

Hannibal Di Francia

Vocation and Mission



STUDY

Centenary of the birth in heaven of ST. HANNIBAL MARY DI FRANCIA

[Fr. Zamperini Agostino, rcj]

“St. Hannibal’s vocation:

gift of the Rogate, discovery of charism and mission.”

Hannibal Mary Di Francia, known and invoked as an apostle of prayer for vocations and as a father of orphans and the poor, is first and foremost dedicated to the Rogate, to which “he devoted himself either through zeal or fixation, or both.»¹. He often spoke of vocations and also of his own vocation. If we want to look at his vocation, let us begin by asking:

WHICH VOCATION?

THE ROGATIONIST VOCATION OR THE
PRIESTLY VOCATION? THE CALL TO SERVE
THE POOR OR THE VOCATION TO BE A
FOUNDER?

In this presentation, I propose to look at these four callings in chronological order and to determine whether they are distinct, independent vocations or stages of a single vocation that developed and became clearer as the years passed.

Reading his biography, we learn that at the beginning there was 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 felt, in an unusual way, the vocation to the priesthood; between December 1877 and January 1878 the Deacon met the beggar Francis Zancone, who would introduce him to the “Avignone Houses”; finally, we can conventionally indicate March 19, 1887, the beginning of the Congregation of Women (FDZ), as the date of the vocation to be a founder.

We will look these “vocations” in chronological order trying to grasp any connections, paying attention to the socio-religious context of Italy in the decade 1868-1878, and highlighting, when possible, the circumstances of the vocation. Naturally, we will let St. Hannibal speak first, while also listening to those who have heard his narrations in confidentiality.

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, which he probably received at the age of 10 in the Cistercian Boarding School of St. Nicholas, Hannibal's Eucharistic piety developed more and more. His strong inclination toward spirituality earned him permission from his confessor to approach the Eucharistic table daily.

The Eucharistic devotion of the young Di Francia manifested itself not only in communion but also in daily visits to the Blessed Sacrament exposed for the "Forty Hours" in various churches of Messina. It was precisely during one of these visits, at the age of 17, that he had what we call the "*Inspiration of the Rogate*".²

This is how he recalls that moment in 1910, speaking of himself in the third person in the context of a rulebook: "A young man, at the beginning of his willingness to give himself to God, and when he still knew nothing about this in the Holy Gospel [Mt 9:37-38], had this predominant thought in his mind, that in order to do greater good in the Holy Church, to save many souls, to extend the Kingdom of God on earth, there is no other means more certain than the increase of chosen ministers of God, of holy, apostolic men, according to the Heart of Jesus. Therefore, the best and most effective prayer to be preferred would be to ask unceasingly the Most Holy Heart of Jesus that he may send on earth holy men and chosen priests, as in the times of St. Dominic and St. Francis, as in the times of St. Ignatius, as in the days of St. Francis de Sales, St. Alphonsus and the like. This idea seemed very clear and indisputable.

This young man was later surprised and delighted to read in the Holy Gospel these

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

divine Words, "The harvest is great, but the laborers are few. Pray therefore to the Lord of the harvest, that he may send laborers into his harvest" [Mt 9:37-38; Lk 10:2]»³.

A few years later, in 1919, in a circular letter to the bishops, he reminded them that "God sends the saints on earth. Is this not one of the greatest Mercies that He grants? How can one expect to have it if he never 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 tells of his own experience, "There was someone who paid attention to this divine command, even before he had read it in the Gospel, and with this attention began the journey of his life"⁴.

Some Reflections

The two narratives, coming from different times and contexts, are clear and consistent: for the good of the Church, the salvation of souls and the spread of the Kingdom of God, it is necessary to ask for holy and apostolic men, chosen ministers of God according to the Heart of Jesus. Holiness is the least common denominator of those whom the Lord sends to earth, provided they are asked for in prayer. Our young man, like every Christian, is convinced that "without prayer nothing is obtained, and on the contrary with prayer everything is obtained [therefore] 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.

He intuitively that this is “the best and most effective prayer to be preferred” to other prayers of petition because it is aimed 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 devotional manual or prayer book, “not even in Riva’s *Philothea*»⁶.

In essence, Saint Hannibal is distinguished by the object for which to pray: “holy, apostolic men, according to the heart of Jesus. We ask for everything the divine goodness, but we do not pray for apostolic men”.

This “dominant thought” will be clarified and developed later in the Gospel passage 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

The Father is right to point out the object of the prayer (= holy and apostolic men) and to remind us that he had this idea when he was still “young, at the beginning of his willingness to give himself to God.” To know the place and the circumstances of “the inspiration”, it is necessary to listen to the testimonies of those who privately heard his narratives.

His first biographer, Father Vitale, testifies, in a general way, that the young Hannibal, “in the fervor of his prayers, and perhaps even before he put on the soutane, while at the feet of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, reflected (certainly not without divine inspiration) that one of the most important graces for the salvation of souls, for which

he should have continually asked Our Lord for, was undoubtedly that of sending Holy Priests to His Church»⁷.

Father Tusino is more complete because he indicates the circumstance and the place that he heard from the mouth of Saint Hannibal: “He already had the pious custom of visiting every day the Blessed Sacrament exposed for the Forty Hours in the different churches of the city on a rotation basis; and he recalls to us that one day, during one of these visits, in the Church of St. John of Malta he had his first inspiration to consecrate himself to the prayer to obtain priests, while still unaware of the Gospel command»⁸.

Father Tusino also recalls that “the Father told us that the first idea of the Rogate, that flashed through his mind, that is, the prayer to obtain priests for the Holy Church, still unaware of the Gospel expression that commands it, he had it as a layman, still a young man, while praying during the days of the Forty Hours before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament in the Church of St. John of Malta»⁹.

Thus, 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 places of inspiration/intuition of the Rogate.

PRAYER AND EUCHARISTIC ADORATION ARE THE THEOLOGICAL PLACES 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 recall that these were the years of the Risorgimento and that in Italy, from 1868, the number of priests was constantly and sharply decreasing. The clergy began to breathe the air of worldliness and there were many defections, in the south we speak of 10%, and in some places even 20%.

Father Santoro recalls that Father, referring to the years when the Rogationist vocation originated, "said that the defections of priests and friars due to the revolutionary uprisings of the time caused him pain." "In addition," Father Santoro continues, "he felt the lack of saints and admired the great heroism of the saints he saw in the frescoes of the churches and convents, especially in his own Porto Salvo; in order to revive those times of piety, he thought that prayer alone was the means, and he composed some precisely to obtain holy priests; **ONE DAY, HOWEVER, HE READ IN THE GOSPEL THE ROGATE. HENCE HIS SURPRISE THAT NONE OF THE MANY MANUALS OF PIETY EMPHASIZED IT. AND SO HE FELT IMPELLED TO CULTIVATE EVANGELICAL ROGATION**»¹⁰.

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

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



CONGREGATION OF THE
Rogationists
of the Holy Spirit



Family
of the
Rogate



Daughters of
Divine Zeal
Rogationists



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

PRAYER TO ST. HANNIBAL MARY DI FRANCA (Centenary of His Birth in Heaven, 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 every 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 us worthy laborers of the Gospel,
and moved by your spirit of charity,
that we may grow in the love of God
and neighbor.
We look to you who, moved by the zeal
of your love,
have fed the poor and the little ones
with the Bread of Life.
We ask the Lord, through your intercession,
that in our daily lives
may we be able to offer on 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 the laborers
of the Gospel.
Amen.

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