

Teodoro Tusino

*HE NEVER
SAID NO*

ST. HANNIBAL MARY DI FRANCIA

English Edition
Rome – 2019

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Rome, May 16, 2020



In accordance with the Decrees of Pope Urban VIII, we declare that we intend to give a purely human trust to all the facts narrated in this book, without preventing the judgment of the Holy Church in anything.

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Ad usum privatum

Teodoro Tusino

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SAID NO*

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English Edition
Rome – 2019

THIS TRANSLATION IS LOVINGLY DEDICATED TO

FR. GASPARE GALLITTO, RCJ,

WHO ZEALOUSLY LONGED TO HAVE
THIS BOOK AND MANY OTHERS
TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH
TO MAKE ST. HANNIBAL
LOVED AND KNOWN
IN THE PHILIPPINES AND EVERYWHERE

PREFACE

(English Edition)

On May 16, 2004, during a very solemn celebration in St. Peter's Square, John Paul II declared Father Hannibal Mary Di Francia a Saint. It was the worthy conclusion of the long journey of love for God and neighbor, especially the poor and the little ones, and of dedication to the prayer for good laborers for the Lord's harvest, that Father Hannibal had started more than 150 years ago in Messina (Italy).

Hannibal Mary Di Francia lived for God forgetting himself to serve others. He is a model for our times, for the youth, priests, consecrated, lay, teachers, social workers, etc., and for all who are in love with humankind.

For many years, Father Hannibal had hardly been known in the Church, and much less in society, in Italy and abroad. It was St. Luigi Orione who woke up the Rogationists, urging them to produce at least a biography in order to bring this great hero of charity and the Rogate to the forefront.

In 1939, Fr. Francesco Vitale, one of the first collaborators of Father Hannibal and his immediate successor in the governance of the Rogationists, published a biography written with historical objectivity and the affection of a son. '*Canon Hannibal M. Di Francia in His Life and Works*' - that is the title - is a thick volume of more than 700 pages, which has been translated into several languages.

However, as the fame of the sanctity of Father Hannibal increased, many more biographers wrote about him from different points of view and according to the varying perceptions and expectations of their times.¹

One of them is Fr. Teodoro Tusino, a Rogationist who had been with Father Hannibal for 16 years and in 1966, wrote this biography entitled "*He Never Said No*". Fr. Tusino was no ordinary writer. As the Postulator of the Cause of Canonization of Father Hannibal, he had access to all the documents and archives. He read all the approximately 14,000 pages of Father Hannibal's Writings and until his last days, he wrote extensively about "*the Father*".

In this work, Fr. Tusino gives us many details coming from his closeness with the Founder and from 'touching' his sanctity. Fr. Tusino's filial devotion to St. Hannibal and intense effort in handing on his heritage to us as faithfully as possible is evident and admirable.

According to Fr. Tusino himself, this biography "*wants to highlight the spirit of Father Hannibal, especially in connection with his twofold mission as Apostle of the Rogate in spreading the prayer for vocations, and as Apostle of Charity in serving the poor and the*

¹ Here is a shortlist of the main authors and titles of biographies of Father Hannibal:

- F. DA PORRETTA, Capuchin, *Popular Life of Canon Hannibal M. Di Francia*, 1941;
- G. PAPASOGLI - L. TADDEI, *Hannibal Mary Di Francia*, 1958;
- G. PESCI, *Men Cannot Wait*, 1958;
- A. PRONZATO, *They Have No More Bread*, 1977;
- DIDAC BERTRAN I VALLVÈ, *Five Columns on the Front Page*, 1990;
- A. SCELZO, *A Life Copied from the Gospel*, 1991;
- CONGREGATION FOR THE CAUSES OF SAINTS, *Hannibal Mary Di Francia. Biography*, 1994;
- C. DRAGO, *The Father. Fragments from His Daily Life*, 1995;
- T. TUSINO, *Father Hannibal M. Di Francia. Biographical Memoirs*. 5 Volumes 1966-2017;
- G. PASSARELLI, *Father Hannibal. A Dream of God*. 2004.

abandoned children.” The book had two editions for a total of 20,000 copies, which, considering the times and the fact that it was just a biography of a Saint-to-be, is already something great. It has also been translated and printed in other languages.

The English translation is overdue. Fr. Gapare Gallitto, former Superior of the Philippine-Indian Delegation and Novice Master, wanted it to have a simple, handy, and reliable approach to the Founder, accessible to our seminarians and friends. This is, therefore, the purpose of this work, which I cordially dedicate to his memory.

Allow me also to thank my family and the Rogationist Community of Desenzano. During my sickness, they provided me with the ideal places and support for this work. A big thanks also to the Editor, Mrs. Cherry Aquino, to the General Editor, Fr. Jose Maria Ezpeleta RCJ, and to the General Commission on Translations.

Let me close with Fr. Tusino’s words, *“If we were successful in doing this, let the Lord and Our Lady be praised; if we failed, kindly bear it with us.”*

*Mairano, June 1, 2019, Feast of St. Hannibal
150th Anniversary of the Inspiration of the Rogate*

Fr. Cesare Bettoni, RCJ

In the English Edition,

- The term ‘*Servant of God*’ has been translated usually with: ‘*Father Hannibal*’, ‘*Father Di Francia*’, ‘*young Hannibal*’, ‘*the Father*’, ‘*Father Founder*’ and similar;
- As much as possible, the proper names have been retained in their original spelling to avoid confusion. Except for Father Hannibal and some internationally acknowledged names of places (Rome, Naples, Apulia, etc.) and of Saints (St. Francis, St. Anthony, St. Francis de Sales, etc.), the proper Italian names have been kept as they are in the original text.
- An Epilogue and Chronology of the process of canonization of St. Hannibal have been added;
- [TN...] = Translator’s Note. Explanations added by the translator.
- [EN] = Editor’s Note. Explanation added by the General Editor.
- Often, the word “anima” is translated with “person” instead of “soul”;
- The footnotes had some minor modifications.
- Some titles of the Chapters and the body have been slightly modified.
- The Italian currency at the time of Father Hannibal was Lira (pl. Lire). Just to give a sample, 10 Lire of 1890 would correspond to 42.35 Euros today.
- Work / Works (*Opera / Opere*) in the Writings of Father Hannibal refer to his entire Institution in all its components: the male and female Orphanages; the Daughters of Divine Zeal; the Rogationists Brothers and Fathers; the Union of Prayer for Vocations; the ‘Priestly Alliance for Vocations (Sacred Alliance); the endeavors to pray and spread the prayer for Vocations; the Anthonian Benefactors Offices; the charitable activities for the human and social promotion of the poor (feeding, clothing, sheltering helping, sharing, and the usual activities like the the bakery, the shoemaking, embroidering, educating the Orphans or similar.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE
OF HIS HOLINESS PAUL VI
Vatican City

Prot. No. 74158

To: Reverend Father
TEODORO TUSINO, RCJ,
Via Tuscolana, 167, ROME

June 15, 1966

Very Reverend Father,

I am pleased to inform you that the Supreme Pontiff has received with pleasure the homage of your recent book, devoutly offered by you, Very Reverend Father, and entitled, "*He Never Said No. Father Hannibal Mary Di Francia*".

Hence, His Holiness has entrusted to me the revered task to express his gratitude to you for this act of filial respect and to manifest His appreciation for the publication, which presents the figure and work of an "apostle of prayer for priestly vocations and of an apostle of charity, especially for the abandoned orphans."

Wishing abundant fruits of goodness, the Holy Father cordially imparts his propitiatory Apostolic Blessing.

I avail of this opportunity to express my sentiments of religious respect and deference to you,

Very devoutly in the Lord,

+ Angelo Dell'Acqua
Substitute

THE SACRED CONGREGATION FOR SEMINARIES
AND UNIVERSITIES
Vatican City

To: Most Rev. Fr. CARMELO DRAGO
Superior General of the Rogationists
Via Tuscolana, 167, ROMA

Rome, July 13, 1966

Very Reverend Father,

I received the appreciated gift of the biography of Father Hannibal M. Di Francia, that you have willingly sent to me.

While thanking you for the sign of attention toward me, I wish to congratulate the author for the simplicity and objectivity with which he managed to outline the life, work, and spirit of Father Hannibal.

Together with the previous biographies, some of which are of considerable historical-literary value, this book has the advantage of presenting briefly and with the proper sensibility of all the characteristics of the spirituality of Father Di Francia.

I heartily wish that the effort of the author be rewarded by the wide dissemination of this work. This will be a means not only to make Father Hannibal known but also to continue his apostolate in favor of priestly vocations.

Please accept my special regards.

Very devoutly in the Lord,

+ Dino Staffa
Secretary

The Archbishop of Trani, Nazareth, and Barletta
Perpetual Administrator of Bisceglie
Trani (Bari), Italy

Trani, August 5, 1966

Reverend Father,

By forwarding to me the life of the holy Founder of the Rogationists written by Fr. Tusino, you have given me a truly beautiful gift. The Father of the Orphans and the Apostle of Vocations comes to life again in the pages of Fr. Tusino, in a vibrant, dynamic, and enjoyable way.

The book of Fr. Tusino can be read all in one go because of the easy and lively style but even more for the interesting content, that gives a wonderful testimony on the sanctity of Father Di Francia.

While expressing again my gratitude for this book, I wish that the cause of the beatification of Father Hannibal may soon reach its happy conclusion.

Very Reverend Father, please accept my distinguished respects and pray for me to the Lord.

Your truly devout in Christ,

Reginaldo Giuseppe Maria Addazi, O.P.
+Archbishop of Trani, Nazareth, and Barletta

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CHAPTER 1

HANNIBAL'S YOUTH

1. The First and Last Encounter

August 20, 1911: on a train, bound for Brindisi slowly treading the railway along the Adriatic Sea.

We were nine boys. Father Di Francia had picked us up in Bisceglie and was taking us to his San Pasquale Institute in Oria.

I was the youngest in the group and years later, the Father liked to recall that trip for the memory he kept of my vivacity. *"You were so small,"* and gesturing with his hand, *"so small, and during the entire journey you laughed, and laughed..."*

This was not, certainly, a statement that makes me proud but, that entire day, the first I spent with the Father, left an indelible memory that is of an entirely different nature.

As the train started moving, he asked me, *"Tell me, how much do you love Jesus?"*

I was embarrassed and stammered, *"I love Him as much as I can."*

He insisted, *"Yet, how much do you want to love Him?"*

I don't remember what I answered. I just recall that, after addressing the same question to all, he added, *"I want to love Jesus with the love of all the Angels and Saints in heaven and of all the righteous people on earth, with the love of the Most Holy Virgin Mary, and finally with the same love of His Divine Father!"*

Then he explained, *"Surely, it is impossible to go as far as that, but what does it matter? Jesus appreciates holy desires; he is pleased with them and increases the ardor of His love in our soul!"*

Such a conversation was entirely new to me, as well as the fact that our trip was continuously peppered with prayers and rosaries. As we approached the different villages, Father Hannibal reached for the window, and looking at the Church, said, *"Look! Jesus is there, maybe at this time He is alone, abandoned..."* I remember very well, however, that we did not get bored, and he knew how to catch our attention with saintly talks. For instance, he narrated the life of the Abbot San Barsanofio, the protector of Oria. He told us about the San Pasquale Institute and so on.

Suddenly, I interrupted him, *"Father, I am thirsty!"*

In those days, trains did not have the comforts they offer nowadays, and since the Apulian Aqueduct was still to come, water was bought by the glassful in the shops. Smiling, the Father turned to me and said, *"Now, Jesus drinks in your heart. When we reach Brindisi, Jesus will give you something to drink."*

This was also a new kind of language to me, and I was staring at him as if to say, *"Meanwhile, however, we have no water!"* Lovingly the Father replied, *"Don't you trust me? Listen. Offer your thirst to Jesus, it would be as if you had offered Him water when He was asking for it on the Cross!"*

The speech was perfect; and from all I saw and observed during the trip, a thought was taking shape in my little childish head, *"This priest is truly a holy man!"* This thought ripened progressively into a firm conviction during the 16 years I spent following him.

May 30, 1927: Two days before Father Hannibal's death.

For about twenty days, the Father had been in La Guardia, a village on the outskirts of Messina, where we hoped he could regain his already worn out health.

Early that morning, I had brought him Holy Communion, and after the Mass, I went to say goodbye before returning to the city. I found him seated in his old wicker chair.

"How are you, Father?"

"Like a fallen tree," he answered, with a tone of voice and a flash in the eyes where I could see that, though in full abandon to the divine will, the nostalgia of the past when the sturdy tree could defy winds and storms was still alive. He continued, *"Let God handle things. God knows what He is doing. God knows what He is doing! I bless you."* and he raised his fatherly hand over my head.

That was his last lesson and blessing that I keep deeply engraved in my soul, and that comes along with me in the alternating vicissitudes of life, until the infinite mercy of God will open the doors of a blessed eternity for me.

May that blessing help me in writing these short memories.

2. At *San Nicolò* Boarding House

Father Hannibal Mary Di Francia was the apostle of prayer for priestly and religious vocations, an apostle of charity, especially for the abandoned orphans, and an apostle of the devotion to St. Anthony of Padua.

He was born in Messina on July 5, 1851, Saturday, to Knight Francesco, Marquis of Santa Caterina, appointed Vice-Consul and Honorary Captain of the Navy by Pope Pius IX, and, on his mother's side, to Lady Anna Toscano of the Marquises of Montonaro.

Hannibal's father died when he was not yet two, so the little boy had a lonely and sad infancy since his mother, busy taking care of the fast diminishing family inheritance, could not take care of him personally. Thus, she entrusted him to an old aunt who lived alone in a secluded environment more suited to stifle the liveliness of a child. The Divine Providence used this moral and physical suffering to put into Hannibal's still young mind the seed of that incomparable tenderness towards the little and abandoned ones, which characterized his life.

When he was seven, he was placed in the Boarding House of '*San Nicolò dei Gentiluomini*', run by the Cistercian Monks. There, while opening his mind to the basics of learning, he warmed up his heart with the fire of devotion. Hannibal remembered forever the good Fr. Foti who accompanied him every evening to an image of Our Lady to recite together a prayer to the Immaculate Conception,² and with his talks and examples developed the ardor of love for the Holy Virgin³ in him.

² The prayer was the "*Stellario*" to the Virgin Mary, a Chaplet of prayers to Mary.

³ In the edifying biography of Francesco Di Francia, Father Hannibal's brother, (FELICI, *The Father of the Orphan Girls, Mons. Francesco Di Francia and his Institute*, Rome) the Author, Icilio Felici, associates Francesco with Hannibal in this stay with the *strange and misanthropic* aunt and then in the Boarding House of the Cistercians. I have no evidence of this. I have arguments that seem to support the contrary. Speaking of his childish fears in connection with the aunt, Hannibal, who remembered with formidable clarity the persons and events of that time, never mentioned his brother.

I agree with Felici that Mrs. Toscano, having necessarily to defend the family's assets, could not deal with the lawyers' offices and courtrooms carrying in her arms the little Francesco. However, there was not only the gloomy aunt among her relatives. Fr. Vitale reasonably writes that Mrs. Toscano 'thought of entrusting the smallest of the

Charity seemed inborn in him. His mother used to say that *since his childhood, the young Hannibal's concern toward the poor was great, and* from early childhood, he had a real concern for the poor. He would give them any food or object he could collect in the House.

3. The Embrace of the Poor

A story related to Hannibal's years in the Boarding House was reported to us.

A poor man had been allowed to the refectory of the boys. In a corner, while eating the food given to him, he became the object of the rudeness of some mischievous boys who, with jeers and lack of respect at first, and then by tossing fruit peels, stumps, and leftovers from the table, forced him to leave the room humiliated. The young Hannibal could not stand this sight. He collected bread, cheese, and fruits in a basket, and ran to give it to the poor man who was leaving. The old man embraced and kissed him with tears in his eyes.

After the 1860 revolution, Mrs. Toscano left Messina and went to Naples to find shelter in the house of some relatives, with the young Hannibal wearing the white "Cistercian" habit.

There, the cleaning woman smiled and said to him, "*Puozza 'mbiri 'nto calici!*" ("*May you drink from the Chalice!*" which implies "*May you become a priest!*"). Father Hannibal was always pleased to remember how God fulfilled the wish of that good woman.

4. Following a Poet

At fifteen, Hannibal left the Boarding House, closed permanently by the anticlerical legislation of that time, and continued his studies under the guidance of the renowned poet of Messina, Felice Bisazza.

Hannibal was born a poet. Later, we will talk about his poetic skills and works. Had he had the time and ways to cultivate his natural talents, certainly he could have earned recognitions in the field of poetry. He preferred instead to gather them in the field of charity. Isn't charity the highest form of poetry?

5. The Apostolate of Print Media

One of Hannibal's uncles was the director of "*The Catholic Word*" (*La Parola Cattolica*), a courageous weekly newspaper that openly defended the faith and the cause of the Papacy to the extent of going through several sequestrations and even one-year suspension, from 1866 to 1867, for its strong stand for the Catholic cause.

children to relatives. I believe that Francesco was luckier than Hannibal and did not suffer the vagaries of the old hysterical aunt who, moreover, died soon during the 1854 cholera epidemic.

When it comes to the permanence of the young Hannibal in the Boarding House, for historical accuracy, we must distinguish two periods. The first ends with the entrance of Garibaldi in Messina, on July 24, 1860, when Mrs. Toscano and her children found shelter with her relatives in Naples. After the revolution, Hannibal returned to *San Nicolò*, and remained there until its suppression in 1866. During this second period, he had his younger brother Francesco as a companion in the boarding school.

With this newspaper, Hannibal began very early his apostolate of the media, which was always his passion.

On June 2, 1868, he published a poem - a *Sapphic ode* - entitled “*For the Virgin Mary*”.

*Let me sing to you on your starry throne,
Embittered in the springtime of my life
Since of a holy and unblemished suffering
I drunk the pains.*

...

*Farewell, youthful dreams! Farewell, happy
Illusions of my mind, I cried out,
Which, in the fervor of my early age,
Inebriated, I dreamt.*

We perceive a personality full of devotion and fervor, but it is always a young man with anxieties and problems.

As a poet, he continues by noting the sadness of the times, the violence of the struggle between good and evil, which was tearing Italy apart, and announces the salvation that will come from Our Lady. However, how will Our Lady triumph?

The poet, we repeat, was a young man; and youth, even the saints or those who ... might be future saints, belong more or less, to the fiery family of the *sons of thunder* (Mk 3:17), which, like James and John, speak of fire from heaven. Thus, he ends:

*Woman and Queen from your eternal Throne,
Strike down the wicked from your highest heaven!*

At this point, I see the holy Virgin Mary bending over the ardent Hannibal to whisper in his ears her Divine Son’s words, applying them to Herself, “*You do not know which spirit you belong to: my mission is not to lose people but to save them.*” The young Hannibal heard this call, and on the newspaper that he kept for himself, he corrected it in his handwriting:

Convert the wicked from your highest heaven!

6. Justice for the Innocent

His first article, dated November 26 of the same year 1868, was entitled “Justice for the Innocent”.

It is meaningful that, in his first article, the future apostle of the “Rogate” revealed himself as a defender of priests. The subject was the defense of two priests, the Director and a collaborator of *The Iblea’s Bee*, a Catholic newspaper of Palermo. Because of the prevailing sectarian spirit of that time, without any valid reason, the two were arrested and imprisoned. “*They are guilty only of having stood by the principles of their Catholic faith in a free city. In front of civilized Europe, we cannot refrain from denouncing an event which is sufficient to show the immorality and bigotry of our legislators.*” Then he concluded, “*What are they thinking? That they can force us into silence by these arbitrary acts? They are greatly mistaken!*”

With God's help, love for our country and religion will keep us firm and steady in this fight. Yes, we say this with our heads held high and for sure, we will avail of the rights that the law grants us to uncover always your plots as mean persons and enemies of the Catholic faith. We will continue to enlighten the deceived people, to call them back to religion, and to make them obedient to the voice of the Supreme Pontiff. This is our mission. However, the spirit of evil that flows in your veins subjugates your heart and mind and does not allow you to be aware of it. You are afraid of the light. Those who are afraid of the light are worthy of darkness and shall remain buried in it."

Apart from the rhetorical emphasis and the conclusion, we cannot but admire the zeal, frankness, and courage of this young man, who was only seventeen, in supporting his ideas in defense of religion.

In 1869, he also published a poem in honor of Pius IX, who on April 11, celebrated his priestly golden Jubilee.

5. A Well Delivered Slap

The apostolate of the young Di Francia was eventually not limited to written words. One day, as he was coming out of the Cathedral wearing his best suit and his top hat, in the corner of the square he noticed a charlatan, who, after gathering a crowd, was ranting about the Pope. Without any hesitation, the young Marquis Di Francia broke into the crowd, faced the impostor, and silenced him immediately with a loud slap, which all applauded.

CHAPTER 2

THE JOURNEY TO PRIESTHOOD

1. Hannibal's Vocation

Upon returning from the Boarding House to his family, the young Hannibal felt in his heart a strong impulse to devotion and union with God. At seventeen, his confessor permitted him to receive Holy Communion every day, which, at that time, was truly a privilege. This leads us to suppose a real progress in this young man's spiritual life. However, he did not yet feel any clue of being called to ecclesiastical life. For some time, he even thought of being destined to raise his own family. At eighteen, with the tingling of the growing personality, he felt a greater need for reflection and concentration, to put himself into an attitude of listening to the voice of God and to let it set the rhythm of his heartbeat.

In September 1869, in the ode "*Solitude*", Hannibal wrote:

*When the heavenly and angelic poetry
Will ignite my soul with a great desire of love,
Clinging to the holy images of Christ and Mary
I will never cease to cry,
I will never cease to love.*

Finally, the Lord heard Hannibal's plea. One day, he said confidentially to me, "*My vocation had three characteristics: 1) First of all, it was sudden. Although I liked a pious life, in those days when masonry and liberalism were dominant, I was not thinking of becoming a priest. Unexpectedly the Lord sent me His light. 2) It was irresistible. I felt that I could not escape from the power of grace. I had absolutely to surrender. 3) It was very certain. After that light, I was absolutely sure that God was calling me. I could not entertain the least doubt that the Lord wanted me to follow that way.*"

Was it then that Hannibal thought of becoming a Jesuit? Maybe. In fact, in '*The Catholic Word*' of October 3, 1869, he published a [book] review of the life of *John Berchmans* who had been declared a 'Blessed' by Pius IX in 1865. He was pleased because that book "*can do much to the hearts of young people, and it may give them a holy fondness for the religious institutions where these very pure lilies of the Lord sprout. It may create attraction especially for the Order of the glorious St. Ignatius, which, though opposed by ungodly people, never ceases to stand out among all for its doctrine and sanctity.*"

Either then or sometime later, Hannibal felt a desire to enter the Jesuits, but his confessor did not approve and steered him toward the diocesan priesthood.

2. How I Wish There Were Still Saints

On the morning of December 8, 1869, the day of the opening of the Vatican Council I in Rome, after a night spent in prayer, Hannibal wore his cassock together with his brother Francesco. They put them on in the Church of the Immaculate, at the feet of the Most Holy Virgin, defying the opposition of their relatives, particularly of their mother who did not let them into the house until her confessor ordered her to do so.

In his self-eulogy he wrote for his funeral, speaking in the third person, Hannibal hinted about his vocation, *“At seventeen, he felt called to the priesthood in a rather exceptional or not exactly ordinary way.”* He expresses his motives, *“He was compelled by some love for devotion, with the purpose of belonging entirely to Jesus and bring souls to Him.”*

In 1922, in a talk delivered in Naples, speaking of his visit to Sister Maria Luisa di Gesù, Father Hannibal gives us a hint of what is in his mind. *“In the blossoming stage of my life, when I was not yet a priest but already clothed with the cassock, at times I enjoyed intensely - and still enjoy - reading the lives of the saints. Still unaccustomed to religious experiences, I imagined that holy men and women belonged to past times, and then they ended, like some heroes of the legends who are not reproduced anymore. I used to say to myself, ‘How I wish that there were still saints! How I would like to know and love them and obtain any grace from God through them!’*

“With a spirit vibrating with youthful ardor, I objectively represented sanctity as existing only in the unfathomable regions of the most transcendental mysticism. I thought of it as that intimate communication of a chosen person who no longer lives the life of the senses but has transformed himself entirely in God and has drawn the divine splendors into himself, as a very clear mirror placed in front of the sun’s rays. A Saint is a person who lives a supernatural life, not common to all other men, and as a trustee of the divine Goodness, can draw endless graces and blessings upon the earth.

“In truth, such were the great heroic men and women of Christianity whom the Holy Church elevates to the honor of the altar.

“With this worry, I went to Fr. Pietro da Porto Salvo, a venerable Franciscan Father, in a convent in Messina, and I presented to him my doubt: that if there were still superhuman beings on earth as in the past centuries. Fr. Pietro was a man of God and told me that souls of perfect holiness are never lacking on earth; and that our Lord Jesus never leaves His Mystical Bride, the Church, deprived of them.”

Thus, Hannibal learned from him about Sister M. Luisa di Gesù who was famous in Naples and its surroundings for her great sanctity. Immediately, he thought of going to Naples: *“I arrived there on July 26, 1870. I throbbed with holy emotion before the gates of the Monastery of Stella Mattutina, in the presence of the humble Servant of the Lord, who, gifted as she was with the Lord’s Spirit, foreshadowed my future with what her Heavenly Bride inspired her.”*

3. The Ministry of the Word

As Hannibal entered the clerical state, a thirst for souls blazed in his young seminarian’s heart, and he used his spare time, after his studies, for apostolic works. He dedicated himself preferentially to teaching catechism to the children and to preaching. He already showed special skills for this, refined by the practice of declamation in the Boarding House.

His years as a cleric were remarkable especially for an intensive preaching activity in Messina and its surroundings. It would be rare today to see a seminarian preaching with the intensity of the young Di Francia but times then led to this. We would like to mention the Saturday sermons he preached for several years about Our Lady; the homilies for the whole month of May of 1876 in the Parish Church of San Lorenzo, when he introduced the devotion to our Lady of Lourdes in Messina; and in the following July, the novena of the Most Precious Blood in the Church of St. Luke.

He even received an invitation, with the approval of the respective Bishops, to preach a novena for St. Veronica Giuliani in Città di Castello (Perugia), but he had to decline because of health problems.

4. Collaboration with *The Catholic Word*

In the meantime, Hannibal continued his collaboration with the weekly newspaper *The Catholic Word*.

He composed ‘*The Church and the 1870 Ecumenical Council*’, a poem in metered verses without rhyme, which continued through several issues of the newspaper retracing the history of the Councils and singing the glories of the Church.

‘*Pains and Triumphs*’, a solemn poem for the 25th anniversary of the crowning of Pius IX, was published in June 1871. ‘*August 23, 1871*’ marks the day in which Pius IX celebrates the pontificate of St. Peter. Since Hannibal was in Rome on September 20, 1871, he wrote the ‘*Reminiscences of the City of Rome*’.

Of course, in all these verses, the author cannot but deplore the violence done to the Church and the Pope with the breach of Porta Pia.⁴

⁴ Publishing again these verses in the book *Faith and Poetry*, fifty years later, Father Hannibal added this note, “*These verses were written by the author immediately after the entry of the Italian army in Rome when the spirit of all the Catholics and true lovers of the Supreme Pontiff felt wounded in their attachment to the Vicar of Jesus Christ. Nobody knew what would have happened to the Pope. [TN: Rome was part of the Pope’s State that comprised the central portion of Italy. The entry of the Italian army in Rome after a symbolic battle and the breach at Porta Pia marked the end of the Papal State and therefore also of the temporal power of Pope. Pius IX, who was the Pope then, was confined into what is today known as the Vatican State]. Later on, the events demonstrated how the Almighty, who turns everything to his glory, has granted success to his divine perspective with the exaltation of the Roman Pontifical Sovereignty. In fact, in the many years that Rome has been aggregated to Italy, even the enemies of the Holy See were forced to admire closely what the glory of the Papacy means and the unshakable stability of this divine Institution. They had to recognize that the gates of Hell, that is, all the adverse infernal or human powers, would not prevail against the Church and will never prevail, according to the infallible promise of Our Lord Jesus Christ: ‘They shall not prevail!’, as it has been confirmed by twenty centuries of history. In the swirling of the passions, clashing of political parties, and agitation of peoples, the divine figure of the Vicar of Jesus Christ, in more than fifty years since the taking over of Rome [by the Italian army], has remained noble, sublime, peacekeeping, admonishing, generous, and holy, a true image of the redeeming Christ and of God! The Italian conscience has remained enchanted at the feet of the unshakable Rock of the Vatican, by the triumphs of a helpless Venerable Old Man [the Pope] whom the world admires stupefied! In this way, those who knew the Papacy only through the mockery and the misleading news of the bad press were disenchanted and they even wound up admiring and loving what they saw and touched with their hands.” In 1921, when Father Hannibal wrote this footnote, the “*Conciliation*” (Conciliazione) was still far and the *Roman Question* remained actual and sensitive [TN: Rome was the capital of Italy led by an anticlerical and masonic government and at the same time, it was See of the Pope, head of the Catholic Church restricted to the Vatican State]. “*For what concerns the Roman Question which is still alive, though wishing that our noble, great, and powerful homeland, Italy, be privileged by God among all the nations, this author entrusts himself without any restriction to follow the mind of the Vicar of Christ and his successors*”.*

In 1878, we read a protest of the young Hannibal to the newspaper *Gazzetta di Messina*. For the death of Vittorio Emmanuele II, King of Italy, that newspaper had collected a fictional correspondence from Rome, true or false, according to which Pius IX would have been very sorry for the way he had dealt with the King. *“The Pope became horrible in appearance, and screaming at the Cardinals who surrounded him, threatening them and shouting, ‘Woe to you, if with your venomous mouth you contaminate the sacred and pure figure of this great saint of Savoy (the King’s household)!”*

The young Hannibal answered to the point, but we limit ourselves to report the conclusion of his long article: it is a temperate admonition to the writers of the newspaper: *“Believe me! In the extreme moments of life, you will not be comforted by the articles written against the Church, by the homage given to the enemies of Jesus Christ, or by the insults launched against the Pope and the Priests. Rather, you will find comfort in the memory of having been firm in the true faith in which you were born, of having constantly served Jesus Christ, of having sacrificed pride, won over passions, and defended the truth as well as the joy of dying in the womb of the Catholic Church. May God allow each of you to take advantage of these great truths!”* (The Catholic Word, January 23, 1878).

As we can see, the fury of the *son of thunder* was cooling down!

5. “Pray the Master of the Harvest”

In the same newspaper on March 13, 1875, there is an unsigned *“Invitation to Pray”*, which I believe had been written by the young Hannibal. If so, that would be the first time that he mentions the Divine Command - the Rogate - in the press.

After Mons. Luigi Natoli’s death, Messina was waiting for a new Archbishop. The *Catholic Word* invited the citizenry to pray, and I cannot think of anyone else but Hannibal as the author of that article.

“We could not raise a more welcome supplication to God than this because He himself told us, ‘Look at these fields covered with ripe crops. Pray, therefore, the Master of the harvest that He may send laborers to harvest it.’ If we are accustomed to hasten with public prayers in asking God to send the rain on our fields, how much more shall we pray to God, with fervor, to bless the vineyards of our souls through the pastoral care of a wise Shepherd, full of divine wisdom? With all our hearts, let us ask the Virgin of the Sacred Letter, our patroness, to send a holy and learned Archbishop, a wise, prudent and strong man, and devoted to her. Let us pray! The humble, confident, and persevering prayer is all-powerful with the infinitely merciful Heart of God! The more we pray to Him, the more we will see the abundant fruits of our prayers.” Hannibal then mentioned the great Bishops of the Church’s history: St. Ignatius, St. Basil, St. Charles Borromeo, St. Francis of Sales, and St. Alphonsus Liguori...

6. Priest!

While he was still a cleric, on January 26, 1876, Hannibal obtained the Diploma of an elementary school teacher, also in order to give some help to his mother and not to be a burden to his family.

What about his studies for the priesthood? At that time, the Seminary of Messina was closed because of the political upheavals. Seminarians attended classes with some professors like Prof. Catara Lettieri for Philosophy, Canon Ardoino for Morals, Canon Filocamo for

Dogma, and Mons. Basile for Canon Law. This was the condition of most of the seminaries in Italy. However, this was to the detriment of the soundness and integrity of the theological studies. Hannibal used this as an opportunity to humble himself. In fact, he writes in his self-eulogy, *“He was very weak in theological studies, and judging with strict criteria of justice, he could not have been ordained as a priest.”*

Certainly, he was not a man born to sit behind a desk. God destined him to action, but regarding his theological studies, he was well versed, as his writings show.

