



Rome, May 1, 2022

125th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Congregation

To Most Rev. Superiors
of the Rogationist Circumscriptions
and to the Rogationist Communities

Dearest Confreres,

This year marks the 125th anniversary of the establishment or diocesan approval of the Congregation by the Archbishop of Messina, Mons. Angelo Paino, with a decree issued on August 6, 1926, with retroactive force dating back to 1897 (May 16), the year of its foundation.

The first page of the July-August 1926 issue of the Bollettino announced the event with the headline "Deo gratias! Deo gratias! Deo gratias!" And the reason for such exultation was immediately explained.

"Deo gratias! The dream that has been cherished for many years has now become reality! The bright goal, the shining ideal, which has formed the holy passion of so many and so many hearts, today has been reached! The prayers and the promises that were continuously raised to Heaven have been fulfilled today! Deo gratias!"

The following pages contained the decree, in Latin, of the establishment of the Congregation of the Rogationists of the Heart of Jesus; immediately followed by the decree, in Latin, of the establishment of the Daughters of Divine Zeal, and then the two decrees in Italian. We would like to read this important page of our history that reminds us of our genuine roots:

"We Angelo Paino ... To all who read these letters, health, and blessing in the Lord. Among the principal duties of our Pastoral Office is certainly that of encouraging with all our strength whatever tends toward the good of souls. Fr. Hannibal M. Di Francia humbly asked us to examine the by-laws of the Congregation of Rogationists of the Heart of Jesus and, if there were no objections, to approve them with Our ordinary authority. It has seemed to us that the Constitutions, drawn up by the Founder himself, lend suitable means to obtain the purpose of the Institute, which aims at acquiring its own perfection, and to procure the salvation of neighbors, especially with the following works: to catechize poor and unrefined children; to help the needy paternally and religiously; to give hospitality and every care to orphans. What pleases us most is that in the distress of the present times, the Rogationists, through their own institute, from which they take their name, assiduously implore the most merciful God to send workers into the harvest.

"Therefore, according to Can. 492 C.J.C. and in accordance with the Instruction of the Sacred Congregation of Religious issued on November 30, 1922, with the previous authorization granted by the same Sacred Congregation on July 30, 1926, by Our ordinary authority We approve and confirm the Constitutions of the aforementioned Congregation of the Rogationists of the Heart of Jesus, and the same Congregation, by virtue of the present letters, we canonically establish and declare the same Congregation as an ecclesiastical moral

person, fully subject to Us in accordance with the law, with all the rights and faculties which, according to the canons, such persons are bound to use and enjoy and with retroactive effect to the year of foundation 1897. We warmly exhort the Rogationists to observe with constancy and fidelity the rule given to them and to love it with great affection, shining in everything for piety, discipline, and charity.

"Messina from the Archiepiscopal Palace, with our seal and with the signature of our Chancellor, in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and twenty-six, on the sixth day of August, the feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ. + Angelo Paino Archbishop and Archimandrite of Messina."

A note that we find in the January-February 1936 issue of the *Bollettino* tells us what the composition of the Congregation was at the time it was approved:

"On June 1, 1927, the passing of the Venerable Founder, the Rogationists numbered 31, distributed as follows: Priests 4; students 16, coadjutors 11. The picture was more or less the same on August 6, 1926, the date of diocesan approval of the Congregation: Priests 5, students 14, coadjutors 10.

With the decree of erection, our Religious Family was approved in a concrete moment in which, although not yet particularly developed, it presented guarantees of growth, also in consideration of the good number of religious students. At the same time, the decree, with retroactive force, intended to recognize the journey made by the Congregation from its earliest beginnings, by recognizing May 16, 1897, as the date of its foundation,

Today we want to look back at that beginning in the awareness that it pertains to all of us, like the sprout from which we developed, the spring from which we sprang, or the roots that were laid at the foundation of our growth.

Fr. Tusino, in talking about the beginnings of the male Community,¹ recalls the proposal made to the Bishop of Messina, on November 25, 1887, to establish in the Avignone Quarter a Community of priests who would dedicate themselves to grassroots missions in the villages, a proposal that was not followed up. He adds that in the following years some young men who showed signs of a priestly vocation asked the bishop for permission to wear the cassock, to undertake the priestly path living as guests of Canon Di Francia in the Avignone Quarter.

