, the persecutors of the Church, and all those who are declared on their side".[138]

[137] Let. 13, March 19, 1935.
[138] Let. 61, Lent 49.

"Poorest – he writes –: they are scattered, out of the way, sick! For all these people you need special care, because they are God's sheep, redeemed by the precious Blood of Jesus Christ and called to holiness like everybody. Be sure, we cannot compromise with evil, but we must separate the evil from the evil doer: the evil is one thing, and the evil doer is another. Never should the Poor Servant neglect these souls that the Lord likes to save for they are our brothers".[139]

"Therefore, they are not enemies to fight against – he continues to write in another part – but brothers to take back home… When in a family one brother does not behave well, and is far away for his bad behaviour, there is the good brother who advises him and invites him to return. We must do so with our brothers who went astray, who follow the evil and wicked programmes..."[140]

"We bring the wealth of God – he told a Mexican Bishop one day – His Divine treasures; if we hold them like this (and crossed his arms on his chest), that is tight, just for us, whose fault is it if the people will not be enriched? We have God with us: active, not a stranger. The word of a dying person is sacred: the words of Jesus Christ on the Cross: '*Sitio* (I thirst) – Souls!..."

"Dear Brothers – he writes to his Religious – be like rags and clay, available for everything, be reservoirs and canals and mould yourselves with divine grace, your life to that of the Apostles, not aiming at anything but the glory of God and the benefit of the souls. This word 'souls' must electrify your hearts,

[139] Let. * 8465, February 27, 1949.
[140] Let. 71, 44th Anniversary of the House (1907-1951), November 26.

thinking that Jesus gave up His life and shed all His blood for the souls. And it is for the souls, for all the souls, that the Divine Providence, especially now, in the confused world that is about to collapse, gave rise to this Opera of the Poor Servants.

Dear Brothers, our thought, our lively heart beat shall be for the souls. How many souls crave for light in the midst of dense darkness, how many are thirsting for grace and peace, after the delusion of a world that is falling apart! But to help and to save these souls, first of all it is necessary that each one of us aims at his own personal sanctification".[141]

And among the souls yearning for light, first, for him, in the list are the separated Brothers.

The Separated Brothers

It will be remembered how the Servant of God would have desired to collaborate with the "Catholica Unio" for the return of our Brothers, separated from the Catholic Church.[142] The immediate hitch then did not make the Father desist from getting interested and working according to what the Lord inspired him, about the problem of unity of all Christians in one fold.

[141] Let. 49, Retreat 1946
[142] Cfr. Chapter 17, The "Laus Perennis" and the "Catholica Union".

The Octave of Prayer continued to be celebrated with particular fervour in all the Houses, in a especial way in Maguzzano; and other initiatives were never lacking.

In 1944, for example, he appeals “to those who share a blaze of faith and love of Jesus, who is continuously present for us in the Sacrament of His love”, so that they would be united to Him, and his Religious with a solemn period of three days of Eucharistic Worship “for the coming back of the dissident Brothers to the unique true Church...

Certainly, we cannot – he writes – remain indifferent to the huge multitude of brothers who, since ages, live separated from the only sheepfold of Our Lord Jesus Christ”.[143]

On the Epiphany of 1946, he goes back to write: “It seems to me that this is God's hour for the great return of the brothers separated since long time. About them the Holy Father Pius Xl said a very meaningful sentence: ‘They are – he said – as pieces of gold detached from the main block’. Hence we must not belittle them, but prepare for them the way, especially through prayers, sacrifices, and other good works.

We must do this always, but we shall do this with a special commitment, in the approaching Octave of prayer for Unity, from 18th to 25th January, that in this year I wish you to celebrate in all the Houses with full solemnity, especially at Maguzzano, where with Episcopal decree we have begun, since many years, the Eucharistic adoration for this purpose.

As far as I know and I can I recommend to you all to join, together with all your souls, this crusade of prayer to hasten the

[143] Cfr. Let. 24, January 20, 1944.

return of our separated brothers. In fact in my poverty I pray, and also you make all pray, for, if it pleases God, a special desire can be realized that I have since twenty years, that in a place of silence and prayer all the heads of believing communities may unite, to exchange their point of view, to know each other, without any discussion, and especially to invoke the Holy Spirit as in the cenacle.

An apt place seems to me could be Maguzzano, and I will be happy if the Providence allows the realization of this goal".[144] Fr. Calabria wrote this in the Epiphany of 1946. How much consonance can we gather from these expressions and what would be said, quite a lot of time later, by the Vatican Council II:

"We must get to know the outlook of our separated brethren. To achieve this purpose, study is of necessity required, and this must be pursued with a sense of realism and good will. Catholics, who already have a proper grounding, need to acquire a more adequate understanding of the respective doctrines of our separated brethren, their history, their spiritual and liturgical life, their religious psychology and general background. Most valuable for this purpose are meetings of the two sides-especially for discussion of theological problems-where each can treat with the other on an equal footing-provided that those who take part in them are truly competent and have the approval of the bishops. From such dialogue will emerge still more clearly what the situation of the Catholic Church really is. In this way too the outlook of

[144] Let. 47, Epiphany 1946.

our separated brethren will be better understood, and our own belief more aptly explained. [145]

"We shall see not to impede it, we shall keep us ready. Many of our brothers are without light and we must take it to them. We are rich in God's graces; as Christians, as religious, and as priests we must share these with others!"[146]

He saw in the end of the war "after the enormous conflict had knocked down many barriers and has drawn closer together many nations as it never happened in the past", "the near hour", "the favourable moment" to encourage these encounters.

But what he called "a dream", that "for many and many years" he favoured, remained such for him; without preventing for this to do something concrete also in this field.

With the consent of the Holy See, in fact, for more than two years he gave hospitality to the Metropolitan of the Romanian Orthodox Church His Excellency Visarion Puiu in Maguzzano, refugee from his country, after the conquest of power by the atheistic communism.