On March 16, 1878, Saturday of the Spring Ember in the Lenten Season, the new Archbishop of Messina, Mons. Giuseppe Guarino ordained him as a priest in the Church of the Holy Spirit.⁵ Note that from the time that he was a cleric, Hannibal had already begun the Saturday weekly preaching in the Parish Church of San Lorenzo. Even on the day of his priestly ordination, he wanted to be faithful to that commitment and spent the afternoon in his small room to prepare the sermon for the evening. He dedicated it to St. Joseph, whose feast was the following Tuesday, as he wanted to express his gratitude to the great Saint for having reached the priesthood.

⁵ Hannibal received the minor orders of Tonsure, Porter, and Lectorate on September 15, 1872, from Mons. Natòli in the Chapel of the Archiepiscopal Palace; and the Exorcist and Acolytate on March 20, 1873, in the Cathedral. He was ordained to the Subdiaconate by Mons. Guarino on June 10, 1876, in the Church of the Monastery of St. Teresa and to the Diaconate on May 26, 1877, in the Church of Montevergine.

CHAPTER 3

IN THE AVIGNONE DISTRICT

1. The Gardenias of Cumia

One day, a florist named Lorenzo was entering Messina with a basket of gardenias, the snow-white, fragrant gardenias from Cumia, a village on the outskirts of Messina. All of a sudden, the basket slipped from his hands and the snow-white flowers fell into a muddy pool.

The poor man seeing the loss of his earnings for that day exclaimed, “May God’s will be done!”

“Yes, well said, my blessed son. May the adorable will of God be always done!” added immediately Father Di Francia who was a few steps behind the poor man, as he saw the scene and heard the words. Then he continued, “It is just a small matter. Keep still, hold the basket.” The priest bent down, collected one by one the flowers that had fallen into the mud, and placed them back in the basket. They were snow-white and intact like before! “Miracle!” shouted the astounded poor man. However, Father Di Francia had already hastened on his way.

God raised Father Di Francia for this mission, to lift souls from the mud of the streets and make their beauty shine in the light of truth and grace.*

2. Encounter with Zancone

Hannibal was still a Deacon when our Lord arranged an encounter that was going to be decisive for his future.

One day, he chanced upon a young blind man whose name was Francesco Zancone. He was begging for alms.

“Where do you live?” the Deacon inquired.

“At the Avignone Houses.”

“Where are the Avignone Houses?”

“Near the Zaera creek.”

“Do you know anything about God?”

“Who is going to teach me?”

“I will come to visit you. Take this.” Hannibal left some coins in his hand.

3. A Cursed Land

During the carnival* of 1878, Hannibal was able to find the *Avignone Houses*. They were named after their owner. It was a neighborhood on the outskirts of Messina consisting of

* TN. This episode can be seen as a prophetic sign.

* TN. *Carnivale* is the traditional revelry of the last days before the Lenten season

hovels, with some hundred inhabitants, living in deplorable promiscuity and amidst misery and dirt. Consequently, it was a place of great confusion, ignorance, and the most degrading material and moral disorder. That place had been defined as *“a portion of a cursed land, inhabited by a herd of beasts.”*

Hannibal immediately realized that *“there could be no better place to exercise some charity out of love for our Lord Jesus Christ who loves the poor so much and wants them to be saved.”*

In front of the slender figure of the young priest who came with the claim of a reformer, the *“somebodies”* of that ghetto felt the duty to take a stand and ordered him openly to leave. *“To convert this kind of people, we need two Capuchins with a beard this long,”* they said, accompanying the words with an eloquent gesture. *“It is not a job for you. You must leave.”*

Hannibal did not leave. Instead, he plunged into that mud up to his neck. One of the toughest struggles he had to suffer was against... insects. Bugs swarmed on the rotting garbage and horribly infested that crowd of poor people *“to the point that some of them died,”* - Father Hannibal wrote - *slowly devoured by those insects.”*

Despite all the hygienic steps taken, the bugs could not be exterminated. Father Hannibal got rid of them through faith, to which he would always resort. He made a fervent novena to St. Joseph Benedict Labre who used to keep those small insects on himself as a penance. The Saint intervened, since Father Hannibal did not have the same strange vocation of the great French Pilgrim.

Father Hannibal’s work began slowly to bear fruit. At the cost of countless sacrifices, the Avignone slums changed its face and were redeemed both morally and materially. *“The Father”*, as Father Di Francia began to be called, made that ill-famed place the center of his works of charity and zeal that was to spread widely in Italy and abroad, especially to the advantage of the abandoned orphans.

4. Beginning the Work

Let us go back to the beginning and try to follow Father Hannibal in his first apostolic experiences among those people. He started to work in that hellish bedlam of Avignone, a huge task that showed clearly the virtue of the young priest. That *herd of brutes* had to be raised first to the level of being human, and then to the dignity of being Christians. He was well aware that he had to start with the body to reach the soul, treasuring the advice of Venerable Ludovico da Casoria, *“Once you find a poor man and had him cleaned and clothed from head to toe, and after you have helped him for at least a month, then you can start talking to him about the Confession.”*

So Hannibal started to clean, provide clothes, beds, food, and money. He began to buy those hovels, unfortunately at the price of gold, to have a home-base and a meeting place.

However, it was impossible to continue working alone. Some priests joined him, first of all, Canon Ciccolo who was particularly endowed with organizational abilities but only to call the attention of the city officials about the miserable conditions of that neighborhood, and to solicit contributions. On March 19, 1881, the matrons of Messina’s aristocracy prepared and served a meal for all those poor. That same morning, for the first time, a Mass was celebrated in one of the shanties, transformed into a chapel. The following year, March 19, 1882, a meal was prepared again for all the children of the neighborhood. In October of the same year, Fr. Angelo Colantoni, of the Franciscans, offered another meal to celebrate the centennial of St.

Francis. The meal was honored by the presence of Archbishop Giuseppe Guarino who blessed the dinner served by the young men of the Catholic Club.

In reality, the aid given to Father Hannibal by his occasional helpers was limited to the organization of those free meals and a modest charitable bazaar. Therefore, he remained alone to battle the infinitely moral and material miseries, with the scarcely enviable inheritance of the high-sounding name of ‘Marquis of Avignone!’

Of course, he could not demand heroism from everybody. When Canon Ciccolo set foot in Avignone for the first time, he came out pale and terrified and, even though he helped, he felt that he could not commit himself as Father Hannibal did.

5. Relations with Fr. Cusmano

The direct testimonies about the beginning of the Work and the grim life of its initial years have faded away because of time. However, a bundle of letters that Father Hannibal wrote to [Blessed] Giacomo Cusmano⁶ gives us shining evidence and an image of the working environment and the inhuman conditions where Father Hannibal laid the foundation of his Institutions.

In August 1884, Father Hannibal wrote to Fr. Cusmano, “*My God, what a horror! To poverty, we must add the demoralization and the frightful destruction of innocence and virginity! I am alone, completely alone, trusting the Providence and with no means, since I am poor myself, I worked to raise those poor people, to improve those dirty places, and to save the endangered innocence and virginity.*”

In another letter of that same month, Hannibal insistently recommended Fr. Cusmano, “*Above all, pray the Highest God, His holy Mother, and St. Joseph to grant those holy virtues may blossom in Avignone which so far has been a place of horror and abandonment!*”

6. The First Orphanages

Without forgetting the adults, whom he provided material bread, besides moral and religious instructions, Father Hannibal dedicated himself particularly to the care of the little ones. He began with the evening school for the small boys and a shelter for girls from five to eight years old who returned to their homes at night. Then, on September 8, 1882, he started the orphanage for girls, which he named “*Small Shelter of the Heart of Jesus*”, and later “*Shelter of Mary Immaculate*”. The following year, on November 4, 1883, he began the orphanage for boys.

The boys were initiated to the arts and trades. With an old printing machine donated by Mr. Crupi, they set up a printing shop. Besides, a shoemaking shop was started, and, as Father Di Francia wrote, “*We hoped to start soon other useful trades.*”

The girls were taught female works. A group of elderly and crippled women was added to them. In all, there were about a hundred of them.

⁶ Fr. Cusmano (1834-1888) was the founder of the Institute ‘*Boccone del Povero*’ (*The Morsel for the Poor*) in Palermo, of the Sisters ‘*Serve dei Poveri*’ (*Servants of the Poor*), and of the [Lay] Missionaries ‘*Servi dei Poveri*’ (*Servants of the Poor*). EN. He was beatified in 1983 by Pope John Paul II.

7. The Rogate amidst Thorns and Sufferings

From the above-mentioned correspondence with Fr. Cusmano, we get other information to complete the picture of the Institution in those years. *“With God’s help, I was able to build a small chapel dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus... On its facade is written, “Rogate Dominum Messis” (Lk 10:2). I am striving to make this spirit of prayer for this greatest interest of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, that is, the grace to have good laborers for the holy Church, become the spirit and the life of this Work.”* He looked tenderly on those boys who showed some seeds of priestly vocation: *“I cherish the idea of fostering holy vocations to the priesthood if ever I can see them, as I hope in Jesus.”* *“The girls are working. Some of them want to dedicate themselves to Jesus, and they look like the first little flowers blossoming among the horrors of this place!”*

The correspondence between the two priests had started and continued with the purpose of realizing an eventual entrustment of Father Hannibal’s Institution to the “Bocconiste” Sisters founded by Fr. Cusmano. Father Di Francia explained, *“This place of the poor, where your pious daughters shall come, is a vineyard chosen by the Divine Farmer. However, still many thorns and suffering surround it! Dear Father, I do not conceal from you that upon coming here your daughters will find many occasions to practice all the virtues: patience, humility, holy poverty, charity, mortification, and others. They will find the cross of Jesus Christ spread all over the place. Nonetheless, the Work is great, and great are the plans of the Divine Providence on it. This place has been the scorn and the shame of the entire city of Messina. The extreme poverty and deprivation have gone hand in hand for the almost forty years that this place has existed. It seems that God wants to transform it into a place of grace, glory, and mercy, and a dwelling of sanctified poverty. Such transformation has already started but is still in its beginnings.”*

Speaking of the girls, he noticed, *“Here, the spirit of Christian perfection begins to blossom. This is the community where the Bocconiste Sisters should come to live, and I assure you, my dear Father, that they will find a beautiful vineyard to cultivate but not without thorns.”* Then he concluded, *“I am asking the Sacred Heart of Jesus that, in making this important foundation in Messina, He may enlighten you to choose among the best of your daughters. Long live Jesus, our Love!”*

8. A Work that is One of a Kind

Father Di Francia was afraid he had not given a sufficiently clear picture of his Institution and did not want to disappoint Fr. Cusmano. *“I see that you have formed a very high opinion of this foundation. In this pious Institution, there is no such discipline, development of arts and skills, or the works that you may imagine. On the contrary, all is just starting. The Institution is still a draft, and you cannot figure it out if you do not see it. It is special, it was born from chaos, and it is growing beyond any calculation, amidst strange new sufferings and miseries!”* He concluded with a solemn profession of humility, *“There is only one thing that this work needs to become sublime: it needs a man of God as its leader!”*

What about the resources for its livelihood? Father Hannibal wrote, *“We have no income, and we live merely on alms. It seems humanly impossible to survive. We live in hardship from day to day, but we see the great miracles of the Divine Providence! Contradictions, difficulties, and worries are always present. Long live Jesus!”*

In another letter, he repeated, “*The Institution has no income of any kind and is living merely on alms. The Divine Providence wonderfully manifests itself, although we are always full of debts.*”

He urged Fr. Cusmano to visit the Work also for his personal appraisal, “*My dearest Father, never mind thinking about starting or not this foundation in Messina. This can be set later after you visit Messina. In the meantime, what is important is that you come. After you see the situation, I am sure that you will send your Sisters. In any case, your coming here will not just be of little benefit but will be of great help, as I find myself almost drowning in worries. I have almost reached the edge of exhaustion. I turn to the right or to the left and find no one to console me. Dear Father! I feel the need to find, even for just a moment, a person who can understand the Institution and me; a person who can guide and teach me. You might say that you are not up to that. All right! The true consoler is God. Jesus is the true teacher, but you, Father, have been involved in these works for several years, while I, only for a few. Therefore, you can enlighten me with the assistance of our Lord. I have so many things to tell you!*” He added, “*I am waiting eagerly for your arrival as the herald of new blessings from the Holy Heart of Jesus to this place where He planted His cross amidst the most extreme moral and material poverty and sowed the mysterious mustard seed!*”

We will see later how this mysterious mustard seed developed into a tree with its branches giving shelter to the birds of the sky.

9. He Saw and Kissed Jesus

In the very early days of his apostolate, Father Hannibal met a dumb, filthy boy who was drooling. He was the laughing stock of the little rascals who were teasing him and making a fool of him. The Father took him away from that mayhem, brought him home, washed him, cleaned him up, and laid him on his bed to rest. Remembering that the poor represent our Lord, he bent down and kissed the boy. He had a mental vision, for a moment: he saw and kissed Jesus Christ!

Perhaps in Father Hannibal’s tender verses in honor of the Holy Face of our Lord there is a hint at that beautiful vision. The vision disappeared immediately, but it left an everlasting blessing on the spirit of lively faith and burning charity for the poor that characterized his entire life. The poor became for him the truly great ones in the kingdom of God. Even when he called them *marquises, barons, princes*, as he used to, it was not a joke or irony, as one might think but a manifestation of his inner-most conviction. I remember a beautiful expression of Canon Celona, “*For Father Hannibal, the poor were truly Jesus Christ.*” Therefore, cleaning them, kneeling in front of them, washing their feet, kissing them with affection was one of the most intense and purest joys of his spirit, and he did this very often.

10. Defender of the Poor

The cause of the poor was the Father’s cause and we recall a defense he wrote in 1899, when the municipality of Messina became cruel to the mendicants, organizing a true “*hunt of beggars*”. Thus, with the justification of the law, the beggars were arrested to the point that a judge boasted of having imprisoned more than sixty of them. Father Hannibal wrote a strong protest asking all the newspapers of the city to publish it. First, he defined the right concept of the law against mendicancy: “*The law condemns begging when done forcefully by young*

beggars who prefer to bother and maybe cheat people instead of working.” This was not the case. “It is an entirely different matter when you have a poor old man who is asking for a bit of bread so as not to die of hunger like a dog! In this case, where are the forceful manners? Which law applies to this derelict? Is poverty a crime? I know that poverty is considered a disgrace, bad luck, an unhappy situation, a grave tribulation, but this does not mean that to be poor is to be a criminal. If poverty were a crime, if poor men were criminals, why then did the Lord Jesus Christ who came into the world to teach us to love each other as brothers, embrace poverty, protect the poor, and said that whatever we do to an abandoned poor we do it to Him? The poor man is deprived of many things, but at least let him enjoy the free sun, the fresh air, the wide horizon of nature, in our days when there is so much freedom for everybody! The more we consider this social injustice, the more frightful it appears!”

The city’s newspapers published the protest, and the “*hunt of beggars*” toned down, at least for some time.

CHAPTER 4

DIFFICULTIES

1. It Is God Who Sows, Not Man

Let us look at the countless difficulties that Father Hannibal had to face, and which are unavoidable in any good endeavor. They are signs of the heavenly blessing that wants such works to be accompanied and sustained by the Cross.

We present the words of Father Di Francia himself on the overview of the struggles that he had to face in establishing his Institution. He used general terms, but they reflect perfectly his conditions.

“Who doesn’t know how burdensome and, at times, humanly unbearable are the difficulties surrounding the development of our Lord’s works? I would say that He who starts such works must fight against four opposing elements:

First, he has to fight against external oppositions: criticism, persecution, and disapproval even from good people... Add to that the scarcity of means, poverty, defections, the ingratitude even of the persons who receive the benefits, and a hundred more difficulties and painful vicissitudes.

Second, he must fight against himself. Man becomes weak, feels like fainting... yet he needs strength, sacrifice, and perseverance. It is a state of continuous violence to one’s self.

Third, there is one who, day and night fights extrinsically and intrinsically, through men and through our own passions: Satan!

However, he who starts such works finds himself in a fight of a very different kind, and this is the fourth one. It is the fight of Jacob against the Angel. He has to fight with God Himself. The Almighty God is the author of any good work, and man is only a frail and useless instrument. Yet, it is in and with this instrument that God works! He wants self-sacrifice. Jesus, the Highest Good, wants us to imitate him... God wants the works, but He wants them formed amidst hardship, wailing sighs, and sacrifices. He works with two hands: with one, He supports the frail instrument, and with the other, He trains it to fight. Then man comes to know his powerlessness and nothingness. He comes to distrust, humble, and annihilate himself, and to consider himself as the obstacle to any good result... Finally, the fight of Jacob with the Angel ends with a strong embrace accompanied by that loving statement, ‘I will not leave you until you grant me your blessings,’ and concludes with the abundance of the divine blessings, which will be all the more abundant, the longer and more arduous the mysterious fight has been. Thus, it was God who sowed, not man.”

2. Mother ... Grant Me Good Counsel

“These four kinds of difficulties,” continues Father Hannibal, “surrounded this small Work of charity and buffeted it from every side from its first beginnings. Difficult situations

kept increasing with an intertwining of circumstances that the Institution found itself in a whirlwind of tribulations, and hundreds of times, it was close to dying, even before being born. How often I felt impelled to say with the wailing prophet, 'A deluge of waters fell on my head, and I said, I am lost'."

However, his trust in God never wavered, and he was sustained by his recourse to the Heavenly Mother.

Father Hannibal wrote, "*Cesare Arici, the poet from Brescia (Italy), was an elegant lyricist and belonged to the select group of poets at the beginning of our century. He has written very beautiful poems to honor the Most Holy Virgin under the noble title of Our Lady of Good Counsel. I remembered often these verses, and at the times when the storm raged and any way out seemed closed, I used to declaim those delicate verses:*

*As the pilgrim, along the way saw You
Clearing the clouds with the batting of an eyelash,
O Mother, grant me your counsel
To save my little boat.*

"The Holy Virgin is the channel of all the graces coming from heaven. Moreover, according to St. Bernard, all graces pass through her beautiful hands. The whole management of the heavenly treasury is entrusted to her. We see her at the beginnings of the human salvation and she is the head of all the Works and of the large and small Institutions rising in the Church of Jesus Christ.

With this confidence, I used to invoke often the Mother of Good Counsel."

3. Ungrateful Environment

Here are some details of the difficulties encountered by Father Hannibal...

First, the environment where he was working. He was surrounded by people of the lowest level, unable to understand the situation of degradation in which they were living and to appreciate the efforts of the pious priest wearing himself out for their redemption. Imagine, the women even demanded to be paid in order to leave their small daughters in the Institute! They could not understand that a boarding house had disciplinary regulations for visits and relations with outsiders. When the Father was out of town; the lady, who was the head of the Shelter, placed a kind of small revolving door* in the parlor. There was a real riot. The mothers stormed the Institute and took their daughters home.

The Father then had to start all over again. There was opposition from relatives and friends. Even the clergy could not understand him. Why should he lose himself amidst the garbage of humankind, when he could and ought to be an orator, an apologist, a teacher?

* TN. This is like "foundling wheels" of the medieval orphanages, where the abandoned babies could be left to be taken care of.

4. Authoritative Encouragement

Father Hannibal's vocation was different and he was resolved to follow it, courageously facing any difficulty with the blessing of his Archbishop who had told him, "*Go, go to Avignone, and save those poor people!*"

Besides this encouragement, there were also those of a renowned servant of God, Ludovico da Casoria and the great St. John Bosco.

The former expressed his opinion about the newborn Institution, "*I like it. I like it since it is born in the stable of Bethlehem,*" hinting at the poverty of the beginnings. Then, as already mentioned, he shared with Father Hannibal his own practical experiences in the apostolate among the poor suggesting to start with the body to reach the spirit.

Through Don Rua, Don Bosco wrote to him, "*Take courage. The works of God suffer great difficulties, but that is precisely the clear evidence that they belong to the Lord; thus, they cannot perish, if the one who is the instrument in bringing them about continues with indomitable faith.*" He advised Father Hannibal to use printed material, "*If you could have some local newspaper talking about you, many would come to know your situation and some charitable persons will be touched in their heart.*"

5. The Illness of His Brother

The illness of his brother Giovanni was a heavy burden for Father Di Francia. Hannibal stayed constantly at his side. According to some notes of Father Hannibal, "*Giovanni won over the compassion of Archbishop Guarino who kept in mind that passage of St. Paul, 'whoever does not provide for relatives and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever' (I Tim 5:8), and he applied it to my case. When Mrs. Jensen, in a letter, questioned the Archbishop on this matter, he answered, 'Let Canon Di Francia find a priest to replace him in his Work.' Since it was impossible to find a substitute, I thought that I was following the will of the Archbishop by leaving the Institutions almost entirely for several years to take care of my brother.*"

Later on Father Hannibal rented the Alessi flat in Avignone, where he transferred the sick Giovanni and could also stay with his boys. However, Father Hannibal's forced absence had damaging effects, "*My absence was the reason one of the Institutions, the orphanage for the boys, turned into complete chaos.*" He commented sadly, "*I have seen my efforts dissipate; the little boys disbanded; and so many hopes of mine perished, as do the wishes of sinners! For all, however, blessed be the Divine Will.*"

He had to start anew with the boys' orphanage, Father Hannibal noted, "*In the foundation of this pious Work, the Lord asks many sacrifices, perhaps because its destiny will be great!*"

6. The Struggle for Survival

We have to be aware of the Father's labor and worries for many years: the struggle for the survival of his Institution, bombarded by thousands of oppositions but always triumphant by the grace of God and by the Father's immense faith.

Where did Father Hannibal obtain the means to support so many people? All was the fruit of his industriousness and personal activities. He petitioned the municipal and provincial

administrations. He also sent requests outside Messina, soliciting assistance for his Work from the good hearts of noble and rich people.

Following the advice of Don Bosco, he got the interest of the city's newspapers, which more than once commended his Institutions.

A newspaper, *La Gazzetta di Messina*, on April 17, 1875, reported, "*Indeed, one must be courageous to take over the burden of keeping and educating one hundred children when one has nothing to rely on. However, the help of courageous hearts will not fail to support the efforts of the pious priest.*"

In the Avignone slums, people survived, yes, but always, we would say, holding their soul with their teeth. The Providence of the Lord was not missing in the critical moments when human means had already failed. But first, the Lord wanted Father Hannibal to use his resources of faith and sacrifice, to obtain large merit, so that his Work could be marked with the seal of God.

7. Oh My Children, a Day Will Come...

After trading all his properties, Father Hannibal became a beggar for his children, asking charitable help from all, out of love for Jesus and Mary.

For more than twenty years, the city of Messina saw the heir of the Marquises of St. Caterina walking with long strides along the streets, under the sun, the wind and the rain, with faded cassock, broken shoes, and rumpled hat, knocking at every door, imploring, "Not for me but for my children."⁷

*So that food might not lack on their table,
Many times, I went frozen, ...I perspired...
Here, my children, is the food today,
God who loves you will provide tomorrow.*

⁷ Icilio Felici (Op. cit. p. 61) also places Fr. Francesco Di Francia in Avignone at the side of Father Hannibal and sees "the two brothers with aristocratic blood in their veins, moving and toiling in that hellish pit that was then the Avignone neighborhood!" Felici thinks as "quite logical that Francesco should place himself at Father Hannibal's disposition to collaborate in the work he had undertaken."

The reality is not exactly that. Francesco had chosen another life. He was a missionary in the diocese and worked at that for many years and very fruitfully, while giving to Hannibal occasional help when he could, and then withdrawing, like the other priests, Ciccò and Muscolino. I can document this assertion. In 1884, the Father had to stay in Rome for a while, and on July 1, he wrote to Francesco, "*I recommend you those poor children of the Avignone Houses. Sometimes, when you can, go there to comfort them.*"

Fr. Francesco started to frequent Avignone in 1887. On November 25, 1887, Father Hannibal wrote to Mons. Guarino, "My brother, the priest, for some months, has shown a special love for these places. He often stays there, sleeps there from time to time, and is asking me to set up a small room for him." Francesco joined the Father in 1888. The Father, having to assist his brother, Giovanni, on September 9, 1888, wrote to the Sisters, "As soon as the Lord turned me away [from Avignone], he brought in my brother who had *never thought of this work*" (the italics is ours).

However, at the time of Fr. Francesco, thanks to Father Hannibal, the Avignone neighborhood had ceased to be a 'hellish pit'. Even when Fr. Francesco started to reside in Avignone, his actual presence was always limited, because it was subordinate to the limited availability left him by his missionary commitments. Thus, the real beggar of Avignone was always and only Father Hannibal.

*In vain, I often knocked on unfriendly doors:
Terrible was what I was sentenced back:
- Don't bother us, crazy man, get out of here!
This you deserve for your foolishness! -*

*Dear children, a time will come when you
will know my daily martyrdom and love;
No father loves more his little ones:
For you, I begged from God and men!*

8. Charity Walks

In August 1906, in a talk to the ladies of Messina's aristocracy against the criticism continuously harassing him, Father Hannibal felt the need to request their generosity for his works. *"I recommend to you my little orphan boys and girls! No. I am not begging you for alms. I ask you for other favors, for your moral support, your benevolence, your compassionate consideration for these Institutes... I am requesting you not to accept so easily the unjust criticism of people who, at times, moved by I do not know what spirit spread disturbing rumors, especially among the well-to-do classes, to alienate their minds from me... and giving a negative view of my Institutes as an unnecessary work of exploitation. Dear ladies, it takes so little to criticize and demolish, but you are quite full of wisdom and experience to understand how much it takes to build up."*

Out of love for the truth, however, Father Hannibal acknowledged that his enemies and opponents in Messina were just a fraction, while almost the entire population always looked with fondness on his Institutes. In critical moments, he used to set up local *fairs and lotteries*, and the citizens responded generously. He loved to recall particularly the several *charity walks*, *"Then all the classes of people of Messina helped: the entire city was moving! The military command lent two large carts to us, which we decorated fittingly with festoons and flags placing in one cart some orphan girls and in the other, several orphan boys. The military band went ahead of the carts, followed by the city's band. A large crowd surrounded them and amidst the music and the general emotion, the two carts proceeded slowly along almost all the main streets of the large and beautiful city."*

"There was competition in giving: clothes and money rained from the balconies, textiles, and food from the stores, and different goods were offered depending on the trade of each merchant. Young people equipped with boxes moved around collecting. The carts had to return to the Institutes several times during the day to unload the clothes, food, and goods filling them and the collection boxes of the young people. Then they would start all over again. Oh, dear memories! You will never die in our hearts."

An event like that would not be understood today. Social justice, with its insurance and welfare laws, has certainly changed the conditions of the orphans; but we are certain that it can never eliminate or replace charity: the sovereign law, which Christianity is spreading in the world, following the example and teaching of its Divine Founder.

Even the city administrations (except for one case, which we will report later), as well as the provincial ones, were always benevolent. And Father Hannibal wanted the distinguished benefactors to never be forgotten, like, for example, Mr. Mariano Gentile, Mrs. Luisa Pellegrino, the Ciampa brothers from Piana of Sorrento, the banker Grill, a Protestant but very

generous of heart, to the point that he went bankrupt and his son became a beneficiary of Father Di Francia.

9. The Work of the Boys and Girls Assisted

Father Di Francia depended heavily on work as a means of livelihood. For several years, the income provided by the printing of colored wrappers for lemons to be shipped abroad was very helpful. Then the works of the girls: knitwear, embroidery on white clothes, silk and gold, lace mesh, crochet, bobbin lace, knitted gold, ancient style lace, paper, cloth, and metal flowers, and later on even the cultivation of flowers. Father Hannibal commented, *“Indeed if the garlands of fresh flowers made by our orphan girls meant the perfume of the prayers for some dear departed ones, their bunches of roses and gardenias perfumed the rich tables of the weddings...”*

With the inheritance left by Mr. Mariano Gentile, Father Di Francia started a mill and a bakery. The Father explicitly commented, *“It was a very daring enterprise, which made us age prematurely. However, by this, we solved a serious problem of our Institution, that is, our daily bread, which we obtained by selling the bread made with pure wheat... Besides we are glad to supply the people of Messina with a perfectly pure and substantial bread, considered as the best for not containing any additional element.”*

10. The Predominant Thought

Meanwhile even amid difficulties, the work of Father Hannibal progressed. The Lord rewarded his faith. *“For the grace of the Almighty, a thought, a feeling, a faith dominated over everything. Let us seek God, let us sacrifice ourselves for souls, and let us look for their success, sanctification, and salvation, and God will take care of everything. The practices of piety, the prayers, the mental prayer, the work, and some very effective and special devotions, let us call them “new” devout, singular, very effective and creative initiatives, were and will always be the great resources of this pious and beneficial Institution which was so small, poor, and abject at its birth.”*

CHAPTER 5

THE APOSTLE OF THE ROGATE

1. He Dedicated Himself to the ‘Rogate’

Worries of another apostolate were distressing Father Hannibal.

As a young man, he felt particularly inclined to the prayer to obtain priests for the Church, especially after reading the works of St. Alphonsus and St. Francis de Sales, which made him desire people like those great saints for the spread of God’s kingdom on earth. In his extended adoration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament exposed for the ‘*Forty Hours*’* in the Church of St. Giovanni of Malta, his longing had become more passionate and burning. Later, upon reading in the Gospel the words of Jesus: ‘*Pray, therefore, the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest*’ (*Rogate ergo Dominum Messis ut mittat operarios in messem suam*; Mt. 19:38; Lk 10:2), a supernatural light enlightened his mind. He understood that the Lord was calling him to dedicate all his strength and life to spread this Divine Command and to ask everyone to obey this explicit command of the Divine Master.

We have the specific confession of Father Hannibal regarding this. Although he conceals himself under the shroud of anonymity, speaking of a person who was interested in this Divine Command, even before reading it in the Gospel and who, with this concern, started his career in life. He adds, “*because of his infinite goodness, the Lord, enlightened that person on this word of the Gospel.*”

Then, when he was approaching the end of his life, in a serene vision of the accomplished task, the testimony of his good conscience allowed Father Hannibal to say in his testament, “*About the Rogate, we say nothing. He dedicated himself to it: either by zeal or by fixation, or both.*” It was like echoing the words of Paul to Timothy: ‘*I have fought a good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith*’. (2Tim 4:7). Father Di Francia too could say that he had fought a good battle and had come to the end of the race, that he had kept his faith, that is, he had been true to the mission entrusted to him by the Lord at the feet of the altar when he was still young.

Between the first and the second testimony, there is a whole life, which began from the Rogate, was spent for the Rogate, and ended with the Rogate. “*He dedicated himself to it.*” This is Father Hannibal in his totality!

2. The Divine Command

Father Hannibal presents the command of Jesus this way, “*Two evangelists, St. Matthew and St. Luke recorded a great word of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

“*St. Matthew expresses himself in this way (9:36-38): As [Jesus] saw the crowds, he felt compassion for them, because they were abandoned and scattered like a flock without its*

* This is a traditional three days of adoration at the end of the Lenten Season.

shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The Harvest is really abundant, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray the Master of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest'.

"St. Luke writes (10:2), 'Then Jesus said to his disciples: the harvest is really abundant, but the laborers are few. Pray, therefore, the Master of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'

"The meaning of this word is very clear. The harvest means the souls, the laborers are the priests and all those who have the task of saving the souls entrusted to them. The souls to be saved are plentiful, but the ministers of God are few. Jesus Christ said, 'Pray, therefore, the Master of the harvest' (Rogate ergo Dominum Messis...) which means: Do pray God to send numerous priests to his Church for the salvation of souls.

"In the Rogate (Pray!) there is an invitation and a command at the same time. It is every Christian's duty to abide by this command. All of us must pray with this finality since Jesus Christ wants it."

3. The "Rogate" as a Great Resource for the Church

In the writings of Father Hannibal, we see the great thoughts which hovered insistently in his mind from his youthful years. "With those symbolic words, Jesus presented the Holy Church, the entire world, and every single social gathering as a harvest which, if well cared for through good laborers would fill up the mystical barns with an abundant crop. However, if neglected, it would miserably perish...

"With those words, Jesus our Lord wanted to show us that his priests are the salvation of this mystical harvest of souls. Without any doubt, the great secret for the salvation of the Church and society, the greatest resource of the Church for the expansion of the kingdom of God and the great means for all good in time and in eternity is contained in the obedience to this Divine Command. Our Lord wants us to understand that to obtain this inestimable good, we must ask for it from the highest Master, God. He wanted to teach us that his priests do not blossom by chance, that they are not formed by themselves, nor by human effort, but they come from the Divine Mercy, which creates, generates, and gives them to the world. Thus, if we do not pray to have them, we will not get them! Isn't this one of the greatest graces that He gives? How can we pretend to be granted it, if we never ask for it?