The young Antonino Catanese was the first among them to enter, on July 2, 1889; the following year, the teacher Francesco Bonarrigo and three other young aspirants, one of whom, Giuseppe Montalto, nephew of Father Hannibal, entered. The group, which lived in a separate section of the Avignone Quarter and had adequate accompaniment, grew from year to year. In a note that listed the assignment of each, for the year 1895-96, eleven names appear, but three other names are found in other notes. Initially, the young men had the internal school, later they attended the seminary forming a distinct group, separate also from the other external clerics.

The community of Clerics did not constitute the beginning of a religious Congregation, because the young men were simply aiming at the Priesthood, but at the same time, at the school of Father Hannibal, they were nourished by a specific spirituality, acquired a sense of belonging to the Pious Work of Charity and dedicated themselves, compatibly with their ecclesiastical studies, to the education and instruction of orphans.²

¹ Cf. TUSINO T., *Padre Annibale M. Di Francia, Memorie Biografiche*, Parte II, Ed. Rogate, Roma 1996, p. 166 ff

² Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

In the year 1897 - as reported by Fr. Santoro³ - Fr. Mauro Placido, a Benedictine Father from Montecassino, asked for hospitality in the Avignone Quarter and was accepted, remaining there for about half a year. He had come to Messina perhaps to try to rebuild a Benedictine community in the ancient Monastery of Mary Magdalene, which stood a short distance away. During his stay, he settled in well in the Pious Work, giving a valid help to Father Hannibal. Among the young people he found in the Avignone Quarter, he identified some who were not clerics but who showed themselves pious and dedicated to the service of charity. Perhaps he thought they could be the first elements for the restoration of the monastery. The fact is that he asked and obtained from Father Hannibal to have them wear a religious habit and consider them novices. Father Santoro specifies that it was a Benedictine-style habit, tightened at the hips by a leather belt, with a cape, also black, and a small hood. They wore, sewn on the cassock, the emblem that distinguished them: a heart printed on cloth with the inscription "Rogate ergo Dominum messis ut mittat operarios in messem suam." The three young men also took a religious name, according to monastic custom: Placido Romeo was called Brother Placido, Francesco Di Gregorio was called Brother Benedetto, Carmelo Calabrò was called Brother Giuseppe.⁴ It was on May 16, 1897.⁵

Fr. Vitale, in the biography of Father Hannibal, published in 1939, tells us that "of those three, after about 40 years, only one remained among us, Brother Placido Romeo, a Rogationist Coadjutor, faithful to his vocation,"⁶ who died in Oria on February 26, 1940.

The road opened by the three young men presented several unknowns and some certainties: that of giving themselves to the Lord and the service of the little ones and the poor and, moreover, of carrying the Rogate in their hearts.

Father Hannibal "thought, therefore, of the clerics in the Congregation and in 1898 proposed the postulancy to them and wrote a special regulation for them, in the hope of later establishing the novitiate with the regular religious profession."⁷

In it, he prescribes: "As the small Congregation is engaged, as well as the entire Pious Work, under the banner of the sacred evangelical motto: Rogate ergo Dominum messis, ut mittat operarios in messem suam, so the Congregants will add to the three vows a fourth vow of daily prayer to obtain good workers for the Holy Church." Moreover, with regard to the Holy Orders, he adds: "No member of the Congregation, as it was said in the beginning, will claim to be raised to the Holy Orders, even though it may seem to him that God is calling him, but nourish a humble and holy desire which he perfectly entrusts in the hands of obedience."⁸

In this journey of discernment, we find that in the following year, on October 11, 1900, Father Hannibal drew up some Notes of Regulations for the *Rogandine* Congregation, in which he declared, first of all, that the purpose was "To gather from the Most Holy Mouth of Jesus Christ the Command of His Divine Heart: Rogate ergo Dominum messis, ut mittat operarios in messem suam. Execute it. Propagate it *ad maiorem consolationem cordis Iesu*."⁹

We learn from Fr. Tusino that on the Feast of the Patronage of St. Joseph, which fell on the third Sunday after Easter, on April 23, 1899, Brothers Placido Romeo and Benedetto

³ Cf. SANTORO D. S., *Breve Profilo Storico della Congregazione dei Rogazionisti*, Roma 1985, p. 20.

