

SAINT HANNIBAL MARY DI FRANCIA

THE HUNT FOR THE POOR

Letter to the editors of Messina newspapers

Messina, August 30, 1899



CURIA GENERALIZIA

ROME, 2024

Most Esteemed Director
of the Newspaper ...

Your newspaper has, on occasion, drawn the attention of the police headquarters to the poor beggars who are sometimes seen in the streets of the city accepting alms. Nearly all the other newspapers in Messina have done the same. The result of this campaign has, unfortunately, been devastating for these poor, miserable beggars. For a year now, we have been witnessing a kind of “hunt for the poor.”

Unrelenting police officers spy on the movements of these miserable souls—be they elderly, crippled, frail, sick, or unable to work—and as soon as they see one of them turn a corner or cross a street, they seize him and bring him before the magistrate. The judge finds him guilty of disturbing public order and sentences him to imprisonment for one to six months. That unfortunate man, guilty only of being poor, finds himself locked up like a criminal, serves two or three months of his sentence, and is then released. At that point, he faces a terrible dilemma: “either die of starvation on a street corner or return to begging.”

Dying of starvation is too harsh: nature rebels, it demands nourishment. Begging? But what about prison? The police? The sentence? In this conflict, the powerful instinct of self-preservation prevails, and the poor man is forced once again to stretch out his hand and ask for alms. Then the policeman catches him in the act and brings him once more before the magistrate, who, finding him as a repeat offender, imposes a harsher sentence. So he returns to prison and comes out only to be sent back again—unless he learns to live without eating or hangs himself to end it once and for all.

I know of some of the poor who go in and out of prison alternately. A district magistrate recently assured me that he had sent as many as sixty of them to jail! Now, there is no one who cannot see that this cruel treatment of the poor is truly a social injustice!

We may say that it is the Law that condemns them. Not so fast: the Law condemns “begging carried out in harassing ways,” particularly by young beggars who, preferring idleness to work, choose to pester the public—and perhaps even to swindle it. But how different is the appearance of a poor, frail old man who, with a pitiful voice, stretches out his hand and asks for a morsel, so as not to die of starvation like a dog!

This unfortunate man is a human being like us; he feels, as we do, the needs of life. He has knocked in vain at the doors of charitable institutions, only to be told that there is no room, that there are too many requests—and so the unfortunate soul pleads for public charity.

Where, in this, are the “harassing ways”? What law can strike down such a derelict? Is poverty a crime? I know that poverty is regarded as a misfortune, as an unhappiness, as a grave tribulation—but never has it been said that being poor is a criminal offense! If poverty was a crime, if the poor were the same as criminals, then why did He who came

into the world to teach us to love one another as brothers, choose to embrace poverty, protect the poor, and declare that whatever is done to the abandoned poor is done unto Himself?

Yet, some will say: is it not an advantage for the poor to be taken to prison, where he is housed and fed? To those who raise this objection, one might reply: if you were in that poor man's position, would you prefer to be brought before a court and sentenced to six months in prison, rather than enjoy personal freedom? Surely, the poor man locked in prison is not given a lavish meal or a soft bed. He is given only a bit of soup and a crust of black bread—the same he might obtain through alms.

In that case, let him eat that crust of bread without the nightmare of iron bars and a locked door. Let him sleep peacefully on his miserable straw mattress, without the threat of a six-month sentence and the gloomy future that looms before him!

The poor man is deprived of so many things, but at least let him enjoy the free sun, the free air, the open horizon of nature—especially now, when there is so much liberty for everyone! The more one reflects on this grave social injustice, the more horrifying it appears.

For many years I have lived in the midst of the poor, and I could support my claim here with facts, evidence, and episodes.

For example: in my boys' institute, I took in a poor man. He had worked as a street sweeper his entire life with such diligence and dedication that he merited admiration. Today, he is a frail and trembling old man. Since my shelter is for children and not for the elderly, and since the finances of my institutions are quite limited, this poor old man can receive nothing more than lodging and food.

But man does not live by food alone. This old man has benefactors who, on certain days of the week, give him a coin out of charity. He goes to visit them on the appointed days. With those few coins, he must provide himself with a shirt, a pair of slippers, and a bit of tobacco. A month ago, he was leaving the doorway of one of his benefactors when a policeman seized him and brought him before the magistrate. His cries and protests were of no use — he was sentenced to a month in prison. But I ask you, what crime has this unfortunate man committed? Can a punishment be applied without any fault whatsoever? Is there any nation whose penal code allows this? Ah, the Law does not understand this!