The command of Jesus Christ is very clear: The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Pray, therefore!"

4. The Supreme Infallible Remedy

As in the days of his earthly life, and even today, "Jesus makes his painful lament heard: The harvest is abundant, the laborers are few...What is the remedy? Our Lord pointed it out wide and universal: Pray, therefore, the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest!"

"Thus, the supreme and infallible remedy is tied to prayer. We call this remedy infallible because, imposed and indicated by our Lord, it cannot fail. If he suggested prayer for this purpose, it means that he wants it obeyed, otherwise he would not have commanded it. It is as if he said, if you ask for laborers for the harvest of souls, I will give them to you. This means also; if you do not ask for laborers, you will not have as many and as good as they are needed.

“Let us remember that when God wants to punish people with the worst punishment, he deprives them of good priests, and this is the greatest evil that can befall a nation or a city. On the contrary, the greatest of all the divine graces is when the Almighty God sends the good laborers for the care of souls, as once he sent to earth his Divine Son, of whom the priests are the true representatives!”

5. The Program of His Life

Therefore, the Divine Command of Jesus was Father Hannibal’s habit, ideal, and program of life.

He used to repeat continuously, *“We offer prayers for rain, for a good harvest, and for deliverance from the divine punishments, while we do not care to pray the Almighty God to send good gospel laborers into the mystical harvest.”*

For this purpose, Father Di Francia wrote and popularized a series of fervent prayers that were collected into a pamphlet and translated into various languages. He used to say, *“The salvation of the world depends on the priests, and the means to have them is certain and infallible: it is the prayer demanded by our Lord Jesus Christ. If we do not obey the command of Jesus, it means that we do not want priests and do not want the salvation of the world.”*

In a fervent invocation to the Sacred Heart, he implored, *“Why do not all your lovers raise this prayer of salvation in front of you? Why, while so many souls perish, the Catholic world does not raise up, like a single person, to implore countless priests from your divine Heart? O Lord, extend this spirit of prayer from East to West, from North to South. Let the hearts of all the high Prelates, Bishops, and Priests of the entire Church be filled with it. Let the hearts of all the virgins and all the Religious Sisters consecrated to you become inflamed with it... We beg from you, Lord Jesus, the triumph of the Evangelical Rogation of your Heart in the entire Church, all over the world. Let it become a universal Rogation... That all eyes may turn to this divine desire of your Heart, that all ears be pierced by this unceasing cry of your Heart: ‘The harvest is abundant, but the laborers are few: Pray, therefore the Lord of the harvest!’”*

6. In or Out of Season

We are truly dealing with a fiery person! About Father Hannibal, somebody rightly wrote, *“The Rogate was the light of his steps, the star of his thoughts, the sun of his life. He was born for that; and we can just imagine Father Di Francia in the act of waving that glowing banner with the ardent longing to carry it to conquer the world.”*

“Indeed, in or out of season, as St. Paul puts it, Father Hannibal talked and discussed about the Rogate with everyone. He took advantage of any occasion and availed of every opportunity. His burning desire was to attract the attention of the entire Christian world on the necessity of this prayer. He was so consumed by the need of this prayer for the Church to have many good laborers, and of the effectiveness of this evangelical remedy to obtain them. To realize this, we can say that he moved heaven and earth.”

At the thought that this apostolic dream could become a reality, he once wrote to a Bishop, *“I feel like dying of joy!”*

On the contrary, in the eventual failure of his Institutions, nothing hurt him more than the thought that the Rogate could be forgotten.

“When in our enterprises,” he wrote, “everything goes upside-down, there is no other consolation but resignation to the Divine Will, which does everything with good reason, even though we do not understand it. Only those who experienced this can understand how painful this resignation can be in such cases. However, in my case, circumstances made this chalice bitter. I would have had to resign myself to let the germ of my Institution consecrated to that holy purpose, “Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” get lost. I would have had to resign myself to fold the holy banner in which one of the most tender expressions of the Sacred Heart of Jesus shines, and to which the salvation of souls can be bound in the shortest and surest way.”

7. All for the Rogate

Father Hannibal considered the charitable work where he consecrated his strength and those of the religious Congregations founded by him, only in view of obedience to the Rogate of Jesus. If we pray for good laborers, we must toil and be good laborers; and the spread of this spirit of prayer will be realized more efficiently by propagating it among the children who will bring it to the families and the society tomorrow.

His Congregations had as their primary purpose the obedience to the Divine Command and the propagation of this prayer, through a commitment to a special fourth vow. Thus, in all his Institutes the invocation: *Lord of the harvest, send holy apostles into your Church*, resounds abiding and fervent on all the lips of Father Hannibal’s children.

8. The Rogate for the Clergy and the Faithful

For the wide spread of this spirit of prayer among the clergy, Father Hannibal founded the “Sacred Alliance” inviting Bishops, Prelates, and Priests to an intense crusade, in spiritual union with his Institutions. For the lay faithful, he canonically established the “*Pious Union of the Evangelical Rogation of the Heart of Jesus*”.

For his Institutes, he begged from Pope Pius X the privilege to add to the litanies of the Saints, a new invocation, ‘*That you may deign to send abundantly worthy and holy laborers to your harvest, we pray You, hear us o Lord*’.

Moreover, to extend this invocation to the Universal Church, he gathered more than eight hundred petitions from bishops of all the continents, which he forwarded to the Vatican Congregation of Rites.

In his correspondence with monasteries and holy persons (he was in contact with many of them), the thought of the *Rogate* comes back frequently, with the insistence of a compelling issue.

Also, when the Divine Providence granted him the means to build in Messina a beautiful Temple dedicated to the Sacred Heart and the ‘*Shrine of St. Anthony*’, he wanted the words of the Divine Command to shine on its façade. You could see clearly the huge characters in the original Latin: *Rogate ergo Dominum Messis ut mittat operarios in messem suam* (*Pray, therefore, the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest*).

9. ‘Laborers’ Does Not Only Mean Priests

Father Hannibal insists on the word “laborers” is a term which refers first of all to priests but not restricted to them. It has a much wider meaning, as it embraces also all the laity whose activities emanate, somehow, from the priesthood and is bound to it inseparably.

Father Hannibal noted, *“The Priesthood exercised under the authority of the Ordinaries, is the only one which has the great power of destroying the kingdom of sin, of planting the kingdom of Jesus Christ, and of changing the face of the earth. It has a power that is not of this world; it has a divine force, a miraculous secret by which it can conquer hearts and make all the hostile earthly and hellish powers powerless.”*

“However, the Divine Word is always a sublime synthesis which contains countless mysteries from which one can derive several salvific applications. That divine “Rogate ergo” is not to be considered only in relation to the priests created by their sublime vocations, obtained through the obedience of that Divine Command. It must be considered also regarding those whom the Almighty sends with his divine grace to operate a more or less beneficial action in his Church and in the large harvest of souls.”

Father Di Francia laid down the details, *“From the apostolic efforts of the priests comes also the formation of many collaborators, like the truly fervent Catholic laity, the Religious Sisters and all those who work with zeal in this holy enterprise of the eternal salvation of souls in the large fields of the Church and the world. Kings and Catholic rulers, enlightened by the Lord, as true sons of the Holy Church and the Supreme Pontiff, can and have to be the saviors of the mystical harvest entrusted to them, through the accomplishment of their great civil tasks.”*

“Obedience to the divine Rogate means also to ask from the Divine Goodness, teachers, educators, and directors of Institutions. They must be good believers, observant, and God-fearing so that while teaching minds with holy instructions they also educate saintly hearts. This prayer also serves so that the Lord may give enlightenment and graces to all parents. They have in their hands the large harvest of future generations. They have to edify their children by their example, keep them away from spiritual dangers, raise them with holy education, and present them as successful or well oriented to success, to that God who entrusted them with this purpose. Rogate ergo!”

10. The Great Means of All Goods

Father Hannibal was really tireless on the topic that was at the center of his heart: Rogate!

“Concerning society, this divine word is the great means for all goodness and for salvation in time and in eternity. Yet, in truth, for twenty centuries, this great word, which is clearly a command repeated by our Lord Jesus Christ, lay almost buried and unheeded in the very pages of the Gospel. Yet that divine command coming from the divine zeal of the Heart of Jesus contains the great secret for the salvation of Church and society. Inexplicable mysteries of God! Perhaps the Almighty has kept the manifestation of this secret, though so clear, until the present, when the Church has become deserted and the cities and peoples are deprived of what constitutes the greatest element of salvation.”

11. Daybreak from on High

We have witnessed the gradual revelation of the secret through the Supreme Pontiffs.

Leo XIII encouraged Father Hannibal to go ahead with his endeavors up to their complete realization. Pope Pius X comforted him with his blessing, observing that he had found a way to *echo the command of Christ*. Benedict XV assured Father Hannibal that the prayer for good laborers concerned him first of all as the Head of the Church, and proclaimed himself as the first Rogationist.

Upon approval of the “*Pious Union of the Prayers for Vocations*”, established in Rome by the Cardinal Vicar, when Pius XI defined it “*the greatest work*”,* Father Hannibal wrote, “*It is indeed an inspired word. God has spoken through the mouth of his Vicar! Praying for holy vocations is the greatest work. The prayer commanded by Jesus Christ to obtain priests for the Church, when it is constituted and organized into a work, shall be called “the greatest work!” If we deepen this expression, it means ‘a work dedicated to this purpose is the mother of many good works, generating great and holy works for the highest glory of God, the wider salvation of souls, and the greater realization of the divine mission of the Church of Jesus Christ in the entire world. It is the work that certainly obtains the chosen ones from God and even produces saints in the Church.’*”

Thus, on this topic, Father Hannibal could not refrain from remarking, “*With interior joy, we are witnessing the sparkle of the first ray of the rising sun of this spirit.*” He recalled the expression of Pius XI, “*This “daybreak from on high” started to proceed splendidly and brightly since the first days of the Pontificate of Pius XI.*”

12. The Full Noon

Death, however, did not allow Father Hannibal to witness the full noon of this bright sun. In his last will and testament, he wrote, “*Fiat, Fiat! Amen!*” Grounded in the communion of saints, we can presume that Father Di Francia’s prayers are not alien to the triumph of the Rogate, as it has developed in our times through the work of the recent Popes. His Holiness Paul VI* instituted the World Day of Prayer for Vocations set on the fourth Sunday of Easter, and he has called the attention of the faithful on two great truths. First, that the primary source of priestly vocation is God Himself, His merciful and free will; and second, that “*The first duty then that devolves on all Christians about priestly vocations is that of prayer, according to the precept of the Lord, “The harvest indeed is abundant, but the laborers are few. Pray, therefore, the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers into his harvest.” (Summi Dei Verbum, 21-22).*”

In the words of the Popes and their actions, the great mind of Father Hannibal thus could have seen the apostolic zeal, which concerned him throughout his life for the triumph of the divine Rogate, crowned with success!

In the joyful anticipation of the fruits of salvation coming from the obedience to this specific command of the Lord, the Father had written in his poems:

* EN. In the original Italian, the expression used by Fr. Tusino was “Opera delle Opere” which literally means Work of Works.

* TN. His successors, John Paul I, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis have not only given an increasing relevance to the World Day of Prayer for Vocations but with their magisterium, messages, and pastoral activities they have supported the development of the theology of vocation. Also, the institution of World Youth Day has become a powerful moment of reflection for vocations. In the second half of the twentieth century, while on the one hand, the Church was experiencing a worsening of the crisis of vocations, on the other, there was a blossoming and new attention to the pastoral care of vocations, to the formation of seminarians and religious men and women, and to the involvement of the laity in the building up of God’s kingdom.

*I dreamed in my ecstatic love, I dreamed
Of lush fields and courageous laborers,
Brave and fervent with divine zeal,
Donning a radiant stole,
Gathering the ripe harvest into the barns,
And directing to heaven
The uncertain journey
Of souls by the thousands...*

CHAPTER 6

THE RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

1. Canon and Prefect of the Clerics

On January 12, 1882, the Bishop of Messina, Mons. Guarino appointed Father Hannibal as Canon of the Cathedral.*

The Father presented “with tears” the conditions that were preventing him from accepting that honor because of his commitments with the poor of Avignone. However, the Archbishop insisted, encouraging him with the example of St. John Baptist de Rossi who was an apostle of charity even while holding the office of Canon. In that same year, the Archbishop also appointed Father Hannibal as the Prefect of the extern Clerics, that is, of those seminarians living with their families, and were assigned to some Parishes for their prayer life and to help the Parish Priests.

2. One Thing Leads to Another

Meanwhile, the Father was taking care of his two growing Institutes. How could he provide for their sustenance?

The people of Messina admired the immense charity of Father Hannibal, and called him “*our St. Vincent de Paul*”. He could also be compared to St. Vincent for the way he behaved in the founding of his Institutions. St. Vincent did not bring about right away his charitable plans. He was afraid of disturbing the steps of the Divine Providence. Instead, he took advantage of the occasions he had to do good things, and then he organized and developed his works of charity.

So did Father Hannibal. He never dreamed of becoming a founder. The Providence set him to work in the neighborhood of Avignone, and he engaged himself with all his strength, always following submissively the ways of the Providence.

This is how he presented himself to Fr. Cusmano in August of 1884, “*For more than six years I have been starting some Institutions; without even knowing how, I found myself in this situation. It seems to me that this is the will of the Almighty God who chooses weak things.*” The Institution needed a firm direction, but he did not feel he was up to the situation and repeated the thought: “*This Work of the Avignone Houses is really beautiful and sublime, but the great inconvenience is that it lacks a man of God who can lead it forward. I have been praying for a long time to the Sacred Heart to deign to provide this Institution with an apostolic man, and I said often those words of Moses in front of the burning bush: ‘I beseech thee, Lord send whom thy wilt send’ (Ex. 4,13, Duoay-Rheims). That is why I beg you also, Father [Cusmano], to pray to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for this Institution.*”

* TN. In the Roman Catholic Church, a Canon is a member of the Chapter of a Cathedral or a collegiate church, headed by a Dean. A Canon’s main task is to perform more solemn liturgical functions in the Cathedral and other tasks that the diocesan Bishop entrusts to the Chapter.

However, the man chosen by God was him, Father Hannibal, though he did not realize it. “*One thing leads to another*” he used to say; and so, from the shapeless and repugnant reality of the Avignone Slums, together with two orphanages, came two religious Congregations.

In 1901, the Father wrote to the members of the Sacred Alliance informing them that the names of his pious Work had been approved by the authority. “*Now that I have found the names for these two growing Institutions, can I flatter myself that this beneficial and religious Institution is already established? That it has already spread deep roots and is ready to produce abundant fruits? I am very far from giving myself this illusion! The Work is just newborn: it is still in its beginning. I can only qualify these twenty years from its start as the time of its slow conception. The seed has been for a long time decomposing underground. Yesterday, it produced its first sprout, but will this small plant grow? Will it take shape? Will it become a tree? God knows. If I look at the abyss of my weakness and misery, I see nothing good for its future, but if the Work belongs to God, His omnipotent arm will grant the persons suited for its formation and stability.*”

These persons came, by divine mercy but only after a long martyrdom of Father Hannibal.

As for the community of the orphans, for a long time, he had to take care of them by himself, with the help of a few pious priests and some good laypersons. There were also some clerics, like Antonio Damio and Pasquale Scibilia, although they were only occasional and temporary helpers. They soon disappeared because the life of Father Di Francia was made entirely of sacrifices and immolation, amidst the most absolute poverty bordering on misery, nourished only by the living flame of his faith and burning charity.

3. The Visit of Fr. Cusmano

There was a time, already mentioned, when Father Hannibal thought of entrusting all his work, and perhaps even himself, to Fr. Giacomo Cusmano, the founder of the ‘*The Morsel of the Poor*’ (*Il Boccone del Povero*) in Palermo. Following his invitation, Fr. Cusmano came to Messina on May 11, 1885, to visit Father Hannibal’s starting work, and found it “*charming for its poverty and for the protection in which the Lord keeps the people gathered there in an admirable serenity.*” He was also moved by the charitable zeal of Father Di Francia and by the peaceful poverty enjoyed in that place. He concluded, “*In my conversation with that good Father, it seemed that he was inclined to join us.*”

However, this unification never happened because it was not God’s will. The two works had to remain separated because each had its own spirit and orientation. Fr. Cusmano wrote, “*The merging will only destroy us.*”

The visit of Fr. Cusmano cheered up Father Di Francia, and encouraged him to go ahead in his own way, according to his own method, that is, the full abandonment to the Providence. Father Hannibal wrote, “*I asked him if in this charitable work one can acquire debts. Yes, he answered, because in that way we induce those who lend us money to do a work of charity. I asked him if in such work we must go on by accounting, that is, by computing incomes and expenses as it is done in the regular administration, in planning the good that can be done, or if we could go only by trusting in God without so many calculations.*”

He answered with these precise words, “*When I did not go by calculations, I saw miracles.*”⁸

4. The Rogationists of the Heart of Jesus

However, even though he saw miracles because he did not use strict accounting, Father Di Francia, remained for a long time alone in Avignone. The lack of helpers was the agony of his whole life.

During the illness of his brother Giovanni, in 1888, his other brother, Fr. Francesco, who up to that time never thought of the Institution, started visiting the Avignone Houses. He settled himself there and begun helping his brother. However, this too was temporary and occasional, since Fr. Francesco, a very zealous priest, was dedicated to the mission of preaching to the people, and worked in that field for several years with great results. So, he was often away from the House. However, later on, this help also stopped because Fr. Francesco left to found a new Congregation.

Father Hannibal began his community in 1889 when he started gathering young people aspiring to priesthood, forming a consistent group of about 30 persons. But the idea of a religious community was not yet clear, and the Archbishop, as soon as the young men were ordained, snatched them from Father Hannibal, assigning them to pastoral work in the Diocese. On the other hand, the young men who were attending classes in the Seminary had nothing else in mind except the diocesan priesthood. In fact, when in 1904, Father Hannibal proposed to them to start the novitiate, within a few days all of them abandoned him up to the very last one, leaving him alone again.

“*Look, all of them left me!*” he said one evening to Fr. Vitale, showing the empty seats in the refectory, but he had no complaints against any of them. He adored God’s loving will, overall!

Thus, with admirable perseverance and with the greatest confidence, he started the work anew. With the help of Fr. Pantaleone Palma and Fr. Francesco Vitale who later became his most valued collaborators, he would lay down the basis of the male Congregation, which from “Rogate”, he named *Rogationists of the Heart of Jesus*.

⁸ At the request of the Superior General of the ‘Bocconisti’, Fr. Mammana, Father Hannibal left this testimony on Fr. Cusmano, “I admired: 1) His great detachment, because having seen that my minimal Institutes, although at the beginning, had a purpose in themselves, he did not allow to aggregate them but encouraged me to continue. 2) His great humility and love for holy poverty, because having seen that the Institutes had started in hovels and shanties, he exclaimed, ‘*Oh, how much these little houses move me! How much I love them!*’ 3) His great fervor. He preached during the Holy Mass with great fervor on the effectiveness of prayer, saying, among other things, *God is omnipotent, but prayer is very omnipotent!* 4) His great prayerful thoughtfulness in celebrating the Holy Mass. He was totally concentrated! 5) His great prudence. He told me of his meeting with Melanie, the shepherdess of La Salette but did not mention her name. When I asked, he replied, ‘*Do not burden yourself with a secret!*’ 6) His great confidence in the Most Holy Virgin. When I asked him to reveal to me the secret by which he obtained graces, he answered, ‘*I say a Hail Mary to the Mother of God!*’ This seemed too little for my weak faith, so I went on questioning him three times, and he always answered: ‘*I say a Hail Mary to the Mother of God!*’ 7) All in all, the halo of sanctity that hovered on his face, and his quiet, gentle and modest speech, moved to veneration like that of a person dead to everything and united to God.”

This writing goes back to January 1912. In 1923, the ‘Bocconisti’ renewed the request for new information and Father Hannibal wrote a report on the visit of Fr. Cusmano to Messina and developed further the thoughts already expressed in 1912.

5. The Daughters of Divine Zeal

Initially, Father Hannibal entrusted the girls to a distinguished lady, Laura Jensen Bucca, converted by his sermons to a life of fervor. For some years, she was a valuable help for him, but she retired; and the Father, after turning to various religious communities, decided to found a female Congregation of his own, which he named: *Daughters of Divine Zeal*. In his mind, and in this case, he was referring to the *Rogate*, which is the expression of the zeal of the Sacred Heart of Jesus burning for the glory of his Father and the salvation of souls.

On the eve of the Feast of St. Joseph, on March 18, 1887, Father Hannibal gave the habit to four girls. This was the germ of the new Congregation.

In one of his speeches in 1906, Father Hannibal himself revealed the intimate origin of the Congregation, *“The very heavy task of the education of so many orphan girls placed me in front of a serious necessity of either getting educators or forming them. First, I tried to find them, and I addressed myself to two communities of Sisters in Italy, since in this matter of the education of girls gathered into an Institute, we cannot just flatter ourselves with the contrary. No private teacher will ever be equal to a Religious Sister who the religious Institution has already trained to be a mother, a teacher, a friend, and a sister to the young girls of every condition. The Sister-educator and mother of the pupils is one of the most beautiful signs that Christianity has offered at any time, especially in the last two centuries.*

“I understood this pressing need from the time I began gathering orphan girls. However, the communities that I was wishing for my orphanage, that is the ‘Daughters of Charity’ or the ‘the Daughters of St. Anne’, did not accept my invitation, as I had no means of paying them.

“Then, I conceived a perhaps too bold, if not daring thought: that of myself forming a community of Sisters for the education of my little orphans.”

Obviously, the daring project went through the screening of critical tongues and Father Hannibal did not ignore it, *“I know that biting criticisms were never lacking against this daring enterprise of the formation of a community of Sisters for the salvation of orphan girls. In truth, it would have been a wonder if there were no criticisms!*

“Unfortunately, it is a truth that no one is a prophet in his own homeland, but I rather feared the criticisms of the future than that of today. I feared that tomorrow, after my death, this orphanage could fail, and then justified blame would befall my memory, as I had been unable to make this shelter of salvation for the poor and orphan girls stable and lasting. The continuation of this work of beneficence was at the top of my thoughts, and it was one of the main aims of my poor efforts. To achieve this important purpose, I needed a community of Sisters, and since I could neither get the ‘Daughters of Charity’ nor the ‘the Daughters of St. Anne’, I thought of forming the ‘Daughters of Divine Zeal’.

“However, how costly such work is! It is not easy to understand how difficult such enterprises are. If only those who once were criticizing me knew the difficulties that I had to go through for the formation of this Congregation of Sisters! How I had to freeze and sweat at the same time when I was receiving crowds of orphan girls and boys from the city, from the province, and from the municipality! Having to grant success to so many girls and at the same time to form their educators and teachers!

“Gentlemen, it was a hard endeavor, an immensely difficult challenge for me, as I have the highest concept of the modern Religious Sister! Today, she is no longer enclosed within four walls. She is in close contact with society, she has to answer the demands of a critical,

sarcastic, and unbelieving century. She must know how to respect the habit she wears and shine with her virtue, modesty, and prudence, as well as by her intelligence and culture!”

6. The Year of Blessings

In the nascent community, troubles were not lacking as tribulations accompany all the works of the Lord. On the contrary, they are the seal of the divine delights.

First of all, a separation took place⁹, which increased the already existing prejudices against Father Hannibal and his work, including the biases even of the Diocesan Clergy of Messina.

⁹ The nature of this book does not allow a broad and exhaustive exposition of the facts, but I believe that some clarifications may be needed so as not to alter the truth.

In 1897, Fr. Francesco Di Francia, who had been helping from time to time in Avignone for nine years, left his brother Hannibal. Differences in ideas about administration were the basis of a painful situation in the Institution, and thus the separation became necessary.

Certainly, the governance of Father Hannibal was peculiar and original. Mons. Di Tommaso, Bishop of Oria perfectly classified it in these words: “His administration was that of a Saint. It would look rather imprudent, because he was daring, endlessly trusting in the Providence.” Now we must honestly recognize that such governance is not ordinary, and it requires a particular vocation in those who exercise it and no less in those who submit to it. Certain positions require heroism; and this, obviously, is not for everyone! Indeed, we have to keep in mind that Father Hannibal cannot be judged with common criteria.

On May 4, 1895, the local periodical *The Awakening (Il Risveglio)* mentioned Father Hannibal as a man of the temper of Cottolengo. Those who read the life of that Saint will know how many troubles he went through because others wanted to measure him with the human meter. The Father never left the community lacking what was necessary. In addition, regarding the spiritual aspect, piety, and interior life of those entrusted to him, he cultivated them with all the effort, to the point of being accused of exaggerating. However, it was necessary to see him by putting one’s self in his shoes in order to judge his actions properly.

Here lies the intimate origin of the division that happened in the community of the Daughters of Divine Zeal at that time. Fighting for survival every day, as it happened in Avignone, and being always with nothing in facing what seemed impossible because the Father's generosity gave everything to the poor made life impossible, humanly speaking, for some of those young Sisters. Had the matter been limited to the material sacrifice of the intimidating work and the unceasing begging, perhaps they could have adjusted to it. But, as they said, the peace of the spirit was endangered because they did not find in the community that material order and regularity of practices, which are a duty and a privilege of the well-settled Institutes. However, they did not realize that such conditions could not be expected in the embryonic state of Father Hannibal’s Institution. They wanted a new set up and meanwhile animosity and discontent were spreading in the community. Fr. Francesco had referred those young Sisters to Father Hannibal, thus they brought their complaints to Fr. Francesco. He shared their ideas and so it is not correct to say that he was collaborating with Hannibal ‘with the docility of a loving child rather than of a brother’ (FELICI, page 81). The community was thus divided into two, and Fr. Francesco considered it right to support his protégés.

I perfectly agree with I. Felici, that ‘this cannot surprise us at all’; ... it was just like that, and it was always painful. Sister Veronica of the Child Jesus, whose original name was Natala Briguglio, stood out among the young Sisters who aspired to change the situation.

The community was deeply divided; and speaking of ‘misunderstandings, persecutions and even slanders’ at the expenses of Sister Veronica and the lack of a ‘spiritual director capable of understanding and guiding her’ (I. FELICI, p. 197) certainly does not clarify the situation and much less adequately explains the solution that followed.

There were appeals to the Ecclesiastical Authority and Cardinal. Guarino, with a letter of August 3, 1896, deposed the Superior, Sister M. Carmela D'Amore. However, things did not change, because the new Superior, Sister M. Nazzarena Maione, was close to the Founder no less than Sister D'Amore.

The discontented Sisters thought it was better to separate. At night, without any notice, passing through the Church door, on March 11, 1897, (not 1895: this is also an important correction!) they went to Roccalumera, a village in the Province of Messina, and remained there under the guidance of Fr. Francesco.

A few months later, during an absence of Father Hannibal from Messina, an orphan escaped from the orphanage with the consequent intervention of the police. This became the last straw, and the Vicar General, Mons. Basile decreed the suppression of the Institute.

The influential intervention of a venerable Friar Minor, Fr. Bernardo from Portosalvo, obtained the deferral of the decree and a year of trial was granted to Father Hannibal's Institutions. In that year, he was able to get as a collaborator of the Institution in the person of Melanie Calvat, the famous shepherdess, to whom the great Mother of God had appeared at the mountain of La Salette on September 19, 1846. Melanie remained in the Institute for one year, from September 14, 1897 to October 2, 1898, and the Father called that year 'truly a year of blessing'. The trial was happily overcome, the community received a vigorous thrust, and the life of the female Congregation was assured.

Father Hannibal attributed all this to Our Lady. On May 25, 1897, a wooden statue, venerated in the chapel of the Sisters, perspired profusely, so much so that small pieces of cloth were soaked. A woodcarver, Antonino Saccà, invited by the Vicar General to study the phenomenon, declared it could not be explained scientifically. Father Di Francia interpreted the event of the perspiration in some verses that he put into the lips of Jesus, conversing with the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Zeal:

*Sad were those days! My Mother then
From the image in the chapel
Trickled drops, like someone on the street
Perspiring exhausted. Thus, She was perspiring too!
For you She perspired, to ask from me salvation,
For you She perspired, to drive Satan away;
She seemed to cry with you, sharing
With you the bitterness of the recent trouble!*

These are how the Providence, admirably pursues its mysterious designs. From that modest group came a beautiful and prosperous religious Congregation, the *Tertiary Capuchin Sisters of the Sacred Heart*.

Concluding, I would like to highlight: 1) The separation of the Works did not affect at all the fraternal sentiments of Father Hannibal towards Fr. Francesco. 2) Until his death, Father Hannibal was a constant benefactor of the Sisters of his brother. Sister Veronica said of him, "*He admired our community. The best gifts of his great heart were for us*". 3) The sons and daughters of Father Hannibal perpetuate his admiration for the daughters of Fr. Francesco with best wishes and prayers for their prosperity in the Lord.

CHAPTER 7

THE 1908 EARTHQUAKE

1. The Little Orphan Girls of Fr. Sollima

Soon, the female branch of the Institution moved from the Avignone neighborhood. By then, the Institute had become too small for the Work that was developing. The number of girls had increased because of the orphan girls of Fr. Sollima, a pious priest, who at his death, had left his orphanage in danger of being disbanded. Father Hannibal accepted those girls into his Institute. At first, he transferred them to the Brunaccini Palace, a historical building that had housed Goethe; and afterward, in 1895, to their definite place in the Holy Spirit monastery, which he had obtained from the municipality. Initially, they stayed there temporarily and then later in a rental.

2. In Thirty Seconds...

Then came the earthquake on December 28, 1908.

Father Hannibal wrote, *“It was an immense catastrophe which has no equal to any similar historical events because only in the populated and splendid city of Messina with its 120,000 inhabitants, 80,000 remained under the debris, buried under the ruins of their own houses.*

“In about thirty seconds, the civil, commercial, industrial, religious, monumental, popular, beautiful, smiling, and artistic Messina disappeared. The waves of her blue sea which washed over those famous shores now strewn with rubble and the slow lapping seemed to be crying over the destiny of the ancient city, against which the finger of God’s justice had pushed them, almost to swallow it!

“My dear fellow citizens, had you died in the battlefields brandishing your weapons for God and for the homeland! Had you died as martyrs of our Lord in the persecutions and assaults of the enemies of faith! Instead, in the darkness of the night, from the quiet of your sleep, you felt jolted by the sudden shaking of the earth. You saw the doors of your homes waving like sails exposed to the winds, amidst the loud thundering of the crashing buildings and the clouds of suffocating dust, and found yourselves either crushed under a boulder, bleeding under a beam, or squashed and compressed between the roofs and the floors! Oh, children of my homeland, victims of the sudden outburst of God’s wrath, how painful were your cries, wailings, and agonies in those supreme moments, in the grasp of such a cruel death! Your voices were coming even from under those wrecks, imploring for help. But for you, who perished under there, there was no help; men were numb, maybe even friends and relatives who survived were terrified, on the run, and abandoned you!...”

3. It Is Neither Fate nor Nature

Father Hannibal used the earthquake as an opportunity to counter the objection of the unbelievers or of the man of little faith, who, in the face of such a terrifying spectacle, did not think of God, but referred to it as fate or nature. *“For us, fate and nature are just the secondary causes, wholly regulated and moved by the omnipotent First Cause who is God. They represent the coexistence of sin and its punishment predisposed ever since by the infinite mind of the Most High. He makes the two elements meet at the same pre-set point, the moral one of the faults that fill the measure, and the natural, physics, terrestrial, or human aspect of disaster, earthquake, war, famine, or scourge. For us believers, when God works this way, He is not cruel or unjust, but He is very perfect, holy, and compassionate.”* Quoting the words of the Scripture, *“even in his anger, he is merciful,”* the Father was thinking of the countless souls the divine mercy had saved by that scourge.

4. God’s Scourge Repeatedly Announced

The earthquake was a scourge that Father Hannibal had foreseen and announced several times. It seemed that the Lord had appointed him as the Prophet, with the mission of recalling his city to the ways of goodness through the threat of divine punishment. He had published and widely distributed a pamphlet of considerations and prayers entitled *‘The Protection from the Divine Scourges’*. This topic frequently occurred in his preaching.

Every year the city of Messina used to hold a propitiatory celebration, established by means of a vote of the City’s Senate after the earthquake of February 5, 1783. Later, the remembrance was transferred to November 16 because of the terrible tremor that occurred on that day in 1894. It was evidently a miracle of our Lady’s protection that Messina was not destroyed. Several times, Father Hannibal was requested to preach on that occasion, and he did it with the utmost freedom. He looked like a prophet sent to announce bitter news (1 Kings 14:6) to his fellow citizens. His last sermon for the somber circumstance goes back to November 16, 1905, and left a deep impression on the vast audience of the cathedral.

