

Congregazione dei Rogazionisti

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Prot. 59/13

Re.: Fr. Pantaleone Palma

To the Rogationists
and To the Family of the Rogate

Dearest,

In these coming days we will be doing a very significant gesture: the exhumation, recognition and transfer of the remains of Fr. Pantaleone Palma from Verano Cemetery in Rome to our Shrine of St. Anthony in Oria.

Last June, in my presentation of the brief biography of Fr. Pantaleone Palma, I have observed, among other things, that the several continuous testimonies of the Rogationists and the Daughters of Divine Zeal confirm their constant fondness, respect and veneration towards him. The publication of his short biography has allowed us to look at Fr. Palma with serenity and admiration, and to dwell on a painful chapter in our history, an event which reveals with increasing clarity illuminated by his great virtue.

Fr. Palma was born on April 15, 1875 in Ceglie Messapica, Province of Brindisi, Italy. He entered the Avignone Quarter, initially as a guest, towards the end of 1902. He was soon struck by the extraordinary figure of Father Hannibal, by the struggles and difficulties which he dealt with faith and pastoral zeal, by his charity, and by the ideal of prayer for good workers. Father Palma soon began to collaborate with him and set aside his initial plan of specialized studies. Attracted by those ideals, in less than a year, he already obtained the permission to leave his diocese and to devote himself entirely to the Pious Work, becoming the first and most valuable collaborator of Father Hannibal.

His presence in the Pious Work has been truly providential. Father Hannibal had initiated a variety of charitable and social works and likewise, for several years, the Sacred Alliance and the Pious Union of Evangelical Rogation. Around him was a series of thriving activities that required brains and brawn. There were, at that time, the two religious Institutes, one of women, the Daughters of Divine Zeal, which developed in different locations and had in Mother Nazarena Majone, a faithful disciple and valid collaborator of Father Hannibal, and the other of men, who could hardly grow. Father Palma soon became the *longa manus* of Father Hannibal in this vast field of work,.

On August 3, 1924, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Father Palma's priestly ordination, speaking of himself in the third person, Father Hannibal takes the

opportunity to show his relationship with Father Palma and the role he played in the Pious Work. He writes:

“The Initiator of the Institute found his faithful companion in Fr. Palma, an intimate spiritual son and brother in Jesus Christ. Having proven in him a great zeal for the growth of the Pious Work, Canon Di Francia did nothing without associating himself with Fr. Pantaleone. Canon Di Francia and Fr. Palma were two souls in one and they laid the spiritual and economic foundation of the Pious Work. It is written in the Sacred Scriptures that a brother supported by his brother forms a firm city”.

This story illuminates the painful situation that has befallen Father Palma in October 1932. The process promoted by the Holy Office in Rome, lasted almost a year. The verdict was pronounced on July 19, 1933: he was dismissed from the Congregation, reduced to secular state and suspended from ministering the sacraments, with the obligation to stay, i.e., confined at the *Scala Santa*. In this place, three years later, on September 2, 1935, he ceased to suffer. The trial and conviction have many obscure points. Father Palma has endured all with edifying behavior, which left a deep impression on those who knew him in that humiliating experience. Up to the end, with faith and love of the Lord, he kept his great attachment to the Pious Work, and in defending himself he intended to defend the dignity of the priesthood, as he had learned from Father Hannibal.

His words, which he addresses to the Pope, are a faithful echo of the testimony of Father Hannibal, just quoted above: “After giving all my spiritual, moral and physical energies to the magnificent Institutions of Canon Di Francia, of which I am proud to have been, since the beginning, his first, most trusted and beloved companion, I found myself, at the age of 60 years, to be the target of an undeserved conspiracy due to jealousy and because of the spirit of rigor with which I wanted to implement the program and directive criteria that the Founder applied on his works. He put all his trust in me; and I say it without any presumption, but only to attest the judgment that the holy Founder had on me and on my loyalty. We lived together for 25 years, and if, throughout all this time he did not send me away from him, and never reprimanded me, it is only certain that I have not given any sign of those negative qualities attributed to me by my detractors. I think that the paternally affectionate treatment of the holy Founder toward me has been one of the strongest motivations of jealousy of which I am now a victim. However, if the Founder died leaving a document of great esteem and confidence in my poor person, appointing me universal inheritor of his properties and preferring me than any other confrere in the Congregation itself, this establishes a presumption in favor of my very notable honesty and faithfulness” (05/24/1935).

We know the serious weight carried for many years by Father Hannibal in the economic management of the works of charity in favor of the orphans and the poor, amidst the naggings of creditors and misunderstandings and refusal of many people. The way of Providence was opened to him through the protection of St. Anthony of Padua with the “bread of the orphans”. Behind the extraordinary development of this providential resource are the efforts and commitment of so many sisters and brothers, but, under the indefatigable guidance of Father Palma, with his intuition, zeal, and untiring labors. This was underlined by Father Hannibal on several occasions in 1906 and 1907:

“Fr. Palma with Bro. Giuseppe Antonio traveled throughout Sicily for the two propaganda: the Rogate and St. Anthony, with good results! Blessed be the Divine Mercy!” (...) “The propaganda of the Bread of St. Anthony of Padua is very extensive and we had a lot of providence”¹. “We have with us for several years another priest who is very fond of me and of the Institutes and works so much, and his name is Fr. Pantaleone Palma”².

