

[Fr. Zamperini Agostino, rcj]

“St. Hannibal’s vocation:

gift of the Rogate, discovery of charism and mission”

Hannibal Maria Di Francia, known and invoked as an apostle of prayer for vocations and a father of orphans and the poor, is first and foremost interested in the Rogate to which “ Devoted himself either out of zeal or fascination, or one and the other”¹. He often speaks about vocations and also about his vocation. Wanting to consider his vocation we begin by asking:

WHICH VOCATION?

THE ROGATIONIST VOCATION OR THE PRIESTLY VOCATION? THE CALL TO THE SERVICE OF THE POOR OR THE FOUNDER’S VOCATION?

With this talk, I propose to consider these four calls in chronological order and verify whether they are distinct vocations, independent vocations or stages of a single vocation that developed and became clearer as the years passed.

Reading his biography we learn that initially there is the Rogationist vocation, what we usually call the “intuition of the Rogate” dating back to 1868; in November of the following year the young Hannibal senses, in a way that is not quite ordinary, the vocation to the priesthood; between December 1877 and January 1878 the Deacon meets the mendicant Francis Zancone who will introduce him to the “Avignon Houses”; finally we can conventionally indicate as the date of the vocation to founder March 19, 1887, the beginning of the women’s Congregation.

We will consider these “vocations” in chronological order trying to grasp any connections, paying attention to the socio-religious context of Italy in the decade 1868-78 highlighting, when possible, the circumstances of the vocation. Of course, we will let the protagonist speak first, listening also to those who received his confidence.

¹ B. VITALE, *Il Can. Annibale Maria Di Francia nella vita e nelle opere*, Messina Scuola Tipografica Antoniana, 1939-XVII, p. 759

Rogationist vocation

After his first communion, received probably at the age of 10 at the Cistercian College of St. Nicholas, Hannibal's Eucharistic piety grew more and more. His marked inclination for spirituality obtained him permission from his confessor to approach the Eucharistic table daily.

The young Di Francia's Eucharistic devotion was concretized, besides communion, in the daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament exposed for the Quarantores in various churches in Messina. It was precisely in one of these visits that at the age of 17 he had what we call the "*Inspiration of the Rogate*"².

Here is how in 1910 he recalls that moment speaking of himself in the third person in the context of a regulation: "A young man, in the beginning of his desire to give himself to God, and when he still knew nothing of those words of the Holy Gospel [Mt. 9:37-38], had this predominant thought in his mind, namely, that to work the greatest good in the Holy Church, to save many souls, to extend the Kingdom of God on earth, no means were so sure as the increase of elected Ministers of God, of holy, apostolic men, according to the Heart of Jesus; and that therefore excellent and profitable prayer to be preferred would be to ask the Most Holy Heart of Jesus instantaneously to send holy men and chosen priests on earth as in the time of St. Dominic and St. Francis, as in the time of St. Ignatius, as in the time of Salesian, St. Alphonsus and the like. This idea seemed very clear and indisputable to him.

The said young man, afterwards, was surprised and perplexed to read in the Holy Gospel those divine Words, "The harvest is great, but the labourers are few. Pray

therefore to the Master of the harvest, that he may send labourers into his harvest' [Mt 9:37-38; Lk 10:2]»³.

A few years later, in 1919, in a circular to the bishops he reminded them that "God sends the Saints to earth. Is not this one of the greatest Mercies that He grants? How can one expect to have it if one ever asks for it? The Command of Jesus Christ is very clear:

THE HARVEST IS GREAT. BUT THE LABORERS ARE FEW: ROGATE ERGO DOMINUM MESSIS. UT MITTAT OPERARIOS IN MESSEM SUAM."

He then goes on to relate his own experience, "There was, therefore, such a one who had a focus on this divine command, even before he had read it in the Gospel; and he began his life career with this focus"⁴.

Some considerations

The two narratives, dating from different times and contexts, are clear and consistent: for the good of the Church, the salvation of souls and the spread of God's kingdom, it is necessary to ask for holy and apostolic men, elected ministers of God according to the Heart of Jesus. Holiness is the lowest common denominator of those whom the Lord sends to earth provided they ask for themselves in prayer. Our young man, like every Christian, is convinced that "nothing is obtained without prayer, and on the contrary by prayer anything is obtained [so] it is necessary"⁵.

3 A. DI FRANCIA, *Scritti*, Editrice Rogate, Roma 2009, vol. V, p. 702. Di seguito indicato sempre con Vol. Con la numerazione romana (= vol. III) indichiamo i volumi dell'Opera Omnia in corso di pubblicazione, mentre con la numerazione araba (= vol. 3) indichiamo la raccolta dattiloscritta.

4 Vol. 50, p. 192.

5 Vol. 23, p. 38.

2 Cfr. B. RAMPAZZO, *L'ispirazione del Rogate nel suo 150° anniversario*. Lettera Circolare alla Famiglia del Rogate, Roma 2020.

He intuitively feels that this is an “excellent and profitable prayer to be preferred” to other prayers of request because it aims at imploring men and women of the stature of Francis, Dominic, Ignatius, etc. . This is an ‘insight supported by Church history, but unfortunately not found in any contemporary piety manual or prayer book, “not even in Riva’s *Philothea*»⁶.