The Father cried, *“I must accomplish my holy ministry! And in no uncertain terms, without reticence and fear, I tell you, my fellow citizens, that Messina is under the threat of God’s punishments ... The punishments are upon us and the Angel of the divine vengeance already twirls his exterminating sword.”* He announced a *strong and exterminating* earthquake. While on one hand, he exhorted to trust in the divine mercy, which would save the people living according to the Divine Law and abandoning themselves to God’s hands, on the other, he explicitly announced that for the whole city he saw no way of survival. *“The salvation should be the same that the Ninevites found at the preaching of Jonah. What did then the Ninevites do? Beginning with their king, everyone, including the animals, made penance with sackcloth, cilice, and fasting, etc. Messina is not doing this. This means that there is no escape for the whole city; the punishment is inevitable...”*

As Father Hannibal announced the Lord’s punishment, these were the spiritual sentiments of the prophet. *“If the threats of God’s wrath, which I have come to proclaim, must be fulfilled, if the Lord has chosen me for the dreadful office of preparing you for the burst of his divine lightning on this sinful City, I will not try to run away from the Lord’s face, like Jonah. However, like Jonah to the sailors, I will say to the Holy Angels and you all, ‘Pick me up, and hurl me into the sea, and then the sea will calm down!’ (Jon 1:12). O, Lord may the useless sacrifice of my life be enough for you, provided you spare this city from your punishments!”*

God did not accept his offering and Messina was destroyed.

5. The Divine Protection on the Institutes

We will not dwell on describing the horrible scene of that bloody dawn. However, divine protection became visible in an impressive manner.

There were no victims in the male Institute. When the dormitory collapsed, only the part of the roof, over which the orphan boys gathered in a corner in front of the image of the Virgin Mary to say the morning prayers, did not cave in! The same thing happened in the small chapel where the Religious were having their meditation. The roof fell, but the part under which they were praying remained intact.

In the female House, all the orphan girls were also spared, with evident divine protection. *“Amidst the terrible shaking and falling walls, amidst the thick darkness, the girls found their way to safety, gathering into groups in the garden. As the wall collapsed, a thirteen-year-old girl was thrown into the street, where she would have been crushed into pieces had she not stumbled on a balcony where she remained unhurt. A little five-year-old girl did not even notice it. She was shielded by some beams that crossed over her bed in the attic, and when she opened her eyes and crawled out of the wreckage, waiting for somebody to take her out, she excused herself to the Sister for not having heard the morning wake-up bell!”*

6. The Victims

However, there were victims; and the Lord chose them among the Sisters. St. Anthony wanted thirteen of them, his symbolic number: thirteen lamps that consumed themselves to obtain from the Divine Mercy the salvation of the Institutes.

Father Hannibal remembers them with expressions full of fatherly tenderness, *“Dearest daughters! They were thirteen little lambs of this mystical fold! They were very humble, obedient to any command, very respectful towards their superiors, very consistent in receiving the holy sacraments. Among them, some maintained the House with their works and sacrifices; some were models of docility and patience in the most humble and practical works; some also had a bright mind, with artistic skills, studying fine arts and works, with the sole purpose of giving glory to God, to console the Sacred Heart of Jesus and their superiors, and to augment their own Institute. They were very faithful people, intent on their own sanctification...! Dearest daughters, you were very dear to the Heart of Jesus. You too suffered the terrible pains of such a cruel death, maybe even prolonged under the heap of wreckage, without human help and comfort! Now you rejoice there, in the kingdom of the chosen ones, where your heavenly bridegroom, I hope, has already placed on your finger the ring of the eternal wedding, and clothed you with the mantle of His glory!”*

Later, Father Hannibal lit thirteen silver lamps in the chapel of the Holy Spirit, each with the name of the deceased Sister.

7. My God! My Messina! My Children!

The earthquake was a very heavy blow to the heart of Father Hannibal. He was in Rome and learned of the event from the newspapers at ten o'clock on Tuesday morning, December 29. He was shocked. He raised his eyes to heaven, *“My God! My Messina! My children!”* He left right away on the ferryboat *Scilla*, where, luckily, he was able to secure a seat in Naples.

He wrote, *“My heart was depressed and I resigned myself to the divine will. I blessed the just wrath of the Almighty and in tears, I prayed for the survivors and the victims, among whom I figured were all my children in Christ!”* He reached the port of Messina at four o’clock on Thursday afternoon, December 31. From the ship, facing the mounds of ruins under which Messina was buried. He searched with his eyes the place of his Institutes and raised a hand tracing the sign of the cross. The General Superior of the Daughters of Divine Zeal, Mother Maria Nazzarena Maione, who was with the community in front of the Blessed Sacrament exposed for adoration in a makeshift shanty, felt a sudden intuition and said, *“The Father is at the port and he is blessing us!”*

Messina was in a state of calamity, and no one could enter. Father Hannibal had to proceed to Catania, where he obtained a permit to return to Messina. He was among his children on the evening of January 5, at the end of the triduum of prayers by the community to obtain his return.

8. Mary Wants Us to Rise Again!

As Father Hannibal had insisted on anticipating the divine scourge, with the same zeal, after the earthquake, he did not get tired of continuously raising the downcast spirit of his fellow citizens, rekindling in them in a particular way the trust in the protection of Our Lady.

In the wooden chapel built on the rubble of Piazza Cairoli, on June 3, 1909, on the feast of the patron of Messina, Our Lady of the Letter, he gave a sermon showing that Our Lady had kept her promise of perpetual protection. *“God and Mary abandon us when they let us do what we want! On the slope where she had put herself, Messina would have perished had God left her alone. Her faith would have failed. However, if God struck her, it means that He wants to save her. This is the protection of Mary Most Holy. The Scripture is full of these examples, which are reflected in that divine word: ‘I chastise and punish those I love’.”*

On June 12, at the inauguration of the reconstructed Shrine of Our Lady of Montalto, Father Hannibal proclaimed what the new Messina must be, *“Mary wants us to rise again. This Sanctuary is proof of this. What is the rising again that Mary wants? Jesus Christ said: ‘I am the resurrection and the life’. The resurrection of a people cannot be but Jesus Christ. Through Mary, we go to Jesus. The resurrection of Messina cannot come except with the return of Jesus Christ. Therefore, each of us shall truly return with our hearts to Jesus through Mary. Those who do not return to Jesus are enemies of themselves, of Mary, and of Messina. Those who do not return to Jesus want their destruction and that of the city! Let this never happen! Let us have compassion on ourselves and on this city, which is laying down disheartened and surrounded by ruins. Here, however, Mary, the morning star, appears again. Here is the dawn of our triumphs! Here is the Catholic Messina! And it is only with the Catholic Messina that the commercial, artistic, industrial, historical, scientific, and literary Messina can rise again because nothing can be restored if not in Christ, and we cannot reach out to Christ if not through Mary!”*

9. First Encounters with Don Orione

The first personal contact of Father Hannibal with the great Don Luigi Orione,* happened on the occasion of the 1908 earthquake.

The relationship through correspondence goes back to 1900, when Father Di Francia heard of the apostolic works of Don Orione who, at that time, was a young priest. On July 18 of that year, the Father wrote to him,

“Rev. Father and dearest brother, through His Excellency Mons. Blandini, Bishop of Noto, I came to know how your Reverence, though still young, has dedicated himself body and soul, mind, and heart to the service of our Lord Jesus Christ. You are zealous and fervent for the salvation of souls, which are the precious pearls that Jesus Christ has acquired at the inestimable cost of his priceless blood.

“This news has flooded my disconsolate heart with an intimate, deep, and immense joy!

“Since then, undeservingly, I never ceased keeping you in my weak, useless, and poor prayers every day, asking our beloved Lord to enkindle you evermore with the unquenchable flames of His love and zeal, by giving you always more strength, vigor, ardor, fervor, courage, virtue, and constancy to work in the mystical vineyard where his laborers are so scarce!

“I would be very honored, my dear brother, if you would send me an esteemed letter and let me know if and when you will pass by Messina, as I would like to see you personally, embrace and kiss you in Jesus Christ, the beloved of our hearts

“As every day with the greatest fervor I can, I talk about you with my Supreme Lord and Eternal God, so I beg you to recommend me to the very merciful love of the Heart of Jesus while kissing again your sacred hands that are open to charity, mercy, assistance, and salvation of the children and many souls. Very humbly, I declare myself as your useless and humble servant, Canon Hannibal Mary Di Francia.”

However, it seems that the two Saints did not meet before the 1908 earthquake. A misadventure similar to that experienced by Father Hannibal happened also to Don Orione with the desertion of the clerics. In 1902, the Bishop of Tortona ordered the clerics of Don Orione to enter the seminary, and so a dozen of his children, raised with the bread of his table and with the warmth of his charity, left the Congregation on the eve of their priesthood. (Cf. *The Servant of God Fr. Gaspare Cocci, of the Sons of the Divine Providence*, p.175). This event caused the closure of several Houses among them the one of Noto, and so Don Orione had no reason to travel to Sicily.

10. We Appoint You as Our Superior General

Because of the earthquake, Don Orione came to Messina first as a member of the Pontifical Committee for the assistance to the people affected by the earthquake, and later, from June 17, 1909 to February 7, 1912, as Vicar General of the Diocese, appointed directly by Pope Pius X.

The Father was very glad and never failed to pay tribute to the new Superior, by writing from Sava (Taranto) on September 18, 1909, a letter worthy of mention.

“From this moment, we are all subject to your wise direction and we proclaim Your Lordship as our Superior General. Kindly embrace in your apostolic heart this other Work as one of yours and lead it to the way of its twofold purpose of religion and charity, with your

* EN: He is now a Saint, canonized on the same day as St. Hannibal.

warm prayers, advice, teachings, and orders. Every Rogationist and Daughter of Divine Zeal, in every House, is ready to obey you, with the assistance of our Lord.

“I hope that the Sacred Heart of Jesus may grant us those graces that my unworthiness could not obtain and will repair all the evil I have committed.

“I present to Your Lordship, together with the personnel of our seven little Houses, that sacred banner on which is written: ‘Pray, therefore, the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’ This divine word coming from the divine zeal of the Heart of Jesus is the mandate of his divine zeal in which the great secret of the salvation of the Church and society is contained. May Your Lordship accept it from the beloved lips of the divine Savior, as we received and impressed it in our hearts and constituted it as our very holy mission. May you be its apostle and announcer!

“I ask your holy blessing and kiss your hands while declaring myself your very humble servant, Canon Hannibal Mary Di Francia.”

The bonds in the love of our Lord that united the two Saints in an indissoluble manner were thus established. I myself remember that my first acquaintance with Don Orione is connected with this relationship.

Fr. Vitale introduced him to us, students, in Messina, with these words, *“Here is Don Orione, the friend of our Father.”* Don Orione underlined with pleasure, with a wide smile on his lips, and with the flashing of his large eyes, which were his characteristics, *“Friend, yes, indeed a true friend!”*

Father Hannibal in the ‘Book of the Divine Benefits’, in the year 1909, defines his encounter with the Apostle of the Divine Providence this way, *“This year we had a special closeness with Don Orione; he showed great affection and protection for us.”*

CHAPTER 8

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INSTITUTES

1. In Apulia

The earthquake of Messina could have destroyed the Work of Father Hannibal Di Francia. Instead, in God's plans, it fostered its greater development. In reality, the small plant of the Rogate had produced new sprouts in Taormina, since 1902, with the girls' orphanage in the former convent of the Capuchins, and in the nearby town of Giardini,* with a daycare center for young girls and a school of arts and crafts, which thrived in a short time.

In November 1908, Father Hannibal was in Apulia for a preaching tour in Francavilla (Brindisi), in the diocese of Oria, and there, through the mediation of the Bishop, Mons. Antonio di Tommaso, he started the negotiations for the purchase of the former convent of the "Alcantarini" known as 'San Pasquale'.

After the earthquake, the majority of the community, at least for some time, could not remain in Messina, and thus moved to Francavilla.

2. Two Conflicting Emotions

In the speech introducing his orphans to the authorities and the people of Francavilla, on January 31, 1909, Father Hannibal revealed his feelings about that event, "*The day when I left Messina, together with the little orphans that you see here now, I felt inside myself two conflicting emotions struggling in my heart like the twins in the womb of Rebekah. I had to say, "Farewell Messina, farewell my dear homeland, so miserably perished! My little orphans, whom you loved so much, will no longer walk through your streets obstructed by mounds of ruins! In your churches already destroyed, you will no longer see these children whom you assisted with your alms! The remaining people of Messina who were camping under the tents amidst mud and rain along San Martino Boulevard saw these children rushing to the already steaming boat, shook their heads, and sighed as they learned that they were leaving Messina. All this caused deep pain for me, a son of Messina. I wish I could go back, return my little orphans to their place of battle and sacrifice... However, like a faraway vision, Francavilla appeared to me! I stifled in my heart the reasons for my pain as a son of the land that saw my birth and my growth. When the train moved from the territory of the equally unfortunate Reggio to transport us here speedily, I had to stifle my sufferings, to give way to reasons of trust and happiness in the Lord. Here we are, now, among you, people of Francavilla! You will be the home of these children. Nourish them in your bosom. You will be their new benefactors. Take care of them, their needs, and their future! They were children of Messina, the now become children of Francavilla. They were children of the 'Holy Virgin of the Sacred Letter', they will now be the devout children of 'Most Holy Mary of the Fountain'.*"

*TN. Taormina and Giardini are two towns on the outskirts of the City of Messina.

The Daughters of Divine Zeal took possession of the Monastery of San Benedetto in Oria on April 4, 1909, Palm Sunday. After the stipulation of the contract for the purchase of the convent of San Pasquale, the Rogationists took possession of it on September 28 of the same year.

3. The Blessings of the Holy Father Pius X

The female community was in agony. There were frequent illnesses and even deaths. At the inauguration of the House of Oria, Father Hannibal, on October 7, implored the apostolic blessing for the new foundation from the Holy Father, and recommended the sick girls to his prayers:

“I come to your feet for two graces. First, I would like to let you know that, with due permission of Bishop Mons. Di Tommaso, I purchased a very beautiful and large convent, which formerly belonged to the Alcantarini Fathers, in Oria. Now, together with my confreres, I humbly plead your Holiness to accompany our entrance into that sacred dwelling with your fatherly, merciful, and apostolic blessing. May our dwelling now in this sacred abode, for the present and the future, be fully acceptable to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Second, let me humbly inform your Holiness that for some time now, the just and supreme Lord is visiting our female religious community with frequent and long illnesses as well as with some deaths among the superiors and the Sisters who are most needed for the proper running of the Houses.

Now, we all plead the mercy of your Holiness to make for us a special prayer in the great sacrifice of the Holy Mass and particularly to bless these communities. May the Almighty not look at my sins and be merciful to us with the healing of the sick Sisters, if this pleases the Divine Heart, through the intercession of His Most Holy Mother.”

The illnesses and deaths stopped within a short time. Reasonably, Father Hannibal attributed this benefit to the prayers and blessings of St. Pius X.

4. San Pier Niceto

The House in San Pier Niceto (Messina) was opened on October 24, 1909, through the generous help of the Vicar Forane, Fr. Francesco Antoniuccio. He offered his own house, properties, the small church built by him in honor of the Virgin of the Rosary of Pompeii, and his entire activities for the service of the foundation. Two of his sisters even entered the Daughters of Divine Zeal. One of them, Sister Mary Paracleta, was truly appreciated in the Congregation.

5. Father Hannibal’s Criteria for Foundations

It is worth mentioning the criteria which guided Father Hannibal in his foundations. We refer to what he wrote to the Sisters.

First, it is essential to prepare a suitable staff. *“Let the Superior take care of forming the spirit and minds of the Sisters, their skills for works, for performing their tasks, and what it takes to become a perfect Sister.”* He gives a golden rule, which is the great secret for

vocations and for properly promoting an Institute, *“Consider that when the spiritual, intellectual, and domestic formation is well done, our Lord always sends new and good vocations for the Institute to progress well, and to become an Ark of salvation and sanctification for those who join it.*

“The foundation should not be considered in a spirit of ambition, casualness, vanity, and vainglory. This would be a crime and the Lord will not bless this behavior.

“Let the Sisters be as ready as soldiers at the hint of their military superiors. Starting with their Superior, let them be attentive when the Lord will manifest his will to start new foundations, always for the divine glory, the greatest pleasure of the most holy Heart of Jesus, and the salvation of souls, so as to work in the Holy Church, that is, the mystical field of God the Father”.

Upon receiving news about the foundation let communities *“immediately begin novenas, other prayers, and celebrations of most Holy Masses, at least for a month.*

“It is certainly necessary to examine the means of subsistence which the new foundation offers, but we must not expect that the income is fixed and corresponds to the needs of the orphans; there must also be a room for some gaps, for what we can add with our own revenues and for what the Divine Providence grants. That is why we must have great trust in Providence. However, we should not go to the excesses of tempting it, by undertaking foundations of orphanages where, humanly speaking, there is little or nothing to hope for. In everything, take the correct middle course.”

6. Foundations in the Small Towns

What about a foundation in a small town? Does it have a chance for subsistence and development? *In this case, a foundation may be accepted with love, even when it is preferred to a foundation in big centers, especially if in that small town there is neither an Institution of Sisters nor there is a different Congregation. Our Lord wants us to work for the good of people who need it most, and perhaps are more docile than those of the big cities and of the children of important people. Keep in mind what has been mentioned before, that the foundations must not be established because of ambition, looking for big centers where the Institute may show off in front of people and make great profits, but humbly seeks the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ and the good of the poor not taken care of by other institutions.”*

Father Hannibal concludes with a wonderful encouragement for the Sisters destined to foundations like these, *“Perhaps the missionary Sisters who go to the uncivilized lands of the unbelievers, go there for their own convenience? A foundation in a humble and poor center, provided that it can subsist, is a real mission, very pleasing to Jesus, the Good Shepherd who, over the mountains and fields, seeks here and there the scattered and forgotten sheep, easy prey of the infernal wolves. The Sisters of such a foundation should have much trust that the Lord will bless them and provide for them if they do not deviate from their vocation, but live always with the initial fervor, with the spirit of sanctification, and bring great profit to themselves and to the people entrusted to them.”*

7. Trani

In 1910 the Daughters of Divine Zeal opened a House in Trani (Bari), through the mediation of Archbishop Mons. Francesco Paolo Carrano, a great benefactor of that House. In April, the Sisters started a school of crafts for the girls but in the summer of that year, the city

was affected by cholera, which took several victims. The Father immediately added an orphanage.

Father Hannibal widely acknowledged the merits of Mons. Carrano in the sermon for his priestly golden anniversary and his funeral eulogy when he died on March 17, 1915. Mons. Carrano had purchased the house, built a second floor, and helped with the initial expenses and granted the rentals coming from the shops, storerooms, and rented rooms attached to the building. Father Hannibal preserved his memory in a commemorative plaque.

8. World War I (1915-1918)

World War I came with all its horrors. The male communities were decimated. The Houses of the Sisters survived with great difficulties. In 1915, following the donation of a pious religious woman, Sister Maria Rosario Jaculano, of the Daughters of Divine Zeal started a craft school and shop for young girls in St. Eufemia of Aspromonte (Reggio Calabria), which was followed by the opening of an orphanage.

In that same year, the Father wrote in his diary, "*September 1915: purchase of a large extension of land in the neighborhood of Arcella, in Padua, where, if it pleases God, a great Institute will be built.*"

Padua had always been a great dream of Father Hannibal. A foundation in the city of St. Anthony, beside his tomb, would have been a proof of love, devotion, and deep gratitude for the great Wonder-Worker who displayed such a great generosity and protection for the Father's Works.

The words of the diary are a true prophecy. A modest building was immediately put up, which remained deserted for many years for various reasons, until a cluster of bombs destroyed it during World War II, leaving only a huge crater in that spot.

Indeed, the words of Father Hannibal did not vanish into thin air. A large Institute was built later, hosting the orphanage, a school, and a minor seminary, together with a beautiful adjacent parish church dedicated to Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

In 1916, Father Hannibal opened an orphanage in Altamura (Bari), for the children of the soldiers killed during the war. In that way, he meant to honor his homeland, for whose greatness her children had immolated their lives.

9. The Temple of the Evangelical Rogation

Until the 1908 earthquake, the male community of Messina had only a semi-public chapel. Then, a beautiful wooden church was built, and Fr. Vitale inaugurated it on July 1, 1910, in the absence of Father Hannibal. At that event Don Orione, who also participated in the adoration, together with Fr. Albera, the future bishop of Mileto, was present. It was the first church in the world that displayed on the top of its humble entrance, with ardent passion, the divine command in Latin, "*Pray, therefore, the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers to his harvest.*"

Besides, it was, for the Rogationists the first sanctuary of St. Anthony to whom the heart of thousands of people conveyed their desires and vows. After about nine years of fruitful service, the church disappeared in the flames of an untamable fire at night before the Sunday in Albis, between April 26 and 27, 1919. Nothing remained. It was impossible even to rescue the Blessed Sacrament.

Father Hannibal again became a beggar in order to give to the Lord a greater and more beautiful house. Later, the beautiful Temple of Evangelical Rogation was built, rich in gold and marble, a true jewel of art. It was inaugurated on Easter morning, on April 4, 1926.

By that time, however, the strength of Father Di Francia was slowly failing. He celebrated and preached in the Temple only twice, but his joy was immense, especially at the thought that the divine *Rogate* shone in the sun, in golden characters on the majestic facade, a reminder for all the faithful to obey always the command of the Sacred Heart.

CHAPTER 9

THE EDUCATOR

1. The Aim of Education

Father Hannibal wrote, *“To gather children, to give them food, and then just let them vegetate, that is not establishing a house of education. It does not change the destiny of the scattered orphans and it does not prepare a future for the abandoned children of our people. Education must regenerate and edify the children taken away from vagrancy. And schooling must make them one day able to earn their bread of life honestly.”*

We have to say something about Father Hannibal as an educator in order to have an adequate profile of his moral figure.

On December 31, 1929, Pius XI wrote, *“education consists essentially in the formation of man, as he ought to be, and as he ought to behave in this earthly life to reach the ultimate purpose for which he was created. There is no real education if it is not directed to this purpose.”*

Father Hannibal did not read the Pope’s Encyclical Letter *Divini Illius Magistri*, which was published after his death, but his concept about the education of youth was not different. Some regulations that were written by him close with these words, *“Let the young men learn to accomplish their duties towards God, towards themselves, and towards their neighbor. Thus, they will set themselves on the road leading to success, and what is more important, they will begin to work for their eternal salvation. Since everything passes away, each man was created for eternity and each Christian must always keep in mind his ultimate end which is the eternal salvation of his soul.”*

2. Religion as the Basis of Education

Religious education is the first component of education. In a talk given on January 31, 1909, Father Hannibal expresses his thoughts, *“I have been wearing out myself for thirty years to gather orphans and to educate them, to provide for their future, and I found out and experienced that religious education is the surest basis of any education. I touched with my hands this truth, taught to me by experience, by reason, by faith, and by the wisdom of all humankind that to form a civil and educated person, and a good citizen, we must form him as a Christian! If we teach the minds of the young in the large hall of knowledge, we must also teach the supreme principles of the Catholic faith. If we train the hands of the children of our people for arts and crafts, we need also to train their lips to prayer, to raise their minds to those pure realms of light in which there will be no distinction of ranks and social levels but only according to the virtues and merits of the Christian life. Nowadays, society goes to ruin because the basis of religion has been shaken, both for the education of the heart and in the teaching of the mind.”*

3. Devotion, First of All

The first great concern of Father Hannibal was to save the children's innocence. He welcomed them when they were only five to seven years old, and kept them as the apple of his eyes. He cared for them with more than maternal attention and willingly and eagerly followed the progress of their studies, work, and above all of their virtues, which he wanted firmly and steadily anchored to the fear of God and resistant to the lure of passions. Therefore, in his Institutes, devotion was the first and unreplaceable means of formation, and prayer was felt as a need of the person as well as the frequent reception of the sacraments as channels of graces and sources of supernatural life.

First and above all, he requested that prayer be done especially by the educators to implore effectiveness in their apostolate. I recall an episode that happened in Rome with the first orphan, a little boy of five, accepted in that House. He was insolent, and the Sister presented him to Father Hannibal to ask forgiveness. The little boy, however, did not move. He remained stiff, cold, and as defiant as a five-year-old could be. The Father wrote to Fr. Vitale, *"The Sister brought him to me to apologize. He stood in front of me like a dumb fish without saying a word, despite the suggestions and insistence of the Sister. He was not convinced that he was wrong!"* Thus, he concluded, *"Let us therefore pray, since without the divine grace it is not possible to bend the human will even of a five-year-old child."*

From the start of his orphanages, Father Hannibal had prescribed a daily prayer to the Most Holy Immaculate Virgin Mary for the success of the girls.

4. The Example of the Educator

External discipline shall aim at facilitating the desire for grace and at cooperating with its action. We must surround the child with care, vigilance, continuous, and paternal assistance to place him in the moral impossibility of doing wrong. This is the preventive method and Don Bosco is its great teacher.

To apply this method correctly, Father Hannibal required the educators (Assistants) first of all *"to shine in their observance, charity, zeal, the communion of heart, and Holy fervor. From these come the examples of virtue and holiness for the children and let their example, more than their words, imbue the tender minds of their charges!"* Then he exemplifies, *"The Assistant, who makes the sign of the cross without the attention and seriousness demanded by this act, shows the youth that, being aware or not, he treats the cross of Christ as nothing."* Those who murmur against the Superiors *"absolutely deprive the youth of learning that there is a principle of divine authority, which is transmitted on earth to the creatures invested with the responsibility of an office."*

5. Spirit of Sacrifice

Only those who appreciate persons and dedicate themselves generously to a life of sacrifice can be educators. *"I will hold dear persons so much, that for the salvation of just one of them, I will deem it worthy to spend my life, even if it were to be entirely made of suffering and sacrifices."* He adds, *"I will keep in mind that educating children is a work of continuous sacrifices, which require great self-denial, enduring inconveniences, deprivations, boredom,*

and difficulties, embracing all of them willingly, and offering them to our adorable Lord Jesus Christ.”

The education of children is indeed demanding. He wrote, “*The education of children is ‘the highest form of art and science’ (Ars artium et scientia scientiarum). Very few know how to practice this, and a person has to be a philosopher, a theologian, a great expert of the human heart, and a saint to be the educator of a little child.*”

Father Hannibal complained, “*In the world, the ruin of souls in the families is ordinarily a massacre. Someone said that in the world, education can be defined as the most difficult art entrusted to the most inexperienced hands.*”

The Father also said that all these reminders should not dishearten or discourage but rather increase the trust of the educators in the divine grace and their commitment to applying the educational rules given to them.

6. Rules for Education

The rules are few, but they have to be rigorously applied.

First, love. The secret for the educators’ success is just this. “*We must love the children with pure and holy love, in God, with profound understanding and charity, with tender and paternal care since this is the greatest secret to win the young people to God and to save them.*” Father Di Francia insists, “*The educators shall be loving persons and love will make them strong in suffering, working, and sacrificing themselves.*”

Second, respect. “*Educators shall have in their hearts a great affection and respect, in God, for all the poor orphans entrusted to them, considering them as persons very dear to the Lord, perhaps closer to the Heart of Jesus than themselves, though they are Religious, because of their innocence and poverty.*” Therefore, “*Children shall never be insulted. Educators shall never get angry at them or show resentment and distrust. That would be the same as discouraging them and letting them become careless.*”

Then, presence, presence...The preventive system “*consists of ‘preventing’* the children who are educated... They must be supervised in a way that they have no space or liberty to become careless and do wrong. Thus, they shall be formed in a Christian and devout way, to have in themselves the holy fear of God, to be attentive and vigilant, and not to commit serious faults.*”

“*Supervision and assistance shall be for us the strictest kind of precept and obligation. Let the Superiors and their collaborators, each for his part, never lose sight of any child in the Church, workshops, school, and especially during recreation and in the dormitories.*” The Assistant “*shall always supervise all the gatherings of the orphans, and none of their movement, action, or words must escape his attention. He will let them play, jump, make noise because they need to let off steam and this fosters their healthy development. He must also take care that they do not injure themselves, and do not start fighting and arguing. He must be vigilant that none of them, especially by two’s, seclude themselves at a distance or behind woods or trees to converse. He has to keep all under his sight constantly, in the same*

* EN. Father Hannibal adopted the “Preventive Method” or “Preventive System” developed by Don Bosco in his educational institutions. It is called “preventive” to contrast it with the “repressive” method. While the preventive method focuses on the active and positive accompaniment of a child in the process of integral maturity by “avoidance” and “prevention” of occasions that can lead to one’s detriment, employing loving presence, friendly reminders, fraternal/paternal warnings, reasoning out on the regulations. The “repressive” method, on the other hand, focuses on police-like surveillance, discipline, and corporal “punishments” for mistakes committed.

playground which must be free and open, with no possibility to hide.” Father Hannibal concludes with a very important reminder. “*The devil is always after the perversion of the children and, with the greatest attention, the Assistant must foil all the deceits of Satan and guard the children entrusted to him like an angel, to give them back spotless to our Lord.*”

7. Punishments and Rewards

Sometimes, punishment becomes necessary, “*because from adolescence, human nature is inclined to evil,*” as Father Hannibal remarks, referring to a text of the Sacred Scripture.

“*Punishment, however, shall never be frequent, nor disproportionate to the fault, like medicine which, if given to the sick person beyond the proper dosage, will do more harm than good, and it may even kill.*” Besides, “*if taken too frequently, medicines lose their effectiveness, because the person gets used to them and then the dosage must be increased... However, this cannot be done with punishments. In an educational Institute run by Religious personnel, punishment must never reach the point where the children do not give importance to them, and thus the Institute becomes a correctional facility.*” According to Father Hannibal and Don Bosco, and in line with the preventive method “*the main punishment shall be a simulated withdrawal of affection, keeping away the child as he approaches, not welcoming him, and showing him that he is not loved anymore.*”

The attraction of a reward is the natural motivation to let a child do well. Father Hannibal held every year a solemn awarding ceremony for the pupils with “*encouragement and entertainment*”. The award shall not be limited to a diploma or medals but has to be made concrete into a bank account, so that “*when the children leave the Institute at the proper age, the money will be handed to them.*”

8. Work

The pupils, however, must prepare themselves for life and learn to earn their livelihood honestly. Thus, the need for work in the educational set up. In one of his talks, Father Hannibal points out the importance of work. “*Boys and girls must get used to work. In an educational setting, housework is among the main factors of morality, order, discipline, and life. It is an anticipation of a successful future for the pupils. They learn in time to earn their bread by the sweat of their brows. There can be neither religious nor civil education disassociated from work. ‘Pray and work’ (Ora et Labora), was the motto adopted by the western monks as their mode of life. Even though they were dedicated to a life of transcendent asceticism, they still proclaimed that there is no firmness of religious principles where there is no work.*”

Father Hannibal’s criteria did not allow misunderstanding on this point. “*I always considered that an Institution for the education of the youth, where besides the children there are also boys and girls capable of working. If it sustains itself only through alms, it would resemble exactly a vigorous young man who, instead of working, wants to live by begging. A charitable institution can beg for donations, within certain limits, only when it has pupils incapable of working, like blind, crippled, old men, or children of tender age. Moreover, to rely only on alms for institutions for the young of both sexes would be prejudicial to correct educational orientation.*”

Furthermore, in the above-mentioned talk to the ladies of the Messina aristocracy who visited the female orphanage on August 20, 1906, he asked for work for the orphan girls, “*They*

must live by the work of their own hands, more than out of contributions. Therefore, give them work. Ladies, I ask work from you! Although the group of little girls, which never lack in my orphanage, may have more of a right to your donations than those already trained to work, they do not want to live on alms. They want to work, even if they have to lessen their hours of sleep, provided that they can work and that, while eating their daily meal, they can say: 'We earned it! May God bless our benefactresses who gave us a profitable work.'”

