

The Spiritual Profile of St. Gaspar Bertoni



St. G. Bertoni's birth house in Verona, at the North of Italy
[picture taken on 9/29/2000]

Its Features and Spirit

Rev. John Ceresatto, CSS

Original Title:

Il volto e l'anima. Profilo spirituale di san Gaspare Bertoni

English Translation:

Rev. Joseph C. Henchey, CSS

[from Lincoln, NE - 2005]

Electronic Edition: Tereza Lopes [Lay Stigmatine]

Latest revision: Advent, 2014

Original Title in Italian:

Il volto e l'anima. Profilo spirituale di san Gaspare Bertoni

Printed Edition:

A cura della Congregazione delle Sacre Stimmate N.S.G.C.

[2nd Edition] - Verona 1991

The Work has been seen: it may be printed

Verona, June 12, 1991

† Joseph Amari

Bishop of Verona

GENERAL TABLE of CONTENTS

	Page
<u>Premise of the Author himself</u>	6
<u>Fonts & Bibliography</u>	8
<u>Author's Brief Biography</u>	10
<u>PART ONE</u>	11
<u>The Intense Activity of Grace</u>	
<u>Chapter 1: The First Years</u>	13
1. His Native City 2. His Family 3. Young Gaspar 4. Early Ideal: the Marian Oratory 5. The Visitation of Deaths 6. Unblemished in the Harshness 7. His studies of Philosophy, Literature and Music 8. His Call.	
<u>Chapter 2: Towards the Altar</u>	24
1. Shadows in Family Life 2. Seminarian at Home 3. Catechist 4. Final Stages 5. A Tempestuous Farewell of the World 6. His First Sermon 7. A Priest forever	
<u>Chapter 3: Two Years of Waiting</u>	38
1. The Fourteenth 2. Sacred Studies 3. Echoes of his Soul 4. My Fellow Sinners 5. In the Gentleness of God.	
†††	
<u>PART TWO</u>	49
<u>The Apostle of Youth</u>	
<u>Chapter 4: A Ready Response to the Needs of the Times</u>	51
1. The Religious And Political Climate 2. The First Marian Oratory gets underway 3. Marvelous Development 4. In Those Challenging times 5. Its Organization 6. The Spirit of the Undertaking	
<u>Chapter 5: With Full Sails</u>	58
1. A Festive Day in St. Paul's Oratory 2. Anxieties and Worries 3. The Academies and the Cenacle 4. From Full Orchestra to the Silences of the Soul 5. Pork Chops 6. Conquests 7. A Spiritual Retreat	
<u>Chapter 6: Pleasant Meadows and Stormy Times</u>	66
1 In Full Flower 2. The Cohort on the March 3. A Special Flower: John Baptist Ruffoni 4. Satan's Fury 5. The Devil's Tail 6. Cenacle Period	

†††††

PART THREE

71

The Spiritual Director of Religious and Priests**Chapter 7: Family Vicissitudes**

73

1. Legal Battles 2. Departure from His Home 3. Still under Dispute 4. Repercussions
5. *I greet you, o my Mother, give me your blessing ...* 5. A Thorn in the Heart

Chapter 8: Interior Riches

80

1. A Revealing Document 2. The Worry of the Soul 3. Temptations 4. To be saved: A Strong Will
5. Proceed with Caution 6. Correspond to Grace 7. The Physiognomy of Perfection 8. In the Wave of Go

Chapter 9: At Mother Canossa's Convent

92

1. The Appointment 2. From the Royal Court to the Convent 3. Two Different Charisms
4. Father Confessor 5. The First Meeting 6. What went before 7. By Divine Command
8. Under the Protection of Love 9. Within the Circle of Charity 10. Journey in the Dark

Chapter 10: From the Plants to the Cultivators

102

1. A 'Yes' to the Request 2. And a 'No' to Rigorism 3. 'A Desolate Vineyard', and Sleeping Workers
4. The Renewal 5. Guide and the Search 6. Along Unaccustomed Pathways 7. A Bridge over the Abyss

Chapter 11: In the Canticle of Abandonment to God

113

1. A Necessary Introduction 2. Hesitant Steps 3. Between Life and Death 4. *In the School of God*
5. In the Game of Providence 6. Loving Confidence 7. The refusal that was not a Whim 8. An Indication of Incoherence?

††††

PART FOUR

125

Apostolic Missionaries in the Service of Bishops**SECTION ONE**

127

A Contemplation toward Hope: The Church of the Future**Chapter 12 Preludes toward the 'Little Company of Jesus'**

127

1. The Voice of St. Ignatius 2. Orientations of his Soul 3. *A United Virtue is stronger*
4. A Sign from on High? 5. The Company of Jesus returns to Life 6. A Dynamic Vigil.

Chapter 13: At the Stimate

137

1. The Paths of Providence 2. A Chronicle of the Early Arrivals 3. *In any manner whatsoever ...!*
4. The Whispers of the World 5. The Pastor's Search 6. With Eyes toward the Future 7. Two Separations and New Arrivals.

Chapter 14: The Christian Formation of the Youth 147

1. Scholastic Activity 2. Mind and Heart 3. Pauses for the Soul 4. Results and Testimonies 5. The Marian Oratory at the Stimate

Chapter 15: In the Spirit of a Charism 155

1. Ministries 2. God is so generous 3. Learn Jesus Christ 4. A Radical Poverty 5. What about the Structures?

Appendix [Added by the Translator]: 167

Two Jesuit Vows of Obedience:

The Apostolic Missionary Mode [CF ## 2; Part IX: 158 – 186] and

Corporate Stigmatine Obedience [CF ## 138 – 151]

††

SECTION TWO 173**The Living Rule****Chapter 16: The Model and Father of the Community** 175

1. Father and Teacher 2. Fr. Gramego, Confessor 3. Fr. Benciolini, the Good Preacher 4. Fr. Venturini, the Catechist of the Unlettered 5. Fr. Marani, Prepared for All 6. Fr. Bragato, Apostolic Missionary in the Royal Court 7. The Mission of Suffering 8. Poor and Mortified 9. One Sole Spirit, One Single Soul.

Chapter 17: Encounters and Anecdotes 185

1. Raking up 2. The Bishop and the Catechism Lesson 3. Faith and reason 4. The Curious and the Devout 5. The First and Ultimate Service 6. Rosmini and Bertoni 7. *Just too Humble* 8. Let God do His Part 9. *You will go to San Zeno's, but not yet to the Cemetery!*

Chapter 18: From Immolation to Glory 195

1. Ultimate Voices of the soul 2. Failures? 3. A Slow Martyrdom 4. In the Breach until the Last 5. Tribulations 6. In the Light of a Great Love 7. Encounters with the 'Good Father'.

†
†††

†

PREMISE¹

The biographical work that we present here, in a rather simple form and stylistically up-dated, is a re-edition of a volume now out of print, just about forgotten, that had as its title:

The Spiritual Profile of Venerable Gaspar Bertoni. Its Features and Spirit

This was printed in Verona in March 1953 and was intended to mark the First Centenary of the death of the man: the Founder of the Congregation of the Sacred Stigmata of Our Lord Jesus Christ, popularly known as 'Stigmatines.'

It all came about in a rather striking and singular manner: this suffered and much worked over Spiritual Profile of the Man whom the Church would proclaim 'Blessed' on November 1, 1975, and 'Saint' on November 1, 1989, came to life, it can be said, in Mission territory. It began in Peking between August of 1950 and July of 1951, in that harsh climate of persecution which at that time raged in the China of Mao. [What a lesson for life did Fr. Bertoni's spirit of abandonment in God provide in those turbulent times!]

The forty and more years of absence from Italy on the part of the Author, far-away Missionary – by way of Rome - from China to Thailand, certainly did not contribute to support the survival of that willing labor, truly offered at that time to the Stigmatine world as a 'fraternal help to know better and to profitably love the Features and the Spirit of our Father's Spiritual Profile.'

Out of nowhere came the re-discovery and the determination to re-launch this work.

The revision and the refinement of this work are due to the real tireless work of a beloved Veronese Confrere, a most committed Missionary himself in Manila, Fr. Romolo Bertoni. In Verona, while making up part of the Community at San Leonardo, quite ill among our suffering Confreres, with the enthusiasm that is all his, he made good use of the prolonged and painful part of his convalescence for this purpose. Even though not fully re-covered, and look at him, already in flight for the Philippines,

¹ Fr. John Ceresatto this year celebrates 65 years of Stigmatine Priesthood. After having obtained the Doctorate in Missiology in Rome, he departed for the Stigmatine Mission in China. It was during his years in this Mission, that his idea for this wonderful biography matured. Following his expulsion from China, he left for the Mission in Thailand, where to this day he is still committed to the service of Bishops there. He spent years engaged in the formation of the young candidates to the Stigmatine life in the Priesthood.

NB: Translator's Note: while it is a privilege to translate this biography, from the outset I need to state that the wonderful use of the Italian language on the part of Fr. Ceresatto is a level beyond my translating ability. The ideal would have been to have these pages reviewed by the author, as he also knows English so very well.

to take up again his field of work after having handed over in all haste, these pages practically ready for their re-printing. From Thailand, here are the few final strokes, and now all is in readiness.

If this renewed volume will be received by its readers as a gift, the author and the reviser are proud that it comes from the Far East, as a humble homage offered to the Founder of the *Apostolic Missionaries* - the original title of the Institute - to whom the Saint of abandonment in God assigned as our field of endeavor the *Diocese and the World*.

Fr. John Ceresatto, CSS

Phuket, Thailand

February 13, 1991

2nd Edition – 1991
Fonts & Bibliography

A. Founder's Own Writings

1. Cause of Canonization

Veron. Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Gasparis Bertoni... *Positio super virtutibus. Summarium super dubio: An constet de Virtutibus.* Insulae Liris 1931. [This is cited as: *Summarium Super Virt.*] [SSV].

Summarium Additionale Virtutibus Ex Officio compilatum: under the care of the Sacred Congregation of rites. Historical Section. Roma. [In this ponderous work there have been gathered an evaluated better than the early documentation presented, empty areas have been filled in, certain particulars have been added, and the entire endeavor has been corroborated with notes and other information fished out of more than a good 20 Libraries and Archives In Verona, Stresa and Rome. [This is cited as: *Summ Add.*] [SA].

2. Computerized

Manoscritti di S. Gaspare Bertoni. The Archives of the Stimmate. Verona²

3. Published

Costituzioni del Ven. Servo di Dio, D. Gaspare Bertoni. Original *Latin* Text with Italian translation. Historical Introduction and Notes. Ed. Fr. Joseph Stofella. Verona: 1951

Epistolario, under the care of Fr. Joseph Stofella. Verona: 1954.

Memorial Privato. St. Gaspar's Spiritual Diary [MP] [1808-1813] in: *Collectanea Stigmatina* [CS] Volume

Pagine di Vita Cristiana. A Collection of the Early Sermons of the Servant of God, Gaspar Bertoni. Ed. Stocchiero. Vicenza: 1947.

Memorie intorno ai Padri e Fratelli della Congregazione. Verona 1886

4 Works about St. Gaspar Bertoni

AA.VV. Saggi sullo Spirito del B. Gaspare Bertoni, edited under the care of the General Curia of the Stigmatines. Rome 1983-1987.

² Fr. Louis Benaglia, CSS undertook the painstaking task of transcribing these thousands of pages by typewriter when the Stigmatine Novitiate was lived at Grottaferrata. These pages were then computerized [now available also in 5 CD ROM'S] by Fr. Pasquale Cavallo, CSS and his Lay Stigmatine group.

AA.VV., *Gaspere Bertoni, un santo per il nostro tempo*. Supplement to the *Missionario* n. 7-8 1989.

AA. VV., *San Gaspere Bertoni. Symposium Bertonianum*, held on the occasion of the Canonization of the Founder of the Stigmatines. Rome, ANGELICUM. October 28, 1989. Ed. Stimmgraf. Verna 1990.

BONETTI, Ignatius:

- *San Gaspere Bertoni. Note di Spiritualita'* Ed. Stimmagragf. 1989
- *La Grammatica di Don Gaspere Bertoni – Meditazioni Quotidiane* 1993

DALLE VEDOVE, Nello:

- *Un modello di Santo Abbandono: fisionomia spirituale del Ven. Gaspere Bertoni*. Verona 1951
- *San Gaspere Bertoni, Fondatore degli Stigmatini*. Ed. Stimmagragf. 1989.

NB: Fr. Dalle Vedove's magnum *opus*, his marvelous definitive biography of St. Gaspar Bertoni:

1. *La giovinezza del Vern. Gaspere Bertoni e l'ambiente veronese dell'ultimo '700 [1777-1800]*. Roma 1971, pp. 483.
2. *Vita e pensiero del Beato Gaspere Bertoni agli albori dell' '800 veronese. Part I [18800-1808]* Roma 1975, pp. 714.
3. *Vita e pensiero del Beato Gaspere Bertoni agli albori dell' 800 veronese. Part II [1809-1816]*. Rome 1977, pp. 754.
4. *Il Beato Gaspere Bertoni e l'Istituto delle 'Stimmate' nella prima meta' dell' 800 veronese. Part I [1816-1827]*. Rome 1981, pp. 571.
5. *Il Beato Gaspere Bertoni e l'Istituto delle 'Stimamte' nella prima meta' dell' 800 veronese. Part II [1827-1839]* Rome 1984, pp. 714.
6. *San Gaspere Bertoni e l'Istituto delle 'Stimmate' nella prima meta' dell' 800 veronese. Part III [1839-1855]*. pp. 768.

†
†††

†

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Fr. John Ceresatto was born in Concordia Sagittaria [VE]. He entered the Stigmatine Congregation and pronounced his first religious profession in 1934, and was ordained a priest in 1940. After having obtained the Doctorate in Missiology, he left for the Mission in China. In the meantime, and while a young Missionary in China, this 'Spiritual Profile' of Gaspar Bertoni was born.

After the expulsion from China, he left immediately for Thailand in 1954, and served there for over a half a century. He dedicated himself for many years in the formation of young Stigmatines there, and now the region has been made a Stigmatine 'Province'.

Fr. Ceresatto died in Trung, Thailand, on Dec. 7, 2011, the eve of the feast he favored. He was loved and revered by the brothers, particularly those that had formed in the 15 years he spent in training.

†
†††
†

The Spiritual Profile of St. Gaspar Bertoni



St. G. Bertoni as a Seminarian taking care of the Youth

Its Features and Spirit

Rev. John Ceresatto, CSS

Part One:

The Intense Activity of Grace

Translation from Italian:

Rev. Joseph C. Henchey, CSS

[from Lincoln, NE – Feast of St. Anthony of Padua, 2005]

Electronic Edition: Tereza Lopes [Lay Stigmatine]
Last updated on Advent, 2014

TABLE of CONTENTS**PART ONE****The Intense Activity of Grace****Chapter 1: The First Years 13**

1. His Native City 2. His Family 3. Young Gaspar 4. Early Ideal: the Marian Oratory 5. The Visitation of Deaths 6. Unblemished in the Harshness 7. His Studies of Philosophy, Literature and Music 8. His Call.

Chapter 2: Towards the Altar 24

1. Shadows in Family Life 2. Seminarian at Home 3. Catechist 4. Final Stages 5. A Tempestuous Farewell of the World 6. His First Sermon 7. A Priest forever

Chapter 3: Two Years of Waiting 38

1. The Fourteenth 2. Sacred Studies 3. Echoes of his Soul 4. My Fellow Sinners 5. In the Gentleness of God.

†††

PART ONE
THE INTENSE ACTIVITY OF GRACE
Chapter 1
The First Years

1. His Native City

Verona was the beautiful and fortunate city which, between the fading of the 1700's, and the first half of the very animated 1800's, served as the framework of the entire life of Gaspar Bertoni, Priest, Founder and Saint.

This very busy city along the Adige, has served as the custodian of the most ancient vestiges of the Roman past, to the rapid sunset of that power of the Scaligers who had entrusted their lot to the Republic of Venice. All that the city wanted in return was quiet and protection; but in the first century of Venetian domination those hopes for the most part, were not realized. Self-assured, and feared on the seas, the Lion of San Marco revealed itself simply incapable of defending the important strategic center from forays of our internal as well as foreign armies, in battle [not considering the varied ideals they bore with them], for the possession of the fertile Paduan plains.

There did follow three centuries of peace, hardly disturbed but for a few sporadic episodes of arms. The indefectible devotion of Verona to the Republic called 'the most Serene', had in recompense a most outstanding autonomy of municipal government, which was always in the hands of the local aristocracy.

Towards the end of the 1700's, the French Revolution was on the verge of breaking out. At that time, the Veronese system of patrician rule was at its highest, with this unusual fact: that the people, rather than hiding under its shadow, were happy in it, being proud of the greatness which to an extent belonged to them.

Goethe referred to all this, commenting on his three days visit here to the City of Cangrande. The rather rapid impressions noted in his personal Travel Journal, by the supreme German poet, can be of help in reconstructing the environs and the tone of life in the Verona of the last years of the 1700's. He noted the *gallant* life of the nobility and the carefree life of the people. It seems to have been a rather friendly atmosphere which bound the people of every condition, and made of the city one large family.

And the faith? Indeed, it was traditional, simple and sincere. On his return noted in his Diary from an evening stroll from beyond the Porta Nova, the great Poet Tourist noted that "some were at their leisure in the Piazza Bra", while others went into Church in order to pray the *Hail Mary* of the evening... Whenever the bells for the *Angelus* rang out", Goethe notes further, "in the homes, the Rosary was prayed. Then the maid would enter the patrons' room with the lamp lit, and would wish them: ... *A very pleasant good night!*..."³

³ Goethe, *Journeys in Italy*. September 16, 17, 1786. At this time, young Gaspar was a boy of 9.

2. His Family

It was truly a happy day that October 9, 1777, in Via di Sotto, registered in the municipal records as n. 5439⁴. Here, in a very modest dwelling, would be gathered all the components of the distinct Bertoni family, which, however, was by now, petering out.

While they were not really rich, nor poor, the Bertoni's did enjoy a certain comfortable existence, insured by their possession of ample and fertile fields in the little towns in the area: in Illasi and Caldiero.

In 1768, when old Gaspar [the head of the Bertoni clan] died, the family went on in this way, and was able to maintain some kind of union. The family was made up of the following: the widow of the deceased Gaspar, Matilda, of the noble Liorsi family; there were two brothers of his: Ignatius, a Notary, a widower without children; and James, a Priest. The deceased also left three children: Anthony Mary, unmarried; Paula, of marriageable age; and Francis Louis, the youngest of all. From May of 1776, he was the husband of Brunora Ravelli, who was about 30 years of age, and 10 months his senior.

She came from the excellent and well off Ravelli family and was born in Sirmione on Lake Garda, on September 30, 1746, the daughter of Francis, also a Notary, and Lelia Gialdi.

To complete this family picture, which certainly was not brilliant for its youth, there was also Teresa, unmarried, daughter of the late Catherine Bertoni in Pistoia, the sister of the late grand-father, Gaspar. All this precision might be a bit bothersome, but will prove to be helpful in the pages that follow. Of the entire household of the last quarter century, Anthony Mary would be the personality most in the forefront. He was a Notary of great importance, the Prior of the College of the Notaries in Verona, and also the Chancellor of the Commune.

On the night of October 9, 1777, into that somewhat melancholic nest of ageing people, the palpitating melody of new life provided a tremble of joy and hope. There was born the one who would be the last and the greatest of the Bertoni family.

3. Young Gaspar

In St. Paul's Parish, of the Campo Marzio section of Verona, the old Baptismal record reads as follows:

...Today, the 10th of October, Fr. James Bertoni, Priest of this Church, with the permission of the Pastor, baptized little Gaspar Louis Denis, son of Francis Louis Bertoni, and of his legitimate wife, Mrs. Brunora Ravelli, who was born yesterday at 22 hours [4:00 p.m.]. The sponsor was Mr. Alexander DaPrato, a Doctor in Both Canon and Civil Law, of the Parish of St. Mary in Organis...⁵

⁴ Today this is Via Nicola Mazza

⁵ From the Parish Register, St. Paul in Campo Marzio, Verona.

After having been born into the life of grace, as the last off-shoot of the Bertoni family, he would bring lasting fame to the name of the household with the reputation of his holiness.

Already for too many years, there had not been heard the sounds of childhood in the Bertoni home. This child would soon be the center of affection and hopes. How easy it is to imagine the expressions of love that poured from his Grandmother, Matilde, Aunt Paula and his cousin Teresa.

It is to be attributed to the vigilance of his Mother that this outpouring of family affection of which the lovable young Gaspar was the object, far from weakening in any way, his upbringing, it rather made it more refined and complete. The recollections of his childhood years present him with bright eyes, an intelligent air about him, a tenacious memory, and often with his hands joined in prayer with his Mother, or alone before his little altar. A simple holy card would bring him much happiness. Whenever he was brought into Church, it was evident that his innate taste for the sacred swept over him as would the sound of the organ.⁶

For reasons that we will bring out later, his father was absent from the upbringing of little Gaspar. Both the honor and the burden of this fell entirely on his Mother. Brunora Ravelli was a woman of great faith and exceptional prudence and she knew well how to pour out her loving care on this son of hers, for whom Providence reserved a sublime destiny.

Noting, with happy surprise, that the innate vivacity of the child was also tempered with a piety and an understanding that were superior to his age. He seemed almost as though he had been invested with a particular mission, and to this he dedicated the religious care that the holiness of his cause demanded.

One significant episode of his early childhood brings us into a small class-room, full of flowers and toys, where a kindergarten teacher was distributing a light lunch. The little sandwiches had been entrusted – and who could ever imagine why ...!? - from the morning to her vigilant protection. A forest of little hands reached out to her, a clamor of tinny voices: a little world was in tumult, quite capable to seeking what was coming to it.

However, there was one exception: one lad, no less vivacious, and surely among the more intelligent among them, remained seated in quiet reserve at his bench awaiting patiently his turn: this was the son of mother Brunora, the one whom the Teacher would call her 'Angelic little Gaspar!'⁷

⁶ SA, *Positio super virtutibus*, under the care of the Historical Section of the Sacred Congregation of Rites. Rome: Vatican Press. Doc 26, p. 309.

⁷ SA, Doc. 26, p. 310; Doc. 20, p. 128.

The boy was not yet eight years old, and he had already won the admiration of those who came in contact with him. He seemed to exude that sweet candor, that serene and thoughtful air about him, and his obedience that had become proverbial.⁸

4. In the Ideal of the Marian Group

At St. Sebastian's: in the fall of 1785, at just about 8 years old, Gaspar was enrolled in the city school at St. Sebastian's which was located next to the Church with the same name, a few steps from the picturesque Piazza delle Erbe.⁹

His First Holy Communion: Fr. Giacobbe does not make precise the date of young Gaspar's encounter for the first time with the Eucharistic Jesus. Recent studies fix the date in November 1788, just weeks after Gaspar had passed his 11th birthday. For Gaspar this was indeed a supernatural light, a day of heavenly delights for him. Perhaps it was that totally divine enthusiasm of his First Holy Communion which inspired a boyhood poem of his, in which among other insights, the saint states regarding himself:

*...in those green years, my heart was drawn
by the gentle voice of a chaste Spouse,
I heard Him, I burned for Him, I almost saw Him ...*¹⁰

Our certainty, however, is based on a quite different argument. When he was by then, an ordained Priest for some eight years, Fr. Gaspar noted in his ***Spiritual Diary***, under the date of October 9., 1808 [his 31st birthday], he would register the gift of a great mystical grace that he had received that morning celebrating Mass. What is of interest to us would be the last words of that note, illuminating with a reflected but sure light that that first spiritual stage of the Saint of long before. We read:

*... at Holy Communion, I experienced devotion and sentiments equal to my First Communion as a boy, which I do not know of ever having experienced it again afterwards ...*¹¹

A Member of the Marian Group: at that time, there was a flourishing Marian Congregation, that had come into life in those times prior to the suppression of the Company of Jesus. This group proved to provide the development of an intense spiritual life among the students at St. Sebastian's.¹²

It is well known the great good that these Marian Congregations [the orientation of which, from their very beginning, remained as one of the beloved inheritances handed on to the sons of St. Ignatius] succeeded in realizing, especially among young students.

⁸ SA, Doc. 20, p. 128; Doc 26, p. 314.

⁹ SA, Doc. 26, p. 661.

¹⁰ From his boyhood papers.

¹¹ SA, Doc. 26, p. 661,

¹² The Marian Congregation of St. Sebastian's had as its title, the Annunciation. It was joined the first Roman Primary, and from June 17, 1776, sharing in the same privileges. cf. SA Doc. 2, p. 6.

Every section would gather a select band of young boys who would look toward the spiritual perfection of their own souls, in working out a real committed program for the spiritual perfection of their own souls. This would be worked out in the exercise of charity towards their neighbor, in a solid piety that would radiate from their most tender devotion to the Virgin Mary.¹³

For the entire period that St. Gaspar frequented St. Sebastian's School, the Director of that Marian Congregation was the ex-Jesuit, Fr. Joachin Avesani [1741-1818].¹⁴ His wonderful reputation as an educator outlived his death and authorizes us to consider him to have been a most zealous and capable Director.

Fr. Bertoni was certainly a member of this Marian organization at this period in his life. This is verified from a page of an old register, that would correspond to what today we might call an identification card given to each enrolled member.¹⁵ This is the only document that regards young Bertoni from that period of time that he was a student at St. Sebastian's, which he would attend all that time until he would begin his philosophical course. However, the fact is that this documents does point out that the Saint did indeed belong to that Marian Congregation for students that sheds some light on his adolescence and explains, in great part, **the dynamic and fruitful apostolate among the youth** of the first years of his priesthood.

His Guide: in St. Sebastian's School at that time, among the teachers, one stands out, Fr. Louis Fortis. He was born in Verona in 1748, and at thirteen, he himself attended the then Jesuit school at St. Sebastian's. One day, at prayer before the altar of the Blessed Virgin, he felt inspired to enter the Company of Jesus.

He was gifted with a sharp and versatile mind, and was able to stand out in the study of literature, physics and philosophy. He was a man of solid piety and endowed with a most exemplary religious spirit, and very soon showed himself to be the most beautiful hope of the Venetian Province.

The suppression of the Company [in 1773] intervened to intercept the complete realization of his Ignatian dream, surprising him at Ferrara where he was as a young Scholastic, teaching Rhetoric.

When he returned to the place of his birth, he completed his theological studies there was ordained a Priest¹⁶. The Municipal authorities named him teacher of Human

¹³ Emile Villaret, SJ, *Congregation de la Sainte Virgin. Manuel des Directeurs*. Rome 1930. cf. pp. 18-19, where the author, citing from the *Annalista* of the Companion, Fr. Sacchini [died in 1625], presents the primitive and minute program of the Marian Association which we will see realized fully by the young member of the group in his youth, Gaspar Bertoni.

¹⁴ **Author's Note:** here and in all that follows in this present Biography, the expression '*ex-Jesuit*' placed before the names of not a few priests whom we will meet, does not intend to give the impression that they had given up their vocations to the Society, but only to indicate these men, of authentic Ignatian stamp, who had been struck and dispersed by the official suppression of the Society of Jesus.

¹⁵ SA, Doc. 2, p. 5.

¹⁶ Ignatius Beretta, SJ, *De Vita Aloysii Fortis, vigesimi S. J. universae Praepositi*. Verona. Ex Officina Libantiana 1833, pp. 40, *passim*.

Letters at St. Sebastian's, and toward that end of that 1785, he was appointed to that Institute, as Professor of Philosophy. In a very short time, he truly dominated the environment with the vast nature of his learning, his fascinating eloquence, his profound interior life which made him austere and mortified with himself, while being tender and most zealous in his devotion to the Virgin Mary, his tireless approach to his apostolate among the youth, with whom the ministry of school brought him in contact.

The meeting of the young student, Gaspar Bertoni, with Fr. Fortis, happened for sure out of a loving disposition of the Providence. The leaving behind of childhood normally represents a most decisive and delicate period. In the most ordinary of cases, adolescents lack a spiritual guide, who would know how to develop the commitment given by family up-bringing, in order to complete this and elevate it with the strength of grace of the Sacraments and good counsel.

For young Gaspar, he had this guide in Fr. Fortis. The handing over of the prevailing powers of education took place as there was still on the young man's face and in his lively eyes there shined forth intact the enchantment of his innocence. If the adolescence of the young man would exhibit so clearly the radiance of piety, of faith, and of purity – if it is a genuine Ignatian spirit that will be at the base of the entire spirituality and enterprise of Fr. Bertoni, this will be due to the providential grace of this meeting.

The Ideal Member of the Marian Group: under Fr. Fortis' spiritual direction, in the young Bertoni, his authentic and instinctive piety found the mode to open itself up to much broader horizons, by illuminating and by reorienting quickly in him every other activity.

From the outset, Fr. Fortis aimed, evidently, to model him on the ideal of the Marian Group, by directing him toward an affective and effective devotion to the Virgin Mary. The student, young Gaspar, showed himself to be endowed with admirable fidelity to all the spiritual practices of the Group: each day Holy Mass, Meditation, Spiritual reading, the Examen of Conscience.¹⁷ The weekly devotions, and whenever he could, even more often, he received Holy Communion.¹⁸ Every year the members made a retreat.

On September 6, 1791, Bishop John Andrew Avogadro, a patrician by birth from Venice, and ex-Jesuit [who succeeded Bishop Morosini in the government of the Diocese], administered to the 14 year old Bertoni the Sacrament of Confirmation, thus strengthening him with a new spiritual vigor.

Young Gaspar more and more became not only a model at St. Sebastian's School, but also a center of attraction. In a young student, an austere piety, not matter how it might be evidenced among other beautiful qualities, is not certainly the most indicated point of attraction to captivate the esteem and sympathies of his companions. However, the piety of the young student Bertoni did win over his school

¹⁷ SA, Doc 26, pp. 312, ff.

¹⁸ SA, Doc 20, p. 117: the Testimony of Fr. Mark Marchi.

companions. This would indicate that it was spontaneous, solid and unconventional at one and the same time. It rendered in him even more lovable those expressions of a healthy exuberance proper to that beautiful age.¹⁹

He was a very fervent young man, making excellent progress; young Gaspar retained the gift of serene and witty joyfulness. When the occasion allowed, without ever surrendering his customary composure, and without ever becoming ‘a real comical Veronese’, with his good-natured chatter. His specialty seems to have been his ability to provide imitations, but he did this with graciousness and a spontaneity that, those whom he was imitating, seeing themselves reflected in his gestures and tone of voice, joined in on the fun as well.

His fellow students saw him always as the leader in their meetings, because along-side his eloquent example of goodness, he knew how to combine his sudden and exhilarating outbursts with an exuberating and soothing joy.²⁰ Young Gaspar made good use of these developing qualities, in committing himself with delicate shrewdness that apostolate among the young that was within the spirit and program of the Marian Group.

He did join in with his companions in those animated recreations in the court yard of the house, or in the open in the public squares. He would call on these experiences, later on as a priest, and was quite able to call them to mind in his own organization of his Marian Oratories. On Sunday and holiday afternoons, together with his companions, he would frequent visiting the splendid churches of the city. Not rarely would he appear in the hospitals, or private homes, to comfort some friend or acquaintance who was ill²¹.

However, whole young Bertoni as a student willingly took part in the happy hikes with the group, he also knew how to reserve for himself some time and the taste of going alone along the backstreets and along the banks of the river, or in the hills, especially during the spring-time, when Verona would be made even more beautiful, and there he would contemplate, read and meditate.²²

The thought of God was the high point of his reflections, of his studies and of his every activity. The Glory of God for him was the live flame that illuminated that pure and happy youth, who grew up in the Ignatian School taught by Fr. Fortis.

¹⁹ A proof of this is found in the significant bit of information fished out of the administrative papers of the Bertoni home. In the family balance of 1789, Charles Ravelli – administrator of the Bertoni finances - among other expenses notes the following:

...August 18, 1789, to repair young Gaspar's hat, and toy gun, 4.11 Lira.

[This is from the Archives of the State, Verona, Under the Ravelli Folder. And that rust was the cause of the need to defuse the war-like device, while this document does not support the thought!]

²⁰ SA, Doc. 20, p. 129; Doc. 26, p. 320.

²¹ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 317-318.

²² SA, Doc. 26, pp. 315, f.

5. Death passes through the Household

From Gaspar's adolescent years, a particular fact needs to be mentioned which had – we believe – a powerful influence on his spiritual life. In the brief cycle of seven years, from 1785-1791, a good three times death knocked at the doors of the Bertoni home.

On June 1, 1785, at the age of 76, his Grand-uncle, Fr. James, died. Gaspar was not yet eight years old. The 11th of November of the following year, Matilde, his sweet baby sister, not even four years old, infected with small-pox, flew up among the Angels, leaving in the most affectionate heart of her brother, now alone, a very painful absence.

In June 1787, in the near-by house, it was the turn of another Grand-uncle, Ignatius Bertoni. In his last will and testament, he wanted to remember Gaspar, leaving to him as his inheritance his own silver sword. We read in the document: *...hoping that my young grand-nephew will pray to the Lord God for me...* In June of 1790, his cousin Teresa Pistoia died, and in October of the following year, his Grand-mother, Matilda of the noble Liorsi family.²³

These deaths certainly produced a profound echo in Gaspar's nature, impressing a shadow in his soul, as he was one always disposed to receive and protect every voice that beckoned to him from on high. It was undoubtedly this sorrowful school of these detachments that deepened within him that profound sense of the rapid passing of time that recurred then later so often in his priestly preaching.

6. Pure among the Thorns

St. Aloysius had become young Bertoni's model in his years in the Marian Group. Even prior to embracing the ecclesiastical state, Gaspar was able to deny himself 'every reading, every talent exhibition, every musical concert, even those that were sacred, and every other entertainment, which even though beyond reproach, that would have as its scope solely that of pleasing and delight the senses.'²⁴

In the exercise of renunciation, the young member of the Marian Group went well beyond the desires of his likewise very pure Mother. There was the incident, totally unknown to her, when young Gaspar went to the family tailor, and asked him to alter a new suit he had been given to make it appear less elegant, and more in accord with his personal tastes. When the alterations were completed, and he put on the suit, this aroused the lively teasing of his companions, and they gave to Gaspar the knick-name the 'Capuchin.' However, the first one to enjoy the laughter he caused, was himself.

Even regarding his necessary rest during the night, we can say that this, too, was limited and mortified. Still in the time of his high school years at St. Sebastian's, the young student had very cleverly asked the maid at home not to make his bed, and

²³ Register of the Deceased, St. Paul in Campo Marzio, the Bertoni Folder.

²⁴ SA, Doc 26, p. 390.

he would take care of it himself. At first, the woman obeyed, but then, thinking that prohibition was a little unusual, and she decided to take a look for herself. And she found good reasons for her suspicions: under the sheets, the hay of the mattress was interspersed with small stones, with which the occupant of that bed had tried to change his legitimate rest into a school of perfection.²⁵ And most likely, not even Fr. Fortis knew of this! This was his decision 'to wage continuous war-fare declared against his own senses. This won for him the grace to keep unsullied his baptismal robe until his death.'²⁶

7. Literature, Philosophy and Music

Young Gaspar was fully capable of applying himself with commitment equal to his gifted intelligence and to his uncommon diligence. In the *Curriculum of Studies* of that time [prior to the time when Austrian Reform of 1818, would change in part their organization], it was arranged in this manner:

Two or three classes which today we would call, 'preparatory' and which in those days were called 'special scholastic drills', where by degrees there was taught the nouns, verbs and agreement.

Once this first hurdle was passed, the young man was introduced into his 'scholastic' career properly so called, including three years of Grammar [inferior, middle, and supreme]; three years of Humanities and Rhetoric, followed and crowned by two years of Philosophy. Before beginning the course of Grammar, Gaspar frequented – we believe – at least one of the three preparatory classes.²⁷

Who were young Bertoni's teachers in these ten years of fervent study? The scholastic registers are lacking to us, so we are not in a position to clarify this with any precision for all the courses frequented by him. However, the testimonies presented by Fr. Giacobbe are valid – even though the first biographer of the Founder is fragmentary, the names he lists are quite authoritative.

In the course of Humanities and Rhetoric, Gaspar was certainly the student of the above-named ex-Jesuit, Joachim Avesani. Throughout Verona he was the most celebrated teacher of eloquence and of Italian and Latin poetry, as well as the teacher of the Greek language. Particularly in Italian, Fr. Avesani was recognized in that literary current known as the 'purists', modeling himself on the Italian authors of the 1300's or the 1500's, in the first half of the 1800's. Precisely in Verona, there would be found its greatest exponent, Fr. Anthony Cesari, of the Oratorian of St Philip Neri.

²⁵ SA, Doc. 20, p. 128, n. 4.

²⁶ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 520, 476.

²⁷ Fr. Gaspar's first biographer – Fr. Giacobbe – shows that he did not know of the existence of these 'scholastic drills', surely connected to the St Sebastian's school in 1785. It was only to fill the void of ten years of effective frequenting school on the part of young Bertoni that Fr. Giacobbe speaks of the voluntary repetition of two classes of Grammar. [cf. SA, Doc. 26, pp. 311, f. and 3124; Fr. Stofella, o.c., p. 28, n. 6.

Young Bertoni, a most impassioned cultivator of the Language of Dante, underwent the powerful influence of this school. This influence will be felt, more or less, in almost all his writings, even though totally foreign to him would be any ostentation. It would turn to his greater glory that he always avoided those excesses which the current style and tastes had embraced.

We owe to this absence of any put-on literary concern the merit of certain pages, which, abstracting from their content which is always interesting, even today can be most willingly read. It would suffice to read, for example, the letters of the elder Fr. Bertoni, written off the cuff, as it were, without the least trace of any re-writing on his part. In addition to the sublime wealth of the content and the richness of the active vocabulary, there is also the surprise of a neat and running flow of his expressions.

His profit in the Latin language was pronounced as it was in Greek. Once he was ordained a Priest, he would still strive to perfect himself in the language of Homer, acquiring in Verona a genuine competence. Witness of this fact might be noted in the papers that have come down to us that are not few in number of his expertise. Among these papers those stand out that presented to us that ancient hand-writing style in use in the most renowned Codices of the Greek Language.²⁸

In his first year of Philosophy he had as his guide, Fr. Louis Fortis. In his second year, it was the Abbot Anthony Zamboni. These were two scholars who were publishing in their field. To Fr. Zamboni, young Gaspar would always be indebted for a profound study of Logic in which, in many circumstances of his priestly ministry, he knew how to call upon it with strategic efficacy. His manuscript from this treatise on Logic was for this young student of Philosophy, his favorite volume, often his companion on those solitary and thought-filled walks in the hills overlooking the city and along the silent banks of the Adige.²⁹

He also cultivated profitably music, specializing in playing the piano, under the guide of an able master. He also learned how to handle, on his own, other musical instruments, a precious experience that would be a valid help for him in his early priestly ministry.

8. His Call

The life of study to which the Saint applied himself with such ardor was that 'great means employed by him in order to achieve that end which from his first years, was gradually maturing within him.' This is Fr. Giacobbe's view.³⁰ Even more explicit is Fr. Marani's testimony. He was the first spiritual son and his most intimate confidant: 'From his youth,' this authoritative witness states, 'he had in mind to lead the religious life.'³¹

²⁸ Manoscritti Bertoni, Folder n. 43. [**Translator's Note: this is the way the manuscripts would be quoted before Fr. L. Benaglia transcribed them with their marginal numbers for easy citation.**]

²⁹ SA, Doc. 26, p. 316.

³⁰ ib, p. 320.

³¹ ib., Doc 22, III, 2, p. 258.

The divine call was not to be separated in him from the torment of trial: the intimate sense of his own insufficiency, the sublime concept of the priestly mission in a world on which there was passing the terror of the French Revolution, must have left him perplexed prior to his definitive decision. As a Priest, in a course of Instructions to Seminarians, having analyzed the certain signs of the vocation from God in a young man, Fr. Gaspar added three lines that appear to us in all their autobiographical splendor:

... Even though the signs of the divine election are quite clear, the humility and low estimation one has of himself, makes it happen that the young man almost might not believe in that which he sees, and against all that he might feel regarding himself, and so has great need of some kind of confirmation...³²

Half way through his course in Philosophy, young Gaspar lost his Spiritual Director. Fr. Fortis left to re-enter the re-established Company of Jesus. However, his own call would become irrevocable and this exploded on him through the intervention of Fr. Francis Girardi, Pastor of St. Paul's in Campo Marzio.³³ Being fully persuaded that the Lord had fixed His designs on that privileged soul, and he had noted intuitively the hesitation of the humble 17 year old young man looking at the priesthood. His Pastor noted a number of signs coming together, realizing that the young man must have been feeling a deep attraction, the experienced Pastor called young Gaspar and without any beating around the bush, with his attitude of a gentle fatherly observation, asked him: *What are you waiting for in order to become a priest?*

To this sudden question, Gaspar registered no reaction, no surprise. He simply responded that he needed a little time to reflect. He intensified his spirit of prayer, accentuated the tone of his mortified life and, to perceive better the secret voices of that God, *Who speaks heart to heart, sweetly and slowly.*³⁴ He set aside some time and entered into a course of the Spiritual Exercises.

Once he became sure of the divine call, Gaspar responded with that thrust of his humble and pure youth. So, once the Retreat was over, he made clear to Fr. Girardi and announced to him the resolution that he had reached. The zealous Pastor had only to give vent to the joy he experienced in noting in the eyes of his young parishioner the sure reflections of a new dawn, so rich in promise.



³² Words found in St. Gaspar's Commentary on St. Gregory the Great on 1 Kings: *Instructions on 1st Kings*. Folder n. 23.

³³ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 321, f.

³⁴ From the childhood poetry of the Saint, already quoted above.

Chapter 2

Toward the Altar

1. Shadows in his Family

Regarding Gaspar's vocation to the Priestly life, the first to rejoice in that with him was that great heart of his Mother, Brunora, who saw her most maternal desires heading toward the most worthy coronation she could have ever imagined. She was a woman of great faith, and was capable of appreciating the human sentiment implicit in that vocation of her only son. She could foresee in this the rather melancholic sunset of the Bertoni family name. Yet, there remained in her the certitude in that spiritual paternity that the Lord would have enkindled in the heart of her Gaspar, once he would indeed be a Minister of God.

What were his Father's sentiments in this regard? The documents maintain complete silence in this regard. It is certain, however, that if he did not oppose his son's vocation, his assent to it all was not inspired by the same sentiments as those of his wife. The first biographer of the Saint, in treating of the relationship of Sir Francis Louis with his son, due to an excess of delicacy and respect, sinned on the side of reticence. He handled this evident by trying to supply for this evident need, attributing to his Father a closed nature and quite vague in his rustic personality. He was most capable of leaving in the city his wife and only son, so that he could remain alone in the family country estate immersed in the administration of his own goods³⁵.

This really is not the whole story. It is our duty to point out even that we might the better understand the rather sad effects that the Father's conduct had on his only son's spirit. The root source of the discord seems to have been the division of the family goods. In 1783, following some real negative indications given by Mr. Francis Louis Bertoni in the area of administration, the understanding was reached that it was necessary to divide up the family goods. The Grand-uncle and priest, Fr. James, owned one half of the estate; the other half, which was under the legitimate supervision of Paula, was sub-divided then between the two brothers, Anthony and Francis Louis. However, once again, Francis Louis lost his share in the responsibility. After only a few years following the division of the family estate, he had reduced his portion into a most disconcerting disarray and lack of balance, that forced him to seek an 'immediate provision', and the agreement was for him to 'cede, renounce, transfer' into the hands of his brother-in-law, Ravelli, 'the full direction and administration of the entire substance of the family,' so that he might become 'fully free of debt.'

As for Francis Louis, to care for him and to handle his monthly debts, he accepted a kind of monthly allotment, keeping however, under his own independent administration, a certain aspect of the state, which he rented. It was precisely this fund that gave him the occasion to go against his early agreements, falling once more into debt. As a result, on August 17, 1792, he was forced to hand everything over entirely to the administrator, and to sign a promise that for the future 'he would not

³⁵ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 308-359.

interfere in any account, either in those goods, or in any others, recognizing the great inconvenience that he had heaped upon his brother-in-law, Ravelli, beseeching him to continue on in his loving assistance.³⁶

With the passing of Mr. Ravelli, Francis Louis' own brother, the Notary, Anthony, took over the reins of the administration of the family property. He, however, by 1800, realized that little by little the family substance was drying up, and so he resigned from the administration. The very poor administration of Mr. Francis Louis Bertoni was not certainly the only reason for the disaccord that was deepening between him and his wife. He was an impulsive and contradictory character, and always wanted to appear as right, even beyond the limits of reality. From the very beginning of their relationship, he very poorly supported those principal traits of his wife, Brunora, her rectitude and profound good sense. It is easy to imagine that suffering that would have been produced by this most blameworthy conduct of his Father, in the extremely sensitive heart of young Gaspar. This tragic tension, rather than lessening with the passing of the years, only increased. Throughout his childhood years and into early manhood, Gaspar experienced the afflicting weight of this Cross. But, even this trial young Bertoni would learn how to make it a rung on the ladder to ascend more gingerly toward God.

2. A Seminarian at Home

The information that refers to Gaspar's life as a Seminarian is very limited. What little we have, though, is sufficient to have us understand with what spirit his preparation for the Priesthood was animated. He completed with praise and real profits his two-year philosophy course. In November of 1795, young Gaspar began to frequent the first year of Theology in the local seminary.

Except for the annual period of the Course of the Spiritual Exercises, as a cleric young Gaspar was never a boarding student in the Seminary, but he continued to live at home with his family, under the surveillance of the Pastor.³⁷ The rigid demands of the new life he had embraced would not have imposed on young Gaspar any radical transformation, but only a more intense dedication to his spiritual perfection and to an increased ardor in attending to his studies.

At the beginning of the second year of Theology, precisely on December 31, 1796, in the Seminary Chapel, Gaspar was vested with the clerical garb, thus officially entering into the sacred militia, realizing the formidable responsibilities he was assuming.³⁸ On January 6, 1797, in the Chapel of the Bishop's Residence he received First Tonsure from the hands of Bishop John Andrew Avogradro. On Saturday April 1st and on Sunday, June 11th of the same year, he received the Four Minor Orders from the same Bishop.

³⁶ Stigmatine Archives. Verona. Bertoni Family Folder - SA, Doc.6, p.25.

³⁷ The situation, rather frequent in those times, of seminarians living in their families, was considered and regulated by special norms that emanated in its time, by Benedict XIV. cf. *Enchiridion Clericorum*, Vatican Polyglot Press 1938, pp. 109-113, CIV, nn. 3-8.

³⁸ Ordinary Process. P. 389.

In his theology course, he has as his teacher, Fr. Lazzarus Righi. For Moral Theology, he had Fr. Nicholas Galvani and for Canon Law, Fr. Michaelangelo Bellini. To be able to say with some accuracy just what was the commitment and the profit made by young Bertoni in his study of the theological disciplines, there has come down to us the witness of Fr. Camillus Cesar Bresciani: 'For young Bertoni there could only be one classification: *excellent in everything!*'³⁹

From these seminary years of theologian Bertoni, his class notes have come down to us. These remain precious documents of a depth of intelligence that is both surprising, and at the same time, admirable. These add up to two large volumes, of more than 400 pages each. These are the notes he took in his Dogma Course taught by Fr. Righi: elegant Latin, very neat penmanship with each letter carefully formed, and quite uniform throughout. They seem to indicate in the copyist the practiced genius of a Benedictine Monk.⁴⁰

Entire pages can be read and one will not find a single correction, or the least shadow of a change of thought. As the seal of the first volume, there are the initials of this motto: *Praise to God Always!* In the second volume, these initials are found at the top of every page, serving as a perennial reminder of a real committed program learned in the Ignatian School taught him by Fr. Fortis.

With like diligence, young Bertoni has also transcribed the daily lessons of Fr. Bellini, entitled: *Canonical Instructions*. In Moral Theology, the seminarian Bertoni studied the *Compendium* of Fr. Gabriel Aynoine, SJ, explained to him and taught by Fr. Nicholas Galvani.

Not a slave to following just the matters that were taught, Gaspar also found himself powerfully drawn by the light of truth, and he completed, integrated his theological formation with his own personal study. During his years in theology, he read and studied with the notes offered by Sylvius the entire *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas. To use the imaginative expression of Fr. Brasciani, he was '...not as a beam that touched upon the pages and glided over them, but much more

³⁹ SA, Doc. 4, p. 8, f., nn. 1-4.

⁴⁰ib., Doc. 21, p. 204. **NB: Translator's note:** Fr. Gaspar's penchant for copying the precise words of others is noted elsewhere – and is quite evident in his *Original Constitutions* - where the large majority of texts are copied from Suarez' commentary on St. Ignatius' rule. Both St. Augustine were quoted there showing their support of copying other people's words about Godly matters. St. Anthony of Padua, however, has a different view:

... *The Apostles spoke as the Holy Spirit gave them utterance. Blessed is he who speaks under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and not as his own spirit suggests. There are some who speak from their own spirit: they pilfer the words of others and pass them off as their own, taking the credit to themselves. It is of these and others like them that the Lord speaks in Jeremiah: 'Behold, I am against the prophet who steal my words from another ... [cf. 2nd reading for June 13th, Liturgy of the Hours. Sermon of the Saint. I, 226.]*

St. Gaspar's inspiration in his copying was to make it his own [cf. Fr. Stofella Introduction to the Spiritual Exercises by St. Gaspar.]

like a bee who sucked deeply from its wisdom, and then consumed his work in his own heart.⁴¹

When he would be ordained a priest, he would have already reached his third reading of that incomparable work. He thus learned not only how to manage it in a professorial manner, but to use it to shape his basic *mind set* very often succeeding even in citing the Angelic Doctor's specific question, article and not rarely, even St. Thomas' very words, when he would be consulted on some of the more sublime theological matters.⁴²

No less than in his studies, Fr. Bertoni made progress in his life of virtue⁴³. The above-cited Mark Marchi thus described his old seminary companion of his time in theology years later: '... he was a man of very much prayer, great penance, frequent vigils... and he was joyful and full of jokes in conversation ...'⁴⁴

As he did not live regularly at the Seminary, as a Seminarian Gaspar remained assigned to help in St. Paul's parish. He was always the first in Church in the morning, and everything would be ordered and with great care in preparing for the celebration of Mass, and in serving the Mass. He would likewise assist at the other devout acts, and was most exact in the ceremonies, without any shadow of ever being bored. He would occupy each interval of time in prayer, either meditating in the Choir, or with some spiritual reading book in his hand. Among his favorites would certainly be *The Imitation of Christ*, and *The Spiritual Combat*, this later by Fr. Lawrence Scupoli.

His was a musical soul and he cultivated Gregorian chant⁴⁵ with a genuine passion, and he was able to serve as maestro for the services in Church. He sang

⁴¹ Manoscritti Bertoni, Folder 1. SA, IV, p. 7, Intr.

⁴² SA, Doc. 20, p. 182; Doc. 26, pp. 283, ff.

⁴³ **Translator's Note:** *progress* became the characteristic of his *Original Constitutions* - the entire Part IV is dedicated to *De Progressu – Suiipsius – In Doctrinis Ecclesiasticis*:

FOURTH PART: ON-GOING PROGRESS [## 47-68]

Chapter 1: Spiritual Development [## 47-48]

Chapter 2: Progress in Ecclesiastical Studies [## 49-50]

Chapter 3: The Series of Disciplines to be studied [## 51-53]

Chapter 4: Those Studies which can assist and embellish Theology [## 54-55]

Chapter 5: The Distribution of Studies [## 56-58]

Chapter 6: The Means by which Studies are to be promoted [## 59-68]

⁴⁴ SA, Doc. 20, p. 117.

⁴⁵ It is interesting to read in this connection what the saint has left in his *Original Constitutions*:
Part III, Chapter 3

The Divine Office and the Celebration of Masses

45. All the clerics and also lay brothers who have good voices, **will learn ecclesiastical music, but not figured chant.** However, the Deacons and Priests will abstain altogether from such study, so that they might be **the more committed to the deepening of their knowledge, and the exercise of the ministry of preaching.**

quite well, and the inspired tones of the Gregorian melodies found in his beautiful baritone voice the appropriate interpretation, that moved others to devotion.⁴⁶

To sum up his Seminary years, there had never been seen a more diligent cleric, one who was more zealous, more concerned and devout than he. No one who burned more with love for God and more loving of the poor and down-trodden youth⁴⁷.

3. Catechist

The youth: this was the field of the apostolate toward which, from the time he was a young seminarian, he showed particularly his aptitude and inclination. His qualities as an educator did not escape the attention of the expert Fr. Girardi, the Pastor, who entrusted to him quite soon the youth of the Parish, so that he might assist in preparing them for the Sacrament of Penance. And young Gaspar attended to this ministry with singular diligence and commitment. He knew almost instinctively how to deal with the young.

He possessed that secret of knowing how to interest them in the most arduous truths of the faith, presenting them with the immediacy of his language that was simple and unsophisticated, rich with an emotional charge, capable of capturing the imagination and of moving the hearts of his little listeners.

When Fr. Girardi gave young Bertoni the charge of instructing the youngsters for their First Confession, he also gave him the order to write out the lessons that he would give them. Very submissive, as always, young Bertoni wrote out the brief course in a catechetical form, with questions and answers, with great care and very neat hand-writing. We still have the possibility of reading this very early composition in his own hand that has come down to us, to get some insight into the personal character of the Saint, in that time he was preparing himself for the priesthood. His work bears this title:

INSTRUCTION ON THE MANNER OF WORTHILY RECEIVING THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION, OR PENANCE, FOR THE YOUTH, COMPOSED BY ME, GASPAR BERTONI, ACOLYTE AT ST. PAUL'S CHURCH IN CAMPO MARZIO, VERONA, IN THE YEAR 1798.

We cannot resist the temptation to cull some reflections from here and there of his work and to present some idea of this document that strikes one as so indicative of his future. This is his short Introduction:

3: You know there is a God ... first, then, let us pray to Him, and let us say an 'Our Father'... God is here present: let there, then, be silence and fear. I do not want to hear one word. Whoever speaks will have his punishment from God and from me. Let no one yearn for prizes. He will be rewarded who will accuse those who would dare to speak. The prizes will be for him who will keep great silence and respect.

⁴⁶ SA, Doc. 26, p.320.

⁴⁷ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 323, ff.

But, you are already smart children, is not that so? etc. . so, I will give prizes to all of you. I will tell you some stories ⁴⁸ and I will make you happy...

There follows then a careful summary on the Unity and Trinity of God, on the Incarnation, the Passion of Jesus, on the Necessity and the Effects of Baptism, and thus he introduces his treatment of the Sacrament of Penance:

... And if after Baptism we commit sins, what do we do? Do we return to receive Baptism again? Baptism is only received one time. But, therefore, if we have sinned, what do we do so that God will forgive the sins, and to obtain remission? What do we do? ⁴⁹

16: Ask good men and Christians. They say that if they fall into sin, to obtain remission, they go to confession. But, how does one make a good confession? Ask good Christians how they do it. They respond: we 1. make an examen. 2. have sorrow. 3. make a purpose of amendment. 4. we confess our sins to the Confessor. 5. we perform the penance imposed on us by the Confessor. So, we too: 1. make, etc.

Five things, therefore, are enumerated to make a good confession: 1. examen. 2. sorrow. 3. purpose of amendment. 4. confess everything to the Confessor. 5. do the Penance imposed by the Confessor.

- How many things are needed for a good Confession?
- Five.
- What are they?
- 1., etc.
- Why do we confess?
- To obtain the remission of sins committed after Baptism.

17: A son has offered a grave insult to his father. The Father, in anger, says: 'I hope I never see you again: I do not want you at table with me any more: you are to leave this house: stay in your room, and I will give you a little bread, and water, and nothing more.'

We have committed sins. God, Who is our Father [because He made us and in Baptism we became his children] says in anger that He does not want us any more with Him: that He no longer recognizes us as sons: that Hell is destined for us. We

⁴⁸ Fr. Bertoni customarily enlivened his Catechetical Instructions with episodes taken from Church History. [cf. *De Sacramentis* with several others in the same work. In this Instruction, however the written indications of examples are missing. It is supposed that they were inserted in the oral explanation].

⁴⁹ CAP 252. [The references are from the *Catechismus ad Parrochos*, [CAP] - they refer to the 1920 edition, Romae, ex officina typographica Senatus - Joannis Bardi].

want to avoid hell, and we want Him to pardon us. What must we do? That which a son does, if he wants his father to pardon him.

And going on further, the young Seminarian offers the effective example of a son who has gravely disgusted his father, and then goes on to the most minute and spontaneous applications on the Sacrament of Divine Mercy. Already as a good pedagogue, understood quite well that certain concepts could not enter into the little heads of his listeners other than through the efficacy of a choice example chosen in this regard. A good example would prove to be the essential part, the integral part of the Sacrament of Penance. If this matter were treated scholastically, in the best of cases, it would only overwhelm the little listeners. When young Bertoni was explaining the matter, there was not this danger:

... Observe a man: without a head, without a neck, without a chest, he could not live; but, a man can live without hair, without a finger, without teeth. One's head, however, is said to be a substantial part of a man; his hair is only an integrating part.

The image here is one of some clarity, and was ably applied to what in the Sacrament of Confession is essential [sorrow, proposal of amendment, accusation of one's serious sins], and to integrate them [accusation of venial sins and satisfaction].

He also then offered a simple and even touching bit of advice regarding prayer and at the same time, the catechist suggests to his little friends, before presenting himself to the Priest for the Sacrament of Divine Pardon:

67:- Why, when we have fallen into mortal sin, must we have sorrow and make a purpose of amendment?

- 1. Because we do not know if we will have time to go to confession.
2. Because not to repent is to show a lack of care for the friendship of the Lord.
3. So as not to fall into other and greater sins.

Therefore, after having made an act of sorrow for my sins, and I have considered how evil sin is, how much it displeases the Lord, I will speak thus: - 'O Lord, my sins displease Thee, Thou art good: it will no longer be true that I will offend Thee. I wish to die before I offend Thee again. For this I will abandon that companion, and I will do all that the Confessor suggests to me. And from now on, I want to serve Thee and I want to continue until death. Assist me in my good purposes and holy resolutions And thou, O Mary, accept me under thy protection and defend me from my enemies. O Guardian Angel and all the saints of Paradise, in particular, though, saint with my name, etc., intercede for me with God and help me to begin a new life, etc.'