In essence, our saint is characterized by the object to ask for in prayer: “holy, apostolic men, according to the heart of Jesus.” One asks the divine goodness for everything, but one does not ask for apostolic men».

This “dominant thought” will be clarified and developed later with the gospel reading where Jesus commands to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers (Mt 9:36-38; Lk 10:1-2).

The Eucharistic context

Father is precise in pointing out the object of the prayer (holy and apostolic men) and in recalling that he had that idea when he was still “young, in the beginning of his desire to give himself to God.” To know the place and circumstances of “the inspiration” it is necessary to listen to the testimonies of those who received his confidence.

His first biographer, Father Vitale, vaguely attests that young Hannibal, “in the fervour of his prayers, and perhaps even before he donned the habit, standing at the feet of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, was reflecting (certainly not without divine inspiration) that

one of the most important graces for the health of souls, which he should have continually asked Our Lord for, is undoubtedly that of sending Holy Priests to His Church»⁷.

Father Tusino is more complete because he indicates circumstance and place heard from the mouth of the protagonist: “He - in fact - already had the pious custom of visiting every day the Blessed Sacrament exposed for the Quarantores in turn in the various churches of the city; and he reminded us that one day, on one of these visits, in the church of St. John of Malta he had his first inspiration to consecrate himself to prayer to obtain priests, still ignoring the Gospel command»⁸.

Father Tusino again recalls that “Father told us that the first idea of the Rogate, which flashed through his mind, that is, the prayer to obtain priests to the holy Church, still ignoring the expression of the Gospel that commands it, he had it as a secular, still a young man, while praying on the days of Quarantore before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament in the church of St. John of Malta»⁹.

So it is the church of St. John of God is the place of “Intuition” and the context is prayer during Eucharistic adoration.

PRAYER AND EUCHARISTIC ADORATION ARE THE THEOLOGICAL PLACE OF INSPIRATION/INTUITION OF THE ROGATE.

7 B. VITALE, *Il Canonico Annibale Maria di Francia nella vita e nelle opere*, (cit), p. 42

8 T. TUSINO, *L'anima del Padre*, Roma s.d., p. 111.

9 T. TUSINO, *Memorie Biografiche*, vol. I, p. 11.

⁶ Vol. 52, p. 264; cfr. vol. 15, p. 68; vol. 46, p. 271.

The social context

It may be useful to remember that these were the years of the Risorgimento, and in Italy priests, beginning in 1868, were continually and sharply declining. The clergy were beginning to breathe worldly air, and defections were numerous, in the south, we speak of 10% and in some places even 20%.

Father Santoro recalls Father Hannibal, referring to the years in which the Rogationist vocation originated, "said that the desertion of priests and friars brought him grief because of the revolutionary uprisings of the time»» Moreover - Father Santoro continued, "he felt the shortage of saints and consequently admired the great heroism of the saints, whom he considered in the frescoes of the churches and convents, especially in his Porto Salvo; in order to make those times of piety flourish again, he thought that prayer alone was the means, and composed some precisely to obtain holy priests; **ONE DAY, HOWEVER, HE READ IN THE GOSPEL THE ROGATE. HENCE HIS WONDERMENT. HOW NONE OF THE MANY MANUALS OF PIETY EMPHASIZED IT. AND SO HE FELT IMPELLED TO CULTIVATE EVANGELICAL ROGATION»**¹⁰.

In those years, though sad because of the defection of many priests and the apparent shortage of saints, a young man, certainly not without divine inspiration, identified the Rogate as the secret to the flourishing of holy and apostolic priests.

¹⁰ CONGREGATIO PRO CAUSIS SANCTORUM, *Positio super virtutibus*, vol II, Roma 1988, p. 16.



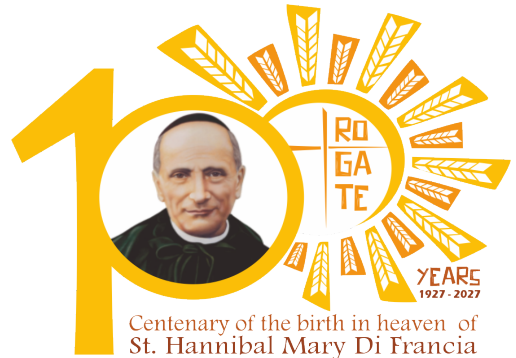
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Family
of the
Rogate



Daughters of
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Centenary of the birth in heaven of
St. Hannibal Mary Di Francia

PRAYER TO ST. HANNIBAL MARY DI FRANCIA (centenaire de sa naissance au ciel 1927-2027)

St. Hannibal Mary Di Francia, who responded with docility to the call of the Lord, teach us, your spiritual sons and daughters, to cherish the gift of the Rogate, and to rediscover its vitality each day. As we prepare to celebrate of the centenary of your birth in heaven, **we look to you** as an outstanding apostle of prayer for vocations. We ask the Lord, through your intercession, to send worthy laborers of the Gospel, and moved by your spirit of charity, may we grow in the love of God and neighbor. **We look to you** who, moved by the zeal of your love, you fed the poor and the little ones with the Bread of Life. We ask the Lord, through your intercession, that in everyday life we may be able to offer on the the altar the sacrifice of perfect charity. **We look to you** who spent your life inflamed by the desire for the salvation of all. We ask the Lord, through your intercession, to live faithfully our vocation and to merit together with you the prize promised to t he laborers of the Gospel.
Amen.

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