Then, he started a noble and holy correspondence with a Lutheran Pastor and with the Anglican C.S. Lewis, professor of

[145] "*Unitatis Redintegratio*", 9.
[146] Let. 47, Epiphany 1946.

the Oxford University, author of the famous book “Le Lettere di Berlicche”.[147]

On the occasion of Fr. Calabria's death, Lewis wrote in polished Latin: “I grieve and mourn with you for the death of the beloved friend! Indeed, he, from the tribulations of this world, which seriously afflicted him, happily flew to his heavenly place: certainly for you it is a deep mourning... Thank you for the photograph: his aspect is what I wished for myself, a heartfelt gravity blended with a certain juvenile briskness. I will remember him and your Congregation in my prayers; I hope you will do the same for me”.

Also with the Swedish Pastor Sune Wiman he had a substantial correspondence, all marked with esteem and reciprocal charity.

Besides these “special” correspondences, the Father wrote and made to write, for some journals, articles of valuable quality on this argument.

He also had a tight epistolary relation with persons who were concerned with the problem, and had offered the life and consecrated their activity to this goal.

Fr. John was extremely happy, when he received some of these separated Brothers.

One day, Mgr. Chiot brought to him a German Protestant Pastor. Before leaving, after the visit, the Pastor

[147] C.S. Lewis, *Le Lettere di Berlicche* (The Letters of Berlicche), Mandadori Editor, Verona, 1947. Original title: *The Screwtape Letters*, London 1942. Berlicche is the name of a devil.

bowed to kiss the hand of the Father. Fr. John didn't want to be outdone, and reciprocated with humility and charity that courteous act. This action of the Father brought the Protestant Pastor to make a profound reflection: “Your hands take and give the Eucharist – he said to the one who accompanied him – but our poor hands are raised only to bless”.

Another time, during the last war, a Catholic German chaplain, who knew the Father, brought to him a Protestant Chaplain. He received him in his study room and made the presentation, the Father, “the way he felt in the Lord”, talked about the paternity of God and the universal fraternity of men.

He spoke in Italian, often with dialect words that the Catholic Chaplain tried to translate. But not the words, which he didn't understand, struck the Protestant Chaplain; not the translation, which he found difficult... to catch up with, also because Fr. John spoke with ardour, without haste, but with enthusiasm. It is the spirit that touches, the untranslatable spirit, which animates them: it is this spirit that shines, that stirs, and that touches. In fact, the Protestant Chaplain started crying and to the Catholic Chaplain, who interrogated him, answered: “If everybody would talk like this, there would no longer be divisions and the diatribe would cease”.

A Colonel of the Bulgarian army, of Orthodox religion, who was able to take shelter in Italy during the Russian invasion of his country, found in St. Zeno in Monte a large and disinterested hospitality. Nevertheless, he cannot evade the charm of charity and the spirituality of the Man of God; he

studies deeply the Catholic religion and a year after he enters the Catholic Church.

Anticipating what the Council would have done a decade after, he wrote a zealous priest:

"More and more I am convinced that this is really the hour of Jesus. We are in a great turning point, everybody must be aware of this, especially those who have to guide the others, and adapt themselves to the new times, for the good of the Holy Church and the souls, for the advent of the Holy Kingdom of God, to hasten the age of Jesus.

"It has brought me a wave of holy gladness the document containing the instructions of the Holy See regarding the encounters between the Catholics and the Protestants in the whole world. I blessed it and I thanked the Lord in my heart; for years. I favoured the thought to start meetings among representatives of various denominations, but in good faith, to know one another. For exchange of views and above all to recollect in prayers to the Holy Spirit; the rest I think would come by itself".[148]

The Jews

For Fr. John Calabria, Turks, Jews, Protestants, etc. are all *goods* of the good God, because "all of them were redeemed by the Blood of Christ". Precious goods, therefore, that he, a

[148] Doc. 5044, March 6, 1950, Archives PSDP.

good merchant, cunning in the things of God, tried to capture, to bring them to God.

We already had the occasion to point out the relations, that since childhood he had with these “first born sons”, who remained outside the door. They no longer stopped. Rather, when he became the Rector of St. Benedict al Monte, it can be said that he had a way of intensifying these relations, for the nearness of this church to the old ghetto, were many Jewish families lived.

His rapports with them were naturally marked with the apostolic spirit of conquest. But his zeal was not just insistent proselytism, but a passionate and respectful concern, so they could “go in”. His faith was water spring, pure and crystalline that gushed out from the impetus within, trying to reach and quench the thirst of everybody.

He always had the best relationship with all the rabbis and he almost put all his attention on them, rightly thinking that their conversion would have influenced even more the others; also because he recognized in them a better preparation to receive the message of Christ.

One of them, one day told him: “In my fifty years of life, I have never seen as much insistence and steadfastness as I see in you”.

In fact, the Lord gave him the joy to baptize one.

But when he dealt with the common Jews, especially if sick, then he didn't want to look as a profiteer, and he didn't intervene unless he was called. And when he was called, he

went first to the rabbi to inform him. Such respect and sincerity could not but gain the sympathy of the Jews themselves.

One time, he had to play a trick to reach the purpose. There was an old Jew, who expressed the desire to the Father to become a Christian, but he was afraid of his relatives. One day, this poor old man got sick and Fr. John went to see him, decided to do everything to baptize him.

The sick was assisted by a relative, who didn't show any sign of leaving him. Suddenly, the sick had a terrible cough attack. “Hurry, hurry! – Father John told the relative – Go and get something at once, a lint...” And when that person was going away, in agreement with the sick, he baptized him.

In a short time, the poor old man died having fulfilled his wish to die a Christian.

One time, he went to the rabbi for a wedding; during the conversation he said to him: “But yes, Fr. Calabria, just take them all and convert everybody...”

The cordial rapport with various families and Israelite personalities continued unchanged as long as he lived. And as the Jews were the first ones to help him, since the “prelude” of the Opera, so many of them continued to help him with offerings and services, especially in the medical field.

On his part, he never lacked the occasions to generously reciprocate.

For example, when also in Italy the racial laws were promulgated, precisely affecting the Jews, he without any showing off but with simplicity and evangelical frankness went

at once to the rabbi and to some well known Israelites to give his “condolences” and all his human solidarity.