This is a style of language that comes up out of the soul of the one speaking, and goes directly to the heart to the listener. It would be impossible to resist this sincerity. At the end of his effort, young Gaspar wrote these words:

[St. Gaspar Bertoni's Personal Conclusion]

133: Having undertaken this little work for the Glory of God, and for the edification of my brothers, by the command of him who is over me, during the Third Year of my Dogmatic-Moral Theological Course, I have tried with divine grace, and not without much of my own effort and much study, to compile this in the manner that it seemed to me as most helpful for the instruction of children. I have chosen, therefore, the most simple, most useful, most natural method, to communicate my thoughts and to introduce them into the minds of others clear and distinct ideas, that is the method of analysis. Experience has confirmed by judgment. I believe that through the grace of God, I have reaped even greater fruit than that which I had hoped, while planting the seeds.⁵⁰

We have delayed a bit to illustrate here his efforts **at teaching Catechism** as a young Seminarian, signaling thus the beginnings of an apostolate to which he would dedicate himself with particular love and profit also as a Priest. The teaching of Christian Doctrine, particularly to the young and unlettered, to the ordinary, people was upper-most in the heart of the Stigmatine Founder. He includes it repeatedly, by name, in the Program of the Apostolate that he will draw up for his Community, all the way from Novitiate to those who would assume the major responsibilities in the future Community.⁵¹

⁵⁰ SA, Doc. 35, p. 653.

⁵¹ SA, Doc. 4, p. 9: *Rudimenta Fidei et morum praesertim pueris et rudibus explanare in oratoriis, in catechismis publicis et privatis.* cf. Pars IX:

NINTH PART: THE GRADE OF THE 'PROFESSED' [## 158- 186]

Chapter 1: The 'Profession' [## 158-160]

Chapter 2: The Means by which the Institute promotes the Salvation of Others [## 161-164]

Chapter 3: The Instruction of Children and Youth [## 165-167]

Chapter 4: The Means to be employed developing Morality in the Young [## 168-174]

Chapter 5: The Means employed for the Academic Progress of the Youth [## 175-181]

Chapter 6: The Duties of the 'Professed' [## 182-184]

Chapter 7: The Principal Purpose of the 'Professed' [## 185-186]

NB: Translator's Note: St. Gaspar would codify his zeal for teaching Catechism making of it one of the central aspects of the Stigmatine Apostolic Mission for all the members of the Community, in his *Original Constitutions* :

CATECHISM/ CATECHETICS [cf. the END of the Congregation]

- | | |
|---|----|
| - matter of Stigmatine study | 55 |
| - Bellarmine's to be learned by heart | 51 |
| - beginning of Stigmatine life of study | 51 |
| - taught by Novices to children | 37 |

4. Final Stages

In this most exemplary Seminarian of St. Paul's in Campo Marzio, the Superiors of the Seminary placed their most well-founded hopes with almost utmost assurance. During the annual retreat, young Bertoni was pointed out for the admiration and proposed as a model for the other young men, candidates for the Altar, even in the presence of Gaspar. He would indeed suffer from that innate sense of embarrassment that he would experience as do all those who are profoundly humble when they hear themselves praised.

On March 9, 1799 [that Saturday of Lent when the Antiphon at the *Introit* of the Mass, which began with the Latin, *Sitientes*] in the Cathedral of Verona, Gaspar received the [at that time] Major Order of Sub-deacon, during which ceremony he bound himself indissolubly to the Lord with his solemn vow perpetual chastity.⁵² Toward the middle of his Fourth Year of Theology, 'Don' Gaspar was promoted to the Diaconate – precisely on April 12, 1800. Once again, the ordaining Prelate was Bishop Avogadro in his own Chapel.⁵³

It is really too bad that of this important period in the life of St. Gaspar there is no spiritual note of his that has come down to us, to reveal to us the sentiments and the proposals with which he was preparing himself for the Priesthood. However, there is a legal document, dated that April 28, 1800, that gives us an accurate glimpse into the tormented family situation he was suffering. To better understand this document, let us recall here that in the first months of 1800, the Notary, Anthony Mary Bertoni, resigned back into the hands of his brother, Francis Louis, the administration of the family goods, after having saved them from near ruin, with which the previous very poor handling of the estate by this same brother had very foolishly reduced them.

It was probably the Saint's Mother who, at the beginning of her husband's once more taking over the accounts of the family estate, she made sure of some future for herself and for her son, by protecting their legitimate rights in the estate.⁵⁴ The preceding acts of administration of Francis Louis, justified in spades the fears of Lady Brunora and her concern was simply a legitimate act of necessary prudence. This brings us now to the reading of the Document. It was called a 'Sacred Agreement' and its intent was to distribute annually between Father, Mother and the one son, the rights, duties, both active and passive, with regard to about one third of the estate for

- taught in our schools	170			
- some c. required in Novitiate	37			
- weekly		170		
- sublime Stigmatine ministry	72	163	165	182
- recited and studied		37	51	170
- Roman, matter of special study	51			

⁵² SA, Doc. 4, p. 9.

⁵³ SA, Doc. 4, pp. 9, ff.

⁵⁴ The annual family income of these monies as it seemed on March 24, 1800, was carefully drawn up regarding the expenses, in 474 ducats, then in round figures, 3 thrones, and 5 coins. [cf. Stofella, l.c., p.142].

each. It is already a preconceived fact of reality and it is attested to that the two partners in this agreement, were no longer living together. The situation of the young Deacon, Gaspar Bertoni, with respect to this agreement drawn up between his parents, is explained to us by the words that are found near the end:

...THE PRESENT DOCUMENT WILL REMAIN ALSO REGARDING THE SAID SON, FATHER GASPAR, UNDER-SIGNED SOLELY TO MANIFEST HIS FILIAL RESIGNATION TO THE WISHES OF HIS RESPECTIVE PARENTS ...

The Document then closes with a note in which one part [including the Mother and the son] defend themselves against the un-willed surprises that could be provoked by the other contract part, i.e., the Father. The Document reads:

...THE DEBTS, ALL INCURRED BEFORE THIS PRESENT MEETING, AND WHICH HAVE NOT BEEN DESCRIBED IN THIS BALANCE, AND WHICH THE PARTIES MIGHT INCUR, WILL BE PAID BY EACH OF THE PARTIES THAT INCURS THEM...⁵⁵

Thus, while the separation of husband and wife remained, regarding their living together, the 'sacred agreement' was meant to establish between the Bertoni spouses a certain convention. While it could not restore what the document was meant to do, viz., to bring harmony and peace, there was explicitly manifested the common proposal 'to remove for the future, all bitterness.' It would be in this unhappy family climate that the Deacon, Gaspar Bertoni, would find himself on the vigil of his ordination to the Priesthood.

5. The Stormy Farewell to the Century

Even more tempestuous was the political and religious climate of the last 5 years, during which Gaspar Bertoni prepared for the priesthood. To describe this climate, even very briefly, it would seem better to shed some light on to what extent the very disturbed situation in which those battle-scarred years were for Christianity as a whole, and how they affected young Gaspar. It was precisely in this five year period that he had reached the decision, with the thrust of his generous and pure soul, to commit himself to the service of God and of the Church.

The years between 1796-1800, with their political and military upheavals, had, as would be self-evident, certain echoes within the City of the late Cangrande of the Scala. The first emissaries of revolutionary France, preceded by the editorial propaganda of the new ideas, seem not to have disturbed very much the peaceful citizens of Verona. The situation, at least in part, changed, though, when, with the scope of trying to overcome Austria, the troops of the Revolution reversed themselves and came toward Italy, and the unarmed neutrality of the Venetian Republic offered the Veronese territory to the forays of the armies in conflict.

The troops of Bonaparte entered Verona on June 1, 1796. They had not forgotten the hospitality that the Scaligeran city from May of 1894, had conceded to the Count of Provence and of Lille, who in June 1795, precisely in Verona, assumed

⁵⁵ Archives at the Stimmate. The Bertoni Family Folder.

the name and title of King Louis the 18th. The welcome of the Veronese to the un-uniformed soldiers of the 'General Citizenry' was a rather ragged joy.

In return, the thieveries of the occupying troops, hungry and poorly clad, the economic burdens imposed by the French representatives on the city and Province, exasperated the minds of the already poor citizens to such an extent that in the April of the following year, the popular indignation exploded in the dramatic episode, known now as the Veronese Easter [April 17-24, 1797].

This unexpected upheaval was repressed in a most bloody manner and a more methodical despoilment. The winged eagle in Piazza Erbe was knocked down. In Piazza Bra, there was planted on May 7, 1797, the First Tree of Freedom. In the attractive shade of those surroundings, with its inebriating perfume of novelty, also the un-uniformed Verona organized itself into a 'democratic government', clubs and rooms of instruction, the societies of patriots.

And the Church suffered persecution. Bishop J. Andrew Avogadro, who from 1789 had ruled the illustrious Diocese of St. Zeno, was the first target of the French wrath. He was made a prisoner with 46 other notables, and just by sheer accident he was not among the four put to death. After the exchange of Campoformio [October 29, 1797], Verona with the Venetian States, on January 21, 1798, passed under the dominion of Austria. The right thinkers expressed their approval with a collective sigh of relief.

In the following year, from those days that would always be remembered in Verona and Magnano [March 26 - April 5], the Austrian-Russian authorities began their expulsion of all the French forces from almost all the Italian territories. However, in June 1800, with the battle of Marengo, once again the tide turned in Bonaparte's favor.

While all this was going on, other events, with even more grave consequences for the entire Christian world, beyond doubt echoed sadly in the sensitive heart of young Bertoni. Two names suffice to summarize the Calvary of the Church as the 18th century passed: Napoleon and Pius VI. The unworthy policies of the Directory with regard to the Roman Pontiff, in February of 1798, culminated in the proclamation of the Roman Republic which reduced Pius VI to a bitter exile. On August 26, 1799, worn out by physical and moral sufferings, Pius VI died in Valencia, in France, a prisoner of the state of the Republic, which was born from the great Revolution.

Young Bertoni, in the last two years of his preparation for the priesthood experienced in his soul the sorrowful passion of the meek Pius VI, the Passion of the persecuted Church. Following another six months of the Roman See being vacant, in the very difficult conclave held at Venice, Gregory Louis Barnabas Chiaramonti was elected on May 14, 1800, and he took the name of Pius VII. This sent a clear refutation to the enemies of the Church who had wanted the late Pontiff, Pius VI, dead.

For the young Deacon, Gaspar Bertoni, not yet 23 years of age, he had already received from His Holiness, Pius VII [when the newly - Elected was at Venice] the

necessary dispensations of age, in order to receive his priestly ordination in July⁵⁶. His first biographer notes here that the initiative of this dispensation was all the idea of his Superiors and that young Bertoni did not urge the process on in any way. This was seen to be due to his deep interior humility, in that he thought of himself as unprepared for this great step.⁵⁷

As it turned out, the ordination could not be held in July because under threat of the French troops chasing him away, Bishop Avogadro was cut off from the city. The solemn ceremony was put off to more tranquil times.

6. His First Sermon

June 8, 1800 was a special date in Gaspar Bertoni's life. On that day, in fact, the First Sunday of June, [and the third set aside in preparation for the celebration of the Feast of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, the Patron of Youth], in surplice with his deacon's stole placed cross wise over one shoulder, for the first time, Deacon Gaspar ascended the pulpit in the Parish Church of St. Paul's to deliver his first public sermon.

Humility in the example of St. Aloysius was the theme on which the young Deacon preached to his co-parishioners which lasted better than one half hour. The expectancy for this event was great and the end result was not disappointing. Don Gaspar spent a long time thinking this sermon over, and yet in that sermon he drew deeply upon his own inner resources, in treating in a magisterial manner that virtue of humility which his contemporaries would see in him as the special characteristic of the spirituality of the Saint.

In the Introduction, he expresses his moving surprise that he is experiencing for the first time the ministry of the Word of God. And then, as though presenting his card of introduction to his listeners, he exclaims:

... Take your eyes from me most prideful nothing, because I am a very grave sinner' turn them rather on that young Saint, most innocent, because most humble ...

And his sermon unfolds in a lively manner and well ordered through his prepared points, very rich in biblical and patristic phrases which inculcate effectively the necessity and usefulness of humility, in the light of the examples of S. Gonzaga. In his conclusion, he addresses himself directly to the Saint in his final invocation:

... This earth is indeed ready to receive authentic humility, but is incapable of producing it. This, o Aloysius saint, obtain it for us ...

The echo of the impressions that Deacon Bertoni would have made on his audience with his first Sermon has not come down to us. However, the emotional

⁵⁶ SA, Doc. 4, p. 10, n. 7, intr.

⁵⁷ SA, Doc. 26, p. 330.

response of Fr. Girardi, the Pastor, we can almost imagine. For years, he had often referred to Deacon Gaspar as his St. Aloysius.⁵⁸

7. A Priest Forever

On September 20, 1800, the Saturday of Ember Week, Bishop Avogadro finally could carry out in his Cathedral Church the annual ordination of new priests, and among these was Gaspar Bertoni. There is no one who can tell us the sentiments that flooded Don Gaspar's heart while he was prostrate on the floor of the magnificent Veronese temple as he awaited the Spirit of God to transform him into a new creature, a Priest of the Most High, dispenser of the Divine Mercies for the redemption and salvation of his brothers and sisters. In the sincerity heart, he looked upon himself as *a most proud nothing*, and *a most grave sinner*.

On September 24, the Festivity of Our Lady of Ransom, the newly ordained Priest celebrated his First Mass. The delaying for a few days the celebration of one's First Holy Sacrifice was a frequent custom among the newly ordained of that time. He did not offer this in his Parish Church of St. Paul's in Campo Marzio, which would have had the honor of these first offerings. Rather, the scene of his First Mass was the little family country Chapel of the Nativity of Mary, at Giara of Illasi. This beautiful little Chapel still stands: it is an oasis of the spirit in this serene peace of the fields.

The initiative for this choice was due certainly to the Saint's father, who lived there, just a few paces away, in the village of Domeggiano. In the city, he would have found too much difficulty, as by now he was totally estranged from it. Present at this First Mass, along -side or a little distant from Mr. Francis Louis, was also her who for years had been living only for this day, his Mother Brunora.

A very strange custom was in use that day, in that there was assigned to a layman the task of delivering the discourse for the occasion. This great honor fell to his maternal Uncle, Joseph Scudellini, who succeeded in meeting this challenge with a certain unbridled skill, especially since, with all probability, his sole fatigue in this area would be keeping up with current events.

He recalled to mind the late Fr. James Bertoni. He saw in Mr. Francis Louis, the father of the new Priest, the fidelity of Abraham. He noted in Lady Brunora, a new Anna. And Fr. Gaspar himself appeared as a new Isaac, or a new Samuel⁵⁹. Since we are treating of an orator called upon just for this occasion, one who was a shop keeper, he did not do badly.

But what passed on that solemn occasion between the newly ordained Priest and the Eucharistic Jesus, made present for the first time in his trembling hands, no one can tell us anything about that. Perhaps one of those present might have thought that the Saints would offer their First Mass as Fr. Gaspar did.

⁵⁸ SA, Doc. 21, p. 204.

⁵⁹ Congratulatory Message of Joseph Scudellini. cf. the Manuscripts in the Archives at the Stimate. Verona.

A few steps distant from thus rustic little temple, there spread out the well ordered fields of corn, with its mature cobs ready for the plucking. At the edges of this, all curved downward by the weight of the most sweet fruit ... Also nature seemed to be there to enrich these sublime statements of the Master Himself: I am the vine, you are the branches ... I have chosen you from the world that you might go, and bear fruit and that your fruit might remain ... [Jn 15:5, 16].



Chapter 3

Two Years of Waiting

1800-1802

1. The Fourteenth Parish Assistant

One could easily expect that the Saint, having reached the goal toward which he had always aimed with his heart, both yearning and yet trembling at the same time, that he would have thrown himself boldly into that great ministry, in order to realize the dream that for such along time was at the high point of his thought: the salvation of souls. Instead, for the whole first year of his priesthood, and for a good part of the second⁶⁰, there was noted in him a fact that was most singular. We want to point out his rather sought for moderation in giving himself over to the external activity of the sacred ministry.

It was not that Fr. Gaspar was inactive. With diligence and fervor he carried out the offices of priestly piety, accepting always in a good spirit those minor ministries which were offered to him by his Pastor. Early each morning, the first to appear in church was always Fr. Gaspar. He celebrated at the indicated hour set for the best interests of the faithful. He was also disposed to supply at any hour if the assigned celebrant was absent.

On Sunday's, provided he did not have other ministries that would have impeded him, he would put on his surplice, and would remain the entire morning recollected in devout prayer, and in contemplation in the choir, with his stole over his arm, always ready to distribute Holy Communion.

Then, when he would ascend into the Pulpit of his Church, in order to deliver to the faithful either his Sunday sermons, or that for some feast day, the young priest seemed to grow in size. From the pulpit he revealed to his listeners, in admiration and often deeply moved, the secret treasures of his soul. All felt that in Fr. Bertoni he

⁶⁰ NB: Translator's Note: Fr. Bertoni codified two more years of study once one's regular curriculum was completed, to review the Fathers of the Church and other aspects of learning, in his *Original Constitutions*:

THIRD PART THE SECOND PROBATION

Chapter I

The Time after Novitiate

40. Those who are still to apply themselves to the required studies, must first become well versed in the Humanities and in the study of languages for at least two years.

Then, they will learn the philosophical disciplines over a three year course.

Afterwards, Scholastic Theology will be taught to them for four years.

Lastly, **two or three more years are granted to them for the private study of the Fathers and for reviewing the more serious areas of study.**

was a priest different from the others. He had a most pleasing style, solidity of doctrine, a real emotional warmth of his soul on fire with God, realizing that he had as a divine trust, the faithful listening to him: it is all this which contributed in him to conquer the hearts of his listeners and to shake up their consciences. Fr. Gaspar manifested no haste in thrusting himself and becoming unsettled in pastoral activity.⁶¹

2. Sacred Studies

As soon as he was ordained, Fr. Bertoni accentuated his dedication to study with the ardor of a soul a thirst for God, with the tenacity worthy of an authentic Benedictine monk. This spirit of his, in addition to the immense and always very neat material that he gathered on the most varied areas of reflection, both sacred and profane, remains documented for us in a manuscript of a rather small format, where in 136 pages the Saint extends a minute report on the work by Mabillon, with the title: *treatise on Monastic Studies*⁶². Among other items, he wrote:

... The Monasteries were not instituted so that they might become academies of sciences, but of virtues: the sciences were cultivated in so far as they could assist religious perfection ...⁶³

⁶¹ J. Stofella, *Il Venerabile Gaspar Bertoni*. p. 47.

⁶² Manuscripts of Fr. Bertoni, Folder 93. Fr. Bertoni quotes two distinct editions of this work of the French Benedictine: the 2nd one was published at Venice in 1729, by Andrew Poleti; and there was a new one in 1745 also at Venice, by the same editor. We really do not know when the Founder wrote out his reflections, as it certainly was of a precious help in directing the studies of his spiritual sons at the Stimmate.

NB: Translator's Note: as has been seen, this is the way St. Gaspar treated the matter in his *Original Constitutions*:

FOURTH PART **ON-GOING PROGRESS** [## 47-68]

- Chapter 1:** Spiritual Development [## 47-48]
- Chapter 2:** Progress in Ecclesiastical Studies [## 49-50]
- Chapter 3:** The Series of Disciplines to be studied [## 51-53]
- Chapter 4:** Those Studies which can assist and embellish Theology [## 54-55]
- Chapter 5:** The Distribution of Studies [## 56-58]
- Chapter 6:** The Means by which Studies are to be promoted [## 59-68]

⁶³ **NB: Translator's Note:** this ideal is often alluded to in his *Original Constitutions* :

66. It will be up to the Superiors to see to it that neither the love for **piety** will be cooled through the fervor of **studies**, nor that through any excess of piety, will the necessary studies be impeded.
127. They will also keep that order so that they do not prefer **knowledge** over the **spiritual exercises** of prayer and meditation, spiritual reading and the required examinations of conscience, and other similar exercises. Neither by all means should they place studies ahead of religious discipline or the orders of Superiors. They should always be prepared to interrupt them immediately, even totally, at the hint of the Superiors, they should be willing to give up studies altogether already undertaken, according to that line in the Psalm: '*Good and discipline and knowledge teach me*' [cf. Ps 118:66].

This is the way it is. For Fr. Gaspar, too, to study was the same as placing oneself in a position of listening and to perceive the divine voice which he would then communicate to his brothers and sisters athirst for the Word of Eternal Life. In an Instruction once to Priests on the necessity of study, he would repeat later the expressive phrase attributed to St. Augustine:

... Whoever would yearn to remain always with God should pray and read frequently; in fact, when we pray, we speak with God; when we read it is God Who speaks to us...⁶⁴

This was his own lived experience. In the first years of his priesthood, in the study of sacred Scripture that he pursued to the extent of developing a truly biblical manner of speaking, he joined that of the Fathers of the Church. It seems that St. John Chrysostom, St. Augustine and St. Gregory the Great were his favorites.

Among the masters of the ascetical life, he read profoundly St. Ignatius of Loyola, Dom Scupoli, Rodriguez and St. Francis de Sales who provided the fonts from which he nourished his spirituality from the very beginning.

There are about 40 of his early Parish Sermons which happily have come down to us. These are all written out with his well known diligence, and they echo this very busy phase of his life which we will call that of his path to perfection. We will cite from them, because as is true of all of his writings, they illumine with a reflexive light his great priestly soul. We are sure that those inflamed and touching expressions proceed from a sincere heart, quite far removed from those artificial expressions and those contorted twists of phraseology from the pens of those who sell words. In St. Gaspar, every gesture, every word, remained the gesture, the thought the word of an interior man, totally committed to God.

3. Echoes of his Soul

Every soul is much like the 'Holy House of Loreto', a 'Temple of God'. This is his theme of a sermon delivered in December 1801. And right away we have the witness that this is but an interior reflection which he communicates to his audience:

EIGHTH PART ON THE PROMOTION OF THE STUDENTS

Chapter 1 On the Final Formation after the Completion of Studies

152. Once their studies have been completed, the students will be proven still for another year, both in the exercises of devotion and humility, as well as in the ministries of the Congregation. This is in view of rekindling some fervor for virtue, which could have grown tepid because of literary studies.

⁶⁴ Bertoni Manuscripts. Folder n. 17. Augustine. Sermon 112, *On Times*.

...I do not know what is the source of a holy thought which has formed in my mind, and which has remained there always constantly to have it on hand to communicate it on this day, to this my devout listeners...

This personal experience of his then becomes his Sermon:

... The Spirit of God, making a soul a sharer in His love, sanctifies this soul, and therefore to it, as to His most sweet spouse, He approaches, and dwells within her, works with in here, and finds His delight... What joy to have God within us. The supreme Good that could fill perfectly all our potencies ... free them in our needs, light in our doubts, consolation in our travails, a cooling for our sufferings, repose in our fatigue, our support, our strength, and our peace ... ⁶⁵

Let us take in his teaching, so rich in Paschal Joy, and let us admire his intimate and continuous union with God. On another occasion [in the Autumn of 1801], the young orator declares that he has added absolutely nothing to the commentary of the Gospel passage itself. He entrusts the explanation of the Parable of the darnel and the good grain on the very lips of Jesus Himself, from the Fathers of the Church and the Doctors: 'as these have so sagely interpreted the Gospel.' To preach only the Gospel and the tradition manifests his extraordinary commitment of consultation, of meditation of choice, fidelity and humility! His conclusion, which engrafts the Liturgy of the Word with that of the Eucharist, leads one to understand that even when the mouth should be silent, the heart continues its love song:

... Oh God! In a short while that good master of whom I have spoken to you up until now in the Parable, you will see Him with your own eyes, having descended from heaven on this altar; I will show Him to you in my hands ...Alas, please pray for me; and I will pray for you .. Already I experience within me my heart swelling with the desire for your salvation ...what more can I say? Love God, my brothers and sisters, love God. ... And that peace that surpasses all sense perception, may it guide your hearts and your minds toward Christ Jesus. Amen....! ⁶⁶

Maybe there could be found other expressions capable of chiseling better these same concepts; but it is clear that these simple accents, with which only the saints know how to verbalize, contain and communicate the lived experience of the word.

4. My fellow sinners!

We have heard these enflamed expressions of love for God and his zeal for the faithful who represent the 'good grain.' And what about those who are compared to the darnel, the tares? To those souls saddened by fault the seraphic Orator, in the name of the Merciful Jesus, could only appeal to them: *My fellow sinners!* All understood that this deep sigh poured out from the depths of his soul. In order to be converted, the

⁶⁵ *Pagine di vita cristiana.* Stocchiero. Vicenza 1947, pp. 302, 305, f.

⁶⁶ Bertoni Manuscripts. Folder n. 9.

sinner needs to experience a kind of irresistible nostalgia for heaven. Above all, on the Feast of the Ascension, to which these following lines refer:

516: *PERORATION: And now, sinner, here you are, and all are waiting for your resolution. Yes, all await it. We wait for it impatiently as the desire of all of us, for whom the salvation of your soul is as much in our hearts as our own is. God knows with how much affection, we have begged today for your conversion, and we have not even yet given up the most fervent appeals to obtain it.*

517: *Heaven awaits it, that I see opened up, above your head. Jesus is sitting there at the right hand of God [Ac 7:55]. He is holding between His hands a crown, and He is inviting you to win it with the victory over that passion of yours. I can see all the saints, who are encouraging you onward to come to where they are now...*

521: *O, my God, my Jesus! If this is the way it is, if this is the state of the matter, I cannot longer put it off. The proposal of this soul who hands himself over to you - by the words of a poor sinner such as I am, assisted by your grace - and by the intercession of so many prayers of such a pious and devout audience - have gained on this day even a single happy soul to be added to the squads of those blessed souls, like happy prisoners, conquered by Your grace - they now form the most solemn pomp of Your triumph, following Your glorious Ascension into heaven. If this is the way it is, then, I do not request of You any other consolations for myself, no other comforts in the hardships of my life and my spirit. This is enough for me, joined to the hope with which I trust that my innumerable sins are benignly condoned, I will be together with all of these, my devout bothers and sisters, after these few days, to enjoy your glory forever.⁶⁷*

Will the obstinacy of a brother sinner prove to be invincible? A saint never gives up, and he appeals through his own tears:

612: *...You are even cruel in your own regard. You have become hardened in your perverse resolution to be lost. Even for this, though, I will not cease loving you, nor yearning for your salvation. I will never cease loving you, nor yearning for your salvation. I will never stop weeping over your extreme danger, without ever giving up the hope of winning you over even at the last instant. I will cast myself down before you, to wash your feet with my tears, begging you and appealing to you, to have mercy on your own selves. And if my tears will not accomplish anything in your regard, I will turn to Jesus Himself, to this crucified love.⁶⁸*

⁶⁷ MssB ## 516, ff. Sermon for Ascension, May 14, 1801.

⁶⁸ MssB # 612 – Sermon 9, Most Holy Names of Jesus – the second on this Theme: **January 17, 1802.**

5. In the Gentleness of God

To liberate souls from sin for Fr. Gaspar was only his first step. The ultimate goal was to push them even further, to a much higher level. This is called perfection⁶⁹, holiness. This is presented not only as a conquest that is not only possible, but even easy. Holiness, he maintained, was the natural vocation of every redeemed soul. The passages which follow are taken from St. Gaspar's Sermon entitled **Devotion**, delivered in St. Paul's Parish in Campo Marzio, on April 20, 1801. It is an original commenting on the Gospel Passage for the [Tuesday] Wednesday of Easter. The Risen Master appears to His Disciples, and He brings them peace. The disciples show that they are quite upset, and even a little terrified. Jesus invites them to the out-pouring of His love and the men cower backward, very much afraid. They fear a commitment that would bind them 'to serve Him with greater perfection'. They are afraid of the Devout Life as something that is sad, mortifying and unpleasant. What a deplorable misunderstanding! This is his reflection:

633: *They look upon the devout life as an object of sadness, of anguish and horror. They make quite clear by their very actions, the extent of the errors and deception anyone would be subject to who would care to judge spiritual matters with an earthy eye, even carnal. What means is necessary, then, to straighten them out? Let them just briefly suspend their judgments until I have spoken. And I*

⁶⁹ **NB: Translator's Note:** This is a major ideal of his *Original Constitutions*, as can be seen from the Analytical Index:

PERFECTING [cf. PROGRESS]		
- a work willed by God		185
- of theological virtues		48
- of studies		41
- of literary studies		40
PERFECTION [cf. PROGRESS; UNION]		
- aided by mortification		156
- actions contrary		220
- of priestly ministry		7
- of charity		216
- diminished by contrasts		221
- cf. <i>OBSEQUIUM</i>	7	
- <u>doctrine</u> , 2 nd means for Congregation		89
- inconveniences		253
- instructions on p.		163/3 165
- in assuming clerical state		169
- does not refuse relaxation	253	
- perfect obedience		143
- more p. obedience	142	301
- sought by candidates		26
- <u>spiritual</u> , 1 st means for Congregation		6
- state of perfection of Jesus Christ		271
- Apostles		2

will do my best to have them consider devotion under such an appealing, joyful and lovable aspect that they themselves will hasten avidly to embrace it.

Come here, therefore, all of you, who have formed such a false idea of genuine devotion: come with me while I clarify your view from all deception. And so that we might proceed with some better order, I believe it best not to expose with some contrived order, I believe it is best not to expose to you the naked truth, if first you do not pierce the darkness that perhaps impedes your admiring eye, it is not cleared away.

634: *Devotion, then, according to the image that your senses might draw of it, might seem rather to be a dreary matter, instead of a desirable part of life. It might come across as pallid and pale of visage, severe in its look, horrid in its likeness. It is seen as a reality that thins down the flesh by perpetual fasting; it lacerates the back with heavy scourging, the whip never being taken out of the right hand; it covers under a coarse garment the harsh hair-shirt. It is thought to flee discourteously sweet friendships, and is hostile to every delight, insensible to every pleasure. It is viewed as making every haste to close itself up in total solitude. It is understood as riveting one's knees immovably to the ground, seeming to nourish one solely on tears, and sighs as the only sign of life. Should it ever once in a while allow one to come out into public view, it would only beg for insults, so that it would then return satisfied with shame.*

635: *I know that some perhaps will tacitly find fault with my shrewdly having been excessive in exaggerating an objection, that might bring real harm to my theme. However, such a concern is so far from me that precisely from such a gloomy description, I am planning to draw the strongest argument possible. And what is it, then, that one would want to conclude from such formidable premises? Does this mean that devotion is indeed less attractive? My response will be precisely the contrary.*

In fact, I pose this question: is there lacking to devotion, all covered over in such a severe guise, by devotees and lovers? I see rather to my wonder that every age, both sexes, of every condition in life, every walk of life - witness avid followers seeking devotion. How many have not been seen, and are still being noted among the ranks of generous young people, still in the flower of their lives, so full of hopes - still turn their backs on splendid nuptials, to offer to devotion alone their right hands? In like manner, how many gracious young women put aside all their delights and comforts, do not still make every haste to enclose themselves in solitary cloisters, to make themselves more tranquil companions to devotion?

636: *And how many among the wealthy, who live in great abundance in their state, entirely despoil themselves of it all, and put it all aside, in order to run more freely and agilely along the desired paths, to follow Devotion. How many others declare themselves happy to have exchanged ample honors and the most sublime dignities, for the most hidden and neglected abjection. And lastly, how many have there not been who put down the much sought after scepters of power, and glorious diadems from their foreheads, in order to enroll themselves among the*

faithful servants of Devotion, in order to serve her laws in obedience. These facts, illustrious as they are luminous, are not rare in the world. Such deeds may be attested to in abundance in the memories of so many people, and they surpass beyond measure the stories of all the centuries.

So, it is necessary to conclude that there can be found in devotion a beauty, a sweetness, a wealth, an exultation, a glory that we do not expect to find at first sight. But, the fact is that so many have loved her, and at this beloved sign, they have shown that they prefer devotion to all the beauties, delights, treasures, and honors of this world. And it is fitting to note further that all that very frightening exterior matters nothing in arresting so many fervent lovers from such a harsh pathway in following her.

637: *Right here, then, is the deception. The majority only look at some of the externals of Devotion. Anyone, though, who does this, does not consider the interior consolation in which the authentic servants of God abound, that is all the more sweet as it is all the more secret. This is that hidden manna:which no man knows, but he that receives it... [Apoc 2:17]. This is that perpetual banquet enjoyed by a secure mind in peace of heart [Pr 15:15]. This is that most sweet conversation with uncreated Wisdom from which is excluded all boredom, all bitterness [Ws 8:16]. O, how good is the Lord to those of upright heart, exclaims the Psalmist [Ps 72:1]. And in another text [Ps 30:20]: ...O how great is the multitude of Your sweetness, O Lord, which You have hidden for them that fear You...!*

638: *Now if it is indeed true that among its harsh points, devotion appears nonetheless so beautiful and lovable to anyone who looks at it attentively with a well purged eye, what will happen, then, if we rise above such horrible externals? It could not fail to draw after it, most gently bound, our hearts that are still weak and infirm. The time has come, then, that I should descend to unmask the other deception that is committed in making judgments about Devotion. For one is to define it solely from externals - I would like now to show the other extreme. That would be to try to present what is particular and proper to a few, to make this common and almost necessary for all.*

639: *What a great misconception this might easily be seen if one would put in mind the more exact definition that is proposed with St. Thomas⁷⁰. With him are all the more learned and illustrious masters. They hold that **true devotion essentially consists in a will ready to give oneself to God, and to be dedicated to those matters that pertain the more to His services**. Now, while it is true that God calls all to serve Him, and indeed all can, and it is fitting that all should aspire to be sanctified in their state of life...*

And it is for this sweetness, for this peace and security, for this wealth, deriving from intimate union with God that all are invited to enter into the Devout Life and Serve

⁷⁰St. Thomas Aquinas, II-II, q. 82, a. 1, c.

God in joyful dedication. This is true if each one will only follow one's own unique call. Thus:

... Nonetheless, it is false think that God wishes to be served by all in the same manner. It is necessary to attend to the difference of the states in which all human beings have been constituted by the same Divine Providence.

640: *For this reason, Devotion ought to be practiced in one way by a religious in a cloister, and by a lay person in the heart of the world - and differently by a sacred minister in the offices of his Church than by a father of a family in the government of his own home. God is served one way by a virgin who dedicates herself to God, and a married woman who is also obligated to her husband. Genuine devotion does not disrupt any kind of vocation, for indeed it would not be authentic if it should impede even in part, the duties proper to one's state in life.*

True Devotion equally has wings to fly to heaven, as well as feet to walk on the earth. While it has hands that are continuously in motion, it knows how to repose its heart in God. It has eyes to maintain the vigil, to supervise and to take care of temporal matters. And, at the same time, it has an even more acute vision in the human mind never to lose sight of one's last end. It knows how to enter into counsel with the divine good pleasure in its every action to direct all to His glory.

641: *Devotion endows one with a tongue in order to speak with other human beings. And, at the same time, secretly, it opens up as many other mouths, all of one's internal potencies in order never to cease praising and blessing its God. Devotion enables one to treat with the world and, at the same time, converses in its spirit in the heavens - thus emulating, as it were, those blessed fellow citizens there. By means of love, Devotion draws God to itself and possesses Him in the abundance of peace, and rejoices already here on earth in another paradise.*

642: *Therefore, it is admirable gentleness with which it permeates all actions, giving that unchanging uniformity of spirit. The world can perceive nothing in it that makes it stand out from the ordinary, in the mannerisms, the activities, and the duties proper to the state of life of the devout person. And yet, there is no end to the wonder at being forced to love in Devotion an indescribable singularity and sense of the divine, that the world does not know. In prosperity, it does not raise itself over the less fortunate - and in adversity, it does not give in to sadness. It rejoices in the happiness of others, as though it were its own.*

It surrenders all its own personal choices, and extends a discreet condescendence to the gifts of others, provided these are upright. It communicates in goodness its consolations to those who are prostrate in affliction of their spirits. It is most liberal with its friends, and generally beneficent towards all. Without any pretension, it awaits from its God alone the reward, and it is in His service alone that it delights.

643: *I could just keep on going, my hearers, in speaking to you about such a lovable virtue, if time were not hurrying me on. Yet, the time allotted does not make me hurry so fast that I will miss heading into the port. What are your views now, then, regarding Devotion? And where are all those difficulties that seemed so overwhelming that you objected against my view? Where are those horrible hues with which you depicted Devotion? Does the reality not now seem altogether different from that which you had judged Devotion earlier? Is the view now not all joyfully, sweet and lovable? You see, then, that also today I have lived up to the expected promise to which I committed myself from the outset.*

644: *And now, my beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, now that there have been removed - as I hope it is so - those difficulties which alone distanced your spirit from the devout life, what remains? What else is there other than for you to follow with every readiness the impulse of the Holy Spirit? Is it not enough for you now for you to **offer your hearts** at this point to Jesus Christ who is asking this of you? Is it not up to you still, then, to resolve efficaciously **to serve from now on**, all the days of your life, that God who merits so well your **obsequious** service?*

645: *You have been given being and life by His creative hand and for this reason alone you were introduced into this world: to know, to love, to praise and to serve the author of every good. You have been created to promote His glory on this earth, thus to merit also yourselves a glorious recompense up in heaven, a perfect beatitude, enjoying and possessing your God forever.*

646: *You have been purchased back by the Blood of a God; you have been adopted as children of the King of Heaven You have been made sharers in the divine nature by the habit of grace. So, you are not our own, but belong to God, to serve Him alone: ... we are debtors, not the flesh... [Rm 8:12]. We are not enslaved to flesh and blood in order to have pleasure in depraved desires. We are rather servants to the Spirit, to allow yourselves to be governed gently by His instincts and to follow His principles. You are no longer of this earth, as though you had to follow this world. But, you are celestial, to work and to live as saints.*

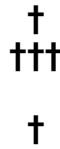
647: *... The time is short... [1 Co 7:29]... for the fashion of this world passes away... [v. 31]. We are taking giant steps forward every day and are preparing for a stable eternity. So, all that we still have to do should be done in great haste [Jn 13:27]. Should we wait for the night, perhaps, before setting down to work [Jn 9:4]? Should we await the arrival of the spouse, in order to provide our lamps which have almost gone out [Mt 25:1-13]? Should we wait until we are invited to the **nuptials** to prepare only then the **nuptial garment** [Mt 22:12]?*

648: *...Behold I come quickly... [Apoc 22:12]. I am here among you and I bring My reward with me: [ib.]. How happy is that soul who will be adorned and disposed to receive Him Come, He will say, My Spouse, receive the crown that your Lord has prepared for you forever ⁷¹: ...Blessed is that servant whom the*

⁷¹Liturgy of the Common of Virgins, Vespers.

Lord, when he comes, shall find watching... [Lk 12:37]. ...The Lord will say: well done, good and faithful servant, because you have been faithful over a few things, I will place you over many things... [Mt 25:2]...Enter into the joy of your Lord... [v. 23].⁷²

The source of this sermon, of course, is St. Francis de Sales, but the variations and the developments bring to it the unmistakable stamp of St. Gaspar who was so absorbed in the full Paschal Mystery, that he lives it and announces it. Should not these pages be pondered anew? However, it is time to move on. The results of Fr. Bertoni's apostolate of preaching were, from the very beginning, most extraordinary.⁷³ There is no difficulty in admitting this in that it is most evident that from the material of his that has come down to us, there abound such suggestive pages. There can be little surprise in admitting that he was an effective communicator of God's Word that the penetrating word from the heart of the young orator was simply a faithful echo of his holy life.



⁷² MssB ## 633, ff.

⁷³ SA, Doc. 26, p. 338.

The Spiritual Profile of **St. Gaspar Bertoni**



Fr. G. Bertoni teaching the boys to love and praise the Virgin Mary

Its Features and Spirit

Rev. John Ceresatto, CSS

Part Two: The Apostle of Youth

Translation from Italian:

Rev. Joseph C. Henchey, CSS

[from Lincoln, NE – Feast of St. Anthony of Padua, 2005]

Electronic Edition: Tereza Lopes [Lay Stigmatine]
Last updated on Advent, 2014

TABLE of CONTENTS**PART TWO****The Apostle of Youth****Chapter 4: A Ready Response to the Needs of the Times 51**

1. The Religious And Political Climate 2. The First Marian Oratory gets underway 3. Marvelous Development 4. In Those Challenging times 5. Its Organization 6. The Spirit of the Undertaking

Chapter 5: With Full Sails 58

1. A Festive Day in St. Paul's Oratory 2. Anxieties and Worries 3. The Academies and the Cenacle 4. From Full Orchestra to the Silences of the Soul 5. Pork Chops 6. Conquests 7. A Spiritual Retreat

Chapter 6: Pleasant Meadows and Terrible Storms 66

1 In Full Flower 2. The Cohort on the March 3. A Special Flower: John Baptist Ruffoni 4. Satan's Fury 5. The Devil's Tail 6. Cenacle Period

†††††

Chapter 4

A Ready Response to the Needs of the Times

1. The Religious and Political Climate

The first priestly activity that committed Fr. Bertoni almost totally was that of the Marian Oratories. The situation in Verona at the dawn of this new century was particularly delicate. After the victory of Marengo [June 1800]. The Napoleonic wave was going forward in its thrust toward the Adriatic, overwhelming in victory after victory the Austrian armies. In December of that year, French bombs, with very little regard for precise targets, reigned down on the city of Romeo and Juliette. And these were not few in number. Then came the peace of Luneville [February 9, 1801] where it was decided to entrust to the caprices followed by the Adige River that responsibility of tracing the eastern boundaries of the newly born Cisalpine Republic.

As a result, the city of Verona found itself cut in two; on the right bank, the Cisalpine liberals dominated – while on the left side, the Empire of Austria reigned supreme. Also the Diocese of San Zeno found itself divided. Bishop Avogadro shifted his episcopal residence to his own property of Monteforte d'Alpone. He continued his pastoral care to that portion of his flock that remained under the Austrian regime. On the opposite bank, the Vicar, Monsignor Gualfardo, of the Marquis Family, Ridolfi, in forced autonomy, substituted for the absent Shepherd, among that portion of the flock, who had become Cisalpine citizens, through no fault of their own. In that new climate of badly understood freedom, the field that was the most under threat was, naturally, that of the youth and the abandoned infancy.

In Verona two souls were deeply moved with this tragic spectacle, of so many young people languishing in material misery and in the real danger of spiritual wretchedness: the great heart of St. Magdeline Marquess of Canossa, the heart of a pious and zealous priest, the Venerable Priest, Fr. Peter Leonardi.

St. Madeline, already in 1799, committed herself to those tender young girls, poor and abandoned, of the popular quarters. Fr. Leonardi for his part, in that same year, had opened a house to take in abandoned children, taking them from the dangers of the streets. His was called the 'Raminghelli' Institute.

However, the vexing problem of the youth was in great part still unresolved. The masses of the city children, in the new climate which the wind from beyond the Alps was bringing, they remained fearfully undefended, exposed, as never before, in the danger of being totally lost with their innocence of faith. To save them, by embracing them in the ardent thrust of divine charity, would be the specific mission entrusted by Providence to a man who was already preparing himself: Fr. Gaspar Bertoni.

2. The Way of the First Marian Oratory

One morning, in June 1802, Fr. Gaspar was in the choir area of the Parish Church, with his surplice on, with his stole over his arm, absorbed in prayer. Fr. Girardi, the Pastor, approached him, as he had something to say to his young cooperator. He said: 'Good Fr. Gaspar, it seems to me that you have the air of a **Missionary...**'

For an instant Fr. Bertoni's eyes were full of humble surprise as he fixed his eyes on his Pastor.

"What I mean is', the Pastor continued, **a Missionary for the youth.**⁷⁴

These words served as the seal of God's will. From that time on, Fr. Gaspar would dedicate himself to working at being a Missionary, and especially toward the youth of the area. His beginnings were somewhat humble: seven or eight boys gathered around him to be protected in the shadow of the Parish in order so assist them to guide them onward, upward from their early youth to maturity, all the way to their graves, through the attractive effects of their first encounter with the Eucharistic Lord.

The Mission to the Youth is as delicate as it is sublime at the same time. In order to fulfill it Fr. Girardi, among the not few cooperators he had under his authority, did not find any better than Fr. Bertoni who offered him the necessary qualities. For this work there was needed one like St. Aloysius Gonzaga. Holiness of life, youthful enthusiasm, a fire for the apostolate, a spirit of sacrifice for every trial, all offered a sincere guarantee of success in the initiative.

For this apostolate that presents real challenges, Fr. Gaspar came to the task well prepared. He had his own efficacious formation at the hands of the good Jesuit Fathers, Fortis and Avesani, from those days when he had been a student himself at St. Sebastian's, and was himself a member of the Marian Congregation there. That spirit, that methodology, became his own.

And so, there came to life on **June 20, 1802 the first Marian Oratory.**⁷⁵ And what was the purpose of this organization? The goal was to impart to the youth an unbounded love for the Blessed Virgin Mary, for the Eucharist. The hope was to involve them in a spirit of sacrifice, nourishing in the group a vibrant flame for the apostolate, in a full union of spirits, in an atmosphere of holy serenity, and of a lively joy.

⁷⁴ SA, Doc. 26,p. 339.

⁷⁵ Despite the numerous pages dedicated by Fr. Giacobbe in his biography of St. Gaspar to the Marian Oratories, there remains imprecise the date of their beginning. Fr. Marani believed that it was in 1805. However, on that date, it seems it was more that of the re-organization due to its growth. Cf. SA, Doc., 32, p. 619.

NB: Translators's Note: In the developing charism of St. Gaspar, this **June 20, 1802** is a key date of a **graced experience** for the central **youth dimension** in his **Apostolic Mission** as portrayed in his **Original Constitutions** – as would be the appointment in **1810 to the Seminary**, and the **Parish Mission** at Sts. Fermus and Rusticus in the spring-time of **1816**.

Unforeseen difficulties immediately threatened quite soon the march of this new-born organization. The first to arise was its setting. The very small Rectory of St. Paul's did not have any place available to gather a notable number of young boys. The whole group had to be organized as well as possible in a room on the ground floor, which also served as the library for the Rectory. Little by little the group increased to the point of needing a bigger space, but the obvious needs for this enterprise were not taken into consideration by those with the authority.

Then because of renovations, the old rectory library was no longer available to the youngsters, and in order to continue their meetings, they had to assemble under a shed roof of the rectory, as though the group was re-living the poverty of Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, for whom *there was no room*.⁷⁶

With the extraordinary increase in the number of adherents, the Marian Oratory seemed to throw into crisis the parish life, as well as the repose of the pious priests assigned to the rectory. Furthermore, since it presented itself as a totally new organization, the Oratory just had to become the object of an onslaught of criticisms both from those removed from the scene, as well as those close to it, with the view that all work should be comfortably anchored in the traditional pastoral out-reach.

3. Its Wonderful Development

When Fr. Gaspar could providentially have at the disposition of his youth group the vacant Church of the 'Least Tertiaries' of St Francis di Paola, a few hundred paces from the parish, all breathed a sigh of relief. The new locale offered the incalculable advantage of two adjacent places, indispensable for the division of classes that very shortly imposed itself. Fr. Gaspar was able to draw into his group the very young and also some adults.

Each Sunday and holiday there were carried out there the spiritual duties proper to the Marian Congregation: spiritual reading, the Little Crown of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a brief talk by the Director [or someone who would stand in for him in those different places when he could not himself be contemporaneously be at the same time], the signing of the Litanies of Loreto, and some sacred song. From there, the procession would form in good order, and all would be led to the Parish Church to assist at Holy Mass.⁷⁷ This is how the Marian Oratory of St. Paul's in Campo Marzio would be conducted. It aggregated members, both young and old, including those who came from other city parishes, reached about 400.

The primary glory for this enormous success so soon should go entirely to Fr. Gaspar. Others came to share in this great work as he understood very quickly how to connect them to his work, inspiring them with the flame of his priestly zeal. Two priests in particular assisted him in the foundation of that first Oratory: Fr. Matthew Farinati and Fr. Cajetan Allegri. Fr. Matthew was two years younger than Fr. Bertoni, and Fr. Cajetan was six years younger. They were tied to him with bonds of admirable

⁷⁶ SA, Doc. 26, p. 340; Doc. 32, p. 620.

⁷⁷ SA, Doc. 26, p. 346.

fraternal charity, based on the commitment of a mutual spiritual assistance aiming at the common goal they all shared: their own perfection and the good of souls.⁷⁸ **The benefits drawn from this initial cooperation of priestly souls would encourage in Fr. Bertoni the idea of a new militia of apostles at the service of the Church.**

In January 1806, one more came to join these first two priest volunteers: this was the new Seminarian, John Mary Marani, destined to become the right hand man of the Saint in his activity for the Oratories, and the first-born of the religious family he would found. As would be evident, there was plenty of work to go around. As for the underlying spirit of the formation of this organization has already been described: it was substantially that of the Marian Congregations with the original addition of an external organization, of a recreational activity, updated in accord with the needs of new times. Fr. Gaspar Bertoni, without even realizing it, has added his name among the pioneers of the formation of the youth. The spectacle that St. John Bosco would offer to the citizens of Turin with the prodigy of his undertaking at Valdocco, St. Gaspar Bertoni offered 40 years earlier in Verona, with his first Marian Oratory.

4. In those stormy times

The period of the greatest effectiveness of St. Paul's Marian Oratory in Campo Marzio was between the years 1805 and 1807. These were years that were far from tranquil from the political and social point of view. On December 26, 1805, the peace of Presburg shifted from the Adige, to the Isonzo, as the boundary line of the Cisalpine Republic which was first called the Italian Republic, and a little afterwards, the Kingdom of Italy. As a result, Verona and the entire Diocese of San Zeno passed under French control.

Bishop John Andrew Avogadro, who had already tasted to the dregs the bitterness of the revolutionary regime, in that same year humiliated in a new way His Holiness, Pope Pius VII. As a result, Bishop Avogadro renounced his See, and hastened to Naples where there was in act the attempt to restore the Company of Jesus. There, the former Ordinary of Verona made himself the least in the community, and dedicated himself to the most humble domestic services. He would find to his own happy surprise that the broom 'was much lighter than the crosier!'⁷⁹

Monsignor Ridolfi, designated to rule the Veronese Diocese during the period of the See's vacancy, was well known for his diplomatic ability. He found himself immersed in the labyrinth of countless and most intricate difficulties. With the French

⁷⁸ An indication of this mutual commitment may be seen in a manuscript with the clear distinction in the hand-writing of the three Priests. They had copied out the first tract of Fr. Rodriguez', *Exercise of Perfection and the Christian Virtues*. Even though the document lacks any date, but there is the near certainty that this can be assigned to this period of close collaboration in the youth apostolate. cf. the Bertoni Manuscripts, without any number, in the Archives at the Stimate.

⁷⁹ Boero, *Menologio di pie memorie di alcuni religiosi della Compagnia dei Gesu*. Vol. I. Rome - *La Civiltà Cattolica* 1859, pp. 529-532. Since the Naples attempt to reform the Company of Jesus failed, Bishop Avogadro went to Rome, and then to Venice, and finally to Padua, where he died in abject poverty, on January 28, 1815.

troops now on the left bank of the Adige, in Verona the dangers and the threats to which the youth in particular remained exposed, were suddenly multiplied.

However, Providence ruled over the entire situation in a truly maternal manner. At that very moment, with the threat of so many evils hanging over them, Fr. Bertoni was able to present the spectacle of piety and a healthy youth, as the compact centurions of his first Marian Oratory. This constituted the admired surprise for the timid, and the secret hope of the good.

5. The Organization

In virtue of its exceptional strategic position, Verona had become in those years the most contested center of the two armies, in battle for the dominion of the Po valley. As a consequence of this, through its streets there would be frequently seen and heard the classical parades, the deafening role of the drums, and the exultant blasts of the military fanfare.

With this in their background, in the external organization of the Marian Oratory, Fr. Bertoni knew quite well how to make use of this combat inspiration for spirituality, that was able to enkindle genuine enthusiasm in young hearts. So it was that the 'Marian Congregation' became the 'Marian Cohort.' It was considered as a small army, under the banner of the Blessed Virgin, on the march towards an ideal conquest. A document in Fr. Bertoni's own hand-writing, that does not bear any date, but evidently seems to come from that first flowering of the Oratories, which traces the organizational outline of the above-mentioned 'Marian Cohort.'⁸⁰ It included the following:

Two *Regiments*, each of which was made up of two *Companies*; and every *Company* includes two smaller *Battalions*, and each of these included two *Squads* and each of these in its turn was divided into two *Squadrons*.

At the head of all was the Director. Eight 'Heads' were picked to preside to preside over each of these, assisted him in various ways: for the members' spirit, in hospitality, studies, recreations, music, instruction, catechism, in handwriting. All of this formed a type of 'Central Command', also called the 'Deliberative Body.'

There was also 'Major Adjutant', who had consultative power; a Master of Novices, Scrutator, a Recruiter, Sub-Master, Major Chancellor and four Chancellors of the Company. The 'Executive Branch' was entrusted to the 'Major Officials' [i.e., 4 Centurions and to 8 Sub-alternates]; 2 Sacristans, 4 Infirmarians, 4 Quarterlies, 2 Questors with the modest title of 'Employees', who handle their 'administrative' duties.

The picture is not yet complete: there was also an orchestra divided into two Choirs of four unequal voices, of 'proposal and response', and two bands: one for the 'Concert' and one for filling in, with their respective Choristers and band leaders [almost every man for himself!]

⁸⁰ Ceresato, *Il volto e l'anima*. 1953. Appendix, pp. 351, f.

The instruments were carefully selected: in the band for the Concert, there 2 violins, viola, violoncello, 2 oboes, 2 trumpets. In the band to fill in, there were two side flutes, two flutes, two piccolos, a trumpet and cymbals.

One could legitimately think that the commitment of so many young artists, unskilled, or almost so, that it might have been a bit uneven in the ideal performance of the art. However, the music, in Fr. Gaspar's plans, was simply a means of service of the one art that was deepest in his own heart: that of the integrally Christian formation of the youth.

There still remains to be explained how these various categories of the components subdivided the mass of members of the Oratory. In brief, this is the way the group was organized:

The *First Regiment* embraced the 'aggregates', properly so-called, or the 'effective' members: the *First Centurion* was made up of the *Seniors*; and the *Second Centurion* was made up of *Juniors*.

The *Second Company* is ordained analogously into two *Centurions*, made up respectively of the *Students*, and the *Children*.

The two *Companies* of the *Students* were made up; of the *Majors who had already received Communion*; and the *Minors, not yet recipients of Holy Communion*.

The *Majors* in their turn were sub-divided into *Novices* of the Second, or First probation, and the *Initiates*.

The *Minors* were divided into the already *Confirmed*, and those *non-yet Confirmed*.

Finally, the *Fourth Company* was constituted into the *Children*, and the two Companies are distinguished between those *to be instructed for their First Confession*, and those *to be instructed in the Mysteries of the Faith*.

This is the Marian Cohort such as Fr. Gaspar presented it in its organizational set-up⁸¹. This was not meant to be a pale copying of a military agenda, but represented the refined intuition of the educator, who in that particular type of organization could be useful to transmit those helps and supports for spiritual formation of the aggregated members.

We need to admit, of course, that today a structure maintained in this complex manner, would appear quite cumbersome. But it does show us at least an ordered, lucid mentality and this was not bound ever whenever more favorable circumstances presented themselves to him. When indeed the suppressive fury of Napoleon, or those who led it for him was mortally wounded, so, too, the Marian Oratories dismantled their external organization. This, however, did not signal their end, as their

⁸¹ Stofella, *Note per servire alla storia del Ven. Servo di Dio, D. Gaspare Bertoni*. Series V, pp. 8, f.; in *BERTONIANO* 1942.

spirit remained intact, at which, more than any other aspect of them, Fr. Bertoni had always aimed.

6. The Spirit

To keep the young far from the dangers of evil, for Fr. Gaspar, could only indicate the first step. He was the intractable enemy for every half measure, and so urged his young adherents towards an immensely more sublime goal, by calling it by its correct name: perfection, holiness. In this arduous undertaking, to back up his gentle and at the same time, strong word of the illumined guide that he was, there was always the efficacious example of that holy life that by now all admired. He worked in depth. The harmonious testimonies of biographers today find their confirmation in new indicative documents.

We do possess an outline of a regulation that Fr. Gaspar put together. With every probability this important document is incomplete. It is plenty, though, then, to reveal to us the solid principles upon which the holy educator would base his Christian formation of the youth.⁸² Here is a single paragraph, that has fallen out of the mass of documents, and who would know how many more of them there would be. This was securely at the basis of that joyful fraternity that always sang out of the hearts and on the faces of the young people of Fr. Gaspar:

*... They will love each other with a holy charity, always to keep themselves far from any occasion whatsoever, from giving the minimal offense, or with sharp words, and all the more so, regarding their actions. However, if anyone is offended by some brother, he will do all he can to suffer this peacefully out of love for Jesus. And if ever by our fragility one should offend someone else, he will strive to make up for the damage promptly, by asking his pardon, or with using toward him those good graces that would immediately remove every danger of resentment, or of bitterness...*⁸³

Of great significance, too, are those norms, or advice that that Fr. Bertoni has left later to the Directors of the Marian Oratories, an evident result of his own personal experience. All Christian formation of the Oratorian Youth is based on a tender and operative devotion to the Blessed Virgin. By walking along and singing in the pure joy of faith, the young Oratorian rises up in sincere happiness toward **the maturation of his own oblation spirit**⁸⁴. There should be neither uncertainties, nor fears: at a single word the youth of Fr. Bertoni would have jumped into the flames!⁸⁵

†
†††

†

⁸² Stofella, ib, pp. 5, ff.

⁸³ ib, p. 7.

⁸⁴ **NB: Translator's Note:** this seems to be a hint of a central aspect of Fr. Bertoni's spirituality of Holy Abandonment: *obsequium!* [cf. Rm 12:1, ff.; CF # 1, etc.].

⁸⁵ SA, p. 145.

Chapter 5

At Full Sail

1. A Sunday at St. Paul's Oratory

Let us join in the Marian Cohort precisely at the moment in which the above-mentioned exercises of piety had been accomplished. The group would leave in orderly fashion from the Church of St. Francis di Paola, and move in procession to the parish Church, to assist there at the Sacrifice of the Mass. Their piety was an edifying spectacle with which those young men participated in the celebration of the Divine mysteries. In those prayers that they offered in common, they alternated back and forth interspersed with sacred chants. A good number of other young men would be inspired to come to the Eucharistic Banquet. The reception of Holy Communion in those times was counseled for at least once a month.