CHAPTER 10

THE FATHER

1. They Call Me Father...

*They call me Father: on their head,
As God's Minister, I lay my hand...*

On the lips of everyone, 'Father' was the spontaneous and natural way of addressing Father Hannibal who poured over everyone the wave of that fatherly tenderness overflowing from the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

The miserable conditions of the abandoned children of the lower class of people was a sad and dark sight, which never left his mind. He cared for the girls in unique way. "*Poor creatures amidst the turmoil of an evil and disorderly world, in times when innocence is exposed to so many dangers. They are small daughters born to the poor and gloomy condition of destitute families where misery and poverty add to ignorance about religion and human dignity, deprived as they are of the paternal and maternal assistance ahead of time... What a sight of tears and horror! These girls would find themselves dirty and ragged in the stench of some hovel, suffering from hunger, cold, and the hostility and wrath of vulgar relatives, venting on them their resentment and grief for their extreme poverty.*"

In his poems, Father Hannibal pointed out the pitiful condition of the abandoned children:

*Gentle flowers of this land, though newly born
Depths were ready to swallow them;
There was no gaze of loving people
To bring them joy at least for a while.
Scattered dear children, on their own way
With no love, liveliness, or smiles in store for them;
Alas, what a future, what a fate
Would have hurt and crushed them!*

According to Fr. Vitale (p. 666), "*therefore the main object of Father Hannibal's loving attention were the boys and girls. How he looked at them, their faces, their eyes, even their tongue to see if they might have some illness! When a boy or a girl looked pale, they were to be given a particular food. When some showed signs of anemia, they were to be prescribed a tonic treatment. If a boy seemed unable to tolerate the lead of the printing shop, he was to be trained for another job. Other times, a girl had to be exempted from working in the bakery or another from the laundry or heavy works.*"

2. “Regarding Hygiene I can Flatter Myself ...”

Father Hannibal used to remind everyone that, in accepting children we commit ourselves not only to educate them but to care also for their spiritual good. We also assume the serious obligation to protect, safeguard, and improve their physical health.

He was very demanding at this point. He wrote, “*Regarding hygiene, I can flatter myself a little bit. I am a follower of Dr. Kneipp. I read the Mantegazza’s treatise, and I am scrupulously demanding when it comes to hygiene. In our refectories, we have moral, hygienic, and etiquette rules concerning the way of eating. ... Air and light are basic factors for life, and it is lamentable that such an important rule of hygiene is not taken care of and practically ignored by many people. We care about it strongly. The glowing health that our orphans enjoy - thank God - is mostly due to the wide observance of this hygienic rule: air, always plenty of fresh new air day and night, in the dormitory, in the workshop, in the school, during recreation, in the refectory, everywhere.*”

He would ask the Assistants and the teachers about the children’s health and always required the Superiors to check diligently, saying, “*The least of the orphans is more valuable than the Founder and the Mother General!*”

3. Among the Children

He felt at home among the children. A very simple episode, which goes back to the last years of Father Hannibal’s life, has remained engraved in my heart.

It happened in the Avignone Houses in Messina. The boys were in the shops; some of the smaller ones, exempted from work, for some squabbles among them, gathered whimpering around the huge eucalyptus tree that dominated and perfumed the courtyard. Suddenly, coming from outside, the Father arrived. He was wearing his hat over the head and his long cloak was waving open adding to the dignity of his noble bearing. The children sprung up shouting, “*The Father! The Father!*” and ran to him happily clapping their hands. The Father smiled, opened his cloak and the children hurried under it joyfully.

The Father said, “*Let us go, let us go! Let us walk this way!*” In that manner, as if dragging the children under his mantle, he toured the courtyard with measured steps.

He had forgotten all his tiredness, worries, and troubles. With the children, he became a child again. Not for nothing, he had written:

*I love my children; they are for me
The most cherished ideal of my life.
From oblivion and abandonment, I rescued them
Deeply prompted by a daring hope.*

*O purest pearls, my little girls,
One by one, I picked them up from dirt,
Like precious shells thrown along the streets
Now on their way to a better future.*

In the feasts celebrated in the community, the children read short poems for him. At times, he also replied in verses keeping the same meter and rhyme of the children. For a girl, whose family name was Loiodice, he wrote:

*If I had flowers-like virtues
I would gather the most beautiful of them,
And painting them with lovely colors
I would offer them to you.
I would pass them to you, my daughter,
To let you love Jesus with strong affection.
Now I pray Jesus that you may be,
You yourself, a gift acceptable to Him:
A gift that He presses to in his Heart
Smiling to you in a gentle act of love.*

4. Correcting and Encouraging

His paternity extended with impartiality to all the Institutes. If ever a partiality and preference existed, it was for those who suffered more.

How skilled he was in encouraging. After a performance, Father Hannibal gave a holy picture of Our Lady of Lourdes to a novice endowed with a beautiful voice. He wrote these words on the back, *“Hurray to the Lord and a special blessing, with the wish that the harmony [of your voice] be joined to that of holy virtues because these are the true harmonious song before the Lord.”*

The Father’s corrections were unforgettable. Once I hurriedly crossed the corridor in front of his room. He recognized my stride, came to the door, waved me to slow down, and with a smile he said, *“Don’t you remember what Dante says about haste? That ‘the wholeness [of a person] is proclaimed by his actions.’ (Purgatorio III:11). Hurrying takes perfection away from things and spoils them. Go ahead... without haste.”*

One day, from his room, Father Hannibal heard that a boy, quarreling with a companion during their games, had shouted: *‘It’s a lie!’*

The Father came out and asked, *“Who said ‘lie’? It is a lack of charity towards a companion, supposing in him the intention to deceive. You shall simply say, ‘It’s not like that!’”*

He also knew how to punish and ... make the punishment accepted with gladness.

Once he punished me to kneel in the refectory, because, while preparing the ciborium with the hosts, I filled it too much, and a host fell on the altar.

- *You have to be punished ...*

- *Gladly, Father.*

- *You will be on your knees in the refectory.*

When the punishment was over, I went to him to ask for forgiveness. When he saw me, he smiled. I knelt and began, *“Father, forgive me ...”* He did not let me continue and explained, *“The host was not yet consecrated... sometimes I give a punishment to see how my sons accept it... Go in peace ...”*

Furthermore, Father Hannibal recommended patience, moderation, good manners to the Superiors. He exhorted the Superior General, Mother Nazzarena, “*to write in a mild, humble, respectful, and uplifting manner to the brides of Jesus Christ (the Sisters).*” Then he quoted the words of the Scripture, “*The lute and the zither make a beautiful sound, but they are not comparable to a gentle tongue.*” “*With kindness and sweetness, you can say everything without offending and embittering people. Remember that the Superior General is the Vicar of the Most Holy Virgin Mary and has to imitate Her who was a dove without gall.*”

5. His Religious in the Army

Then came World War I... What a bitterness for his fatherly heart! First, he wrote a fervent prayer ‘*for our confreres in the army*’ which had to be recited every day in all the Houses.

The remembrance of his Religious who were in the army always surfaced in the hymns of July 1 of those years.

*Jesus; where are they roaming
The sons of your Rogate?
They too are Children of Italy
Among risks and perils ...
Soldiers of two armies,
Of the Italian and ... the heavenly one!*

Addressing Our Lady:

*Dear children, your beloved children,
Constant champions of the Rogate;
Now dispersed among risks and perils,
Over lands steaming with blood!
Oh, on that most beautiful among the days
Bring these dear brothers back to us!*

Again:

*O great Mother! If the divine wrath
Has also features of kind forgiveness,
In the field of so much devastation
Save our brothers consecrated to the Lord!
Remember that they are the germ
Of the Rogate of his divine Heart!*

Father Hannibal always encouraged his Religious with a good word and material help.

When he learned that I had to enlist, he wrote me right away, “*I learned that you were declared fit for the war! What can I say? I am distressed to the point of tears. However, can we mistrust the kind mercy of the Sacred Heart of Jesus? Let it never be!*”

In a circular letter to the Rogationist soldiers, he wrote, “*I take advantage of the occasion, dearest children, to advise you never to become lax in your spirit about the Divine Presence and the religious principles. May the fatigue and discomfort of the military life serve you as a very effective means by which the Lord calls you to a closer union with his divine Heart.*”

Again, “*These are all God’s ways. When you, dearest children, will return to our dear Institute as we firmly hope for the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, you will come back as grown-up men, to become champions of Jesus Christ and his beloved Evangelical Rogation! Meanwhile, the Lord desires that you pass through a series of interior and exterior sacrifices of every kind since it was written, ‘what can he know who has never suffered?’*”

It was his dream, his prayer, that all of them would come back!... He had implored it from Our Lady:

*Oh! Save Italy from shore to shore
When it is time, and reverent to You,
O Mother, let them come back to their sweet nest,
Bring them all back, in your great mercy!*

Some did not return because they did not want to, and some could not return. Bro. Mansueto Drago, one of our dear young students, lost his life on Monte Nero (Karst) on March 24, 1917. The Father enshrined his memory in the Eucharistic hymn of that year:

*Compassionate companion
Of our exile, now look
At the little flock of your Rogate
That sighs to you,
Adoring your will
On our child, Mansueto,
Whom you wanted to draw to you.*

To this, he added the prayer for all the Rogationist soldiers:

*Look at them, the tender lambs
Of your dearest sheepfold
From the temple and silence
Scattered on hostile fields!
They turn to you the cry
Of their devastated heart,
But steadfast in their faith.*

6. “Never Was my Heart so Pierced

The war also had another victim. One of Bro. Mansueto’s cousins, Bro. Mariano Drago, a coadjutor, who was a soldier in Palermo, became completely blind in a few days.

The Father wrote, *“My heart is deeply hurt! Among our dearest children, none was so warm in his love for us, especially for me, as the dearest Bro. Mariano. He must have been a victim of my sins and the present society’s sins.”*

Father Hannibal rushed to Palermo and had to struggle to get him discharged from the military.

He wrote, *“I have never been so pierced! The death of a young man in the battlefield is not the greatest pain as we thought. To lose your eyesight at the age of twenty-five and live like a dead man for another forty or fifty years is much worse. Certainly, we, who by our Lord’s grace, are Christians and his ministers, will always praise and bless God’s adorable will, but he doesn’t forbid the fatherly love we have for our dear children in Jesus Christ to implore for a grace!”*

He did the impossible for the young man to recover his sight, especially by requesting prayers from holy people and monasteries of his acquaintance. In a letter to the Mother Superior of Altamura, Sr. Maria Elisabetta, recommending very intense prayers to the Infant Jesus, he concluded, *“Say so many prayers that He must surrender!”* Jesus did not surrender because he had his special plans for the pious Brother, but the prayers were certainly effective.

In the early days of his problem, when he was still in the hospital of Palermo, the Father observed, *“The many prayers which are said for him, poor Brother, attract the merciful eye of our Lord on him. This evening the Lord gave him such an interior calm that, as I was leaving, or rather, when he let me go, I heard a sound as if he was wailing. I did not know what it was. I approached him and asked what was the matter. He answered quietly and serenely: ‘I am singing: Blood of the First Martyr.’”**

7. The Daughters of Divine Zeal in Padua

In 1917, the bishop of Padua requested the Daughters of Divine Zeal for the Belzoni Military Hospital. Father Hannibal sent eight of them and followed them with great care for the few months that they stayed there. He visited them more than once and encouraged them in the mission, which was new to them. *“You do not only have the task of comforting our afflicted brother soldiers there; you also have the task of letting your religious habit shine and be appreciated by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities as well as to prepare the beautiful work of Arcella,* where St. Anthony, the glorious wonder-worker has called us. In order to do this, you have to pay attention to your religious duties, beginning with the Morning Prayer that is so important. Never neglect any of the religious practices we are used to, according to our calendar. All shall obey like little girls the Sister leading you. She represents the Superior General, or, if you want, the Divine Superior Herself. Be very loving with each other.*

“Great is the task entrusted to you, rather wide and in a new field. You all know, however, what our weapons are: prayer, right intention, the spirit of sacrifice, the practice of

* TN. It was one of the most meaningful Hymns sung on the feast of July 1 in the Rogationist communities.

* EN. Arcella is a district on the outskirts of the City of Padua. St. Anthony of Padua died in the Poor Clare Monastery of Arcella, which about 500 meters from the land Father Hannibal bought and where the Rogationist Institute in Padua now stands.

charity as well as great respect for the religious rules among the Sisters themselves. Do not let yourselves nor the others be influenced by the behavior of the sick. Be modest with your eyes, keep an appropriate demeanor, inner concentration, and so on. Religious Sisters of active life must be like Noah's dove, which came back to the ark without wetting itself or like the sun's ray which never dims even when it touches the mud."

That year, by the end of October, the breaching of the Italian battlefield at Caporetto and the invasion of the Veneto Region [by the Austro-Hungarian Army] happened. Father Hannibal instructed the Sisters not to leave, "*As long as the hospital is there, remain there as the Holy Father has recommended for all the ecclesiastical people.*" However, Father Hannibal sent right away a telegram to all the Houses, asking for very special prayers for those Sisters. Thus, he comforted them, "*I myself, never cease unworthily to recommend you to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to the Holy Virgin, to St. Anthony of Padua, that they may protect and enlighten you in the cases of doubts when you have no one to advise you... I admire your resignation to the divine will and your perfect abandonment in God. This is the best disposition so that the Sacred Heart of Jesus may help and assist you in every circumstance. It is unnecessary to remind you and to all the perfect observance, the practice of the holy virtues, and the concern to never displease in any way the adorable Heart of Jesus that is already quite angry at the sinful humankind*".

After the withdrawal of Caporetto, the Belzoni Hospital was transferred to Florence, where the collaboration of the Daughters of the Divine Zeal was no longer needed, so they returned to Trani.

8. The Spanish Flu

The year 1918 saw the outbreak of a great epidemic, the Spanish flu. Father Hannibal wrote, "*The right, holy and divine hand of the Supreme God is felt everywhere on this mad and apostate society! Oh, what a joy it brings, even if we were to perish! Let the time of vengeance for the incessant human iniquities come! May the Most High remain vindicated and atoned for the universal human transgression! May kings and peoples oppressed under the divine scourge, be regenerated. This will be for salvation! Honor and glory only to God! However, these are still the beginnings of suffering! Let us abandon ourselves confidently to the adorable Heart of Jesus, and offer ourselves as victims of his adorable will.*"

In those days, the Father was in Apulia, going back and forth between Trani and Altamura, the Houses most affected. The one encouraging, helping, substituting nurses, and so on... was the Father with the heart of a mother.

CHAPTER 11

BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES

1. He Never Drew Back

While the Congregations and the Orphanages kept Father Hannibal constantly busy, they did not limit his activity, which extended far and wide beyond his Works. When it came to doing good, Father Di Francia never drew back.

From his early years, the Father nourished a particular devotion to St. Veronica Giuliani. Though he could not preach a Novena in Città di Castello, he contributed to the glory of St. Veronica by revealing to the world her admirable writings and publishing “*The Hidden Treasure*”, which had remained buried in the Capuchins’ archives for over a century and a half. Unfortunately, he had to stop the publication at the second volume due to illness and other commitments!

Due to Father Hannibal’s zeal and piety, the precious relic of the heart of St. Camillus was kept in Messina, which otherwise would have been transferred to Palermo.

On November 16, 1894, a strong earthquake shook Messina and it seemed a miracle that the city remained standing. The people felt a beneficial response.* Those were days of great toils for Father Hannibal and his brother. The crowds flocked to the Avignone neighborhood, longing for a word of trust and reconciliation with God. From there they moved almost in procession towards the Archbishop’s palace and Cardinal Guarino appeared on the balcony to bless the crowd with a large gesture of the left hand since his right was already paralyzed.

2. We Must Preach Jesus Crucified

Father Hannibal’s intense work in the field of sacred preaching deserves wider mention.

First, we have to know his mind about this. We can see it from the Father’s report about a speech given by Canon Ardoino for the closing of the year 1877, and published in “*The Catholic Word*” on January 2, 1878.

The preaching of Canon Ardoino “*was done with the utmost clarity and acclaim; a clarity, however, that did not dim the thought and the acclaim that did not degrade the sublimity of the Christian teachings. Indeed, the simpler the truth, the clearer and nobler it is. The quotes from the Bible and the Fathers of the Church, so indispensable for the Christian oratory, corroborated his arguments. His way of presenting was serious, certain, and dignified; he was a person who was completely imbued with the truth of his topic. Some brief inaccuracies of*

* EN: This refers to the response of conversion.

images disappeared, absorbed by the abundance of the eloquence and by the natural and sober handling of oratory forms.

“In some areas, the genius of the Christian eloquence flashed. We observed with great satisfaction that the people hung on the lips of the speaker and gave signs of regret, rather than vain and useless admiration. We will not add anything else. We really said a bit too much for the modesty of the Rev. Canon Ardoino, but we would rather take the liberty to express frankly our mind about the state of preaching in Messina. We hope that many will persuade themselves to what consists of the true value of the herald of the Divine Word. Away with the vain ostentation of intricate scholastic and nebulous philosophy. A well explained Gospel parable is worth more than all the pompous declamations. The depository of Christian morals is a great sea, from which one can always draw with success and perhaps with less effort.

“It is the proclamation of God’s Word, as the Prophet says, that enlightens and gives understanding to the children. Is it not perhaps with the practical presentation of this morality that Massillons, Bourdaloue, and Bossuet in France, and Segneri, Tornielo, Venini, and Ventura, and many others in Italy ascended to high levels of Christian eloquence? Is it not by explaining the Gospel and correcting the people’s habits that Tertullian, St. Augustine, St. Basil, and St. John Chrysostom, through the eternal miracle of Christian oratory, touched the summit of eloquence? Let us always keep these models in our hands. Let us draw from the Bible, from the Fathers, from the Gospel, and from the sound theological doctrine. Let us organize the material we have to present. Let us study the art of properly adorning it and making it acceptable. Let us deal with the ministry of the Divine Word with the purity of intention, with sincerity of heart, with order, clarity, relevance, sparing in embellishment, then we will obtain the profit of souls!

“Let us always remember that we must preach Jesus Christ Crucified and not ourselves.”

3. His Eloquence

The Lord had given Father Hannibal an easy, lively, and fascinating eloquence; a sharp voice, though not very strong, which pierces the audience like a blade; and a measured, expressive gesturing, and the fire of the heart ... His sermons were remembered for a long time.

Though he could not dedicate himself completely to preaching, he would gladly take advantage of every opportunity to pour out his soul through words.

However, in his self-eulogy, he judges his eloquence this way: *“When he became a Priest he dedicated himself to preaching and, almost immediately, to this Pious Work. His preaching had ups and downs. Sometimes his sermons were vibrant, sometimes miserable! He used to say that two phenomena happened during his sermons: some people yawned while others cried.”*

Yet, the judgment of his listeners was different. Canon Celona recalled, *“His interior life had the opportunity to be manifested externally through his preaching, which flowed spontaneously and eloquently from his heart; people listened to it with immense pleasure and produced abundant fruit.”* He had his own distinct way of speaking. In Brà (in the Province of Cuneo), once Don Orione asked Father Hannibal to say a few words to the novices and priests of his Congregation. Don Risi, who was present, confessed, *“For me, it was a fascination, for what he said and the way he said it.”*

Parish priests and rectors of churches, especially during the early years of his priesthood, were vying for him; and he could not deny them.

He had the utmost respect for the Word of God and therefore, except in special cases, he never improvised, no matter who the audience was, even if they were only a few boys or very modest Religious Sisters, despite his natural ease and long practice of speaking.

4. In Special Occasions

Father Hannibal left us voluminous notes of sermons, instructions, panegyrics, discussions, etc. He always wrote down an outline, or rather a fairly developed draft and sometimes he wrote out the entire speech, though only a few. Among them, we recall the panegyrics on Our Lady of the *'Lettera'* and of the *'Racomandati'*, on St. Ignatius, St. Clare, St. Mark, St. Aloysius, St. Euplius, St. Cyrus, and Blessed Eustochio. Understandably, he wrote down sermons in full for special occasions so that he could read them. We also mention some funeral eulogies, which became memorable, because on great events, Messina wanted to hear Father Hannibal's word.

In 1885, Canon Ardoino, a distinguished scholar of moral theology, whose fame had filled Sicily, died. In the funeral eulogy, Father Hannibal raised a hymn to the priesthood as the light of peoples with the double beam of science and holiness. Naturally, the memories of his young years emerged, *"Tender and sad remembrances! It seems to me to see Canon Ardoino, when, calm and serene, during the classes in our Seminary, as a good master among his pupils, he explained the cumbersome moral questions and made more intelligible the scholarly pages of Scavini... to us young students. He was always joyful, lovable, patient! The following years found him always in the same place. The classes changed, clerics succeeded clerics, new students attended the classes, but he was always at his place, indefatigable to teach and cultivate the blossoms of the Sanctuary! Alas! A new generation of clerics will enter that class tomorrow, but the ancient Master will not be there anymore to teach them!"*

For the death of the Archbishop, Cardinal Guarino, in such a magnificent re-enactment, Father Hannibal remembers him as *"A father who quivers with tenderness and love for his sons; a Shepherd who pours out himself for his sheep; and a Prince who saintly reigns and governs in the midst of his people."*

The funeral eulogy for Leo XIII was splendid.

Since the temporal power of the Popes had ended, the sectarian liberalism foresaw and announced the end of the Church with the death of Pius IX. However, the Divine Providence raised Leo XIII, *"the prophetic light in the sky"* (*lumen in caelo*), who in his twenty-five years of pontificate, cast his rays all over the world. *"He magnificently increased the brightness and splendor of the Holy Church; he expanded the kingdom of God in the world, brought Christ back in front of the earthly realms, and showed Him as He is in Catholicism: the God of peace, love, and truth; the God of eternal life."* He made the moral power of the Papacy shine forth with vivid light that has no need for material weapons to triumph over a convulsed, restless, and unrestrained century. *"He donned the strongest spiritual weapons. He put on the armor of fortitude and constancy; he grasped the shield of evangelical doctrine and of the sanctity of his rights; he adjusted the helmet of the great concepts of the Catholic faith; he brandished the two-edged sword of the Divine Word. Then, entrusting himself to a great, invincible leader, that is the spirit of true prudence and of Christian meekness, he entered the struggle and won"*.

The memory of Leo XIII inevitably linked to his social action.

Father Hannibal wrote, *"What a vast field opens before me; how can I travel it all in such a short time? Should I talk about the great importance of this social problem? Of the arguments that the miseries of the working class offer socialism to put forward its theories, and*

proclaim itself as the expected messiah of peoples? But I keep silent because it seems to me to see that diaphanous and trembling hand of the Vicar of Christ as if from his coffin he would place his hand over his heart to tell me, 'Here (in my heart) I brought the weary workers!'"

Then Father Hannibal mentions Leo XIII's Encyclical letters: *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *On the Christian Democracy* (1901).

5. Commemorating Ludwig Windthorst

We cannot neglect a page of Father Hannibal's life that has a particular connection with the present times, especially what concerns the apostolate of the laity: the commemoration of Ludwig Windthorst (1812-1891), an eminent champion of Catholicism in Germany who fiercely stood against Bismarck and forced him to surrender.

*"Windthorst was the man stirred by the Divine Providence... Among the many persecutions which targeted the Church of Jesus Christ in our day, the one that came from the most powerful nation in the world, Germany, is not to be considered the last. The inadequate laws already manifested the persecution, while at the head of the Germany of Luther, the most intelligent politician of our times, Otto von Bismarck, was the arbiter of the destinies of peoples. He almost issued a challenge to the Papacy by saying: We will not go to Canossa!"**

However, there was a man who took up the gauntlet and went down into the field to compete with the feared Prussian. This man was Windthorst!

What he did to overthrow the head of the German parliament cannot be explained by simply stating the facts. Nevertheless, with the eye of faith, we have to admire the grace of the Lord, which penetrates the hearts, invests the minds, ignites, arouses, moves, agitates, inspires, and fills with a sacred fury, as the biblical expression rightly tells: 'I was filled with sacred fury' because the God who forms the saints also forms the geniuses. He is the one who creates devotion and courage, compassion, and fortitude, the ecstasy of love, and the ardor of struggle! He does everything to everybody, as the Apostle says. Thus, while the clouds saturated with horrible storm thickening on the cold north to pour down on the mystical little boat of Peter, suddenly a breath of wind scatters them. They flee, disappear, the storm dissolves, serenity returns, and the fierce opponent of Catholicism withdraws his gauntlet, tears his unjust laws, and turns reverent and humiliated to the venerable Old Man of the Vatican.

The Providence obtained its intent: Windthorst, the providential man, accomplished his mission!"

Father Hannibal then speaks of the efforts and battles sustained by Windthorst to arrive at the triumph of his Christian ideal, *"He saw with his own eyes all the enemy camps. A majority had to be created; the Catholics had to unite into one and oppose their energy and will to the unbridled progress of the adversaries of the Catholic religion. First, it was necessary that this core, this center of lively, active, and combative Catholicism, be true Catholicism, be the constituted, organized, and compact Catholic laity whose principles were purely Catholic. The greater difficulty of our time is that many call themselves Catholic, but few are those who openly profess in their entirety the principles of Catholicism! Windthorst went beyond his time and difficulties. He was a man of mind and heart but also a man of action and eloquence. He gathered around him the Catholic members of the German parliament, formed a great*

* TN. Canossa is a municipality and castle town in the Province of Reggio Emilia, northern Italy. It is the site where Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV did penance in 1077, standing three days bare-headed in the snow, in order to reverse his excommunication by Pope Gregory VII. The Walk to Canossa is sometimes used as a symbol of the changing relationship between the medieval Church and State.

majority, and indeed established it so firm and compact, that it seemed to be a single person. In this way, he was able to impose himself on the adversaries of the Church and repress their bold impudence!”

Father Hannibal then expounds on the consequences derived from the example of the great Windthorst, for the Christians of his time and ours. *“What is then the duty of the Catholics? What are the sentiments that we have to awaken in us in front of the venerable coffin of such a generous son of the Church? Our duty is nothing else but to foster evermore, with all our strength, the honor of the mystical sanctuary of God, the Catholic Church. We have to proceed in this sacred task with that integrity of conscience, purity of principles, firmness of purpose, and freedom of spirit and speech with which the great Windthorst fulfilled his noble career as a distinguished defender of the right cause.”*

Then, turning to the young promoters of that commemoration, Father Hannibal urged them, *“This model is offered first to you, the youth, that you may learn to love the Church, to honor its holy laws and the Catholic devotion, which the world calls bigotry, while they form the great men who earn universal admiration.*

“There is a glory based on the vanity of foolish human evaluation. However, it soon lapses and dims before the impartial judgment of history and in the face of the serene and unbiased conscience of the new people. Then, there is the true glory, which passes through time, because it is a reflection of the eternal glory; the glory of those who can say in the midst of human vicissitudes and earthly defeats, ‘I have loved justice and hated iniquity!’ Let us leave its nonsense to the world and let us rejoice in being children of the Church and in aspiring to the true glory.

“If we let the Kingdom of God on earth be our whole ambition, we cannot but be victorious. The heavens harmonize and the heavenly creatures echo us. God is with us! Let us be brave, without letting ourselves be intimidated by human respect. Let us not be ashamed to call ourselves Catholics, because Jesus Christ said, if you do not acknowledge me before men, neither will I acknowledge you before my Father. Let us manifest our religion in our works and first in the purity of our principles. Let half-baked Catholicism be far from us, which accepts all the articles of the Law but always with some reservation; which respects the Vicar of Jesus Christ but with certain conditions, and which compromises with the opponents of the Church. In short, let us stay away from Catholicism that is not pure and integral, mixed with the false maxims of the world, whereby some, while calling themselves sons of the Church, do not shun from becoming earnest admirers and supporters of the enemies of the Church!”

He concludes, *“Be united, young people, in the sole intent of defending the holy cause, because strength is in unity! ... Such are, gentlemen, the feelings that the memory of that great Ludwig Windthorst, must awaken in us as a true model of the Catholic laity,”*

6. The ‘Geltrudine’ of the Sacred Heart

In 1910, Father Hannibal became acquainted with an Institute consecrated to St. Geltrude, founded in Naples by a Benedictine Oblate, Lady Geltrude Gomez d’Anza, and assisted by Fr. Angelo Padovano. An orphanage was later added to the initial workshop intended to assist young working women. The work was sailing amidst innumerable difficulties and needed help.

Father Di Francia, as usual, did not spare himself and worked through the press to make the new Institution known, calling the attention especially of the Neapolitans to it. For two

years, he also left two Daughters of Divine Zeal in Naples, dressed with the Benedictine habit, for the formation of the 'Geltrudine of the Heart of Jesus'.

In one of his papers, Fr. Padovano attributes to Father Hannibal the title of *Co-founder*, and this makes us believe that he did much to help that Work, which today, thank God, is flourishing.

7. The Daughters of Sacro Costato

The Daughters of Sacro Costato (Sacred Side), required a greater commitment. The very devout Fr. Eustachio Montemurro, helped by Fr. Saverio Valerio, with the valid collaboration of the Jesuit Fr. Gennaro Bracale, had founded them in Gravina di Puglia (Bari) in 1908. However, just a few years later, in 1911, under the accusation of engaging in pseudo-mysticism, the competent ecclesiastical authorities dismissed the founders and suppressed the foundation.

The Bishops of the dioceses in which the Daughters of the Sacro Costato were zealously exercising their apostolate, obtained from St. Pius X permission to try to save the Institute by giving it a new direction. Thus, they placed the almost devastated Work in the hands of Father Di Francia, to infuse new life and vigor into it. Father Hannibal worked at this with so much diligence and love that later he wrote "*I have looked after the Daughters of Sacro Costato as one of my foundations and I have consumed myself to help and carry them forward.*"

First, he renewed their spirit, giving them a regulation suited to their condition. In presenting it to the communities, he wrote, "*Consider well that you will have a great need to observe it because you must consider yourselves as a community that was struck and dissolved by the Holy Church... Why? Humility requires that you believe that you have received this tremendous blow for your sins and neglect. Therefore, with a great spirit of humility, compunction, and contrition you have to welcome these rules, and accept them as a means that the compassionate Lord offers you for your spiritual resurrection. Do not neglect this means of salvation. Consider that from the perfect observance of these rules you could obtain the greatest advantages. You will be a holy community attracting other souls to this holy vocation, your Houses will always progress, new Houses will open, the good of souls in the Holy Church will multiply... and the Divine Mercy will give you more than you have lost.*"

The Institution not only recovered but also began to prosper happily. In 1919, because of a disagreement with Mons. Razzoli, Bishop of Potenza, Mons. Farina was sent as Apostolic Visitor. This sanctioned the split of the Daughters of *Sacro Costato* into two branches: the *Catechist Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus*, under the Bishop of Potenza, and the *Missionary Sisters of the Sacro Costato* who remained loyal to Father Hannibal, and after his death affiliated themselves to the Society of Jesus.

Both Congregations are now of pontifical right and, with God's help, are doing much good in the holy Church.

CHAPTER 12

THE BREAD OF ST. ANTHONY

1. Financial Difficulties

For over twenty years, the financial difficulties were the heaviest among the many worries of Father Hannibal's works. They were tribulations that he overcame by blindly entrusting himself to the Divine Providence.

In 1901 he wrote, *"From the point of view of its means of survival, this Work could only last one day, that is, today, and for tomorrow there is nothing. Still, we do not worry much about this, as it seems to us that what is important for our Work is to take care of the Divine Glory and of the good of souls, with the right intention - which is pure grace from God. Works are not created with gold or silver, but by laying their bases on the purest principles of fear of God and the holy Christian virtues. About this, yes, we often worry, to the point of being several times on the edge of giving up..."*

"On the other hand, that Divine Providence, which feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the fields, has never let us down, and has often helped us in a very admirable way!"

During the time of Father Hannibal, the laws and benefits inspired by social justice, which are the achievements of our days, did not exist then. The orphan, who did not have family properties remained abandoned, and those who engaged in works of beneficence, could only count on private charity. Usually, the priest's cassock was not welcomed, especially by public administrators.

2. I am a Priest...

Having applied for a subsidy of 3,000 Lire from the Municipality of Messina for the festivities of mid-August 1902, Father Hannibal had to withstand, together with the denial of the contribution, a series of insults in the Council Hall, which stirred in him an energetic reaction.

The Father bravely wrote, *"The gentlemen Counselors opposing me are making it a matter of their party and principles to pretend that for 3,000 Lire I sell my principles and accept theirs. However, if they are unbelievers, rationalists, atheists, and enemies of the priests, I am a priest, I am a cleric, I am a Roman Catholic, apostolic, and I am faithful to my priestly uniform. I am proud of my religious principles, which have sustained and will sustain me in the tremendous fight for the salvation of so many unfortunate little creatures, who, with all the rants and the insults of my opponents, would now be either in prison or in prostitution houses. I am aware that my educational system aims at forming honest, hardworking, and civil young people.*

"I remain unconcerned about the denial of the annual 3,000 Lire subsidy, as I always confided in that highest Providence who feeds the little birds of the air with the worm under the stone! I had mixed feelings of horror and pity, when I realized that today's society was sliding down the slope."

3. All the Needy had Recourse to Him

Father Hannibal's modest family properties soon vanished like smoke as the needs multiplied day by day, as the people assisted by him were like a circle far too wide for his charity.