During the period of harsh persecution, not a few Jews were given daring help from him. Among others it is enough to remember the already indicated case of the lady doctor, daughter of the Colonel who during the First World War had been so large in understanding and favouring him.[149] After she went to Fr. John when the danger was apparently imminent, he didn't let her go home, but immediately offered her a secure refuge in one of his Houses, where the lady doctor stayed for many months, sharing the work of the Sisters with admirable spirit of simplicity and sacrifice. Even later she will please to be called, by those who were near her in those days, with the adoptive name “Sister Beatrice”, used when she lived in the hospitable pavilions of the Divine Providence.

There is also a curious episode, which is worth narrating.

A Jew family usually gifted him a lamb for Easter. He showed his gratitude for this. Once he perceived something mysterious, which he himself didn't know how to define, but touched him a lot. So thanking them he promised to remember them in a special way during the Holy Mass.

The mention of the Mass terrorized them! “No, No! – they interrupted him – pray for us for us, bless, but do not remember us in the Mass; in the Mass no!”

[149] Cfr. Chapter 7, The War 1915 - 1918. The name of this lady doctor is Mafalda Pavia.

And he always carried that cry in his heart. Maybe those people simply saw the Mass as a magical rite that brings misfortune; or accepting to be remembered at Mass would appear like an implicit infidelity to their belief.

His Missionary Soul

A heart in love with God and the souls, as that of Fr. John Calabria, could not be a stranger to the missionary problems, to the multitude of non Christians, "our brothers, whom the Lord wants to save". In fact his apostolic passion exploded in this anguished cry:

"When I think that there are more than a billion souls, who have not yet enjoyed the Divine benefits, I feel my heart being crushed".

A brief missionary experiment of the Congregation in India, the activity still moderate in the UMMI, the frequent offerings he did for the Missions, through the students and the Novices, already sufficiently prove his missionary spirit.

Besides, he saw the Congregation also in missionary function since its beginnings, and this concept is frequently echoed in his "Letters"[150] and in the private conversation with his Religious.

[150] Cfr. The book "*My Beloved Brothers...*", above quoted.

"Brothers, we will elapse but the Opera will go on. It must live, walk, and go on till the ends of the earth, till the end of the world".[151]

"From the small seed, the Lord will draw a great plant that will give abundant fruits. From the small group, that today we are, the Lord will form an army composed of numerous soldiers who will spread out along the roads of the earth to collect souls for the holy Kingdom of God. But the condition is that we are today as the heavenly Father desires".[152]

"The gift of faith – he writes – the possession of truth and divine grace are a great privilege for us, but it is not something to keep for ourselves, on the contrary, to be spread among many brothers. The Divine Master had given his command: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' (Mt. 28, 19). How this command was followed along many centuries?"[153]

"How can it be imagined – he said to the novices one day – many priests living in tranquillity and closing their actions and zeal to few souls, without thinking of many needs, without aiding many who suffer? But if they believe in the words: '*Hoc est corpus meum*' (This is my body), why don't they think that there are other words which are similarly true: '*Ite, docete omnes gentes?*' (Go, teach everybody). We must have great faith, because the words of God are equally all true".

[151] Let. 63, Feast of the Precious Blood, 1949.
[152] Let. 20, August 7, 1939.
[153] Let. 61, Lent 1949.

Even the problem of the unity of the Church, which had made an impression on him when he was a young priest, was seen by him within the same frame given by Jesus: "*ut credat mundus*", so that the world will believe in the Son of God, incarnated, died and resurrected for us. Therefore he was strongly affected not only by the thought of many separated Brothers, but more so by the bad behaviour of many Christians, obstacles to the conversion of the pagans.

From here the continuous exhortation to his Religious to live the supernatural life, and be "light and salt" and to feel being missionaries, always and everywhere, with prayers, with works, with the practice of virtues and with sufferings.

During the material inaction caused by his illness he was comforted by the thought of fulfilling a "profitable work in the vineyard of God to increase the holy Kingdom of God in the souls! With patience, resignation and prayer, the sick person exercises a very effective influence and an industrious Apostleship for the advantage of the Church and of souls. The Lord puts him, invisibly, near that priest, that Missionary... so that the pains can make their jobs blessed and prolific"[154].

He confirmed this concept, writing to a person who was eager for the Missions in the Arab world: "Let us trust that the Lord will find the means to arrive to many souls immersed in Islamism, a very difficult field and ungrateful to the apostles of the Holy Gospel; Jesus will cheer up with this grace.

[154] Let. 20, August 7, 1939

The souls, the works of God have a cost and their acquisition and progress is worked by contradiction, sweat and blood".[155]

His Catholicity

One of the peculiar characteristics of Fr. John Calabria, which made a profound impression to many, was the vast vision, disinterested and universal of the things. We can very well think that, having vastly drawn, continuously and with big gulps, from the limpid spring of the Gospel, and Christ, his heart became that "river of living water", prophesized by Jesus, for all those who are filled with His Spirit (Jn 7: 37-39).

If during the last twelve years of his life he said he heard like a voice, whispering internally: "My Church!" this was not but an echo extended of a whole life spent for the Church, until the point of deserving the appellative, given to him by Cardinal Schuster, a "victim for the Church".

It is true that his hidden life didn't make him stand out with works of public impact: but the activity of counsel and stimulus – the more effective and fertile the more humble and reserved it was – with which he had influence on important personalities and on worthy deliberations. The efforts of his personal sanctification, the constant and insistent exhortation towards sanctity addressed to his sons, to the priests and all Religious, to all the Christian people, were all services given to

[155] Let. to Mgr. Renato Lanteri, * 4678, November 6, 1951.

the Church, so that it would be as the Apostle describes it: “in splendour”, “without spot or wrinkle”, “holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5: 27).

The newly born Congregation which, he continuously and with intimate conviction didn't call it his, but God's, was seen by him as destined to such a wide purpose that he found for it an amazing statement: “The Church is Christ, Christ is the Opera, and the Church therefore is the Opera”.

He calls the Congregation “ark of Salvation for many”, “city on the mountain”, “lamp, spring”: scriptural vocabulary that suites the Church, and can, we repeat, impress somebody, but that he used with sure persuasion.

“Who founded this House? – He asked his Brothers and the boys gathered in the church on the night of May 13, 1918 – Who is its owner? Who supports it?” And he answered: “God! It is enough to have eyes to see it...”