After Mass, a certain number of the Oratorians lead the way to the Bertoni home, taking Fr. Gaspar with them for the rest of the morning. And there was no pause for him until the hour of dinner. As part of his responsibility of his smiling patience, there would be those who measured a bit slow in reading, and in writing, and they attempted to catch up as much as would be possible for them. This was along side his challenge as a willing instrumentalist, under his most attuned ears of a *Maestro* the pieces of music would be practiced again and again ... perhaps a bit weak for the next execution of this music. Then there was the inseparable group of the most faithful, who free from every commitment of work, they could not even conceive of a bit of rest or relief far from their beloved 'Don Gaspar.'⁸⁶

Early in the afternoon, all would return to the Parish Church. Before their catechism lesson, Fr. Gaspar with the leaders of the Cohort, and the more fervent of the members, would make the pious Exercise of the Way of the Cross, a devotion that was quite dear to the Saint. Then would follow the Catechism class, after which there would be held simultaneously and separately in three large groups, the singing of the Litanies and the Eucharistic Benediction. In good order, and this time in march-step, the group would approach the Campo Fiore. The green and ample stretch of lawn was totally at the disposition of that exuberant youth group. Even those no longer young would profit by this. There was something for every taste: from playing ball, to that of skittles. There would also be race contests as well as the characteristic dueling contests for the more spirited, as well as lawn bowling, as well as the fierce passion for the 'red rover' contests.

There would always also be those who in the quiet intended and practiced in an even less dynamic fashion: imaginary playing house and various contests. There were also those who gathered in groups in serene conversation, who took their inspiration in the events of the day, and very often there would be animated discussions on religious matters, especially when Fr. Gaspar took part in them, or one of his collaborators.

⁸⁶ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 345, ff.

To an outsider who might find himself on the side-lines of that field, he might be surprised to find such liveliness of nourished recreation with so few monetary resources at hand. In the sports contests or in the other competitions, it was absolutely prohibited to play for money or betting. The winner's reward was that the losers would have to kneel on the winner's side and offer an *Our Father* or a *Hail Mary*.

In the afternoon, all of the youngsters were reminded to bring with them one or two sandwiches which they would store in strong enough baskets, and in the middle of the recreation they would be distributed, to each one as he appeared. At the sound of the very sharp whistle, on the instant each game would end. The lines would form again, the squadrons, the companies, the regiments, the battalions. And the Marian Cohort would be on its way, marching towards the city with the happy step of a little army returning to its base after a victorious encounter. There would echo through the air the festive hymns of praise for the most worthy victories of the spirit, and a favorite song of those times was: *O world. You are no longer for me ... sins no more...!*⁸⁷

And as the peaceful files went by, all the good people [especially the mothers of families, would bless that good man who knew how to create this wonder out of nothing. Fr. Gaspar referred all his success to God. If the blessings heaped upon him from the good, these were only an encouragement for him to continue in that provident mission. In opposite manner, the evil from the repressed whisperings of his livid adversaries confirmed him in the certitude that this indeed was a work willed by God.

2. Anxieties and Concerns

Along-side his vigorous activity of spiritual e]benefit in the field of the young, Fr. Gaspar was also able to keep an eye on the efficacious assistance being offered to young girls especially on the clothing styles that came in with the revolution. It seems that France has lifted all sense of shame, by multiplying the dangers and threats, especially leveled against the incautious and inexpert young women.

He once exclaimed; *Poor innocence, I cannot even imagine any other object of greater sensibility and such vivid and continuous suffering for my soul!*⁸⁸ And he raged against the styles, with a tone and a style which clearly is different from his every other sermon of his: he becomes sarcastic, almost violent. Certainly, as he himself pointed out, he had to experience great 'repugnance' in treating a matter that was so alien from his basic inclination. However, God's glory asked this of him, and the real danger there was developing for souls. With innocence, as is well known faith itself is in danger. Fr. Bertoni thrust forward this accusation:

...The scandalously bad customs of our times is the public school where our young people learn – alas, this is too wicked for words - the first lessons of irreligion, of

⁸⁷ SA Doc. 26, pp. 349, f. 1 Doc. 32, p. 621.

⁸⁸ Bertoni Manuscripts, Folder n. 9.

wickedness, of atheism. I do not have the time here to prove this accidental proposition to you, but hold it as most true ... ⁸⁹

Two years later – precisely on December 13, 1807 - ascending once more the pulpit of St. Paul's Church, with no less efficacy, he would preach against *that dishonest manner of speech, which opens the way to even greater license...* He labored mightily against the onslaught of filth to reinforce the embankments and the dikes. Day by day he would pray for his young people, dispersed throughout the schools, in the shops, in the offices. He multiplied his visits, sought information about the teachers, of the bosses at work, of the heads of departments, always with discretion and firmness. At times he would also take this or that Oratorian of his from the dependence on some boss who was without conscience, or with little religious conviction, to place the lad in some other shop, or office, that would offer him greater moral guarantees.

All were very grateful to him for his interest in them: the young people felt themselves to be better protected by that great fatherly heart; the teachers, the masters would recognize in the Oratorians of Fr. Gaspar under their supervision, to be the most diligent, the most serene, the hardest working, among their dependents.⁹⁰ Today an apostolate conceived in this way is as modern as could be imagined: but Fr. Bertoni exercised this original, most efficacious apostolate at the first beginnings of the 1800's.

Of course, when he could not attend to all these matters himself, his cooperating Priests would join in. And more young men were in the Cohort who assisted him in the good functioning of the organization. And all around, each carried out his role in the group, and they satisfied their duties of vigilance and control over their own 'brothers', encouraging them, helping and, wherever necessary, admonishing them in the spirit of the most exquisite evangelical charity.⁹¹ Thus the beneficial work of the Marian Oratories entered into the schools, into the shops, the offices, bringing everywhere a renewing breath of the Christian spirit.

3. The Academies and the Cenacle

Fr. Gaspar never offered his youth a truce. He was always trying to inspire within them a healthy emulation both in spiritual matters, as well as in their activities of study and work: these expressions usually indicate the integral expressions for the Christian life.⁹² Opportunities simply poured forth permitting the organization of those

⁸⁹ **Parish Sermon 28. The Styles [in 1805]:** The 22nd of April, on St. Zeno's Day. The Monday after Low Sunday, in the Venerable Church of St. Paul's, C.M., Verona. – It lasted about one hour and 10 minutes! [MssB ## 1019, ff.].

⁹⁰ SA, Doc. 26, p. 343.

⁹¹ ib, p. 349.

⁹² **NB: Translator's Note:** as noted many times, this integral theme is developed by Fr. Gaspar in his *Original Constitutions* – life-long Spiritual and Intellectual Progress: *attende tibi et doctrinae ...* : **FOURTH PART: ON-GOING PROGRESS [## 47-68]**

serene treatments in which each one of the members of the organization was invited to present a personal exemplary of his own artistry: a poet, or a pair of shoes, a passage of a composition, or a carving, a painting, or a pair of pants, depending on whatever art or profession one was developing. The solemn *Academy* was preceded by an appropriate exposition of the works and in the official proclamation of the first classified, to which there would go a reward, plus the deafening applause of the assembly, and a joyful tune from the band.⁹³

Each evening the Bertoni home became a Cenacle where the Major State [the leaders] of the Marian Oratory would have its appointment to report on its own activities of fraternal vigilance, to exchange their experiences and to organize the life of the Oratory. Fr. Gaspar was forming these close associates in the School of God: free from mediocrity, always tending toward what is better, dedicated to an apostolate which included the over-riding need to communicate to others the riches of their own spiritual life. In these serene evening meetings the discussions on matters of religion were most frequent.⁹⁴ One evening, one of those attending the meeting stated that he did not understand the meaning of the words, *Pange Lingua*. That suffice – for six full months, Fr. Bertoni led his young men to the discovery of the secret meanings of that marvelous Eucharistic hymn.

4. From Full Orchestra to the Silence of the Soul

In the Bertoni home, the young members breathed the family atmosphere. They would be welcomed there always with the smile of his Mother Brunora, who saw suddenly her solitude repopulated with so many young legates, body and soul, I to come for her Fr. Gaspar. For her, and only after God, did her help her with the burden of life with a serenity that was totally Christian.

She was like everyone's grand-mother: good, concerned, patient. Yes, she was indeed patient – at times, there was needed a bit of this patience. They were students, artisans, who came also to give sway to their youthful exuberance, after their tiring activities of the day. Then, when the band started to practice, or when the orchestra played a piece just for the ears of Mother Brunora, but also for those who lived near by. When the musical hurricane was over, the conversation, whether serious or joyful, but always edifying, would begin again. Then, Fr. Gaspar would wish them all a good night, accompanying his greeting with a special word for each one, which was the equivalent of an exhortation.

And thus in the house of Mother Brunora, once the musicians had departed, quiet returned. While it was quiet, the time for repose had not yet the time for rest. In his room, on his desk there were large volumes that were opened, awaiting the return of Fr. Bertoni. While he was tired of walking all day, or hurrying here and there, of speaking with different people, he then slaked his thirst on the sources of his spirit; the Gospels, the Fathers of the Church, the *Summa* of St. Thomas. And there, close by, was his kneeler.

⁹³ SA, Doc. 26, p. 352.

⁹⁴ SA, Doc. 26, p. 353.

Often as mid-night came, the vigilant heart of Mother Brunora broke into the weight of the quiet rhythm of the nocturnal silence: patience, dear Mother. But, why does not that blessed light go out yet?

5. Pork Chops

One night, the Bertoni home served as the exceptional theater of a most entertaining joke. The idea was launched to have an extraordinary supper, one that would be memorable, with polenta and pork chops. The usual meticulous preparations were set in motion, with this specification added: 'Pork chops, for sure - and from the most meaty part of the pig!'

The appointed evening finally arrived. Fr. Farinati was there, and also Fr. Allegri and Fr. Marani. To help Mother Brunora and the old servant lady of the house, three young members of the Oratory also helped out, all dressed in white. They were to carry the dishes from the kitchen to the sitting room, showing themselves officious beyond all description. The ceremonies began in the usual way as for a meeting, with the devout praying of the Rosary; then followed some spiritual reading, and now ... all was in readiness. Raised on high, there arrived the long awaited blond queen of the banquet: a polenta as round as the moon. And, following this, then came other pots and pans. But, why was there no odor from the cooking?? At a sign from Fr. Gaspar, the mystery evaporated. And all, among the joyful laughter, all dove in to the polenta and turnips, seasoned with vinegar, salt and much good humor. Who could ever claim again that joy and mortification are not good sisters?

As for this theme of mortification, we will insert here another significant episode. In the writings for membership in the Oratory, it was prohibited to frequent taverns, coffee bars, theaters, or public spectacles. One time, one of the members of the Oratory, having given in to his curiosity of wishing to look over the carnival on a bill board along the passage way he followed. So, he accused himself humbly in the presence of his colleagues that this was a fault, asking all the other members for their pardon, and Fr. Gaspar, for a penance. He was an Oratorian who was already married, and living in comfortable surroundings.⁹⁵

To the brave slogans of the French Revolution, Citizen Bertoni responded with the challenging truth of the Gospel: in the much varied society of the membership of his Oratory, the freedom of spirit, with the commitment against sin, could reign as supreme sovereign: the young members, as well as those who were no longer so – nobles and men of the people, celebrated the most perfect equality, all being enrolled in welcoming ranks. The membership, made up of the poor, students, workers, youngsters, small and tall, all experienced the most genuine fraternity in the blessed name of the Queen of Peace.

⁹⁵ SA, Doc. 26, p. 356.

6. Conquests

Just how did this first Marian Oratory reach the level of membership that it did, with 400 inscribed? The reason is because the **Missionary of the Youth** made of the young people Missionaries in their own cause. An episode might point this out. A member of the Cohort invited a friend of his, who was much opposed to the Church and to Priests. The invitation was just that he make a visit, *incognito*. His response was one of derision and discussion. Finally, though, he agreed, more through accepting the challenge rather than surrendering to the idea.

At the agreed upon time, on Sunday morning, the baker mixed in with the group of the regular members. His initial hostility was transformed into plain curiosity, then interest, and some surprise. Why is there so much festivity surrounding that young priest? It seemed that all idolized him, and each one received a smile, a friendly gesture, a kind word. However, the time came to move on to the Church. What beautiful prayers were being offered together! What happy songs! What peace, and sense of welcome! The Father of this wide family directed to the members his words which only he could address... When the Mass was over, a new voice and a new heart was opened up in the press of those congregated, and he asked: 'Fr. Gaspar, would you please hear my confession...?' From that day onward, he became one of the more dedicated members. Several years later, this young man returned to heaven, following an enviable death, to share in the liturgy of the chant and eternal joy.⁹⁶

7. A Spiritual Retreat

To the young priests who with him dedicated themselves to the apostolate of the youth their most beautiful energies, and to all of these young men indistinctly, Fr. Gaspar presented without any half measures, the summits of Christian perfection. Any spiritual mediocrity found in him one of its most implacable enemies. He worked at the formation of those under his care in a very strong manner.

There is one example we have documented. Let us take a look at his Manuscript that has come down to us which gives us a faithful trace of his course of Spiritual exercises, "For My Brother Priests and Sons of the Marian Congregation ... Carnival Time in the year 1806."⁹⁷

Of all times of the year, precisely Carnival time, that period of just letting go. And what about *Daddy Gnoco*, the parades, the masks, the dancing, the grandiose supper? In contrast, Fr. Bertoni's words are:

'My dear friends, it is necessary to give glory to God, precisely in a time when sinners are offending Him, and draw His lights and benediction on our Congregation, and on those which will inspire young Fr. John...' [this refers to the Cleric, John Mary Marani.]

⁹⁶ SA, Doc. 26, p. 346; Doc. 20, n. II, 2, p. 146.

⁹⁷ Fr. Bertoni's Manuscripts, Folder 97. Miscellanea.

So for a few days, there was imposed on all the withdrawal from friends and acquaintances and companions ... and give a rest to every thought and worry regarding earthly matters... so that all might be recollected in a single thought, that of God. Your empty soul, separated from other creatures, will dispose itself to seek and to unite oneself to God. The more one's soul is disposed to draw near to Him, so much the more is it disposed to receive the gifts of His goodness...

In the Meditation on the Final Judgment, the Preacher and their Father invites the young men to consider the great gift offered to them by God, in being members of the Oratory. So, from this flows the necessity of corresponding to such a grace so that they might never see themselves meritorious of a grater condemnation. How great that would be, in such a hypothesis, in confusion of soul, cursed for ever by the Eternal Judge!

... What penance would one not undertake to remedy his fault – how many humiliations would he not accept. Of how much displeasure, of how many Carnivals would one not deprive himself. Here and now, so little suffices in order to insure yourselves: a greater obedience, a more sincere manifestation to your Confessor. This is the point to be resolved without listening to that which the flesh might dictate to you. What confusion is there not in seeing other young men, members of the Oratory, who have lived among you, but not like you, being called to the crowns, carried by the angels, conducted in triumph into Paradise; while you would remain most unhappy, in the hand of demons for not ever having done good...If such horror changes in you even thinking it over, what will be the experience of accepting this grace in you mean? Thank God in time. Detest your negligence of the past. Pray to the Judge: May Your Passion not be fruitless!

In the Meditation on the Reign of Christ there resounds the trumpet blast and that awakens to the total commitment of the following of Christ. To guarantee this commitment – Fr. Gaspar warns - very weak wishful thinking does not suffice. There are needed *resolute wills, even in the appreciation of means; would you wish to have virtue, beloved young men, without the travail, victory without difficulty...?*

This Divine King is to be followed *without reservations, not serving him adapted to your manner, but in His way; not by a single path of your choosing, but wherever He wants you to go: 'My heart, O God, is ready' I will follow You wherever You will go!*

He continued:

... May your resolutions be decided upon, on the example of Sts. Ignatius of Loyola, Aloysius Gonzaga, John Berchmans... (1) Death rather than sin mortally. (2) Be united to Christ's will with the resolution of avoiding all deliberate venial sin. (3) Perfect adherence to God, seeking not only His glory, but the greater glory of God and that which is more perfect...

We have transcribed these few fragments of his notes. Would that we could have been present when Fr. Gaspar developed these ideas and animated his listeners with his inflamed and penetrating word. The young men of that time were completely won over. In all of them was the conviction that among the known Priests [and of those good and pious men, there were more than one], there was no one who followed Jesus more closely⁹⁸ that Fr. Gaspar did himself: The Father and Master of their souls.



⁹⁸ **NB:** Translator's Note: this remained his life-long ideal, as noted in his Spiritual Diary:

25th SEPTEMBER 1808

[51.] Meditation. The Kingdom of Christ. Strong [inner] motion to follow Our Lord closely, at the cost of [my] life, through Poverty and Humiliation.

His annual Retreat is finished. It seems that Fr. Bertoni wanted to fill in the gaps of an incomplete course of *Spiritual Exercises*, picking up and considering more deeply some Ignatian themes which had been neglected. Fr. Da Ponte is his teacher here. In the Manuscripts of Fr Bertoni, at [MssB] [Fascile, n. 92], we have the organized points of more than 50 Meditations of Da Ponte. Titles and sub-titles in such a way that each point could make for a complete Meditation. The first carries this title: *The Kingdom of Christ*, which in Da Ponte's is just a page heading but Fr. Bertoni put it as the title to the whole collection. The Journal too carries here *The Kingdom of Christ*. Fr. Gaspar says that he felt a **strong inner motion**, which indicates a supernatural experience, towards what is the utmost *fruit*, as Ignatius calls it, of this Meditation. Fr. Gaspar feels like one of those generous souls which give away all for all:

...Those Religious who imitate the Apostles have as their aim to get concerned not only about their own salvation and perfection, but also about the salvation and perfection of their neighbor... and... profess to be companions of Jesus in this enterprise. They offer themselves with enthusiasm for any labor whatsoever...until the shedding of blood...for the glory of God and the salvation of souls...⁹⁸

This sentiment was already in Fr Gaspar on **11 and 24 July** when he offered himself *for sacrifice*. It will come strongly again on **27, 28, 29 September**, coupled with a *humble petition of martyrdom*... too.

Chapter 6

Pleasant Meadows and the Terrible Storms

1. The Flowering

The Oratory of St. Paul in Campo Marzio, set up by the brilliant initiative of Fr. Bertoni, was not to remain an isolated incident. It served rather as the providential spark that was destined to enkindle, in the brief cycle of a few years, numerous centers that irradiated the most efficacious devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, in that early childhood and teen years where the youth needed to find the most sure defense of their threatened youth. Between the years 1804 and 1806, following the example of the first-born Veronese Oratory, there arose those of St. George's and Saints Nazarus and Celsus parish on left side of the Adige – and others slowly matured.

On the right bank of the Adige, where the French dominated the venerable Fr. Peter Leonardi at S. Nicholas Parish directed in that same period, a Marian Congregation.

However, the possibilities of maneuver in the shadow of the three colored French flag, and the tree planted in the name of liberty, were much reduced.

2. The 'Cohort' on the March

On Saturday afternoons, the meeting would be held at the Oratory center, and the young participants put themselves on the ready to march in ordered fashion towards the country side, the goal of their missionary expedition. The first to line up would be the Advance Guard. There would follow then at the proper intervals the other squadrons, and at the end would be Fr. Gaspar with all, or at least, the greater part of the 'high command' of the group. The march would be broken up at obligatory stages. At a pre-established stop, the Advance Guard would halt, resting until the arrival of the first group.

They would exchange their greetings, and would then get up and go to the second established stop on the march. This would be the manner of proceeding until evening, at the last halt, near the country place which they wanted to 'conquer' for the sake of the Marian Congregations. They would break ranks, that self-assured and confident young assembly, to the singing of their Oratorian hymns, and they would take their ease along the streets of the town, welcomed by the happy surprise of the inhabitants and the very much moved blessings of the local Pastor.

The ordinance called for the evening meal to be polenta, as much as one wished, along with bread and beans, all good and abundant. The evening prayer would then be offered together, then following their rest, all joyfully stretched out on the hay, which the assigned 'President of Hospitality' [do you see how much this served?] had found for them, with much help from others so appointed, as they had come ahead of the group to find an opportune place. Over all, the flame of a lamp flickered throughout the night, and Fr. Gaspar spent much time in prayer, or reading.

In the morning, all were at Holy Mass for the Oratory. Kneeling on the floor in the country Church, the young men of St. Paul's gathered in their totality, offered to the faithful of the place the edifying spectacle of piety and composure. At the customary prayers of the Oratory, offered in common, they were interspersed with the appropriate hymns. At the Gospel, Fr. Gaspar exhorted the youth of the town they were visiting, to submit their names to the new institution being established among them, and he would do this with such warmth and fervor, that the impression given would remain indelibly impressed upon them.

In the afternoon, the usual services of the Oratory were conducted. Then in the open spaces, the new recruits and the directors of the newly established Oratory would fraternize with the pioneer brothers from St. Paul's. In the late afternoon, the Cohort would once again close ranks, take up their march toward their home base, leaving behind a sense of ardor and even regret. In that memorable period for the Diocese of San Zeno, the Marian Oratories sprang up in this way.⁹⁹

3. A Genuine Hero: John Baptist Ruffoni

The name of John Baptist Ruffoni should be presented here as a vital expression of a young model who matured in Fr. Gaspar's school of spirituality, in that dedicated climate of his first Marian Oratory. In a fragment of a letter to Fr. Bertoni, young Ruffoni, who was one of the 'Prefects' of the group, signed his name humbly as 'the servant of the servants of the Marian Congregation.'¹⁰⁰ How well he had absorbed the lessons of Fr. Gaspar!

One very beautiful account of his life written after he died as that pious young man, put together by his two great friends and admirers, Frs. James Righi and Anthony Campostrini. Their epitaph offers the possibility of pointing out some of his spiritual traits, that would suffice to reveal to us just how great Fr. Gaspar's influence was on him in preparing this elect soul for heaven.¹⁰¹

John Baptist Ruffoni sought with courage and success Christian perfection. He was excellent in piety, a mirror of purity, most obedient and respectfully in his family. He was of a somewhat irascible character, and he succeeded so well in tempering his own character as to lead many to believe that he was meek by nature.

He was struck down by a relentless cancer, nailed to his bed, that made it impossible for him to experience any movement whatsoever without experiencing a most acute spasm. He supported it all with serene patience. He never chose to pray for an end of his sufferings. Rather he begged the Lord so that, as his pains increased,

⁹⁹ SA, Doc. 20, p. 373.

¹⁰⁰ Stigmatine Archives, Verona

¹⁰¹ cf. Stofella, *Life of D. Gaspare Bertoni*. o.c., pp. 29, ff. Actually, the epigraph, dictated by Fr. Cesari, does not explicitly refer to Fr. Bertoni, nor could it, as Fr. Gaspar was still living at the time. It does not even refer to the Marian Congregation, of which young Ruffoni served as its most zealous 'Prefect'. This second omission finds its justification in the fact that at that date [March 1813], there was already in vogue for six years that oppressive Napoleonic Law that suppressed every religious association that manifested any external organization.

he might be able to support them all with equal patience. To all who would come to visit him, he could speak even joyfully about his approaching death, and as his eyes dimmed to the light of this world, all noticed that they seemed to reflect with the perpetual light of heaven.

During his final days, Fr. Gaspar gave him the comfort of both Priest and friend, spending long hours with him in conversation.¹⁰² He died on March 9, 1813, the first fruit for God in that choice garden that Fr. Gaspar had cultivated under the sun of Divine Grace, in his first Marian Oratory.

4. The Furies of Satan

Against these Oratories, and their original Founder in particular, there came to be unleashed in the city and throughout the diocese, poisonous enemies with their knowing criticisms in the hopes of blowing his hated foundation sky high. While these bitter tongues were not able to arrest the ascending march of the Oratories, but is there any measure of Fr. Gaspar's suffering over all this? As he was endowed with a most renowned sensibility and a kind of sanguine temperament, he suffered this blind opposition, manifesting a heroic proof of his Christian fortitude.

Let it be said once and for all, that in Fr. Gaspar there was the extreme gentleness of manner, the imperturbable calmness that we have admired thus far. Having said this, there should absolutely not be attributed to him and extraordinary felicity of temperament. This was, and would always be until the very end of his life, the effect of a constant discipline on his vibrant and piqued nature. One proof of this might be this episode presented to us by Fr. Giacobbe.¹⁰³

One day along a public street one of his more furious enemies, notice Fr. Bertoni that great mesmerizer of the youth, suddenly came upon him and poured out at him all kinds of unkindness and insults. In Fr. Gaspar, his first reaction was that he seemed to tremble from head to foot. There was even a slight hint of some disdain on his face, but his spirit took over. His lips remained sealed and his head, under the immediate control of a superior will, bowed down in a sense of offering to God of that unexpected avalanche of shame. At his enormous effort at restraint, his nature could resist no further. His sight became lessened, his entire body weakened, and he collapsed on the ground. These are the battles of the saints.

5. The Devil's Tail

Or, the most harsh blow that he had to endure that had been inflicted on his Marian Oratories, was the Napoleonic Decree of May 26, 1807. This law aimed to eliminate with one sole act, Confraternities, Congregations,, Companies, all Religious Lay Societies, except the Confraternities of the Most Blessed Sacrament [one per Parish], and the Vestry-Boards of the Churches.

¹⁰² *My dying friend keeps me quite occupied...* cf. Letter to Mother Naudet, February 28, 1813. cf. Stofella, *Life...*, o.c., pp. 59, ff.

¹⁰³ SA< Doc. 26, p. 352.

So, on June 17th, there arrived at the Prefect of the Department of the Adige, a minute Circular Letter, with the utmost precision, reserved for the local government. The signature was that of the 'Councilor Consultor of the State, Guicciardi, the Director entrusted with the surveillance of the General Police of the Kingdom of Italy.' Among other matters that it contained, the following is a quote:

... Due to the Decree of His Imperial Highness ... it will be necessary that You must observe, and make observed, by all the Directors, Administrators and Leaders of any Religious Society whatsoever that are now prohibited, inviting them respectively to hand over a list of the individuals that make these up....

And to whom should these exhaustive lists be submitted? The document specifies further with the stark writing with the goose feather pen:

... You will see to it just how important it is to make sure that no subject of the Kingdom is affiliated with foreign associations, or that any correspondence of any sort whatsoever be ever conducted with them. You will not fail to keep an eye particularly on the comings and goings of those Directors, or Heads of the Congregations, or the Companies of St. Aloysius, Marian groups, that might exist within this Department. Such Congregations, or Companies, without any correspondence being maintained among them, and further, that there be recognized any foreign centrality among them be made known. This is why these merit even greater observation...

This Circular – as was quite obvious from its entire tone - just had to end with a most just alarm, recalling particular attention of those wanting to be preachers, or Missionaries, as they are the most zealous promoters of these above-mentioned Societies.¹⁰⁴

All of this originated with a regime that had been born in the name of Liberty, so there is not much that could be said. The echoes reverberated. On the basis of these Instructions received, the Prefect of the Department of the Adige, which under the theme of 'those suspicious Societies, no one knew how much was known by the Napoleonic Police of the Kingdom of Italy, with the great care suggested to each under the threat case by case, government recourse was even had to the Capitular Vicar, in order to find out if, and to what extent there existed in the Diocese, such Congregations, or Companies, noted above.

The very able Monsignor Ridolfi [a personality acceptable to the French government], On July 3, 1807, responded assuring it that as far as the Congregations, or the so-called Companies of St. Aloysius, or Marian groups were concerned, that as far as was in his precise knowledge, neither in this city, nor in the diocese, there is not any one of them. He then gave some explanation regarding the devotion to St. Aloysius, and on the manner in which the saint was traditionally celebrated in the Diocese. As for the Marian devotions, Monsignor Ridolfi responded:

¹⁰⁴ Verona, State Archives. Prefecture Folder 185.

... Some years back there had begun to be propagated in this city on the left side of the Adige [at the time when I was not in charge of the right side], a certain beginning, but that since as far as comes under my surveillance, all has been almost entire eradicated...¹⁰⁵

With all his best attentions, the Vicar General could not therefore keep this Imperial Decree from weighing heavily on the Marian Oratories.

6. Time for the Cenacle

New measures of necessity had to be adopted also for the Marian Oratory in St. Paul's Parish of Campo Marzio, because of all those in existence, it was the best known. However, even deprived of his external apparatus, this model Oratory continued to live its intense spiritual life within the confines of the common Church. This same can be said also of the other Oratories of the city and beyond. For Fr. Gaspar there was no small disappointment in seeing his Marian Cohort reduced to shambles, as this perhaps expressed that which within that Mission to the Youth was the most specifically his own.

Fr. Julius Sommacompagna, in the notes that he left of these days among his papers as his profile of the Saint to be inserted into the Church History of Verona, brought out mostly the great good that had been accomplished by the Marian Oratories, and adds this of their Founder: ...he suffered much from the French government ...¹⁰⁶

These 'sufferings' most surely have derived from a surveillance because of suspicion over him, executed by the local police. Consequently: farewell to those wonderful evenings in the Bertoni family home, perfumed with piety and youthful enthusiasm. Farewell also to those recreation days on the fields of the Campofiore.¹⁰⁷

With the collapse of the French power in 1814, the Marian Oratories came out from their enclave of the Churches, to spread out once again through the entire city, and in all the Diocese of Verona, even beyond, manifesting that healthy liveliness impressed on them by their Founder.



¹⁰⁵ ib.

¹⁰⁶ Communal Library of Verona. Folder 114.

¹⁰⁷ SA, Doc. 20, p0. 149.

The Spiritual Profile of **St. Gaspar Bertoni**



*Fr. Bertoni was a notable Preacher and Spiritual Director
of Religious and the Clergy*

Its Features and Spirit

Rev. John Ceresatto, CSS

Part Three: The Spiritual Director of Religious and Priests

Translation from Italian:

Rev. Joseph C. Henchey, CSS

[from Lincoln, NE – Solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, 2005]

Electronic Edition: Tereza Lopes [Lay Stigmatine]
Last updated on Advent, 2014

TABLE of CONTENTS

PART THREE

The Spiritual Director of Religious and Priests

<u>Chapter 7:</u>	Family Vicissitudes	73
1.	Legal Battles	
2.	Departure from His Home	
3.	Still under Dispute	
4.	Repercussions	
5.	<i>I greet you, o my Mother, give me your blessing ...</i>	
5.	A Thorn in the Heart	
<u>Chapter 8:</u>	Interior Riches	80
1.	A Revealing Document	
2.	The Worry of the Soul	
3.	Temptations	
4.	To be saved: A Strong Will	
5.	Proceed with Caution	
6.	Correspond to Grace	
7.	The Physiognomy of Perfection	
8.	In the Wave of God	
<u>Chapter 9:</u>	At Mother Canossa's Convent	92
1.	The Appointment	
2.	From the Royal Court to the Convent	
3.	Two Different Charisms	
4.	Father Confessor	
5.	The First Meeting	
6.	What went before	
7.	By Divine Command	
8.	Under the Protection of Love	
9.	Within the Circle of Charity	
10.	Journey in the Dark	
<u>Chapter 10:</u>	<i>From the Plants to the Cultivators</i>	102
1.	A 'Yes' to the Request	
2.	And a 'No' to Rigorism	
3.	<i>'A Desolate Vineyard',</i> and Sleeping Workers	
4.	The Renewal	
5.	Guide and the Recall	
6.	Along Less Traveled Pathways	
7.	A Bridge over the Abyss	
<u>Chapter 11:</u>	In the Canticle of Abandonment to God	113
1.	A Necessary Preface	
2.	Hesitant Steps	
3.	Between Life and Death	
4.	<i>In the School of God</i>	
5.	In the Game of Providence	
6.	Loving Confidence	
7.	The Refusal that was not a Whim	
8.	An Indication of Incoherence?	



PART THREE
THE SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS AND PRIESTS
Chapter 7
Family Vicissitudes

1. Juridical Litigations

The years from 1802 to 1813 mark the almost complete decline of the Bertoni family. After the death of Mr. Francis Louis Bertoni, his only heir was the Saint. This is a story that is not lacking in its disheartening elements. There was an unfolding of law-suits and of legal maneuverings: a genuine labyrinth was created that we would like to ignore except for the fact that the central protagonist of these pages became deeply dragged into the mess. To try to sort out just how great a part, and how fully immersed in these matters Fr. Bertoni had to be, it is necessary also to take note of the deep repercussions that these terribly unhappy family events had on his priestly soul, this is a task that the conscientious biographer cannot decline.

It goes without saying that the primary root of all this contrast was Mr. Francis Louis Bertoni. That 'Sacred Agreement' of 1800 was upset just two years later, when, at the sudden death of the Notary, Anthony Mary, the elder brother of Francis Louis, this latter initiated a case against his own sister, Paula, and his own son, Fr. Gaspar. The case never reached the court room.

Then, in May 1803, Fr. Gaspar's Mother found herself duty-bound to cite her own husband in a civil suit. Francis Louis had one more time violated his formal responsibilities. This suit, too, was eventually settled somewhat arbitrarily outside of court. There were no more civil suits until the death of Madame Brunora, in 1810.

2. Flight from the Family Home

Once the Mother was dead, it seems that Mr. Louis, having returned by now to live in the city from the year 1808 on, extended to his son the invitation to remain with him, and the maid that he had brought with him from Illasi. But how could he ever agree to this? The maid, Catherine Slavier, with whom the Father had taken up, was never a servant like any other. Fr. Gaspar did not accept the Father's suggestion, and went to live rather with his maternal Aunt, Rosa Ravelli, married to Joseph Scudellini, the business man- orator, whom we have already met at Fr. Bertoni's First Mass. Fr. Bertoni's own extreme delicacy and his duty to protect his priestly dignity made this demand on him. He did not even care about that portion of the estate that was his by right of inheritance from his Aunt Paula. Nor did he even think of renting it out to someone else to generate some income. So, rather than just leaving his paternal home, he was forced by these circumstances to flee from it.

3. Further Litigations

This firm decision of Fr. Gaspar embittered his Father even more. For years he saw that he was for all practical purposes swimming in red ink due to his own debts, and his own immediate resources continued to dwindle. He was able to quiet a few of his creditors, and was trying to save what he possibly could.

So, shortly after his Mother's death, Fr. Gaspar found himself in the terribly awkward situation of having to cite his own Father: it was a matter of laying a claim on his Mother's share, which was a paying back of sums poured out by him because of his Father, and his ecclesiastical patrimony. His Father counter-sued.

This time was settled without going to trial. The path of the court room was eventually abandoned and everything was submitted to the exchange of titles of right among the procurators of the two parties in contrast with each other. What anguish of spirit did all this not cause Fr. Bertoni, this terrible quagmire of litigations, is easy to imagine when one thinks of his admirable detachment from the goods of this world. However, he had to go through with it all, because as a Priest, entirely vowed to the divine service, his ecclesiastical patrimony was the sacred property of the Church. And it was this above all that he saw threatened.

His Father's death occurred in 1813, and this confirmed in full the many fears of his son. In the dispositions made in his last will and testament, his Father chose to privilege Catherine Slavier, leaving to her, during her natural life, the usufruct of his portion of the estate. He added also a clause which confirms for the 'nth' time his hostile sentiments towards his own son:

... If then, the person receiving this usufruct should ever be bothered by the heir, Francis Louis Bertoni, in so far as this is legally possible, intends to deprive him from every benefit of the inheritance, then all would go to Catherine Slavier ...

The succession was painful. In the end, the only inheritance that Fr. Gaspar received from his own father was nothing but endless bitterness and tribulations. The old reading of the ecclesiastical patrimony, *based on his Father's goods*, went up in smoke with the legal disappearance of the paternal inheritance. Fr. Gaspar once again had to surrogate on goods that would not come to him from his father's estate, and this attempt was made on May 1, 1815.¹⁰⁸

4. Repercussions

From all this knotted web of litigations and very entangled legal matters in which, totally against his own desires, the son found himself terribly involved. However, through the entire mess, he came out on top as a priest full of integrity, and not in the least stained. He gained the esteem of all and his reputation soared. It is significant that in the most acute times of family contrasts, the ecclesiastical Authorities, far from losing confidence in Fr. Gaspar, this or deal he went through, only increased it.

¹⁰⁸ SA, Doc. 6, pp. 28-34.

Fr. Bertoni took up residence with his aunt, and the Chancery Office sanctioned this. As a result he was transferred from St. Paul's in Campo Marzio to service at St. Firmus Major in 1810.

In that same year, Bishop Innocent Liruti [who succeeded Bishop Avogadro, after a two year vacancy in the See] broadened Fr. Bertoni's apostolate. He was appointed to assist the **Clergy**, by being called to preach the Annual, as well as other **Retreats, and days of Recollection, the Sunday meditations and instructions to be delivered in the Seminary**.¹⁰⁹ The Canons did likewise, appointing him to assist the College of the Acolytes, assigned for the liturgical service of the Cathedral.

This family 'way of the cross' that he had to endure, in the end, actually conferred greater freedom on Fr. Gaspar, and a more evident authority in preaching God's word to his brothers in the Priesthood and to the Seminarians. Even prior to formulating any words, he was able to speak through his lived experience. Let us listen in on his Autumn Retreat of 1810 to Priests and Seminarians. St. Gaspar, following the Ignatian method, presents Jesus, Who with His example wishes to show:

1. *How we should be detached from flesh and blood and from the natural love of parents by leaving them, and by not doubting further about leaving them saddened when this will prove necessary in order to attend with greater diligence to the Heavenly Father's business.*
2. *That we should not remain with them longer than what would be God's Will. When I might suspect that my parents, or any other person of this world, are impeding that which God wants, when this is done either out of ignorance or misguided zeal, or when it is done out of malice, it is better to leave them without saying anything, even if they might be afflicted by this, or if they might find fault with me for this, by putting all this behind us with resolute and virile mind, in order to carry out God's Will...*¹¹⁰

His traumatic experiences of rather base cupidity rendered him a keen and lucid prophet regarding the most absolute detachment. Sometimes the blood of avarice in ecclesiastics comes to a boiling point, which renders their ministry sterile, and even wastes it entirely, by scandalizing the faithful. The words of Fr. Gaspar in this same retreat to Priests in 1810 seem to bear this out:

... The heavy chain [which impedes one from giving oneself over totally to God] would be possessions, to which so many church men became singularly ensnared ... What kind of a Pastor, or of a Father would one be toward his own children, when he is a harsh exactor, an inexorable, abject mercenary? If these wounds, like so many others, were only hidden somewhere in the Sanctuary, we

¹⁰⁹ **NB:** Translator's Note: as earlier, his Pastor thought of him as the Apostle to the Youth, here his Ordinary, Bishop Liruti, OSB, thinks of him as the Missionary to Religious, Priests and Seminarians. This is a second stage in the progressive unfolding and living out of his Founder's charism: the Youth, Clergy and Consecrated Life and Apostolic Missionaries in any ministry of the Word of God whatsoever – this last would be crowed in his unique experience in a Parish Mission in 1816.

¹¹⁰ Bertoni Manuscripts, Folder 16. [MssB ## 2173, ff.].

would be able to dissimulate them; but, this mercenary hardness hide scandalous contrasts, and the lay tribunals resound with the shame of the Priesthood. Therefore: the Priest, or the Pastor, who is hateful and disdainful toward his flock, and toward religion, in the spirit of coarse people, has become merely a means of profit and personal gain ...Oh, how fitting it is for an ecclesiastic, obliged to perfection, and to verify what he preaches, but his disdain of the riches of this world ...¹¹¹

Surely, Fr. Gaspar practiced to perfection that which he preached to others also on this detachment and gospel poverty.

Let us conclude: these court trials, for Fr. Gaspar, were only a harsh necessity, founded on his rights, even though they were so disturbing, in order to bring his 'adversary' to a reasonable solution. It was just an expedient for him, in that he abandoned this contestation always, as soon as he could, in order to take up again the ways of peace.

5. I Greet You, o my Mother...!

His beloved Mother, Brunora, died in 1810. In treating of her, one who had in the life of her son exercised such a providential role, it would be simply unjust to limit ourselves to point out only the extreme dates of her existence. We are not able to fix precisely the progress of her final malady, but it seems that her physical decline was long and painful. The problems of the advancing years reduced her practically to inactivity. The doctors diagnosed her problem as dropsy. She lingered for a long time, watched over, comforted, assisted by her blessed son, Fr. Gaspar. It was he who administered to her the comforts of the faith, and it was he who witnessed her last breath, on February 6, 1810.

The petering out of that great heart was certainly for her 33 year old son a deep blow. In fact, in her, from his infancy, Fr. Gaspar had placed his deepest filial affection. This profound love that he had for her never attenuated, but was always sublime and strengthened with the years. Particularly in her last years, the spiritual bonds between mother and son had been elevated even beyond the natural bonds of flesh and blood.

From 1805 on, from the moment that the 28 year old¹¹² Fr. Gaspar had received the faculties to hear the confessions of women, that precious mother had no hesitation of entrusting her own soul to the priestly heart of her angelic son, making of herself his penitent. For as long as she lived, he remained subject to his mother in everything, with that tenderness and spontaneity of a child. Even as a priest, he would make the time to accompany her from the house to church, always offering precedence to her as a sign of his respect. He obeyed her promptly even when there was entrusted to him some family matter. One day, they had to sell about ten sacks of grain for polenta. Once he showed the buyer the sacks, Fr. Gaspar is remembered as having said to him: 'She set the price, as I do not understand much about these matters.'¹¹³ Fr.

¹¹¹ Manoscritti Bertoni, I.c. – Folder 16. Autumn Retreat 1810, Meditation 6.

¹¹² **NB: Translator's Note: priests had to be ordained 5 years prior to receiving these faculties.**

¹¹³ SA, Doc. 20, p.169.

Gaspar was a priest who showed and had always a profound esteem and tenderness for his mother.

Even the detachment of death produced its fruit in him. This harsh trial flowered into a sense of filial abandonment to God, and into an even more tender, vibrant devotion to the Most Holy Virgin Mary. Indeed, we do not wish to force the documents: the reader may make the judgment. There are two hand-written entries into his own Spiritual Diary that we would like to bring up here. They both date from May 1810, three months after the death of his mother. The first is from May 18th:

18th MAY 1810

[154.] Is it difficult for Mary to intercede? Is it difficult for Jesus to grant us any grace?¹¹⁴

[154a.] We have to purify our minds thoroughly.¹¹⁵

Just three short lines, which, however, over a kind of *compendium* of the most elevated program of perfection founded on a solid Marian devotion. His devotion was indeed strong, but always tender.

Another day in this same month of May 1810 [perhaps some two weeks later than the above], Fr. Gaspar transcribed into his *Spiritual Journal* a prayer which he found corresponding to his own sentiments of filial confidence:

[159.] *I greet you, O my Mother: give me your blessing; bless me and all who are dear to me. Vouchsafe to offer to God all I have to do and suffer today, in union with your merits, as well as those of your Blessed Son. I offer you and consecrate to your service all my being and whatever belongs to me placing everything under your protection. Obtain for me, my dear Lady, purity of soul and body, and grant that I may not do anything today displeasing to God; I entreat you through your Immaculate Conception and your perfect Virginity [before the birth, in the birth and after the birth].*

(A Hail Mary for the person who wrote this prayer.)¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ [This May of 1810 was the first *Month of Mary* for the orphaned Fr. Gaspar. We can imagine him even more intensely committed to making the Mother of God his own *mother*. We have two important Marian thoughts in this month. The first entry of this date shows how he put Mary in an outstanding place in his ministry. The second, on the 24th, gives us a prayer which will accompany him all throughout his life.]

¹¹⁵ [Also Fr. Stofella's note] The last line of this *Journal* entry under this date sounds as the condition for obtaining the graces from Jesus through Mary. A **thorough purification of the mind** is indispensable in order not to put any obstacle to God's generous giving. It is an expression on the same radical level as the entry of May 1809 about **universal mortification**. The ideal is noted as well on the 14.15.16.23.24 July 1809 about the absolute requirements for Perfection.

¹¹⁶ SA Doc. 35, p. 669.

[NB: Translator's note: included here is Fr. Stofella's Note from his publication of St. Gaspar's *Spiritual Journal*]:

This is still prayed daily in the Stigmatine world.

6. A Thorn in his Heart

This present chapter really cannot close without responding to a haunting question: did Fr. Gaspar have the comfort of assisting personally his own dying Father? The time that preceded his death was not without their problems.

With a primary juridical Act in 1810, Fr. Gaspar's Father through a suit which for all practical purposes deprived his son from the very foundation of his filial inheritance. Why did he do this? This is how Mr. Bertoni justified his position: ... *the testator has*

Following some texts in his *Spiritual Journal* that are so closely linked, that we may call belonging to the reform of the Church, here – without any change in the date – we find a beautiful prayer. This is a real treasure for the understanding of Fr Bertoni's spirit. We think that this text became part of his daily morning prayers. This will then be followed by a series of Patristic texts with varied thoughts. And then lastly, two short lines from a Psalm. We have the suspicion that all these entries were placed on different days – but the Servant of God who had written this notebook for his own eyes only, does not indicate any change of date. These entries from May 24th-31st, just as they are, will round out the entries for this year 1810.

We have already noted that this prayer is a real gem, and it does not seem easy ever to exaggerate its value. The last line **A Hail Mary...** seems to exclude the possibility that it was a personal composition. He took it from some source and, finding it very proper for himself, he added also the spiritual token for the demands of honesty, with regard for the unknown author. The Founder has handed this on to us through its inclusion in his *Journal*.

If we examine this prayer, we can easily see it as an expression of the *Treatise of the True Devotion to the Virgin* by St Grignon Marie de Montfort (+ 1716). In Fr. Bertoni's time this Treatise was already written for a while, but it remained hidden until 1842. Since that year it began to be spread very widely in the Church. The wording of Fr Bertoni's prayer is very close to the expressions of *Spiritual Slavery* of St. de Montfort's doctrine.

This prayer is already in the spirit of a total dedication to Mary as the Mother and *Lady of the House*. We should greet her every day as such. Our offerings and prayers pass to God through her hands, and similarly all our daily activities and suffering, in union with her merits and those of her Divine Son. The whole of ourselves and our world, every day, are placed at her service: all under her mantle... St. Grignon de Montfort could not agree more!

In return for this service, we expect every day *purity of mind and body* and that *we should not do anything which can displease God*.

A strong foundation for our petition to Mary is her great privilege as the **Immaculate Conception**. Fr Bertoni supported the doctrine of Mary's *Immaculate Conception* long before the dogmatic definition of 1854.

In all the research, this text of this prayer has not yet been uncovered. This is so despite having pondered the prayer manuals of many Marian Congregations. A partial text, though, perhaps even the substance of the second part of the text. Might be found in an invocation that was in use of the old **Preces Matutinae** [Latin for **Morning Prayers**] often used by Priests and Seminarians. The title of one of these prayers was dedicating to that of commending the living of chastity. The text reads: *By your Immaculate Conception, and most pure Virginity, cleanse my heart and my body, a Mother and Virgin before the Birth, in the Birth and after the Birth*.

With this in mind, does not the deMontfort devotion pertain quite closely to Stigmatine Spirituality?

only one son, who is a secular priest, who in addition to his own Patrimony, finds himself provided with goods of fortune well beyond his own needs ... At the same time, Mr. Bertoni made provisions for his maid that she be ... remunerated for the assistance that she rendered...

Thus, in September 1813, in drawing up his will, Mr. Bertoni completely bypassed his own son, and mentioned only the maid, in order to benefit her with his part of the estate. Finally, a few days before dying, he inserted a codicil was inserted regarding one half of the value of the house, which for 'his reasons' would serve as a guarantee for his debts toward Ms Slavier.

These decisions on their joint patrimony did not lessen the son's love and the truly tender priestly compassion of Fr. Gaspar, who accompanied the last days of his Father in prayer. There is some hint of these times in a letter that Fr. Gaspar wrote to Mother Leopoldina Naudet on December 14, 1813. He wrote: ... *I recommend to your Reverence, my poor father who has become quite ill...* There seems to be implied in these words a real insight into the priestly heart evidenced by the genuine anguish of his filial piety, suffering under two accounts.

The Parish Register in St. Paul's of Campo Marzio notes that on December 27, 1813, Francis Louis Bertoni passed to a better life, 'strengthened by the sacrament of the Eucharist.' The deceased received from his disinherited son a solemn funeral and very many suffrages.¹¹⁷

The anguish suffered for the conduct of his father, the sacrifices, the tears, the prayers raised up to God for the eternal salvation of the one who had given him earthly life, remain a secret that the Saint guarded jealously in his heart, and bore with him to his grave.



¹¹⁷ Stofella, *Life ...* o.c., pp. 72, ff.

Chapter 8

Interior Riches

[1808-1813]

1. A Revealing Document

The life of St. Gaspar Bertoni was universally recognized as an incessant ascent toward God. However, testimonies in this regard, even though they are in agreement, with the passing of long stretches of time, lose something of their bite: no matter how authoritative they may be, they become rather cold, and may seem less convincing. This moves one to look to draw from authentic sources, capable of communicating even at a distance, a reflection of the holiness recognized by contemporaries, to the man of God, of whom already more than a century later, any writer whatsoever would want to illustrate his life.

Providentially, such a source is not lacking regarding Fr. Bertoni. His spirit radiates outward from his ***Spiritual Journal***, a hand-written document, some how preserved – and no one knows how – from the insatiable appetite of the flames, to which Fr. Bertoni consigned his every note that might provide for us an echo of his inner soul.¹¹⁸

This has come down to us as a few hand-written pages, from July 1, 1808 until June 26, 1813, in which he entrusted the secret confidences of his own soul: proposals, his state of soul, rapid notes from his meditation or spiritual reading of the day; it has recorded what it was that was nourishing his priestly soul over these years, or what poured forth from this piety. In developing our efforts here to illustrate his life, and ignoring these revealing notes, would mean – in our view - to try to give life to a body, abstracting from its soul. To avoid repetitions, we will omit those passages already cited, as well as those which we might have occasion to cite more opportunely in another context. As much as will e possible, we will sacrifice chronological order for that order of ideas, grouping his notes according to themes. Of our own, in this chapter, there will be nothing other than what is purely accidental. Most humble Fr. Gaspar, please pardon the mischievous joke ... This will be necessary, because when he drew up these very personal spiritual notes, for his own exclusive and personal use, he never imagined that he was writing for those who would come after him, the most beautiful chapters of his holy life.

2. The Concern of his Soul

The diligent quest for perfection in everything is the constant challenge of Fr. Bertoni's soul:

¹¹⁸ SA, Doc. 35, pp. 656-672.

8th OCTOBER 1808

[58.] Inner movement to fight against small defects as I did, on other occasions, against big ones. [Determination] to rise towards virtue with all diligence. The time in which I can serve God and promote His glory and sanctify myself is running short more and more.

The fleeting nature of time is a thought that was most familiar to Fr. Gaspar, and served as an efficacious spur to his spiritual undertaking which does not admit of delays:

24th JULY 1808

[13.] "Making the most of your time" (Ep 5, 16). Time never comes back. We have therefore to use it with great diligence.

In the Retreat of September 1808, at the Meditation on Death, he noted:

17th SEPTEMBER 1808

[49.] Meditation. Death. The past is no more. The future has not yet arrived. Only the present is here. And it is in my hands. Let me live day after day, or rather from morning to midday and from midday to evening. Let me do every single thing with all possible perfection. Perhaps I will have no more time in which to glorify God.

Regarding this central concern of his soul, there is still one more testimony, from December 1808:

17th DECEMBER 1808

[85.] While browsing again over Scupoli's [*Spiritual Combat*] and reading the *Imitation of Christ*, I felt a desire to acquire perfection and to wage war upon any negligence.

3. Temptations

His note of August 31, 1808, even in its brevity, does bring out the fact that temptations have the character of testing: if in mediocre spirits these tests too often are experienced as stumbling blocks, obstacles for the climb, in souls who know how to give themselves generously to God, they become powerful thrusts towards the heights. Our great spiritual teacher explains to us:

... Great temptations are the matter and the means of great holiness, if there is at the same time courage and strength ...

Again from Dom Scupoli, under March 27, 1809, he noted:

...Temptations return when we have given in to them the first time, in order to give God the occasion to draw from them that fruit which we lost before hand ...

Four months later a reflection of his seems to be the corollary of the preceding note:

... If you had had the heart to resist, by this time you would have finished with temptations ... [July 29, 1808].

In the delicate area, there are two significant observations. The first is from August 17, 1808. The arduous problem is resolved by the boldness of saints, through which the remedy that heals and preserves is the love of God. This is the note:

... In a soul in which Charity enters, libido flees from it ...

Also these temptations, therefore, are interpreted in the light of charity, which is the bond of perfection. This, in substance, is explained in his note dated September 13, 1808. The Saint wrote:

... God calls us to emulate angelic purity. It is necessary to be prepared for greater temptations, and to make up for defects already committed, and to arrive at that point that God wants for us ...

He closes the discussion on temptations in general with an original commentary on *watch and pray*, of the Gospel. It is this note:

28th APRIL 1811

[167.] Watch and pray: This summarizes all the advices of Scripture and of the Gospel.

WATCH: This means we have to be fully awake and strong: but without weapons. One could not resist if attacked: we shall be conquered.

PRAY: This means to be well armed, but asleep. If we are to be attacked we shall be stripped of our arms and killed by treachery.

Watch and pray! This is a man who is strong, awake and well armed. He won't be conquered.

4. In order to be saved: will it!

On February 22, 1809, there is an ordered and well nourished note that suggests the secret to anyone who wants to be a saint:

[111.] Three are the things needed for salvation:

1. Avoid small sins. *He who contemns little things shall fall little by little.* They are like little thieves who enter by the window in order to open to door to the big thieves.

2. Convince ourselves that we shall not go to Heaven without the cost of much labor and effort. *The Kingdom of God suffers violence.* Make an effort to go in. *If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.*

3. Have the good will to go [to Heaven]. *He, who has good will, has everything.*

There is a beautiful commentary on this last point:

[112.] If the matter of our Salvation would depend on God alone, no one would ever be damned: *I do not want the death of a sinner...*

But since it depends also on our cooperation, and this is lacking, and so, many are damned.

More explicit is the note for July 30, 1808 – and continues on March 22, 1809:

[19.] All depends on the resolution of wanting to serve God at any cost. It is necessary to guard against *velleity* [wishful thinking]. We can distinguish *velleity* from the will by their consequences. In front of difficulties the former shrinks back and gives up, while the latter persists, gains stability and is strengthened.

22nd MARCH 1809

[132.] Those who make a resolution without the determination [of taking practical steps] are similar to those soldiers or hunters who are portrayed in the pictures. They are always on the point of wounding and killing but in fact they never unleash the blow.

"He who has good will has everything, but it is not good that will which does not want to do what it can".

5. Proceed with Caution

When the fragile human will finds itself exposed to oscillations and re-thinking decisions made, a salutary fear can prove to be an efficacious stimulus of not turning away from the enterprise:

... If we do not accept the loving invitations of Mercy, what else remains to us, if not that of falling into the terrible hands of Justice ... [March 14, 1809].

The next day this same salutary thought returns with efficacy of a conclusion which does not admit of rebuttal:

... In this world, penance is brief, light, useful; in hell, it is very long, enormous, useless. Who does not repent in this life will have to repent uselessly in the next...

In fact, God is infinite goodness, but also infinite Justice and: **Whoever does not want to know God as just, only knows Him by half ... [September 13, 1809].**

6. Correspond to Grace

Emphasizing the value of the will, St. Gaspar by no means intends ignore, or diminish the preponderant activity of Grace in the sanctification. His insistence wishes to be only a spur to a correspondence, as perfect as possible, to the divine munificence, with the persuasion that:

...We ought above all to be vigilant not to fail the Lord on our part, being sure that on His part, He certainly will not fail... [December 2, 1808].

We do fail when we unintelligently pretend to construct by ourselves our own perfection/ What is necessary then is rather a total adherence to God's Will and to His plan for us. He noted on July 14, 1808:

... Do nothing other than for the glory of God and for His holy love; from this proceeds disdain for the world, the proclamation of all vices...

And on July 15, 1808, he stated:

... To work solely out of an instinct of nature, even for an instant, this would mean that one would impede what God is doing, in order to make room for the activity of creatures ...

He adds to this idea on July 16, 1808:

[139.] Lose the habit of doing your own will. Do anything as moved by God's will with the intention of pleasing Him and giving Him honor. (Scupoli, *Addition to the Spiritual Combat*).

For Fr. Bertoni, to correspond means not to inject any impediment to the transforming action of grace. This means that we need to allow God to carry out His loving designs on us. These are his words:

... Very few are they who understand what it is that God would do with them, if He were not impeded in His designs by them...¹¹⁹

In his 'Instructions' to the Seminarians, this beautiful Ignatian maxim returns almost with the same words, but clarified just a bit:

... We cannot even imagine what God would do with us, and how much He would achieve in us and for us, as we are the pupils of His eyes, if we did not place an obstacle to His grace, but were we to remit ourselves freely and totally into His hand ...¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ **NB:** translator's note: this is an often repeated Ignatian principle in Fr. Bertoni's Journal [July 15, 1809, May 18, 1811] and life.

¹²⁰ *Instructions on the Book of Kings.* Commentary on the words: *Loquere, Domine...*! Bertoni Manuscripts, n. 23.

7. The Face of Perfection

The quest for perfection for St. Gaspar means in the last analysis: the search for God in every creature:

[91.] We have to seek God alone and nothing else: no consolations, no gratifications. [December 23, 1808].

An even more demanding proposal is found on February 26, 1809. Here the perfection toward which the saint is vowed manifests its visage: it is the face of Jesus Himself:

... We must draw in ourselves a portrait of Jesus Christ ...

This bold proposal for St. Gaspar is simply his response of love for Jesus Christ, Who – and not for just one time – had led him to taste the ineffable sweetness of **a mystical union**. On October 25, 1808, St. Gaspar made this entry:

... [72.] During Mass: short but vivid enlightenments. Intense feeling of the presence of God. Trust, love, desire to transform myself into Him. That Jesus may live in me, no longer myself. After Mass this grace of Union would pass, but it came back while [walking] along the street, on family business, just as when I was in Church.