All the needy went to him and never went away unsatisfied. He would give without counting the cost and without reservation, giving always to everyone. The less he felt he had, the more generous he was in giving, convinced that this was the very secret to attract the Divine delights and to force the Divine Providence to greater generosity. In Messina, they used to say, "*This is the House of Father Francia, whoever comes, can sit and eat.*"

Father Hannibal left written for his followers, "*The Rogationists must remember that our pious Work was born with this holy mission of giving and that the more we give, the more the Lord will give us. In fact, He said: 'Give one, and you will receive a hundred, and you will possess eternal life.'*" Elsewhere he added, "*There is more happiness in giving than in receiving.*"

What a pleasant sight to see him sitting among the poor! Eating with them, after scraping together from them, on his knees, some of their food, all for the love of God, talking affably to them, catechizing them, distributing alms while his face radiated with joy! He would get the money from a metal little pot, smiling and saying, "*Inside this pot, money boils and multiplies for the poor...*"

4. An Unpleasant Accusation

The supernatural principles were the constant rule of his life and enlightened all his charitable activities. Naturally, opponents were never lacking, but he did not care, though on one occasion he wanted also to justify himself.

He wrote, "*They accuse me of helping the poor. This accusation truly displeases me. Helping the poor, the afflicted, the miserable, the abandoned that are dying from hunger and cold, and the blind and the crippled who are unable to work, is the duty of every Christian, even if it requires some effort. Jesus Christ our Lord told us to do to others what we would like them to do to us.*"

"*They say, 'You do not have the means to help the poor because you have to take care of the orphans.'*"

"*I never took anything away from my orphans to assist the poor. I obtained the means for my orphans from public generosity and I experienced that the Divine Providence, to whom the poor is worth as much as the rich, never left me without the means to give some soup and a piece of bread to the needy.*"

"*They say, 'You are helping beggars who could work.'*"

"*I beg you, gentlemen, to come one day to my Institute at noontime, and you will see the pool of Bethesda.* You will see feeble old men, blind, crippled people languishing from hunger. I can assure you that I lifted some of them who fainted from hunger. If then among those there are some who are jobless, isn't it true that even among those without an occupation there are some who cannot find a job in their trade, even though they are willing to work?*"

* EN. The term *probatica piscina* was used in the Italian original. The reference is the healing pool in John 5:2.

Should society sentence them to death? But charity and humanity do not dare to do it, to deny the charity of a piece of bread.”

“They say, ‘We know that some of the poor are deceiving you and stealing from you.’

“It may happen that under false appearances of extreme poverty a rascal may conceal himself and rob me of a plate of soup and of a morsel of bread (truly a very grave crime!) However, I cannot adopt the saying ‘so that the culprit may not escape, let the just man perish’. I mean, for the fear of giving bread to a false beggar, I cannot deny it to so many truly unhappy people!

“Do they steal from me? Please, gentlemen, didn’t anyone steal from you? Didn’t it ever happen that human fraud and falsification took money away from your pockets and safe boxes, in spite of your vigilance and attention? Maybe I am touching a painful spot or awakening painful experiences!

“I beg you, therefore, not to criticize me so light-heartedly if, while I distribute help to so many unhappy people, among the throng there happens to infiltrate a beggar, who at the end, is twice unhappy! Yes! Society did not take care of him when he was a young rascal, a little beggar; he was left to himself and he gave himself to a bad life. Today, will society sentence him to death? At least may he find, in the heavenly breath of charity, a feeling of peace, which could bring him back to better thoughts.”

5. Debts and Creditors

With Father Hannibal’s great generosity of heart and of hand, it was natural for debts to pile up, with consequent serious troubles. The pressing and continuous requests of the creditors sometimes went as far as insults, abuses, and threats.

Prof. Gazzarra witnessed one day a disgusting scene, which could have ended tragically but fortunately had a happy conclusion. A creditor presented himself at the door, firmly decided either to be paid or to do something insane... Father Hannibal, calmly tried to soothe him, but he ranted even more. Providence intervened at the right moment. Just then an envelope from an anonymous donor arrived, which made up for the debt, with a substantial amount left for the needs of the House.

Another time, Mr. Presente, tired of waiting for the payment of the bread he supplied to the orphans, had a warrant issued against Father Hannibal. In the court, the judge asked Father Hannibal if he had a lawyer. He got from his pocket an image of St. Joseph and said, *“This is my lawyer. I recognize my debt and I want to pay, and I will do it certainly as soon as the Providence will send me the money.”*

At this point, Mr. Presente came forward to object, “Always these words, confidence in St. Joseph: I have to pay, I shall pay, let’s wait for Providence. Anyway, let us wait again and for today we don’t talk anymore...” Thus, the court hearing ended.

6. The Providence Always Intervened

Indeed, if the Divine Providence placed its faithful servant, Father Hannibal, in difficulties to let him practice his faith and increase his merits, it never failed to timely intervene in mysterious ways. When all seemed lost, at the last moment, an unexpected resource would change the situation! It did not happen just once that at lunch or suppertime there was nothing on the table, then Father Hannibal gathered his children around him, set them at prayer, or more

often led them in front of the Tabernacle or of the statue of Our Lady, and the Providence arrived without fail.

An episode of evangelical flavor.

In one of the frequent days of a low ebb, the orphans went to the refectory while the tables were still empty. Father Hannibal entered, "*Children, let us pray, and the Lord, will not leave us without the necessary.*" As soon as the prayer ended, a big tuna fish was brought to the door, together with a large basket of bread, which provided abundantly for the meal. The tuna had been exceptionally caught that very morning in the waters of Milazzo, and an unknown benefactor thought that it could serve well for the little orphans.

On another occasion, the Sisters complained that there were no more underclothes for the girls. The Father said, "*Let them ask Our Lady.*" The girls prayed and Our Lady listened to them. Unexpectedly a cart full of clothes, sent by a generous woman came to the door. There were bed sheets, shirts, tissues, plus a steel bed, and four mattresses. While the people in the House were busy in settling all those providential items, another gift, a good quantity of noodles, arrived from God's grace, sent by an unknown person.

One evening, the young men assigned to the kitchen went to the Father to say that in the House there was not even a drop of oil to dress the salad. The Father said, "*Did you check well?*"

"Very well, and the jar is totally empty."

"Then go back and look harder." They went back to the pantry. Their eyes were wide open, as the jar was filled to the brim with oil. In the meantime, the Father with hands joined raised his eyes to heaven in a gesture of prayer. The boys came back happy, "*Father, we have oil! We have enough...!*"

Another time, the Father was asked urgently for 78 Lire for some immediate needs of the House. The Father was with Fr. Vitale and Canon Celona. Only Fr. Vitale, checking his pockets, could find a few pennies, 2 Lire in all.

"Let the children go to the church," ordered Father Hannibal. He put on the surplice and the stole, opened the tabernacle, and began to recite the Our Father. At the end of the prayers, the door-bell rang. It was the postman, with an urgent registered mail.

While Father Hannibal had the envelope in his hands, he asked the 2 Lire from Fr. Vitale to give to the postman as a tip. The latter protested. He objected because it was too much, especially for Father Di Francia who had so many children to care for. However, Father Hannibal was generous. He insisted and the postman had to accept it.

The package was opened. A pair of golden earrings and an envelope, with a note which specified that the earrings should be attached to the statue of St. Anthony, while the money in the envelope - there were four golden coins worth 20 Lire each - would serve for the needs of the orphans. So St. Anthony had sent the needed 78 Lire plus the tip for the postman!

We have to add immediately that the final solution to the financial problems of Father Hannibal's Work was taken over by the glorious St. Anthony of Padua.

7. The First Acquaintance with St. Anthony

St. Anthony did not enjoy a special devotion in the Di Francia family. After St. Joseph, came St. Francis di Paola. Father Hannibal's father and brother were named after him. Once upon a time, the authentic citizens of Messina used to call St. Francis of Paola '*The Holy*

Father’ because they could not forget his miraculous landing at Ringo, a beach near Messina, after crossing the straits in his tattered mantle.

I do not remember if it was in the beginnings of his life as a cleric or as a priest, when the Father lost a silver buckle of his shoe, the necessary complement of the priest’s attire in those times, at least in Southern Italy. They advised him to pray to St. Anthony to find it. He addressed prayers to the Saint for some days, but the buckle was nowhere to be found. Finally, he decided to buy a new buckle, so he went to the jeweler who said right away, “*Here is your buckle; it was found in the street and brought to me, in case its owner might show up!*”

Thus, St. Anthony and Father Hannibal made their first acquaintance! Afterward, St. Anthony became the special patron of the Father’s Work.

8. The 1887 Cholera Epidemic

In September-October 1887, an outbreak of cholera created havoc in Messina. Among the orphans of Father Di Francia, there was only one victim, Sarino, a small, intelligent, five-year-old angel, who knew his prayers well and repeated them during his sickness. He died reciting the Hail Mary.

Among the girls, Rosa di Blasi, 11, fell into a coma but recovered and overcame the crisis after Father Hannibal administered the Anointing of the Sick to her.

Father Hannibal himself could have been a victim, as he contracted the illness but recovered quickly without consequences. However, an old lady who had offered her life for him got sick with cholera and died.

It was on that occasion that the devotion to St. Anthony’s bread for the orphans of Father Di Francia was born. Mrs. Susanna Consiglio Miceli, a widow, while the epidemic was raging, made the promise that if St. Anthony would save her and her relatives, she would offer 60 Lire *to the orphans of Father Di Francia to buy bread for them in honor of St. Anthony.*

Mrs. Susanna obtained the grace and kept her promise, sending her offering through her house helper, the young Letterio Currò. She began renewing her offering whenever she needed a special grace, and St. Anthony never failed to grant it to her because of the prayers of the little orphans.

The devotion to *St. Anthony’s bread for the poor*, developed in Toulon (France) by Theresa Bouffier, began in 1890, three years after it started in Messina.

9. The Anthonian Orphanages

Father Hannibal placed his orphans under the protection of St. Anthony and named them “*Anthonian Little Orphans*” (*Orfanelli Antoniani*) and his charitable Institutions “*Anthonian Orphanages.*”¹⁰ On the wall of the small chapel, he placed a modest image of St.

¹⁰ There is no documentation at all of the alleged dialogue of Father Hannibal with the Servant of God Fr. Gioacchino La Lomia, Capuchin (1831-1905). According to Fr. Da Porretta (Cf. *Popular Life of the Canon Hannibal M. Di Francia*, p. 50) it should have happened in the Church of the Holy Spirit and it should have given origin to the devotion to St. Anthony in the Works of Father Hannibal. The visit to Avignone indeed took place in the early years immediately after Fr. La Lomia’s return from missions (1880), when the Father’s Works were in their beginnings, but nothing was involved concerning the Church of the Holy Spirit nor of the devotion to St. Anthony. Speaking of Father Gioacchino, Father Hannibal used to praise his virtues, especially the simplicity with which he narrated prodigious facts that the Lord had done through him, but he never had any reference to regarding

Anthony in front of which candles were lit, and the orphans raised their hands in prayer. The devotion to St. Anthony thus began. Later, it will have a very great development in the majestic Temple of the Evangelical Rogation and Shrine of St. Anthony.

Father Hannibal and his collaborators started the [Anthonian] promotion in the churches of the various dioceses of Sicily through small collection boxes for the *Bread of St. Anthony for the Little Orphans of Canon Di Francia*. There was a frame on the boxes explaining the purpose of the Institute and the nature of the devotion, which aimed at the renewal of morals and the development of Christian life, thus not limiting itself to obtaining material favors from the Saint.

Father Hannibal wrote, "*The aim of those who expect graces from St. Anthony of Padua must be the true spiritual good for themselves and their relatives, oriented to eternal life, otherwise any devotion will degenerate into superstition.*" "*This devotion has to be understood in a Catholic sense, and not as superstition and simony. That is, the graces of St. Anthony cannot be bought by money but are obtained through faith and charity; a pure and right faith in God and in His saints, as well as charity towards the orphans and the poor out of love for Jesus and St. Anthony.*"

Later the Father published '*The Miraculous Secret*', a pamphlet whose editions multiplied year after year. In 1908, Father Hannibal started "*God and Neighbor*", a monthly magazine of a rather modest appearance and with a circulation that in a few years exceeded the 700,000 copies, propagated the name of Fr. Di. Francia and of his Institutes throughout the five continents.

'*God and Neighbor*', as the periodical of the orphanages continued until 1942. After World War II each orphanage created its own publication of the '*Herald of St. Anthony*'.

the devotion to St. Anthony. Instead, Father Hannibal often said that he had been encouraged by Fr. Bernardo, his Franciscan confessor from Portosalvo, always after the event of Mrs. Miceli.

CHAPTER 13

“FAITH AND POETRY”

1. A Little Bit of Parnassus' Inspiration

In 1921, the *Printing Press of the Male Orphanage* in Oria printed a book collecting a good number of Father Hannibal's poems. The title was “*Faith and Poetry*”.

In previous pages, we hinted about the Father's poetic talent.

Father Hannibal breathed poetry in his family. He wrote, “*When I was nine, I started scribbling verses. My father, whom I did not know because he died when I was two years old, was a good poet, interested in our most renowned poets. He wrote and published poems according to their classical style. My mother also had a taste for poetry. That is why my two brothers and I had a touch of the Parnassus' inspiration.*”

He sharpened and brought to proper form this natural talent in the school of Felice Bisazza who enjoyed in those days the wide fame as an easy and elegant poet, although pretentious literary critics downplay his legacy today.

According to Father Di Francia however, Bisazza, as a poet can “*be put side by side with the greatest geniuses of the modern poetry.*” *Modern, not contemporary*, he frankly notes, because the latter brought us *libertinism* also in poetry! “*Freedom of everything! Freedom of religion, worship, press, thought, and writing verses. Why do we have to depend on syllables, accents, rhyme, and imitative harmony? It would be slavery for free-thinking!*” Thus, according to the canons of contemporary poetry, Father Hannibal cannot be considered a poet.

2. I Wrote... as I Felt a Poetic Inspiration

The Father had the same concept of poetry as Bisazza, but he had no intention of being compared to him. “*I know my limitation. I almost feel belittled and disappear in calling to mind the many ancient and modern poets who are so plentiful in our Italy, the land of flowers, songs, poetry, the enchantment of nature, and smiles of God's creation.*”

He remarks, “*I wrote many poetic compositions when I was very young because I felt the poetic inspiration, and still more, that intimate and indefinite sentiment for what is beautiful, pure and kind love for all that is good and holy. It happens that what we feel with a little bit of poetry, we love to externalize in those poetic forms what reflects the internal feeling.*

“*However, I was so far from considering myself a real poet and a person of letters that I abandoned and scattered almost all my poems. My humble dedication to charitable Works for the abandoned orphans and the poor left me almost no time for literary study.*”

Certainly, by nature, he had a noble, delicate, very sensitive, and affectionate heart; an excitable and creative fantasy, an intimate, gentle sentiment, spontaneity, and taste for beauty and rhythm. He mastered his verses. They flowed from him clearly and in a very easy manner, enriched with special and charming images. What more do we want from a poet?

His book, “*Faith and Poetry*”, was printed not because the author wanted it. Father Hannibal reveals its origin this way, “*Some years ago, the clever young people of my Institute researched diligently my humble writings. After gathering them, they asked me for permission*

to print them. I could not deny because of the affection with which they had undertaken such a poetic task.”

3. His Plan

In 1869, the Father published a booklet, “*First poems of Hannibal Di Francia from Messina*”. The conclusion of its preface is a program that enlightened his poetic work, “*The grandeur of his homeland and the glories of his God will be the poet’s rhythms!*”

To sing ‘*the glories of his God!*’ This is the synthesis of Father Di Francia’s poetic work, and the program he faithfully kept throughout his life. God is always the theme of his songs: God in the Blessed Sacrament, God in his most Holy Mother, God in his Saints, God in his Church.

Obviously, not all poems have the same value. Poetic impetus, distinctly chosen form, deep thoughts, and genial concepts could not accompany him in all the poems, and constantly keep him on the level of excellence.

Furthermore, as we learned from him, the author is not a professional poet, and in his hard-working life, he “*had much more and better things to do than to put together poems of rhymed verse,*” according to G. Papini.* Father Hannibal had to rush here and there, where the manifold needs of his charitable Institutions summoned him. Usually, his poems were written in the midst of the most demanding activities, sometimes also during his travels, even on the train. A great number of them were composed for the Saints and their feasts, to be sang by the devotees. Thus, they were usually written in a “*rather popular and modest style, and always in connection with their respective prayers.*”

There are however compositions “*which are not so easy and popular in their style and form but are rather lofty and poetic, according to my limited capacities and little skills.*” Among these, let us mention the ‘*Octaves to Our Lady of Lourdes*’; the ‘*Roman Reminiscences*’; the free verses ‘*For the death of Carolina Taccone Gallucci and of Santi Nicola Proto*’; the poem ‘*For the death of the Knight Jaculani*’, and some others.

4. The Hymns of July 1

The “Hymns for July 1” that celebrate the great Eucharistic Feast of the Institution for the first coming and permanence of the sacramental Jesus [in the Chapel of Avignone], were published after Father Hannibal’s death. One of the activities of the celebration was a new Hymn dedicated to Jesus and another to Mary according to the new title given each year. All the communities sang these hymns in their church.

He wrote all the poems without any literary preoccupation. It would have been useless since they were intended for that crowd of children and poor who were not looking for literature. However, we find in them the overflowing heart of Father Hannibal who used the occasion of the coming of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament to renew his constant love and faithfulness to Him.

The Hymns have three parts. The second has general characteristics, explaining and singing the new title, while the first and the third reflect the nature and special circumstances

* TN. A renowned Italian journalist, essayist, literary critic, poet, philosopher, and writer of the first half of the 20th century.

of Father Hannibal's Work. An Institution born in the midst of hardship, enriched by an immense trust in God, and ennobled by the magnificent coat of arms of the great Word of Jesus: *Pray, therefore, the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers in his harvest (Rogate ergo Dominum messis ut mittat operarios in messem suam)*. The Father recalled and repeated this divine Word and command in thousands of ways because it constitutes the great longing of his apostolic heart that found in the *Rogate* the secret of the salvation of souls and of the entire world.

"The 'Hymns' usually open with a cry of joy for the happy return of the Lord, or with an ardent invocation to Him by the Institution, which implores Him with sighs in the bitterness of His temporary absence.

"The last part is a memory of the Eucharistic Mystery. Jesus in the Eucharist reminds us about Priesthood, which generates, guards, and distributes the Eucharist to the people who, in the Eucharist, experience the salvific effects of the new Title. However, in a very special way, the Institution feels and enjoys the same effects since it places its glory in living and being consumed around the Tabernacle. These concepts, though repeated so many times, are always expressed with new words and ardent insistence, vibrant with holy enthusiasm, and celestial fervor.

"In addition, in the 'Hymns', the Most Holy Virgin, and our many patron Saints are seen in this perspective: their heavenly protection mainly bestowed on the Institution in its eventful life." (Di Francia, Hymns for July 1, p. 18)

5. Some Examples

Father Hannibal gathers all his children around the Eucharistic throne of '*Jesus Most-Worthy of Infinite Praise*':

*Little children snatched from the oblivion
Of the danger of an unhappy fate,
Little orphans, creatures of God,
Pure virgins, consecrated to the Lord,
And you all, whose eyes are now wet with tears,
Poor people in your abandonment and hardship,
All men and women, kneeling in front of his throne,
Let us praise Jesus the Savior.*

To '*Jesus the Divine Builder*':

*Come back! Come back! Raise your shouts
Bursting with joy from the fervent hearts
Let the little flowerbed stand up and smile:
A feast day has come for its children.
The God of the Altars, the Love of the chosen ones,
From the heavens shining in their eternal sapphire
From the brilliant stars dancing and turning around,*

He finally came back as a 'Divine Builder'!

Behold, the '*Divine Emperor*' approaches:

*As a sound of angelic harps,
As a bursting of harmonies
Of the infinite spaces,
It invades all fields and roads!
It soars really so high
In a bright sea of splendor,
It's a cry, just one cry
Long live, 'Divine Emperor'!*

What a profound pain is the absence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament from the empty and deserted chapel!

*It looked like it was crying
The little bare, neglected church;
The open Tabernacle
Seemed to say, "Come back!"
"Come back" it seemed to cry
The blown-out candles,
The faithful hymn was silent
On the innocent children's lips*

The *Rogate* is the aim of the Institution:

*Hail, Jesus! Among the remnants
A sprout is blossoming,
The beats of your Rogate
Pulsate in all its leaves,
It prays... My God, make it flourish
With its prayer... with your prayer!*

The glory of the Institution is to immerse itself in the Divine Heart, '*Ever-Burning Furnace of Eternal Love*':

*You, little unknown spark
Wandering, the fun of the whirlwind,
Go, plunge into that burning Heart
And into the flames of his love.
There, totally lost in that fire*

*You'll burn in the intoxication of love:
To be consummated inside that Heart
Will be your most beautiful glory.*

Father Di Francia considered his religious poems in the light of his apostolate. He wrote, *"Since they are directed to the worship and honor of the Saints of the Lord, these little things [poems] will be of more profit and good for my poor spirit, though sometimes, they will seem to me better than others, stained with my vanity!"*

We believe however that because of these "little things" the author deserves his place of honor among the popular religious poets in the Italian literature.

6. Poems in Prose

Father Hannibal also wrote poems in prose. For special events, he composed poetic works in prose entitled 'Psalms'. However, their poetic surge was so compelling, pressing, and vibrating, to enchant the spirit and bring it to the highest contemplation.

For the third centennial of St. Louis (1891), he wrote *"Lily and Angel"* which *"The Catholic Mother"*, a magazine printed in Brescia, published in full, defining it as *"a really so admirable, beautiful, and so highly inspired canticle. We call it 'Canticle' because, though it is written in prose, it is a poem and a divinely inspired one to the point, according to us, that it has nothing to envy in Solomon's Canticles."*

Only a dozen of such poetic compositions was left to us: one for the golden priestly Jubilee of St. Pius X, another for the silver episcopal Jubilee of the Venerable Dusmet, Archbishop of Catania. Many are dedicated to Our Lady.

7. Sine Labe! (Without Sin)

As a sample, we present the Psalm for the Immaculate:

A throb with joy flows over the peaks of Hermon, Amana, and Mount Carmel; the high cedars of Lebanon were moved with exultation...

God then said to his Angels, 'Go, gather the vermilion of the roses, the purple of violets, the white of jasmines, and the candor of camellias when they are sprinkled with the morning dew;

Gather for me also the fragrance of all the flowers, the perfume of cinnamon, aloe, and all the aromatic scents distilled from the bark of the trees'.

The Lord said to his Angels, 'Bring me the blue of the seas when they are not stirred up with gales, and the blue of the sky, stretched as a sash in space;

Bring me also the rays of the sun, when in springtime it shines on the valley of Betsaida, the shimmering light of the stars shining in the firmament, and the silver beam of the moon, mirrored in the fishponds of Hesebon'.

Thus, the Angels of the Lord flew on the earth and gathered the vermilion of roses, the purple of violets, the white of the jasmines, the brightness of camellias, the fragrance of all the flowers and all the aromatic scents distilled from the bark of the trees.

Moreover, they collected the blue of the seas and skies and the rays of the sun and light of the stars and the beams of the moon mirrored in the fish-pools of Hesebon.

As they flew passing over the earth, to go back in front of the Most High, they saw the children of sin, lying down, trembling and sprinkled with tears, outside Eden, the place of their birth; and the Angels consoled them.

The Most High was delighted and created the beauty of all beauties, the fragrance of all fragrances, and the splendor of all splendors.

For this, the Woman was made Immaculate, and She came out of the mind of God as a morning star, rising from the east; that is why She was named Mary, which means light.

Then the blessing of the Most High pervaded all her soul and the fire of the Holy Spirit endowed all her heart with his fire and filled her with all graces.

She came down from the firmaments and leaned on the horizon: the heavens bent under her feet, the stars throbbed with exultation, and the Angels of the Lord picked up the edge of her robe, with the zephyrs blowing in her hair.

A great uproar of gales, a loud crash of thousands of warriors fighting with spears and armors and dashing their shields on the fields of Amalec.

Satan screamed with rage; he opened his jaws as the mouth of the Etna volcano when it roars like thunder and sends its flames high.

His eyes were flashing like aether in the darkness of the night, his hooked claws like the vulture's, to tear apart the heart of his prey.

Blood of his victims poured down from his fangs, his belly filled with the flesh of sin, and by turning his tail, he uprooted even the stars of the firmament.

Raise, o children of the earth, raise your hands to the heavens and strike up a canticle of exultation.

Gird your loins with strength; let your feet be always at dancing like those of a young deer.

Because the Most High does great things, he knocks down the powerful people and scatters the armies like a handful of sand trampled by the feet of a passerby. He smashes Satan's head.

The Woman has crushed Satan's head, the Virgin has shattered the head of the dragon; the Immaculate has chopped the crest of the great serpent.

She won: that is why the peaks of Hermon, Amana, and Mount Carmel throb with joy; the high cedars of Lebanon are moved with exultation...

For this reason, she is hailed as the Queen of the Universe, the generations are consoled, and the nature without spirit and life, and the one with spirit and life proclaim: eternal praise to the Most High who makes wonders; eternal praise to the Woman without sin (sine labe)."

This poem written in prose seems to be a wonderful comment on the incomparable Dante's verses:

*"In thee is pity, in thee tenderness,
In thee magnificence, in thee the sum
Of all that in creation most can bless"*

(Dante, *Paradise* 33: 19-21; Transl. Laurence Binyon)

CHAPTER 14

HIS SPIRITUAL LIFE

1. The Spirit of Faith

The Revered Bishop of Oria, Mons. Antonio Di Tommaso, pointing at Father Hannibal, one day, said to one of his priests, “*That man wants to become a Saint by force!*” By that, he meant the commitment and consistency with which Father Hannibal pursued the work of his sanctification.

For the Father, sanctification was nothing else but growing every day in God’s love and in the spirit of total immolation for Him in the service of neighbor. He made this resolution, “*With all my strength I will try to destroy the old man within me, to mortify my bad habits in everything, and to clothe myself with the new man, according to Jesus Christ.*”

The heirs of the owners of the Avignone Houses sued the Father, as they did not consider his purchase legitimate. The case was worrisome, and the Institute was in danger due to its great financial problem. Father Di Francia did what he had to do on his side, and he worked actively with the lawyers to prepare his defense. He also appointed a heavenly court formed by Angels and Saints, for which he established a set of devout practices and asked for the contribution of prayers from several communities assisted by him. After that, he placed himself quietly into God’s hands. The case was won in the lower court and in the court of appeals but was overruled by the highest court. When I received the news, I informed Father Hannibal, “*Father, we lost the case!*” There was no gesture of surprise or wonder. He just limited himself to observe, “*My dear son, God always wins, He always wins!*” Then, as if nothing had happened, he started talking about the future pilgrimage, which our community had to make to the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Lettera and where he was going to preach the sermon.

The Father won the case at the new Court of Appeals of Palermo.

2. Obedience to the Mother Church

His submission to the Church was complete and unconditional.

He wrote to Fr. Vitale, “*To operate scrupulously with the rules of the Holy Church means to be always right, like those who follow holy obedience! Obedience to the Holy Mother Church, first of all!*”

When Father Hannibal learned that he was suspected of becoming inclined towards the false doctrine of theosophy, in a letter to Mrs. Zùccaro he protested energetically, “*This never happened. If for just a moment I had admitted this erroneous and false doctrine, I would have denied my holy Catholic faith, I would have opposed all the teachings of the Holy Church. The false, erroneous, and imaginary doctrine of theosophy is one of the many heresies which has appeared in the world... one of the many hallucinations of the human mind. Burn these volumes produced by unbalanced minds far from God and from the truth. Hold on to what the Church teaches*”.

In his self-eulogy, we read, *“He loved the Holy Church, and humbled himself with great love in front of the Supreme Pontiff. He suffered for the progress of evil and was pleased with the advancement of good.”*

His devotion to the Pope was boundless, *“Up to the last breath of my life, I will always consider the Pope as the same person as our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the same love, I will love and obey him. All the interests of the Supreme Pontiff will be the lively interest of my heart...the sufferings and the worries of the Supreme Pontiff will also be my sufferings and worries, and in my inadequate prayers, the first object will be the Supreme Pontiff and all his holy intentions.”* He prescribed for the Rogationists: *“In the preaching and teaching of the Christian doctrine, and much more in the education of the youth, we must place every care to inspire love, reverence, obedience, and devotion to the Supreme Pontiff. To this end, we will make popular instructions on the doctrine about the Roman Pontiff, especially about his infallibility, and it will be useful to remember the glorious events of the Church’s history related to the Supreme Pontiffs.”*

He suffered immensely for any offense against the Holy Father.

In Perugia, Father Hannibal was painfully hurt by a monument that was a permanent insult to the Pope: the emblem of the city, the griffin, tearing apart the tiara [the symbol of the Pope]! He strongly urged Father Santoro, who was going to listen to Fr. Gavotti, from the Center of Morality of Perugia, who had come to Messina for a set of conferences, to tell him to make every effort to put an end to that indecency.¹¹

His love for the Pope had wonderful filial expressions.

When Benedict XV prescribed three days of fasting for the end of the war, declaring that he would be the first to give the example, Father Hannibal begged the Pope to exempt himself from this mortification, which would be willingly done by him and his communities.

Several times he sent the Holy Father a nice basket of tangerines from the garden of our House in Oria.

He had been highly impressed by a *holy picture* of Jesus in the tribunals, with the words of the Gospel: *‘Jesus indeed kept silent’*. He made a very simple reprint, in black, on glossy paper and sent a package of it to the Pope, thinking that it *“would have been certainly appreciated by the profound piety of the Holy Father.”*

In 1919, the revolution had turned Italy upside down. Father Hannibal wrote to Mother Nazzarena, *“Times are becoming terrible! More than war! Socialism and anarchy start to dominate! The government is powerless to repress them. We do not know where we will end.”* He was worried about his communities, but he thought of the Pope: *“We must not forget the Supreme Pontiff, our Holy Father Benedict XV! God forbid that they may storm the Vatican... it seems that we are still far away from this, but the danger is there... Let us pray for the Holy Father and offer our life for that of the Supreme Pontiff!”*

3. The Vows of Trust

His confidence in the Lord was limitless and he committed himself to this with three vows. 1) Never mistrust the goodness and mercy of God regarding his own sins, in the certainty that all are and will be forgiven him, provided that he always addresses himself to the Lord

¹¹ The monument recalled the 1859 revolution largely exploited by the anticlerical propaganda under the name of *Massacres of Perugia*. The indecency has been removed a long time ago.

with true and sincere contrition. 2) Among the miseries, hardships, and persecutions suffered by his Institutions, he committed himself never to mistrust the love of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, which will free him of every evil, even by doing wonders of mercy and love. 3) Relying on the promises of Jesus, he committed himself with a vow to believe in the effectiveness of prayer, which will always be answered, provided it is done with the right intention, humility, fervor, perseverance, and union with God's adorable will.