On July 11 of the same year, always during the evening thought, he affirmed: “I am really sure that this is the House of God. Also here, there are miseries and human things, but these do not remove the fact that the Good Boys' House is the House of the Lord. The king has a beautiful cloth, of satin, but it is stained; does this mean that the king does not exist? Do you understand what I mean...”

“The Opera is of Jesus – he wrote to his Religious –; it is He who is at the steering of the boat, it is He who is the soul that gives and conserves life to the Opera… We are like the corporal body of the Opera. The body can get sick and be faulty,

but the soul surely does not. It will remain in fully efficiency. What I want to say is that in the Opera there could be certain defects both material and moral, but as long as we hold on to be faithful to the pure and genuine spirit that Jesus has engraved, the Opera will progress, will develop all the more and better, expand and improve, like the external life of the body".[156]

For him the Opera was not so much the members, the houses, the initiatives: yes, these too, but above all the aims, the ideals, the reasons for which it was born and grew: "the pure and genuine spirit that Jesus has placed since the beginning": that is the spirit of the Gospel lived *sine glossa*, without interpretation, the Spirit of the Apostles and the first Christians; the Spirit, which is the Soul of the Church.

Therefore, everyone who showed the inspiration and lived-up to this spirit belonged for sure to the Opera, whoever he would be, layman or priest, Religious of any Order or Congregation.

The Opera, from his part, had to be "like a wax match that lights other works". "Small fires must be lit", he always said. And how many "fires", big and small, he had lit and contributed to be enkindled only the Lord knows.

One of the characteristics of the Opera, as we already have had the occasion to see, is to cultivate vocations of poor people, leaving then the souls free to orient themselves according to the blow of the Spirit.

[156] Let. 75, April 10, 1952 - Holy Thursday.

Many did not understand this way of behaviour and they called it absurd, exaggerated, which could lead the Congregation towards suicide; instead he considered "essential" and "vital" for the Congregation, this spirit of generous catholicity.

"It is necessary to be Catholics – he said – the whole world belongs to God. A light is extinguished here, it is lighted there".

He so disliked each of parochialism. "Woe to localisms – he said – to the churches and cliques; great esteem of all the Congregations, because all belong to the Church, for the good of the souls, though with different means".

He often insisted on the spirit of catholicity that must permeate the Christians, but especially the priests and the consecrated souls.

The "priests for the Church" and the "oblate priests of the Bishop" who for a lot of circumstances he could not fulfil are also a testimony to his catholicity.

One day he said: "It appeared to me that (yesterday) the Lord told me: the whole Congregation be in the hands of the Holy See and of the Church! Not only the priests for the Church, but the whole Opera".

His motto: "The whole world belongs to God!", while it made him disinterested and liberal, **of** counsels and works, made him as well solicitous and concerned about what good and bad was happening in the world, to rejoice and suffer with the brothers, in whatever latitude and longitude they may be.

It can really be said also of him that the Lord gave him "a great wisdom, discernment and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand of the seashore" (1Kings 4: 29; Ch 5: 9 in Heb).

His Sanctity

"Rev. Father, very deeply I beg you to pray for me: either Saint, great Saint, or otherwise: dead at once".[157]

"I place myself in your hands... Until now I have not done anything but smoke and smoke".[158]

"Jesus has given me so many graces, he has chosen me in a especial way, but I didn't correspond...

"Most Very Reverend Father, for the Blood of Jesus Christ, tell me again if Jesus loves me, if there is still time for me to become a saint.... I have thoughts of desperation, and I see death near... but then I am convinced that nobody knows my wickedness and malice… Father, I humbled myself, I asked for pardon, but will I be pardoned? Can I be loved by Jesus? I believe I am an obstacle, the ruin. My God, how fearful! What can I do to mend and make me a saint?"[159]

"Oh my Jesus, here I come once again to you, humbled and contrite I ask for pardon for all my sins, promising, with the help of your grace, to start a life as You are expecting from me

[157] Let. to Fr. Natale di Gesù * 5421, April 21, 1914.
[158] Let. to Fr. Natale di Gesù * 4522, May 17, 1914.
[159] Let. to Fr. Natale di Gesù * 4523, April 26, 1915.

in a especial way, that is in all and for all in conformity to your Holy Will, ready with your grace to undergo death a thousand times, rather than stain my soul with a deliberate venial sin. Jesus, I offer myself as victim..."[160]

It is said that the handwritings of Fr. John Calabria were presented to a famous graphologist to judge the writer. The graphologist answered: "He is either a great saint or a great delinquent".

It was frequent in the lips of Fr. John the warning of Father Natale as an exhortation to his sons, for the vitality of the Congregation: "Sanctify yourself – the Father Carmelite told him – sanctify the members, and the whole Congregation will be insured".

In these pages we will not linger to examine the heroism of the theological and moral virtues of the Fr. Calabria, and other related virtues. It seems to us that they are sufficiently seen in the narration of his life, showing his moral and supernatural greatness.

We would rather like to briefly point out, as a simple example, leaving to others a more deep study, what for us seems to be "the type" of sanctity he lived by.

It is clear: there is no sanctity apart from Christ and from his examples. But it is also true that, the infinite sanctity of Christ fits to be assimilated and relived in an admirable variety

[160] Let. to Fr. Natale di Gesù, * 4524, February 8, 1915.

and in indefinite ways, as indefinite as the number of those who will form with Him “the total Christ” in Paradise.

We know as well that the essence of sanctity doesn't consist in having in common with Christ the power to do miracles or to pronounce prophecies, or read the hearts or enjoy visions.

The Saint is he, who loves God with all his heart, above everything; ready to renounce himself and every created thing, if it opposes God’s commandments and the obligation of one’s real status, or if it is required by the love of God and Brothers. And this in every circumstances, common or extraordinary, that the proper particular vocation and life’s condition require, so as to be distinguished from the average of men, also virtuous, though appearing as one of them; resembling the Divine Master, who, in the days of his flesh, “wanted in any case to be similar to the brothers, yet without sin”, “eating and drinking with them”, one with them in their tears and in their sweat.