Christ is the divine model toward Whom St. Gaspar constantly directed the eyes of his soul, reinvigorated with so much love that he yearned for His sacrifice and shame, in order to be the more assimilated to Him. He noted on February 1, 1808:

... Frequent memory of Jesus' life with a tender love of correspondence...

On July 11, 1808 he wrote:

... After Mass, there were very vivid sentiments of faith in the presence of our Lord and much confidence: and further a sentiment of offering myself to suffer vexation with him and for him...

Then, on September 25, 1808:

... Today's Meditation was on the Reign of Christ; I experienced a powerful inspiration to follow Our Lord more closely at the cost of life for His poverty and shame ...

The desire to be as similar to Christ in the **humiliation** that came to occupy His mind and His heart:

... While meditating on the Incarnation ...I experienced a sentiment of great love for the Trinity in handing over the Son and great tenderness toward Him, together with a very vivid faith and a great desire for union and association in His sufferings and shame: with the petition for grace in order to suffer in being disdained for Him ... [September 28, 1808].

The **offering of himself** in suffering out of love of Christ, reached in his desires the reached the summits of immolation:

... I experienced the desire and expressed the petition also of martyrdom and a great internal exhortation...

The Lord did not fail to slake in His Servant the thirst for humiliations. There was this episode noted above about his 'furious' adversary who attacked Fr. Gaspar on a public way, with a tempest of poisonous invectives. They provoked in the Saint such a violent reaction that in the inner struggle to restrain himself, he actually collapsed along the side of the street, is certainly around this period in his life. It might even be said that his note of September 29, 1809 is a faithful commentary on this:

... There was some knowledge of the great good which is to suffer something out of love for God ...

There follow in Latin the comforting words of Jesus for those who might experience some suffering of malediction and disdain of the world out of love for Him:

29th SEPTEMBER 1808

[57.] The recognition of what great good it is to suffer something for the sake of God. *Blessed are those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice. Blessed are you when they will curse you and insult you and reject your name as bad and they will say any evil against you, falsely, for my name. Be glad on that day because your reward is great in heaven.* [Mt 5:11].

8. On the Crest of God.

With devotion and respect, we now enter into the most profound secret of Fr. Gaspar's soul. We will feel the presence of God so close and tangible that it is quite inebriating. Let us read with much calm and silence inside and outside of us, dispensing ourselves from any comment¹²¹:

2nd JULY 1808

[2.] *Feast of the Sacred Heart. During Mass, at Consecration, at Communion and throughout the whole thanksgiving time, many tears of compunction and affection. In particular during Communion I felt for a moment as if my spirit was snatched away from all creatures, at the service¹²² of its Creator.*¹²³

¹²¹ cf. instead: Nello Dalle Vedove, *Un modello di santo abbandono*. Verona 1951, pp. 188-196.

¹²² **NB: Translator's Note:** For the first time in this document, St. Gaspar uses the word *ossequio* [cf. *obsequium*, in: Rm 12:1, ff.] – one of Fr. Bertoni's favorite words. Cf. 'Published Studies' under St. Gaspar Bertoni's *Trinitarian Charism of Hope*, on this Web-site.

¹²³ **NB: Translator's Note:** Fr. Stofella notes: In his entry on this Feast of the Sacred Heart, we have the first indication of some characteristic mystical gifts which God was going to grant to Fr Bertoni. If we may say, here one sees what theologians call **Piety as a Gift of the Spirit**. It is very clear **that the Sacred Heart is also near Fr. Bertoni's final entry in his Journal** [cf. June 26, 1813 he also noted a mystical grace, his ecstasy regarding the Sacred Heart on May 30, 1813]. For Fr. Bertoni, his

On the Sunday dedicated to St. Aloysius, the Day of the Maternity of the Virgin Mary, St. Gaspar wrote:

9th OCTOBER 1808

[59.] Feast of St Denis and the Maternity of the Virgin Mary.

During the Eucharistic prayer of the Mass near the time of the *memento*, it seemed that my mind opened up to know with Whom was I speaking. I felt great affection and an enthusiasm of love in prayer. Then some outbursts of my heart for God and some impulses of my spirit towards God. I seemed to be like a person overwhelmed by the appearance of a great friend who had not been seen for a long time and on seeing him suddenly, he wants to throw himself at him and embrace him. Then I felt a desire that the vision could increase and an impulse to be able to reach the Supreme Good. Since I was in public I feared [the feeling of] some vanity and I [made an effort to] think of my most serious sins. As a consequence [I felt] an increase of knowledge of goodness and love which dissolved in most soothing tears which lasted until after Holy Communion. In the meantime faith and confidence increased very much together with humility and loving reverence. Lastly, at Communion, a very intense devotion and sentiment similar to that of my First Holy Communion: an experience that I am

devotion to the Sacred Heart often served as his vehicle for the presentation of his integral understanding of the Paschal Mystery – both its sorrowful aspects as well as its glorious dimensions. A few days after his May 30th, 1812 ecstasy, he spoke on the Sacred Heart – emphasizing the wound in the side retained in Christ's Risen Body [cf. MssB 1755-1778] [cf. J. Henchey, 'Una Speranza Missionaria formata ed expressa nelle sue divozioni e nel suo servizio ecclesiale', in: *Symposium Bertonianum*. Verona: Edizioni Stimmgraf 1990, pp.143-160. This idea is found in his parish sermons [cf. MssB ## 464; 475; 490; 494; 517; 1300; 1305; 1308; 1312; 1314; 1315; 1317; 1318; 1322; 1759; 1771, , ff. In his Letters: MssB 9510; 9689; 9707. In his preaching to priests and seminarians: MssB ## 2632; 2635; 2637; 2647. It is found often in Fr. Gaspar's Meditations on Primum Regum, based on St. Gregory the Great: MssB ## 4899; 4957; 4984; 4991; 4999; 5094 and 9707 – among other texts. The integral theme of the Paschal Mystery is found from his earliest written documents: his parish sermons up through his last letters to Fr. Bragato [cf. Web-site. *Stimmate Integre*]. [cf. also Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove, *Un Modello...* pp. 53, 186.]. [Under the studies for the *Original Constitutions*, there is offered a reflection on the Ignatian and Stigmatine spirituality contained in the word: *obsequium* – Studies on St. Gaspar's *Compendium Rude*].

Hence, in his Journal, he notes the many tears of compunction and affection. Compunction is intended here as a blend of *spiritual illumination* and a consequent feeling of one's own inadequacy in front of the divine. What stands out here is that gift of **the spirit snatched away from all creatures, at the service [obsequium] of its Creator**. To this experience Fr Gaspar had contributed also by his own spiritual attitude

St. John of the Cross teaches that "the soul cannot receive the light of divine union unless it first rejects affection for creatures". He also teaches that "every soul who wishes to climb the mountain of the Lord in order to make of himself an altar for the offering of pure love, of praise and service [*ossequio*], should have already fulfilled three conditions. The first is that it rejects from itself all affections and desires which are foreign to God. The second is that it should purify itself from the consequences of those affections which still remain by continually denying them and doing penance. The third condition is that it should change *habits*: only then the Lord himself will clothe it anew' [Fr. Stofella's note].

not aware of having felt since. The recollection lasted for another hour and it remained for the rest of the evening.¹²⁴

Then on December 4th, a Sunday of Advent:

... During the Mass, I experienced a vivid sentiment of the presence of Jesus Christ, inspiring much confidence, but this was short. The recollection, however, lasted also afterwards and devotion went through the entire day ...

Again, on the following Sunday:

11th DECEMBER 1808

[84.] During the Canon of the Mass, at the *Te igitur*, a very lively, reverential and loving sense of the presence of the Father. A vivid confidence and love towards the Son. Again a sense of the priestly dignity during Consecration as I was acting in the person of Christ before His Father. Even more tenderness and deep humility immediately after Consecration when I was holding Christ tightly in my hands. There it was: the utmost Goodness joined to the utmost wickedness. The most pure to the most impure. The most holy to the most sinful. That sentiment lasted until after communion. The compunction until evening.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ **NB: Translator's Note:** Fr. Stofella's footnote here:

It was the second Sunday of October, the 18th after Pentecost, and Fr. Bertoni's birthday. He was 31 years old. It was also his name-day because Denis was the third name given him on his Baptism day. That day the commemoration of St. Denis had to give liturgical precedence to the celebration of the feast of the Maternity of the Virgin Mary. That feast was commemorated in the regions under the Venetian Dominions on the second Sunday of October. Could not all this have had some bearing in preparing the soul of Fr Bertoni for **the visits of His Divine Majesty**?

It seems that one should read this day's entry on one's knees! What can we say? Fr. Gaspar found himself taken over by a very special state of grace. Let us note first that **opening** of his mind and heart. This prompted these **outbursts** of his spirit toward God. Such a desire and impulse reached Him. Then, on the apparent threshold of ecstasy, in order not to fall into vanity in front of the public, he made an effort to **think of his very serious sins**. This reminds us of what St Teresa of Avila used to say to her nuns :

... Let us be on guard when we are taken by these great impulses of such desires, not to add anything nor to increase them. We have to cut the thread gently with some other consideration...

However, it seems as though Grace took firm hold of Fr Gaspar even after the ecstasy. He was given a certain consciousness of the Divine Goodness. He experienced gentle tears, and an increase in virtues. He was being granted literally what he prayed for in that familiar Ignatian prayer written for his own private use: **Give me humility and loving reverence** (cf. 12 July). What can be said about his remembrance of his First Holy Communion day? ... The sway of grace in his soul seems to go back a long time in his life.

¹²⁵ **NB: Translator's Note** - Fr. Stofella's note here:

It was the Third Sunday of Advent. Judging from the notes of this *Journal*, it seems that God had favored Fr. Bertoni with his gifts often during Sunday Masses. What shall we say now? Perhaps what we said on the feast of the Maternity of Mary (which was his birthday). We need to fall on our knees and read the note again and again.

Then, a few weeks later:

11th JANUARY 1809

[96.] During Mass, at the Consecration: a very lively sense of the presence of Christ as a friend who talks with another friend. I also felt the presence of the Father, while perceiving also, in some way, the distinction of these Divine Persons in only one nature. Great reverence and love! This recollection continued for half an hour afterwards, not the experience, though, which...

Fr. Bertoni's pen end right here, without any further comment on his part.¹²⁶

Then, near the end of his Journal, St. Gaspar wrote:

30th MAY 1812

[171.] While in prayer before Mass I was taken over by some drowsiness and I heard from the Crucifix these words addressed to my heart: *Look at this Heart of mine!* Those words immediately brightened my mind with light and my heart felt suddenly a great fervor. Then it was as if my spirit rose up to see the lovable

This was another experience of the Presence of God, pondering anew the mystery of the Trinity (cf. above, the 24 of August), reviewing the Persons of the Father and the Son. Therefore at the words of the Canon of the Mass, Fr. Bertoni felt **vivid confidence**. At the Consecration he felt the loftiness of his priestly dignity: **reverence, love, confidence, tenderness and deep humility**, and each of these sentiments immerse Fr. Bertoni into the abyss of **compunction**. His innate feeling of wretchedness and culpability in any contact of his joined to God's supreme goodness, Infinite Purity and Infinite Holiness! Those expressions can be judged by us, who are far from those lofty experiences, as excessive. St. Teresa of Avila had similar compunction for her faults, and ingratitude, due to those special *caresses* and favors which God so often poured out on her. She said: *When I see that I receive daily more and more graces, and since I correspond so badly to the past ones, I feel a sort of terrible torture.*¹²⁵ This Sunday in the life of St. Gaspar with all of its ministries, rendered him full until evening. Would that the Lord might grant also to us a similar gift of light!

¹²⁶ **NB: Translator's note:** Fr. Stofella's thoughts follow:

The note remains interrupted – the word *which...* indicates incompleteness. And yet here we have, laconically expressed, one of the most noteworthy graces recorded in the *Journal*. Christ, as *friend*, reminds us of those outbursts and impulses of the heart towards God, like a person overwhelmed by the appearance of a great friend, as in the entry of 9 Oct. 1808.

With regard to the presence of the Father and the experience of, in some way, the distinction of these Divine Persons, let us hear what St Teresa of Avila said out of her personal experience:

... As regards the Three Divine Persons, I clearly perceive that they are distinct among themselves... it is, though, a strange certainty. As a matter of fact I do not hear and I do not see anything. Neither with the eyes of the body nor with the eyes of the soul. Yet it is felt when the Three Divine Persons disappear. However I do not know how does this happen. What I do know is that this is not my imagination. Sometimes, in fact, after receiving this grace, I made an effort to bring [the Three Persons] back again, by myself. But I never succeeded. I therefore do know this by experience...

object which was indicated. I felt a shivering throughout my whole body. I found I had my eyes and mouth closed but my soul was wide awake and full of delight.

It seemed that my soul wished to separate itself from my body. It seemed to be dying and yet to enjoy this. When it turned again back with desire towards the one who was talking to it, I had another episode of shivering and the feeling of a sweet painful death. My soul was then confused about what to do. If the experience had continued it was going to die or at least to be separated from the body. In such inability to act, it rested with delight in the hands of the Lord and finding great peacefulness it was ready to die in that very moment. Then, in an instant, it regained contact with the senses.

The effect of this was a very tender devotion to the Sacred Heart. During Mass I was full of sentiment. My soul was moved to tears at Holy Communion. After Mass I kept much recollection and gladness for the whole day with an increase of Faith, Hope and Charity.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ **NB: Translator's Note:** The text is worth reading and meditating with devotion. This would be sufficient to understand it and to savor it without pretending to penetrate the deep phenomena which it narrates. However some remarks are helpful. We take from what Fr. Dalle Vedove wrote with regard to that mystical experience of Fr. Bertoni:

... It is probable that he was preparing in those days the homily for the Feast of the Sacred Heart, the following Friday. Spending nights in work, study and prayer makes one somehow drowsy early in the morning. But Fr. Bertoni's drowsiness was not just natural: it was that *turgidity* and tying up of the human faculties which is characteristic of mystical experiences. The words **Look at this Heart of mine!** were heard distinctly. What followed was like a flash of lightning: an irresistible desire to **see the lovable object which was indicated.**

Fr. Dalle Vedove notes further:

... The sudden and almost violent way in which Fr. Gaspar was taken by this mystic gift showed that it was not a simple ecstasy, which should have developed slowly and pleasantly, but rather a real *rapture* or *flight* of the spirit. The effects of this extraordinary experience invaded not only the spiritual faculties of mind and will but also the physical ones with characteristic phenomena like shivering of the body and shutting off of sight and voice. He even reached, twice, the state of *alienation* close to death. Yet the whole experience was described as **delightful** and in great **quiet**. The *rapture* in front of the Crucifix marks the height of Fr. Gaspar's extraordinary spiritual gifts. After this mystical experience he was no longer sure what he should write down on paper. He will record only seven more short notes and will leave blank the remaining 90 pages of his JOURNAL. The reason could be that a new phase of his life was opening up.

... Within few months he will be struck by a sickness which will accompany him for the remaining forty years of his life, marked by intense suffering. From the ecstasy in front of the Crucifix which showed him the Sacred Heart, a new journey began. It will lead him to the total sacrifice of self. Just like Jesus who, after his Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, took decisively the road to Jerusalem for his sacrifice on Mount Calvary... [Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove, *Un modello...* o.c., pp. 191, ff.].

It is interesting to note that in these days, Fr. Bertoni was thinking integrally also of the Glorious Wounds retained in Christ's Risen Body. In St. Gaspar's sermon on the Sacred Heart [June 5, 1812], he stated: His side, opened after His death, is used to show us that Heart, that same Heart wounded by the lance, that WOUND RETAINED IN HIS GLORIOUS BODY, render the Heart

These are the revealing fragments that we have wanted to offer to the reader, convinced that, better than every other testimony, they can illumine us regarding the spiritual physiognomy of the saint, at this time in his 30's. When we read these carefully, it would be indeed the prodigious ardor of his apostolic soul, the extraordinary success he realized in the most varied fields of sacred ministry. There is no surprise for us here. We know the secret flame that has enkindled and fed these.



so sweet, evident, divine, so much so that it is impossible to venerate the Wounded Heart without remembering and venerating His immense love [cf. MssB # 1771]. This integral theme is much in evidence in Fr. Bertoni's spirit - cf. J. Henchey, CSS, 'S. Gaspare Bertoni: una speranza missionaria..., in': *Symposium...*, pp. 143-160.

Chapter 9

At Mother Canossa's Convent

[1808-1810]

1. The Appointment

The official suppression of the Marian Oratories brought about by the well-known Napoleonic Decree of May 1807, notably reduced Fr. Bertoni's activity amidst his beloved young people. But, this did not disarm him. In the limits allowed by the new circumstances, he continued to assist them spiritually; he filled his days sitting at his table of study, or in the city libraries, head-first into sacred and profane studies.

The Cenacle of the Bertoni home, under interdict by the local place for the youth which kept the law in the name of the new France, was transformed into a fraternal evening **gathering of priests**. The soul behind this initiative, of course, was Fr. Gaspar. As in prayer, as well as in the works although now reduced of his priestly ministry, in intense study, Fr. Gaspar, as was his norm and practice, awaited serenely for some indication from God. And arrive it did.

In May 1808, Bishop Innocent Liruti appointed Fr. Bertoni as the first Confessor of Mother di Canossa's Convent¹²⁸. The Confessor-elect was then just about 30 years of age. Such was the esteem placed in him by the new Diocesan Shepherd. The history of that Convent is written in letters of gold by two extraordinary Women, outstanding for their holiness of life and the fruitfulness of their works: St. Madeline di Canossa, and the Servant of God, Leopoldina Naudet.

The former had extraordinary contacts with Fr. Bertoni who also served as her Confessor, without becoming her regular Spiritual Director. Mother Leopoldina, on the other hand, found in him the Father of her soul, the Angel sent to her by God to sustain her in the foundation of her Community, and to guide her step by step in the old ascent for her spirit.

The holy Marquess enjoyed a much deserved notoriety which dispenses us from treating of it in a specific manner. Mother Naudet, however, is much less well known. The very close spiritual relationship that the Saint had with this soul, totally of God, demands here a page that might present in its essential lines, the life and the spirit of this exceptional woman.¹²⁹ The biographical notes that we present here are taken from the official collection of documents for St. Gaspar's Cause of Canonization, called the ***Summarium Additionale***, and of the official ***Positio***, submitted to the Vatican on the virtues of Fr. Bertoni. Even though presented here in a rather concise form, they do offer the characteristics of an indisputable authority both for the bibliography and due to the direct sources that the compiler employed.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 364, ff.

¹²⁹ **NB: Translator's Note: cf. the website: www.st-bertoni.com – under 'Mother Naudet'.**

¹³⁰ SA, Doc. 5, Intro. Pp. 11-16.

2. From the Royal Court to the Religious Convent

Leopoldina Naudet was born on May 31, 1773, of a French family which was established in the Tuscan capital within the Hapsburg-Lorena realm. She received the name of the Grand-Duke, Leopold, who held her at her Baptism. For as long as her mother lived, she was a most pious woman who offered her infant daughter every day to the Virgin, and took every care of her. When her beloved Mother died, Leopoldina was only five years old, and she was sent to school in a Monastery in Florence. There, when she was eight, she received her Confirmation and a year later her First Holy Communion. Despite the Jansenism of the time, she also received permission to receive frequent Holy Communion. At 12 years of age, she moved to France and there completed her education with the Mesdames of the Congregation of our Lady, at Soissons, the city of origin of the Naudet Family. With her, was her inseparable older sister, Louisa.

With the humility of his demeanor and the good reasons of her heart on fire for the Eucharist, she disarmed her Ecclesiastical Superiors where she lived, obtaining – a favor unheard of in that Jansenistic enclave - to continue also there her practice of frequent Communion. This first success, her beautiful traits of mind and heart, her excellent success in studies and, of course, the Grace of God which worked almost visibly in that soul, all contributed to make her an irresistible center of attraction. Leopoldina profited by this, inspiring her companions in their piety for the Blessed Virgin, often being with them to constitute a small Choir in the praying of the Little Office of Mary.

At the death of her Father [1789], the two young orphans were sent back to Florence. In 1790, on the decision of her august God-Father, who had become the Emperor of Austria at the death of Joseph II, the two young girls, Leopoldina and her sister, Louisa, moved into the Royal Court at Vienna, as Ladies of Honor to the Archduchess, as the instructresses of the Archdukes. Later, then, from Vienna, the two sisters went to Prague, assigned as Ladies in Waiting to the Arc-Duchess Maria Anna Fernanda, the sister of the Emperor Francis I, who succeeded Leopoldina.

In many trips undertaken by the pious Princess, Leopoldina was always at her side. Her ardent piety, the incomparable modesty of her demeanor, made her everywhere the object of esteem and veneration at the same time. An ecclesiastical dignitary stated: 'We will one day celebrate the liturgical Feast of Leopoldina Naudet!' In reality, the Grace in that elect soul worked without repose to transform and to direct toward good every tendency that might have been less than perfect.

This is true also for Leopoldina, as for every soul called to perfection, holiness has to be the end-result of struggle and conquest. Referring to the very turbulent life she had in the Royal Court, she wrote in 1801:

... Even in the world I experienced my rebellious nature that would have chosen at times to seek human satisfactions and to love creatures. However, sustained by the intimate sentiment that convinced me that I was already of God, so I overcame every affection, every thought ... If I had ever allowed my passions full sway, what would I have been and what would have I become...!

Therefore, precisely in the pomp of the Royal Court she already felt that the Lord had chosen her for His Spouse. However, even though this Voice was clear, the path ahead remained enveloped in darkness. She once thought of the Trappistines. Her first attempt, through no fault of her own, did not succeed. And in her heart, she experienced a sense of regret over this for a long time. The dream to become the Spouse of Christ in a religious Institute seemed impossible to her until about 1800.

The following year, she found herself in Rome at the Corsini Palace, in the Mother House of a forming Institute, as its Superior. The Institute was called 'the Beloved of Jesus.' The Founder of this new group appeared to be considered almost a second St. Ignatius of Loyola come to life once again. In the end, he is judged by history as being nothing more than an ambitious visionary. His name was Fr. Nicholas Paccanari. Because of the adherence to him of the Archduchess Maria Anna of Austria to his enterprise, Fr. Paccanari was able to find some support and credit. However, this Institute, after a very travailed and ephemeral existence, lasted only six years, or so, and then petered out. The Archduchess was recalled to Austria and the Roman Community living in the Corsini Palace, was just about dissolved.

Mother Leopoldina with a few Sisters very faithful to her, left Rome in 1806, and moved to Padua and they gathered there a group of these ex-'Beloved' with the secret proposal of bringing into reality the dream that the Archduchess saw vanish. From Padua those simple women remained tenaciously faithful to an undertaking, which from a human perspective seemed desperate, and they moved on to Venice. It was there in Venice, she who was the linchpin of this lean band of souls in waiting, ran into Monsignor Pacifico Pacetti, the zealous Missionary who already for some years had established in this city of St. Mark the general headquarters of his very fruitful apostolic campaigns.

From 1804, Monsignor Pacetti was the Spiritual Director and the counselor of the holy Marquess di Canossa, who for some time had been developing the idea of an Institute of Sisters dedicated to the apostolate for poor and abandoned young girls. She herself, assisted by some volunteer companions, from the year 1801 was taking care of a small group of girls who had been assembled in a humble dwelling first for the '*Filippinis*' and then in the most poor and wretched parish of St. Zeno.

The meeting with Mother Naudet with the Marquess di Canossa seemed quite providential to the Canon from the Marche region of Italy, as he, too, was able perhaps to look ahead to make use of these two women of God the corner-stones of a very special edifice he was thinking of establishing.

3. Two Different Charisms

In October 1807, in the first months of the following year, Leopoldina was in the city of the Scaligers, as secretary to the Marquess for various letters pertaining to the acquisition of a former Monastery of Augustinian Sisters, called the Convent of Sts. Joseph and Fidentius, situated in the area of San Zeno in the periphery of the city.

On May 8, 1808, St. Madeline di Canossa, with a few of her companions sharing her ideals and proposals, took possession of that ancient Convent. Madeline did not want to occupy the first place – she reserved this for the virtue and the experience of Leopoldina. On Monday, May 9th, Mother Leopoldina, in her role as local Superior, gave her first conference to the nascent Community, and the holy Marquess with all the other Sisters were gathered in a circle around her as disciples listened to her. In the space of a few months the little Community grew, thanks to the efficacious impact extended by the two Foundresses on souls desirous of offering themselves to God in the exercise of charity towards their neighbor.

The local statistics of 1809 present us with a Community of a good 18 women; and the number of the girls they had gathered there to keep them from the dangers of the street, was no less. An attempt at union was made after only a year of living together, but this revealed that there were clearly two distinct charisms, and this effort of union could not get off the ground. Between the two Foundresses, of course, certain ideals they held jointly, but there were likewise radical divergences.

St. Madeline aimed always at the good of the poor girls of the populous districts: she and her Sisters, in their Convent and in the parishes, in the popular schools, and trained the young women in the domestic arts. There was a very active life for the Sisters. Mother Naudet, on her part, while not excluding the poor girls, intended to offer preferentially her charity to the upper classes. She excluded hospital work, courting more the cloistered life. Since their attempt to work out something together, the two groups continued in that union of theirs which was quite precarious, until November 1816, when Mother Leopoldina would depart from the Canossian Retreat with her faithful followers to the Convent in the city, which was once inhabited by the Teresians, the Contemplative Carmelites.

4. The Confessor

The first spiritual guide of the nascent community, which was called the Canossian retreat, was the 30 year old Fr. Gaspar, considered to be mature enough for that delicate ministry. In the first two and one half years, there is very little to note, other than the extraordinary diligence, and the exceptional spirit of sacrifice demonstrated by the Saint in his commitment to his new office. Spiritual assistance, as he understood it, imposed on him very soon sacrifices and challenges which, joined to the whole tenor of his mortified life, led to weakening irreparably his physical make up, which when he undertook all this was considered to be robust. Precisely in those years, there were not a few who had been gathered in that holy Recovery who fell ill, and some of them, in grave manner. The Registers speak of this: from 1809 until 1812, four of these young women after long and painful illnesses, flew off to heaven. The Saint, with his admirable dedication, lent to them his every spiritual assistance; it was he who would comfort them, to bless them on their beds of death. It was stated that to take special care of one of these little dying creatures, he kept the vigil over here for 30 entire consecutive nights. One thinks of the distance that intervened between his home in St. Paul's Parish confines, and then later to where he lived in St. Firmus' parish boundaries, and the peripheral neighborhood of San Zeno, and the streets of that time in history in Verona.

He would be there in response to every request, by day or night, whether it rained or snowed, always without his umbrella, wrapped in a stitched mantle, hung over his shoulders, even when it was already soaked with rain and mud. No one in that Convent ever persuaded him to have a cup of coffee, or some spirits, or even a glass of water. He did have a room there and his bed would be prepared with every diligence so that on those nights that he kept vigil, he might be able to catch at least some cat – naps. However, the bed always remained untouched. Fr. Gaspar preferred the prayer stalls of the little Church there, where in the flickering candle light, he would remain for long stretched of time on his knees in prayer with his eyes fixed on the tabernacle, or seated with a spiritual book in his hands. This is how he would remain until morning, when he would return to the Parish, to pick up his day in that rhythm and in the spirit of which we are already quite familiar.

St. Madeline di Canossa, and the Servant of God, Mother Leopoldina Naudet and Fr. Bertoni: they were like three sails at the full responding to the breath of Infinite Love. There can be little surprise in the statement that the good ship of the Canossian Retreat aimed resolutely toward the ports of heaven.

5. The Meeting

Fr. Bertoni continued that assignment at the Canossian Retreat for eight years, a precious and much appreciated service. With that spiritual sensibility which was characteristic to her, Mother Leopoldina Naudet had certainly noted from his first coming there that in the humble priest God was already at work as absolute Master. She was able to take advantage of that delicate discretion of one who, in approaching souls, never went beyond the limits of Spiritual Director, nor gave the impression of being the master. She had seen him anxiously concerned with the sick girls, and noted his treasures of charity, as he was recollected before the altar of God.

However, it was not until January 9, 1811 that this woman of God, obeying an inspiration that seemed to her to be divine, took that young Priest as her own spiritual director. From that day, out of a loving disposition of Divine Providence, two elect souls became companions in the journey toward a common goal. To follow along the essential stages on their spiritual itinerary is such a bold undertaking that borders on presumption, but we should undertake it.

6. The Precedents

Leopoldina Naudet's life, before her meeting with St. Gaspar Bertoni, has the very clear traits of a loving plan, traced out for her by Providence, in order to dispose that elect soul for the specific goal to which her Spouse was calling her: a life of loving abandonment to Him.

Her early orphanage, her journeys through half of Europe, 10 years of turbulent and insidious Court life, but always with her heart fixed on Him, the tempestuous events that broke over her dream to be the Spouse of Christ. These storms would often occur precisely when her dream seemed to be actually becoming a reality. So often on this journey for the most part, she would be alone without any spiritual guide.

There were surely times along this arduous path that she felt the lack of strong guidance, but yet, the plan of God for her made itself known to her, to draw her ever onward toward that goal which she had lovingly fixed for herself.

In the generous soul of this exceptional woman, steeped authentically in the vivid sentiment of her own nothingness, the divine voice of her Guest was heard. After an early suspicion, that force of impetus in the inexpressibly sweet stamp, those mysterious words, but so clearly distinct, aroused in her heart the humble and surprised marvel of an extraordinary fact. And she corresponded with the cordiality of a dialogue among friends.

Just when all this happened remains a secret within God. Of these hidden voices, she remained always the jealous custodian, convinced that 'certain interior matters given to her to understand are something like a bottle of precious liquor that if one disturbs the cork, the goodness evaporates. But, even if she wanted to, how can anyone express certain mystical experiences of the spirit? She once wrote: 'Certain matters, it seems to me, are so much in the depths of the soul that no one could ever express how they are'.¹³¹

Before her meeting Fr. Bertoni, not a little did she have to suffer because of the lack of understanding she had to experience from the one who was directing her, so much did she experience a clear natural reluctance to share spiritual confidences with the Ministers of God. Over the years, this increased, rather than diminished. She then abandoned herself to God's action Whom she chose as her only Master and Guide in matters of the spirit.

Once again, we read from her notes from her Retreat of 1801: "... Share all with the Lord in Prayer, since He is the true Spiritual Director of souls, and afterwards if the thought comes that something should be shared with the Confessor, then do it...'

7. By Divine Command

Therefore, January 9, 1811 marked a decisive stage on the spiritual journey of Mother Naudet. Moved by the Spirit of God, for the first time she opened the secrets preserved in her own soul to the one who up until then had been her ordinary Confessor, Fr. Gaspar Bertoni. The decision was made by her without any interior contrast. Up until then, she was getting along quite well by herself, that soul in the school directed by her Lord. In her prayer following that first meeting, Jesus Himself dissipated the ultimate uncertainties of that humble Servant. Let us read from the Diary of Mother Leopoldina, on June 10, 1811:

... Last night [following her meeting with Fr. Bertoni] I prayed and this busied me for two and one half hours. This time passed for me in what seemed to be continuous communication. It seemed to me that the Lord was consoling me for having willed that I should submit myself to that external help. I would almost say that all passed in justifying myself, leading me to understand that He would

¹³¹ These personal notes of hers are from 1801. They were written during her Retreat. General Archives of the Sisters of the Holy Family. Verona.

not have asked this of me, of submitting to any other person. And it was only to this one [Fr. Gaspar] that the Lord asked this of me. I simply followed what He wanted of me, and He assured me that this is what He, the Master of my spirit, desired of me. He led me to understand that in order to help me, it would only be of Him that I would ask counsel and trust that He would make sure that I received the proper light. I then, came to understand the good of this and I experienced supreme consolation, that all had come to pass from the Lord Himself, as the Center and Principle of all. It seemed to me that He was saying to me that in order to direct me, there is not needed learning, because only one quality is at work in me, and that is Love.’

At the same time, to His Faithful Servant, the Lord imparted also the same directives. In his *Spiritual Journal*, under the date of June 12, 1811, we read:

... The fact is that you do not have to study for the spiritual direction of ... But, you need to have recourse to the Font of all Light. With this, much good will also come to you.

You must never precede, but always follow the Lord, as He illumines her, and from you, He will suggest to you, once recourse has been placed, with which He will make her proceed and correspond ...¹³²

As all can see, we are here in the introductory phase of a marvelous journey of two, willed and planned by Heaven.

8. Under the Guardianship of Love

The secret Voice of the Guest, speaks to His Servant, inviting her to protect and defend that Center of her soul where there had already taken up residence – even in sensible manner – His love:

... The day after the Lord led me to understand that in order to guard that Center where He dwells within my soul, it was proper for me to put up a barrier. It seemed, in order to put a name on it, that this should mean mortification. And just as my health did not permit me to do any, I reflected upon this somewhat. But, I know that the Lord was not asking penance of me, but rather protection. This can only be done by means of those virtues which can protect that Charity which the Lord has placed in my soul...

However, the practical realization of that divine command has shadows of uncertainty. There was not disturbance: whoever is vowed to Love, whoever of this Love has made himself an impassioned pilgrim, ought to keep in custody in his saddle-bag the precious breads of confidence and expectancy. In fact, a few days passed and the light was as bright as the sun. There came to her –without him ever being aware of all this – the Minister of God.

... A few days later, since it had been suggested to me to make a particular examen – to consider myself always in the presence of God, and to do that which is known to be of His good pleasure – I came to understand, in beginning

¹³² SA, Doc. 35, p. 670.

to practice this, that it would be that barrier which externally might protect that Center ...

The divine promise finds its seal: the voice of man is in perfect harmony with that of God. For whoever is vowed to Love, Love no longer gives a truce:

... Asking one night of the Lord, after one or two hours or prayer, the permission to be able to sleep, fearing that the length of the vigil might be harmful to my health and that as a result I would not be able to serve Him during the day, and I heard these words in response: 'I want you to be a Slave of Love, not of health.' I did not make any further reply. To live simply in habitual Charity is not enough for one, who has given herself to him, only asks for the grace to love him, and the commitment to please Him in all things... [February 16, 1811].

These loving thrusts want our souls present to every word, every slogan, every least activity. This is to be a love that would vivify the fleeting activity of which life is made up: from beginning to the end of everything. However, nature is always in ambush. On February 5th, Leopoldina's Diary contains a humble accusation which vibrates with loving compunction:

... To have neglected that vigilance ... which is the sole means with which I can show Him how little gratitude for so much love that He bears toward me ...

Her haste to repair this was immediate. The Minister of God counseled her to repeat the Examen of Conscience each hour, and this most fervent handmaid of the Lord would obey him:

February 8th. This morning, for a while after Communion, in the prayer that I offered, I came to know the great good of the frequent examination that I have undertaken, which recalled to me an even greater vigilance over myself, brought me the contentment of being able to do something that is proof of the desire that I would have of being able to correspond to the graces of the Lord, and to that particularly His love for me, and hence, I experienced so many affections...

9. In the Enclosure of Charity

There was no more time to pay heed to the Barrier, it is necessary to fix the eyes yearning for the Lord in the soul, even more within the Enclosure of Charity. The Minister of God made it easier for Leopoldina to attain to that goal, illuminating for her the way to follow. Up until now, she had looked to the Lord in order to do that which is known to be of His good pleasure. Now, her soul must rivet on Him her gaze in order to make herself a copy as conform as is possible to Him:

... It was said to me to begin the particular examen on these words of St. Gregory¹³³: That soul walks securely in the presence of Christ which in its every action looks constantly toward Him, modeling its own perfection on that of Him, who with His Humanity is the Species of the elect ...

¹³³ *Expositio in Primum Regum*, c. 2.

It was this passage from the great **Commentary on First Kings of St. Gregory the Great**, which precisely in those days that Fr. Gaspar was explaining to the Seminarians and Priests in the Diocesan Seminary. And Leopoldina felt happy to 'have one more means in order to consider the redeemer more often', while through her own experience she recognized how 'difficult it was to consider Him without being drawn toward Him.' The flight is made easier, when it was being watched over by the timely counsels of the Minister of God, always in harmony with the secret Voices of her soul's Guest. This constant and perfect recognition has something of the marvelous about it:

... To see that the lord comes always to the support of what His Minister is telling me, and that he indeed follows the Divine Will in my regard in all that he counsels me: I renewed within the desire to obey always further...

In her every perception of an even deeper appreciation of her own nothingness, in the consequent loving confidence in Him, her ascent continued. Thus, also in those days that were the most difficult because of all the business she had to handle, Leopoldina was by now living in solitude with her God:

... I experienced in this day on which I had many occupations a perfect peace and quiet in all, which seemed to me to come from this continual recall to internal solicitude with my God alone, without Whom nothing can penetrate in me, unless it is He... [October 7, 1812].

Her soul could already see a port, the next to the last: that which precedes that definitive landing on the shores of eternity:

... Now it seems to me that it is no longer me, but that it is He. There is only some remnant of me which I should expunge – and I move to do this in order for Him alone to remain, with nothing of me...

This luminous point of arrival is noted on October 17, 1812. Her young Guide, called expressly by God to direct into deeper Love this privileged soul, resolved with fidelity his delicate mission. In 22 months of illumined spiritual direction, this Adjutant of God deluded neither her Master, nor did he delude this directed soul. What was the secret of this happy result? –

... It is only because this person has followed that which He wants from me...¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Mother Naudet's hand-written Spiritual Diary, as also part of her letters, also hand-written by the Saint to the Servant of God, are conserved in the Archives of the General House of the Sisters of the Holy Family, in Verona. The notes of the above-mentioned Diary that appear here are taken from the publication of Fr. Joseph Stofella, *The Spiritual Diary of Leopoldina Naudet. The Foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Family and the Venerable Gaspar Bertoni, Founder of the Stigmatines*. In fact, this entire present chapter bespeaks of the dependence on that precious work. Cf. Supplement to the *BERTONIANO*, a periodical reserved to the Stigmatines. 1930, pp. 80; 293-372.

NB Translator's Note: an English translation of Mother Naudet's *Spiritual Diary* may be found on the web-site, under Mother Naudet: www.st-bertoni.com

10. The Route in the Dark

Now solidly established in pure Charity, Leopoldina had to go through the waves in order to offer the supreme attestation of love for her Divine Spouse, Who wanted her totally abandoned in him. The trials were already at the threshold of her soul and these would not give her respite until that day on which her spouse would invite her to celebrate in the harmony of Heaven that Canticle of Love which was her 'Act of Abandonment', that could flower only from the soul in the anguish of exile. In this final phase, by a mysterious joke of Providence, Fr. Gaspar would be both her light and her cross at the same time. These are the secrets of God which give form to the Saints.



Chapter 10

From the Plants to the Cultivators

[1808-1812]

1. ‘Yes’ to the Quest

The expression which provides the title for this present chapter is not ours, but is that of Fr. Camillo Cesare Bresciani.¹³⁵ This seemed to us to be a kind of compendium of the two-fold task which in the City and the Diocese of Verona, Providence chose to entrust to Fr. Bertoni within the early decades of the tormented 1800's: **the salvation of the youth** and **the renewal of the ecclesiastic spirit in the Clergy**. Having already pondered the first apostolate, we now wish to shed some light on the second.

In the writings of the Saint, we write: ... ***It is not necessary to find, but rather to form companions of one's own zeal and to draw them along, even the most timid ...***¹³⁶ Before beginning a warm exhortation to his Confreres in the Priesthood, the beautiful maxim was and remained to be for him a vital program of his apostolic soul. The organization of his first Marian Oratory, the rapid flowering of all the others in the city and outside the city, very shortly rendered Fr. Bertoni the center of a solid band of priests and clerics, dedicated to the youthful movement raised up by him.

The plan of a kind of trip to be undertaken with other Priests, probably in the form of a pilgrimage to Our Lady of the Rosary, organized by Fr. Bertoni, in the autumn of 1806 is a clear confirmation of this.¹³⁷ Nor was this an isolated initiative. Fr. Louis Bragato, a very well informed witness, assures us of this. He was a most pious cleric in those years, and he was much inspired by the actions of the Saint¹³⁸. When the Decree of Suppression came out in May 1807, the Marian Oratories were forced to disappear from the streets and the recreation fields of the city. However, that battle-group of Priests and Clerics, who thought of Fr. Bertoni as their leader, while they were diminished in number, intensified their active spiritual and intellectual activity around him.

The Ecclesiastical Cenacle at the Bertoni home was thus born. First it met at the home in St. Paul's, then moved to his residence in St. Firmus, always following the path of its animator. It was not an empty academy of vain 'know-it-alls', but it manifested rather an admirable dedication and a committed program of study, all aiming at integrating souls and minds in the service of an innovating apostolate that was much needed. We cannot offer the names of all the participants at those fervent evening gatherings, because a complete list has not come down to us. A few names do emerge.

¹³⁵ Camilo Cesare Bresciani, *Collection of Funeral Orations*. Vol. II. Verona 1866, p.19.

¹³⁶ Bertoni Manuscripts, n. 23. ***Primum Regum***.

¹³⁷ Stofella, cf. his cited study in the **BERTONIANO**, 1942, pp. 11-59.

¹³⁸ SA, Doc. 25, pp. 286, f.

The unfailing trio from St. Paul's Parish: Fr. Farinati, Fr. Allegri, Fr. Marani. Fr. Michaelangelo Gramego joined in certainly after Fr. Bertoni left St. Paul's parish confines for those of St. Firmus. Then there was the already mentioned seminarian, Louis Bragato. Among the very first members in order of time and fervor was the Servant of God, Fr. Nicholas Mazza. This last mentioned, from the time of his seminary life, chose in Fr. Bertoni as the Father of his soul, and he served also as his illumined guide for his sacred and profane studies.

2. A Clear Rejection of all Rigorism.

In Verona, the Ecclesiastical Cenacle in the Bertoni home became the center of a shrewd and courageous offensive against the heavy-handed, most pernicious heresy of Jansenism. This heresy, and the spiritual rigorism derived from it, suffocate all loving thrust of the soul toward God with the oppression of a terror that is as false as it is sterile. These evils could only find in Fr. Bertoni [whose soul had deeply experienced the most tender abandonment to Divine Love] the born adversary. These wrongs commanded an intelligent and constant action, directed toward beating back the artificial barriers that have been raised up to separate as much as possible those redeemed by the Redeemer.

He gave no attention to these poisoned enemies whose influence was spread far and wide. Beyond all human regard, for him as a Priest, what was important was his sacred duty to diffuse everywhere the rights of Jesus in souls. In this arduous battle his Ecclesiastical Superiors were with him. In a reorganization of the 'Colleges' for the discussion of Cases of Moral Theology and the Liturgy, in 1809, Bishop Liruti named the 31 year old Fr. Bertoni as the Definitor Theologian for the College of St. Nicholas.¹³⁹ This was the direct result of the reputation that he was gaining for that Cenacle gathering of Priests, due to the sagacious initiative of the Saint. This had found an immediate, favorable repercussion on the Chancery Office.

The faithfulness to the accomplishment of this new responsibility remains verified by direct documents treating of it and confirmed by a number of episodes that have been handed down to us. The solutions of not a few moral cases – written in good Latin - are able to be read and evaluated even today. His exposition is clear and gifted, his doctrine is solid, which he always refers back to St. Thomas and in the practical solutions, allows itself to present the tempering influence of St. Alphonsus Liguori.¹⁴⁰

The episodes echo that red-hot climate in which the discussions were sometimes held, provoked by the rather threatening intervention on the part of an ecclesiastic present, perhaps infected by Jansenism to some degree. In the meeting of January 14, 1814, the discussion of the Moral case had run its course, and the conclusion was reached among the participants, when a religious whose name, the community to which he belonged, the historians have not related to us, arose to

¹³⁹ SA, Doc. 16, pp. 85, f.

¹⁴⁰ Manoscritti Bertoni, n. 38.

contradict this. He read out a flood full of sophisms, poorly hiding the most noted Jansenistic propositions already condemned by the Church.

Fr. Gaspar listened to him attentive and patient until he had ended. Then, he spoke up: with a firmness that impressed all that gathering of priests, and point by point rebutted the pseudo-dissertation, placing his errors and the misconceptions before the view of all. When then his theological adversary tried to get out of being cornered in this rebuttal, Fr. Gaspar took him on with such an abundance of proofs as to reduce him to silence and to confusion, while all the others present simply admired his presentation.¹⁴¹

The Jansenists on their part moved against Fr. Gaspar a very heavy and tenacious campaign, in full harmony with the ideas they proposed. Directed against the Saint, they launched vulgar pamphlets in the public ways and even came to be extent of insulting him in his own dwelling. Fr. Gaspar defended himself, opposing this livid violence with his dignified calm. When he felt it might serve some purpose, he would willingly accept a discussion one on one, with that serene peace of mind which aims solely at the triumph of the truth and seeks to illumine the one wandering from it.

One day a real rabid opponent took on the Saint near the Church of St. Firmus Major. Seeing him along the way, he interrogated him suddenly on a point of doctrine somewhat in controversial manner, provoking him to pronounce himself right there on the street. Fr. Bertoni's response was immediate: calm, clear, exhaustive. The adversary seeing himself defeated, did not know how to respond. Having been beaten on the doctrinal level, he sought to gain new ground on a less noble level, by unloading against him a torrent of invectives and villainy. Fr. Bertoni understood that in those insults, doctrine had no place; these were directed simply against him. What difference does it make if one's whole frame trembles? This is the hour of God.

The faithful disciple knew how to find himself with the Master in the dark hours of his own Passion, overwhelmed with shame and insults, and responded with silence, as Jesus did in His dark time. An heroic silence which for the second time was too much for the fragile frame of Fr. Gaspar – once again, he collapsed.¹⁴² In this humiliation, this holy desire of his seems to have been heard:

...While Meditating on the Incarnation ... I experienced a very vivid faith, and strong desire of union and of association in the sufferings and shame of Jesus: with the petition of graces in order to suffer and to be disdained for him...

[September 28, 1808].

However, in his great heart as an Apostle, the thought that pained him the most was that this vituperation was inflicted on him by his brother priest, and what bitterness of soul this brought him. Fr. Gaspar loved **Priests**, so much so that **he reserved the best energies of his soul, pouring himself out with no reserve in an apostolate that lasted as long as his life did, directed to recalling to the good way those**

¹⁴¹ **Summarium, sup. Int., p. 28.**

¹⁴² SA, Doc. 26, p. 532.

who might have wandered off, to instill fervor into the tepid, and to encourage the good.¹⁴³

The official beginning of this methodical apostolate goes back in his life to the autumn of 1810¹⁴⁴. St. Gaspar was assigned to preach for the first time a course of Spiritual Exercises to the Seminarians, and to a substantial group of Priests of the City and Diocese of Verona. The result were of such efficacy that the 32 year old Priest was immediately entrusted with the spiritual direction of the Diocesan Seminary, with the task of preaching the regular annual and other retreats there, as well as the monthly Days of Recollection, the Sunday, feast day and holiday Meditations and Instructions during the year. The Canons of the Cathedral also had recourse to him for their College of Acolytes.

3. The Desolated Vineyard and the Drowsy Workers

When Fr. Bertoni began his apostolate among the Clergy of the Diocese, the Seminary of Verona was in the midst of an exhausting renewal from a very destructive financial and moral collapse. This ruin was brought about by a number of factors: one of course, was the truly deleterious example of priests who were all involved in the outcome of the French Revolution, and they showed much enthusiasm for the 'new times', and not even keeping their names, in some instances, from the Massonic lodges. From the end of 1807, the Diocesan Authorities had entrusted its direction to a man who for his excellent qualities of mind and heart, for the energy of will in his character, showed all the requirements to become its providential reformer: Fr. Louis Alberghini.

The appointment of Fr. Alberghini as Rector was the first step of the urgent reform: the choice then of Fr. Bertoni as the Spiritual Director of the Seminary [a choice due to the hidden influence of Fr. Louis Trevisani¹⁴⁵], smoothed the path for ultimate success.

The plan of that first and also for other Retreats, the copious material that collected outlines for meditations and instructions, preached between 1810 and 1812 by the Saint to the Priests of the Diocese, for the Seminarians and for the College of

¹⁴³ **NB: Translator's Note: in Fr. Bertoni's Apostolic Mission, a central aspect was reserved for ministry [as confessor, and personal retreats, spiritual direction] among his brother Priests and Seminarians. This ministry lasted as long as his life did, as Fr. Ceresatto reminds us – and is codified in his *Original Constitutions* :**

SEMINARY

- privileged Stigmatine apostolate 164
- chairs of teaching in s. accepted 67

So many of his 'private conversations' were aimed at spiritual direction, directed retreats of priests - **STIGMATINE APOSTOLATE: 163/2 255 277, f.**

¹⁴⁴ **NB: Translator's Note: like building blocks, these aspects of his Apostolic Mission flowered at the behest of his ecclesiastical Superiors: 1802: the youth [his Pastor]; 1810, Religious and Priests [his Bishop] – all summarized in his *Apostolic Missionaries* codified in his *Original Constitutions: 1816.***

¹⁴⁵ Bresciani, o.c., p. 106.

Acolytes, offer a synthesis that proved quite successful in this arduous apostolate, that imposes upon us at this point a certain pause for the reflection it merits. Only for those who would take the time to look over those many pages will feel taken up by their apostolic spirit that inflamed his priestly soul.

The apostolate among the Clergy Fr. Gaspar felt immediately that this was a particular mission entrusted to him from on High. Otherwise we would be at a loss to explain his uncanny tone of authority that he employs throughout [... *I have the honor and the duty to say to you...*], nor the frank approach with which he analyzes and denounces in the Priests of his time, for their sins, their lack of commitment and their weaknesses. There seems to have danced within his heart that counsel of St. Paul to Timothy: ... *proclaim the message and, welcome or unwelcome, insist on it. Refute falsehood, correct error, call to obedience - but do all with patience and with the intention of teaching* ... [2 Tm 4:1, f.].

We would even dare to say more: there is something prophetic in that impassioned appeal of the Preacher when he inexorably demolishes all that there is in Priests of the worldly and merely human spirit, in order to re-build there in their souls, unencumbered now from sin and from the trash of sins, the wonderful structure of that holiness required of their state. In his spirit of renewal of the ecclesiastic spirit, it might be said that Fr. Bertoni might constantly have his eyes of his soul riveted on this well-known passage of Jeremiah: ... *There! I am putting My words into your mouth. Look, today I am setting you over nations, and over kingdoms, to tear up, knock down,, to destroy, to overthrow and to plant* ... [Jr 1:9 b, f.]. His writings seem to so echo in a faithful way that action, and they vibrate still today with his bold program.

This seems all the more true in that this biblical passage just referred to here was cited and commented on by Fr. Bertoni in his Instructions to the Seminarians, precisely where he is presenting this theme:

*...The Vocation of the New Ministers of the New Spirit, called by the innovating and restoring Spirit of all. Their Vocation is to renew and to restore their priestly ministry and through this, the Church, by abolishing the old, merely human spirit, exciting the new and the divine, in the ineffable rectitude of the First Stone...*¹⁴⁶

4. The Renewal

The Meditations and the **Instructions on the First Book of Kings** [1 S today] is a concatenation of trumpet blasts and recalls for the urgent reform of the priestly spirit. Fr. Bertoni was not one who when confronted with such ruin and mediocrity, would fold his arms in discouragement: he courageously denounced the failures, very wisely pointed out the remedies: wept over the betrayals, but inspired trust and resolution. His voice was one of an incessant and trusting appeal to his confreres who had wandered off course, but was one also who shook up the tepid and those without energy, when with fervor and also in a more impassioned manner, he would repeat his

¹⁴⁶ *Instructions on 1st Kings.* Bertoni Manuscripts, Folder, n. 23.

challenging word of order: ***Renewal for the sake of renewal – and sanctification in order to be sanctified.***

His bold plan of reform bore the seal of the time: 1810-1811. The Church once again was reliving her indefinite Passion under Pontius Pilate of its time: this time he was called Napoleon, known as the 'Great.' May God pardon him. Pius VII, after his unworthy arrest on July 6, 1809, remained at the whim of the despot who impeded him from all free contact with the ecclesiastical world. The astute Napoleon thus hoped to be able to bend the Cardinals, Bishops and Prelates to his ambitious goals. Among the faithful and the clergy, the sense of loss was enormous.

In a period precisely in which so many Priests, even good ones, sent themselves somewhat cut off from the bonds of unity with the Roman Pontiff, Fr. Bertoni's plan of ecclesiastical *reform* began with an essential premise: full and total adherence to the Vicar of Christ. We read from one of his pages:

... This is the Plan of Reform through which, in the indefectible firmness of the First Rock, the old minister is reformed and is ascribed to the new...

- [I] *The open confession of faith without weakness and fear.***
- [II] *Imitation of the Passion of Christ without the comforts of life, disdaining even death itself.***
- [III] *Join in with authentic Priests to see together for the glory of God without being isolated out of self love or love for one's own family bonds.***
- [IV] *Desire Heaven, and no longer the revenues of this earth, or the honors of this world.*** ¹⁴⁷

In the final analysis, right after the suppression of the religious Orders, sanctioned and very rapidly made the law of the land by the Napoleonic laws [April-May 1810], the bold program inspired the diocesan Clergy to an integral return to the practice of the evangelical counsels. And the ideal of priestly holiness with a view to an heroic apostolate very soon came back to animate the Clergy, after the wandering of that unhappy decade. In this time of spiritual malaise in which many ecclesiastics of his time debated, Fr. Bertoni was able to perceive a secret yearning to go back to the abandoned summits. And he enlisted all those experiencing this:

....God begins to abolish and destroy manifestly the ancient and human spirit, both in the faithful as well as in the ministry, carefully inspecting the grain and separating it ... ¹⁴⁸

The fraternal invitation for renewal and to collaborate in this renewal program, through Fr. Bertoni's words, became an ardent heart-beat of divine charity which embraces all, even the most distant. The lines dedicated to illustrate the paternal

¹⁴⁷ ib.

¹⁴⁸ ib.

solicitude of God in initiating the encounter with a fallen Priest, do indeed touch one's soul:

... Almost immediately following even a hint of being converted, and After the first steps have been taken in this return, God hastens forward with His grace. For that little humiliation he sees to it that the first restorations and almost the outlines are established for a better way of life, there proceeds an example that edifies many souls. From one's sermons there blossoms forth an abundant fruit after only those first days of silence. And all of this is done in order to lure one into carrying through on the enterprise [of each one's own spiritual renewal].

Oh, who would ever realize how much do the souls of Pastors stand in the heart of God! Who would not further the loving goals of His Providence! If God would do this much for one who is not yet really converted, but only would hint at the first steps toward conversion, what would He not do with an authentic and perfect convert? We see this in Peter...¹⁴⁹

How difficult in that wasted and disorientated society that the temptation to pessimism and inertia remained always a threat to entrap the thrust also of those most willing. Pessimism, however, is not the sphere of the saints. The calamity of the times, far from discouraging, should ever more inflame a genuine apostle of Jesus Christ:

... those whom God calls in this time He disposes them to great services for his glory... [provided, of course, that they wish to docilely to abandon their soul to the transforming action of His grace] ... We cannot even think of what God would do with us and how much He would achieve in us, as we are the pupils of His eyes, if we did not place an obstacle to His grace, but if we would remit ourselves freely and totally in His hand...¹⁵⁰

This is already the note of his own Spiritual Journal, but reappears here with an addition which is a canticle of confidence in the merciful tenderness of God toward His Ministers, as we *are the pupils of His eyes*.

The 'reform' of the ecclesiastic spirit which Fr. Bertoni proclaimed with all the ardor of his apostolic soul, in the City and Diocese of St. Zeno was coming into realization with quickened stages. Fr. Bresciani, who had described the Seminary in 1807 as a 'desolate vine-yard', in 1841, without the slightest shadow of rhetorical exaggeration, could praise it 'for the splendor of its re-born ecclesiastic education'¹⁵¹. And Fr. Sommacompagna, around 1815, could refer to it as a monastery of monks, rather than a retreat of young ecclesiastics.¹⁵²

To attribute all this to Fr. Bertoni's presence would mean to commit a real wrong to the objective conscience which he had of his own personal mission. True men of God are simply incapable of reserving for themselves any monopoly at all. Both very zealous diocesan Shepherds, Bishops Liruti and Grasseri, contributed

¹⁴⁹ ib.

¹⁵⁰ ib

¹⁵¹ Bresciani, *Funeral Orations*, Vol. II. On the death of Fr. Louis Alberghini, p. 95.

¹⁵² Sommacompagna manuscripts. Communal Library. Folder n. 113.

efficaciously to the rapid and complete re-healing of the Veronese Clergy. They did this through an elect band of hard-working and holy Priests, such as Fr. Leonardi, Fr. Fortis, Fr. Provolo, Fr. Steeb, Fr. Mazza, Fr. Bresciani, glorious standards of the Veronese Church who knew how to chirp in harmonious accord to the divine breath of charity. Divine Providence did reserve for Fr. Bertoni the honor of pointing out in spited manner the path and the mission to sustain it even to the very last days of his long existence.

5. Guide and Recall

The infirmities that came to him rendered less frequent his fruitful appearances in the Seminary. However, as these diminished, there increased at his home the visits of Clerics and young Priests, who by now knew that for anyone in need, he could be approached in order to enkindle and to increase the flame of priestly zeal. In 1820, Bishop Liruti appointed Fr. Gaspar the **Examiner of Ecclesiastical Vocations**. Bishop Grasser re-confirmed this appointment. Thus, for almost 20 consecutive years the young candidates to the Altar matured their irrevocable decision in the light of his counsels.

Those for whom their scrutiny offered the occasion for their first meeting with the Saint, as Fr. Giacobbe tells us, remained 'subjected to the unction of his zeal and charity that shone through him from sparkling eyes, from his face enkindled and with his attitude of full attention, surprised with the supreme gift of an immediate penetration into the very depths of their souls'¹⁵³. To return to him became for many of them a necessity. Here the testimony of his first biographer acquires a special value, as in this, he is making known his own personal experience.

In carrying out this delicate office, Fr. Gaspar employed 'zeal and charity in comforting' those who in this process of sifting he believed were called by God, but also with firmness in excluding others, resisting impassibly their reasoning, influence they might bring to bear, and the recommendations they might receive. And often enough he would receive sooner or later the serene gratitude of those who were not approved. Very often, once their ambitions were unmasked, they believed that the inflexibility of the Saint was the right path for them, and they recognized that he was much moved by God.