4. Spirit of Prayer

Father Di Francia teaches: *“Interior life, union with God, zeal, charity, and thirst for souls are powerful weapons for the man of God. With these weapons, he does great things for the Lord and for souls, not so much with his personal works, new sacrifices, gold, and intelligence, rather for an invisible, or better, a visible contribution of the Divine Power. This weapon, which wins over everything, this golden key, which opens the treasures of the divine graces, is prayer. I once heard the preaching of a servant of God say an unforgettable, sharp sentence, “God is omnipotent, but prayer is the most omnipotent.”*¹²

The Rogationist *“must base the hope of his own true growth on the spirit of prayer. If the great means of prayer is properly used, everything will go well, but if prayer fails, the sources of graces will dry up and everything will perish. May God spare us!”*

Holiness is tied to prayer. *“The saints were very wise in using this great means, not only for their salvation but also to grow in every heroic virtue, to win over and knock down every disorderly passion, to win over every difficulty, to overcome the entire hell, to sanctify and save countless souls, and to perform great wonders. They made use of their efforts and all kinds of sacrifices, but neither the efforts nor the sacrifices would have any value without their fervent and unceasing prayer.”*

All of Father Hannibal's life was a prayer. He lived by prayer. The collection of the prayers written by him for the most varied occasions amounts to several volumes. He petitioned our Lord and the Most Holy Virgin, the Angels, and his patron Saints to progress in the virtues and to grow in divine love. He did not hesitate, with childlike simplicity, to go down to the particular needs of the day, *‘Today I need this amount of money, You take care of it. Today we are without bread, You provide it. That creditor has shown himself so good to us, he needs money and we cannot pay, we entrust ourselves to You’...*

¹² Father Hannibal refers to Fr. Cusmano and his visit to the Avignone slums in May 1885. The Father wrote, *“I will never forget his very fervent speech. The topic was ‘the humble and fervent prayer as the maker of the works undertaken for the glory of God and the good of souls’. Fr. Cusmano used to put his entire soul before God, that is why prayer penetrates the heavens. It seemed that he annihilated himself before the Most High. It seemed that he reproduced that profound, intimate humility and perfect loving trust, with which he had already taken the habit of annihilating himself in the feeling of one's own nothingness in front of the divine presence. That is, throwing his heart to Jesus, his Supreme Good, with that fervor, by which he had snatched so many graces from the adorable Heart of the Divine Redeemer. The conclusion of his speech was sublime! He said, ‘If God is all-powerful (onnipotente), the prayer done this way is most all-powerful’ (onnipotentissima). This expression struck me, instructed me, and revived me. Thirty-eight years have passed since that day, and I remember that sermon as if I heard it only yesterday. When he spoke of the effects of such prayer, at times, he used to accompany his words with a smile that was somehow gentle or I would almost say, heavenly. After he finished the Mass, I was going to celebrate Mass and he helped me put on the vestments. I wanted to refuse, but he said to me, “for him to whom to serve is to reign...” (1923 Report)*

Father Hannibal never ceased to ask for the spirit of prayer, *“Dear Jesus, divine teacher, you who have ordered prayer as a necessary means for salvation, grant us its spirit. Give me a spirit of kindness and goodness in all things, the spirit of perseverance with complete victory over my senses and gluttony.”*

Father Hannibal wanted people to learn how to pray, more with the plea of the heart than with pre-set forms. *“The person trained in mental prayer, in meditation, and mortification, who feels the love of Jesus, the living interests of the Heart of Jesus, the living commitment to know Jesus and to love him, who feels ardent compassion and zeal for souls; this person of virtue and sacrifice does not need to learn formulas of prayers from books. The Spirit dwelling in him will make him moan with unutterable groans. Who can say how many continuous graces this person will be able to snatch from the innermost recesses of the Heart of Jesus for the entire Holy Church, for all the souls journeying on earth, for those in purgatory, and for the entire world?”*

As long as Father Hannibal was healthy, praying during the night was customary for him. We don't know about extraordinary gifts enjoyed by him concerning prayer. It is certain however that the various degrees of prayer described by St. Theresa and by St. John of the Cross did not present any difficulty for him, and, as wisely observed by Fr. Vitale, this does not seem to be easily explainable without some personal experience of it.

Did Father Hannibal have distractions in prayer? We do not think so. At least habitually according to what he wrote, which certainly reflects his personal situation, *“We think that when a person is really mortified and diligent in his works, distractions in prayer seldom occur, and they are easily dispelled.”*

The fruit of his prayer was his habitual union with God.

Canon Celona observes, *“His mind was plunged in God.”* An experienced Jesuit missionary, Fr. Fazio, coming from a conversation with the Father, exclaimed with admiration, *“This man is entirely filled with God!”*

If such was the prayer of Father Hannibal, is it any wonder that the answer from Heaven would come often through unthinkable ways?

5. Humility

Father Hannibal's humility was profound. According to him, he was *“a miserable sinner, the abomination of heaven and earth, who no longer has the right to the air he breathes, or to the soil on which he treads, and who should stay forever under Lucifer's foot.”* Reflecting on the many graces he received from the Lord, he declared, *“Not only do I feel myself sinking in my nothingness, but I am seized by great fear, thinking that all these interventions of divine mercy can pile up for me a new stack of debts towards the Divine Justice.”*

In 1887, he jealously kept a holy picture that happened to come into his hands: the Child Jesus holding a large cross, reclining next to a donkey lying on the ground. He felt represented by that animal and on the back of the holy picture, he wrote this prayer, *“O Jesus, good Master, have pity on your little donkey! See how wounded and languishing it is. Give it the food of your grazing pastures and make it drink from your clear springs! Ride him, O Jesus, good Master, and excite him with the power and kindness of your word to walk in your ways and to take you where you want. Make it obedient to your will under the direction of your compassionate hand! O Jesus, good Master, if your little donkey does not want to do this, beat it with your Holy Cross and make it perfectly docile to your beckons. Let the little donkey know you as its only and true Master, serve you with patience, humility, meekness, and always carry you where you want. Amen.”*

He did not want to be called ‘founder’. Often he would play with the words: ‘de-founder’, ‘smelter’, ‘glutton’* and in a letter to Melanie he signed as ‘*Founder, Superior and Director of the Castles in the sky*’. In the solemn declaration he made on July 1 and 2, 1913, he stated that the Work was founded by God, and the Most Holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary were its divine Superiors.

He wrote to Fr. Palma, “*I see that I just ruined everything, that my life was only a chain of mistakes, errors, inexperience, temerities, and what is worse, bad examples.*” Another time, after a failure, “*It is very clear to me that the Lord did so for my sins, and I am not happy that so many men and women in our Institutes often bear the punishment for my sins! May the Almighty credit it to their merit!*”

In his self-eulogy Father Hannibal wrote, “*That deceased [Father Hannibal is speaking of himself!] wants it to be known that in the entire course of his earthly life, he caused many souls and people to suffer and aggrieved many hearts! He asks forgiveness from God and from all for every bad example and for any suffering caused to whomever!*”

To Fr. Vitale: “*I say always that when I leave, things work better and many difficulties are overcome. Long live Jesus!*”

Father Hannibal thought that he had ruined the work of God and therefore he called himself a *botcher*, or rather the *sole botcher* of the entire Work, while the others were busy building it.

He used to tell us, “*What is this Work in God's plans? I imagine it as a large building with several floors, stately decorations, large courtyards, and vast halls; or as an immense garden, with parks, villas, farmhouses, etc. How much good we could do! How many souls to save! How much glory for our Lord and consolation for his most gentle Heart! This is the Work. How I wish that God had found another person instead of me or had found greater fidelity in me! However, alas! My sins have reduced the Work to a miserable little plant, with a stunted life ... My sins have kept the Work confined to the misery of the Avignone Houses!*”

About his own Work, he wrote that it was “*directed by me with negligence, but I was unable to destroy it, as the Lord Jesus protected it against any blunder of mine.*” Later he stated, “*I worked more to destroy than to build! And if I was unable to destroy everything, that was because the work, as it seems, is God's and the Lord did not allow it!*”

Humility was his preferred virtue since it is the virtue of the Sacred Heart.

One day, the young students were lively playing in the courtyard, and when they saw Father Hannibal, they ran to him. He asked them, “*Dear boys, what is the virtue that makes us more acceptable to the heart of God?*”

“*Humility, Father, humility!*”

He smiled, with pleasure: we had read his thought.

“*Very well, it's really humility.*” Then, he added, “*Go on playing*” and he left.

In his “*Letter to the Friends*” meant for the people of righteous mind, even though not practicing religion, Father Hannibal tried to make them understand the value of humility with an argument suited to them, “*Some people believe that to humble oneself means to depreciate one's self and that humility is abasement. On the contrary, humility makes us great and lifts us up to God. In fact, humility is the death of pride, arrogance, ambition, and conceit: all passions that devalue the reasonable person. Humility makes us courteous, prudent, and agreeable to others. Just as pride makes us demanding with others, humility, which is the mother of modesty*

* E.N. In Italian, the words *sfondatore* (de-founder, destroyer), *fonditore* (smelter), *mangiatore* (glutton) sound very similar to ‘*fondatore*’ (founder).

and prudent discretion, by which we do not boast about our merits, does not despise anyone, and attracts respect and admiration from others.”

6. Mortification

His mortification was rigid. First, Father Hannibal made clear the necessity for external mortification, *“Those who despise and have no consideration for the corporal penances, saying that the interior ones are sufficient, show that they lack the true spirit, wisdom, and the true science of the saints, and do not aspire to develop firmly their inner virtues. Let us remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, “If you do not do penance, all of you will perish,” as well as the threefold cry of penance of the Holy Virgin at the grotto of Lourdes through Bernadette, ‘Penance, penance, penance!’*

“It is true that the above-mentioned words of our Lord Jesus Christ refer first of all to the interior penances, that is, the repentance for our own sins because of supernatural reasons. However, the word of God has infinite extended meanings. When he insisted on penance, because without it the Lord says that we will all perish, he intended also to speak of voluntary penance. Without them, the people called to perfection will perish, if they could do penances but do not do them because of their carelessness at least when it comes to achieving religious perfection. From this comes incalculable evil, a detriment for one’s spirit that can produce incomplete repentance or a delayed resolution to go to confession and then all that follows, among which is the danger of totally extinguishing the spirit and losing one’s holy vocation.”

However, Father Hannibal did not fail to specify that *“true penance consists of practicing the holy interior virtues”* and he wanted *“everyone to embrace sufferings, mortifications, contradictions, illnesses, worries, and whatever that comes from the Divine Will which ordains or allows them. Any labor performed in the service of God and neighbor can also be sound and holy penance.”*

He warns against possible and even false beliefs which we may encounter regarding penances: *“There are people who easily deceive themselves with bodily penances: they are capable of doing very harsh penances and then without misgivings disregard holy obedience, humility, fraternal charity, proper fulfillment of tasks, etc. These people by doing bodily penance believe that they are already holy, and therefore they confirm themselves in the bad practice of virtues and become obstinate, untreatable, negligent, irritable, etc.”* In these cases, Father Hannibal prescribes that the penances that they do whimsically should not be allowed. Rather, let other penances, sensible ones, be imposed on these people.

Regarding the practice of penance, we kept a true collection of instruments of penance, cilices, small chains, and sashes provided with steel spikes, which Father Hannibal used. As a youth, he wore down his health with vigils and fasting. His food was regularly made bitter with *aloe* or *knapweed* or other powders.

However, his most important mortification was the vigilance over himself. He was always in control of his words, facial expressions, gestures, smiles. He never took a vacation or a free hour for a walk. According to the biblical expression, he continually carried *his soul into his own hands*; and his whole life was always present to him, as he confessed with candid simplicity, *“I see in my mind all the countless sins I committed in my life, although, by God’s grace I confide that they were never grave. Nevertheless, who can weigh the malice of a defect? The Lord let me understand the many faults of my youth, over more than sixty years ago, and how no fault has remained without punishment. Indeed, the Lord made me understand that He gave me that specific punishment to purify me from that particular fault. I remember the words*

of the Sacred Scripture: If the Spirit is upon you, do not abandon Him, because He will work out the purification of your sins. However, we must always have great trust in the Lord.”

7. Poverty

We can infer how much Father Hannibal loved poverty from the life he wanted to lead among the poor! Poverty was the true richness for him, *“a very precious pearl and a sturdy foundation of the Institute.”*

Oh, the poverty of the Avignone slums! The first time I set foot there - it was in 1917, and we were no longer in the heroic times! I could not refrain from writing my impressions to Fr. Vitale, in Oria; *“The poverty of those houses would not raise the envy of St. Francis of Assisi!”*

The clothes of the Father were always clean and spotless, due also to the upbringing he received from his family. They were made of ordinary material, faded and worn out, and had to last as long as possible... In the early days of the Work, the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul took care of replacing them.

In his small room in Oria, he hung his clothes on nails driven into the wall, covering them with a cloth to prevent rust stains!*

He always traveled in the cheapest manner. Instead of suitcases, he rolled his things in bags or large handkerchiefs the way the poor and peasants do. When he lost or broke something, he accused himself of lack of poverty and begged so that the community would not suffer for it, and usually imposed on himself some renunciation as atonement, especially during meals.

This was his teaching, *“Let the Works, born in the misery of the Avignone district always remember their origin, and remember that, as much as possible, everything must have the mark of that original poverty. Let the furniture, the household goods, the refectory, and everything be poor. Let the food also be poor and simple although always sufficient.”* He also wanted that the Rogationists *“in cases of controversies and discussions on points of the rules, should lean always to the rigid choice of evangelical poverty.”*

8. Chastity

On chastity, we have Father Hannibal’s explicit confession to Fr. Vitale, *“Thank God, I don’t know temptations in this matter.”* In his self-eulogy, *“He declares, for the glory of God, that he never knew action, called dishonest, obscene, etc., and he could never understand what pleasure, if ever, could be found in them.”*

9. Obedience

Father Hannibal exalts obedience as *“the virtue of perfect sanctification and perfect union with God, because by obeying the Superior and the rules we do the will of the Almighty perfectly... Holy religious obedience is the surest, safest, and shortest way to reach a greater perfection. The Religious House, where everyone obeys religiously, is a kingdom of God on*

* TN. It was charming to observe what his clothes hanger is made of.

earth.” Instead, in religious persons where obedience is lacking “*everything will fail: love for God, zeal for the divine glory, humility, poverty, chastity, charity, and one’s vocation itself will fail.*”

He made this resolution: “*I will never be obstinate in my judgment and opinion but through exterior obedience, I also intend to obey internally by conforming my judgment and my ways of thinking to those of my superiors.*” To Fr. Vitale, who one day wondered upon seeing him behaving differently, he declared that it was the desire of his Superior, “*And this is enough for me to follow him blindly.*”

His immediate Superior was the Ordinary, and we find in his self-eulogy a sentence in connection with him, which requires an explanation. In fact, he maintains himself guilty in his relations with the Superior, “*He [Father Hannibal] alienated the mind of Monsignor D’Arrigo, Archbishop of Messina from himself and from the Pious Work.*” On the contrary, examining the matter, we do not find any fault in Father Hannibal.

The Father was appreciated and well-liked by Cardinal Guarino, while Canon D’Arrigo opposed him. When Canon D’Arrigo became Archbishop, he felt some distrust toward Father Di Francia, thinking that the Father was antagonistic toward him because of his attachment to Cardinal Guarino. Nothing could be more wrong. “*The Servant of God was equally faithful to Cardinal Guarino as to Mons. D’Arrigo. A fidelity born exclusively out of supernatural principles, as he saw in the Archbishops, the representatives of God and the Church. If Mons. D’Arrigo did not understand this, the reason must be sought either in his preconceived notions or in the environment that he had formed around himself. Monsignor D’Arrigo made it something personal and this was completely outside the thought of Father Hannibal who, the Archbishop thought, would have opposed his government due to personal resentment.*” (Cf. PAPASOGLI TADDEI, *Annibale M. Di Francia*, p. 275).

CHAPTER 15

JESUS!

1. Fall in Love with Jesus Christ!

“We can do nothing more pleasing to the very loving Jesus than to tell him: ‘I love you!’ He desires and wants this from us. Let us then repeat it often to Him. When we cannot do it with our lips, let us say it with our hearts. Let us tell him that with every beat of our hearts we mean to repeat: ‘I love you!’ With these words, Father Hannibal presented to us a genuine portrait of himself: a person entirely inflamed with the love of Jesus.

“Fall in love with Jesus Christ!” was the advice he gave to Fr. Vitale who was then a cleric, during one of the encounters he had with him, revealing with these words, and even more with the expression in which he uttered them, all the richness of love which filled his heart.

Jesus was the mirror that Father Hannibal always kept in front of himself, and the full commitment of his life intended to reproduce in himself that divine image. In a personal composition which he entitled *“Imitation of Jesus, my Lord”*, there is a complete loving study of the words, actions, and inner feelings for Jesus, to try to conform himself to that Divine Model in everything.

In particular, here are Father Hannibal’s main devotions regarding the adorable person of our Lord.

2. The Most Holy Name

“Long live Jesus! Long live Jesus!” was his preferred short prayer, because for him, as for St. Bernard, “Jesus” was honey to the mouth, harmony to the ears, and joy to the heart. In all his Houses, he had the entire month of January dedicated to this Name, and the month concluded with the solemn novena that he preached for thirty-four consecutive years.

On January 31, the day of the feast, Father Hannibal had obtained from the Holy See permission to celebrate two Masses for the Name of Jesus. At noon, the *‘Great Supplication’* was offered to the Eternal Father. Father Hannibal intended this to store graces for all the needs of the Work for the entire year. The Supplication was based on the Divine Promise, *“Truly, I say to you: whatever you ask the Father in my name, He will give it to you (Jn. 16: 23). Not to have faith in this divine promise - Father Di Francia said - is like denying the faith in the very Divinity of Jesus Christ!”*

3. The Child Jesus

He wished the Christmas novena to be accompanied by pious devotions suited to inspire love and enthusiasm among his little ones. They had to prepare the small mattress, the small pillow, the blanket, the swaddling clothes, etc., with particular practices and acts of virtue, so

that the Holy Child could be born in their hearts. Above all, he wanted the imitation of the Holy Child, and wrote a pamphlet with 25 prayers to help people in practicing the ‘*spiritual infancy*’.

4. The Passion

The Passion of Jesus was the topic of his daily meditation and he imposed it on his Congregations. A photograph of Father Hannibal shows him with a crucifix in his hands, and it is very significant. It tells us that the light emanating from the Crucified Lord enlightens the characteristics of his sanctity. The purpose of his life was to know and love Jesus Crucified and to make Him known and loved by others. It recalls also those years when, in teaching catechism to the children, he loved to present the crucified Christ to them, pointing to the wounds, the nails, the crown of thorns, and the open Heart to let the children understand how much Jesus loved us!

He had a particular devotion for the Holy Face of our Lord and he dedicated the month of April to this. He wanted the spread of the Holy Image of the Shroud that was drawn by Celine,* the sister of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, and he wanted a large picture of it to be displayed in all the Houses. He pointed out its exquisite characteristics: “*We could say that an angel has guided the hand of the pious artist. It succeeded in showing marvelously not only the stains of blood, the wounds, the swelling of the right cheek, the bruise on the nose, the swelling of the right eye but even more, the gentle serenity, the profound calm, the concentrated suffering, and the sublime majesty of the Divine Face!*”

5. The Most Precious Blood

In Messina, the devotion to the Most Precious Blood was popular. When Father Hannibal was still young, “Christ’s Blood” had already been sung by his mentor, Felice Bisazza, with verses that are among the best he penned:

*Blood of the first martyr,
Blood of the Man-God,
Reddening our altars,
Victim of my fault
Victim of peaceful love,
I turn myself to you!*

However, in time, and especially because of the revolution, the devotion faded away. It was to the credit of the young Hannibal, when, as a cleric, he revived this devotion once again with his preaching.

In his Houses, the entire month of July was dedicated to the Most Precious Blood, especially in a spirit of atonement. He wrote, “*We could present this great price of our ransom to the eternal Divine Father for the salvation of the Holy Church through the abundance of holy laborers, and thus for the salvation of the entire world.*”

* EN. In 1904, Sr. Genevieve of the Holy Face (Celine Martin), drew in charcoal the Holy Face based on the photograph of the Shroud of Turin, upon the urgings of her sister, St. Therese of Lisieux.

He prescribed a daily prayer to honor the divine Blood with the recitation of seven Glory be to the Father... with open arms, interjecting the short invocation: *We salute you, Immaculate Blood of the Man-God, precious price for the redemption of sinners.*

6. The Sacred Heart

The devotion to the Heart of Jesus was the queen of devotions in the heart of Father Hannibal, because “*when we say ‘Heart of Jesus’, we mean his infinite goodness, love, charity, and mercy.*”

Then he explains, “*In the very holy life of Jesus, everything was love... however, when we look at Jesus in the maternal womb, in the stable, in his secluded life, in his miracles, in his patience, we see his love in its external manifestations. This is not the most beautiful contemplation of love. A more beautiful sight is that of looking inside the holy humanity of Jesus Christ, to find the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus: all the love of Jesus is enclosed in that Divine Heart.*”

Therefore, “*Nothing is more pleasing, gentle, and dear to me than the devotion to the Most Holy Heart of Jesus. I want that all the interests of this Divine Heart be my interests.*” Thus, we can explain the original title that Father Hannibal gave globally to his Institution in the field of beneficence and religious life: “*Pious Work of the Interests of the Heart of Jesus.*”

“*I will take pride in offering myself as a lover, a son, a slave, and a victim of this Divine Heart, and I will do my utmost to make it known and loved all over the world.*”

He wrote for his children, “*You know how this Divine Heart is everything for us. We are consecrated to this Divine Heart, to which we belong, to which the Work belongs, to which all our poor efforts and intentions belong. All our Houses, Orphanages, and works with the externs belong to the Heart of Jesus; all belong to that Divine Heart.*”

In our churches and chapels, he wanted the Heart of Jesus to be in the place of honor, and he liked the image of the Sacred Heart extending his hands as if to receive all his children under his protection.

*He extends his arms for protection,
As if to tell us: Children, I am here:
Do not be afraid...*

However, Father Hannibal insisted on a particular aspect of the devotion to the Sacred Heart and he wanted it to be considered as a *special characteristic of the humble and small Institute of the Rogationists, considering it as a special gift to them from the Lord.* This aspect is the meditation of the “*intimate and very painful passion of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This passion embraces those intimate and ineffable pains and bitterness, which the divine Redeemer Jesus experienced all his life in his Most Holy Heart at the sight of all the sins, of all the human ingratitude, and of all the souls that would have been eternally lost.*” In connection with this, he wrote moving reflections and prayers.

Father Hannibal sees the Rogate in relation to the intimate passion of the Heart of Jesus. The people who consider it with attention “*cannot remain indifferent in front of the interests of that Divine Heart. Then that divine word [the ‘Rogate’] will resound in their ears and in obedience to that command, they will find a great means to console the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus in his sufferings!*”

7. For the Greater Consolation of the Heart of Jesus

Consoling the Heart of Jesus is the specific meaning of Father Hannibal's devotion to the Sacred Heart. The words in the Sacred Scripture, "*I looked for comforters, but I found none.*" (Ps 69, 20) struck him deeply, as well as those addressed by Jesus to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque: "*At least you give me this consolation of repairing men's ingratitude!*" His whole life was committed to giving consolation to the Sacred Heart and he made it a rule for all his followers. "As the principle and the end of the rule, it is prescribed that the Rogationists do everything *for the greater consolation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*" (*Ad maiorem consolationem Cordis Jesu!* - A.M.C.C.J). Thus, as the Jesuits have as their motto: *for the greater glory of God*; the Salesians: *give me souls, take away the rest*; the followers of Don Orione: *Souls, souls*; the Rogationists have also their adage: *for the greater consolation of the Heart of Jesus!*

How many times, we heard Father Hannibal, in the impetus of his love for Jesus changing '*for the greater*' into '*for the greatest*', or '*for the infinite*' consolation of your Heart, O Jesus!

8. July 1

Jesus is always with us, alive and true in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. Thus, the place that Father Hannibal gives to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament in his Institutes is this: "*The loving, fruitful, dutiful, and permanent center of this Pious Institute of the interests of Jesus is Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. From now on, everyone must know that Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is the true, effective, and immediate founder of this Pious Institute. We may say of this foundation, "God did something new." In fact, usually, the Lord grants a founder who is rich with his graces and gifts to his Institutions. However, our Lord himself in the sacred Tabernacle wanted jealously to be the real founder of this Institute, which was born to promote the Heart of Jesus' divine command that has been neglected for so many centuries, into an Institution, without the intermediation of a founder as we ordinarily intend it. All the graces, help, enlightenment, and divine providence have all poured out from his divine Heart in the Blessed Sacrament.*"

Truly, Father Hannibal felt and wanted all of us to feel the real presence of Jesus in the Tabernacle, as the center of attraction of the House!

Before making the first chapel sacramental, for two years, he fostered in his boys, girls, and people he assisted the living desire for the divine presence of Jesus through ardent prayers and moving poems, which resounded with nostalgic notes in the Avignone Houses:

*Open, O Heaven of heavens,
Let the Beloved come down to us
Enclosed in the host, as the victim
Of his divine love
Let our beloved Redeemer
Come among his children!*

On July 1, 1886, the octave of the Feast of Corpus Christi, Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament took possession of the first Tabernacle of the Work in the Avignone slums.

Father Hannibal wrote, *“Jesus came as a King in the midst his subjects, as the Good Shepherd in the midst his lambs, as a divine farmer to cultivate himself the small plant whose germ contained the small seed of the Divine Rogate! He came as a very loving Father in the midst of his children to form for himself a small family, which would live on his Flesh and his Blood and to enable it to receive from his holy lips the divine command, “Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest!”*

Since then, he wanted to renew every year the loving expectation of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament in ways suitable to awaken the fervor of the people. In the last days of June, the Blessed Sacrament was removed [from the tabernacle], and three times a day, the prayers and hymns were repeated. On July 1, Jesus returned with a new name: *King, Pontiff, Father, Good Shepherd*, etc. Every year, there were new hymns of praise, springing from the heart of Father Hannibal, which later became a volume of verses entitled *“The Hymns of July 1”*.

9. The Holy Mass

The Eucharistic presence of Jesus leads us to deal with the Holy Mass.

“All the Rogationists will have a very high concept of the great sacrifice of the Holy Mass. For us, the Holy Mass will be the great means to obtain every mercy and grace from the Almighty God and to satisfy our duties of adoration and thanksgiving to his Divine Majesty... When we celebrate the Holy Mass, we shall see immense rivers of graces and blessings spreading all over the Church and the world.

“We must see the person of Jesus Christ, victim and priest who, in the Holy Mass, renews all the mysteries of his earthly life, from his incarnation to his death, from his resurrection to his ascension...”

“In the Holy Mass, we must then contemplate this display of faith and join Jesus Christ in adoring, offering satisfaction for us and for all, begging even for the smallest spiritual and temporal grace for us and for all, and asking graces upon graces and endless mercy for us and for all.

“The prayers we say during the Holy Mass are joined to those of our Lord Jesus Christ, who immolates himself on the altar to obtain all the graces for us. Spiritual authors teach that those who, for their negligence or lack of faith and devotion, do not receive graces during the Holy Mass, will never receive them.”

Except in some special cases, the Father did not accept stipends for the Holy Mass. He offered it for the glory of the Holy Trinity, in thanksgiving for the divine benefits, for the needs of the Holy Church and the Work, for the benefactors, and the like. He used to announce it to the communities before the Mass, so that they could participate in his intentions.

Indeed, he celebrated the Mass with great faith. Absorbed in the contemplation of the great mystery, he no longer belonged to this world! Tears of love and tenderness often flowed on his face, expressing his intimate participation in the sacrifice of the divine Victim. Thus, it is no wonder that many people looked for a place where they could see him better and follow his celebration.

When I served him as an altar boy, I prepared myself very early, by the side of the altar, with the cruets in my hands for the ablution. It was a spiritual joy for me to contemplate his face, which seemed to bear the shining reflection of his union with the Lord! He noticed that, and told me, *“Son, you must leave to the priest the freedom to linger with God! You must kneel on the step, almost behind the celebrant, and for the ablution, you will stand only after the priest has consumed the Holy Blood, and not before!”*

10. Holy Communion

Father Hannibal was an apostle of daily Communion, which he began to practice when he was 17, even before his putting on the clerical habit. He regretted that he had not been allowed to receive it daily since his First Communion. We find in his notes that he wanted to make up for the missing communions by reciting 2,355 spiritual communions, corresponding to the days from his 7th to 17th year [= from the day of his First Communion to the time he was allowed to receive it daily].

He wanted the day of the First Communion to leave a permanent mark on the life of his boys and girls, and therefore it had to be done in a solemn and memorable way. He wanted the Sisters and educators “*to show themselves so happy on that day for the holy celebration to impress the girls and boys they assisted, edifying and instilling in them an ever greater desire to receive Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.*” The follow up shall continue after the First Communion, and if there are girls and boys who, with the permission of their confessor, want to receive daily communion, they (= educators) should keep an eye on them, that they may always receive it with increasing fervor and devotion. Otherwise, it would be better for them to receive communion with a good preparation and thanksgiving, every Sunday and major festivities.

Noticing that among the Sisters several did not remember their First Communion, he thought of a “*First Communion Renewal*”. Through particular purification of the conscience and special prayers and practices, each Sister had to renew the fervor of her first encounter with the Sacramental Jesus.

Father Hannibal had written about Holy Communion for his communities, which cannot be forgotten because “*their sanctification and salvation, as well as the expansion and stability of the Institution, depends particularly*” on Holy Communion. We know that the fruits of Communion are bound to the disposition of the one who receives it. Woe if there is sin! We would have a sacrilege, the greatest damage that could befall a soul.

Father Hannibal remarks, “*However, we have to consider seriously also another damage, to be avoided at any cost, effort, and sacrifice, and by devotedly compelling one’s self to it.*” This happens when the religious person “*approaches the Holy Eucharistic table with some imperfections that he doesn’t want to acknowledge and correct.*” Then “*what profit can be gained by that person? Because of God’s right judgment, that person becomes even more blind, makes himself more irresponsible, confirms himself in his obstinacy, and becomes more angry and impatient...*”

Instead, “*Let the person come to the holy table of the Angels with an angelic heart, very profound humility, burning love, and living faith. Let her approach the Eucharist with loving confidence and with a burning desire; let her receive Jesus with hunger and thirst. All her natural affections, sentiments of the heart, human faculties and sensibilities, everything must be transformed into this spiritual intelligence and hunger and thirst for Jesus.*” In fact, “*Jesus in the Eucharist is the bread that fills the hungry ones and leaves empty those unfortunate who do not hunger and thirst for the Supreme Good.*”

When he celebrated in the communities, before the Holy Mass, after reminding the intention for which it had to be offered, without fail he would talk about Holy Communion to excite the people’s fervor. In the festivities and sometimes on weekdays, he would intentionally add a dialogue immediately before distributing Communion, where he transmitted to the children all the fire of his spirit for the Sacramental Jesus.

He was rigorous and demanding in the preparation, and especially in the thanksgiving for Holy Communion “*which is to be followed not just by a transitory thanksgiving, but by a complex of thanksgivings which should thus become a thanksgiving throughout the entire day,*

until the time of the next Holy Communion.” And he describes in detail how this distinct thanksgiving has to be done, so that the entire life of the Rogationists and of the Daughters of Divine Zeal, in whatever way it is spent, would be a perennial preparation and thanksgiving for Holy Communion.

CHAPTER 16

MARY

1. The Name of Mary

*Gentle Mary! You the breath
Of his ardent sighs,
You the light, by which he splendidly
Enlightened the peoples:
He made you his arbiter,
He drew all hearts to You!*

These verses, which Father Hannibal wrote in a hymn to St. Louis M. Grignon de Montfort can fully be applied to him in the fullness of their meaning. He always loved Our Lady with tenderness and fervor, and worked untiringly to make her loved by everyone: he was completely Marian.

His parents' devotion had set the name of Mary on all the children as their second name; to Hannibal, instead, it was registered as the first name, on both the baptismal and civil certificates. It was a mistake, but Father Hannibal was happy about that and was proud of it. He said to us, *"I think, that the devil must have quivered with rage, as the Virgin showed to take me under her particular protection, without which I could not be saved."*

The love for Mary increased continuously in his heart together with that for God: two inseparable loves, as he wanted those names to be inseparable. And from here comes his salutation, *'Praised be Jesus and Mary!'* which he introduced in his communities,

He wanted all the Daughters of Divine Zeal to be named after the august name of Mary, but they had to submit a special application *pressingly insisting and urging* him to grant it with a special decree. This concession was intended to commit the Sisters to a special love for the Most Holy Virgin through the imitation of her virtues and the perfect regular observance, under penalty of the withdrawal of the concession.

He gave them the coffee-colored habit to entrust them to Our Lady of Mount Carmel and the Augustinian belt to recall precisely Our Lady of the Belt.

To attract more protection from the Holy Virgin over him, Father Hannibal became a tertiary of the Carmelite Order. Moreover, when the Lord's call to Avignone did not yet seem definite to him, he even thought of entering the Carmelite Order *"after entrusting the pious little Work to a trustworthy person."* His humility did not allow him to see that he was that chosen person. He gave up his dream but in his spirit, he remained a Carmelite forever.

2. Mary's Singer

He placed his poetic inspiration at the service of Our Lady. In 1868, he promised:

*In my verses, I will sing to you,
O Holy, immortal Queen!*

And he sang to her for about sixty years, laying his harp at the feet of the Queen *seated at the right hand of the King*, and contemplating a mother who is all kindness and mercy:

*From the right hand of God Redeemer
The mighty scepter is handed on to you.
Overwhelmed with love and mercy
You bend it on your prayerful children:
Let each one know what a Mother he prayed!*

His Marian songs are innumerable, with the most varied and beautiful titles. As a young man, in the parish of St. Mary dell'Arco, he founded the pious association of Our Lady of Stella Mattutina and he published a booklet of prayers and verses to depict this title.

As a child, he used to go to the church of the *Madonna della Mercede (Our Lady of Ransom)*, near his home, and this devotion never faded in him.

3. The Apostle of Mary

For several years, every Saturday, the cleric Hannibal preached the glories of the Virgin in the Parish Church of San Lorenzo. In 1876, as previously mentioned, he also preached the whole month of May, introducing the devotion of our Lady of Lourdes to the citizens of Messina, and concluding it with the foundation of a Confraternity and the publication of a pamphlet on the Virgin.

He studied very well *'The Glories of Mary'* by St. Alphonsus Liguori, and the twelve volumes of the *'History of the Marian Sanctuaries in the World'* by Vico, thus he never lacked solid arguments and examples in his sermons.