In the life of Fr. Calabria it seems that supernatural manifestations were not lacking. It will be up to the further studies to focus and to ascertain if he received and exercised extraordinary charisms. Regarding this, there was like a curtain of mystery, due to his profound simplicity and discretion, that those who lived near him did not want or know how to raise it.

Regarding the external mortifications, Fr. John Calabria’s sanctity seemed to us so near the profound human sense revealed by our Lord Jesus Christ in himself, to confirm us once again into the persuasion that it is not necessary to imitate the hermits of the deserts, the penitents of the middle

ages, those who fasted at all times; or those who kept themselves awake with hair shirt, sleeping on floor beds or on bare earth, having a troublesome sleep; or those who exposed themselves to the rigors of cold or the insect bites, in short, those who tormented their present life, to take part with Christ in the future life.

Also Fr. John used some instruments of penance in the first years of his priesthood: then he left them in a drawer. Due to the advices of somebody? We do not know. It is sure that his precarious health, his shaky and worn out nerves, the horrible nights, the long and atrocious sufferings, the extreme poverty until his priesthood, and then the worries about the Opera of the Lord with all that it entailed of moral and material responsibility, could very well substitute the hair shirt and fasting.

And it was probably his confessor who advised him to abandon those traditional ways of penance.

And his ascetics became that of his Religious. They too shared the poverty of place and food, the weight of work and the assistance to the youth, aggravated by the scarcity of personnel and the consequent whole day service.

“Since in this Congregation we have to live the life of the poor – he wrote in his Constitutions – and since each one is occupied in toilsome offices, no penance or fasting are prescribed other than those prescribed by the Church…

To feed the strictly necessary sentiments of penance, our Religious are invited to accept voluntarily the adversity and

the deprivation that the Divine Providence will send everyday in food, clothes, occupation, etc… been adapted to the common life".[161]

And he always behaved this way, too.

He was a man of God who travelled on heavenly paths, raising, transporting, dragging whoever went near him, he was the man of men, who identified himself as one of them, crying with those who cried, rejoicing with those who were happy.

With Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane cried to the Father that, if it is possible, the very bitter chalice of sufferings would pass, but with Jesus and together with Jesus, he accepted adoring the will of the Father, even in fear and horror of the poor nature.

Therefore, we see him a man, looking for relief to work better, for a healthy meal to better sustain himself, for a bit of warm during winter to relax the tense nerves and a bit of cool during summer so as not to fall due to exhaustion. We see him in search of a little bit of calm and rest, to deal better with the interests of God with the souls; and finally we see him desirous of a comfort and the support of men, to feel himself man and not to be presumptuous about himself.

But we also see him, adopted Son of God, lovingly accepting in spirit of penance the hot and the cold, the sleepless nights and nameless sufferings, the insults from his inferior part and the contradictions and abandonment of his sons.

[161] This rule, in the present Constitutions (2010), is included especially in the Constitutions 12, 24, 85.

“When a Christian, day by day, from morning to evening, fulfils all the duties which go with his status, profession, the commandments of God and men; when he prays in recollection, works with all the efforts, resists all bad passions, shows charity towards his neighbour and the dedications due to him, and stands strongly, without complaining, all what God sends him; all his life is always under the sign of the Cross of Christ, even if he has physical suffering or not, even if he bears it or evades it with just means.

Even if we only consider the obligations that are imposed to a man under pain of sin, he cannot live and fulfil as a Christian his everyday work without being constantly ready to sacrifice, which means he has to continuously sacrifice himself. The acceptance of physical pains is nothing but a means, among others, to signify what is essential: the will to love God and to serve Him in all things.

In perfecting this disposition of one’s own will, consists above all the value of Christian life and its heroism”.

These are the words of Pius XII in the Medical Symposium of February 1958.

Father John Calabria appeared to us in this new light of modern sanctity, more in accordance to those who live in our times, in the atmosphere of penance appeased by the maternal understanding of the Church.

APPENDIX

(Prepared by the Translation Team)

The process of Canonization

Fame of Sanctity

The fame of sanctity surrounded Fr. John Calabria while he was alive, and continued unceasingly after his death. In fact, while still alive, they called him "the saint" and when he died, they unanimously said that "a saint" had died; people then came to his sepulchre like the sepulchre of a "saint".

"*Vox populi, vox Dei*": the testimony of the people is the testimony of God, and the people and those who had the opportunity to come close to him, were so impressed by his gigantic faith, by his unshakable trust, by his boundless charity.

The impression of his sanctity came from an indefinable something of supernatural that pervaded his person as a whole, his word, his glance, which was the fruit of his intimate and continuous union with God, with his unceasing prayer.

His works were the witnesses of his sanctity.

His “little hole and little den” could not contain and conceal the perfume, “the good smell of Christ” that emanated from his life.

The souls came to him, looking for him as a “saint”, and left happy and consoled for having seen him and for having heard a “saint”.

It was impossible for him not to be aware of it, and now he regretted it, now escaped and hid even more; other times he himself was amazed about it, and still others resigned and almost happy, commented: “And yet, even a good name is a means to do good”.

Even now, it is said that appealing to him is not without result and he still consoles hearts, heals wounds, and grants wishes of those who turn to him. This is also the evidence of sanctity and that power of intercession that the Saints, friends of God, enjoy up there, by the infinite generosity of the infinite Good.

The journey towards the Canonization

The fame of the extraordinary virtues of the Servant of God Fr. John Calabria and the continuous large attendance to his tomb persuaded Mgr. John Urbani, the Archbishop-Bishop of Verona to insist affably with the superiors of the Congregation to ask for the opening of an Ordinary Information Trial on the fame of sanctity of their Founder.

The Bishop was also urged by a prodigious recovery of a young girl, on November 1, 1956, after a novena to Fr. John Calabria. Therefore the Bishop of Verona on December 7, 1957 started the "Ordinary Trial" of Beatification of the Servant of God Fr. John Calabria.

During this Trial, 57 witnesses were called to give their evidence. And the new Bishop of Verona, Mgr Joseph Carraro, closed the Ordinary Trial on January 11, 1964.