After he had withdrawn to the Stimate [1816], his apostolate among the diocesan clergy did not experience any slowing down. He was always tireless in preaching retreats, both to groups as well as to individuals, to seminarians or to Priests, either in the little Chapel of the Transfiguration, next to his poor room, or in his room itself, from his bed of his long and very painful illnesses.

It would be no exaggeration to state that Fr. Bertoni, in his city and Diocese, for as long as he lived, **exercised the most powerful challenge to priestly souls**. The most beautiful prodigies worked by Grace in this apostolate, through St. Gaspar,

¹⁵³ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 407, ff.

remain a secret known only to God. However, two episodes of this era have come down to us.

6. Through Less Traveled Paths

The unpleasant story of Fr. Gaziero merits here at least a reference: it serves for nothing other than an implicit confirmation of the illumined dexterity of the Saint in guiding souls, as a witness of the unconditioned trust placed in him by his Superiors in his counsels and decisions. Here is the story in brief.

During the days of a Retreat, which would be offered just before the reception of Holy Orders, the young and very pious Seminary, one Joseph Gaziero of Soave, was the victim of a deep disturbance which, overwhelming him, had a deep impact on his even physically, as was evident. He returned home to his family. The affectionate appeals addressed to him by his Superiors and by Bishop Grassler himself, who tried to bring him some peace, and bring him back to the Seminary. All were ineffective in overcoming his indecision.

However, just a single word pronounced by Fr. Bertoni in charity- persuaded the hesitant cleric to continue his ascent toward the altar. In that correct soul, but one who was easily the victim of anguish of spirit, Fr. Gaspar had received a deep insight. After a year's absence, the young man returned to the Seminary, bringing with him a letter from Fr. Bertoni, with the request that this be shown to his Superiors and kept with him always. In that sheet of paper, Fr. Gaspar prohibited young Gaziero from participating in the future in annual retreats, commanding him rather to distance himself whenever the Last Ends would be preached. For his daily meditations, Fr. Gaspar prescribed to him to use only the well known book, *Manna for the Soul*.

He remained faithful to these particular directives of the Saint, and so Fr. Gaziero lived serenely and contented for 35 years, as an exemplary priest and pastor. However, in 1867, he was struck by the bite of a poisoned accusation: a confrere of his accused him of liberalism to his Bishop, Louis di Canossa. The Diocesan pastor, badly informed, relieved that he had discovered a confirmation of this accusation from the fact that Fr. Gaziero always stood out through the years by his methodical absence from the obligatory annual retreat.

The Bishop wrote him a very strong letter, threatening him among other things, with suspension if in that year and in the following years he did not present himself for the required Retreat. Because of the terrible sensitivity of this pious Priest, that accusation and the strong letter from his Bishop were mortal blows. He fell ill. In an indescribable bitterness of soul, the poor man found in Fr. Cajetan Giacobbe, his close confidant and friend, one in whom he could confide. It was through the hand-written letter of Fr. Bertoni, no deceased for many years, that was sent to the Bishop. Once he had realized that a misunderstanding had occurred, Bishop di Canossa sent Fr. Giacobbe to him, with grave concern, to the bed-side of his afflicted friend to comfort him, encourage him to follow from then on with tranquility of conscience, the directives of Fr. Gaspar. With his superior insight. Fr. Gaspar had understood the particular needs of this delicate soul.

In February of the following year, the poor man died. His regret was that he had not made known in good time the special letter he had received years before for his good friend, Fr. Bertoni.¹⁵⁴

7. A Bridge over the Abyss.

In the early days of July 1813, in Verona, the name of Angelo Allegri was on the lips of all, because of the drama of a priestly life that had been profaned by apostasy and by crime¹⁵⁵. He was an ex-religious and priest, who from the muddy waters of avarice, he found an easy and short cut to his crime. He was hoping to inherit the goods of a step-brother of his, he had prepared poison for him to eat, and by a tragic error, it served to kill his own mother.

Far from any salutary remorse, his condemnation weighed heavily on his heart, hardened as he developed a paroxysm of hatred and despair. While awaiting execution, pious and zealous Priests, with their fraternal hearts, approached him in his cell, in the confidence that the unfortunate might find salvation, but casting himself ship-wrecked into the sea of Divine Mercy. However, at every visit there followed a rejection that was ever more disturbing, and to every invitation, his response was a decided 'no', with insults of horrendous blasphemies. It seemed as though nothing could be done.

In the meantime, all were talking. This case even disturbed the civil authorities. Anthony Smancini [Prefect of the Department of the Adige] came in person to visit the Vicar General, Monsignor Dionigi, in order to solicit from him a certain provision that might put an end to the public scandal. The Vicar thought of Fr. Bertoni. To medicate certain deep wounds in one's soul, there is needed the gentle hand of a Saint. And the Saint responded immediately, even though the time was late.

Fr. Bertoni's visit to the condemned man was arranged for the following morning. That night, Fr. Bertoni could only spend it in a vigil of prayer, i.e., with utmost confidence, he exercised his 'violence' toward Heaven for the return of that wayward priest brother, for he, too, had been a minister of God, *the pupil of His eyes*. At dawn, he offered Mass for the unfortunate man, certainly one of those Masses in which the Disciple and the Master talked together.

At the prison, in the precise moment when Fr. Gaspar was on his way toward the cell of the condemned man, this prisoner, overwhelmed by desperate anger, rejected furiously all visits from Priests, who had presented themselves to him in an extreme attempt to save him. However, as soon as he recognized Fr. Gaspar at a distance, he cut off half way in his own throat one more imprecation. His wide open eyes changed their expression, and they shone with a new anguish, a sudden deep

¹⁵⁴ SA, Doc. 33, p. 640.

¹⁵⁵ In the Chancery Office files of Verona [Prot. N.1806, December 13], there is registered the laicization of one Fr. Angelo Allegri, dei Geronimini. In the register of Deaths [State Archives, July 8, 1813, there may be found this note; 'Angelo Allegri, the son of the late Bartholomew, and the late Victoria Trevisani, ex-Friar of the suppressed Monastery of Victoria, was condemned to death on March 27, 1813. This sentence was carried out on July 8, 1813.'

sigh of liberation. And his voice came forth in deep sobs to bless the one whom the Mercy of God had sent to him to lift him up out of the abyss.

In the Sacrament of Divine Pardon, that abominable life was renewed in an act of repentance poured forth from the depths of his contrite soul. In his tears, he implored incessantly pardon of God and of his fellow man.¹⁵⁶

Perhaps never before had the voice of the Saint beat so profoundly with charity and tenderness, as in pronouncing over that poor soul, almost annihilated under the weight of his own sins. *I absolve you!* These words renewed him. Perhaps never before as in this instance had the hand of the saint so trembled at the flood of a secret joy, as in tracing over that head, bowed down now, the sign of the Cross, and to seal that soul for all eternity with the merciful pardon of God.

On Jul 8, 1813, in Piazza Navona, Allegri rose up onto the scaffold. The scandal was in great part repaired. That conversion in Verona was considered to be miracle. But in order to bring it about, Grace had chosen Fr. Bertoni, which surprised no one:

... We cannot even think of what God would do with us, and how much he would achieve in us, and for us, as we are the pupils of His eyes, if we did not place any obstacle to His grace ...

Fr. Bertoni did not place any obstacle: he gave his all.



¹⁵⁶ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 485-486.

Chapter 11

In the Canticle of Abandonment in God

[1812-1834]

1. A Necessary Preface

Before illustrating that which in Fr. Bertoni was the coronation of his holy apostolate [the Religious Family founded by him], we think it opportune to approach to some extent his soul, in order to garner there in the part of his life which extends from October 1812, until August of 1834, those definitive lines of his spirituality.

There is no second *Spiritual Journal* to guide us on this decisive pathway of his soul, in his itinerary traced the ‘Master’ for his faithful servant. This will involve pondering the rather copious correspondence between Fr. Bertoni and Mother Naudet¹⁵⁷. Of the Letters written by the saint to the Servant of God and kept in the Archives, the first one is from November 1812. And the final note in his *Spiritual Journal* is June 28, 1813.

For the knowledge of Fr. Bertoni’s spirituality, the point of chronological connection of two documents does not offer in and of itself any absolute guarantee to that continuity of development upon which only an attentive examination can decide. However, in our view, this examen ends in a positive manner. The dominant spiritual attitude that the letters to Mother Naudet reveal in Fr. Bertoni [her confidante, for her loving abandonment in God], more is found in germ, in the *Spiritual Journal*. What is very revealing is this note:

12th OCTOBER 1808

[63.] *Whoever is drawn by the Spirit to a way of greater perfection - as it is that of being totally abandoned to God, - should not resent others who are of lower virtue and use lesser means [for their perfection], which are also good.*¹⁵⁸

This expression, **that of being totally abandoned to God**, points out what would be in Fr. Bertoni, on that date, the secure orientation of soul.

¹⁵⁷ The veneration of Mother Leopoldina toward the Father of her soul is evidenced in the 190 Letters [some of them brief notes, including just some fragments] written to her by Fr. Gaspar, from the end of 1812, until mid-1834. She died in August of that year. For the most part, these are letters of spiritual direction; they offer counsels on the Rules of the Institute of the Holy Family **[NB: Translator’s Note: there is an English translation of her Original Constitutions in the website: www.st.bertoni-com]**. Here and there can be found biographical indications of the particular moment in which they were written. A number of these, united to the few remains of the correspondence between Fr. Bertoni - Fr. Bragato make up in some manner for the lack of any *Spiritual Journal* at this stage of his life, the mature years of Fr. Gaspar. As for the Letters of Mother Leopoldina Naudet, there could only be found a very few of them and some fragments.

¹⁵⁸ SA, Doc, p. 662.

In December 1808, he wrote: *Let God alone be sought and nothing else; not consolations, not pleasures*¹⁵⁹. On the 16th July 1809, he wrote:

[139.] Lose the habit of doing your own will. Do anything as moved by God's will with the intention of pleasing Him and giving Him honor. (Scupoli, *Addition to the Spiritual Combat*)¹⁶⁰

These are the principles that offer the prelude for this goal which is now near at hand, towards which his spirit is extended. Moved by grace toward this blessed goal, Fr. Gaspar arrived by following the paths of Ignatian asceticism. This brings the human soul to a holy 'indifference', through which one does not want *on its part, health rather than illness, wealth rather than poverty, honors rather than dishonor, a long life, rather than a short one...*¹⁶¹ In brief, this leads the soul to the threshold of Holy Abandonment. This is that spiritual attitude which better has us understand and to love the soul of St. Gaspar Bertoni.

2. An Unequal Pace

From the time of his Mother Brunora's death, there was no one to temper in a loving manner in her son, his thirst for penance, his mortified life in him had assumed of increased rigor. **The very varied activities of the Sacred Ministry**, the assiduous vigils at the Canossian Retreat and in the Seminary, the little rest that he took, and this with chosen frequency, and often on the floor of his own room with the foot-stool as his pillow, his little nourishment, the long hours consecrated to his piety and study¹⁶² - all this, little by little had weakened the once robust frame. For anyone committed to Love, this love allows no truce. He seemed to have a thirst for mortification, also in its external form, that was never slaked, this was one of the aspects of the man which the more impressed those who had the good fortune to live along-side the Saint. The biographers refer to this, but perhaps they made the mistake of not referring sufficiently to the secret flame from which this proceeded.

It seems that this flame proceeded from his 'great desire for union and for association with the most shameful sufferings of Jesus'¹⁶³, so that the 'portrait' that his soul was committed to drawing of Him within itself, might succeed as the most perfect possible¹⁶⁴. He was totally committed to such a vibrant program, that it was logical that also in the area of external mortification Fr. Gaspar was ensnared in the usual 'imprudence' of the Saints. The result was that by mid-October 1812, his body cried out that it had had enough, but this was in a tone so severe that it seemed to be the death-sentence, without any possibility of an appeal. What he suffered was a very

¹⁵⁹ ib., p. 665,

¹⁶⁰ ib, p. 667.

¹⁶¹ Bertoni Manuscripts, n. 16. Retreat to the Clergy – 1810.

¹⁶² SA, Doc. 16, p. 417.

¹⁶³ SA, Doc.35: His *Spiritual Journal*, September 27, 1808, p. 660.

¹⁶⁴ ib, February 26, 1809 – p. 667.

grave attack of military fever, which [as appears in the Spiritual Diary of Mother Leopoldina Naudet], reached its crisis on October 26th.¹⁶⁵

Then, the disease gradually diminished bringing such a sense of relief about the middle of the following month, to the happy surprise of all who cared for him. It seemed as though the ship-wreck in some manner was brought to the shore. The first letter of the convalescing Fr. Gaspar to Mother Leopoldina is dated November 16, 1812.

3. Between Life and Death

The serious illness of Fr. Gaspar was a worry to half of Verona. The possible departure of this man was looked upon a city calamity and to avoid, there was an authentic mobilization of generous and pious souls. Public prayers were raised up in various Churches of the city, arousing a moving plebiscite of affection and esteem¹⁶⁶. The parishes of St. Paul in Campo Marzio and St. Firmus, tied to the apostolate of young Fr. Bertoni, the youth of the city, the Marian Oratories, the Seminarians, the Acolytes of the Cathedral, the pious women and young girls living in the protection of the Canossian Retreat – all these souls were committed to bring ‘violence’ to bear on Heaven to obtain a favor, which brought its pressure on all in an equal manner.

During those days of the more serious phases of his terrible illness, some young Priests and a few seminarians, offered their services, forming a kind of crown at his bed-side, which manifested in their trepidation a deep sentiment that each of them had for him of sincere reverence and filial affection. For some years, Fr. Gaspar had given them a secret word which bound them to a work that he hoped to bring to realization for the greater glory of God and for the good of the Church.

In that sick-room also, very punctual every evening, would be the visit of a vigorous old man: the most beloved figure of a Priest and Master, whom the seriously ill man had known from the years now long gone of his own youth: Fr. Louis Fortis. Often gently bending over the patient, the ex-Jesuit often prayed in a soft voice, but clear, that beautiful in which the soul offers itself to God, abandons itself to a boundless trust into the loving arms of God:

.... Take, o Lord, and receive through the hands of St. Ignatius, all my liberty, understanding and will. All that I have and possess. You, Lord, have given all to me. I now give it back to You, O Lord. All of it is Yours. Dispose of it according to Your Will. Give me Your love and Your grace for that is enough for me ...¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Stofella, *The Spiritual Diary of Leopoldina Naudet...* o.c., in: BERTONIANO 1930, p. 332.

¹⁶⁶ SA, Doc. 20, p. 138; Doc. 26, pp. 416, f.

¹⁶⁷ **NB: Translator's Note: this is a slight paraphrasing of St. Ignatius' prayer, his *Suscipe* - cf. *Spiritual Exercises*, n. 234.**

And this is what sufficed. The serious illness of 1812, which came upon him so suddenly, was certainly, among the most efficacious lessons on holy abandonment imparted to Fr. Gaspar by the Divine Pedagogue¹⁶⁸.

4. In the School of God

Fr. Bertoni reached the heroic practice precisely because he had learned how to be an attentive and loving disciple in the School of God. The infallible traces of the Divine Instruction are in him the dominant biblical language in his letters which are the guide of this present Chapter. There is simply no spiritual situation that does not find its adequate commentary in Sacred Scripture, which had become the perennial font of light and by this time, the almost exclusive nourishment of his soul.

The sudden collapse of his once strong physical nature, but which had been used to excess, rather than just facing, made way for his authentic physiognomy, by despoiling it of every element that might induce him to illusion. If Fr. Bertoni had been only a man of action, that cruel sickness which even with the salutary care he received, would have brought him truly to the extremes. The traces of all this would stay with him for the remaining 40 years of his life, and would have made of him one who was washed up for good. On the contrary, though, from that holy external and much mortified dynamism, there flowed an even more profound activity that was all spiritual. This rendered him an even more refined collaborator of God, in his work of working out in himself and in others the marks of Christian perfection. In the light of an Ignatian thought, Fr. Gaspar had for some time uncovered the admirable simplicity from the divine plan in working out the sanctification of the soul.

The sole Architect of all holiness is God Himself. God, ever ready to work wonders in every soul who does not place hindrances to his divine action. Fr. Bertoni committed himself to this divine plan with all his soul, contributing his collaboration in absolute docility: he would thus live out personally a canticle of abandoned love to the Loving Providence of God.

5. In the Game of Providence

His first letters to Mother Leopoldina assure us by their reverberation in St. Gaspar of the ineffable impression of finding himself under the dolorous, but intelligence bearing of the Divine Farmer¹⁶⁹, who was gradually detaching me from the world of persons and activity, in which up to that present moment, he had been completely absorbed.

Would his first meeting he had in his convalescence with the Bishop been the occasion for his appointing the priest to even more delicate tasks, that would require

¹⁶⁸ This lesson [of full and loving docility to the Divine Will] it seems that the Lord wanted to repeat this to me in my ears, when I was so seriously sick in these recent days. Every evening, He had me hear from the lips of my old Teacher, Fr. Louis Fortis, offer that excellent prayer which I followed in my heart ...*Receive, o Lord, through the hands of St. Ignatius, all my freedom, etc.* [cf. SA, Doc. 35, Letter of November 26, 1812, p. 68].

¹⁶⁹ SA, Doc. 35. Letter of November 16, 1812, p. 676.

him take leave of the Canossian Retreat? He explained to Mother Leopoldina that she should not be disturbed at all about this, because *perhaps God is taking from her work a great obstacle and impediment... All concurs to the good for one who loves God ...* [His own response in all this was] *to say with every affection: 'Thy will be done.' and since it was to serve his Divine Majesty that I came to St. Joseph's, and so with that same will to serve Him, I take my leave ...*¹⁷⁰

The incidents and the disappointments, the more they seemed to take human light from the future, so much the more did they render in Fr. Bertoni a more vigorous hope in that God Who makes all concur unto good for those who love Him. And he was so taken over by that 'blessed trust' that is most efficacious in comforting and sustaining anyone who in the anguish of trial might experience the impression of traveling in the dark:

... Do not be afraid, Reverend Mother, in Paradise it will always be a very clear day. You will not be able there to lose sight of your Lord. But, for as long as we are on this earth, there are days and nights that succeed one another. May you follow His path; even by night, the lord will make sure some star shines ...

With surprising assuredness he indicated the tactic that the Master preferentially follows in attracting certain souls to Himself. A little at his own expense, Fr. Gaspar had already learned to recognize God's loving joking with souls who pertain to Him in a more intimate manner:

...While I was quite ill, and after other prohibitions had come to me, it seemed to me that the Lord was making use of me for one of His jokes of His loving Providence, with which He now is exercising you. At that time, this matter kept me quite content, as it does now, since I could never have pretended to displease you, due to the motive of it seemed to me to know what is pleasing in His Divine Majesty and of greater use that would result for you...¹⁷¹

As for the object – and no longer just the instrument - of God's joke, the Saint's attitude does not change; because rather than just a sentiment of profound humility provides harmony and robustness to the canticle for the soul that is abandoned and trusting in the 'Divine Providence', to Whom serve equally

... all things, both prosperous as well as adverse, and the good wills as well as those that are perverse, of human beings ... If I did not have so many sins that should make me tremble, I would now have more than ever a better taste, while since I have done almost nothing, I am just watching what the Lord is doing. Oh how good He is! Oh how He surpasses our every praise! We, however, should never cease to praise Him in so far as we can, because this is what He deserves, and it is only right that He should be admired, blessed, loved and praised by these wretched, lowly vermin...May He be thanked, blessed and loved forever...!¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ ib.

¹⁷¹ ib.

¹⁷² ib, Letter of January 15, 1813, p. 688.

Docility to the action of God, his confident abandonment in Him, makes no accusation of wavering, not even under the most bitter torments of his physical pain. A serious and very painful infection in his leg is described by him as *a little tumor*, in 1821. This would immobilize him for 8 years, and almost continuously between his arm chair and his bed. Some of those surgical interventions [and just think of the surgery of those times!] had to be as deep as the bone, and they are beyond count. Fr. Giacobbe stated that there were more than 200 of them. In a letter to Mother Leopoldina Naudet, almost incidentally, he hints at the absolute fidelity to his supreme torture on the crucible of an extremely painful, but loving experience:

... the present life, beyond serving God and suffering for Him, is seen through experience not to have any other allurements that would commit our desires...¹⁷³

This is the tract:

... The Lord keeps me in bed, and under the irons and the knives; may be blessed. 'I will bless the Lord in all times.' As long as He is served and this suffices for me. However, I do recommend myself to your prayers, so that God might continue in me the patience He grants me. 'Without Me you can do nothing'...¹⁷⁴

Crosses, adversities, physical sufferings for Fr. Gaspar remain always:

... the better portion which God reserves for those dear to Him; this is not the mouthful for all...¹⁷⁵ [rather, this is the most suitable diet for the soul, which in the spirit of Holy Abandonment where one is...] ***a bit up, and a bit down, a bit straight and a bit bent, but go ahead in the wake of Him Who precedes us with His Cross on His shoulders ...***¹⁷⁶

6. Loving Confidence

The formal commitment of the soul possessed by Divine Love and totally abandoned in him, Fr. Gaspar reduced it essentially to emptying out and defending the soul from all that might 'impede', or even to slow down God's action. With this, then one is called to collaborate with the divine action, offering

... here on earth [through prayer] the perfect and perennial sacrifice and the holocaust of oneself which the Blessed Spirits and the Saints in Heaven before God offer....¹⁷⁷ Of prime urgency, therefore, it to prepare one's soul to conquer the ***first nature***, so that ***it does not impede the holy and stupendous effects of the second nature communicated to us by the grace of adoption of the children of God ...***¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ ib., Letter of August 24, 1813, p. 718.

¹⁷⁴ ib., Letter of May 11, 1827, p. 727.

¹⁷⁵ ib., Letter of December 14, 1812, p. 687.

¹⁷⁶ ib., Letter of December 14, 1812, p. 687.

¹⁷⁷ ib., Letter of December 5, 1812, p. 689.

¹⁷⁸ ib., Letter of February 1813, p. 691.

In the last analysis, all is reduced to establishing the soul in the loving disposition to carry out in every instant

... not in part, but in everything, the Divine Will, in what pertains to our sanctification, and what is useful for our neighbor and His Glory ...¹⁷⁹

This is the ideal disposition for the action of God:

... May His Divine will reign, also free in our hearts, and that there be verified in all its meaning: 'The reign of God is within you'; 'I the Lord your God strong and zealous.' This is the love of God, active and committed to so take over our hearts, that God alone might reign there as a free Master and that He not remain just a Guest with His hands tied...¹⁸⁰

Defects, weaknesses and the miseries of soul for Fr. Bertonni do not already constitute an obstacle, but rather offer a right for 'loving confidence':

... Our defects were already well known to the Lord, even before He invited us. And if these are now becoming better known before our own eyes, we should also even more to have known His Goodness and Omnipotence; so, it is necessary and dutiful for us that together with our humility, confidence should also increase...¹⁸¹

Let us allow that loving confidence should mature its attitudes. This will become **filial confidence**, sure in the maternal love of God:

... An infant is never surer than when it is asleep in the arms of its mother, and abandons every thought and solicitude about itself ...

This loving confidence will become **a spousal abandonment**:

... Let us freely allow God to enter and take possession of this soul which He loves and seeks to unite to Himself. We know the time of His visit; let us put aside all creatures and our senses and not disturb this soul when she reposes in her Lord. Not is anything else required. In His time, she will produce a fruit that is so precious, so high, so noble – worthy of nuptials that are so holy, so sublime...¹⁸²

This is the sublime style of mystics who express through images the experience of communion with the Inexpressible. The practice of loving Abandonment has brought Fr. Gaspar to holiness.

¹⁷⁹ ib., Letter of 21 December 1812, p. 689.

¹⁸⁰ ib., Letter of December 5, 1812, p. 683.

¹⁸¹ ib., Letter of June 28, 1813, p. 711.

¹⁸² Ib., Letter of February 1813, p. 691.

7. The Refusal which was not a Whim

In June of 1819, Fr. Gaspar ended – like a lightning bolt out of a clear sky - his spiritual direction of Mother Naudet. His decision did not have any shadow of uncertainty. One sole letter of spiritual direction was the exception, specifically granted to confirm her Rule¹⁸³.

The repeated and prudent appeals made by the Servant of God were to no end. Certain letters of hers in this long period show the deep regret of her soul in finding herself simply bereft of that comfort of a sure guide as was the 'Minister of God' to her, the one whom the Lord had expressly assigned to her. There is an echo of her sorrowful cry, but one that is full of love and hope, which dominates her 'Act of Abandonment' of 1820: *I need a guide for myself and for this enterprise; My love, you think it over.*¹⁸⁴

And yet, the Saint remained firm in his decision. He responded to the Servant of God, who was seeking some light in the choice of a new Spiritual Director, in an unusual laconic manner:

... It is fitting for me to say that I see only obscurity, and from every side, except from one alone, where I see quite clearly: that is that I cannot assume, nor maintain any direction, except for that little bit which I hold in my hands ...¹⁸⁵

To temper somewhat the increasing anguish of Mother Leopoldina in her long and fruitless search for a new guide, Fr. Bertoni, while remaining unmoved in his decision, offers words of supernatural comfort, always inspired by the most trusting Abandonment in God:

¹⁸³ Ib., Letter of January 10, 1828, pp. 727, ff. [NB: Translator's Note: an English translation of her Original Constitutions may be found on this website: www.st-bertoni.com].

¹⁸⁴ Stofella, *The Spiritual Diary*, l.c., p. 365.

NB: Translator's Note: An English translation of Mother Naudet's Act of Abandonment:

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Ignatius.

Act of Abandonment

O my Lord... from this moment, and for always, I abandon all my interests into Your hands. I entrust myself entirely to Your infinite goodness, being sure, to the extent that I am able, that You care for me and of all that You have entrusted to me. So, from now on, I wish to live without anguish and fears, to do whatever I can for You, to serve You, and to make You loved and served by others, to the extent of my ability. I wish to work for Your glory and Your service and You think of me... To You, I abandon everything. You are able, You know how, and You will - all this suffices for me to be sure of what You will do. Give me Your holy love, zeal for Your glory; increase always in me trust and confidence in You. I ask all this through the merits of Your Most Holy Mother, Mary, to whom you can refuse nothing of what she asks of You. I ask it through the merits of St. Joseph, Your foster-father, and of my advocate, St. Ignatius [July 1820, f. 108].

[The Act of Abandonment is the document which expresses the entire spirit of Leopoldina and which distinguishes the most personal characteristic of her spirituality - cf. Adami].

¹⁸⁵ SA, Doc., 35. Letter, prior to February 20, 1834, p. 724.

*... As you do not have at present any person to whose prudence and experience you can confide entirely, as it is said, and in every matter: prayer is to be offered to God so that He might deign through His goodness provide you with one; and for this end, and for whatever these prayers are and are able to be, I offer also my own prayers, as will all of my followers, as something for which I am in debt to your charity, since I am not able to offer my own services nor may any of my men, either now, or ever. In the meantime, where you see clearly that which has to be done, then do that in all freedom, trusting fully in God who, where it might be necessary for the salvation of your soul and for the souls who are under your care, I would not want to deny the light of the wisdom to His Minister. He is able to accomplish even with the tongues of infants a certain eloquence to speak well of Him... for the rest, the Lord, Who is the Father of all consolation, grant you tranquility and peace, and fort you with his grace and love...*¹⁸⁶

The years passed slowly and Mother Leopoldina found herself in a rough sea, always buffeted about by trial, and she followed here route in darkness. Jesus was assuredly in the boat with her, even in the very 'center of her soul', but, as on the lake in the storm, He gave every impression of being asleep. This loving game continued. In her heart that felt suspended, the lost soul knocked again another time at the door that would not open. His response, this man who had been her illumined build of yesterday, explain in unmistakable terms the reason for his persistent refusal: ***When the Lord says: 'Enough!' to someone, he cannot respond: 'I will continue'.***

The fact that Fr. Gaspar overcame without any sign of regret, with assuredness and decisiveness, the common manner of reasoning, shows how profoundly he experienced the dispositions of Providence and as such, he did not intend to withdraw from them in any manner.

From this long trial which anguished the life of the Servant of God in these last 14 years of her life, Fr. Gaspar understood anew how ***the Lord might make use of him for a game of loving Providence with which to exercise*** one in the heroic practice of Holy Abandonment, the very one who had offered herself to His Love. The very harsh anguish that Mother Leopoldina experienced could have indeed moved her guide who had resigned this office, but certainly not to the point of bringing displeasure to the Lord. He did all to ***please God,*** and for ***the greater good*** that he could not return to that great soul so deeply immersed in trial. These were the divine plans that Fr. Gaspar knew and had to further to he did.

And Mother Leopoldina furrowed along on the 'capricious' waves that her Divine Lover raised up around her so that she remained always in His power, without the help of any other guide, she reached her home port in peace on August 17, 1834. That very day, in a truly caring letter of condolence, with perfect understanding of its cause, Fr. Bertoni did not hesitate in describing this very holy woman who had now passed to the eternal embrace of her spouse:

¹⁸⁶ SA, Doc. 35, Letter of October 16, 1825, pp. 724, f.

... She was one of those souls who was not ordinary – to keep her in this life is a very great grace that God our Lord does make. It is a life not reserved only to those few with whom they live, but are so much good for the multitude for whom they live ...¹⁸⁷

8. A Gesture of Incoherence?

In the first days of August, 1813, Fr. Bertoni suffered a relapse. It seems that this time, his illness did not have that alarming character of the year before, since, by the end of that month, Fr. Gaspar was already undergoing a quiet convalescence in the quiet country district of Colognola ai Colli. However, even at that peaceful sojourn a touch of bitterness reached him from the Chancery Office:

... I have received the news that they are thinking in the Seminary to appoint me Vice Rector there; this is something that pierces me to the core and causes me supreme sadness and embarrassment ...

This is how Fr. Gaspar related the case to Mother Leopoldina. As the letter goes on, he submits his views to the decisive judgment of the Servant of God, in a rather detailed presentation, that seems to have been a kind of thinking on paper with some dexterity showing how this responsibility is repugnant to him, since it is something *alien to his vocation*. The particulars of this ‘plan’ of his are not of interest here.

However, it is of interest to explain why it is that he would experience such repugnance for that office. It is necessary to become disavowed of the matter to see if, and to what point, his own retiring nature played a part in the plan which, in all reality, was one that was trying to elude dispositions in his regard that came from legitimate superiors.

The energetic renewal going on in the local Seminary, led by the Rector, Fr. Louis Alberghini, was not lacking in its excesses, which created in the long view of the matter, a real unpleasant climate of heavy-handedness, both among the seminarians as well as among the faculty. Fr. Gaspar, who from 1810 on had been the Spiritual Director there, was better informed on this matter than perhaps anyone else. He understood clearly, that a Vice-Rector, whoever he might be, would have been immediately under the thumb of the authoritarian Fr. Alberghini.

Even more so that which rendered him absolutely hesitant before such an appointment was that in his mind it was simply impossible with his position as Spiritual Director.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, and in particular, precisely in those years, this man of God felt deep within himself to bring into life an Institute of Priests. This adds further strength to his statement when faced with the possibility of being appointed as Vice Rector that this office was ***alien to his vocation***. He was convinced that the inner causes of his own dissent, he could not, nor should he say, so that he would not find himself ***committed in some explanation that would bring with it not insignificant consequences***. Furthermore, he laid claim to ***the argument of his own health***

¹⁸⁷ ib., Letter to Sophia Gagnere, Sisters of the Holy Family, p. 730.

¹⁸⁸ This is what he expressed in a letter without date. Manuscripts 73-6.

which in reality, turned out quite well], as the most convincing to save him from that responsibility that he felt so deeply that he had to avoid. Can it be asked: did this trembling before a responsibility also reveal in him something merely human? So he wrote on to Mother Naudet:

... If you should think that these fears of mine are vain, or excessive, or too human: I do not withdraw from the Cross, nor from the consequences that these times connect to offices of this kind; and in your prayers I trust to enter for the Divine Glory into a conflict that is above my abilities: since, if on the one hand I might be lacking in generosity – on the other hand, I could be temerarious. And to take counsel from others is a little bit dangerous, not so much to me, but that would be to them, because it would be like one waking up sleep-walkers, which is something better left to the Lord and to them, little by little...¹⁸⁹

Therefore, he left up to the Servant of God the free initiative to act, or not to act, being sure that there would not be lacking in her both the prudence and the light to decide in accord with the supreme interests of God in mind. Fr. Bertoni then concluded:

... However, regarding all of this I want to know whether you think that this is fitting for the Glory of God, and whether you do judge these steps of mine to be false, or perhaps just too human. I hope it is not a difficulty for you to write to me, and to let me know; whether I should do this, or not, as the matter seems to you to be for the greater glory of God ...

If in the first part of this letter there seems to be the more evident a certain restlessness, and whether his subtle plan of avoiding this obedience is suspect because of his excessively human reasoning – the rest of the letter then dissipates all doubt as Fr. Bertoni seems to return on powerful wings to his habitual climate, as one still and always at rest in the arms of a loving Providence. Blessed is anyone who dwells above with the Most High, and places in God his assurance:

... It is seen that the Lord wishes that we remain mindful of Him, and in Him and let our every thought and affection be in Him perpetually firm and concentrated. And if for this we forget other matters: He will either remind us of these realities, or with His Providence will conduct the matter than we, with all our remembering and thinking, could have done on our own. In fact, we are always diligent when 'we love [diligimus] God'. Blesses is anyone who loses himself in this abyss! Blessed is anyone who casts himself spiritedly and ship-wrecked into this ocean!¹⁹⁰

Amen! Amen!

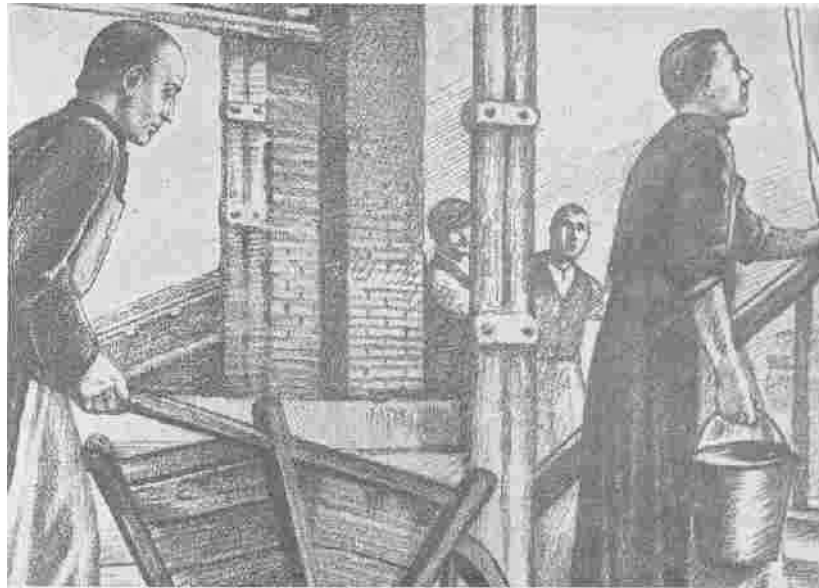
†
†††
†

¹⁸⁹ SA, Doc. 35, Letter of August 24, 1813, p. 717.

¹⁹⁰ SA, Doc 35, Letter of August 31, 1813, p. 719.



An illustration of Fr. Bertoni's broad apostolic mission: writing the constitutions of the Stigmatine Congregation; teaching the youth; with the Marian Oratories; preaching parish missions; giving spiritual direction to the clergy.



Fr. Bertoni and his companions working in the remodeling of the Stimate

The Spiritual Profile **of** **St. Gaspar Bertoni**



Fr. Bertoni and the Stimate

Its Features and Spirit

Rev. John Ceresatto, CSS

Part Four

Apostolic Missionaries in the Service of Bishops

Section 1 - A Contemplation Toward Hope:

The Church of the Future

Translation from Italian:

Rev. Joseph C. Henchey, CSS

[from Lincoln, NE – Solemnity of St. Peter and St. Paul, 2005]

Electronic Edition: Tereza Lopes [Lay Stigmatine]

Last updated on Advent, 2014

TABLE of CONTENTS
PART FOUR
APOSTOLIC MISSIONARIES IN THE SERVICE OF BISHOPS
SECTION ONE
A Contemplation toward Hope: The Church of the Future

<u>Chapter 12:</u> Preludes toward the ‘ <i>Little Company of Jesus</i> ’	127
1. The Voice of St. Ignatius 2. Orientations of his Soul 3. <i>A United Virtue is stronger</i> 4. A Sign from on High? 5. The Company of Jesus returns to Life 6. A Dynamic Vigil.	
<u>Chapter 13:</u> At the <i>Stimmate</i>	137
1. The Paths of Providence 2. A Chronicle of the Early Arrivals 3. <i>In any manner whatsoever...!</i> 4. The Whispers of the World 5. The Pastor’s Search 6. With Eyes toward the Future 7. Two Separations and New Arrivals.	
<u>Chapter 14:</u> The Christian Formation of the Youth	147
1. Scholastic Activity 2. Mind and Heart 3. Pauses for the Soul 4. Results and Testimonies 5. The Marian Oratory at the Stimmate	
<u>Chapter 15:</u> In the Spirit of a Charism	155
1. Ministries 2. God is so generous 3. Experience Jesus Christ 4. A Radical Poverty 5. What about the Structures?	
<u>APPENDIX</u> [Added by Translator]	167

Two Jesuit Vows of Obedience:

The Apostolic Missionary Mode [CF ## 2; Part IX: 158 – 186] and

Corporate Stigmatine Obedience [CF ## 138 – 151]



PART FOUR

APOSTOLIC MISSIONARIES IN THE SERVICE OF BISHOPS

Chapter 12:

Preludes toward the ‘Little Company of Jesus’

1. St. Ignatius’ Voice

If we are to believe Fr. Giacobbe, Fr. Bertoni would have been thinking about instituting a Congregation *from the time he was a Seminarian*.¹⁹¹ As the fervent Acolyte of St. Paul’s Parish in Campo Marzio, when he was called to become the **Missionary to the Youth**, Gaspar was already dreaming of a program of action for that future Institute of his. Twenty years later it would spring into life, inspiring itself on **a most broad horizon of apostolic Charity**.

In the very committed years of his first priestly apostolate, the idea of an Institute of Priests certainly occupied the heart and mind of Fr. Gaspar. The only hesitation was that the light from on high had not yet illumined him fully on the program and the way to follow. And it was the great Saint, himself the convert of Manresa, to confirm him in this program and to clarify the path to be follow. These lines from his *Spiritual Journal* are quite indicative:

... Introduction to the Annual Retreat: In a visit to St. Ignatius’ altar with my companions, I experienced much devotion and recollection, with a great internal sweetness and some tears, even though the visit was brief.

It seemed to me that the saint welcomed us and was inviting us to promote the greater glory of God, as he did, and by the same ways, but not in all the modes that he was able to use. It seemed to me that he wanted to say:

*Onward, soldiers of Christ, put on the belt of fortitude, take up the shield of the faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the divine word, and fight with the ancient serpent. Make my spirit come alive in all of you and in others through you...*¹⁹²

The great Founder of the Company of Jesus certainly was not talking to one unknown to him. With the light of his examples, Aloysius Gonzaga had illumined and sustained the spiritual journey of Fr. Bertoni from his youth to his priesthood. Having reached this goal, Aloysius Gonzaga faded into the background – so to speak - in handing over the elect soul of his protector and own Patriarch, St. Ignatius:

*... For the examen it is necessary to choose a saint of one’s own vocation as a mirror. Then one finds matter to confess every day. All that is lacking from that perfection, is a defect ...*¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ SA, Doc. 26, p. 342.

¹⁹² SA, Doc. 35, pp. 659-660.

¹⁹³ Ib., p. 658.

This is a note from his *Spiritual Journal*, of July 30, 1808 [the eve of the Saint's Feast]. The very personal pages of his more than hint that the 'mirror' he had in mind for his own spiritual life was precisely St. Ignatius of Loyola. Two characteristics of the great Saint had fascinated him: his all-consuming zeal for the Glory of God, and his innovative piety that unleashed the golden Book of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

In a society that the shocks of the revolutionaries of France had over-turned so much, in the visible slackening of the remaining religious Orders, the ideal of a Company, no matter how small it might be, but along the lines of that of Ignatius, unfortunately suppressed, appealed to Fr. Bertoni as something even more than opportune, but truly necessary.

2. Orientations of his Soul

Some notes from his *Spiritual Journal* [almost all from 1808] direct the spiritual progress of his soul toward the ideal of the religious life. Poverty, which in the Constitutions would be defined as that *bulwark of religious discipline*, has the honor of being the most frequently noted:

... today I experienced a powerful movement to follow our Lord more closely, at the cost of life through poverty and shame...¹⁹⁴

In those souls truly of God it is easier to find deficient more the theory than the actual practice. A month later, in fact, it notes in his *Spiritual Journal*:

... Joy in adversity and the consequences of real poverty with thanksgiving to the Lord and he offering for greater manifestations of shame and of suffering, should He hold me worthy. This is the best gift of which I consider myself to be downright unworthy ... There was the desire to imitate Christ in His poverty and in the anguish of poverty ...¹⁹⁵

The note of July 23, 1809, almost splitting open the veils of a secrete reserve, he locates poverty as the foundation of the Institute he would like to establish:

... To begin this undertaking, there is need to have already made the acquisition of great and heroic virtue. 'The essential capital is poverty; and then all the other virtues ...'

On the following day, among the virtues he found necessary to wage ***a great war on hell***, he re-emphasizes the ***detachment from all things, so that the demon might not have the means whereby to seize us ...***

As for chastity this has been noted above. For obedience, the note of December 23, 1808 is significant. It seems almost like an anticipated warning for one who is destined to become the Founder and Superior for life in the new Religious Family:

¹⁹⁴ ib., p. 660. Note of July 22, 1808.

¹⁹⁵ ib., p. 662. Note of October 22, 1808.

... The vow of obedience for one who has no superior, but rather indeed is the Superior, it binds the spirit to a total dependence from God in everything ...

These are simple and only schematic notes, but they do provide something of a blessed compendium for religious life.

3. A United Force is Stronger

For the foundation of his Institute, Fr. Bertoni was much inspired by the ideal that was so alive in him of a **fraternal collaboration among Priests** for the purpose of sustaining one another in the paths of the spirit, and to unite souls and arms and hearts for the sake of an urgent apostolate among the faithful.

Fr. Gaspar writing from Mantua to Mother Naudet to remind the vacillating Fr. Matthew Farinati that ***he look not just at the present good, which he can do on his own, but to the good of the entire little company, which will always be more than that which comes from one alone and will have greater consequences...***¹⁹⁶

Previously, in his Instructions delivered to the Seminarians on the **First Book of Kings** [1811], he had pointed out of

... gathering, uniting workers under one and the same spirit: 'A United Force is Stronger'; separating from among them a division of perfect workers ... imitators of the Apostolic life, so that with this army of assembled examples, to go on then to the assistance of our neighbor and to weaken the demons...¹⁹⁷

What is the purpose of this specialized division?

... to gather together and to unite the light of many examples: to diffuse everywhere the light of preaching ...

In the exercise of their specific ministry [that of the divine word] these new apostles should be:

... upright in their intention to preach directly not to the pocket books, but to the soul, not to the ears, but to the heart, not to be praised, but to be followed; not to draw the audience to themselves, but to Christ ...

This is a courageous program but one that could be realized whenever the preacher

... would always have his heart directed to Heaven where he returns to rest from his continual fatigue, as to the natural term of them; to heaven where there is formed the rule of his judgments and directions, and there he directs his desires, there he directs the souls with effectiveness...¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ **BERTONIANO** 1931-32. Letter 57, p. 337.

¹⁹⁷ Manoscritti Bertoni, n. 24. Meditation 44.

¹⁹⁸ ib.

A 'Company' of this caliber, no matter how small, would not just improvise; for this goal it would have to 'proceed' to the apostolic action [in its members] ***the secret life as was that of Christ, in which there might be had the ease of forming the spirit ...***

Success would necessarily crown this beautiful undertaking when it would be presented in the struggle well prepared for battle and animated by a well-defined program, and this would be: ***the courage to suffer, a spirit disposed to sustain persecutions; ... to attribute the results not to oneself, but to God, to flee one's own glory to seek solely that of God...***¹⁹⁹

The ***Compendium Rude*** which synthesizes in a few pages the Constitutions of Fr. Bertoni's institute, written after 1840, maintains that its ideal dependence is on the very seductive force of ***the division of perfect workers***, anticipated by Fr. Bertoni in 1811 in his preaching to the young seminarians preparing for the Diocese of St. Zenobio.

4. A Sign from on High

On July 15, 1810 in Verona there occurred the solemn 'Translation' of the mortal remains of St. Gualfardo. Among the bearers of the sacred relics we find Fr. Gaspar and his close friends, Fr. Gramego and Fr. Farinati. All three of them felt within themselves a further strengthening of that secret impulse to withdraw to a life of greater perfection.²⁰⁰ Faithful, as always, to his principle: ***to follow, but never to anticipate the will of God.*** It is easy for us to imagine the fervor with which Fr. Bertoni attended in prayer for the Lord to manifest to him His plans regarding the Work that He wanted from him.

This humble and confident waiting – seems to have had from heaven the favor of an extraordinary sign. Fr. Lenotti wrote: 'Even though with some hesitancy, he told Fr. Marani that he had had a celestial vision immediately following the suppression of the Convents that took place in 1810, in which it seemed as though he was going to be the founder of a new religious congregation.'²⁰¹ This special sign seemed then to give flight in the saint to his lingering doubts and uncertainty:

... If the Lord has made clear the object of His glory, He will also make clear gradually how and when it will happen. And you, Reverend Mother 'await upon the Lord in the city until endowed from on high with the power for this ...

These words of Fr. Gaspar to Mother Naudet, written on June 28, 1813, with regard to the Institute, the realization of which she was waiting.²⁰² These words reflect, with some chronological precision, the serene and suppliant attitude of the Saint while

¹⁹⁹ ib., Meditation 54.

²⁰⁰ Manuscripts of Fr. Lenotti, *A Few Reflections on the Life of Fr. Michael Gramego*. A copy under n. 3 in the Archives at the Stimmatum.

²⁰¹ SA, Doc. 20, pp. 132-133.

²⁰² A quote: 'remain in the Cenacle until being invested with the strength from on high, waiting on the Lord.'

he, too, awaited light from on high, on the *manner* and on the *time* for his Work with which the Lord has inspired him.

Another passage from a letter to the same Servant of God, dated August 14, 1813, offers a further proof of this. From Colognolla ai Colli, while convalescing from his first relapse into that serious illness of 1812, Fr. Gaspar thanked the Servant of God for her effective prayer for the recovery of his health, and added:

... I entreat you most sincerely to use that same charity for my poor soul, which is ailing from so many defects, even more than my body is, and for the purpose that it might serve God our Lord and His Church as He is commanding me to do...²⁰³

That command refers – in our opinion – to the Institute that Fr. Bertoni would found three years later.

5. The Company of Jesus Rises up again.

When Napoleon fell, August 7, 1814, the most tried Roman Pontiff, Pius VII, with the Papal Bull, ***Sollicitudo***, announced to the entire Catholic world the integral restoration of the Company of Jesus, rewarding that revered and tenacious band of Priests who had remained heroically faithful to the spirit and the ideal of St. Ignatius.²⁰⁴

And from every part of Italy there was a hurrying back to those first houses of the Company now re-opened. Also in Verona, ex-Jesuits and Diocesan Priests experienced the fascination of the great Order that had been re-born. Among the first, we find one who is already well known to us, being so intimately tied to St. Gaspar: Fr. Fortis, whom Providence had destined to become the first *Prepositus General* of the risen Company of Jesus.²⁰⁵

Among the young priests of Verona, most desirous of giving their own names to the reborn Company only very few of them would ever be able to realize their dream, and Bishop Liruti held firm in his refusal to let them go. Among those desirous of going, we find the following who might have made the flight to the Company, are three of Fr. Gaspar's close friends: Fr. Matthew Farinati²⁰⁶, Fr. Michaelangelo Gramego²⁰⁷, as well as the newly ordained priest, Fr. Louis Bragato²⁰⁸.

²⁰³ SA, Doc. 35, p. 717, August 24, 1813.

²⁰⁴ From the Papal Bull of Pius VII: '... We would hold Ourselves accountable of very grave fault in these such grave needs of Christianity, if we failed to employ those salutary remedies which God, in His singular Providence, administers to us: and if We, placed in the Bark of Peter, which is continuously agitated and assailed by such storms, should refuse to make use of such expert and failed rowers, who spontaneously offers Us their work in order to break through the waves of a stormy sea which in every moment is threatened with ship-wreck and extermination ...'

²⁰⁵ Fr. Fortis had returned to Verona, his native City, in 1811. In the anguish of real poverty, his ever-memorable disciple always found in him the affectionate and delicate assistance [cf. SA, Doc. 26, pp. 333-488]. From January 1813, due to Fr. Bertoni's protracted illness, little by little he took over the spiritual care of the Seminary.

²⁰⁶ General Archives of the Sons of Charity. Roma: Letter Galvani-Canossa.

As for Fr. Bertoni, he did not experience the least ‘temptation’ in this regard. Rather it was he who dissuaded Fr. Gramego, and perhaps also Fr. Bragato, from asking the permission to go from their staunch Diocesan Shepherd, assuring his two friends from the bottom of his heart that their generous dream would not remain unrealized. Thus, even the strong opposition of Bishop Liruti played into the hands of the plan of Providence. Perhaps all this was nothing more than to enable the first members of the Institute that Fr. Gaspar would found, to be prepared for that day.

5. A very Active Vigil

a. The Marian Oratories come out into the open

When, at the unexpected dismantling of Napoleonic power – [1814], the repressive laws against religious liberty gradually gave up their strangle-hold, and Verona returned to contemplate admiringly the re-flowering of an institution which others had believed were extinct for ever: the Marian Oratories. In the passage of just a few months, it could be said that ‘there was not a Church,’ in our city, whether parish or subsidiary, which did not see an Oratory opened for its own youth. And in some churches, there were groups formed also for girls, strengthening all the young people in their piety and fervor, and seeing the harvest of the most beautiful and copious fruits from such a holy institution.²⁰⁹

The first Founder and organizer of the Oratories, was also the very soul of the surprising renewal. At St. Firmus Major he immediately spawned the new life to an Oratory, directing it ‘quite soon to that perfection to which it was accustomed to lead its works any time he put his hand to it.’²¹⁰ This new Oratory of Fr. Bertoni was called in honor of the ‘Purity of the Virgin Mary, and all the members in the city and beyond, looked to her as their Model. This time, too, ever-faithful to his principle: *A United Force is stronger*, Fr. Bertoni sought young collaborators among the priests, to whom he was able to communicate his admirable spirit of the apostolate.

In fact, on February 25, 1816, the catalogue of the Membership began with the names of four priests: Gaspar Bertoni, Nicholas Mazza, John Mary Marani and Michaelangelo Gramego.²¹¹ Among the names might also be found other devout persons, such as the young Count, Francis Cartolari. He would one day become a

²⁰⁷ Manoscritti Lenotti, *Reflections on the Life of Fr. Gramego*, in a copy found in the Archives at the Stimate, p. 3.

²⁰⁸ From the Spiritual Diary of Fr. Bragato [September 1814]: ‘When will the day come when, removed from the world, and having taken refuge in the Company, where I might live as a dead man in a tomb, to all the matters regarding the senses, and not to think of anything, and to live only for God...? [cf. Manoscritti Bragato, p. 27. Archives of the Stimate, Verona.] Furthermore, as for the renewed desire for the religious life there followed a veiled hint at the impossibility of any immediate realization of it: ‘... and I shed heart-felt tears of having fallen into these times, in which it is necessary to put off the realization of my dream...’ [ib., p. 32]

²⁰⁹ SA, Doc. 26, pp, 371, f.

²¹⁰ ib, p. 370.

²¹¹ Communal Library of Verona. cf. Folder Cavattoni.

Priest, would enter the Stimate, and would be an admirable example of humility and detachment from this world. The girls' Oratory also came into being at this time at St. Firmus Major, and this, too, was the work of Fr. Gaspar.²¹²

b. Apostolic Missionary

The Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith with its Prescript of December 20, 1817, honored Fr. Bertoni with the title of *Apostolic Missionary*.²¹³ The naming of him was through the intervention of the Canon, from the Marche, Louis Pacifico Pacetti who had the Saint as his collaborator in the Parish Mission to the People and to the Clergy, in both Verona and Mantua. And he wanted spontaneously to achieve this so that from Rome Fr. Gaspar might receive the most worthy recognition.

At Mantua with Canon Pacetti, the Saint preached two Retreats to the Priests of the City and the Diocese in the fall of 1816. Fr. Lenotti, referring back to these some 40 years later, stated that among the priests that were still alive then who had shared in those Exercises, 'the memory of Fr. Bertoni still remained in benediction', for that apostolate that lasted little more than two weeks.²¹⁴ This was the only time in which the Saint had occasion to sound the depths of his priestly soul in the Diocese neighboring on his own, of St. Zeno.

The apostolate to which this man of God was the more occupied in the two years that preceded his withdrawal to the Stimate was – according to both Fr. Lenotti and Fr. Giacobbe – **the preaching of Parish Missions**. Among all that he did preach, there remains documentation only for the Parish Mission preached at St. Firmus Major, that began on May 14, 1816 and which was concluded on the 26th, after some unusual and agitated happenings. The rather challenging events of that Parish Mission remains to this day one that draws much interest, as it provides some indication of the political and religious temperature of that delicate time of transition.

When the French forces had just about left [as did the man who had brought all the upheaval], when in Verona, and elsewhere there reappeared the austere tents of the Austrians. That exceptional concourse of believing people [especially of men], from the most disparate parts of the city, into that crowded concentration in the Church, alarmed somewhat more than necessary the rigid Lieutenants of His Apostolic Majesty. They were simply not able to leave well enough alone – as this was an event that was most easily controlled - which all that movement would calm right down at the doors of the Church.

Under a false light of suspicion, they found a more than exhaustive explanation for the uncertainties and the involvement of the ecclesiastical Authority. The adverse pronouncement of the Government, arrived, fortunately, when that Mission was coming to its conclusion.

²¹² Stofella, *Note per servire alla Storia del Ven. Bertoni*. Series 5, p. 22. in: *BERTONIANO 1942*.

²¹³ SA, Doc. 8, p. 44.

²¹⁴ SA, Doc. 20, p. 154.

c. The Chronicle of that Memorable Parish Mission

That Parish Mission for Verona was defined by her historians as the most memorable of the century. The one who had been its intrepid Director, Canon Pacetti, on June 21, 1816, sent to Venice, to the Holy Marquess, Madeline di Canossa, a confidential report from which we believe we have the essential facts.²¹⁵ The Missionary from the Marche had designated as his collaborators the Venerable Fr. Peter Leonardi,²¹⁶ and Fr. Gaspar Bertoni. However, once he got to Verona, he found that both preachers were not able to hold to the agreement that they had made. Nor was this the only difficulty. Against this Mission, from the outset – we read textually – ‘there had broken out all, and I mean all, the forces of hell’. However, there was nothing to fear, as the ‘Virgin Mother will take care of all.’ And the Canon got on quite well with Fr. Bertoni.

However, there was a further difficulty. This would be the ‘collared’ enemies, those priests intent on sabotaging, with their envy, their sarcasm, and their disdain, every good work. The Bishop, acting on false accusations, cut off the ‘dialogue’, and gave the order to end the second day of the triduum offered in thanksgiving, as willed by the Vicar General, in thanksgiving. And then there was a problem from the Government of Venice, which prohibited from that time on, the giving of any more Missions to the people without previous authorization, and forbidding introducing priests to conduct them who would not be from the area.²¹⁷

This was a reference made to the Monsignor from the Marche, **Pacifico Pacetti**, considered at least suspect [despite his first name and family name, as ‘**pacific** and a man of *peace*’!], and even rather as a spy for the Pontifical State. *Canon* Pacetti concludes his Report to Madeline di Canossa: ‘... However, at all this, I have always had to laugh because I knew that in all the churches of Verona work was going on day and night, as Fr Galvani told me, which reached such most beautiful dispositions that had never been experienced before and a larger number of conversions of the greatest kind that had never been seen here before...’²¹⁸

In the end, beyond all the efforts of the demon, the Parish Mission of St. Firmus Major left on Verona a providential effect of a thunderous and refreshing downpour, on a land that had been dried up in three lusters of the revolutionary climate.

d. At the Threshold of Reality

For the entire duration of the Mission, Fr. Bertoni sustained a role of the first order: the daily meditations to the people were reserved to him. Of those sermons there remains only some outlines in his writings, but the testimonies of the historians supply in a harmonious manner in attributing to the Saint the tone and power of a prophet. In Verona, too, for more than 15 years there had been in the air a kind of

²¹⁵ General Archives of the Canossian Daughters of Charity, Rome.

²¹⁶ Camillo Cesare Bresciani, *Life of Fr. Peter Leonardi*, Verona Frizerio Type 1855,p. 136.

²¹⁷ SA, Doc. 12,p. 58.

²¹⁸ Archives at the Stimmate. Galvani Folder.

insidious false freedom that had aimed at suppressing for ever in consciences the Fear of the Lord and of sin. The accumulated hatred and injustices in the name of 'Equality'. The moral ruin that was brought about through the principles of 'free love', took its victims from every social level. And many of these victims, tired and disillusioned, were attracted by a secret appeal, and came in droves for that monumental time at St. Firmus'. Fr. Gaspar was aware of this.

To shake up the many consciences which had tumbled into evil, it was an essential premise to introduce there some salutary fear for the time lost. The tone, which was extremely strong, used by Fr. Gaspar in the course of his preaching, has been emphasized by the historians almost with a sense of surprise, due to his perfect coherence to that priestly frank approach. This had already been inculcated by Fr. Bertoni in another situation in which he had been called by God to renew the Christian spirit in society through the apostolate of the divine word. It might help to review a passage or two. This is what the saint had preached to the Seminarians in 1811:

... As the time of the manifestation had come, the Elect employs a strong charity, without weakness; he does not look for the effect whether it would be well, or badly received, but he keeps his look fixed on the order of God and to satisfy his responsibility, leaving the outcome up to God... ²¹⁹

That strength, never separated from his usual unction, appeared to all as the expression of a Divine Charity that burned in his own soul. And there was a wave of emotion to his strong and sad voice that had broken through the religious silence of the audience, with singular frequency, with scarcely repressed sighs: these were hearts that the disturbing word of the holy orator had upset, and they surrendered to God.²²⁰

There was even the incident during one of the sermons, how a man began to confess his sins out loud, of his 'seventy years of a dissolute life.'²²¹ In the Sacrament of Divine Pardon, from the beginning of the memorable Mission, Fr. Bertoni was the most sought for priest. By now, his voice was hoarse: kneeling in the confessional of Fr. Bertoni was like feeling oneself at the feet of Jesus.²²² This is the statement of a truly impassioned and conscientious witness: 'As Fr Bertoni had worked with the Roman Apostolic Missionary, Canon Pacetti, he was truly consumed in the exercise of the Mission. However, he was gifted with a felicity of exposition, surpassed by his unction in leading the listener to realize the proposals brought to the fore.' His instructions brought light, his preaching tone could terrify and frighten: but his confessions were a downpour which re germinated life.²²³

²¹⁹ Mss Bertoni, n. 23: Instructions on *Primum Regum*.