Undoubtedly the organization and guidance of the Anthonian Secretariats (Benefactors’ Offices) was the context in which Father Palma expressed more clearly his organizational skills, but his action as first collaborator of Father Hannibal was spread to all areas of the life and apostolate of the Pious Work.

It is moving to confirm that Father Palma, even though being forgotten, unknown and unjustly condemned, has preserved and confessed up to the end his strong affective and spiritual bond with the Pious Work. Many have testified that they were deeply impressed by his great spirit of mortification and unlimited conformity to the will of God. To someone he confided: “I offer all for the greater good of the Rogationists and the Sisters of Divine Zeal of Can. Di Francia”³.

On the eve of his death he received with great joy the permission to resume the celebration of the Holy Mass, declaring: “On August 6 (Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord) I will celebrate the holy Mass. Thus the Lord be greatly praised. To our Lord everything is easy. In a moment He changes everything. Do not be afraid: you need to leave it to Him and Him alone. He takes every little thing and makes it as great as He pleases”.

Dearest, as I recalled at the beginning, after the death of Father Palma there have been always in our Institutes those who have preserved their affection, esteem and sometimes even veneration towards him. It had not been previously possible to initiate a revision of his painful event. We can say that he remained beside the Pious Work, almost like a stranger, he who had consumed all his strengths and offered his life for the Pious Work. The Lord who has saved us by his cross, continues to save in the same way.

We are living a historical event in bringing the remains of Father Palma to Oria. In that house, with intelligence and love, he has re-launched the great socio-educational work after the terrible ordeal of the earthquake in Messina; he will now rest in that Shrine, where he had paused in long prayers.

We welcome him again, and – refraining from judgments on people and situations – let ask God to forgive us for our eventual responsibilities or errors. We are certain that he has never been away from the Pious Work and that he continues to watch over us. He was the first and main collaborator of the Institutes founded by Saint Hannibal; a man and a priest full of virtue, zeal and sacrifice. May he inspire us and be a model in our life and mission as Rogationists.

¹ From the *Memoriale dei Divini Benefici*.

² Letter to Giuseppina Lembo, 18 agosto 1907.

³ Testimony of Can. Altobello Nicola of Trani.


These are the sentiments that will accompany us in the following activities that we will live for the exhumation, recognition and transfer of the remains of Fr. Pantaleone Palma.

- April 9 - Exhumation in Verano Cemetery of Rome.
11-17 - Recognition.
17 - (9:00 P.M.) – Prayer Vigil in the Parish of Saints Anthony and Hannibal (Rome).
The text for the Prayer Vigil will be sent to the Communities so that they could live spirituality united during this appointment.
18 - (10:00 A.M.) – Holy Mass presided by the Superior General, Fr. Angelo Mezzari, in the Parish of St. Anthony at C.ne Appia (Rome).
- (11:00 A.M.) – Transfer of the remains to Oria.
I invite each Community to celebrate, possibly on this day, a Holy Mass in suffrage of Father Palma.
19 - (11:00 A.M.) – Holy Mass in the Shrine of St. Anthony in Oria, presided by Msgr. Vincenzo Pisanello. The temporary interment will be done in our chapel at the cemetery of Oria and successively at our Shrine.

In conclusion, we would like to extend a grateful thought to the Palma family, who had frequently welcomed and helped Father Hannibal. We know that the Father Founder «so as to avoid “the terrible inheritance tax, which is unfavorable to private Works of Charity, had decided to authorize the Palma Family, *alias* “The Palma Relatives”, to purchase all the material goods of the Work». On the same occasion the Father expressed in this way: «We have two brothers and two sisters, they are four, and we let them purchase everything, and they will (also) make the testaments among themselves. They are Fr. Palma, his brother Pietro, the two sisters, Teresa (my Sister) and Giacinta. Very trustworthy people!»⁴. Our sincere thanks also goes to the Rossi family, who welcomed and kept the remains of Father Palma in their family tomb and allowed us to make the exhumation and transfer.

Let us live this event, in the Easter joy of the Lord's Resurrection, with a renewed love for the Pious Work imploring from the Divine Superiors copious blessings on all of us, through the intercession of our founder, Saint Hannibal Mary Di Francia.

With this wish, I greet you with affection in the Lord.


(Fr. Angelo A. Mezzari, R.C.J.)
Sup. Gen.

⁴ Cf. Santarella V., *Il Padre Pantaleone Palma* (pro manuscripto) 1986.