

[Fr. Zamperini Agostino, rcj]

The priestly vocation

The vocation to the priesthood, which immediately followed the Rogationist vocation, dates back to November 1969¹¹. He declared that he felt called to the priesthood “in a rather extraordinary or, rather, not quite ordinary way”¹² because, according to him, his vocation had “three qualities: 1. it was sudden: as much as I loved the pious life, in those times when Freemasonry and liberalism prevailed, I did not even think of the ecclesiastical life: suddenly the Lord sent me his light; 2. it was irresistible: I felt that I could not escape the action of grace: I absolutely had to give in; 3. It was the most certain: after that light, I was absolutely sure that God was calling me, I could no longer doubt in the least that the Lord wanted me to follow this path”¹³.

Moreover, there was something supernatural in his priestly vocation¹⁴ because, as the Father Hannibal himself confessed to Father Vitale, and confidentially told to others as well, “one night, while he was praying, he felt strong impulses in his soul to consecrate himself totally to the Lord, to offer himself to him, to no longer enjoy the world; so much so that, when daylight came, he ran to the church where the Most Divine Sacrament was exposed in the form of the Forty Hours, and there he had to repeat to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament: Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening (1 Sam 3:10) - And he inwardly heard such voices, and had so much light in his mind, so much fire in his heart, that he could not express it himself, or perhaps he did not want to”¹⁵.

Father Vitale’s testimony is echoed in the words of Prof. Leopoldo Nicotra (1846-1940), Hannibal’s childhood companion and Professor of Botany at the University of Messina: “I knew from my very good friend Hannibal”, he explains, “who confided everything to me [...] that he felt strongly called by God. In fact, here I recall with great emotion his tender words (I write them ad litteram): God is calling me, and in an extraordinary way, by unexpected means, he almost forces me to become a priest. I feel tears welling up in my eyes, and I

11 CONGREGATIO PRO CAUSIS SANCTORUM, *Positio super virtutibus*, pp. 1268-1269.

12 B. VITALE, p. 758.

13 T. TUSINO T., He never said no, Edizioni Paoline 2nd ed., Modena 1967, p. 23.

14 B. VITALE, pp. 35-36.

15 Ib., p. 36.

almost seem to hear the voice of the Chosen One (note: referring to Fr. Hannibal) [...] who spoke to me openly (knowing my religious convictions) about the extraordinary way in which God had taken him out of the world and anointed him with holy oil.”¹⁶

In conclusion, we must affirm that the vocation to the priesthood (of Father Hannibal) immediately follows the intuition of the Rogate, and we can assume that it is its effect. Certainly, the vocation to the priesthood, like the Rogationist vocation, must be seen in relation to the Eucharist. He relives the experience of little Samuel: he hears the voice of the Lord and responds by going to the presence of the Lord present in the Sacrament.

A vocation to serve the poor

In the years leading up to his ordination to the priesthood, our young cleric not only studied but also preached and ministered to the poor.

His frequent invitations to preach were due both to the esteem in which he was held for the seriousness of his studies and to his inclination to preach, as he himself recalled in the funeral eulogy he wrote for himself¹⁷.

His commitment to preaching had its debut on January 16, 1870, a few months after he had donned the cassock. An invitation from the Rector of the Church of St. Nicholas to deliver the panegyric on Mary Most Holy of Providence marked the beginning of a series of sermons in the Churches of St. James and St. Mary of the Arch, where he preached on Our Lady “Morning Star,” and then again in St. Lawrence, his parish, for the entire Marian month. In short, from then on, the invitations followed one after another and the young cleric dedicated himself to them with great zeal, carrying out

an intense oratorical activity (panegyrics, novenaries, Marian months, etc.) in the various churches in and around Messina.

Commitment to the poor. If the commitment to preaching was due to the request of the priests who knew and esteemed him, the work among the poor was for our young man a sudden and unforeseen invitation to “leave his own land”. It all began in March 1878, when he met a poor stranger named Zancone, who extended his hand and with whom the young deacon, after giving him alms, began a brief but engaging dialogue. Father Hannibal recalls this encounter in the Preface to Precious Memberships (Preziose Adessioni) to the Sacred Alliance:

“I was still a deacon when, twenty-two years ago (that is, in 1878), I happened to enter the Avignone District, which had become an abomination to the whole city, and I was struck by the sight of so much misery and neglect. Those unfortunate ones lived like beasts: all unions were illegitimate, the children bathed in lotus, the maidens exposed to danger, the old men dying on the bare and damp ground of the hovels. It was a case of remembering the words of the Gospel: “Those crowds were badly pastured and lay like sheep without a shepherd.... Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Mt 9:36-38)”¹⁸.

Having come and settled in Avignone, the young deacon immersed himself in the Gospel reality of the flock without a shepherd, the ripe harvest in danger of being lost for lack of laborers.

He began by engaging the poor to obey the Rogate, raising up what he called the “evangelical rogation”¹⁹.

16 A. DI FRANCIA, Scritti, Editrice Rogate, Rome 2009, Vol. 61, p. 207.

17 B. VITALE, Canon Annibale Maria Di Francia in his life and works, (cit.) pp. 32-33. 17 lb., pp. 758.760.

18 A. DI FRANCIA, Scritti, Editrice Rogate, Rome 2009, Vol. 61, p. 207.

19 This expression reveals the intimate connection between Rogate and response: response is the extension and fulfillment of Rogate; moreover, it is broader than what we call “Prayer for Vocations” because it embraces, besides priests, parents, educators, rulers, etc.