²²⁰ SA, Doc. 26, p. 377.

²²¹ Cf. the report of Canon Pacetti, noted above.

²²² Cf. Biography of Fr. Gramego, by Fr. Lenotti. Manuscripts, Archives of the Stimmate.

²²³ Camillo Cesar Bresciani, *Collection of Funeral Orations*. Vol. II. Verona 1866, p. 23.

That Mission was for Fr. Bertoni the providential experience that clarified definitively the original inspiration. A few months later, and Providence would give him the hint for departure. Here in three precious lines of Fr. Gaspar written to Mother Leopoldina Naudet, on August 17, 1816:

... The Arch-Priest Galvani... has offered me the Stimate as an opportune place to establish a Congregation of priests who would live under the rules of St. Ignatius...²²⁴

The crib, poor and simple like Bethlehem, is read: the active and difficult wait was over.

†
†††
†

²²⁴ BERTONIANO, 1932. Letter 54, p. 333.

Chapter 13

At the Stimate

1816-1831

1. The Paths of Providence

A Church, with a little Oratory along-side, a modest house and small garden, which provided much peace and a bit of green: this is what made up the property of the Stimate. The name derives from the Stigmata of St. Francis, from which the Church took its name. For two centuries, it had belonged to a Confraternity, named for the Stigmata, for which the Napoleonic Decree was one of death, that May 26, 1806. Once the group was dissolved, their goods were confiscated.

The pock-marked Church was very soon pressed into service as a little shop to repair military carriages. A few years later, once the profanation had been completed, it was decided to make it over into a real dive; but this ignoble project failed thanks to the ever-vigilant zeal of one Fr. Peter Leonardi. It was he who had suggested to the rather wealthy miller, one Joseph Bellotti, to purchase the property of the Church and all pertaining to it, in order one day to establish there a charitable work.²²⁵

The document of purchase bore the date of October 11, 1813.²²⁶ In 1816, Mr. Bellotti maintained there at his own expense two priest teachers, with two elementary classrooms. In his charitable endeavor, Mr. Bellotti had had the immediate support and financial assistance of Fr. Nicholas Galvani. As his health was poor, realizing that his own death was near, the good man thought of insuring the continuity of his little endeavor, by naming Fr. Galvani as his heir. A few days before his death, from his bed of real suffering, the marvelous man sent Fr. Galvani this note: '... Some time ago, I drew up my last Will and Testament. I have made you responsible for the properties of St. Teresa's Convent, the Stimate and the House of the Derelitti; and I beg you out of charity not to refuse this, and by the mercy of Jesus Christ, to perpetuate and to develop the work begun there... You know what I mean ... but I cannot write any further. Bellotti.'²²⁷ On July 27, 1816, Joseph Bellotti died.

The fears of the testator regarding the uncertainties of Fr. Galvani in accepting the burden of these places were well founded. Fr. Galvani felt that he was most inept in directing a work immersed in dense shadows.²²⁸ However, in the passing of but a few weeks, those dark clouds were much less dense. This was due to the provident circumstances that opened the path toward a solution, even though not yet totally definitive. The Convent of St. Teresa, named in the note of the dying Bellotti, was a convent along side the Stimate. Once Mr. Bellotti was gone, Mother Leopoldina

²²⁵ Camillo Cesare Bresciani, *Vita di D. Pietro Leonardi*, Veronese Priest, Apostolic Missionary, Founder of the Congregation of the Daughters of Charity. Verona Frizierio 1855 type, p. 136.

²²⁶ SA, Doc. 12, p. 58.

²²⁷ Archives in the Stimate. Galvani folder.

²²⁸ ib.

Naudet petitioned his heir for it.²²⁹ After some hesitancy, Fr. Galvani gave in to some extent, to the wishes of the Servant of God, by granting to her the use of it.

In this way, the problem of the Convent was resolved, but it was now necessary to take care of the matter of the little school for the poor children of the neighborhood being conducted in the Stimate. This was a problem, though, that Fr. Galvani noted was the most difficult for him. Fr. Galvani, however, began thinking of his most beloved disciple and spiritual son: Fr. Gaspar Bertoni. Let us read again Fr. Bertoni's note announcing this to Mother Naudet:

... the Arch-Priest Galvani has offered me the Stimate as an opportune place to establish a Congregation of Priests who would live under the Rules of St. Ignatius, after having narrated with pleasure that St. Teresa's Convent and its property would be for Your Reverence ...

One particular might not appear all that clearly. And that is where he speaks of the tuition-free school being offered to the youngsters of the area. Fr. Galvani was perfectly informed on the secret intentions of Fr. Gaspar. **He knew quite well that the Christian education through a tuition-free manner, of the youth was fully within his plans and interests. Furthermore, the gratuitous school for the youth would serve as an excellent cover to hide from the civil authorities the nascent religious institute.** Thus, with the beneficence of a deceased miller, the trust of an arch-priest and the initiative of a saint, God found a way to open the way for the Congregation of the Stigmatines. For the ways of Divine Providence, at this point, a round of applause which It has certainly merited.

2. The Chronicle of the First Arrivals

It was the morning of November 4, 1816. At the Stimate, naturally Fr. Gaspar had not arrived alone. With him, were the inseparable Fr. John Mary Marani, and the good Brother Paul Zanoli, the first Coadjutor of the nascent Institute. A few weeks later, the Community would increase by one more subject: Fr. Michaelangelo Gramego. It was just a matter of time for this to take place! From the time that Fr. Gaspar was assigned to St. Firmus Church, Fr. Gramego entrusted himself to him as his guide and father. Once Fr. Gaspar had left the parish, Fr. Gramego felt that he had been deprived from his gentle but strong support. On the morning of December 4th, he came to visit Fr. Bertoni at the Stimate and never left again. He was gifted with a joyful and lively personality, and when he arrived on the scene, in the austerity of the surroundings, he was like a breath of fresh air and holy joy. Fr. Lenotti defined him as the 'delight of the nascent Congregation.'²³⁰

It is to Fr. Gramego that we owe the gift of a little notebook of early memories that were jotted down more or less casually, but with such a sense of cordiality, recordings the joys and the sorrows of the beginnings of the Congregation. He often narrates with very pleasant humor, and even more often, he sings of the joy of

²²⁹ Letter of Mother Naudet to Fr. Galvani, cf. **BERTONIANO**, Vol. 5 [1931-1932]

²³⁰ Manoscritti Leonotti, *Vita di D. Michaelangelo Gramego*. Archives of the Stimate. Verona.

fraternal communion. His little manuscript is entitled; *Reminiscences of those who came to the Stimate.*²³¹ The first page has the value of bringing a typically family style to the notes he offers. This is how it reads:

‘...On the 4th of November 1816, the following have come to live at the Stimate, in whatever manner they could....: the Reverend Father Gaspar Bertoni, as head and father; Fr. John Mary Marani, a former member of the Oratory of St. Paul in Campo Marzio; Mr. Paul Zanolli, as secretary, spender, cook, and so on, and so on, without knowing how to do any of them...’

Paul Zanolli was a young man of 23, pious, a self-starter, and endowed with outstanding good sense. Having escaped by a miracle from one of the last drafts demanded by the Napoleonic regime, he joined Fr. Gaspar and remained faithful to the promise of offering himself to the Lord, if he could have escaped from the barracks and the war-god, Mars.²³²

The diligent Chronicler did not fail even to record his own entry: ‘...Then, on the 4th of December, I also came, Fr. Michaelangelo Gramago, to count for one more and... to do what?... We will see. Thanks be to God!...

A few weeks later and the community saw its numbers brought up to five in its membership: the taciturn Fr. Matthew Farinati, an old standard-bearer for the Marian Oratories. After battling his well-known uncertainties, he, too, decided and he knocked at the door on January 1, 1817. The witty Chronicler notes further: *He consoles us much, even though ... he is a man of few words.*

On the 11th of October of that same year, the reminiscences record one more shout of joy: *Oh, what a beautiful thing! There has come to the Stimate to live with us, the good priest, Fr. Cajetan Brugnoli. Viva Jesus, Mary and the Saints Francis, of Assisi and Borgia!* Fr. Brugnoli came from the city parish of St. Anastasia’s where he had been the soul of that Marian Oratory. He was an architect by trade and had served as an officer in the engineering corps of the Napoleonic army, and was also a member of the select Guard of the Emperor. What is even more marvelous is that he had left it all behind, in order to follow the voice of the Lord Who invited him to wage more worthy battles. And he was a priest. He was of an imposing stature, and had a war-like bearing about him which always remained with him, but these traits never succeeded in hiding his great and child-like heart.²³³ Fr. Gaspar liked him very much also because and perhaps that priestly vocation matured in the delusion of his military career constituted for him a living recall of that holy inspirer of his humble work, St. Ignatius of Loyola.

²³¹ Archives of the Stimate, Verona.

²³² Cf. *Reminiscences regarding the Fathers and Brothers of the Congregation of Apostolic Missionaries.* Colombari Press. Verona 1886, p. 75.

²³³ O.c., p. 57.

A year later and the finished up in this net also the Benjamin of Fr. Gaspar, the young priest, Fr. Louis Bragato. At the Stimate, they had been waiting for him for a long time, as Fr. Gramego noted: *Finally, at long last, on the day of St. Teresa of Jesus there came first the dowry and then in the evening, the spouse. Long live St. Aloysius Gonzaga.*

3. *In Whatever Manner that they could.*

In the first note of this Gramego Chronicle, the description *in whatever manner that they could!* At the Stimate, that rather descriptive adverb does quite well succinctly present those early years of the endeavor, and this lack of real organization would have been felt at least until perhaps 1828. We need to explain this. The buildings at the disposition of the incipient Community were truly insufficient and unsuited for the purpose for which they were being used, and they imposed sacrifices beyond counting. The undertaking had to come to life under the seal of real poverty and renunciation. Every personal comfort was serenely sacrificed to the needs of their principal occupation: the school.

Thus, one's room, which served him at night for his repose, and for two or three priests, during the early morning hours would be transformed into a classroom, provided with benches and with all the necessary equipment. Thus each day for months and months this rhythm went on. And for their meals? Brother Paul, the cook, *without knowing anything about this*, prepared the meals of mid-day and then for the evening supper, with a good polenta or a steaming vegetable soup: a menu made up of much good will, the specialty of all the holy days.

Let us take a seat at that table, poor and sparse, but clean. The most pungent condiment was that of their good joy. When they were at table, there would make its appearance little squares of cheese for each one. Fr. Michael would shake his up in the palms of his hands, and roll them out across the table: four, six! - as though he were playing at dice, at that table that always bespoke quite clearly of a continuing Lenten fast, setting the style for all. All would laugh at this demonstration. That joy, as spontaneous as it was, it served as a clever means of veiling or dissimulating the generous sacrifices of a way of life that was chosen to be mortified. In entrusting themselves to Fr. Bertoni those fervent priests knew well where that man of God wanted to lead them. And in fact, that monastic tone of life, far from being burdensome, delighted them, a witness to how contagious remained their Father's example was for them all. The rigid abstinence practiced in those first years at the Stimate, in addition from the great thirst of mortification, was kept alive in all from a solid principle of faith. Furthermore, in the years 1816-1817, and in the two successive two years, there was a fearful famine that desolated all the Venetian provinces.

In those years also in Verna the famine could be seen along the street, on the emaciated faces of the sudden appearance of beggars without numbers, for whom the local charity was unable to satisfy. Fr. Gaspar and his companions were certainly not so short of means that they could elude, had they so chosen, this public calamity.

However, the Saint had his ideas in this regard: that famine was a common punishment for sin: no one [a less than anyone else, a priest] had the right to withdraw his dutiful tribute for personal expiation²³⁴. And so many of those suffering hunger were helped every day by the generous charity of those mortified priests, and they were the first to bless the Institute that was being born. In the eyes of good people, there was nothing exceptional going on at the Stimmate, after the arrival of Fr. Gaspar and his companions. And yet, in the voluntary poverty of such humble beginnings, each of those priests felt that he was a living part of a Work that heaven itself would bless.

4. The Whisperings of the World

There is no work of God which does not, sooner or later, come to experience the opposition of this world. The little Community was just about taking its first steps and it was under siege from a barrage of evil tongues. The courageous activity of renewal of the ecclesiastic spirit conducted by Fr. Bertoni was not suited to certain priests of the city, as they had the great wrong of being excessively committed to the comforts and the pleasures of life. These were certainly not the majority, nor most likely, very many. However, it is well known that to enkindle a forest, one match suffices.

Those tuition-free classes for the young, for heaven's sake, are they not perhaps a work that is too demanding to have to sacrifice so many priests for the work? Or perhaps, is all this but a clever maneuver that is organized to break free from the Authority of the Bishop and thus camouflage the comforts for an undisturbed and calm existence? There in the Stimmate, it was whispered, Fr. Gaspar and his associates, are not having such a hard time...

This evil campaign finally reached the Chancery Office, where it was not difficult to find some who, not knowing whether or not to give credence to all this, decided it was their duty to inform the Bishop. From the *Reminiscences* of Fr. Gramego we believe we perceive something of an echo, veiled in his entry for September 6, 1818, the *Chronicle* emphasizes two verses from the Eucharistic Hymn ***O salutaris Hostia, and notes: bella premunt hostilia – da robur fer auxilium!*** [*We are anguished by the persecutions: give us strength and help...*]. This note of the 28th, even though hidden under the veil of a delicate reserve, signals in the priests of the Stimmate, perhaps the psychological reflection of that hostility to which it seems there had been announced their calamitous failure. The *Chronicle* continues: *Work was begun on the main altar, between fear and hope, in the midst of consolations and afflictions, but we are joyful. St. Michael has won!* All was resolved then an outburst in all directions, leaving the calumniated uninjured. It had the sole effect of dismaying the detractors, and mortifying the credulous.

²³⁴ SA, Doc. 26, p. 522. *Summarium super virtutibus*, p. 198.

5. The Request of the Shepherd

Throughout the early and long months of trial, even in the presence of truly harsh contradictions, Fr. Bertoni did not take a single step to justify his undertaking in any manner whatsoever. His abandonment in God was never just an empty literary expression. He did not betray even a minimum of surprise, as he had already ‘budgeted’ such responses to his endeavor:

*... Those who wish to live piously in Christ Jesus, will suffer persecutions...²³⁵
 ‘Blessed will you be when they insult and curse you...²³⁶ I will show him how
 much it will be necessary to suffer for My name...²³⁷*

The poisonous campaign never made the slightest dent in the utmost confidence the Bishop had in him. There was a time, however, in which Bishop Liruti wanted to put an end, once and for all, to the unfounded whispered campaign. He went personally unannounced to the Stigmata to conduct his own inspection. He wanted to be accompanied in this visit by two of the priests who were much involved in the whispered campaign of defamation. At the Stimate, the unexpected inspection found Fr. Gaspar and the other priests in full scholastic commitment. In the presence of the two Priests, the Bishop interrogated Fr. Bertoni at some length regarding the life that the community was leading in that hallowed retreat.

From the lips of that humble man under accusation, they came to know how and to what extent, on their hours and days free from their commitment to classes, these priest teachers dedicated themselves, without respite, in the **most varied ministries** for the assistance for the assistance of the various churches in the city. They were available to hear confessions, teach Sunday catechism to the people, visits to the sick and the imprisoned, and were **ready always to offer themselves to any other ministry to which the Bishop might invite them.**

The Bishop also thought it opportune to visit the individual rooms. In their very scarce furnishings all was tidy and clean, all appeared uniformly poor but neat. The impression was that of a primitive Franciscan observance. The visitors did not fail to drop in on the kitchen and their interview with Brother Paul, who had no hesitation to manifest his views even without much warning, and delighted his illustrious visitors with an example of his daily repertoire.

Much contrary to what had been bandied about, their entire life style seemed to be that of rigid penitents. Before the visitors took their leave, the good Bishop was effusive in expressing to the Saint and to his companions his most emotional admiration. He called them ‘his joy and his crown.’ He thanked them for their apostolic abnegation in behalf of the Diocese, exhorting them to persevere in the work they had

²³⁵ From a Letter to Mother Naudet, without date, but surely from this period. The phrase is cited with regard to the contradictions provoked by the opening of the school at the Stimate. Cf. *BERTONIANO*, 1932, p. 344.

²³⁶ SA, Doc 35, p. 661.

²³⁷ ib., Letter to Mother Naudet [December 14, 1812, p. 687.

begun.²³⁸ Thus, after months and months of rumors, Providence decided that Bishop Liruti would be the first Diocesan Bishop to bless, in his official role, the Institute which was born, and which worked in *the service of Bishops*.

From that day on, the venerated Bishop would multiply his acts of presence at the Stimate to visit his kind friend and first counselor.²³⁹ He appointed him Pro-Synodal examiner for ecclesiastical Vocations. And when in 1821, Fr. Gaspar became so seriously ill, the ageing and quite handicapped Shepherd would not hesitate to have himself brought to the bedside of his holy friend, as though to give personal witness of his emotional gratitude for the man who had consecrated his life and committed so generously his entire work for the service of Bishops.²⁴⁰

6. With Eyes fixed toward the Future

From the very first day at the Stimate, a perfect common life was led. As the beginning, there were no rules, but everyone the norm remained the example and the directives of their Father. The reason is that this was not some mere gathering of priests, but rather an encounter of souls vowed to a work they hoped would last. The Founder himself demonstrated this by setting about quite soon to reorganize the old place, and allow more light and air into the Church, with the evident intention of reopening it for the public. The House Chronicle of Fr. Gramego indicated the various stages of this gradual transformation, in his unique style already well known to us. On May 23, 1817, among other items we read: *we have replaced the old windows in the Church, 17 Napoleons well spent!* Then, a year later: *... ok, indeed very good! On the first of April we signed the contract for the building of the main altar. What happiness!*

And on it went. After long and laborious renovations, the new altar was set up, and the Church was opened to the public on October 3, 1822. In this, and in all the work of renovation that went on in the old house, of great value was that of the domestic architect, Fr. Cajetan Brugnoli.²⁴¹

On January 6, 1823, the Arch-Priest, Nicholas Galvani, expired in the kiss of the Lord, 'the good Grampa' of the nascent community. It was he who had pressed Fr. Bertoni into accepting as an inheritance the properties of the Stimate and the other locales noted in the Bellotti will.

Now, Fr. Gaspar was the absolute owner of it all, but he did not choose to change anything. He took over only a small tract of the land bordering St. Teresa's [which was now also his property], and had torn down the old house, then proceeding to build a dwelling and very solid structure, which took from 1823-1828. In the following year, he erected a bell tower and put in some arches. Four years later, he

²³⁸ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 534, f.

²³⁹ ib.

²⁴⁰ SA, Doc. 26, n. 1. Intr. P. 85.

²⁴¹ Stofella, *Il Ven. G. Bertoni*. Verona 1952, pp. 226-228.

saw to putting up six good bells with their silvery ring. All of this was done at his won expense, refusing along the way those spontaneous offerings, faithful to his principle: *whoever want to be of benefit to souls, must leave aside their pocket books!*

He also gave much thought to furnishing a copious and esteemed ecclesiastical library, in the manner of those Institutes who look forward to a future. In order to insure the economic foundations of his Institute that had as its goal to offer its services absolutely gratuitously, he set aside a considerable sum in order to acquire a basis for it all.

7. Two Departures and Some New Arrivals

At the end of 1819, the *Reminiscences* of Fr. Gramego take note of two departures, that were keenly felt in the bosom of the still very small Community. This is his entry: *...Note, and this has to be noted: on the 14th of June 1819, Fr. Louis Bragato left us and returned to his own home, but ...* - and this was left opened, nurturing the secret hope that he would one day come back again to take up residence within those walls. And this hope would not be deluded. To live out that austere lie, the rather poor health of the young priest could not make it. He may have been suffering from hemoptysis. This suspicion arises from an indirect and much later reference of the Saint in a letter of his to Fr. Bragato: *take good care also of your health, so that those accidents you suffered as a young man may not return...*²⁴²

The departure of this most holy priest – a former pupil of Fr. Gaspar – afflicted to some extent all the others then living at the Stimate. However, after 9 years or forced absence, when he returned it was a first class festival! This is how Fr. Gramego recorded this event: *Look at this note and be joyful. On the 30th of October 1828, to our great consolation and by the marvelous disposition of Providence, my good Fr. Louis Bragato returned, never to go away again' until death.*²⁴³

On October 30, 1819, another departure. Fr. Matthew Farinati left the Stimate 'to breathe his native air of Alcenago, to see if he could ever get better.'²⁴⁴ Fr. Gaspar let him go with a heavy heart. He knew only too well the very fragile temperament of his beloved Fr. Matthew, who so needed at one and the same time, a strong and gentle support. Commenting on this departure, which was not meant to be definitive, said: *... You will see that he will either come back, or die soon...*²⁴⁵ And he proved to be prophetic. Eleven months later, we read in these same *Reminiscences*: *'...On September 17, 1820, Fr. Matthew Farinati has passed to a better life. May God grant him peace, Amen.'* This was a loss that was deeply felt. Notwithstanding the involuntary weaknesses of his temperament that was exposed to anguish of spirit, Fr. Farinati had been a very precious element in the varied ministries with the little

²⁴² Archives of the Stimate, Verona. Fragment of a Letter, April 11, 1848.

²⁴³ From 1820 on, Fr. Bragato had been assigned to the **Seminary**, where he had been named Prefect of Studies, an office he filled until his return to the Stimate.

²⁴⁴ Gramego Manuscripts, *Reminiscences*.

²⁴⁵ Gramego, l.c.

Community and he was sought after by all. In 1812, he served as the much appreciated substitute for Fr. Gaspar who was already ill, in the spiritual direction of the Canossian Retreat. Then, in 1817, acting on the Bishop's request, a priest was needed for the spiritual assistance of those already infected with cholera, and Fr. Bertoni immediately thought of his dear friend, Fr. Matthew. He accepted this assignment willingly and gave himself to that challenging ministry with authentic gospel commitment. However, when the epidemic had passed, he did not come out of it all with his health in tact, and he never again regained it. St. Gaspar had always wanted to consider and honor his first companion as the generous victim of charity, and many times in speaking of him to his surviving sons, or those who came afterwards, he declared that he truly envied his fortunate lot²⁴⁶.

In March of 1822, the vacancy left by good Fr. Farinati was filled by the noble, Fr. Francis Cartolari. He was a very open soul, quite generous, rich in the goods of fortune. However, he said, without any regrets, his farewell to any yearnings for the comfortable life, in order to make himself a humble son of Fr. Bertoni, attracted by that penitential life that was led at the Stimate.

Then two years later [July 25, 1824], the *Reminiscences* noted: Fr. *Modesto Cainer has come to help us in our grave need, and may God conserve and bless him, since 'He forced him to enter.'* Fr. Cainer was a man of limited talents, but had a great heart with a fascinating humility.

On October 24, 1826, we read from the same source, Raphael Arcangelo brought with him to live with us young Charles Fedelini, who arrived not yet vested in clerical garb, so he was vested by Monsignor Dionigi. He was the first aspirant of the Institute.

On May 5, 1827, at long last there was brought a bit of relief to Brother Paul Zanoli, who was always on the move from morning until night, almost overwhelmed by his many tasks: cook, provider, tailor, infirmarian and still more than he knew what to do. The Chronicle note reads: *At long last, poor Paul is comforted. Some help has come, so unlike him, i.e., not with so much fury: Louis dal Forno. Long live Jesus, long live Mary!*

In October 1823, two other consolations came to re-create the anchorites of the Stimate: *On the 4th of October, perhaps a little too early in the morning, there came with great soul and with good will, the serious and timid Cleric, Louis Biadego, to console us and make even more joyful our festivities of St. Francis.* He is described as serious and timid, young Biadego, but also decisive and courageous in following the Lord. He left home, under cover of darkness, and entrusted to a little note his farewell to his loved ones, and indicated to them the goal of his innocent running away from home. The early riser sacristan at the Stimate found him seated on the steps of the Church, and let him in. During the day, the fugitive received a short note from his Dad that extended to him a generous pardon:

²⁴⁶ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 485, 538.

‘My very dear son: you have done what the Gospel asks and so I pardon you... please extend my best to that wonderful and worthy of all reverence priest, Fr. Bertoni, to whom I do not have to recommend you to him due to his limitless charity...’²⁴⁷

The second and great consolation was the return of Fr. Bragato. In November of the following year, having overcome difficulties and resistance, we read: *On the 11th of November 1829, Fr. Francis Benciolini came to dwell with us, with his open and frank personality, like the Germans.*

And not even with a year’s interval, *after so much waiting and then having given up, finally, having removed so many obstacles and impediments, my Fr. Innocent Venturini came. May God bless him and make him a saint.* In 1831, a very provident wind of March brought to the Stimate, to the great surprise of the ecclesiastical world, Fr. Vincent Raimondi, a young priest of great zeal and excellent abilities.

And with this arrival with the much admired welcome, the series of ‘*those who came to the Stimate*’ in the first three lusters of the life of the Community founded and directed by the *Very Reverend Fr. Gaspar Bertoni, as Head and Father.* Just what was their work, and the spirit with which they conducted it, the chapters that follow will tell us.



²⁴⁷ Archives of the Stimate. Verona.

Chapter 14

The Christian Formation of the Youth

1. Scholastic Activity

In the first twenty years of life, scholastic activity was that to which the young family of Fr. Bertoni dedicated its best energies. Gradually, from the humble beginnings of two simple elementary classes²⁴⁸ the school year 1824-1825 saw the high school curriculum completed with the four Grammar classes and one two year course of the Humanities and Rhetoric, in perfect agreement with the scholastic reform that was ordered by Austria in 1818.

The classes at the Stimmate prospered all the more when the new building was up, which had come into being at a measured pace between 18223-1829 under the expert direction of the domestic architect, Fr. Cajetan Brugnoli. The new building provided more comfortable and decorous classrooms. The number of the students was constantly over 100, reaching its high point with 180 inscriptions.²⁴⁹ This was a considerable number for the times that hastened by.

From 1818 on, Fr. Gaspar was the director of the school and also one of the teachers. He docilely followed the scholastic program and made sure that the government prescriptions were fulfilled, as the Austrian government had made obligatory also for private schools. First among his Priests, he presented himself for the examinations of approbation in order to receive the state license. A diploma from the Communal High School of Verona, dated April 9, 1821, approved him in these words: 'A Private Teacher approved for the entire High School course.'²⁵⁰ Following him, the other priests dedicated to the school had also presented themselves for the public examinations. The following were approved for the elementary courses: Fr. Benciolini, Fr. Venturini, Fr. Cainer. For the grammar courses: Fr. Cartolari, Fr. Gramego, Fr. Brugnoli, Fr. Marani. For the two year course of the Humanities, Fr. Bertoni.²⁵¹ **The Saint himself understood the teaching of school was understood by himself, and he had his followers understand, that this was indeed an apostolate of the new community.**

Bishop Liruti in his triennial report dated November 27, 1822, to the Apostolic See, pointed with evident personal pleasure to the presence of the community gathered around Fr. Bertoni and his new scholastic institute, and provided official notice of this positive reality in his Diocese.²⁵²

²⁴⁸ From the three preparatory classes from 1818, the first was omitted on purpose: 'We will not accept anyone who had not first learned how to read and write with ease.' This is what St. Gaspar had written to Mother Naudet in a letter without date.

²⁴⁹ School Registers, Archives at the Stimmate. Scholastic year 1831-1832.

²⁵⁰ Ordinary Process. Folder 400.

²⁵¹ Sa, Doc. 12, pp. 60-61.

²⁵² Making up for an omission that occurred in his Report three years earlier, Bishop Liruti described Fr. Bertoni and his school, which then had been in existence for about six years, in these words:

The results achieved tell the real story here, and these were admirable both in the spiritual area, as well as in the technical area. After studies, examinations, reflections, going against the current stream of the Cartesian, or deductive method, the Saint adopted for his school from its very first year, that inductive method which, as a young student, he had personally learned in class under Frs. Avesani and Fortis.²⁵³ And his success was enviable.

Along with the usual teaching, they gave efficacious help discovering effective contests thought up to keep alive a healthy emulation among the students: there were attestations of merit, moderate and prudent praise, rewards of little booklets, or little crowns, a place of honor and the one must strived for, the grade of Decurion, which would elevate the winner to serve as teacher's helper.

The school maintained frequent and obligatory contacts with parents. The sole intent inspiring commitment to a more active collaboration with those who in fact shared with the teachers the responsibilities of education.²⁵⁴

2. Mind and Heart

Teaching school, in the spirit and practice of Fr. Bertoni, aimed to mature in the young students, more than anything else, **the formation of hearts**.²⁵⁵ The emphasized piety, which in the schools at the Stimmate simply took hold. It flowed over from the morning Mass, preceded by a half hour of study, generally for the sake of going over assignments, or reviewing those passages that were to be memorized. In the Church, everything spoke of order and devotion, so much so that the Mass for the students was the one that a fairly good-sized group of the faithful would prefer.²⁵⁶

And in the classrooms, the lessons, the examples, the texts, the themes of the exercises, both oral and written, centered around Christian Doctrine: all was ordered to the formation of the complete Christian, and therefore, of the exemplary citizen.²⁵⁷ In the heaviest hours of the afternoon, 'for the edification of their spirits', there were very ably interwoven uplifting accounts, taken from the lives of the Holy Fathers, and from others of this ilk. It was a very pleasant way to instruct and offered even jovial correction – in re-creating, it educated.

From the teacher's chair, Fr. Gaspar re-lived, in part, the years of his first priestly apostolate. Surely, the exterior thrust could no longer be the same; but within him, there still vibrated so much power to overcome and conquer the heart. No one

Furthermore, to these pious instructors, I must now add Gas Bertoni, a priest, both learned in letters, and venerated in piety, who, together with a few other priests, imitators of his virtues, forms many young students from the working classes, in a tuition-free elementary schools and forms them in piety through holy exercises. SA, Doc. 16, p. 86.

²⁵³ SA, Doc. 20, p. 165.

²⁵⁴ SA, Doc. 20, p. 165.

²⁵⁵ **NB: translator's Note: this is clearly reflected in Fr. Bertoni Original Constitutions - CF ## 66, 127.**

²⁵⁶ SA, Doc. 20, p. 162.

²⁵⁷ SA, Doc. 26, p. 387.

was his peer in jesting in a courteous manner so characteristic of him about those most noticeable little defects of his students. His gesture and his voice all served his purposes. But in the occasional outbursts of a composed joy that entertained all, those who needed it learned how to accept his gentle invitations at correction.²⁵⁸ The exceptions of his habitual meekness and good humor were most rare. Sometimes the necessity arose for him to handle a somewhat unruly student, or his need to fulfill his sacred duty to preserve an atmosphere free of any contagion of natural disorder. On such occasions, with carefully measured, but unmistakable words, he was able to communicate a salutary impression for all – and as one of his former students would testify – even at times to frighten.²⁵⁹ Once this brief interruption ended, the hours of class seemed to fly by quickly and no one experienced any hardship.

In Fr. Gaspar's classroom, every student was led to the supernatural level. One day, his lesson led him to explain the spiritual ruin that grave sin brought to the soul. There was a brief pause, and after it, in the silence of the class, the teacher sighed: *If man only knew what sin is!* And a deep breath kept him from going on. A few minutes later, he picked up the lesson; but his tone was audibly saddened, which seemed to translate the anguish of a saint before *the great evil which sin is*. This scene was deeply embossed into the soul of everyone.²⁶⁰

3. Pauses for the Soul

In the course of the school year, there was offered a varied program of religious practices, genuine pauses for the spirit, from which the piety of each took on nourishment to strengthen better their lives. Here they are:

- a spiritual exhortation at the end of each week delivered by the teachers in the individual classes;
- sacramental Confession, counseled for every two weeks – but, which was frequented much more often;
- holy Communion, recommended at least once a month;
- the retreat, reserved for the older boys: three days of silence with readings, sermons, spiritual practices of piety, examen of conscience – these were able but sure abbreviations that brought with them the essential points of the Ignatian piety.

For the month of May, there would be conducted pious practices honoring the Blessed Virgin. Devotion to her, was profoundly felt among all, and gave a tone to the entire environment. In the common Chapel or in Church: a brief sermon, the reading of one of the 'little flowers', and some ejaculatory prayers, the singing of the Litany of Loreto, and Marian praises. Would all this be time stolen from study? May was simply

²⁵⁸ SA, Doc. 20, p. 163.

²⁵⁹ SA, Doc. 20, pp. 163-165; Doc. 26, p. 392.

²⁶⁰ SA, Doc. 20, p. 124.

the month in which the students made more tangible their profit in study and in virtue, for the harmonious recognition of their teachers and families.²⁶¹

On June 21st, there was celebrated the festival of St. Aloysius Gonzaga: in the morning: a panegyric, Holy Mass and general Communion; towards evening, after the solemn Vespers, there would be the unfailing '*accademia*' of poetry, recitations, and songs to the glory of the Saint²⁶².

The scholastic year would be formally closed always at the feet of Jesus with a solemn song of thanksgiving, the Latin *Te Deum*. There would follow then the distribution of the rewards to those students who distinguished themselves in the course of the year for their goodness, diligence and profit. The encounter would be sealed with a fervent pep talk on the part of one of the teachers, commenting on the by now traditional Decalogue of proposals, that constituted a precious *Vademecum* for the student on vacation: (1) Every morning, a bit of Meditation. (2) Hear Mass, when possible. (3) In the afternoon, a visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and to the Mother of God. (4) The praying of a third part of the Holy rosary. (5) A brief spiritual reading. (6) Before going to bed, a brief examination of conscience. (7) Frequent the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion. (8) Avoid bad companions and especially all dangers that could stain purity. (9) In every time and place exercise the thought of the presence of God. (10) Dedicate every day about one half hour to review the matters already studied, exploring and looking over something of the program for the year that is coming.

In the spirit of this fervent and serene summer program, the Teachers would often give their all-knowing best wishes, that were always cordial: 'Anyway, we will see you in November...!'²⁶³

4. Results and Testimonies

At the Stimate, 'there was always maintained a scholastic discipline as to be the perfect model for any Institute of education whatsoever.' These are the words of an eye witness, the same who would emphasize the excellence of the teaching given there, with an expression perhaps somewhat exaggerated, as it referred to the entire teaching body as, 'an authentic academy of learned men.'²⁶⁴

And the profit of the students was equal to the value and to the commitment of the teachers. The celebrated Fr. Anthony Bresciani, Jesuit, wrote that in the judgment of learned men, the students of the Stimate stood out in the exams of comparison.²⁶⁵ Others fathers of the Company, around 1840, could testify that those students were

²⁶¹ SA, Doc. 20, pp. 164-165.

²⁶² SA, Doc. 20, p. 165..See also the *Diary of Fr. Modesto Cainer* [Folders 14-15] where there is offered quite a detailed account of the Festival of St. Aloysius for the year 1834, Archives of the Stimate. Verona.

²⁶³ Stofella, Biography, p. 140.

²⁶⁴ SA, Doc. 16, n. 1, p. 96.

²⁶⁵ SA, Doc. 22,n. 2, p. 214

far ahead of all the others in both piety and letters²⁶⁶. The school of which Fr. Bertoni was the Director, has so drawn the attention of the cultural milieu in the city, that many personalities, even foreigners, Bishops and Prelates, who were passing through the city, would come to visit them.²⁶⁷

Of all the many visits, there is one that is still remembered. Around the end of April 1825, when the school building was still under construction, the Students of the Stimmate had the good fortune of seeing no less personages coming to visit than their Royal Highnesses, the Austrian Sovereigns, who appeared without any forewarning to be in their midst. This was just too much honor for the very humble Fr. Gaspar. Of that most sublime visitation, he has left in writing: *The Sovereigns had demonstrated that they were behind our struggles, even though all we had to show them was our wretchedness.*²⁶⁸

Very many students, with the food for their life's journey from that solid spiritual formation, became fathers of families, were distinguished in their Christian piety and in the good government of their homes. Far more, however, can be said. The classes, from the earliest beginning until their fading away, never lost their good reputation as the ideal terrain for the re-flourishing of priestly and religious vocations. 'Great was the number of priests who had come from that school, who shone out in the Veronese Church, or who embraced religious life.'²⁶⁹

Fr. Modesto Cainer's *Diary* designated a good 5 former students who came over the years to pay their debt of gratitude towards their old teachers, by gifting them with their first priestly offerings by celebrating one of their first Masses in the Church which had so many times received them, as devout students and where, perhaps for the first time, they had heard the secret voice of Jesus who was calling them toward the altar.²⁷⁰

Fr. Cainer's *Diary* covers only four years [September 1833 - October 1837], and is far from offering us a complete picture. He makes no mention, for example of the young priests, Fr. Louis Biadego and Fr. Charles Fedelini; of the Clerics Ferrari and Lenotti who had entered for some time to make up part of the Community of Fr. Bertoni, as all four had been young students at the Stimmate.

The abundance and the goodness of the fruits speak of the excellent quality of the plant. When the Jesuits reopened their school of St. Sebastian's, Fr. Bertoni did not think that his school at the Stimmate was necessary longer, so he closed it.²⁷¹

²⁶⁶ SA, Doc. 24, n. 2, p. 648

²⁶⁷ SA, Doc. 20, p. 165.

²⁶⁸ Letter to Mother Naudet. Manuscript n. 76-10.

²⁶⁹ SA, Doc. 20, -. 165.

²⁷⁰ Cainer, Manuscripts, Archives in the Stimmate.

²⁷¹ The closing of the school was not considered to be a necessity from which the Saint could not withdraw because of the lack of personnel, who had either left or died. At the time of his decision to close, these facts had not yet occurred. His reason was different: when the Jesuits in 1842-1843 reopened St. Sebastian's, Fr. Bertoni closed in his high school the first two classes; in the following

5. The Marian Oratory of the Stimate

a. The model Oratory

Following the first years of the scholastic set-up, Fr. Bertoni gave new life to a Marian Oratory for men, and it was the third such organization that he established in Verona.²⁷² In the meantime, he continued his precious assistance in the city Oratories, offering on Sundays, the generous and fervent work of his Priest teachers. From an initial group of 26 inscribed, the scholastic Marian Oratory, in 1826, succeeded in ascribing all, or almost all, of the student body at the Stimate, to the expense of the 10 Oratories in the city to which those young men originally had belonged.²⁷³ From the year 1824, ceding to the pressing invitation of the Pastor, the Oratory of the Stimate could consider itself a Parish Oratory of the Most Holy trinity, after the gates and doors had been made open for the youngsters, for the young men and for the adults outside the school. As a matter of fact, it retained unaltered its inter-parochial character, including among its inscribed members also people from other parishes and neighborhoods²⁷⁴.

In the beginning it assumed the nature of an authentic Marian Congregation, typically scholastic. However, as it found greater space and possibilities of movement, in its wider place of establishment it was able to take on the very clear physiognomy of an Oratory of Fr. Bertoni. And as the beginnings was protected at St. Paul's in Campo Marzio, and successively at St. Firmus Major, so, once this group took on its own life, at the Oratory of the Stimate in the city and the diocese it came to be looked upon as the norm and the model of all the others²⁷⁵.

The external organization of this third-born Bertonian Oratory assumed the almost military imprint which characterized the first development of the institution, in the exultant climate of the Napoleonic campaigns. To insist on this would have been something of an anachronism, and Fr. Bertoni knew this. In the simplified subdivision of the Oratory, there were three groups [boys – young men – men], these groups were sub-divided into companies with their leaders, collaborators with the Prefect and his two Assistants. The spiritual program remained unchanged.

On Sunday afternoons, the Oratory of the Stimate was not slow in transforming itself in to a Recreation Center. The beautiful days of long ago were being re-lived. The open fields beyond the Porta Nuova, unfolding at the feet of the high walls of the Sammicheli, welcomed the traditional assortment of contests, at the

year, when the classes at St. Sebastian's were complete, he closed the entire high school level at the Stimate. From that time on, the Saint committed his men more directly in the preparation for parish missions. [cf. Nello Dalle Vedove, *San Gaspare Bertoni*, Vol. 6, pp. 249-256; cf. pp. 124-132, Note of the Editor.

²⁷² The was aggregated to the First Primary of the Roman College on April 4, 1824, under the title of the 'Purity of Mary the Virgin,' and to the Roman Arch-Confraternity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, May 21, 1829 - cf. SA, Doc. 12,p. 63; Doc. 32,n. 9, p. 626.

²⁷³ Scholastic Registers, Archives of the Stimate.

²⁷⁴ Stofella, Biography, p. 143.

²⁷⁵ SA, Doc. 32, n. 6, p. 633.

whim of the tastes of the different ages. There was the usual *Hail Mary's* said on their knees on the field of play, the losers praying for the winners. And all was conducted under the vigilant and paternal eye of three, or four priest-teachers, very often they were a living part of such admiration. As it began to turn dark, the teams would line up and the march would resume and in ordered manner towards the Stimate, while throughout the air would vibrate those old songs of the Oratory: 'Sins never again!' - 'Have mercy on us, Lord!' – 'O world, for me you are no longer!' ²⁷⁶

This was the rhythm of life of the Marian Oratory of the Stimate that had arrived luxuriant at the vigil of the second half of the century. Then, once again, the tail of the devil reappeared. Alarmed by the restless wave of insufferable control and the fear of liberty that passed over almost all the Italian Provinces subjected to its dominion, in 1848 the Government of His Apostolic Majesty with peremptory ordinances imposed the suspension of every organized recreational activity. ²⁷⁷ For the Oratory, which served as a model, and for all others like it, this blow signed the slow but fatal decline. After Fr. Bertoni's death [1853]. Even with the efforts of his Congregation, the Marian Oratories had here and there rather vigorous reorganizations, but they were such that could not overcome the regret for the Oratories that once had been. They had worked marvels in the religious and civil field throughout the first half of the 1800's. ²⁷⁸

b. The Beneficial Activity of an Institution

The aged and experienced Bishop Innocent Liruti had confided to his old friend, as at the beginning of his every Pastoral Visit, would ask about the existence, or not of the Marian Oratory. This would give some indication, depending on the positive or negative answer, regarding how the parish was going. And from his long experience, this is the way the facts would usually show the parishes to be. ²⁷⁹ For not a few pastors of souls who came to open their hearts to him somewhat embittered by the apparently incurable disintegration of their own flock, Fr. Gaspar indicated that the Marian Oratory was the sure expedient for the spiritual regeneration of their parish. The laments, or recriminations did not carry the day; even in desperate cases, the Marian Oratory, the Work of the Blessed Virgin, would indeed work the prodigy of an integral renewal: he would exhort with the confidence of the saints: *Have much hope in the Mother of Holy Hope.*

The impression was that even a desert would turn green again under the influence of the Oratory. No matter how impossible it was for him in the last decades of his life to work directly in the field of the Oratories, due to his grave infirmities, the saint seized every occasion to communicate his apostolic spirit to the new members to continue his work. And the results of all this?

²⁷⁶ SA, Doc. 20, p. 150.

²⁷⁷ *ib.*, p.151.

²⁷⁸ Stofella, Biography, p. 147.

²⁷⁹ SA, Doc. 20, p. 147.

Let Cardinal Louis di Canossa, Bishop of Verona from 1863-1900, respond with his undisputed authority. As a young man he had been a most active and zealous member of the Marian Oratories. He attributed to that 'holy institution of the Marian Oratories of which he proclaimed Fr. Bertoni to have the merit to have served efficaciously as the bank against the tides of irreligion and lack of morality which in those disturbed and calamitous times, threateningly came from beyond the Alps also onto the city and Diocese of St. Zeno. The venerable old man stated: 'We ourselves were witnesses of the great good that was accomplished. We saw and experienced of what temper did the young men receive who were formed there.' And he concluded: 'If Verona did not yet deny its boast of being faithful and pious, in great part this is due to the Marian Oratories.'²⁸⁰

The generous battle tenaciously sustained by Fr. Gaspar for the salvation of the youth and for the defense of the Christian spirit in his native city, at close of his long priestly life, can be said to have been won.



²⁸⁰ SA, Doc. 32, n. 9, pp. 635-638. Pastoral Letter of February 14, 1898.

Chapter 15

In the Spirit of a Charism

1. Ministries

Teaching school and serving the Oratory were quite far from exhausting the zeal of the Founder and of the Priests of his undertaking. To his personal commitment of a methodical zeal there was added the preparation for various branches of the apostolate. There unfolded at short intervals a progressive and generous offering of himself **to every sort of ministry**. The requests flooded in from every side, encouraged also by the fact that the Missionaries refused as a principle of their life every remuneration that was not spiritual. Many city parishes and rectories profited by this, especially on Sundays and Feast Days.

The gamut of the apostolic services rendered varied from the spiritual care and the recreational activities of the Marian Oratories, to the anonymous ministry of the Confessional; from the preaching here and there of that more onerous kind of Retreats to the Clergy, or the Sunday Catechism lessons to the people – from the spiritual assistance to the incarcerated and to those condemned to death, to the daily toil of teaching in the Seminary²⁸¹.

Even though the Community of the Priests of the Stimate remained small, in a few years of life, it reached the ideal of the one who founded it: ***to be ready for every request of the Bishop to preach, to confess, to instruct, either in the city or in the country, in any place of the Diocese, in the Seminary or among the people...***²⁸².

Each morning the renewed and welcoming Church of the Stimate offered a spectacle of punctuality and décor in the celebration of holy Masses, in the administration of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and of the Eucharist. And this was all carried out without any interference or disturbance with the near by parish of the Most Holy Trinity.

The calendar provided certain solemnities, in fact, there were three: the espousals of Mary the Virgin; September 17, the Stigmata of St. Francis [the original title of the Church]; October 4th, Feast of the Poor Man of Assisi. Having instituted the first festival, and bring the others to new life, Fr. Bertoni understood how to 'draw from these the sole result of a solid piety and devotion.'²⁸³ Consequently, there was excluded every excessive manifestation of music or pompous tapestries. No sung Masses, but a great number of low Masses, celebrated with great piety, in truly

²⁸¹ SA, Doc. 23, Marani Report, pp. 260, ff.

²⁸² A hand-written document by Fr. Bertoni, which he himself then cancelled. [cf. Dalle Vedove, *San Gaspar Bertoni*. Vol. 6, p.126. It could very well be sufficiently his ideal, then expressed in his *Original Constitutions*, CF ## 1-2, 6-7. [cf. o.c., pp. 126-131. Editor's note].

²⁸³ SA, Doc. 26, p. 513.

precious vestments²⁸⁴. The presence of the faithful was extraordinary, attracted also by the beautiful possibility of gaining the plenary indulgence connected with this²⁸⁵.

There was a note of particular gaiety: from 1833 the three festivals, of the sublime tower, crowned with cupola, would ring gloriously with their six silver bells, of which the very humble Fr. Cainer was the impassioned director and chronicler.²⁸⁶ Every week, at the hour of Vespers, a celebration would break the uniform pace of the week: this would be the Friday devotions in honor of the Five Wounds of our Lord Jesus Christ. The '**Grades of the Passion**' would be sung, after the conference of about a half hour. There followed then as the conclusion the offering of certain prayers in honor of the Holy Wounds at the Altar of the Crucified.²⁸⁷ This pious exercise exerted a broad appeal, and brought much fruit, and was particularly dear to Fr. Gaspar. It was indeed his conviction that to reawaken the love for God that might have weakened in many redeemed souls, there remains but one means: to lead believers to the feet of the Crucified: '**Have them contemplate the suffering Jesus, and they can do no less than to love Him.**'²⁸⁸

As long as his physical strength supported him, he wanted to reserve to himself that weekly sermon, at the cost of reaching with great personal struggle, or to have himself carried there in his arm chair.²⁸⁹ That great heart of his, so full of God, struck the faithful, by illuminating them and moving them even to tears. Certain Friday sermons were a great event in Verona.

2. God manifests His Generosity

The assurance of finding 'confessors always ready day and night'²⁹⁰ made of the Stimate a refuge of souls desirous to be reconciled with God. But, it should be noted that this was all only for men – as Fr. Bertoni used to say – 'as far as the women are concerned, they can find elsewhere as many confessors as they would want.'²⁹¹

In the evening, as the hours wore on, there would often come into the net the 'big fish', concerned to liberate their own consciences with God without being noticed by others. Especially on the occasion of Church Jubilees for indulgences, both ordinary and extraordinary, many spirits sought here the grace to redirect their steps after the revolutionary drunkenness. It was not without purpose that at the Stimate

²⁸⁴ In his statement of his Pastoral Visitation, Bishop Aurelius Mutti conducted at the Stimate in 1846, among other matters, he testified: 'Altars that are very clean and well decorated ... On these the sacred vestments and liturgical garments and linens are on display; what more or what more decent care could one hope for?' SA, Doc. 16, p. 93.

²⁸⁵ Stofella, Biography, p.155.

²⁸⁶ Cainer, *Reminiscences*, Manuscripts. Archives in the Stimate.

²⁸⁷ SA, Doc. 12, pp. 61, f.

²⁸⁸ Fr. Bertoni's Sermon on the Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi. Manuscritti Bertoni.

²⁸⁹ SA, Doc. 12, pp. 61, f. Letter of Fr. Bertoni to Mother Naudet, June 9, 1826. This devout function on Fridays at the request of the Saint was enriched with many indulgences. Cf. Stofella, o.c., p. 155.

²⁹⁰ SA, Doc. 23, p. 261.

²⁹¹ SA, Doc. 20, p. 158.

the confessors were endowed with ample and special faculties.²⁹² In certain periods, the work was so heavy that Fr. Bertoni, invoking the charity of good souls, wrote: *...Let us pray that our meager forces do not fail under so great a weight.*²⁹³ And in another letter: *... It seems that the Lord is preaching on His own, as His ministers are unable to keep up with it. The fact is that without our opening our mouths, we are crowded here in a way, by those that God sends us already in good shape and converted, that in a Mission one could not perhaps do much more... God is showing His generosity...*²⁹⁴

Sometimes there were priests from other Churches which, having exhausted their every possibility of assisting certain souls, they would send them to the Stimate so that the man of God might share with them that dosage of grace that would be definitive and transforming. There are two significant cases:

A scandalous priest, notorious apostate and a declared sectarian, was touched by the mercy of God had recourse to the pious and zealous priest, Fr. Mark Marchi, so that he might assist him to come up out of the abyss of sin to the light of grace. Fr. Marchi committed his special penitent to the hands of his old fellow student in the Seminary and holy friend, Fr. Gaspar. Just a few meetings suffice: on June 15, 1823, Fr. Charles Allegri, with the humility of the prodigal son, he returned to his Father's house. He once more began to celebrate Mass, after many years, and it was for him like a second First Mass celebration in St. Luke's Parish²⁹⁵.

An actress had turned the head of a respectable citizen. He was exhorted many times to end this relationship, and the poor man responded in tears, but was not able to decide on the necessary ending of it. The Confessor [Fr. Marchi again] directed him to the Stimate: his conversion was immediate and entire. The converted man, still in his twenties, survived to celebrate always December 8th as a singular memorial of his return to Grace.²⁹⁶

Should there ever appear before the Bishop a priest, or a religious who had lost his way to the altar, Bishop Grassier [and after him, Bishop Mutti] imposed on the penitent a pause for renewal at the Stimate – and almost all of them who returned had made that stop.²⁹⁷

3. To become experienced with Jesus Christ

Fr. Gaspar dedicated his special care to the spiritual and intellectual formation for the four clerics who had entered to become part of the Community at the Stimate. Two of these are already known to us: Louis Biadego and Charles Fedelini who were ordained priests respectively in 1831 and in 1834.

²⁹² Stofella, Biography, p. 151.

²⁹³ Letter Bertoni-Naudet, mss. 76-6.

²⁹⁴ Letter Bertoni-Naudet, 75-2.

²⁹⁵ SA, Doc. 28, n. 1 c], p. 590.

²⁹⁶ *Summarium super virtutibus*, p. 141. Stofella, Biography, p. 152.

²⁹⁷ SA, Doc 20, p. 155

In this latter year two more recruits were added: the 17 year old John Baptist Lenotti and, Louis Ferrari who had just about turned 14 years old. Fr. Gramego's Chronicle described him as a 'timid rabbit' – he would one day become the second successor to Fr. Bertoni. 'Little Dove' is the delicate nick-name given to young Louis Ferrari.²⁹⁸ And was foreseen in his prophetic nick name, it was close to the mark: in just a few years of a fervent life in the school of the Saint, the very pious and willing 'Little Louie' would strengthen his wings of the spirit, in order to fly still very young to his heavenly home land, much like his holy name-sake and protector [St. Aloysius Gonzaga], leaving behind at the Stimate a deep sense of loss perfumed with piety and innocence.

For philosophy and sacred theology, the Stigmatine Clerics frequented the courses as the Diocesan Seminary. However, the assistance that these young students received at home was both precious and formative. The scholastic programs of the Seminary were surpassed quite well also thanks to the methodical study that was inculcated, deepening their grasp of the matters of obligation, and then even reaching out to further areas of study both sacred and profane. Fr. Bertoni thus intended to prepare his future priests to the increasing demands of their times, in the spirit of the Institute.

However, at the base of all this, there was something even more profound. He admonished both seminarians and priests in the retreat preached to them in 1810:

... With study you will obtain not only the ability to purge the mind from so many impure thoughts, but also to mortify the body. Even without all this, such study will remove laziness that is so connected to impurity. Without study, the waters of life would be putrid swamps, and souls would be lost through pleasures...²⁹⁹

Therefore, study for Fr. Bertoni was an apt instrument of mortification but not only this. Study, for a priest who aspires to be a worthy herald of God, is a necessary weapon to propagate to the others the divine glory³⁰⁰. It is a most useful means of nourishing piety. In fact – Fr. Bertoni said further to these men of the Church is this same retreat, quoting St. Augustine: '...when we pray, we speak with God – when we read, or study, it is God Who speaks to us...' At the Stimate study served also as contemplation.

But let us go back to speak further about school. Fr. Gaspar did want his sons to limit themselves solely to class material, or to the more ordinary volumes at hand. He wanted that each student should undertake his own personal labor on those more accredited source for each subject. And the House Library, would be nourished with munificent foresight, with varied and well ordered volumes, constantly being updated, remained at the disposition of all, both seminarians and priests. His ideal was to stimulate each day a bit more a thirst for learning which in the last analysis was a thirst for God.

²⁹⁸ Gramego, *Reminiscences*, Manuscript in the Archives at the Stimate.

²⁹⁹ Retreat to New Confessors. Manuscript. n. 17.

³⁰⁰ Letter to Mother Naudet. SA Doc. 36, pp. 716, f.

Immensely, and more than every pious exhortation, or written rule, the example of the Father kept alive in the early Stigmatines their own love for study. His particular vocation for study, with the passing of the years, knew only periods of slowing down in those more acute phases of his illness. Until his last days, there remained within him that youthful freshness and mental fecundity. Suffering and study were what made him an excellent disciple in the School of God, and permitted him to irradiate through the city and beyond, his ultimate apostolate, that of spiritual counselor. In all who had recourse to him, there came the realization that they had approached a Saint, and the perception was that God spoke through him.³⁰¹ And his sons at school, both as students as well as teachers, deepened the commitment that he had shared with them in the ideal of experiencing Christ Crucified and of transmitting Him to others.

4. Radical Poverty

a. For Apostolic Freedom

One of the factors that is positively surprising in the life of Fr. Bertoni is the perfect harmony between what he taught and what he practiced, between his word and his life. He was in no way indebted to any spirit of flogging his listeners without mercy from his podium in giving retreats. As he combated avarice and cupidity of some clerics he did so first with the example of that little band of priests who, through their mortified and poor lives. They united an absolute selflessness giving themselves to every work, *absolutely gratuitously, refusing* out of principle any offering whatsoever that might be made to them on the occasion of their sacred ministry.

Whoever wants to do good to souls, let him not touch their pocket-books! This great principle of St. Philip Neri was practiced by Fr. Bertoni to the letter. In the Church of the Stimmate he never wanted anyone to go around and take up a collection with the basket to take up offerings – nor would he tolerated little boxes to collect devotional alms. He very often refused the usual Mass stipends and would very often agree to celebrate Mass, or to have Masses offered for the intentions of whoever might ask him.

In the face of insistent offerings of rich donations, or of outstanding inheritances, not one single time did Fr Bertoni give in to them. And some potential donors had recourse to deception in this matter. To one Mr. John Trevisani, an excellent and generous merchant, an Oratorian at the Stimmate, asked who might keep him from making a contribution to the restoration of that Church which was to some extent, also his? Immediately he received the very dignified refusal of the Saint, so one day the real gentleman left a bit of gold on one of the altars and left no name with it. That substantial donation was returned within the day to the generous, but disappointed donor. All was done was utmost politeness, as is clear.³⁰²

³⁰¹ SA, Doc. 20, p. 157; Doc. 26, p. 473.

³⁰² SA, Doc. 20, p. 178.

Could not conduct of this nature be thought excessive in that there should be realized in the faithful the sense of a precise duty toward the divine worship? The answer seems to be no: the saint did not lead anyone to understand that he was prohibiting their helping other churches, nor to be generous in behalf of other works of charity. For him, very simply, the particular ‘circumstances’ of the times persuaded him that for himself, this was the proper attitude. Every saint walks by the path that the lord shows him – and the paths of God are many. Furthermore, aside from the fact that He does not arouse in all and always only admiration the delicate but decisive refusal of Fr. Bertoni, most times turned to the advantage of others.