After this first phase, a second Trial is requested, called "Apostolic Trial" because it is conducted under the authority of the Apostolic See. This second Trial was opened by Mgr. Joseph Amari, then Bishop of Verona, on December 4, 1981. During this Trial, 26 more witnesses were called to testify. Then the Bishop concluded the Apostolic Trial on October 6, 1982 and the whole dossier was sent to Rome, at the "Congregation for the Cases of Saints".

On January 16, 1986 the Congregation for the Cases of Saints officially proclaimed "The heroic exercise of virtues" by Fr. John Calabria. Now for the Church Fr. John Calabria was a saint… But at this point the procedure requires a "sign" from the Lord to confirm the judgment of the Church. A miracle is requested for Beatification and another one for Canonization.

The Miracle and the Feast for the Beatification

Mr. Liborio Testa, a 72 year old woodcutter from Cappadocia (Central Italy), was affected by cirrhosis of the liver.

Admitted to the hospital on November 12, 1957 he received any possible treatment but uselessly. On December 24 he was discharged to die in his home. Mr. Liborio's wife had an idea: why not to pray to Fr. John Calabria? He is a saint! His Good Boys every year come to our mountains for holidays. On December 27, the relatives of Mr. Liborio put a medal on his body and started a prayer to Fr. Calabria. After a short time he recovered completely his strength and was perfectly healed.

On March 16, 1987 Pope John Paul II, after listening to the Medical and Theological Councils, ordered to read the Decree on the Miracle. Then the date of Beatification was established.

The Beatification happened in Verona on April 17, 1988. It was a very solemn feast in which Pope John Paul II, among other things, defined St. John Calabria "a witness of charity for the poor, a witness of zeal for the souls and of an intense love for God, and a witness of trust in the Gospel without reservation".

The Miracle and the Feast for the Canonization

For the Canonization another miracle was requested. And it happened soon after the official recognition of the first miracle, just in time to be used for the Canonization.

It happened in Argentina at Reconquista (Santa Fé) to a woman called Rita Faccioli, 45 year old. She was affected by breast cancer and was in the care of the Adventist Church

Hospital. Let us notice here that Christians non Catholic – so dear to the heart of Fr. John – were involved in this miracle! After all possible treatments, she got worse; indeed the CAT (Computerized Axial Tomography) revealed that the metastasis had affected also her brain, and she was paralyzed in the right par of the body. Then on June 12, 1987 she was sent home to die there.

The relatives – a well to do family, with deep faith – sent the medical report to the Oncology Institute of Rosario City to accompany there Mrs. Rita to do an extreme attempt. But before the transfer to Rosario City, a Poor Servant Priest visited the family and brought a medal of Fr. John Calabria. In the same night and on the following day all the relatives present in the house prayed the Novena to Fr. John Calabria.

Next night, on June 13, 1987, Mrs. Rita felt like another person, and could move normally all parts of her body. Then the relatives took the occasion to transfer her to Rosario Institute. But when the doctors made the CAT no sign of metastasis was found in her brain and she came out completely healed.

On July 7, 1997, on the basis of the positive judgment of the Medical and Theological Councils, at the presence of Pope John Paul II the Decree on the Miracle was read. Then the date of the Canonization was established.

The Canonization happened in Rome, on April 18, 1999, with a huge joyous people from Verona and everywhere. Also Mrs. Rita Faccioli was present with her husband.

Through the Canonization, the veneration and the liturgical cult of St. John Calabria is extended to the universal Church. The great message of St. John to the Church and to the whole world is: "*Let us go back to the Gospel and seek first the Kingdom of God*".

THE EXPANSION OF THE CONGREGATION IN THE WORLD

The Calabrian Family includes:

- *The Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence*, Brothers and Priests

- *The Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence*, Sisters

- *The Congregation of the Missionaries of the Poor,* Sisters

- *The Lay Calabrian Family*: External Brothers and Sisters, Former Pupils, various Voluntary Organizations, UMMI (Italian Medical Missionary Association), Exodus Foundation, some Companies and Cooperatives with Calabrian spirit, Collaborators and Friends.

At the death of Fr. John Calabria (1954), the Congregation was not widely dispersed. Its presence was limited to a few cities in Italy: Verona and surrounding areas, Costozza (Vicenza), Maguzzano (Brescia), Milan, Ferrara and Rome.

Later other communities were opened at Naples, Bologna, Mantua (very recently), and in the southern regions of Calabria and Sicily.

Mission in the Spanish Language Countries of Latin America

St. John Calabria had an ardent missionary spirit, but apart from the brief spell in India (November 1934-August1936)[162] he was not able to see the dream of his life, of sending religious people in missionary lands, realized before his death.

This missionary matter was reopened more than 20 years later. On September 12, 1959 a small community opened a mission in Uruguay (Salto). The Poor Servants started working in poor parishes and among poor villages, with abandoned children and people of various kinds of diseases. They were accompanied by the same spirit of abandonment to the Divine Providence.

Gradually they extended their activity also to Argentina (1973), Colombia (1980), Paraguay (1985) and Chile (1995).

[162] Cfr. Chapter 14, Fr. Desenzani and the India Missions, and followings.

In 1962, at Salto, also the Pious Union "*Missionaries of the Poor*" was founded. They were a group of women with the purpose of carrying out an apostolate among the poor, especially where priests were lacking. They issued their private vows in the hands of Fr. Louis Pedrollo on October 11, 1962. In 1964 a similar group arose in Italy, which later fused with the group of Latin America. In 1965 the *Missionaries of the Poor* were officially established by the Bishop of Salto Mgr. Alfred Viola in "Pious Union". And finally, on April 1, 1998 the new Bishop of Salto, Mgr. Daniel Gil Zorrilla approved their constitutions, raising them to the status of religious Congregation. They have their Mother House in Salto and are working also in Paraguay (Ciudad del Este).

In 1980 also the Congregation of the *Poor Servant, Sisters*, started a mission at Salto. Then with the grace of God they extended their apostolic work also to Argentina (1984) and Paraguay (1990).

Mission in Brazil

On August 30, 1961 a new community coming from Uruguay began its activity in Brazil at Porto Alegre. The first step was the vocation activity: to form "priests and religious for the Church", according to the spirit of the Congregation of the Poor Servants.