If it is a crime for the poor to ask for alms, then those who give it are equally accomplices — starting with myself, the police chief, and the judges, all of whom, being human, have surely felt compassion for the poor many times in our lives, and have offered them some small coin. But you may imprison all the poor in the world, you may hunt them down like dogs and drown them to death — but you will never be able to destroy the sentiment of charity that moves people to help the unfortunate. There will always be generous hearts who want to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, consider the frail and abandoned poor as their own brothers, and feel the sweet consolation of doing good for them — even if they are beggars scattered through the public streets, where we have often seen them on the brink of dying from hunger!

Nor will you be able to destroy the poor, for the condition of human life and the structure of society are such that the poor can never be entirely eradicated. Whether prisons are prepared or trials held, whatever means are employed, the words of the Gospel will

always be fulfilled: “*Pauperes semper vobiscum habetis*”—You will always have the poor with you!

Instead of showing cruelty toward these miserable beggars, instead of burdening the finances of the State or Province by maintaining so many poor in prison, let us rather consider opening a new shelter in Messina to house these unfortunate souls. But it is painful to say that charitable works are not well understood in Messina!

Soon winter will arrive — a season especially harsh for the poor. What are these unfortunate ones to do if they are not even allowed to ask for alms? The tragic irony is that there were once two public dormitories in Messina, where more than eighty poor men and women found lodging; these dormitories have been closed. The poor who once slept there spent the summer nights in the open air. Must they do the same on winter nights, when the snow falls? If, during the day, they ask for a few coins to sleep in a shelter, they will be seized, judged, and condemned!

MOST ESTEEMED SIR,

Despite the difference in religious principles that may separate us in matters of Faith, I believe that Your Honor possesses a heart inclined toward compassion for the neglected. I therefore appeal to your humanitarian sentiments and ask that, through your newspaper, you might clarify the proper understanding of the repression of unlawful begging and of harassing behaviors, and that you might seek to exempt from the strict application of the Law those poor, unfortunate elderly individuals—frail, disabled, physically afflicted—“who find no shelter in public institutions,” despite the repeated pleas made by many of these poor souls, as I personally know, to the Collereale Hospice, to the Little Sisters of the Poor, and to the Casa Pia.

It seems to me that all these people are worthy of compassion and assistance, not of police inquisition and imprisonment. The poor, miserable, forsaken cannot seek justice for themselves; they have no lawyers to vigorously defend them, no newspapers to speak on their behalf or secure their welfare. Today, they are the outcasts of society and are not even considered worthy of life!

May this reflection further stir the noble heart of Your Honor to take to heart the cause of these weak and oppressed and thus exercise the noble virtue of charity—for which one shall receive the blessings of God and of men.

Please accept, Honorable Director, the expression of my most sincere respect, and believe me to be:

Messina on August 30, 1899

Your Most Humble Servant
CAN. H. DI FRANCIA

Source: Di Francia A. M., in *Scritti, Vol. VII, Epistolario (1873-1900)*, Rome, 2016, pp. 462-466. English translation by Fr. Kristian Taok RCJ.

Information about this document: APR 560 - C2, 6/20 orig. print; 2 ff. (mm. 205x300) - 4 sides written, edited. Messina, August 30, 1899. Typographically printed circular letter addressed to newspaper editors in which Father Hannibal defends the poor who were arrested for misinterpretation of the Crispi Law, which prohibited begging. It is a courageous letter revealing his boundless love for the poor and his particular charity towards the marginalized and defenseless.

Footnote in Di Francia, A.M., *The Father's Letters*, Rome, 1992, pp. 136-140. English translation by Fr. Rosario Scazzi RCJ:

This letter was sent to the editors of Messina to be published in their newspapers. "It treats the sad custom of Messina (and also of Italy and Europe) of hunting and putting the beggars in jail... But the charity of Canon Di Francia reacted against the drastic, indiscriminate repression of the right to ask when no other means of living is available. He thought that society should provide asylum for the people unable to work, before using police measures. This letter inspired by Christian charity is permeated by exquisite social sensitivity and reveals the well-balanced charity of Canon Di Francia" (Papasogli, Vitale, ibidem, Ch. 22).

Several newspapers reported the Father's circular, and some of them commented on it very favorably.

"We have received from holy Canon Di Francia this letter which is the most sincere and high expression of Christian charity. He has been victimizing his noble life for the suffering human beings" (L'Alba, September 7, 1899).

"The blessed Canon Hannibal Di Francia has mailed to us the following article which always better reveals his angelic heart and his love for the suffering human beings. They find in him a great apostle of Christian charity, unlike some fat and big liberals" (L'Ordine, September 14, 1899).