Thus, for example, with regard to a very considerable inheritance of the noble woman, Mrs. Borgetti–Cartolari, Fr. Bertoni and his Companions, ‘freely and unanimously in the resolution to renounce, and even more they all did it of the own free will’ – as the official deed of their renunciation goes – ‘they know that the most pious testatrix has substituted the Institutes of the Hearing and Speech Impaired, and the Stigmatines rejoice that soon and surely these beneficent and needy Institutes can have at their disposal, such a benefice, in the great needs of their very expensive works ...’³⁰³

There is still another example, chosen from among many. Teresa Gamba was a Recluse of St. Augustine, thrown back out into the world by the monastic suppressions, used every persuasion on the Saint that he might accept in behalf of his work certain rather considerable monies. The response of Fr. Bertoni rebuffed all such wishful thinking in the very pious woman:

‘Most Reverend Madame: My constant principles impede me from accepting your gift for the second time, offered to me by Your Ladyship, and this obligation holds also to turn it down following my death. If I did accept the legacy of the Arch-Priest, Fr. Galvani, the reasons are quite clear, that it would not serve any purpose to go into them here. Furthermore, may Your Ladyship follow my advice: hold on to this, and any other funds that might come for those uses that might arise up until death that you would otherwise be unable to accomplish. And if God does not grant any such consolation, in death you might dispose of them in accord with that prudent counsel of anyone who might help you draw up your last will and testament. Please, however, do not do this in favor of me, nor of the Stimmate because I will not accept it, nor will my men here accept it. For it is on them, that these maxims have been recommended and which they maintain. I know all too well how important these maxims are for the honor of God in these circumstances.

In closing, I express infinite thanks, Your Ladyship, for your charity, and a express my veneration and perpetual recognition ...³⁰⁴

³⁰³ SA, Doc. 27, 2, p. 583.

³⁰⁴ SA, Doc. 27, 1 b, p. 581.

b. For his Abandonment in God

The inheritance from Fr. Galvani was, therefore, the only one that he would accept. He considered this one bequest a gift of Providence, a useful instrument that would serve only the interests of 'Divine Glory.' In 1837, the Jesuit Fathers of the Venetian Province, desirous of being re-established in Verona, found powerful resistance that refused them their old nest at St. Sebastian's, and setting up all kinds of obstacles in like manner for their acquisition of any other property for their Novitiate. The negotiations ended up on a dead track. Fr. Gaspar, to whom Fr. Ferrari had appealed, intervened at this point: '

'Desirous that there be set up as soon as possible the Novitiate for the Company of Jesus, from which so much is hoped for all these places', Fr. Gaspar placed at the disposal of the Jesuits two properties that he owned: the House of the Derelitti and a second tract of land near the Church of the Most Holy Trinity. In the case that neither one of these might prove suitable, Fr. Bertoni then offered them the house of the Stimmate, reserving for himself and for his community only a few rooms.

And not only this: for as long as the civil authorities would not permit the re-purchase of their old place at St. Sebastian's, Fr. Bertoni was ready to hand over his own school to the Company, disposed even to provide the financial support for the maintenance of the individuals who would be needed for this enterprise³⁰⁵. With his gesture, generous beyond all imagining, did not the Saint risk suffocating almost at birth, his own work? In a letter of his to Mother Naudet, dated June 28, 1813, he had already answered that question:

...whoever would abandon for the glory of Christ one house, the Lord would open a hundred of them... No one who has ever hoped in Him has remained confused...³⁰⁶

Everything remained on the level of a simple offering, because the Company was able to obtain the house of Novitiate in another manner. However, this spontaneous deed left echoes of recognition and admiration in the history of the Venetian Province and in the General Annals of the Company. This all testifies to what point Fr. Bertoni would go would activate his proposal to seek in everything and always the Divine Glory, and how fertile in him was the spiritual developments to live completely abandoned to God.

c. To found the Institute

He established a sum, for time set aside for the scope of providing the Institute with an adequate support for its purposes to serve God and the Church in the apostolic ministry, in total gratuity. On August 7, 1838, Fr. Bertoni purchased property described as 'habitable quarters', from the department of Sezano and Stallavena – in the good Veronese country-side – which had belonged for centuries to the Olivetan

³⁰⁵ SA, p. 646.

³⁰⁶ SA, Doc. 35, 12, p. 710.

Monks.³⁰⁷ For this acquisition, Bishop Grasser far more than a suggestion he had given to his holy friend, almost an 'express command.'

With his Petition of August 9, 1838, Fr. Gaspar placed everything at the feet of the Holy Father, Gregory XVI. His delicacy of conscience, his emotional commitment as a son of the Church, his absolute detachment from the goods of this earth, his trust in God, stand out in this document which, it is said, brought tears of tenderness to the eyes of the Vicar of Christ. Here is the central passage:

...Now if it will seem to the Holy Spirit and to You, a most Blessed Father, that it should be for the service of Christ our Lord, and for the usefulness of His Church, to designate this capital of Yours for this purpose, that I had intended to apply this capital even for a profane use, I would receive this as a gift of heaven from Your hands.

If the Holy Spirit and Your prudence should dispose in another manner, I will also be joyful and blessed that the Lord and You would render me worthy to accept from my hands a gift as meager as a bit of gold which with all confidence I have placed at your most holly feet: and even though I would cease for the enterprise undertaken, this would be an argument for me to be able to trust even more and to proceed with even greater perfection. The fact is that this is my own firm will and that of my companions, to spend ourselves entirely in serving Our Lord and His Church, if He should hold us worthy of such service ...³⁰⁸

An Apostolic Rescript, dated December 7, 1838, assigned that capital to the Institution of Fr. Bertoni for the most noble purposes expressed in his Petition.³⁰⁹ And Fr. Bertoni remained its faithful and conscientious administrator. He would never withdraw from all the annoyance and disturbance, or even from judiciary litigations any time the duty of defending that which belonged to God was thrust upon him.

In his doubt, he would have recourse to the Holy See with ever new expressions of faith and devotion towards the Vicar of Christ, manifesting throughout an incomparable delicacy of conscience.³¹⁰ In the administration of his estates he was much moved by social concerns. He spared no expense in order to increase the worth of those two country properties, set beautifully on the smiling hills of Valpantena, dotted by the olive trees and the vast wooded plots.

He thought immediately of the organizing the streams and to renovate the houses there. In taking over the property, there were immediate benefits, and these continued for the share-croppers and the many workers of the area, who, depending on Fr. Bertoni, they found constant and fruitful work³¹¹. Even his interest in agriculture produced a good effect!

³⁰⁷ Stofella, Biography, pp. 195, f.

³⁰⁸ SA, Doc. 14, text, n. 1, p. 69.

³⁰⁹ ib, p. 70.

³¹⁰ ib, pp. 71, f.

³¹¹ SA, Doc 20, p. 177: In the economically difficult years, those battered by famine, in beginning to restore the Church of the Stimmate, and to construct the new residence, the Saint declared that he was

Those country properties were providential also for the poor, who each morning would come with the hands open to the Community door. In the book of accounts, that Fr. Bertoni kept always up to date with scrupulous fidelity, there stood out the repeated word, alms. Fr. Lenotti wrote of these years: ‘... On certain occasions and circumstances, he was so generous that it seemed almost as though he sinned with prodigality.’³¹²

As for himself and his companions, imitating his virtue, concerning their tenor of life, nothing changed at the Stimmate, all continued to follow living as ‘poor men of Jesus.’ Fr. Bertoni was vigilant that this spirit of poverty and detachment was deeply rooted in his own sons. He maintained that poverty, and with good reason, is the first foundation of religious discipline, and indeed of his whole Work ³¹³: ***... to begin the undertaking ...I poverty is the necessary capital. Then all the other virtues...*** this ‘undertaking’ to which he refers in his *Spiritual Journal* surely was his Institute. This is the way he saw it even before its foundation, and with the coherence and fidelity of a saint, he achieved it in the first community at the Stimmate.

d. Take the trash out!

On July 3, 1846, following an unexpected encephalitis, death made its furtive entrance into the Stimmate, stealing away in less than three days one of the dearest sons of Fr. Gaspar, in the person of Fr. Francis Cartolari, a humble and poor priest, even though of a noble and very wealthy family.

Two days later, when the will was opened, there was a great surprise: Fr. Bertoni had been named universal heir of all the goods that had belonged to the family of the deceased, more than a half a million Austrian Lira of those days. Certainly, he would have been a millionaire by today’s standards. In the stipulated case that Fr. Bertoni should refuse the inheritance, three other members of the Stimmate were named in succession as the heirs of this estate: Fr. Gramego, Fr. Brugnoli, and Fr. Benciolini.

On becoming aware of this, the Saint declared with utmost simplicity: ‘*As for me, I will not accept a red cent. As far as you are concerned, think it over.*’ This formal renunciation on the part of their Father, without emotion, nor theatrical gestures, was repeated as a faithful echo, by each of his sons, and the will ended up favoring the Noble, Anthony Cartolari, the brother of the deceased³¹⁴.

As a result of all this, the Community was assembled in the little domestic oratory of Fr. Gaspar, and, with brief but touching words, he sang the joys of poverty animating all present with love of it. This seemed to be a living out of Fr. Bertoni’s note

happy to commit to his own dependence a discreet number of workers and artisans. ‘To assure a worker of his employment is the most beautiful charity that one can render.’ This was contracted work, of course, and he responded. cf. Summ. Add., Doc. 26, p. 489.]

³¹² SA, Doc. 20, p. 177.

³¹³ SA, Doc. 26, p. 540.

³¹⁴ Stofella, o.c., p. 257.

in his *Spiritual Journal*: today ***I experienced the desire to follow the poor Christ more closely...!*** And then, the *Te Deum* was chanted.³¹⁵

When he shared this news with his beloved son serving far away, as the Confessor at the Royal Court of Prague, Fr. Gaspar invited him to sing also the *Te Deum* as an act of living gratitude to the Lord for having given to his Brothers at the Stimate, ***the courage and the grace to send out of the house all the old trash of Fr. Cartolari, keeping rather for themselves the wonderful inheritance of his virtues...***³¹⁶

This gesture made an enormous impression as news of it spread. Even the local newspaper mentioned it – as well as the newspaper in Milano, ‘*La Fama*.’ And all noted it with applause.

5. And the Structures?

To the eyes of others, the Community at the Stimate, as long as the Founder was still living, appeared to be noting more than a simple union of diocesan **priests, dedicated to the most varied ministries dependant upon the Diocesan Shepherd.** Why was the Founder so adamant in not setting his Institute on the way for some kind of Canonical recognition? To his sons, who from time to time would encourage him to do so, he responded with his antiphon that “*he was not of the stature to found religious communities ...*”³¹⁷ And there was in that smile of his the unconscious joy of a limitless act of faithfulness to an old maxim he had made his own: *We need to be lowly, lowly; each finding his own little den, lair...*³¹⁸ However, there was also the reality of a community that was actually ‘living in the manner of religious, but those of perfect observance and a most perfect common life, in the exercise of a ready obedience and a solid piety, with the bond of charity that everything was shared in spiritual kindness.’³¹⁹

From March 1, 1836, Fr. Gaspar, with the cautions imposed by the times over that which the shadow of Joseph II still weighed heavily, extended the activity of the Institute in a continuing and organized manner to one of the most populated quarters of the city: St. Stephen’s Parish, on the left bank of the Adige. It was the local Pastor who requested this of him.

The House of the *Derelitti* with its little adjoining Church dedicated to St. Mary of the Lily³²⁰ received the first Stigmatine detachment, and this was the only one that Fr. Bertoni had the comfort of realizing in his lifetime. To the first ones assigned there,

³¹⁵ SA, Doc. 20, p. 179.

³¹⁶ Stofella, o.c., p. 257.

³¹⁷ SA, Doc. 20, p. 124.

³¹⁸ *Bassi, bassi, buseta e taneta: piccola bucca, piccola tana.* This child’s game refrain would recall the lowly crickets’ hiding place. It was often repeated by Fr. Bertoni, as the motto that would summarize the spirit of his old mentor, Fr. Nicholas Galvani.

³¹⁹ Fr. Marani and Fr. Bragato, in SA, Doc. 23, p. 259; Doc. 25, p. 284.

³²⁰ Property that came to Fr. Bertoni in the Galvani Will.

Fr. Marani and Brother Paul Zanolì, in 1840, a third confrere was added: Fr. Benciolini. And the spiritual benefits of that rather obscure apostolate among the poor people in that rather neglected sector of the city proved to be incalculable. Fr. Benciolini would remain in that assignment for more than 40 years, much loved and venerated as the father and apostle of that district.³²¹

And finally there came to see the light of day those Rules that were meant to establish in time the spirit and the program of the new Institute's life. The Saint wrote them, *drop by drop, between* 1841 and 1850, as the *fruit of long meditations and mature counsels*.³²²

That ten-year stretch represented in effect the most crucial period of the Work of Fr. Bertoni. The Stigmatine community visited at different times by death, was deeply saddened by some men leaving the Congregation, was reduced to the small number of six priests and 3 Lay Brothers, went through a phase of trial that was so hard that it could appear even to be an agony. In this climate, without any light of human hope, the Rules written by the Founder were a triumphant act of faith and abandonment in God. Fr. Bertoni had undying confidence '*in the loving Providence,*' which bears the seed for the corn full of grain, that comes to life only after burying agony and death in the furrow.

Among the principal sources which helped him in drawing up the document full of norms of fervent unction, verbalizing the ideal that the Lord had enkindled in his heart are the following: **the Decree of the Sacred Congregation Propagation of the Faith** which had named him an *Apostolic Missionary* in 1817; the work, ***De Religione Societatis Iesu in Particulari***,³²³ of the celebrated Jesuit, Fr. Francis Suarez; then, a few tracts taken from the ***Summa*** of St. Thomas Aquinas³²⁴. Wherever it was possible, he preferred the formulations of others, and once he found them, and conformed his own thinking and, always those more accepted to the authority of the Church.

And from this work, even though it was left incomplete in some of its parts, the leaps clearly forward and unmistakably the role of the Charism of St. Gaspar Bertoni in the Church: his men were to be a squadron of ***Apostolic Missionaries in the service of the Bishops***, i.e., a Congregation of missionaries, *dedicated and determined in a special and clear way to the service, and obsequiousness to the Bishops*. This is all analogous to that **special mode**³²⁵ with which the Company of

³²¹ Stofella, Biography, pp.178-179.

³²² SA, Doc. 23, p. 264.

³²³ Suarez, tom. 15, Ed. Veneziana. ex Typ. Balleoniana 1754.

³²⁴ II-II, qq. 160, 161, 166-168.

³²⁵ **NB: Translator's Note: the special mode of missionary obedience is presented by St. Gaspar in CF # 2, of the *Compendium Rude* - that one paragraph, citing the Decree of the Propagation of the Faith, December 1817, has 6 separate terms indicating obediential apostolic missionary service to Bishops; please cf. the Translator's Note added as an *Appendix* to the end of this Chapter.**

Jesus is dedicated and orientated to the service and disposition of the Supreme Pontiff.'

Their camp of activity will be to *go anywhere in the Diocese and the world*. The Means to achieve this will be their own *religious perfection and an ever-deepening competence in the ecclesiastical doctrines*. Their life-style will be a perfect adherence to the local Church and territory: *the good, the clothing and dwelling will be like that in the lives of the more exemplary Churchmen in the places where the Institute finds itself, so that they might edify the faithful by their parsimony and evangelical poverty*.

They will live the freedom of the Apostolic Mission, withdrawing themselves from dignities, benefices, the perpetual care of the faithful, and they will offer their services in a totally gratuitous way for the service of God and of the Church.

The internal relationships will copied from the first disciples of Jesus and from the first Christian community: ***The confreres will ³²⁶ have as the scope and mark of their vocation those words of Jesus Christ: 'by this will all know that you are My disciples if you have love for one another ...***

When Fr. Bertoni died, the little Community at the Stimate was able still to think of itself as a small seed buried in a furrow. However, it was able to live with all the certainty and the strength of life. Only two years after the Founder's death, his Institute obtained its first Pontifical recognition, with the *Decree of Praise*, April 16, 1855. That Decree which had been obtained following an unusual process when the new religious family did not count more than 6 priests and three Coadjutor Brothers. It was considered to be a miracle, and this was true also in the experienced eyes of the officials of the Roman Curia. The roman official in contact with Fr. Marani, in writing to him about the approval, did not hesitate to remark: 'The Institute of Fr. Bertoni is indeed of God because it goes forward on the strength of prodigies.'³²⁷

In the darkest hours, when the little family of the Stimate seemed near to petering out for good the Father Founder would always encourage them to have confidence in the future of the Work, by exhorting them: ***Let us trust in God who can do all things...***³²⁸



³²⁶ *Costituzioni del Ven. Servo di Dio, D. Gaspare Bertoni, Fondatore dei Preti delle Stimate di N. S.* G. C. Verona: A.M.B. 1951, pp. 190, # 187.

³²⁷ Letter of Bertinelli-Marani. November 12, 1855. SA, Doc. 23, Introd. P. 227.

³²⁸ SA, Doc. 29, n. 7, pp. 608, ff.

APPENDIX**[Added by Translator]****Two Jesuit Vows of Obedience:****The Apostolic Missionary Mode [CF ## 2; Part IX: 158- 186]****and****Corporate Stigmatine Obedience [CF ## 138-151]**

In the tradition of St. Ignatius of Loyola, there were two Vows of Obedience both noted in his *Formula*:

- the Corporate Obedience of the daily Life of the Company of Jesus, epitomized in the election of the Praepositus General for life;
- the Ecclesial Obedience, Missionary Modality, expressed by the special Fourth Vow, indicating a special obedience to the missionary, apostolic service to be rendered in the service [*obsequium* - translates the Spanish *servicio*] the Roman Pontiff.

For the 'Corporate' Obedience, its principles are covered in Ignatius' famous Letter on Obedience [made up of 21 Points], from Rome, March 28, 1553.³²⁹ This emphasizes the three levels of obedience: execution; obedience of the will; and the true oblation, obedience of the intellect. [These are found in Fr. Bertoni's *Original Constitutions*, ## 138-151].

For the *Apostolic Missionary Mode* this may be found in the concluding paragraphs of the Jesuit Founder's Spiritual Exercises [cf. nn. 352- 370, made up of 18 *Reglas para sentir la Iglesia* - sentire cum Ecclesia]³³⁰. This is what has been synthesized in CF # 2, and throughout Part IX, the Grade of the *Professed*, the *Apostolic Missionaries*.

There follows reflections of comparison between St. Ignatius and St. Gaspar Bertoni:

CF # 2. The Manner [of achieving this goal]: the Apostolic Missionaries are to work **under the direction** of, and **dependent** on the Ordinaries of those places in which the Missions may be offered. The Missionaries are to be totally **submissive** to these Bishops, concerning **all** that pertains to the exercise of their Apostolic Ministry.

³²⁹ Manuel Maria Espinosa Polit, SJ, *Perfect Obedience. Commentary on the Letter of Obedience of St. Ignatius of Loyola*. Westminster MD: The Newman Bookshop 1947.

³³⁰ AaVv, 'Una lectura actual de las Reglas para sentir con la Iglesia', in: CIS 44 1987; cf. José Corella, SJ, *Sentir la Iglesia. Comentario a las reglas ignacianas para el sentido verdadero de Iglesia. Mensajero – Sal Terrae. 1995*. [Fr. Corella speaks of modern efforts to redact new such Ignatian Rules, or to consider St. Ignatius; interpretations as pertaining to another period – many such efforts have not gained any special fortune – cf. p. 217].

The Missionaries are to receive their permission beforehand from them, along with the necessary faculties, always observing the guide-lines set down by these Ordinaries concerning the places and the time in the exercise of their ministry. [From the Decree of the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, December 20, 1817].

There is in Fr. Bertoni's Compendium Rude, a clear Parallel with the Jesuit Formula:

The definitive **Formula** prefacing the Jesuit Constitutions is constituted by the Papal Bull ¹ of Julius III, **Exposcit Debitum**, dated July 21, 1550. This document made up of nine rather lengthy numbers, is divided into '**Five Chapters**', or five central ideals for the Company of Jesus to be spelled out, developed, in the course of the rest of the Ignatian Constitutions. These **Five 'Chapters'** are as follows:

- I. **The 'End' of the Company and its Fundamental Regime** [nn. 1 & 2].
- II. The Special **Missionary Mode of Obedience** to the Supreme Pontiff [n. 3-5].
- III. The exercise of **Corporative Obedience within** the Company [n. 6].
- IV. **Missionary Poverty** within the Company and the regimen of the scholastics ¹ [nn. 7-8].
- V. **Miscellaneous**: Other Points more in particular, of this Form of Life [e.g., **no specific Religious Habit; nor Choral Recitation** of the Liturgy of Hours, etc.] [n. 9].

§§§

Reasons for the special Fourth Vow: - [this is also applicable to the Bertonian *Profession of Apostolic Missionaries*] - there are three noted in the Jesuit text, all comparatives for the *greater glory of God*:

- for the sake of greater devotion and obedience to the Apostolic See;
- for greater abnegation of our own wills;
- and of a surer direction from the Holy Spirit. [cf.CF # 185]

This Jesuit clarification was in response to a Cardinal Ghinucci's opposition in saying that all Christian were called to obey the Pope – not just Jesuits. However, for the Jesuits these three motives offered them distinct characteristics – they were called to serve the Pope more than others ... [a theme then developed by Fr. Lenotti: not intended to relate any sense of triumphalism, but as an ascetic comparative, like **Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam – Ordo Fratres Minorum** – an always greater challenge.

The Modality of the Fourth Vow: it is a *special* vow - the common vow of obedience binds **all religious to obey the Pope**, as he is the first superior of all religious. The spiritual aspect of the vow is more important than the challenging juridical nature of the Company of Jesus in its obedience to the Vicar of Christ – and

hence, to Christ Himself – more immediately and more intimately. The Jesuit is called to carry the Apostolic Mission out without subterfuge. The entire meaning of this Fourth Vow of Obedience to the Pope was, and is, **in regard to the Missions**.

For St. Gaspar, the ***direction and dependence on the Bishops*** is to be understood within the limits of the Decree of the Propagation of the Faith, and as it was lived in the customary practice of the authentic Apostolic Missionaries, in accord with the rest of the *Original Constitutions*, in particular with Part IX [## 158-186] – i.e., **for all that is to be done in the broad exercise of the apostolic ministry**: within these **extended limits** of the Apostolic Mission, of **every aspect of the Word of God whatsoever**, there is to be integral obedience.

Fr. Bertoni made no effort to hide the difficulty of such a broad ministry. In order to explain the content of the ***Compendium Rude***, Fr. Stofella chose a Constitution from **Part IX, Concerning *the Grade of the Professed***, [CF ## 158-186] – **Chapter VII, Concerning the Principal Purpose of the 'Professed' [Priests]**, [CF # 185] as a special Commentary on the *Compendium Rude*:

[a] ***Cum ejusdem Sodalitatis scopus sit, Ecclesiae sub Episcoporum directione, obsequium praeestare per varia et propria suae vocationis munera...*** this broad program, ***to offer assistance to Bishops through the various and proper duties of its vocation***, will at times prove to be:

[b] ***... haec autem quandoque ardua et difficilis res sit...***: the reason why this is ***arduous and difficult...*** is due to the constant challenge of balancing the ***contemplata aliis tradere***, the need for the ***more than ordinary knowledge***, the demand to be in constant formation for the ***varia et propria*** and the ***graviora ministeria*** - striving ever forward toward having those qualities that would merit the ***Grade***, being always committed to on-going preparation toward ***serving*** in the ***perfectum opus sacerdotale***. The ***arduous and difficult*** nature of the Stigmatine vocation appears immediately following in this important text:

[c] ***... si ad fragilitatem hominum comparetur quibusdam forte periculis exposita esse videatur...***: if it seems that this vocation is compared to the fragility of men as being powerfully exposed to certain dangers. However, the conclusion is immediately forthcoming:

[d] However, Fr. Bertoni, based on Suarez, adds this comment: ***... non tamen propterea imprudens aut temerarium est propositum devotionis nostrae...*** However, nevertheless, this ***broad program is not imprudent or temerarious as being proposed to our devotion***. The reasons are then forthcoming what it is not imprudent or temerarious for these reasons:

[e] {1} ***... Primo quidem, quia non humanis viribus, sed Spiritus Sancti gratia implendum creditur...***: the first reason why this enterprise is not believed to be 'dangerous or temerarious' is that it does not depend on human strength, but on the **[special]** grace of the Holy Spirit to be carried out. Following this comment, Fr. Bertoni again makes use of a biblical text that seems to have been in his heart [cf. **Ph**

1:6 – which he often quoted] – this is an indication of his personal conviction that the inspiration for the Congregation was from God:

[f] ... *qui enim coepit et inspiravit illud, ipse perficiet si per nos non steterit: nam haec est specialis gratia huius vocationis quae potentior est omnibus periculis et difficultatibus*: for He who began and inspired this good work, He Himself will perfect it [cf. Ph 1:6], if He is not impeded by us: for this is the **special grace of this vocation** which is more powerful than all the dangers and difficulties: there follows then the second reason why this undertaking is not imprudent or temerarious, and this is an act of faith. For St. Gaspar Bertoni believed – based on Ac 20:28 - that...

[g] {2}... *Deinde per hanc intentionem non proponimus nos periculis exponere, nec hunc vel illum locum adire, aut has vel illas actiones exercere, sed directionem sequi orthodoxi Episcopi quem Spiritus Sanctus posuit regere Ecclesiam Dei*... Therefore for this intention we do not propose to expose ourselves to dangers, nor to do to this place or to that, or to exercise these, or those activities, but to **follow the direction of the Orthodox Bishop whom the Holy Spirit has placed to govern the Church of God**. As for the Bishops being chosen by the Holy Spirit, this is based on Ac 20:28.

[h] The saintly Founder adds: *quod medium satis cautum est ad non errandum in via Dei* - because this is a means that is sufficiently cautious in order not to err in the way of God. This is an expression dear to St. Ignatius.

[i] Then, Fr. Bertoni, following Fr. Suarez, adds a third reason which is: {3}... *Accedit tamen religionis providentia, tum in disponendis et probandis personis, tam etiam in eis eligendis et omni opere suffulciendis et confirmandis*... - Lastly, there is added also the providence of the state of religion, both in disposing and proving persons, as well as also in selecting them and in supporting them and confirming them: all these things in which for Fr. Bertoni the intervention of the Ordinary has only to oversee, because all this is reserved to the providence of the state of religion.

As has been noted, this extraordinary commentary which Fr. Stofella understands as a 'fervent commentary on the **Compendium Rude**' is cited from several places in the Commentary of Fr. Suarez. In his Book I, he studies "**Concerning the Institution and the Institute of the Society in General**". The Jesuit theologian then asks in c. 7 '*Whether the Society of Jesus embraces the contemplative life, or rather the active life*'. In number 9 of this Chapter, Suarez treats of the '**difficulty**' of this vocation, under the title: 'How can the Society satisfy at the same time both its broad activity together with Contemplation?' Here Suarez speaks of the **grace of the vocation** [cf. Fr. NADAL]. The second reason for hope is **the protection of obedience to the Bishops chosen by the Holy Spirit** – whom Suarez mentions [in his Book VI, c. 4, n. 25 – where he speaks of **the special vow of Obedience**, the Fourth Jesuit Vow].

[j] The final words in this **CF # 185** are: *...et omni ope suffulciendis et confirmandis...*: the using of every effort to sustain and strengthen those who are chosen for this vocation. [So far research here has not discerned the origin of these words.] The Stigmatine Founder believed deeply in the supernatural means provided for the confreres chosen for this special task. He was deeply convinced of the principle contained in **Ph 1:6** – *that the One Who began and inspired this good work, would see it to fruition*. He was convinced, with Suarez, perhaps basing himself on **Fr. Jerome NADAL, SJ**, and his many commentaries on the *arduous and difficult* vocation sustained by a **special grace**. Fr. Bertoni was convinced that he personally was not of the stature to institute a religious community.

[k] Here the title **Professed** in Fr. Bertoni's Constitutions refers to those **Priests**, who **at the choice of the Father General** [and later, with the advice of his Council] are promoted to **Solemn Profession**. These men would be those confreres to whom the Saintly Founder entrusted the government of the Institute. These are the **Apostolic Missionaries**, in the most proper sense, the **Professed**.

[l] **Missionarii Apostolici** - Fr. Bertoni certainly would have known that this title, an honorary distinction, is a property reserved to the judgment of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. In his prudence, then, he placed the title, which pleased him very much, in which he saw more a challenging burden than an honor. His emphasis was on **Missionary Obedience, the Modality of Mission** - **as Christ toward his Father**. He considered the **Apostolic Mission** as that **good work** capable of nourishing souls sensitive to the zeal for the greater glory of God, and for the eternal salvation of one's neighbors. He dreamed of a **reserve of evangelical workers** always ready – one by one, kind of a ***flying squadron, Noble Guard*** - for even the most unexpected demands of Bishops, to **go anywhere in the Diocese or the world, for any service of the Word of God whatsoever**. They were to be men decisive in their will **to offer themselves for God and for the Church of God [obsequium]** with absolute **gratuity** of service – they were to remain **free** from dignities, residences, benefices, perpetual or particular care of souls, or nuns. They would be ready to go **anywhere** in the diocese, or outside it, in the world.

†
†††
†



Fr. Bertoni teaching even when sick, in his room



Fr. Bertoni with the boys in Verona: devotion to the Holy Spouses Mary and Joseph

The Spiritual Profile of St. Gaspar Bertoni



Fr. Bertoni: Founder and Living Rule of the Congregation

Its Features and Spirit

Rev. John Ceresatto, CSS

Part Four

Apostolic Missionaries in the Service of Bishops

Section 2

The Living Rule

Translation from Italian:

Rev. Joseph C. Henchey, CSS

[from Lincoln, NE – Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, 2005]

Electronic Edition: Tereza Lopes [Lay Stigmatine]

Last updated on Advent, 2014

TABLE of CONTENTS
PART FOUR
APOSTOLIC MISSIONARIES IN THE SERVICE OF BISHOPS
SECTION TWO
The Living Rule

<u>Chapter 16: The Model and Father of the Community</u>	175
1. Father and Teacher 2. Fr. Gramego, Confessor 3. Fr. Benciolini, the Good Preacher 4. Fr. Venturini, the Catechist of the Unlettered 5. Fr. Marani, Prepared for All 6. Fr. Bragato, Apostolic Missionary in the Royal Court 7. The Mission of Suffering 8. Poor and Mortified 9. One Sole Spirit, One Single Soul.	
<u>Chapter 17: Encounters and Anecdotes</u>	185
1. Raking up 2. The Bishop and the Catechism Lesson 3. Faith and Reason 4. The Curious and the Devout 5. The First and Ultimate Service 6. Rosmini and Bertoni 7. <i>Just too Humble</i> 8. Let God do His Part 9. <i>You will go to San Zeno's, but not yet to the Cemetery!</i>	
<u>Chapter 18: From Immolation to Glory</u>	195
1. Ultimate Voices of the soul 2. Failures? 3. A Slow Martyrdom 4. In the Breach until the Last 5. Tribulations 6. In the Light of a Great Love 7. Encounters with the 'Good Father'.	

†
†††
†

PART FOUR
APOSTOLIC MISSIONARIES IN THE SERVICE OF BISHOPS

SECTION II
THE LIVING RULE

Chapter 16

The Model and Father of the Community

1. Father and Teacher

Having become the Father and the Founder of a new Family in the Church, the Saint attended with faith, love and solicitude in the spiritual formation of his sons. The most powerful lever on those willing souls, bound to their 'Don Gaspar' by profound esteem and veneration was his example, the sense of the supernatural that radiated from him. For as long as he lived, he served as the moderator of the Community, also in the long years in which illnesses confined him to immobility in his arm chair or in bed. None of his sons ever thought that someone else – while he was still alive - could ever take his place.

Rigid with himself, he communicated to his subjects with the certain fascination of his good nature that when it proved to be necessary, he never surrendered his necessary firmness. There was no doubt: the task of Superior was for Fr. Bertoni sustained by the light of that solid principle expressed in his *Spiritual Journal*:

...The vow of obedience for one who has no superior, for one who indeed is the Superior, binds his spirit to a total dependence on God in everything...³³¹

His fidelity to that ideal was the secret of which he made full use to conquer the hearts and the wills of his followers and to create around him that atmosphere that was totally permeated with spirituality which the biographers, in agreement, point out. We would like for a moment to breathe for our benefit that supernatural climate.

In a rapid and exceptional note in the House Chronicle there is presented to us, the entire Community of Fr. Bertoni is presented as gathering closely around him in a particular moment for a decision which involved all. There were present, it seems 11 Priests and 4 Brothers and two Clerics. It was July 5, 1835. Four days earlier, Bishop Grasser had come to Fr. Bertoni, talking with him at some length in a private conversation. To that visit were dedicated 'all the free periods of the day and night, for discussions among the elders on the most secret level.' Finally, 'all were gathered, both young and old in the recreation room and all sat around in a circle, with the Superior standing in the center.' In this backdrop he made the official announcement formulated in prudent and somewhat veiled terms:

³³¹ SA, Doc. 335, p. 665.

... it is the will of God, manifested in our most zealous Bishop, that our confrere, Fr. Louis Bragato, is to be separated from us, and will leave for Vienna ... he will depart tomorrow on the quick train. Pray for him, so that the Lord might bless the work that he is going to take up...

Bishop Grasser had asked Fr. Bertoni for Fr. Bragato as the Confessor for the Empress, the wife of Ferdinand I of Hapsburg. **The will of God, manifested in the desire of the Bishop was in the episode the decisive reason for this choice.** But, let us return to the 'Superior.'

In the handling of affairs, in the external direction of the Community, the Founder was never an autocrat. This is confirmed in the passage just quoted above. The first men who entered the Stimmate – Frs. Marani, Gramego and Brugnoli – were in fact, his closest collaborators, constituting with him the 'Council of the Elders', whom he consulted in every decision regarding the life and the interests of the Institute.³³²

However, it was to all of his followers – Priests, Clerics and Brothers - that his frequent and inspiring exhortations were addressed³³³, with their incalculable fruit when we think of what it was what they themselves relate to us about these: '...they had never heard him speak of God and of the future life, without themselves being deeply moved and enkindled with his own spirit...' ³³⁴ From the traditions, from the writings of those who were the first and most faithful followers of Fr. Bertoni, let it be permitted to us to gather those more significant echoes of his wise direction and intense activity, in the hearts and souls of his sons. This will just be a type of rapid survey before individuals already known to us, but little more than their names.

2. Fr. Gramego, Confessor

Concerning Fr. Gramego, who came to the Stimmate, among the priests of the very 'first hour', we do know of his exuberant and joyful character. Fr. Bertoni thought almost immediately of making him, in addition to being a good teacher – his students were in agreement in calling him 'the Good Master' – a catechist for the people. However, going one time to teach Sunday catechism in the near-by Parish of the most Holy Trinity, 'he was at times forced to support himself along the way on the wall of a house, because of the great struggle he had with stage fright and the proximity even of vomiting, because of his great worry that he was simply overwhelmed and deeply disturbed. Despite all this, Fr. Gramego did his best to overcome his terrible concerns, but in the end, realizing that this experiment was not working, the sage and discreet Superior judged that he would have to leave him in peace, taking him from **preaching, to which Heaven had not called him.**'³³⁵

³³² **NB: Translator's note: this is his own rule: consult the 'Elders' [CF # 151]; the 'Sages' [#301].**

³³³ Stofella, Biography, o.c., pp. 180, f.

³³⁴ SA, Doc. 26, p. 481.

³³⁵ Lenotti, *Remarks on the life of Fr. Michael Gramego*. Manuscripts in the Archives of the Stimmate.

Fr. Gramego found his **Stigmatine Apostolic Mission in the confessional**. Being of a somewhat robust nature, he could remain long hours in this ministry with incredible goodness and patience. His ‘hobby’ in free time was working around in the garden. One day while he was leaning over a favorite plant of his, he heard the familiar voice of Fr. Gaspar at the window: ‘Fr. Michael, please bring me that plant!’ What? The invitation was repeated with smiling firmness; and the gardener had only to offer his equally smiling and simple obedience.³³⁶

Fr. Michael also enjoyed animals. He had a small cage with a nest of birds. One day, Fr. Bertoni invited him to let them go” ‘Go, creatures of God; Fr. Michael gives you the freedom of the woods and the skies.’³³⁷

It would seem that St. Francis, from near the altar of the Stimate, certainly smiled at, and blessed these ‘little flowers.’

3. Fr. Benciolini, the Good Preacher

Of this very humble and fervent priest, all full of zeal for souls and tenderness for the poor, was justly defined as ‘candor personified’. Let us allow two little autographed incidents speak to us about the enchanting docility he had for the counsels that Fr. Gaspar gave to him, as the true father of his soul.

The following is a note he left recorded: ‘Fr. Francis, Fr. Francis: you should preach according to your own nature, nor should you try to force yourself to do what others do, no matter how more perfect that might seem; because if you try to imitate others, you may not succeed and will fall flat on your face. Therefore, rely on that good spirit that the Lord has granted you. And preach from the heart, i.e., with charity.’³³⁸

If Fr. Francis achieved in his long life a great deal of good with his ministry of the Divine Word, this is due to the fascination of his simplicity and warmth of his style. These are precisely the two qualities on which in the judgment of his Master and Father, he should depend. His ‘Master and Father’ was Fr. Bertoni, whom he loved and obeyed as his ‘God on earth.’ He once wrote:

‘... You ought to consider Fr. Gaspar as another God on earth over you. His words are as the word of God ... he is your great Benefactor, as one who has showered on you numberless benefits and spiritual maxims, by having received you in the House of God. He is your Superior, invested by God with the authority to command you. He is your Father, as the one who is the Father of your soul, who nourishes it, feeds it both with heavenly wisdom and with his holy examples. And how should you consider the corrections, which he lovingly makes to you, the acts of virtue, to which he encourages you? Obedience, then, love, respect ...’

³³⁶ Family traditions – cf. Fiorio, *Vita del Ven. Servo di Dio, D. Gaspare Bertoni*. Type Bettinelli. Verona 1922, p. 259.

³³⁷ ib.

³³⁸ cf. Stofella, Biography, p. 189 – this incident was recorded in Veronese dialect.

4. Fr. Innocent Venturini, the Popular Catechist

Fr. Innocent Venturini was most devoted to the Blessed Virgin and to St. Joseph., and he was accustomed to defining himself with admirable humility as ‘the most wretched at the Stimate.’ Under the patient guidance of the Saint, he succeeded as being a successful and much sought after preacher. For his convincing lessons of Christian Doctrine for the ordinary people, always diligently prepared and delivered in the Veronese dialect, there was always a steady stream of persons of every social level, from the furthest ends of the city. He would die the death of the just in 1864, mourned by all, and especially by the poor, who in life the deceased had called ‘his own bread.’³³⁹

5. Fr. Marani, *prepared for all*

Fr. John Mary Marani was the ‘right hand man’ of Fr. Bertoni, from the days of the very first Marian Oratory in St. Paul’s in Campo Marzio. He would then succeed him in the government of the Institute and would serve as his spiritual director. He directed the Community making his own the norm of the Founder: ‘... this is what Fr. Gaspar would do, say, want...’³⁴⁰. Regarding him, there would remain proverbial his tireless dedication to **every form of ministry**, committing himself in an outstanding manner and fruitfully. He was a prime example of the **Bertonian Ideal**:

... Fr. Marani during the day, teaches school at the Stimate; in the evenings and on holy days, he is at the Derelitti. At the Stimate, he teaches and spends some time in the library. At the Derelitti on Saturday evenings and Sundays, he hears many confessions and with excellent results for that district. Other evenings he gives a moral conference to about 10-12 priests... After his methodical exposition, he determines and defines according to the circumstances – and this is every day – the more intricate cases. And the Lord bestows on him the light and prudence and frankness beyond the ordinary.

On Thursdays, he examines as usual the clerics sent to him by the Seminary; and then he receives penitents of every kind and at every hour, even interrupting his lunch, supper, and putting off his rest.

Likewise on feast days, he hears Confessions in St. Stephen’s choir up until the time that he then gives the Instructions [catechetical] at St. Sebastian’s. This will go on as long as it will please the Lord. The people receive him very willingly and it seems that he does not just cast the word of God about, but it is received in good ground ...

*I have sent him also to St Zeno’s to preach the Octave of the Deceased ...*³⁴¹

Fr. Marani, too, although certainly not to the extent that Fr. Bertoni did, had long periods of harsh physical sufferings. But, with what serenity he expressed in that silent suffering he endured! Fr. Bertoni, who also in this had been his teacher, wrote

³³⁹ *Reminiscences regarding the Fathers and Brothers of the Congregation.* Verona 1886, p. 70.

³⁴⁰ *Summarium super virtut.*, pp. 22, 27.

³⁴¹ SA, Doc. 35, n. 4, pp. 743, f.

of him: *... may the Lord grant him perseverance in his willing suffering, as, by the grace of God, and for our edification, he has done up until now ...*³⁴² Fr. Bertoni in the last years of his life in his work and suffering, would commit the spiritual direction of his own soul, to this well tempered apostle.

6. Fr. Bragato, Missionary at the Royal Court.

Fr. Louis Bragato, the humble ‘lowly priest of the Stimate’, ended up as the Confessor of an Empress in the Royal Court of Auxburg, was **the disciple who more than any other had penetrated and made his own, the spirit of Fr. Gaspar**. While he was still a seminarian, and had heard a lesson and meditation, the fruit that a Priest ought to harvest with his example. He wrote of that integrity, gravity, holiness, that ought to all breathe forth, as I see in Fr. Gaspar....³⁴³

In his constant contact with the guide of his soul [as he had resolved to have recourse in all things, even the small ones, to Fr. Gaspar], this docile disciple, having abandoned all to the intensity of Grace, follows from close at hand the agile pace of his Master in detachment from this world, in his thirst for penance, in his spirit of prayer. ‘What a beautiful experience it is to be able to say with St. Peter: we have given up all things and we have put ourselves into following You.’

Nor could he choose to renounce his exceptional service of guidance when Providence, with a joke on him that upset all his personal plans, brought him to work out, as the first herald of the nascent Institute, far from the city in which it had been its crib, to Vienna and Prague, confessor and almoner of the Empress Maria Anna Carolina Pia di Savoia, the wife of Ferdinand I of Auxburg. We will read further ahead some of what has remained of the copious correspondence between Fr. Bertoni and himself, a testimony of that exquisite friendship and holiness.³⁴⁴

7. The Mission of Suffering

To this aspect of the Apostolic Mission were destined the two little angels of the Stimate, the young Fr. Louis Biadego and the seminarian, ‘little Louis’ Ferrari. Both of these seemed destined to an early of the inexorability of their illnesses [the former being slowly consumed by tuberculosis, and the latter was plagued by deep and incurable sores], suffered next door to each other. They received regular visits from their Superior, who was also ill himself, who blessed them, comforted them, and encouraged them with the sacred words of confidence and holy abandonment: ‘Whether we live or die, we are of the Lord’.³⁴⁵

And they found – in those words - so much of an echo of correspondence in their own souls, equally generous. The infirmarian was often deeply embarrassed, by

³⁴² Letter Bertoni-Naudet, ms 76-19.

³⁴³ Mss. Bragato – Archives at the Stimate.

³⁴⁴ SA, Doc. 35, pp. 737, f.

³⁴⁵ *Reminiscences concerning...*, o.c., p. 46. Fr. Lenotti, *Life of Fr. L. Biadego*, p. 23, ff. Archives of the Stimate.

being overwhelmed with emotion because each one of the two - as they were obliged to say it - thought that he would arrive at the gate of heaven before the other. ³⁴⁶

From the dawn of that October 4 of some years earlier that he had planned and protected his early morning departure from his family home to enter the Stimmate, Fr. Biadego had walked strongly in the school of the Father. He was assigned to assist Fr. Gaspar in his long infirmities, and Fr. Louis truly enjoyed having a more intimate communion of life and thought with him: every day together they would pray the Breviary and often made their meditation together. And he had learned how to profit by this. Certain proposals of Fr. Biadego truly reflect in full the vigorous spirituality of Fr. Bertoni: *to die to oneself is everything... abandon myself into the arms of Divine Providence ... Suffer....* And then, almost a comment on this last entry: *...Your first and principal concern is on Christ Crucified ... From such a Teacher and from such a book you will draw the desire to suffer for Christ...* ³⁴⁷

And when the Crucified Master took him at his word, the disciple did not have a moment's regret. On December 26, 1841, at dawn, Fr. Louis experienced a kind of fit in his chest, causing a deep gurgling sound. This was repeated at various intervals. The members of his family and his doctors hastened to assist him, quite alarmed. He, however, remained abandoned into the arms of Divine Providence, committed to enduring what had to be, as he stated to his Confessor who had come to comfort him. 'I am at peace,' he smiled, 'I have placed everything into the hands of the Blessed Mother.' ³⁴⁸ And he completed his sacrifice right to the end.

When the sufferings became even more severe, he invited the one who assisted him to repeat to him at intervals the beloved phrase that his 'Superior' had suggested to him, and this is the way he died, as though cuddled by that sweet music, full of love and hope: 'Whether we live, or whether we die: we are of the Lord.' ³⁴⁹ It was the 17th of February 1842. Fr. Biadego was only 34 years old. And all who knew him, remarked: 'A saint has died.' ³⁵⁰

As for 'little Lou', he had to wait for three more long weeks. To the Brother who, on one of his last nights, had brought him something to help him, and which also was tasty, he asked: 'But, why these things? Now I think only of Paradise.' ³⁵¹

No less edifying was the very sudden death of the beloved Brother Angelo Casella, who from the Stimmate had been the first to cross the threshold of eternity.

In similar manner might we speak of the two other prematurely deceased priests, Frs. Cainer and Cartolari. ³⁵²

³⁴⁶ *Reminiscences...*, p. 46.

³⁴⁷ Lenotti, o.c., p. 17.

³⁴⁸ *ib.*, p. 19.

³⁴⁹ Lenotti, o.c., p. 23.

³⁵⁰ *ib.*, p. 26.

³⁵¹ *Reminiscences ...* o.c., p. 46.

³⁵² Gramego, *Reminiscences...*, cf. March 3, 1843, January 12, 1844, July 3, 1846.

And certainly, after these most consoling examples of such peaceful passing away to the other world, that Fr. Michael, finding fervor with some of the Confreres on the spiritual beauties of the austere life that had been embraced, with that exuberance that was so much his style, very often would enter this comment into his Chronicle: 'He passed from the Cell to Heaven' [similar sounds in Italian: *dalla cella al Cielo*]. And the joy that he sang in his heart was something like a mini-ball; in his view, this is what seemed to be most in place.³⁵³

In the school of Fr. Bertoni 'we kept our eyes solely turned toward the eternal reward, toward that reward which through His Mercy the Lord willed to grant us in heaven; that is the blessed homeland toward which we aspire and where we have been called...'³⁵⁴

8. Poor and Mortified

It would be totally wrong to think that these sick men lacked attention. To them were reserved the most choice foods, and an affection that was more than maternal³⁵⁵. But whoever could do so, always led a poor and mortified life. At the Stimate, the life offered of itself much mortification: as, for example, daily hard work. For the long years that the harsh manual labor lasted in the building of the new residence, in the few hours free from school and from their commitments to the ministry, those Priests-teachers enjoyed always to mix among the workers with joyful simplicity, assisting them in those most tiring tasks, as to mix the cement and to carry the bricks.

In this work, the Founder was no less involved than was his sons. Fr. Giacobbe attests that he had seen Fr. Gaspar with his own eyes, with the wheel barrow in hand, and working like a brick-layer, when the restorations in the Church were going on.³⁵⁶

And if for the muscular Fr. Gramego a work of this kind could represent a little more than a sport pleasing to him, for the others, as for example, for the nobleman and dutiful Fr. Francis Cartolari³⁵⁷, that unusual heavy labor became a genuine exercise of humility and mortification.

Other mortifications built into that early Stigmatine life, while being harmless to the body, were accepted as a precious gift for their spirits. This would be an example: at the end of December 1822, there closed in Verona, three months after its opening, a spectacular Congress. This witnessed seated at the same table sovereigns and political people from all over Europe. Thus, as it was accompanied by exceptional celebrations with dazzling lights and the first arrival and the almost idyllic display, it was only logical that this warm adjourning of that level of well off people, would be

³⁵³ Lenotti, *Remarks on the life of Fr. Michael Gramego*.

³⁵⁴ SA Doc. 26, p. 470.

³⁵⁵ **NB: translator's Note: a Benedictine [?] ideal found in Fr. Bertoni's *Original Constitutions* - CF # 240.**

³⁵⁶ *Summarium super virt.*, p. 100.

³⁵⁷ *Reminiscences concerning the Fathers...* p. 50.

sealed then by a most extraordinary spectacle of fireworks, as this was really a farewell, with so many of these paths most likely not to cross again.

However, as these rockers blared and the explosion of different colors high in the sky, the modest windows at the priests' residence remained closed, and the shutters were sealed.³⁵⁸

The austerity regarding food, as the dominion of the most innocent of the appetites, was constant and simply the order of the day at the Stimmate. When along the way the people might see a priest who looked thin, it would be whispered: 'He must be from the Stimmate'. And often enough, they were right! One fine day there appeared at the sparse table of those Priests-Teachers a fine roast chicken. On the proposal of the Father, all offered their thanks. And this exceptional plate with its well roasted victim was returned to the kitchen so that it might serve – as only would be expected – to bring joy to an even poorer table than that of the poor Priests at the Stimmate.³⁵⁹

While the number of those adherents to the new Institute remained always small as long as the Founder lived, the motive might also be sought in the rigor of life that attracted a few spirits, desirous of offering themselves to the Lord³⁶⁰. More than one friend had exhorted Fr. Gaspar to mitigate that harsh aspect of the ancient anchorites but the saint responded *that austerity can never be excessive at the beginning of an institute, as time itself would have the task of mitigating it...*³⁶¹ However, when this suggestion came from Bishop Grassi, Fr. Gaspar agreed, and docilely, arranged a gradual alleviation, but there remained in all the nostalgia for that serene original frugality.

During the harsh winters that Fr. Bertoni passed, actively at his desk the better part of the day, in his high and isolated room, in the northeast corner of the house, he was there without heat of any kind. He was protected somewhat by an old thread-bare overcoat that none of his sons was ever able to substitute for with a new one.

The affectionate suggestions to lead him not to exaggerate were all in vain.³⁶² With saints, in matters of this kind, often there is little one can do. There is needed a precise command from the doctor, so that at long last, the saint did give in favor of a warming flame, that would flicker in his freezing room. However, on the very date that this was imposed, Fr. Gaspar was close to reaching 70 years of age, if he had not already passed it.

³⁵⁸ The practice of little mortifications of Fr. Bertoni and his companions was noted and admired by a group of persons who had taken up positions near the house to enjoy that innocent spectacle. Among those who were led by the hand by his Dad, was a 12 year old boy, the future Biographer of the Saint: Cajetan Giacobbe, not knowing at that time that Providence had chosen him... to act as a spy on this occasion. Cf. SA, Doc. 26, p. 519.

³⁵⁹ Summa. Super virt. P. 200.

³⁶⁰ SA, Doc. 20, p.191.

³⁶¹ SA, Doc. 29, n. 7, p. 608.

³⁶² SA, Doc 26, h, p. 525.

9. One Sole Spirit, One Sole Life

In 1840, the Vicar Capitular of the Diocese, Monsignor Joseph Belloni, was able to present the Priests of the Stimate in these terms to Cardinal Patrizi:

...From their first institution, up until the present, they are the mirror and the flower of the Veronese Clergy, for their piety, their study, for their counsels, for their example and for their prudent and tireless zeal, with edification of this whole Diocese, under every regard...³⁶³

The second testimony is even more precious. It seems to have been totally spontaneous, zeroing in on the Community of the Stimate and its 'Superior', who appeared to an attentive visitor from Vienna, toward the end of 1837 and the first months of the following year: he was the learned and pious priest, Fr. Louis Schlör.³⁶⁴ In his work, *The Philanthropy of the Faith*,³⁶⁵ he presented to the Church beyond the Alps the Veronese Church, and even zeroed in on the example of the Institute of Fr. Bertoni:

... It is quite clear that they have chosen as the principal character of their life and actions the retired and hidden way, while nonetheless there is evident the clarity of their virtue and the efficacy of their zeal is such and manifests thus that the entire city, people and clergy, holds them in veneration and love as holy priests.

'Their Superior – Fr. Gaspar Bertoni - is both a lovable and venerated old man, quite well versed in the theological sciences and especially in the government of souls – and he is, so to speak, an oracle for the city, much sought after even by outsiders, who even from distant places have recourse to him either in writing and come to him personally, to have counsel from him in theological matters or in the interests of their conscience ...

Now, this man, of such knowledge and piety, understood well that with some, it is with gentleness of manner that they are won over; for others, there is needed a real firmness in leading his Community, so that one spirit animates them all, there is only one life in all, that is spread about, so to speak.

If you get to converse with one of them, you will find that each one of them in thought, in sentiments, in their exterior conduct, each makes a perfect portrait of the other. If you want to know what it is that renders them principally notable, it is humility, charity and a most affable manner of treating with others.

³⁶³ SA, Doc. 14, 3, p. 73.

³⁶⁴ Fr. Schlör was born in Vienna in 1805, was ordained a priest in 1828, and for three years served as Chaplain at the Imperial Court. He lived for many months in Verona, exercising his priestly ministry among the flourishing colony of his co-nationals. From 1842 on, until his death [1852], he was the Spiritual Director of the Seminary of Gratz. He was a writer of ascetics, who was much appreciated, and deserves the credit for putting back into vogue the *Spiritual Exercises* for the Clergy in the Diocese of Gratz and elsewhere. Cf. Stofella, Biography, o.c., p. 191. SA, Doc 13, 2, p. 65.

³⁶⁵ Printed in Vienna in 1839

They live as real poor men and mortified. The room of each one of them is very simple as is their furniture. But, throughout the house I saw such a real effort at neatness that it is a delight to admire it. The little Church is a marvel of restoration and is always outstanding for its cleanliness.

The Priests of this community preach every week in their little Church, and they hear confessions there, but only of men.

There is a lack of selfishness that is so outstanding in the priests; it places them in great reverence before all.

And truly, I would not know what more fitting name that I could give them other than they are 'the pearl of the Veronese Clergy.'³⁶⁶

†
†††
†

³⁶⁶ SA, Doc. 13, n. 2., pp. 65-67.

Chapter 17

Encounters and Anecdotes

1. Raking up

Let there be granted to us here a brief pause to gather a variety of facts, episodes and encounters for which we did not find any other place to insert them in the preceding chapters. The figure of St. Gaspar, without losing anything of his spirituality, will appear also closer to us, palpitating with humanity and vitality.

2. The Bishop and the Catechism Lesson

Evidence for this anecdote can be found on those sheets of paper that make up his *Spiritual Journal*. This note is dated November 20, 1808:

[78.] The bishop came to pay me a visit to the Class of Christian Doctrine, while I was teaching Catechesis to the adults. He wanted me to carry on. My mind became completely confused. All my ideas disappeared. I decided then to summarize, as the last resort. I did that without almost knowing what I was saying. In the mean time I was reflecting within myself, wondering how would my spirit have found itself if it had to give an account of my priestly ministry in front of the tribunal of Christ. Even if I had lived in the utmost innocence, and if I had accomplished all my duties...how much would I have felt discouraged and fearful in that moment! We have therefore to get ready to stand with confidence before Christ, no longer as a "Father" but as a "Judge".³⁶⁷

The great preacher becomes all flustered, but instead of thinking about the thin figure of Episcopal authority who had come to listen to him, he thinks of God's judgment.

3. Faith and Reason

One day, a few swaggering men, very frequent companions of the Bar in Piazza Bra, decided to make fun of Fr. Bertoni in a particular way. One of them separating himself from the group presented himself in Fr. Bertoni's way: '...Tell me, reverend, how can it be reasonably maintained the teaching about the resurrection from the dead ...?'

With utmost courtesy and firmness, Fr. Gaspar asked his interrogator, there and them, to stand before him and recite the Creed. The Saint would not take 'no' for an answer, and the man had to recite it until he came to the article of the faith in question.

'Here we stop', Fr. Bertoni interrupted, 'and therefore this is a matter of a revealed doctrine for our faith. The Christian in order to believe in God has no need of reason; faith suffices for him. Therefore, you believe it. And these are the solid motives of credibility that the Theologians give.' And with great clarity and effectiveness from his gifted ability to explain, the Saint gave the reasons and the

³⁶⁷ SA, Doc. 35, p. 663.

arguments to resolve possible objections. Because the presumed adversary was put in complete check, the brazen man, far from feeling that he had just been humiliated, came to admire Fr. Bertoni and was conquered by him. From that day on, he and friends, remaining impenitent frequenters of the bar, nonetheless, whenever Fr. Gaspar passed by, he was welcomed with esteem and respect, and they often tipped their hats, with a cordial smile.³⁶⁸

4. The Capricious and the Devout

In dealing with all who came to consult him on the more delicate problems of their souls, the Saint was a man of patience beyond compare. But, he was also prudent and knew how to discern the real intentions of certain individuals.

One such person, while concealing his own lightness of character and sheer curiosity under the veil of making believe he really wanted to become a member of the Community of the Stimmate, he presented himself punctually and politely to Fr. Gaspar, asking him information about the Rules and the house discipline and the food. Fr. Gaspar answered him smiling: 'But, it is not here where God is calling you and for whatever I could tell you, you would have one more item to add to your knowledge, but it would prove to be fruitless and useless.' And the crestfallen citizen who had come to play a tune, like his pals up on the mountains, ended up being 'taken' himself.³⁶⁹

Then a certain lady who is described by Fr. Giacobbe as having an intense piety of her own making, and one that depended on her own whims, came one day to consult the man of God on the reading of devout books that she felt were a necessary guide for her brand of perfection. Fr. Bertoni allowed her to speak but he understood her right away: more than her piety, the good lady wanted to feed her erudition. Fr. Bertoni gently interrupted her, saying: 'Madame, all that would be necessary for you would be the 'Philothea' [*Introduction to a Devout Life*] of St. Francis de Sales.' She answered: 'But, I have already read it.' And he answered her: 'You could profitably go back and read it again.' And then what? 'You could profitably read it again and again. And do not tire to make it all yours. If you would achieve what this golden book teaches – believe me - that would suffice for whatever it is you really want.'³⁷⁰

And his respectful greeting put an end to that consultation.