⁴ Cf. TUSINO T., *Padre Annibale M. Di Francia, Memorie Biografiche*, Parte II, Ed. Rogate, Roma 1996, p. 395.

⁵ Cf. *Positio super virtutibus*, vol. II, Cronologia, p. 1305.

⁶ VITALE F., *Il Canonico Annibale Maria Di Francia - Nella vita e nelle opere*, Messina 1939, p. 254.

⁷ TUSINO T., *Padre Annibale M. Di Francia, Memorie Biografiche*, Parte III, Ed. Rogate, Roma 1998, p. 31.

⁸ DI FRANCIA, A., *Scritti*, vol. V, Ed. Rogate, Roma 2009, p. 244

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

Maria made a vow ad annum of chastity and obedience to the Rogate, that is, to pray every day so that the Lord God may deign to send good workers to the Holy Church.¹⁰

The following year, on May 6, 1900, the third Sunday after Easter, the feast of the Patronage of St. Joseph, the first ten religious made their profession ad annum. It was a scaled-down profession. They committed themselves with a promise of poverty and obedience and a vow of chastity and obedience to the Rogate. The following May 11 they gave an account of their profession to Monsignor D'Arrigo, imploring his pastoral blessing. Here are the names: Father Hannibal and Fathers Bonarrigo and Catanese; D'Agostino, sub-deacon; Micalizzi, cleric; Coadjutor Brothers Placido, Benedetto and Giuseppe Antonio; and two young clerics, Russello Salvatore and Schepis Nicolò, completed the number of ten.

They declared themselves to be the most humble and obedient sons and servants of the *Regular Oblates of the Heart of Jesus*.¹¹ The following year, on September 14, 1901, they took the officially approved name of Rogationists.

We see that on this occasion the Brothers, Coadjutors, who had embarked on the path of religious life on May 16, 1897, oriented to the service of children and the poor, and the Clerics, together with Father Hannibal and Fathers Bonarrigo and Catanese, met together. They made private vows, on which they sought the blessing and approval of the Bishop. This is an important step towards the organization of a formative program beginning with a regular novitiate.


In the *Memoriale dei Divini Benefici*, Father Hannibal recalls, with simplicity in a few words, the birth of the male Congregation: "In this year (1900) in May, on the day of the Patronage of St. Joseph, the small religious Congregation of men began, with the pronouncement of two vows and two promises *inter solemnia*, and with ten members; then after a few days, the small Congregation was presented to His Excellency Archbishop Monsignor and was blessed and approved. A special speech was read and delivered to Monsignor. Laus Deo!"

Father Hannibal chose the feast of the Patronage of St. Joseph as the day for religious profession. Paul VI, in 1964, dedicated this Sunday of the Good Shepherd as the World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

The initial journey of our Congregation was not easy. Father Hannibal recognized all this in the life of the Pious Work: "With the coming of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, the Pious Work, in the person of its first members, sprang up as a baby, or rather it sprang up as a small caravan to begin a very arduous pilgrimage, but always comforted by the true ark of the covenant that contains not the symbolic manna, but the true living Bread come down from Heaven, Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament."¹²

This anniversary inspires us to praise and bless our Divine Superiors for the great gift of our Religious Family, to invoke Divine Mercy for our lack of fidelity, and to implore new graces and blessings, repeating once again "Deo gratias! Deo gratias! Deo gratias!"

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


Fr. Bruno Rampazzo, R.C.J.
Superior General

¹⁰ TUSINO T., *Padre Annibale M. Di Francia, Memorie Biografiche*, Parte III, Ed. Rogate, Roma 1998, p. 32.

¹¹ Cf. DI FRANCIA, A., *Scritti*, Vol. VII, Ed. Rogate, Roma 2016, p. 479.

¹² DI FRANCIA, A., *Scritti*, vol. VI, Ed. Rogate, Roma 2010, p. 390