Significant in this regard is the petition to the “Most Pure and Immaculate Virgin”, dated August 15, 1885, in which the 34 signatories, “Poor Sons”, including Francis Zancone, ask for “the following graces:

1. Send us good laborers to nurture our souls;
2. Let Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament come soon and let us receive Him worthily;
3. Deliver us from every sin and from the infernal enemy;
4. Send us the arts and crafts to work and make a good success;
5. Give us the grace that the church may be built soon, that we may soon have the other little houses, and be all together this place;
6. Enlarge and expand the little nursery schools for the care of many children and make us all holy. Amen”²⁰.

The poor, evangelized by Father Di Francia, recognize themselves as a flock without a shepherd, and for this reason they ask first of all for laborers to cultivate their souls, secondly for the gift of the Eucharist and the forgiveness of sins, because without priests there is neither the Eucharist nor the forgiveness of sins. Next, they ask for the means to work, to build the small houses, including the one for Jesus, and to expand the nursery school for boys and girls. The petition ends with the invocation, “Make us all holy! The order of the petitions corresponds to the Gospel maxim: “Seek first the kingdom of God” (= priest, Eucharist, forgiveness) and the rest will be given to you in addition (= work).

Observe how “those unfortunate ones who lived like beasts”, when evangelized, they become protagonists: first harvest, then “Rogationists”, striving to become all saints, that is, laborers.

The most worthy Rogationists

The inclusion of the poor in the “rogation” is not accidental, or even secondary, but the result of a project pursued from the

20 T. TUSINO, *Father Annibale Maria Di Francia. Biographical Memoirs*, Editrice Rogate, Rome 1995, Part One, p. 543.

day Father Di Francia entered Avignone, as he himself confided to Msgr. Guarino in a letter dated October 29, 1887: “From the day when I began to gather, as meagerly as possible, the abandoned orphan girls, in order to introduce them to piety, I tried to make them understand the word of Our Lord Jesus Christ: Rogate ergo Dominum messis, ut mittat operarios in messem suam, and to instill in them this spirit of prayer.”²¹ He also reminds the bishops of the “rogation” that he was not a casual orphan.

He also reminds the Bishops - speaking of himself in the third person - that from the beginning of his “activity among the hovels of Messina” he was concerned “to make the most perfect and dutiful obedience to that Divine Command of the Divine Zeal of the Heart of Jesus, ‘Rogate ergo Dominum messis, ut mittat operarios in messem suam’ the main program of the pious undertaking. He made it a rule to pray together in the midst of that crowd of poor people and children of the poor, who were truly a flock without a shepherd. It was very beautiful,” he points out, “that the Evangelical Rogation to obtain good laborers for the Holy Church now resounded in the tender voices of the children of the poor, and from that miserable place it rose to heaven, to the throne of Him who looks down upon the heavens and the earth, (Ps 112:6) and hears the cry of the poor! (Ps 9:38 Vul.)”²².

Two reasons emerge from these texts as to why Father Di Francia includes the poor in the “rogation”: first, because they are the first ones concerned, they are the sheep without a shepherd who cries out to the Lord/Shepherd to send shepherds. Then there is a second reason, which our Father Hannibal puts forward on the basis

21 A. DI FRANCIA, *Scritti*, Editrice Rogate, Rome 2009, Vol. VII pp. 150-15.

22 Vol. 50, p. 192.

of Sacred Scripture and, more precisely, of Psalm 112:6: the Lord looks at the small things in heaven and on earth, he chooses the humble to enrich them with his gifts.

For Father Hannibal, the choice of the poor is intimately linked to the Rogationist vocation and mission, first of all, “because while we dedicate ourselves to imploring for good laborers to the Holy Church, we should also be laborers, and that prayer be combined with action”. In other words, the prayer of petition is a commitment for the one praying (pray-er) in the sense that he or she must work and cooperate with God in what he or she is asking for: when we ask for laborers, “we should not be ‘all the day doing nothing’ [Mt 20:6], but strive, in the limited circle of our weak strength, to be laborers in the Holy Church”²³.

Secondly, Father Hannibal seeks “allies” who will join him in obeying the Rogate, and even before addressing bishops and priests, he chooses to unite with himself “in this daily prayer of souls more worthy of us, such as the poor and the little children, and to both we also give the name of the Poor of the Heart of Jesus”²⁴.

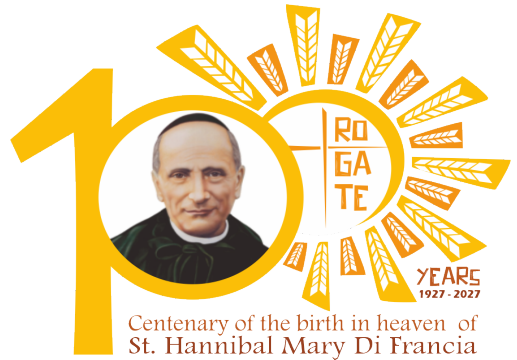
Moreover, he reminds us that true poverty goes hand in hand with humility: “For it is written that God resists the proud and gives his grace to the humble [Jas 4:6]. In order for our prayers to be well received by the Most High God and to enter into His presence, they must come from a humble and contrite heart [Ps 50]”²⁵. Poverty accompanied by pride is not evangelical poverty; in fact, “the proud poor man who prays is a contradiction to himself” the Father notes. And “if he did not pray, he would be more consistent. To pray is to acknowledge one’s helplessness; now, is not this confession a reason to humble oneself?”²⁶.

23 A. DI FRANZIA, *Scritti*, Editrice Rogate, Rome 2009, Vol. 3, p. 62.

24 Vol. IX, p. 382.

25 Vol. 1, p. 64.

26 Vol. 23, p. 55.



PRAYER TO ST. HANNIBAL MARY DI FRANZIA

(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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