5. The First and Ultimate Service

At the conclusion of a course of the annual Retreat, preached by Fr. Bertoni to a crowd of priests, Bishop Joseph Grassi, only recently come to the Diocese, wished to put his seal on Fr. Gaspar's work in a brief talk. His allocution – despite a bit of a German accent - surpassed all expectations. Even in those days there were prejudices that made their rounds: Bishop Grassi had the major fault of being from another district. This scene took place in the sacristy. In the silence that was almost

³⁶⁸ Stofella, Biography, p. 90.

³⁶⁹ SA, Doc. 26, p. 414

³⁷⁰ SA, Doc. 26, p. 494. Stofella, Biography, p. 236.

embarrassing for those who were there, Fr. Gaspar got down on his knees and kissed the hands and the feet of the new Shepherd. Following this gesture, the situation became quite calm, and all noted that the eyes of the new Bishop were moistened. This proved to be a fruitful lesson for all.³⁷¹

Later, during the final hours of the saintly Bishop, we find a very moving account of this in a report made by Fr. Camillo Cesare Bresciani. He remained in the dying Bishop's room for more than 15 hours by his bed: he stayed until the Bishop died. It was touching to witness a type of honor guard at the Bishop's door, as they all expressed the desire to be near the bed of this illustrious patient in order to help him in any way they could, to weep and to pray.

In this marvelous document, there is interest of us in its mention of Fr. Gaspar. It seems clear that from that encounter of St. Gaspar, who was also ailing himself, in the room of the dying Bishop, those present thought of this to be little less than a miracle. The marvel is that if he might not have made the visit, this in no way would have touched the high estimation in which Fr. Bertoni was held.³⁷² At any rate, Fr. Bresciani records that 'little by little all the heads of the religious Orders, and that I presented them to the illustrious dying Bishop. Two of these presentations made a very sublime and edifying impression on me: that of Fr. Bertoni and the other, the visit of Cardinal Odescalchi. Fr. Bertoni came, almost being carried by Veronese priests as though he were a saint.' So, I said: 'Your Excellency, here is Fr. Bertoni, who has come to visit you.' The dying Bishop said: 'What a distinct favor you do me, my Fr. Gaspar!'. But, the holy old man was so overwhelmed with sorrow, that he just sobbed and wept, and could hardly even offer a little prayer.' Fr. Bresciani then concluded: 'This gave us the sign that God wanted the victim already mature for heaven.'³⁷³

When at dawn on the following day, the 22nd of November 1839, Bishop Joseph Grasser died. Throughout the City and the Diocese of Verona both clergy and people found themselves together in their profound sense of loss. And there was a unanimous sense that their beloved and holy bishop had been exalted, and was loudly acclaimed as the 'Angel of Charity.' The faith of Fr. Bertoni, with his casting himself on his knees before his newly promoted Shepherd, had securely opened the way to the acceptance, the esteem and the love of all Verona toward their Bishop.

Fr. Bertoni and Bishop Grasser: two men who deeply understood each other and loved each other. Between the two there was a profound and mutual esteem. Fr. Bertoni described Bishop Grasser as a 'Man of God', and Bishop Grasser, in his turn, considered Fr. Bertoni as 'his Fr. Gaspar'. He had such veneration for Fr. Bertoni that the Bishop felt that 'he would not in the least be surprised if he would one day find out that the Church had designated him for the honors of the altar'. The Bishop's thought has been verified.

³⁷¹ SA, Doc. 25, p. 285; Doc. 26, p. 554.

³⁷² Stofella, Biography, p. 206.

³⁷³ Letter of Fr. Camillo Cesare Bresciani to the Countess Julia Guarienti Buri, November 22, 1839. SA, Doc. 16 d, p. 91.

6. Fr. Rosmini and Fr. Bertoni

a. A Cordial Relationship

‘In Verona, I met Fr. Gaspar Bertoni who with six priests does a great good.’ This is what Fr. Anthony Rosmini wrote in his own *Travel Journal* under the date of February 26, 1826. This was his first personal contact with the Superior of the Stigmatine Community.³⁷⁴ This was not some mere casual meeting as the laconic note might seem to insinuate. St. Madeline di Canossa had discussed for years with the young Abbe’ of Rovereto, regarding his plan for a Congregation of Priests who would be, something like the masculine branch of her Daughters of Charity. To resolve a certain dissent that had developed regarding a detail in the apostolic program of the projected Institute, the holy woman ‘sent’ Fr. Rosmini to take Fr. Bertoni’s counsel.

From that day on, between these two men of God an immediate friendship blossomed, nor did the distance of some twenty years in age stand in the way that remained for various *lustres* a cordial and almost fraternal relationship. They wrote back and forth a number of times.³⁷⁵ In offering his counsel on ‘the Plan for the Priests of Charity, in the encouraging the practical realization of the Plan, St. Gaspar played such a determining role that later, Fr. Rosmini himself would state that ‘in some manner, his Institute was born at the Stimmate.’³⁷⁶

Every now and then, in his frequent journeys and he was passing through Verona, Fr. Anthony would make his obligatory stop at the Stimmate. And he was always received as a beloved friend of the house. Often he spent the night there. Once he himself had become a Founder, Fr. Rosmini was happy to take advantage of each occasion to offer to his most beloved sons the desired comfort of meeting with ‘the most venerated Fr. Gaspar’, so that they might benefit spiritually from him.³⁷⁷

With the passing of the years, this friendship became even closer and more fruitful. Fr. Rosmini looked on Fr. Bertoni as one of his most trusted confidants and sources of encouragement. He seems to make some reference to this as a part of his studies and publications: ‘I recommended myself to the Lord’, he wrote among other matters on November 22, 1831, ‘and asked for the prayers of those close to Him, as I have such need. And when possible, please read the book...’³⁷⁸ Fr. Gaspar, on his part, held Fr. Rosmini to be that holy man, and person of sublime value, that he indeed was.

However, when in Verona there arose the rumors of the imminent designation of Fr. Anthony as the Arch Priest of Rovereto, regarding the opportunity of accepting or not, this honor, to the chorus of not a few friends of Fr. Rosmini, happy or resigned

³⁷⁴ Rosmini, *Opere edite ed inedite*. Roma: Editoriale 1934. Ed. Nazionale. Vol. I, p. 243.

³⁷⁵ SA, Doc. 15, pp. 79-83.

³⁷⁶ Letter to Monsignor Bragato, May 18, 1846. cf. SA, Doc. 15, n. 7, pp. 83, f.

³⁷⁷ Rosmini, *Epistolario Completo*. Ed. Pane, Casale. 1905. Vol. II, p. 468, n.900; Vol. III, p. 774, n. 1467; Vol. IV, p. 9, n. 1479; p. 116, n. 1551; p. 223, n. 1630.

³⁷⁸ *Ib*, Vol. IV, n. 1479, p. 9.

to see him governing the Arch-Priesthood of St. Mark, the opinion of Fr. Bertoni was in sharp contrast with so many others, and his disagreement was beyond discussion. A man of such exceptional talents should not – in Fr. Gaspar's judgment – should not deny himself to the good of the whole Church, rather than limiting his activity only to the advantage of the Church of Rovereto.³⁷⁹ However, in the end there was no choice – Fr. Rosmini had to accept the appointment and he became the Arch Priest of Rovereto. This went on for only 12 months – this was a year of incredible crosses and bitterness. Then, in October 1835, he resigned.³⁸⁰ When he left Rovereto, Fr. Anthony stopped for a while at the Stimate, finding there in the anguish of that period in his life, a certain balm and comfort with his venerated' friend.

b. The Irreconcilable Dissent

No one could have foreseen it: and yet, after a while that holy and fruitful friendship was broken off for good. The initiative for this separation was Fr. Gaspar. It was not so much Rosmini's philosophical direction, but two separate manners of understanding the discipline of the individual with regard to the Church.³⁸¹ Regarding the episode, there are no documents. In its place, we do have a valid Stigmatine tradition³⁸² on the basis of which the facts which led to the unpleasant break might be reconstructed as follows:

In a visit to the Stimate during the autumn of 1841, Fr. Rosmini alone with Fr. Gaspar, or perhaps also in the Community itself, shared some thoughts in anticipation of the content of two works that he had written still not printed, entitled *The Constitution*, and *The Five Wounds of the Church*.³⁸³ Devoted to the Church's authority, almost to a scruple, Fr. Gaspar was alarmed. He would not even admit as possible any discussion on such delicate arguments. Being so upset with these two works, he predicted that one day they would find their way on to the Index of Prohibited Books.

The earnest clarifications offered by his holy friend, inspired on his part, with the purest of intentions, were not sufficient to resolve their dissent. Fear for himself, and also for his followers, Fr. Bertoni admonished Fr. Rosmini that *for the spirit of novelty*, there was no place at the Stimate.³⁸³ Both of these men, heart and soul were

³⁷⁹ On June 19, 1834, the Rosminian Priest, Fr. Oberrauch [who was then assigned to the spiritual care of the 'civil Germans' resident, or passing through Verona], thus wrote to his Superior and Father: 'Already for some time here there are rampant the rumors that you most probably will be named Arch Priest of Rovereto. We, from the first moment, are resigned to the Most Holy Will of God, as is His Excellency, Bishop Grassier and other persons. **However, Fr. Gaspar Bertoni does not choose to consent to this and to surrender,** and the reasons he brings forward are most just, since, as he told me among other things, that he sees in you a more suitable area in which to work for the glory of God, not being bound to the Arch Priesthood, than you would be able to do if you are so bound...'

³⁸⁰ Pusineri, *Rosmini*, end ed. Domodossola 1929.

³⁸¹ Stofella, Biography, p. 220.

³⁸² SA, Doc. 15. Intr., pp. 78, f.

³⁸³ Stofella, Biography, p. 221. ['Fr. Ceresatto, following Fr. Stofella, admits that the break between Fr. Bertoni and Fr. Rosmini happened in the fall of 1841, and that this had been occasioned by the latter's

dedicated to the triumph of the Church. However, they found themselves on divergent paths and they did not agree on the realization of their generous plans.

7. Too Humble

It was said at the Stimate and beyond: 'Fr. Bertoni is too humble!'³⁸⁴. To remain habitually immersed in the sentiment of one's nothingness had become for Fr. Gaspar a profound need of his soul. It was enough to show him esteem and veneration to make him suffer.³⁸⁵

sharing in anticipation of publication of his two works, the *Constitution* and *The Five Wounds of the Church*. It is our opinion, however, that the disagreement happened 6 years later.

In 1841, there was an attack on Fr. Rosmini's *Tract on Moral Conscience*, in a polemical work: 'Some Affirmations of Fr. Anthony Rosmini, a priest of Rovereto, with an essay of Reflections written by Eusebius Cristiano', which was really written by one Fr. Pius Melia, SJ. Immediately, Fr. Rosmini responded in his own defense: 'A response to the imaginary *Eusebius Cristiano*, by the Abbe' Anthony Rosmini - Serbati, or Rovereto' [Milano 1841].

In September of 1841, Fr. Rosmini was in Verona to preach in the Seminary a course of Retreat and Fr. Bertoni sent his cleric, John B. Lenotti, to hear him, as he was preparing for the Sub-diaconate.

The Professor of Philosophy, Fr. Settimo Arrighi, after a sojourn at Rovereto, as a guest of Fr. Rosmini, as soon as he returned to Verona, came to see Fr. Bertoni. Therefore, on November 23, 1841, Fr. Arrighi wrote to Fr. Rosmini: 'I spoke with Fr. Gaspar, and while conversing with him, I touched on the matter that concerns me: afterwards in excusing myself in not having had the time to read the copy I sent him as a gift'. ['In the Response to the Imaginary *Eusebius Cristiano*'], he added his praise regarding the merit and person of your Reverence.' [cf. Nello Dalle Vedove, Vol. 6, p. 144]. Therefore, there does not seem to be here any break between Fr. Bertoni and his sons with the Philosopher].

There is further confirmation of this in a letter dated March 18, 1846, which Fr. Rosmini wrote to Fr. Bertoni to seek his support for founding a House in San Zeno. He confided to the Chaplain at the Royal Court that Fr. Bertoni had given in times passed counsel and help so that it could truly be said that the Institute of Charity in some manner was born in your house, i.e., at the Stimate [p. 359]. I would hint it would seem counter-productive for one intimately bound to Fr. Bertoni, if the break between the two had already happened. The same might be observed through a letter from Verona, where he was that March, and Fr. Rosmini was writing to Monsignor Bragato, on September 14, 1847, for material assistance.

When on October 15th there arrived in Verona the response from Vienna, Fr. Rosmini had already departed for Stresa, but not without, we believe, having been at the Stimate to meet with Fr. Bertoni. Here, therefore, it would seem opportune to bring up the conversation on the work 'The Five Wounds of the Church' which Fr. Rosmini had every intention of completing as soon as he got back to Stresa, and this in fact is what he did. Fr. Bertoni remained disturbed by the information he had received from Fr. Rosmini in anticipation, especially regarding the election of Bishops by popular ballot, and he strongly counseled Fr. Rosmini against publishing it [cf. Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove, *Vita di S. Gaspare Bertoni*. Vol. 6, p. 1991.] [This note of Fr. Dalle Vedove was inserted by the Editor of this second edition of Fr. Ceresatto's work].

³⁸⁴ SA, Doc. 20, p. 167

³⁸⁵ SA, Doc. 26, p. 540.

One day, a Monsignor Dionisi, of the noble Dionisi Marquis family,³⁸⁶ was the one to play his role in his own words not hesitating to proclaim Fr. Bertoni 'a Saint', sometimes in a joking manner. For some years, Fr. Gaspar was at the Stimate as Founder and Head of that Community. To the Monsignor, therefore, someone floated the great idea of proposing Fr. Bertoni with an honorific title: Canon of the Cathedral.

At even the mention of this, Fr. Gaspar was much disturbed. He discouraged it, pleased but – it seemed – uselessly. The night passed with no decision made, and then two more. Then, in the end, Monsignor Dionisi was convinced that it would not make much sense to insist on this idea. In his old, and often repeated saying, *Lowly, lowly, to our dens and crags...* a humorous manner of expressing the depths of the humility of his heart. Fr. Bertoni continued to consider that which so many times he had declared in his Letters to Mother Naudet: 'Gaspar Bertoni, unworthy Priest.'

He never succeeded in seeing to it that never at the door of his room, that of a poor and failing old man, that there might ever come to knock at his door the likes of the Emperor Ferdinand I³⁸⁷, Count Maruffi Villa of the Royal Court of Parma, and so many other civic personalities, as well as Bishops and Prelates. Among these we could name Cardinal Monico, the Patriarch of Venice; Monsignor Soldati, Bishop of Treviso; the Bishop of Mantua, Bishop Belle' and the Armenian Archbishop, Aristace Azarian.³⁸⁸ And all this, without bring up again the Bishops of Verona: Liruti, Grasser and Mutti, who were at home at the Stimate.

In the second half of August 1839, Verona was paying tribute to her Patron, St. Zeno. His remains were exhumed, and most solemn celebrations were held. Among the 7 orators designated to celebrate for the occasion to offer worship to the Patron Saint, on 7 consecutive days, was included the name of Fr. Gaspar Bertoni. He made his intervention with a good essay of ecclesiastical and sacred eloquence, composed in the style of the times. The question was raised why not print all these. A young priest knocked at the door of the Stimate with a precise order from Bishop Grasser: the manuscript of the discourse was to be handed over to be printed. Fr. Bertoni offered no resistance. This time over his old motto: *Lowly, lowly, to our crags and nests...* there prevailed the motto of his entire Apostolic Mission: *in the service of Bishops*.³⁸⁹ But the price was his tears.

For some time there had circulated with extreme caution the idea of having a portrait done in order to hand on to the heirs of that early Community the beloved likeness of their Founder. When he got wind of this loving plan of his sons, the Saint blocked every initiative, but with such firmness that the thought was not even brought

³⁸⁶ Monsignor Dionisi, the Vicar General of the Diocese of Verona from 1807; he was Vicar Capitular, 20 years later following the death of Bishop Liruti. He was re-confirmed Vicar General by Bishop Grasser, and died in 1831. cf. Stofella, Biography, pp. 165, f.

³⁸⁷ This visit to the domicile on the part of the Sovereign in the summer holidays of 1838.

³⁸⁸ Stofella, Biography p.239.

³⁸⁹ Stofella, Biography, p. 205. 'Description of the Solemnity celebrated in Verona from the 15th-21st of August, for the most happy re-discovery of the body of her 8th Bishop and Principal Patron, St. Zeno,' etc. Verona: Libanti 1839. Fr. Bertoni's sermon is found from p. 103-126.

up in the house. The humble man of God did not think of himself as one whose likeness should be immortalized on canvas.

Fortunately, there was an extern friend, one Mr. Michaelangelo Smania, Fr. Bertoni's legal counselor, who took the matter into his own hands. He came one day to see Fr. Bertoni, realizing that the dear old man, now rather ill, was also suffering from very poor eye sight. Mr. Smania introduced a friend of his to Fr. Bertoni, who, of course, was his artist accomplice. Then, the lawyer introduced a very animated discussion at table and the talented artist drew some outlines of the much desired image. This innocent snare respected the Father's sentiments, and with a simple and venerated painting he nourished the piety of his Sons. The community has ever since been grateful to the Attorney, Mr. Smania.

8. Leave it up to God

Fr. Bertoni was well known to all, in the City and through the Diocese, either by direct knowledge, or by reputation. His reputation as a saint was even known to the open-minded. There is the incident of a man who despised priests, and everywhere spit out his awful invectives against the Clergy. In order to close off his conversation, it sufficed to ask him: 'What do you have to say against Fr. Gaspar?'. He would respond: 'The man is a saint ... we are not treating here of saints.'³⁹⁰ And the fanatic, from that instant, together with Fr. Gaspar, began to spare even the less than holy.

From all sides there came to the Stimate with full confidence to obtain from the intercession of the man of God special graces, if not miracles. On February 17, 1827, Mrs. Rose Storari suffered from one of the more virulent attacks of military fever. The doctors attending to her became very worried. On March 18th, the sick woman was found to be in the extremes. She received Holy Viaticum in the morning, and then in the evening, Extreme Unction. Her despairing husband, Mr. Joseph Ferrari, had asked Fr. Bertoni to make a visit to the sick room, in the secret hope that the intercession of the Saint would rescue from death that life which was so dear to him. Fr. Gaspar was himself confined to his own bed, because of a relapse of his old infection in his leg, and he sent word back to Mr. Ferrari, expressing his deepest regrets that he could not come personally, but that since the morrow was the feast of St. Joseph he should find great courage, placing all his trust in St. Joseph. Later, Mr. Ferrari would state: 'It was a genuine prodigy.' That very night, as the new day the 19th was dawning, there arose a 'crisis', but one that was most benign. The woman suddenly began to get better, and her convalescence from then on proceeded rapidly so that the sick woman in a few days could get out of bed, and she was restored completely to her pristine state of health.³⁹¹

In August of 1834, Mr. Joseph Tubaldini, having already lost his wife, had to watch his son, Marino, with his precarious constitution, and in a state of habitual flux, and still at a very young age – suddenly lapsed into a terrible illness that was declared incurable. The desperate father begged from the saint for the comfort of his visit. Fr.

³⁹⁰ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 571, ff.

³⁹¹ Stofella, Biography, p. 325.

Gaspar in fact did go, saw the sick boy, and prayed over him, blessed him, and exhorted the family members to have confidence. He left, 'leaving them full of hope'. Nor did this hope prove vain, as Mr. Tubaldini later testified, because on the following morning the doctor found that the lad's condition of health. There was an immediate improvement and a complete cure within a few days.³⁹²

In the year 1839, Mr. Sante Mariotti, who was working for the Sisters of the Holy Family, for a few months had been subject to excesses of a very robust fever, that withstood ever remedy. One day, when he was struck by this fever as he walked along the street, not far from the Stimate, he was struck by the malady before he got to the House. He dragged himself into Fr. Bertoni's room to take care of an errand for the Sisters. Seeing him visibly ill, the Saint said to him: 'Come in, my dear Sante!'. He took a small vial full of blessed oil and anointed the suffering man with the Blessed Oil of St. Zeno, Patron of Verona. Fr. Gaspar also suggested to him that for a few days that he be confident in praying a few Our Father's; Hail Mary's and *Gloria's*, in honor of the Saint. Sante responded: 'Why should I do that?' as Mr. Mariotti remarked a few years later: if the grace of my healing had already been granted? At that very instant, the fever ceased, and I began to feel well, and it has never came back to bother me.'

Naturally, these and other outstanding graces were received through the faith of the Saint. Those who benefited by them rejoiced, but without wondering very much about them. It was simply a matter of fact: the faith of the saints can accomplish wonders. Fr. Bertoni himself showed no surprise over these incidents. Precisely because in those facts he did not believe that he was the cause of them. For him, the solution lay always in the faith of the petitioner, the Providence of Heaven, and the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints. Let us all trust in God.

9. *You will go to St. Zeno's, but not yet to the cemetery!*

At the Stimate, certain lively exchanges that appeared only in a joking manner between Fr. Bertoni and Brother Paul Zanolli have left their mark in our traditions. It was a few days before August 19, 1838. Fr. Gaspar, on that date, had made the commitment to deliver the panegyric honoring St. Zeno, in the monumental Basilica dedicated to him, and he found himself in bed. To Brother Paul, who was taking care of him, he asked in an enigmatic manner: 'Paul, will we be able to go, then, to St. Zeno's?' With some hesitation, Brother Paul responded also enigmatically: 'We will see.' And Fr. Bertoni picked up on him, and sought further: Paul... is it to the cemetery? Tell me, is that where we are going?' And the good Brother answered: Of course; you will go there like all the others!' Fr. Bertoni answered: 'See, Paul, how frankly you answer me!'

This refrain, then cut off then, even after August 19, 1838, right up until a few months from the death of the Saint, all the testimonies of the Fathers and Brothers, remembered this incident in a happy way. Was it a prophecy? Or a mere

³⁹² ib. p. 326.

presentiment?" Fr. Lenotti commented: 'The fact was that Fr. Gaspar did go to St. Zeno's and preached: and in time, he did not go to the Cemetery.'³⁹³

And so it was at the death of Fr. Bertoni [June 12, 1853] all was arranged by Fr. Marani for the normal burial in the local cemetery. At the end of his extraordinary funeral services, two influential admirers of the venerable deceased, to the joy and happy surprise of the entire Stigmatine Community, made of themselves promoters of a blessed initiative, with a view to providing a worthy entombment to the remains of the Man whom all of Verona was unanimous in thinking of him as a Saint.

For a while, the body was kept in little chapel of the Parish Church of the Most Holy Trinity, while the long and drawn out negotiations with the civil authorities were conducted. Finally, on July 30, 1854, the mortal remains of Fr. Bertoni were placed in the center of the Church which was his own ³⁹⁴, to the great comfort of his sons, who continued to consider themselves as being under his gaze and still disciples in his school, which he had lived personally, as the '**School of God.**' Brother Paul was always happy that in his views were correct!



³⁹³ SA, Doc.20, p. 195.

³⁹⁴ Stofella, Biography, pp. 297-304.

Chapter 18

From Immolation to Glory

1. Final Words from his Soul

The texts of the epistolary correspondence between Fr. Gaspar and Fr. Louis Bragato allow us to fathom the true depths of the interior riches of his great soul, by now close to his goal in heaven. Those letters date from 1835 and bring us up to 1848

provide the soul with those moving testimonies of sons who discuss the most troubled final years of the venerated old man. We will limit ourselves to choosing a few passages.

The Saint reveals himself in the blessed fullness of that spirituality which is already interpreted by us as holy abandonment practiced in a constant climate, even one that was intensifying, due to indescribable tribulations, crosses, and physical sufferings. In fact, if the trials, the bitterness, the illnesses were a bit always part of his life, in the last three *lusters* of the life of the Saint, they simply moved right in and took up residence now at the Stimate. And with such peace he received them all:

... My very dear Fr. Louis,

Following this [the death of a dear and holy friend in the house], I will not tell you all our other tribulations as these are not few, and I do not mention them so that I will not excessively burden your soul. 'Let us glory in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings patience, patience brings proof, and proof brings hope: this hope does not confuse, because the charity of God is poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit Who has been given to us... [Rm 5:4, 5].

Farewell, dear Fr. Louis, beloved and greeted by all 'in a holy embrace.'

From Verona, December 1, 1837. ³⁹⁵

At the end of 1839, with a view to the new year about to dawn, with the punctuality of a devout son, Fr. Bragato wished to the Father of his soul and to his fortunate brothers who lived near him, 'a thousand benedictions, and not excluding the crosses...!' In his response, Fr. Gaspar manifests the emotion of a saint who had chosen to love and serve Christ in suffering:

... I thank you, above all, for your benevolence, especially spiritual. Indeed, what greater good could you desire for your friends other than Crosses? Certainly, as far as I am concerned, you could not have pleased me more; it is not that I have already the strength to carry them, but may the Lord grant me the grace to embrace them, and I await from your prayers and from divine mercy, together with suffering, also patience. Now, since I am forewarned already from these early days of the year that is coming, as a man told beforehand, I will give them

³⁹⁵ SA, Doc. 35, pp. 744, f.

a hearty welcome, and I say: here are the crosses that my Fr. Louis told me about: may God be blessed ...³⁹⁶

Is this one further introspection into the marvelous depths of the spirit of Fr. Bertoni?

His beloved Fr. Louis was still in exile, at the Royal Court of Vienna, where he had participated as the guide of souls in the joy of a clarification, after the anguish of a spiritual dark night that had brought him agony of soul and heart.

Fr. Bertoni was much experienced in the 'jokes' that his Most Loving Lord plays on souls loved particularly by Him. In his response, he inspires his own beloved disciple toward the heaven of perfect abandonment with the unmistakable accents of one who for many years habitually lived in that supernatural atmosphere:

... What tongue is capable to praise God as much as He merits, and to bespeak of the love with which He loves us, and the most diligent care that He takes of us, even more than that of a mother for her babies.

Let us accustom ourselves well n this day of light with which God consoles us by revealing over us his loving face, and to entrust ourselves totally in Him also for those moments where He remains hidden, as a mother who entertains herself with her little children, rejoicing in making herself sought and desired and called with sighs and even tears.

O how blessed is this Father of ours!

What could he do for us, after having passed through so many trials, in Heaven, if even now He shows us so much, and such tender benevolence...?³⁹⁷

2. Failures?

After 1843, at the Stimate there circulated a climate of failure. The Stigmatine Community was diminishing before the eyes of all.³⁹⁸ Of the eleven priests in just a few short years, three had died: Fr. Biadego, Fr. Cartolari and precisely, on the 12th of January 1844, Fr. Modesto Cainer. Fr. Gramego recorded this in his House Chronicle: 'After four illnesses that were quite extended and one after the other, supported with much patience, he, too, slipped away silently. At the Stimate he had been the willing and loving servant of all. He was 46 years old.'

However, these deaths, while they deeply sadden the heart, they offered to the reflective soul only reasons for peace – giving joy. However, the men who left brought only sadness without much comfort. Two Coadjutor Brothers, after having served the Lord respectively for 13 and 8 years, returned home; other Brothers entered and left; only one of them persevered. In the meantime, not a single cleric, no priest came to

³⁹⁶ ib. Letter of January 29, 1840, p. 746,

³⁹⁷ SA, Doc. 35. Letter of August 27, 1840, p. 748.

³⁹⁸ SA, Doc. 29, p. 608.

take up the last three rooms that death had emptied on us. But this was not all: there were two other departures that proved the most painful:

These were Fr. Vincent Raimondi, who left in June 1843; and Fr. Charles Fedelini, the pupil of Fr. Gaspar, left in August 1847. Both of these for years had served the Diocesan Seminary. They were most esteemed teachers of Church History – and the latter, the much appreciated Professor of Moral Theology. They stated that the reason for their leaving was health. If that were the convincing reason why would not the others also leave: Fr. Marani, the newly ordained Fr. Lenotti, and of course the most ailing of all, Fr. Gaspar himself?

Fr. Raimondi would die in 1855, as an approved Scholastic of the Company of Jesus. Fr. Fedelini, though, would come back to the Stimate during that same year, re-enter the flock, warmly received by Fr. Bertoni's first successor, Fr. John Mary Marani.³⁹⁹

And Fr. Gaspar's comment was: 'And do you, too, want to go?' - he would say to those who remained. And the question was addressed with a calmness that was disturbing. On other occasions, however, he would encourage them: 'Let us trust in God.' And something of his unchanging peace would pass into the depressed spirit of his sons.⁴⁰⁰ These poor men! Forty years of generation dedication to the common ideal seemed to be crumbling towards a total disintegration. The school had closed in 1843, the ministry of the Fathers had been necessarily reduced to the assistance of the Pastors, and the Superior was immobilized by his illnesses. The others were sick as well, and there was not a recruit in sight ...

However, this was a temptation that Fr. Bertoni helped them to overcome: beyond all appearances, the Work of God was simply in its most fecund phase. And he put himself in this dark hour to writing the Constitutions, entrusting the Institute to nothing less than *anywhere in the Diocese and the World!* In the School of God he had for some time learned that even the works of the Lord often enter into the loving game of providence, being subject also they, as are individual souls, to days of sun, and to nights without stars. He would maintain: ***It is not for this the Providence is slowed down; often all this betters it, confirms it and perfects it.***⁴⁰¹ A passage from a letter dated March 26, 1829, to read it again today seems to provide an anticipated commentary on the harsh trial that his Institute would one day endure:

... the works of God have their trials, with which God shows His hand, in ruling them and leading them to His purposes. He accomplished with the difficulties He permits, to take hold of the hand of man, and to give way humbly to His Providence, from which the man sees clearly and how conservation and success to depend only on Him...

³⁹⁹ Stofella, Biography, p. 253.

⁴⁰⁰ Zara, *Cronache*. Archives at the Stimate. Verona

⁴⁰¹ Letter of Fr. Bertoni to Mother Naudet, October 16, 1808.

Also the attitude of confident assurance expressed by Fr. Bertoni in the apparent agony of his work, finds in this same letter his earlier explanation:

...When, though, it is night for us it is day for Him Who knows what is to be done. And we should raise our hands to heaven when we do not know where else to put them ... 'in the nights extol your hands toward the holy': this is the Latin that God teaches to anyone who is in His school. 'And the night will be illuminated as the day.' This is another Latin phrase that the good Father has explained to us from the beginning, by drawing light out of the darkness...⁴⁰²

Such blind confidence is never deluded. Shortly after the Founder day, a period of some light came also for his family⁴⁰³. To comment on the long phase of trial overcome heroically in the love and confidence of their Father, the sons said of him: ***'He hoped against hope...***⁴⁰⁴. And they could only echo what Fr. Gaspar himself had written to Fr. Bragato in 1840:

... How different are the ways of God from the ways of men! Who learns these well so as not to be disheartened, when it is necessary as happened to Abraham, the father of all the faithful, to 'believe in hope against hope!' Blessed are they who close their eyes to short vision when the most wise hand of God takes ours to direct us and to govern us ...⁴⁰⁵

Writing these inspired words, Fr. Gaspar without realizing it, sang to his distant son and to his heirs the beatitude of his own soul: ***Let us trust in God, as this is a beautiful trust.*** And in this saying that uttered forth from his lips. He offers us a synthesis of his life, his work and his message, all of a great Saint.

3. A Slow Martyrdom

In that overwhelming passage of making himself more in conformity to Christ, from the very first years of his Priesthood, Fr. Bertoni had no hesitation in vowing himself to suffering and to martyrdom.⁴⁰⁶ Nor would Heaven delay in showing gratitude for that offering. The period from 1812-1853, his was a single, fatiguing and suffered itinerary of his body struck and lacerated with illness, but at the same time also the incessant ascent of a blessed soul in all that suffering.⁴⁰⁷

One curious ailment, which seemed also invented to have frustrated the medical experts of that time taking care of him. They did not seem to understand very much about his problem. He wrote once in a rather clear manner concerning this: ***'Many say many things'. And I do not say a thing and I let those who know what***

⁴⁰² SA, Doc. 35, pp. 729, f.

⁴⁰³ Stofella, Biography, pp. 316-322.

⁴⁰⁴ SA, Doc. 29, n. 7, pp. 608, f.

⁴⁰⁵ SA, Doc. 35, p. 749.

⁴⁰⁶ SA, Doc. 35, *Spiritual Journal*. July 24, 1808, p. 657; September, p. 661.

⁴⁰⁷ SA, Doc. 26, p. 424.

to do to do their thing. It is enough that 'whether we live or die we are of the Lord.'⁴⁰⁸

He understood that the Lord did not yet want him 'dead', but only 'wounded'⁴⁰⁹, a disciple who was very attentive and diligent in His School, in the purifying class room of suffering: ***Please, Reverend Mother, pray that I might gather some fruit from the School to which the Lord has assigned me, indeed so that I might dispose myself to serve Him...***⁴¹⁰

And the profit must have been top grade to judge from the occasional hints of Fr. Gaspar himself and of the testimonies which refer to this – to cite a single example – on that long suffering in his leg from which the Saint suffered atrociously from 1821 until 1828, with only some brief period of respite in 1826. That poor limb was almost 'de-fleshed' with more than 200 surgical interventions: a repeated deep lancing, piercing, cauterizations, draining: long years of sophisticated martyrdom, caused by a mysterious malady and from an indeed superficial knowledge of surgery inflicted on patients, which still had no knowledge of anesthesia. In December 1827, the malady got much worse, so much so that it again brought Fr. Gaspar to the very lip of the grave. To hold back that terrible loss, still another time, it was the supplicating faith of an entire people.⁴¹¹ With a Saint in toe, also an entire city feels that it is making sure and better progress toward the sunset of eternity. And his improvement, almost instantaneous, seemed to be a miracle. It was not, however, a healing. And the weight of that lacerated and suffering limb continued to make itself felt.

His flesh weakened as he was more wasted by infirmity, but the vigor of his spirit grew in the loving acceptance of that bitter chalice: ***... the Lord is keeping me in bed under the irons and the knives: may He be blessed! 'I will bless the Lord at all time.' As long as He is served, this is what suffices for me...***⁴¹² He had a way unique to himself in resisting the most atrocious fits of pain. When the incisions penetrated mercilessly into his flesh even to the bone, prayer came to his lips on a higher level. But even for this expression of his weakness would find him asking pardon of his doctors. One of them, who was quite well known at the time, testified: 'In the many operations on him that I did, I have never seen a patient like him: I believe he is a Saint.'⁴¹³

The suffering in his leg seemed to spend itself out in 1828, but it took much longer to restore Fr. Bertoni to health of his better years. He was able to achieve some

⁴⁰⁸ Letter to Mother Naudet, without date. **BERTONIANO**, 1933, p. 126.

⁴⁰⁹ Letter to Mother Naudet. Manuscripts n. 75-2.

⁴¹⁰ Letter to Mother Naudet, June 1, 1814. **BERTONIANO**, 1932, p. 323.

⁴¹¹ On this occasion in Verona there was repeated the moving spectacle of 1812. To rescue Fr. Gaspar from death, all resources were mobilized: Eucharistic expositions in St. Firmus Major and in St. Paul's of Campo Marzio; the extraordinary exposition of Our Lady of the People in the Cathedral; private and public prayers in the Churches and homes; good works, sacrifices, repeated pilgrimages. [cf. Stofella, Biography, p. 163.]

⁴¹² SA, Doc. 35. Letter to Mother Naudet, p. 727, Intr.

⁴¹³ SA, Doc. 21, n. 2, p. 164.

periods of relative wellbeing but there were periods of time, and these were not brief, when he was obliged to remaining his room, or in bed. Then there came that, which his first biographer has called his last illness. It included the last 11 years of that holy life, years that were the most severe, the most fruitful: these are what brought him to the summit of immolation.⁴¹⁴

4. In the Breach until the very End

With his Panegyric honoring St. Zeno in August 1839, Fr. Gaspar said farewell to his solemn preaching assignments. In the Introduction to that final discourse that he had worked out, there is a clear presentiment of this⁴¹⁵. And indeed, as it was from his bed he dragged himself to the pulpit, so, from St. Zeno's he returned to what would prove to be almost definitive confinement, with the only alternative he could use, either his arm chair or his bed.

However, this still was not the end of that busy life. The opposite is the truth of the matter. The resistance to intellectual activity and to continual truly qualified ministry offered by Fr. Bertoni in his cell is more than surprising. As the flesh was more and more being destroyed, the more was did there flare up also the ardor of his soul.⁴¹⁶ And in his love for God there was enkindled the flame of apostolate. After his tenuous and fragmentary repose during the nigh – when it was that the nights were not passed by him without any sleep at all - how full would his day be! Once he had completed his morning meditation, if the doctors allowed, to whom he always offered a most perfect obedience, he would **celebrate Mass in the Domestic Oratory of the Transfiguration, next to his room.**

It would be then that his spirit would come back to him to immerse himself in the ocean of God. The singular devotion, the thrusts of his heart which enkindled in him even the features of his pallid face, would recall to those at Mass with him that they were attending a celebration offered by the likes of a St. Alphonsus Liguori or by a St. Philip Neri.⁴¹⁷

However, most of the time he had to limit himself just to following from his arm chair, or from his bed, the holy Sacrifice which others would celebrate for him. Woe to anyone who would try to deprive him of this supreme comfort. He received communion every day and fasting. Every energy of soul for him arrived from this.⁴¹⁸

And once, with the help of Fr. Marani, he would have taken care of all the business pertaining to the direction and to the administration of the Institute, this 'Man of Counsels'. Forgetful of his own tiredness, his suffering, remained at the disposition

⁴¹⁴ Stofella, Biography, p.164.

⁴¹⁵ *If for my entire life I have made use of my tongue to bring to you the fruit of my little knowledge, exhorting you to a good and perfect activity, according to the office to which God has called me: so, it is so sweet to close my career, serving and pleasing you in such holy affection and with the praises of our saint in my mouth...* See the description given, pp. 105, f.

⁴¹⁶ SA, Doc. 20, p. 188.

⁴¹⁷ Summ. Super virtut., p. 124.

⁴¹⁸ SA. Doc. 26, p. 539.

of all. And in that little cell, in need of light and comforts, the souls came and went almost uninterruptedly until late evening.

From his bed, or from his armchair, the Saint gave many **retreats and Spiritual Exercises to groups of priests, or seminarians about to be ordained.** This was his 'routine' up through 1849, a little more than three years prior to his death. It was surprising how much light of wisdom and how much apostolic warmth could spill forth from a soul that was so bound to an organism, by this time, pretty well spent with suffering.⁴¹⁹

Condemned to confinement, Fr. Bertoni was happy to conserve as long as possible of a periodic contact with the young of his this-born Marian Oratory. On Sundays, the group of the 'Perfect' would file silently up to the little Chapel of the Transfiguration. Then all would visit the room next door and would gather around the bed of the suffering Fr. Bertoni. He then, would speak to them. How much warmth and how much fruit would be derived from his words! At times he moved them even to tears.⁴²⁰

All through the years, on the second Sunday of July, the Marian Oratory of St. Paul in Campo Marzio with most of its members present, would arrive punctually at the Stimate, as in sacred pilgrimage, also to state that the remembered its origins and past splendors. Once the devotions had been completed in the main church, all those young boys – this is the testimony of the priest who guided them – prayed for 'the grace' – as they would call it – to see the Saint. However, as would be expected, only a modest representation of the group would go up into the room of the Saint. And what about Fr. Gaspar? That meeting almost seemed to sweeten him further, as they would share their flood of memories. There would be relived the humble beginnings and the unexpected developments and growth of a work that was born almost by surprise, right there at St. Paul's in the vigorous years of his early priesthood.

Just think of the jokes of Divine Providence! The assignment of long, long ago, from Fr. Girardi, that first little squadron of youngsters admitted to their First Holy Communion. Then the little encampment, the small Church of the 'little Paul's'. And later, the Marian Cohort, the band, the green fields of Campo Fiore ... And then based on the example of this first-born Oratory, how many others sprang up throughout the city and the Diocese! The light in the setting sun would come alive again in those instants in the splendor of the luxuriant afternoon.

The older lads, gathered as a crown around his bed, he would call them affectionately by name. For the little group there would be a small souvenir. There would not be a long discourse, but a few touching words that came from the depths of his soul and which remained with some of those men forever.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁹ Stofella, Biography, p. 262.

⁴²⁰ *Summ. Super virtut.*: the testimony of a Dr. Anthony Caprara, a former student of the Stimate, p. 133.

⁴²¹ SA. Doc. 31, n. 1, p. 616.

Fr. Gaspar's active day in his final illness was no spent entirely in audiences. There was also his regular study; that personal, in response to a soul thirsty for God which could never be slaked, as well as that necessary for the delicate commissions received from the Chancery Office.

When there did not come to him **priests or religious**, struggling to find their way, to be re-directed on the right path, with some **Retreat**, there were always books to review, questions to resolve on the more disparate problems hat the direction of the Diocese could ask of him.⁴²²

When he could no longer write, he would dictate judgments, or solutions, with a clarity of exposition and assurance of doctrine which were admirable. He would always sign these documents personally. The last document of this nature which the Archives have kept for us is January 28, 1852. Thus, amidst his diligent and fervent practices of piety, the audiences, his study, the sick man would end his day. Then, the long night would begin. This is often a time for nightmares for those suffering who have to measure it with the seemingly interminable loneliness. For Fr. Gaspar, insomnia was not a torment. He would say, 'with affection', his Rosary, slowly, meditating for long hours and hours on the 'Our Father', and on the 'Hail Mary.' And the light of the new days would often catch him by surprise.⁴²³

5. Tribulations

The hostility of certain churchmen that accompanied the first developments of the Community of the Stimate, who were then mortified by the well known intervention of Bishop Liruti himself, came back little by little to make itself felt in the Saint's last years.

The occasional writings of the Saint hint about this with a certain frequency.⁴²⁴ But we do not have much precision regarding this. Fr. Bertoni had a special delicacy in simulating and in wishing that his followers might forget the wrongs they received. Being an adversary of his was one way of being assured of his charity.

There were also tribulations of another kind, indeed: the sorrows of 1848. It is not that Fr. Bertoni was a politician. However, loyal to his principle that all authority comes from God, he considered the 'sin of revolution' to be very grave, and in his time he did not hide this in his sermons.⁴²⁵

⁴²² Stofella, Biography, p. 277.

⁴²³ SA, Doc. 20, p. 188.

⁴²⁴ Stofella, Biography, pp. 248, f.

⁴²⁵ His sons followed he same line. In 1866, when the passions of 1848 had burned out, a good liberal with unexpected serenity, of the Community of Fr. Bertoni would write: 'It was said that they were adversaries – those Priests of the Stimate – to our every progress in constituting ourselves as a free people. I do not know how they think in their hearts, nor do I have any right to ponder them. I do directly to the fruit of the tree, and where there is good fruit, I hope that this prospers.' John Baptist Montanari. His work: *Che fare?*. Verona 1866, pp. 44, ff. – cf. Stofella, Biography, p. 265.

The promoters of the New Italy were on the march, and Verona, tranquilly hidden behind her walls, will never pardon them. In 1848, the Stimate, as Fr. Lenotti testifies, were considered a sign of conspiracies and plots of the 'libertines', who, since revolutions are supported on nothing other than what they confiscate from others, counted on the goods of the Community, seeking its ruin.⁴²⁶ On March 18th, just before the 'Five Days of Milan', there was also at Verona a brief skirmish of the insurrection. The appointment of those rebelling and the crowd manipulated by them, took place under the pacific windows of the Priests of the Company of Jesus in the College of St. Sebastian's.

The cry: *Viva Italy!* Alternated to other cries, less edifying, to say the least, '*Death to the Jesuits!*' To disperse the unruly crowd [there is record of a stone having been thrown] was not the police, as they were nowhere to be found that night, nor on the following days. Nor was there any sign of the rather imposing military force, but the surprise of a providential burst of thunder with a torrent of pouring rain and hail, only a single burst, and this was providential. All of a sudden, the breath of the winds offered to those in the maneuver the way of escape.⁴²⁷

In the matter of revolution, the highest point was of 1848 in Verona was just the above. The disgusting episode which obliged the Fathers of St. Sebastian's to an immediate dispersion. This did not succeed at all to convert Fr. Bertoni and his spiritual sons to the cause whose cry, '*Long Live Italy*' as they intended to serve, as their fidelity to the constituted authority remained unaltered.

And yet – and this is the height of irony! - the most serious tribulation of 1848, for Fr. Gaspar and his companions was precisely the military command of His Apostolic Majesty stationed in Verona. The evening in July 2nd, with seven other priests, two Priests of the Stimate were arrested, while there were in St. Stephen's Parish hearing confessions, by a detachment of soldiers, veterans of the battle of Santa Lucia. On Fr. Benciolini's person, they found a certain sum of money: the money was necessary for purchases for the small Stigmatine Community at the Derelitti, and Fr. Venturini was with him. The investigators for military security thought instead that this was money that would be used to bribe the soldiers, in the effort to persuade them to desert. They were all brought into prison, and treated harshly. Among the phrases bandied about was that they would all face the firing squad.

Fr. Gaspar did all he could to intervene to save his spiritual sons from this terrible misunderstanding. Influential persons made their voices heard beginning with the Bishop himself. But all was a state of siege. After four days of anguish the first rays of the light of hope intervened. The decision was to await the return of Field-Marshal Radetsky. He came back on July 13th, in a certain euphoria – perhaps – because of his victory at Mount Berico. On this occasion, Radetsky proved to be good. The two

⁴²⁶ SA, Doc. 20, p. 173.

⁴²⁷ *Brief History of the Venetian Province of the Company of Jesus*. Venice 1914, pp. 82; 247, ff.

priests of the Stimate and the other seven were released into freedom, after having been given – as would be expected – a severe admonition.⁴²⁸

Thus troubled rained down on the few Priests of the Stimate from the left and the right. Fortunately, for St. Gaspar, he held it to be ‘of faith’ that ‘for all those who love the Lord, everything works out unto good.’⁴²⁹ After a brief interval there was a further proof of this.

When in fact, in 1850, on the request of the Austrian Military Command, Bishop Mutti requested two priests from Fr. Bertoni to serve as chaplains for those condemned to death, and those assigned were precisely Fr. Benciolini, and his companion of adventure, Fr. Innocent Venturini.⁴³⁰

They accomplished a great deal of good, also because at least in the memory of those bad memories that they both had endured, they were able to serve the poor victims of an Empire that now ruled only on the strength of tired bayonets. From March 6, 1850, also the ground floor of the Stimate was taken over by a small detachment of soldiers, whose presence was most annoying.

This presence of a military detachment in the house was most annoying and a source of suffering for Fr. Bertoni, who was now gravely ill, as it was for the fathers and Brothers of the House. However, it was also a period of spiritual wealth, thanks to the incomparable Brother Paul. With his fine manners, he knew how to make friends with his boyish spirit among the soldiers, and led a good group of them every Saturday into the Church for confession.⁴³¹

Contemporaneously, Fr. Bertoni had to suffer even great disconcerting afflictions caused him by a series of wicked and dramatic deeds that had forced Pius IXth to flee to Gaeta. First Pius VII, and now Pius IX: Fr. Bertoni opened and was now concluding his priestly life on the Calvary of two Popes, he who in all times maintained that calm of soul, through his loving, indefectible devotion for the Vicar of Christ and His Church.⁴³² In fact, there was no sorrow and tribulation of the Church for which Fr. Gaspar did not suffer the more than if it were his own suffering and tribulation – as there was joy, or victory of this same Mother that would not bring him exaltation and tender happiness, sometimes even to the point of tears.⁴³³

In the painful Roman happenings of 1848-1849, Fr. Gaspar was also much comforted visibly in the filial attachment shown by the faithful of the entire world toward the persecuted Pope. The triumphant return of the Pontiff to Rome⁴³⁴, his early announcement of the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother

⁴²⁸ Thomas Netti, *Castelnuovo e gli austriaci nel 1848*. Venice 1914, pp. 82; 247, f.

⁴²⁹ SA, Doc. 20, p. 173.

⁴³⁰ Giacobbe, *Remarks on the Life of Innocent Venturini*. Verona 1864, p. 13.

⁴³¹ *Reminiscences concerning the Fathers and Brothers ...* o.c., pp. 79, ff.

⁴³² Stofella, *Biography*, pp. 182, f.

⁴³³ SA, Doc. 26, p. 505.

⁴³⁴ SA, Doc. 20, p. 172.

of God, were two great joys that sweetened Fr. Gaspar's sorrowful sunset of his earthly day.⁴³⁵

6. In the Light of a Great Love

From that , prayer offered before Mass in ecstasy, on that long ago May 30, 1812, the Crucifix had said to him: **Look at this heart, this My heart!** It was the Crucified Christ, speaking with his impassioned disciple who would remain a prisoner of His for ever, being pressed by an overwhelming yearning and an incessant thrust towards a loving total conformity to the sublime Model.

In particular in the last 30 months of his earthly pilgrimage, the last, and the most beautiful strophes of his Cantic of Abandonment to the Father. These were stanzas that no pen ever fixed on paper, but St. Gaspar formulated them in communion with the Divine Agonizing Lord of Golgotha. Thirty months, just think: this is how long the final phase of his illness that would bring him to the tomb lasted. We might ask anew the formal name of that final malady" however, there is no clear indication concerning its nature. The popular terms in those days would be 'miasma', and 'malign humors.'

However, the Saint himself offered his own diagnosis: he called it a 'malady not curable by an earthly doctor.'⁴³⁶ In January of 1850, he was forever riveted now to his arm chair. There remained to him now only his harsh pallet. Condemned from now on to the humiliating trial of an immobility that was almost absolute, and the ailing man himself called this 'exquisite suffering.' The spasms of acute suffering came more than formerly, almost surpassing the limits of human endurance – he was under attack from the insidious onslaught of desperation. He gave expression to this at times for a rather an unusual tone of lament. But this was only to implore from his sons the charity of a special prayer. He would say: *'If you only knew my sons, what suffering and what anguish!... O, if the Lord does not help me with His grace ... Pray much for me that He might give me the patience to handle this trial ...'*⁴³⁷

His eyes were wide open from his torture, sought refuge and relief **in the Wounds of the most loving Savior**, Who opened wide His arms to him from the bare wall.⁴³⁸ On his lips there would often return those consoling, comforting expressions, the most beautiful of loving trust: **Your Will be done... May the Lord be blessed ... Jesus, Mary ...!** In the presence of His Master, nailed and crowned with thorns, the sufferings of the disciple appeared to him as something less and he would say: *Strike, o Lord, and buffet me, as I merit it and I merit even worse ...!*⁴³⁹ His was a suffering without any thought that he was being heroic, nor certainly masochistic, full of compunction.⁴⁴⁰ One night he was not sleeping, and he murmured a few ejaculatory

⁴³⁵ Stofella, Biography, pp. 270, f.

⁴³⁶ Letter to Mother Naudet, n. 143.

⁴³⁷ SA, Doc. 20, p. 143; Doc. 26, p. 423.

⁴³⁸ SA, Doc. 26, p. 539.

⁴³⁹ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 143; 452, ff.

⁴⁴⁰ Stofella, Biography, p. 279.

prayers under his breath, but loud enough to interrupt the sleep of Brother Ferrari who was sleeping in the next room. 'Father, do you need anything>', the good Brother asked. 'No, Louis, I just need to suffer...' ⁴⁴¹

His courage and patience did not fail, and neither did the loving attention of others. He would have recourse also to his inherent good nature in order to mitigate the sadness of those who would visit him. ⁴⁴² This long martyrdom of confinement brought o him next a deep bed sore that became infected, and brought enormous discomfort. In the last four months of his life, this had developed into a terrible oozing back ulcer. The Saint did not complain, and it was not known how long he had endured this. The infirmarian discovered it, and of course, made it known. When the doctor looked at that terrible raw wound that penetrated to the bone, he could only sigh. The care of this, then, proved to be long and quite painful, because his forced immobility was a crucifixion, and only to touch him was a piercing. His poor body was reduced even further in its extreme situation. And what about his spirit?

Three weeks prior to his death two Professors of the Seminary came to see him to comfort him. In response to the usual pleasantries, with a half smile he said: ***Here I am, in School!*** ⁴⁴³ *'Blessed is the man whom You instruct, O Lord'*. This is the scriptural phrase that is the most current in the Saint's letters, an almost unconscious chant of his own beatitude. ⁴⁴⁴ This is the way it was. From the bare wall, the Crucifix imparted on the disciple the last and most sublime lessons of confident love. To abandon oneself blindly and lovingly to heaven even when it seems all closed off and it is night, as happened to the dying Jesus Himself on the Cross, means to reach the most sublime confines of perfect Abandonment. And for the saint, those outer reaches caressed him, already heroic in loving compunction, while the anguish experienced in this trial which suggested to him thoughts of despair for his own eternal salvation. ⁴⁴⁵

Having guessed the tremendous dark night of the Spirit that the Founder was passing through, the Brother Infirmarian sought to comfort him, by reminding him of the great good he had done in his life. This kind gesture, though, only increased his discomfort and torment in his anguished soul: *'Don't say that, Brother, for heaven's sake! Do you not know what a poor sinner I am? If you wish me well, please don't say those things, but pray much to the Lord so that He might extend His Mercy to me.'* ⁴⁴⁶ Then, in that quieting thought of the Lord's Mercy, the clouds seemed to thin out, and to his soul returned splendidly the serene heaven of his long-suffering and loving waiting. Can we think that maybe the Crucifix inspired him and said to him anew: ***Look at This, My Heart....?***

⁴⁴¹ SA, Doc. 26, p. 301.

⁴⁴² SA, Doc. 20, p. 144.

⁴⁴³ SA, Doc. 26, p. 423.

⁴⁴⁴ One example might be noted in one of his letters to Fr. Bragato: *Since you are no longer teaching school, keep yourself in the School of God; 'they were all taught by God. Blessed is the man whom You instruct, O Lord, and regarding Your Law You instructed him...* [SA, Doc 25, p. 753.

⁴⁴⁵ Dalle Vedove, *Un modello di santo Abbandono*. P. 255.

⁴⁴⁶ SA, Doc. 26, p. 469.

7. His Meeting with the ‘Good Father’

It is not altogether temerarious to think something along these lines. It is certain that in his final days, the Saint seemed to experience a peace and a serenity without precedent. It seems that his eyes shone in the light of an imminent certitude. Whatever happened in that room during the night when the venerated patient asked the Brother Infirmarian assisting him, and in a tone of voice that translated perhaps the interior melodies of his soul, asked him: ***Louis, did you see anything?***

Was it the Crucifix? Or was it perhaps the Blessed Virgin, who had come to comfort and to return his devout and confident greeting to her every morning in his prayers: ***I greet you, o my Mother, give me your blessing...***? Certainly, for Brother Ferrari this was neither a delirium, nor a vague dream, but some inexpressible reality of a ‘heavenly vision.’⁴⁴⁷

By the end of that May, the terrible bed sore that had brought such discomfort to his back had in some way healed over, but now his body was afflicted with an invincible nausea toward every form of nourishment and his body declined visibly. He was gradually also losing the feeling of pain that had been most acute for him. His mind however, did not show any signs of wandering or confusion, nor did his spirit lose anything of its readiness and strength. This is based on the statements of those close to him and those who had recourse to him for counseling, or for some other need right up until the day before his departure.⁴⁴⁸

This arrived on June 12, 1853, his last day on earth. In the morning, he had received Holy Communion, fasting, as always. This was to be for him his viaticum for eternity. A little after noon, he suffered a real crisis of a very serious listlessness. At the signal from the Brother Infirmarian, the Community which was at table, gathered around the bed of their Father with much trepidation. Very gradually he seemed to come to. He responded to them all with courtesy and serenity, but now just by means of very slight movements of the head and his eyes, to their words of comfort and devotion that each of them present expressed to him. With full use of his senses and his sentiments, he confessed for the last time to his beloved Fr. John Marani. He seemed happy to see Extreme Unction being administered. He responded to this sacred ritual, at which his sons assisted on their knees around the bed as though it were an altar.

He entered into his final agony. It was Sunday, and time for preaching. A little before 3:00 p.m., three of the Priests of the Stimmate, with their hearts broken with this sad happening, left the Founder’s room as he agonized, because they were to keep their regular Sunday assignment of teaching Catechism to the People.

The sweet and sorrowful duty of assisting the dying man was entrusted to Fr. Brugnoli. Just after 3:00 p.m., Fr. Marani re-appeared, as he had someone else go to teach his lesson, which he was giving at St. Luke’s, and he came back into the sick

⁴⁴⁷ SA, Doc. 20, p. 192; Doc. 26, p. 433.

⁴⁴⁸ SA. Doc. 26, pp. 431, ff.

room. The eyes of the first-born sought with trepidation signs of life on the agonizing face, and discovered that the soul of their gentle ‘Father and Master’ had already taken flight toward the bosom of the Lord.

Bent down over the lifeless body, with the little liturgical ritual open between his hands, Fr. Brugnoli was still reading, with much emotion and devotion, those prayers for the dying.⁴⁴⁹ There returned to the memories of those present those most fervent bursts of his soul, on the tempestuous waves of the exile [but, how it all was a game of loving Providence!], he yearned for the final embrace of his Lord at the Port of that Peace which will last forever: ***O admirable secrets of divine love! ...A profound abysses of His Charity! ... When will it be that we will be so shipwrecked and abandoned in this immense sea, that we no longer see the shores of this wretched earth of ours...!***

In the very hour in which our Divine savior expired on the Cross, the blessed soul of His faithful disciple, abandoning himself ship-wrecked in the immense sea of Charity, lost sight of the shores of this earth. His pilgrimage lasted 75 years, 8 months and 3 days.

Breaking a long series of days that were obstinately grey and stormy looking, suddenly Verona exploded in the light of the returning sun, and the room was inundated with light, just as the Angel of Life passed through.⁴⁵⁰ The visage of the large Crucifix, hung on the wall, and the sweet, almost smiling remains of Fr. Gaspar Bertoni, inclined gently in the sleep of the just, seemed to be identified, as though transfigured by a mutual infinite love.⁴⁵¹



⁴⁴⁹ SA, Doc. 20, p. 191; Doc 26, p. 435.

⁴⁵⁰ This pleasant particular is documented: Fr. C. C. Bresciani [cf. *Collection of his Funeral Orations*, Verona: 1866, Vol. II, pp. 29, f.] noted this almost as heaven's homage to the passing of a just man. There reappeared in those hours a most beautiful spectacle, the serenity of the visage of God, after a flood of rain, as though the prayers of the faithful had been all poured out. – Stofella, Biography, p. 290.

⁴⁵¹ SA, Doc. 21, -. 210.