This idea was pleasing to the Bishop of Porto Alegre Mgr. Vicente Scherer who invited the Poor Servants to work in

the slums among the poor, and through this contact with poor families they could also cultivate young vocations for the Church and for the future of the Congregation. They worked with faithfulness to the spirit of St. John Calabria, and the Providence repaid with generosity their apostolic zeal sending to their house a small group of vocation.

In 1964 the Bishop of South Caxias (100 km from Porto Alegre) Mgr. Benedict Zorzi offered the Poor Servants a house for their minor seminary, near the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Caravaggio at Farroupilha. A little later, the Congregation got from the Marists Brothers a big house very fit for vocation activity; and today this house continues the same work, besides the novitiate, and the activity of retreat centre and spiritual meetings.

When the group of vocation left Porto Alegre, the house got free to start a school for hundreds of young students. In 1968 the Congregation began a pastoral work in some parishes of Mato Grosso, where in 1978 also a Hospital was opened at Anaurilandia. After some years, the activity reached the North East, one of the poorest zones of Brazil, with communities in Feira de Santana (1983), São Luis do Maranhão (1983) and Marituba (Belén; 1991).

The *Poor Servants, Sisters*, are present in Brazil since 1974. From Farroupilha, they extended their activity to Mato Grosso where, among other services, they were in charge of the Parish of Taquarussu, without the presence of a Parish priest. Other communities were established at Porto Alegre, Quixadá, Feira de Santana and Marituba.

The *Missionaries of the Poor* are working in collaboration with the Poor Servants at Vila Restinga, in the social, vocation and pastoral activity.

Today other communities of Brothers and Sisters are opened where the Congregations see some people in need, according to their possibilities.

The Divine Providence gave the Congregation also the joy to see two religious Poor Servants appointed as Bishops: Mgr. Adelio Tomasin (1988) Bishop emeritus of Quixadá, and Mgr. Jaime Kohl (2007), Bishop of Osório (RS).

Mission in Africa

The first contact the Congregation had with Africa was in Nigeria from 1969 to 1972 in St Joseph's Technical School of Ado-Ekiti (200 km from Lagos).

In 1982 the Congregation started a mission in Angola. The Poor Servants were called by the Bishop of Uige Mgr. Francisco Moreira to run the diocesan seminary according to the charism "priests and religious for the Church". In 1983 also the Bishop of Benguela Mgr. Oscar Braga called the Congregation for the same work. Later, other communities were founded in various cities of Angola with different services.

In 1986 also the Poor Servants, Sisters, began their precious collaboration in Angola.

In 2002 the mission extended the activity to Kenya, at Nairobi and Nakuru.

The Divine Providence granted a Bishop also to the Mission of Angola, Mgr. Eugenio Dal Corso (1996), Bishop of Saurimo, first, and then Bishop of Benguela.

Mission in the Philippines

In 1990 the Divine Providence called the Congregation to the Philippines. The General Council considered very important the presence of the Poor Servants in Asia, a Continent with great moral and religious values, but only a little permeated by the yeast of the Gospel. The Poor Servants can receive there the influence of the eastern culture and, humbly, spread the small seeds of their faith.

The Congregation followed the same method: to be attentive to the signs of the Providence. And the sign came from the Bishop of Antipolo Mgr. Protacio Gungon, on the outskirt of Manila, who entrusted to the Poor Servants the parish of St. Laurence Ruiz.

Besides the pastoral work, the community opened also a small Clinic for the poor, a Calabrian Formation School and a Calabrian Home for children with particular difficulties.

The Providence blessed the work of the Poor Servants and made possible a development of the activity with Nazareth Formation House for vocations in Calbayog City (Samar; 1994)

and a Calabrian Children Foundation at Cagayan de Oro City, beside the Novitiate (Mindanao; 2001).

In 2010 also a Community of Poor Servants, Sisters, reached the Philippines, ready to the signs of the Divine Providence.

Mission in the Eastern Europe

Russia

In October 1992 a religious Poor Servant settled in Moscow to carry out an exploratory mission. In 1993 a community started a small activity at Rodniciok, 40 km from Moscow.

After some explorations in different places, the community is doing a service for minors with some difficulties, and for group accommodation (conferences, meetings and spiritual retreats); besides, the Poor Servants are cultivating some vocations with openness to the whole Church.

Rumania

A community of Poor Servants reached Rumania in 1997, settling in Tamaseni, in the Diocese of Iasi. In June 1998 the community moved to the village of Racaciuni, not far from the city of Bacau. Here they started a formation house for priests and religious and an activity of assistance of poor children of the area.

In the period after the General Chapter of 2002, a new formation house for theology students was opened at Roman City, 70 km from Racaciuni.

Recently, also the Poor Servants, Sisters, started their precious collaboration with the Poor Servants, Brothers, in Racaciuni, in the field of pastoral, social and vocation activity.

The activity of the Poor Servants in the World

As we can realize by a glimpse to the spread of the Opera in the world, the characteristic activities of the Poor Servants, Brothers, Sisters and Missionaries of the Poor, are various, in different fields, but with the preference for the poor.

In the pastoral field, the Congregation is committed with parishes in poor zones; and when a parish reaches a sufficient development, the Congregation, if possible, returns the parish to the Diocesan clergy.

In the field of social work, the Congregation is committed in various activities: educational, Calabrian Homes and Schools, for young people; Homes for aged people, Hospitals, assistance for handicapped and rehabilitation, and also in the field of the so called “new poor”.

In the field of vocations, the Congregation is working to form priests and religious with an apostolic spirit, available for everything, free from money and human interests in total abandonment to the Divine Providence. It aims at forming them not only for itself but for the Church and the world.

THE JOURNEY OF THE CALABRIAN FAMILY IN INDIA

The Origins

As we read at the chapter 14 of this book, the first missionaries of the Congregation worked for two years at Secunderabad in St. Mary's School, from 1934 till 1936. Then they were called back to Italy because of some inner problems of the young Congregation.

But the Congregation considered the mission in India a challenge still open. And the Providence gave the Poor Servants the possibility to return to India in 1994.

The occasion came from an Indian priest, Fr. Abraham, who in 1986 went to Italy for health reasons. He knew the Congregation of Fr. Calabria and was a guest for some months in a Calabrian community in the compound of the Hospital of the Congregation at Negrar (Verona). There he felt the call to join the Congregation of the Poor Servants. He went back to India, and after some years of preparation he got the permission from his Bishop John Baptist Thakur of the Diocese of Muzaffarpur (Bihar) to realize his new vocation. In 1990 Fr. Abraham came to Italy to start the journey towards the

religious life and he made the religious profession as Poor Servant in 1993.

After a visit to India with the Superior General Fr. Peter Cunegatti, he had the task to open a small Calabrian community in India at Nagpur. On July 23, 1994 there was a day of Eucharistic Adoration in the mother house of Verona, and on 24 July, Fr. Abraham left to India and reached Nagpur in the evening of the same day.

The indications were in line with the Calabrian life style:

- To live in prayer and simplicity

- To be a symbolic presence of the spirit of the Congregation

- To start a small activity with poor boys as the Providence would indicate

- To be attentive to the signs of the Divine Providence

- To be acculturated in order to witness God's Paternity in the Indian context.

After the contact with the Bishop Mgr. Leobard D'Souza (Bishop Bai) and an agreement with the Diocese, Fr. Abraham went to the Philippines to help that community for some months. He came back to Nagpur in October 1994, and was accommodated in the Bishop's House. On November 1, the name for the new Community was chosen: "ISH KRIPA SADAN".

On November 11, a new student came to join the community, Mathew John (later, Fr. Mathew) who was sent to

the Red Building to stay over there and join the diocesan minor seminary team, while another student was studying philosophy in the St. Charles' Seminary.

On January 11, 1995 Fr. Abraham reached Mathew John in the Red Building, and the Calabrian Community started living there, with the hope to have soon a new house to develop the plan of the Congregation, according to the indications of the Divine Providence.

At the beginning of the new academic year, May-June 1995, some theology, philosophy and minor seminary students came to join the Community of the Poor Servants; also three girls, candidate for the Sisters, were in contact. The academic year started on June 6, with 16 students.

During the academic year 1995-1996 the new house was built. Bishop Bai blessed the first foundation pillar of the B-block Isk Kripa Sadan on June 30, 1995. With an infinite gratitude to the Divine Providence, the new house was inaugurated on November 26, 1996. Besides being a Formation House of Minor and Major Seminary and the Theology study, also with a simple service to the aged diocesan Priests, the Ish Kripa Sadan was for many years the Mother House of the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence in India.

The Development

Nagpur

We saw the first house of the Poor Servants in India was Ish Kripa Sadan. The first community is established in 1994.

On November 19, 1996 the first Community of Poor Servants, Sisters, began their mission in India, living for a while in a small house in the compound of Ish Kripa Sadan.

In 1999 the Sisters went to Shanti Niketan, where the candidates could continue their formation and studies.

Thana

In 1996 a new community of Poor Servants, was opened in the village of Thana (40 km from Nagpur). The first activity was to attend the School for children of the village and nearby. Later, various other activities were developed: A period of Novitiate (1997), the Hostel for boys and girls (2000), the Medical Centre (2001), the House for Aged people and the Parish. Today all these activities continue and the School is evolving from Hindi School to English School to offer a better service to the students.

In 1997, the Sisters moved to Thana, in the house of St. Theresa of Child Jesus, fit for their pastoral, social and vocation activity.

Fetri

To give continuity to Thana activity and to meet the needs of many poor families in Nagpur, a new Calabrian Home was opened in Fetri (2006) for boys and girls of 8-10 standards and Higher Secondary School.

The Calabrian Home of Fetri in the beginning was managed by a Board of Directors under the responsibility of the Poor Servants both Brothers and Sisters.

In Fetri the Poor Servants, Sisters, have also the Main House of the Indian Territory, with a formation activity of "come and see".

Mananthavady

In 2000 a Minor Seminary was opened in Mananthavady, Wayanad District (Kerala), in order to divide the various steps of formation, carried out entirely so far at the Ish Kripa Sadan, and so qualify better this important activity.

Later, also the Novitiate from Thana was transferred to Mananthavady (2004).

In 2005 a small Calabrian Home was opened for children with some difficulties.

Bangalore

In 2005 a new Community of Major Seminary and Theology Study began in Bangalore.

After one year, in 2006, also a Hostel for children with some difficulties was opened. And recently (2010) the Providence offered a very good and big house for the future development of these activities. In the course of time the campus became a center of learning for many children in the vicinity. Divine Providence Academy became a place of good learning for many middle class families.

In 2010 also the Poor Servants, Sisters, started a formation activity for candidates to religious life.

Guwahati-Jagiroad

In December 2010, with the grace of God, a new community was opened at Jagiroad (Assam) with the task to start a small work among the poor and to know better the Northern India Region in order to establish there in the future a Calabrian Mission with various services for that Region.

St. john Calabria Parish and Divine Providence School at Hahim, Assam

In the year 2013 the Archbishop John entrusted the congregation a rural pastoral area and gradually proclaimed it as a parish. First of its kind in Asia, and in India dedicated to St. John Calabria on 17 April 2013.

Gradually the religious involved in the rural pastoral works and focused on the better education of the children, to avoid the great drop outs after primary school. Now the congregations had a high school.

Poor Servants sisters also joined the education and formation activity in Assam at Hahim.

Conclusion

"A consistent characteristic that emerges from the history of the Opera is its flexibility, its ability to take and leave, let us say, its temporariness… It must be faithful to the spirit, always; but not inflexible in its work. It must show its loyalty to the poor always; but also a careful attention to uncover that poverty which from time to time emerges between the indigence of the world.

And so, while the traditional Homes for Children diminished in some country, other services were developed, like the assistance to handicapped young and adult, the presence in the prisons, the care for drug addicts and for the so called 'new poor'.

What are the fields which the future will reserve to the Congregation? The Poor Servants must not worry of this. Only the Divine Providence will make its projects for them. The Opera has the task to be attentive and flexible and not to establish itself on the past realizations.

'The Opera will be great if it is small, will be rich if it is poor and will have God's protection if it is away from seeking human security'.[163]

Only this way the Opera has to walk, ready to go along again with joy, if the Divine Master will give a nod"

(Ottorino Foffano).

[163] Let. Pentecost 1947.