He used to say, *"It is gentle and sweet to speak of her whose name is honeycomb, whose venerated images steal our heart, whose divine memory makes us faint with love."*

One year, when he started preaching in the month of May, he declared to be happy to let loose his tongue with praise of Mary *"for whom I would willingly give my blood."*

Several volumes of Father Hannibal's sermons on Our Lady have been kept. Most of them are outlines which his faith and love translated into lively and burning words later on. I cannot forget what Fr. Nalbene, SJ, said, *"I remember an acclamation on the Virgin of the Scala. It was a masterpiece, and its charming part was most of all his sense of filial love for the Virgin."*

4. Filial Confidence

Father Hannibal reveals his filial love especially with his confidence in referring to Mary.

He asked the Virgin for his own conversion: *“Mother entirely pure, beautiful, and holy; I beg you to inspire in me a holy horror for every fault, however small, and to convert me. Convert me to God, convert me to the Blessed Jesus... convert me to the perfect accomplishment of his supreme will.”*

With great fervor, he asked her for the virtues he needed: *“My Holy Mother, divine teacher of all virtues, I plead you, let me walk the path by which I can reach my sanctification, the sanctification of souls and the growth of this pious Work in the Most Holy Heart of Jesus. May I come to the desired union of love with my Supreme Good.”*

For the needs of his Institutions, Father Hannibal found an infallible remedy for having recourse to Our Lady. In the very earliest days of his apostolate, he let the crowd of Avignone sing to the Most Holy Virgin, *Mother of the Poor*:

*We are oppressed and abandoned,
We lack food on the table,
And our tired life
Fades away among worries.
Beautiful Mother of the afflicted,
Have mercy on us!
The wind blows and the storm
Pours over our roofs:
O Mary, if you do not hurry
This winter we will die;
Beautiful and true Mother,
Have mercy on us!*

Then, depending on the case, he pleads, *“Have mercy on us, O most powerful Empress, save us! Tomorrow we have no more bread, no more noodles, and no more income.”* Again, *“Mother of the poor, of the orphans, of the virgins, and of the priests, have mercy on us! All the doors are closed: O Door of heavens, open up for us!”*

Father Hannibal also addressed prayers for vocations to Mary, *“Look, Holy Mother, how so many poor souls perish because there is no one to save them. Look, Oh Merciful Mother, how innocence is wrecked because of the lack of good laborers who cultivate the tender sprouts. Mother, You are the Queen of Apostles, and from your intercession comes every vocation...”*

He prayed for the Church, battered by storms, *“The Church cannot perish, because your Son swore that it will not perish. However, souls perish and Satan devours his prey. Come! Break his head. It is enough for you to want it, O Immaculate Mary”*.

In a prayer, we find the title that later on St. Paul VI solemnly proclaimed and strongly recommended: *Mary, Mother of the Church*.

All the graces come through Mary. Father Hannibal wrote, *“It is true that when God closes, no one opens, as the Sacred Scriptures say; but I think that the Most Holy Virgin Mary*

is exempt. She opens and closes the door, through which every grace comes to us, as she pleases."

Father Di Francia solved his doubts and perplexities through recourse to the Most Holy Virgin. He remembered often the verses of the poet Arici dedicated to Our Lady of Good Counsel. He insisted that the Superiors especially needed to implore "*the divine help in all circumstances through the Most Holy Name of Jesus and the enlightenment of the Blessed Virgin of Good Counsel.*" He says, "*The invocation to the Most Holy Virgin of Good Counsel, done with love and faith, has proved to be always more effective than we think and opens the most rigid minds.*"

4. The 'Special Identity' of the Institute

The Work of Father Hannibal stands out because of its particular devotion to the Virgin. "*The greatest devotion to the Mother of God will be the special glory and characteristic of the Congregation of the Rogationists... The devotion to the Holy Virgin is a special identification mark of this pious Institute*" because sanctity is not possible without love for Our Lady. "*This is the flame of love which forms the Saints, the flame that cannot be separated from the love of God and without which no grace can be obtained from the Lord. The tender, profound, and gentle love for the Mother of God, Mary Most Holy Immaculate, is the love of all those who are predestined [for salvation].*"

He insisted, "*Jesus will then reign in our hearts when the love for the Most Holy Mother will permeate them. We cannot love Jesus if we do not love Mary; we cannot reach Jesus if not through Mary... Truly, by loving and serving this great Mother, and not otherwise, we come to know, love, and possess, in the union of love, the supreme good, Jesus our Lord who shall be our ultimate and supreme end. Those who do not seek Mary will not find Jesus. Those who seek Mary will find Jesus.*"

The Marian spirit of the Institute is conveyed at first sight at the entrance of each House of Father Hannibal where people are received by the smiling images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Heart of Mary. They introduce themselves respectively. "*I am the Owner of this House and of all those who dwell in it and love me*" and "*I am the Lady of this House and of all those who dwell in it and love me*".

All the Marian feasts are always to be celebrated with the greatest fervor and prepared with small sacrifices [little flowers], sermons, supplications, and small letters addressed to our Lady. The Father prescribed the consecration to the Holy Virgin of Perpetual Help every first day of the month, the abstinence from fruits, and the meditation on the Virgin each Saturday. Several times during the year, there are vigils to honor Our Lady, for example, for the Child Mary, and so on. However, we cannot express the enthusiasm for our Lady that Father Hannibal could arouse in the hearts!

He wanted the statues and images of the Virgin to be beautiful, holy, and devout in order to excite devotion and encourage prayer, recalling truly our Lady, the masterpiece of God.

He did not fail to express his complaint to an accredited Marian magazine that had published a picture of Our Lady which he did not like because "*it does not reproduce at all the sublimity and excellence of Mary, our great Lady. The facial features of that picture had nothing sacred or divine; notwithstanding that the artist is famous. In fact, the image, I repeat, lacks that aesthetic, which, instead of fostering fervent devotion, seems rather to stifle it. If the original is the same, it means that the artist, with all his skills, did something inconclusive.*"

For his Houses, Father Hannibal preferred the statue of the Immaculate sculptured by Cantalamessa, which, with its hands clasped together and its attitude, enraptured him, “*See how beautiful she is!*” - he repeated – “*She is the glorified humility!*”

6. His Spiritual Creativity

Father Hannibal’s devotion devised “*industries*” [special activities] to foster the fervor and love for Our Lady.

On July 2, 1913, in Oria, he had to inaugurate one of the statues carved by Cantalamessa. The anticipation was fostered for a long time. The image was going to be displayed in front of the community gathered in the courtyard around the box that contained it. The altar boys with candles, cross, and a bucket of holy water were ready for the procession as well as the excited musicians and singers to greet Our Lady immediately at her first appearance.

The Father, wearing surplice and stole, started maneuvering hammer and tongs, helped by others. The box was opened; everyone's eyes were pinned to it... What a disappointment! The box was empty!

Embarrassed, the Father exclaimed, “*Oh, the Mystical Dove has flown away; she has flown away!*” All followed as he went through the garden and into the House, looking into all the corners. Finally, we saw a small light at the end of an underground corridor and we heard the cooing of doves ... “*Here she is! Here she is! The Mystical Dove! ... She has taken refuge in the hollow of the stone...*” Full of enthusiasm, he proposed a song of invitation:

*Arise, ethereal Dove,
Leave your stony nest,
Get out of the rubbles
As the sun from the shadow.
Don't you hear the cry
Many of your children raise to you,
In the holy Tabernacle
God your Son awaits for you!*

How much tenderness for Our Lady! At La Salette, he noticed that the three statues of the Most Holy Virgin, representing the three stations, were in the dark! He sent to the Shrine three bronze Angels with a lamp in their hands with this inscription, “*In the darkness of these mountains, the Angels of Messina light up the Queen of the Alps, the Most Holy Virgin of La Salette, O Mother of God, the City of your Holy Letter greets you, loves you, and begs your mercy!*”

In Oria, over one of the city gates, he saw a statue of Our Lady completely decapitated caused by a cyclone that had occurred twelve years earlier. Immediately, he had a beautiful head with flowing hair sculptured. Thus, the Most Holy Lady returned to smile at her faithful.

When he found the name of Mary on the threshold of churches and the platform of the altars, he arranged to replace them at his own expense. He wrote a circular letter to the Bishops for these cases, in order to avoid that the Most Holy Name of Mary is trampled upon.

Father Hannibal proclaimed Mary Most Holy as the “*absolute, effective, and immediate Superior, guide, and teacher of the Rogationists and of the Daughters of Divine Zeal*” and he

proclaimed the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus as the “*absolute, effective, and immediate Superior of the two Congregations.*”

From this proclamation, he expected “*miracles of grace, true conversion to Jesus, and the acquisition of holy virtues.*”

In fact, he clearly warns his children, “*The love of the Most Holy Virgin consists particularly in the imitation of her virtues, especially of her humility, purity of soul, strong and constant love for our Lord, zeal for his glory and the salvation of souls, great love and gentleness in all the encounters.*”

8. The Slavery of Love

The Marian spirit of Father Hannibal and of his Work lies principally in the interior and exterior practice of the holy Slavery of Love taught by St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort.

“This slavery starts with baptism. From slaves of sin, we become slaves of Jesus Christ Our Lord. We cannot be such if we do not first make ourselves slaves of love of Mary Most Holy. This is the secret! This is the work that the Holy Spirit dictated to St. Louis M. Grignon. The purpose of this slavery of love is for Mary Most Holy to make us perfect slaves of Jesus Our Lord, so that we may acknowledge Him as Lord and God, serve Him with fidelity, and do his adorable will in everything.”

Father Hannibal did not ignore the polemics sparked by the word ‘*slave*’, which made the people of our time turn their noses up, being idolaters of freedom without boundaries. However, the obstacle can be overcome by putting the accent on love, as the characteristic of this slavery, and in the end, it only bonds us closer to Our Lady with filial bonds. The Father wrote, “*Basing everything on the love of a child and considering myself as a son who, out of special love for the Queen Mother, wants to become also her slave; or that the Queen adopts the slave as her son, driven by immense love, so that the slave remains a son and a slave.*” He concludes, “*Oh most happy slavery! Thus, we all belong to Jesus and Mary. Jesus and Mary will unite us to their divine Hearts and share their graces with us! This sacred slavery is all slavery of love, by which we become beloved children of Jesus and Mary more deeply. This sacred slavery will make us grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus and Mary, will obtain many blessings in life for us, and make us eternally happy if we are faithful and persevering.*”

St. Louis M. Grignon warns that the one who will reach the final step of this devotion and permanently inhabit is “*only the person to whom the Spirit of Jesus Christ will unveil this secret. This very faithful person will be led by Jesus himself in advancing from virtue to virtue, from grace to grace, from light to lights, and thus reach the transformation of himself in Jesus Christ, the fullness of his life on earth, and his glory in Heaven.*”

We believe that Father Hannibal was precisely one of these lucky persons.

CHAPTER 17

CHARITY

1. Father Hannibal's Distinctive Virtue

Charity was Father Hannibal's distinctive virtue that dominated the others, a characteristic of his personality that gave a specific aspect to his apostolate.

Fr. Nalbone stated, *"He was a saintly priest, forgetful of himself, humble and meek, Franciscan in his poverty, with an interior life and singular devotion."*

"Charity towards the poor was his characteristic, to the point that in describing a charitable man, people used to say, and still say: 'He is another Canon Di Francia.'"

We find repeatedly stated about him, *"He was outstanding and unbeatable in charity, a hero, a genius of charity."* Thus, he can rightly be put side by side with the great champions that enlightened the Church in recent times: Cottolengo, Don Bosco, Fr. Ludovico da Casoria, Don Guanella, Don Orione, and Fr. Cusmano.

He found joy, happiness, and life in giving and in giving himself.

2. The Offering of His Life

Father Hannibal loved people immensely. *"I will esteem people so much that for the salvation of just one person, I would consider it worth spending my entire life even if it had to consist entirely of sufferings, toil, and sacrifices. I will keep in mind the teachings of the Saints that Jesus Christ our Lord loves a single person as much as he loves all the people put together, and that if in this world there had been only one person, for this single person, our Lord would have suffered and died the same."*

The *'offering of himself'*, as he desired to annihilate and destroy himself for the glory of God, goes back to May 3, 1880. Feeling desolate, he asked the Lord, *"Why is it that I don't know how to love you? Why do not all people love, serve, obey, and please you?"* He recognized that Messina needed an apostle to transform and regenerate it by *"working for the conversion of sinners and the sanctification of the just one."* And he moaned from the depths of his heart, *"Send, send, O Lord, the one you have to send!... From the treasure of your infinite goodness, send to Messina a true apostle endowed with your blessings, a pure, chaste, blameless, simple, meek, sober, just, and prudent priest. A priest full of Holy Spirit, of mercy, of strength and perseverance, full of the knowledge of the Saints and of all ecclesiastical doctrine, to carry on his sublime ministry in the most dignified way."* He concluded with this generous offering, *"My God, if to raise this priest according to your Heart, you want the offering of my life, I offer it to you right now... Accept, oh most gentle Lord, this offering of mine; make me disappear from the earth and, as my replacement, let this longed for apostle come, this faithful priest who will do according to the will of your Heart. Send Lord, the one you have to send!"*

We can reasonably believe that the request was well-received and that the desired priest, the longed-for apostle was... he, himself!

3. All had Recourse to Father Di Francia

Any public work of beneficence was inconceivable in Messina if not connected, in one way or another, with the name of Father Di Francia, at least for moral support and for lively encouragement, besides the material contributions in the form of generous offerings, which he would never fail to grant.

Children to catechize, doubtful persons to enlighten, sick people to console, sinners to convert, fallen people to lift up, marriages to save: all of these interested Father Hannibal immediately. He rushed to these situations either when he was called, or spontaneously offered his help.

In desperate cases of dying persons who refused the sacraments, people appealed to Father Di Francia. He immediately required the orphans to pray, and then rushed to the dying person. He had thus great consolations, like the Pharmacist Cananzi and the renowned Jewish politician Francesco Faranda who were reconciled with God and were assisted by him until their last moments.

I remember Senator Ludovico Fulci, a well-known and outstanding member and head of the masonry who did not have his child baptized. One day, Father Hannibal presented himself to the Senator who declared himself honored by the visit of Father Di Francia, saying that he was ready to help him with whatever he needed. The Father said right away, "*What I need now is to baptize your child.*" Nothing could be denied to Father Di Francia, and to the baptism of the child, Father Hannibal added the legitimacy of the marriage of his parents.

When the time came, Father Hannibal wanted to prepare his godson for his First Communion and to accompany him to the altar during the Mass that he wanted to be solemnized and celebrated by Fr. Vitale.

4. Professor Tommaso Cannizzaro

Father Di Francia had frequent relations with and was received with pleasure by Tommaso Cannizzaro, a poet and writer of Messina. Cannizzaro professed as an atheist. Their talks and discussions generally began with the reading of the poems that they shared, then continued about religious issues. Cannizzaro's daughter gave us a copy of Father Hannibal's letter to her father where he explains the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Prof. Cannizzaro said he recognized Jesus Christ as *a sublime child of Mary*. Father Di Francia replied, "*From where did you get the knowledge of Jesus Christ as a sublime man who drove away the Pharisees, consoled the afflicted, and so on? Certainly from the Gospels. Well, the Holy Gospels are full of the divinity of Jesus Christ... The evangelists present him to us throughout his life as Man and as God. He was born as a child in the grotto: this is as Man. The Angels came down to the grotto and sung, and an Angel announced him to the shepherds by telling them, 'I give you news of immense joy. The Savior of the world is born.': this is as God. At thirty, he entered Jerusalem, preached, and consoled the afflicted: this is as Man. He worked wonderful miracles, multiplying the bread, and so on: this is as God. The Jews insulted him and he kept silent: this is as Man. His disciples, with just the name of Jesus, cast out demons and healed the sick: this is as God.*"

He concluded, *“Thus, dearest Professor, I wish that the faith in Jesus Christ may enter brightly and splendidly into your mind and your heart, and enkindle it with the beautiful flame of the divine love for Jesus Christ, true Man and true God. May this light and flame be such that your conversion to the true faith be entire, complete, perfect, universal, so that faith may free you from eternal perdition and lead you to eternal salvation.”*

During one of Father Hannibal’s absences from Messina, the Professor died reconciled with God. The prayers of the Father had not been in vain.

5. Letter to His Friends

Prof. Cannizzaro was *“a man of great natural goodness, righteousness, and incapable of offending anyone,”* as Father Di Francia wrote. The Father wanted to extend his thoughts to many other people who, in matters of religion, considered themselves ‘*atheists*’ or ‘*agnostics*’ but would not reject a good word, and not close their minds and hearts to the revealed truth. They could practically be won over to God through His grace if they could find a sincere friend taking interest in them.

From this came his *“Letter to the Friends”*, a pamphlet he printed to explain simply and clearly the truths of the Christian doctrine, and to invite his readers to think seriously about their salvation as the ultimate goal of life.

Father Hannibal addressed the pamphlet *“to his friends and gentlemen whom he loves as he loves himself, and whose welfare and happiness he desires as that of himself.”* Turning to a specific addressee, he explains, *“I composed this letter for persons who, through my personal acquaintances or through others or through their fame, I knew to be endowed with admirable qualities of mind and heart. It seemed to me that they are the people best disposed to receive the wholesome expressions of my heart, with the pure impartiality of the most righteous reason.”*

The letter was sent to all the intellectuals of Messina, even to foreigners and to circles hostile or indifferent to religious matters. We know that it was received everywhere with respect and, may the good Lord will it, with satisfying results.

6. His Supreme Interest: The Salvation of People

Before anything else, Father Hannibal always established the arguments of faith because for him the salvation of people was the supreme interest.

In 1923, when for the first time a ‘*Beauty Contest*’ was announced in Messina, he published a fiery protest in the newspaper ‘*La Scintilla*’. The article ended with the vigorous reminder that *“the very strict account that we have to give of all our actions, from now to the short end of our life, to that supreme judge who said that it is better to tie a millstone to our necks than to be the cause of scandal for the innocent! After the harsh passage through this world, for those who observed the divine law and practiced the holy religion of Jesus Christ, there will be the encounter with a happy eternity. For those instead, who lived detached from God and their religious duties, there will be a very unhappy eternity and, in a moment, as the Gospel says, they will fall into hell.”*

7. Giving and Self-Giving

Giving and self-giving was the life of Father Hannibal, not only for the spiritual but also for the material necessities of his neighbors.

He wrote, *“Let the Rogationists remember that our Pious Work was born with the holy mission of giving and that the more we give, the more the Lord will give us, since, he said, ‘Give one, and you will receive a hundredfold, and you will have eternal life, besides.’”*

He taught, *“If on one hand, we must seek the means of subsistence for us and for the Works, on the other hand, we must pay homage to the word of the Divine Redeemer, ‘There is more happiness in giving than in receiving’ (Acts 20:35). This faith in the words of Jesus Christ will make us remember what he Himself declared, ‘Whatever you did to one of these little ones, you did it to me’ (Mt 25: 40).”*

These divine words represent the program of Father Hannibal’s life. He always wanted to distribute everything: bread, money, and clothes. When he had nothing left to give, he would give a smile, a good word, and the hope of a gift to give the day after. Thus, he made all feel his pain for not being able to give immediately, and he felt mortified.

In his Houses, the soup for the poor had to be ready every day. No poor was to be dismissed without receiving help. Once, upon learning that a Mother Superior had dismissed a poor with empty hands because the House was still in its beginnings and there was absolutely nothing to give, he did not accept this as an excuse. He set a ‘*Novena of Charity*’, an extra help for nine days for all the poor who came to the door, and, upon learning about it, for those nine days the poor were plentiful.

What he wrote of himself with simplicity is true literally: *“I would like to have a bond of friendship with everyone on earth, rich and poor, masters and laborers, humble and poor people or aristocrats. I have seen a brother and a lord in each of them, and the best I desired for myself in this life or in the next, I desired equally for all.”*

His heart was immense. The sufferings of all would find the echo of effective compassion in his immense heart and the tears of all the sufferings dropped warm into his heart caused a river of charity, which kept on widening its banks and continued even with a fuller and more fruitful abundance. Broken families, unemployed workers, endangered youth, students with no possibility of continuing their studies for lack of means, any kind of afflicted persons, people persecuted by misfortunes without a name and a shelter: all had recourse to him, and he placed all his time at their disposal. All found a consoler and a father in him.

8. Concern for Priests and Religious

He had more than paternal tenderness for poor priests and needy communities.

He wrote for his followers, *“You cannot help feeling moved and extend your hand towards those who belong to our Lord Jesus Christ, with unlimited confidence in the divine promise. Just read the words of the prophet Malachi (3:10ff, RSV), ‘Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house, and thereby put me to the test,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. I will rebuke the devourer for you so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil (that is, I will put to flight the insects that devour the crops, such as the worms, the locusts, etc.) and the vine in your field shall not fail to bear,’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘Then, all the nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight.’”*

9. A Strange Behavior

Father Hannibal used to behave following these principles, and this is how he justified himself when Mons. Francesco Parrillo, the Apostolic Visitor, requested an explanation from him. *“I have to reveal to Your Reverence, who represents for us the Supreme Authority, a somehow strange behavior, as I behaved during the more than forty years that I have been in the field of charitable works.*

“I had great concern for the orphans and the poor, and this is good. However, I also had a belief in desiring to give, not only for the Institutions I started but also for the worthy institutions created by others, and not only for the people I assisted in my Institutes but also for poor beggars and Religious Houses. I put my trust to that divine Word: ‘give one and you will receive a hundredfold,’ and the other, ‘give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.’ I consider ‘giving’ as the infallible secret of continuous Providence.

“Thus, my hope in God was never disappointed. With his infinite goodness, our Lord overflows us with the superabundance of his divine Providence from every side. I have to state that indeed my donations in relation to our Institutes and the people I sheltered in them could not be considered thoughtless because, first of all, by God’s grace, I never let those sheltered in my Institute lack in anything. Therefore, it is on today’s abundance that we tried to make investments with the Bank of the Divine Providence, without worrying for tomorrow.

“I closed my eyes especially when I had to help Religious Sisters and their Houses. Shall I say it? I will tell you in strict confidentiality: to an impoverished monastery in Naples named ‘Sisters of Stella Mattutina’ (Sisters of the Morning Star) I gave 120,000 Lire. To several Salesian monasteries of St. Francis de Sales in Italy and some in France, we made monthly donations summing up to several thousand Lire. The Salesian Sisters of Bologna, for the grave situation in which they were, received from us 30,000 Lire. The Claretians, Carmelites, and Dominican Sisters receive from us monthly allowances given the sorrowful times in which the cloistered nuns perish and they are the true victims of this century.”¹³

This was the way Father Hannibal acted and thought; and the ‘strangeness’ and ‘presumption’ of which he humbly accuses himself did not bring any condemnation to him.

Instead, the people of Messina understood him and named him with a title perfectly consistent with his nature: *‘Father of the Orphans and the Poor’*. We cannot forget the meaningful word from the lips of a commoner at the death of Father Hannibal, *“The mouth that never said ‘no’ is now closed.”*

¹³ To understand the real value of these donations, bear in mind the value of Lire during Father Hannibal’s time. (TN. 10 Lire of 1890 would correspond to 42.35 Euros today).

CHAPTER 18

ANECDOTES

1. She is Only Three, and They Made Her Cry!

Here are some stories that reveal the tenderness of Father Hannibal's heart.

In the orphanage of Taormina, the Father found a little girl desperately crying. He stopped to look at her, was moved, and cried. The Father learned from the Sister that the girl did not want to drink the milk.

"Oh let it go! Let it go! Why do you make her cry like this?"

Then he took the little girl by the hand and led her to his room, repeating in a sorrowful voice, *"My poor little daughter, they made you sad; they made you cry at three!"*

He brought the child back to the Sister only after a genuine smile had returned to the lips of the innocent.

2. Am I Not your Father?

Again in Taormina, once, two young girls of the orphanage felt especially the burden of their misfortune. They were never called to the parlor or received gifts because they had no relatives.

Father Hannibal sent a gift to each of them with the card, *"Your Father is waiting for you in the parlor."*

They found him in the parlor. He received them with the sweetest smile. Since the girls were surprised, he asked, *"Why? Am I not your father?"*

3. The Lord Will Not Let Us Go Hungry

In Oria, a poor man showed up and Father Hannibal happened to open the door. He went to the refectory and, as he could not find anything else, he collected the bread on the tables and brought it to the poor fellow.

The servant objected, *"Father, it is already lunchtime and there is no bread for the community."*

"The Lord will certainly provide. He will not leave us hungry..."

While the church's bells rang the Angelus, a woman came to the door with a large basket of bread steaming hot. She just wanted one loaf back, blessed by Father Hannibal. The remaining bread was for the children.

4. Mr. Vito Morabito

On a winter evening in 1915, Fr. Vitale arrived at a late hour in Reggio, the city on the other side of the Strait, almost in front of Messina. It was wartime and very dark, and the rain was pouring. A porter picked up his luggage and offered to accompany him to a safe hotel, but it was hard to find any accommodation.

On hearing the story, the Father asked, *“How much did you give to that poor man?”*

“Two Lire, Father.” Those were difficult times and the porter was happy with that tip.

“Too little, too little!” remarked the Father. *“Do you know his name?”*

“Vito Morabito, he told me.”

Father Hannibal wrote in his notebook, ‘Vito Morabito’, and added, *“When I get to Reggio, I will look for him at the station and compensate him.”*

We are sure that the man got his reward. The Father never forgot these things.

5. The Waterman

One day, a water deliverer slipped, broke his barrel, got a bleeding foot, and started swearing.

Father Hannibal rebuked him, threatening the divine punishment. The poor man was confused and asked for forgiveness. Then, the Father dried the man’s wound with his handkerchief, accompanied him to the nearby Frasti Pharmacy for medication, and upon learning that the cost of the barrel was 5 Lire, gave him 25 to buy two barrels and to keep the rest for the time he remained without work.

6. This Poor Man Will Have Something to Eat

One time the Father returned accompanied by a man who carried a large wicker basket full of fruits, definitely not of the best quality.

“What are we going to do with these spoiled fruits?” asked the Bursar.

“My blessed son, that man has to live somehow. Who would buy this stuff? We will throw away the rotten ones, but the poor man will have something to eat.”

7. We Will Force the Providence

In times of lack of means, it was necessary to increase charity. It was the sure way to come out of it happily.

One day the Father presented a young unemployed person to be accepted for a job.

“Father, you know very well that we have no money. How will we cover the expense?”

“We must take this poor man precisely for this: by doing charity we will force Divine Providence to come to our aid.”

8. “See the Miracles of Providence”

On a trip to Rome with Fr. Carmelo, who was still a student at that time, Father Hannibal asked him how much he had.

“One hundred Lire, Father.”

“It’s too little. However, give them to me.”

It was useless to protest that at least fifty was needed for the return ticket... The Father asked for all of it, placed them into an envelope and gave them to a poor priest that he had seen in the other compartment.

Meanwhile, a man asked Fr. Carmelo who the other priest with him was. Upon hearing that it was Father Di Francia, he rejoiced at having met a priest of whom he had heard people talking about so well and, when the Father returned to his seat, he went to greet him and gave him an envelope.

There was one thousand Lire inside the envelope. The Father remarked to the young Carmelo, *“Do you see the miracles of the Providence? Had we given fifty Lire, we would have received only five hundred. We gave one hundred and the Lord sent us one thousand.”*

9. The Three Capuchins

On a winter evening, three Capuchin Fathers alighted at the Oria station from the last train trip of that day. They met our Brother Giuseppe Antonio Meli who heard them talking of going to the Seminary for accommodation.

When Father Hannibal learned about it, he rebuked the Brother for not having offered them hospitality in our House and asked him to go, despite of the late hour and pouring rain, equipped with a lamp, to look for them and to invite them. Brother Guiseppe found them at the front gate of the Seminary, which at that hour of the night would never open.

Those good Fathers accepted the invitation. First, Father Hannibal apologized, then he had warm water ready to wash their feet. He went to look for blankets so that they would not suffer because it was cold; and because there were not enough blankets in the House, he gave them his own.

10. I Did Not Want to Leave Without Blessing You

In October 1926, Father Hannibal was in Oria. He felt that his end was nearing. He did not have the strength to walk up to the Sisters’ House in San Benedetto. He invited the Sisters to come down to San Pasquale, the male House, to receive his blessing.

As the community was lining up in front of him, he asked solicitously, “Where is Sammeri?”

Sammeri was a former orphan girl who, after finishing her education, did not want to leave the Institute, and had remained there as a daughter [*guest-helper*] of the House. The Father could not forget her whom he considered as his daughter. They told him that she could not come because of her corns [*calluses*], which afflicted her. He sent a carriage right away to pick her up.

When she arrived, he said, *“My dear, I will never come anymore to Oria, and I did not want to leave without giving you my blessing. As for the corns, recommend yourself to St.*

Charles Borromeo who suffered much because of them and is the patron against this ailment...

11. The Sheep for the Butcher

Father Hannibal had a sheep in the garden given by a benefactor. A poor man came to the entrance asking alms for himself and his family. There was no bread... and the Father's pockets were completely empty!

"What is the job of this man?"

"He is a butcher, Father."

His face lit up as a bright idea flashed in his mind:

"Very well then. Give him the sheep. We couldn't use it more conveniently."

12. Switching of Dishes

One day, the Father ordered a sumptuous meal.

At the set time, the guests entered. They were the dregs of mankind, a rabble of poor ragged men who were the *marquises* and *princes* for Father Hannibal's great faith.

He sat happily among them and the feast begun. The man on his side was less acquainted with cleanliness and hygiene than the other men, thus he soiled the dish of noodles with the drippings from his mouth and nose. In an instant, the Father traded his dish with that of the poor man. The Sister, who was serving, noticed it and stifled a cry of horror. However, a glance of the Father imposed silence and he finished the dish with particular relish.

13. Uncle Giacomo

An old servant, uncle Giacomo, had worked for many years in the House of Oria. At that time, he was going around leaning on a knotty club that he had found, but it did not give him the proper support.

Father Hannibal said, *"Poor old man, that is not good. It's not good."*

The next time he came home, the Father brought a wonderful deluxe cane with a bent and comfortable handle and rushed directly to uncle Giacomo with a little bag of candies. *"Uncle Giacomo, take everything. I chose the cane especially for you."*

14. The Poor are Our Masters

The Father got off at the train station and was returning home on the orphanage's carriage: a humble couch, drawn by a humble horse, guided by an unassuming Religious.

Together with the Father were a coadjutor Brother and a Sister. It was around noon.

As they were approaching the Institute, the Father continued to look out of the window generously giving bows and salutations. The Sister could not find an explanation for those cordial greetings and was thinking, *"The Father surely has many friends in this town! However,*

is it possible that they are all gathering here at this time?" Thus, at the first opportunity, she peeped out and was astounded to see a crowd of dirty and ragged poor men, coming back from the orphanage where they had just received their daily soup.

Father Hannibal perceived immediately the Sister's thought and said "*My daughter, do not wonder if I greet them: are not the poor our masters?"*"

15. The Flock of Sparrows

Another episode is worthy of St. Francis' 'Little Flowers'.

The snow had fallen in abundance and, from behind his window pane, the Father was watching a flock of sparrows, vainly searching for birdseed over that white blanket.

"Poor little birds, they too are creatures of God!"

He summoned one of the Brothers. "*Brother, bring some crumbs to feed these little creatures.*" The Brother came back with an abundant supply.

The Father added, "This is not enough. The crumbs will sink into the snow and disappear."

They had to look for a plank and lay the birds' *banquet* over it. Then, the sparrows feasted for God's praise.

16. How Could I Say No to Father Di Francia

A postal worker had been fired for opening the letters and for stealing, which were done against Father Hannibal. Several days after, the Provincial Director [of the Post Office] had the man rehired and his dismissal files thrown into the wastebasket. To those who expressed surprise, he confided, "*I couldn't do otherwise. Last night, Father Di Francia came to see me, and knelt in front of me, pleading for the case of the disgraced man who has a wife and children and so on. 'I have forgiven him and you must do the same'! He also said that he would remain kneeling as long as I did not give in to his request. How could I say no to Father Di Francia?"*"

17. They Do Not Have the Courage to Come to Me...

One winter evening, Knight Musicò met Father Hannibal, walking on the street together with Brother Mariantonio, both loaded with things they were hiding under their mantle.

Musicò inquired, "*Father, what are you doing on the road at this time, in this cold and rain?"*"

"You cannot think of cold and rain when in this block a family dying from hunger... they don't dare to come to me. So, I have to go to them."

18. The End of the Swearer

At the train station of Oria, one day, Father Hannibal met an operator who, blind with rage, was swearing like a trooper.

“Why are you swearing?”

“I lost my wallet with 50 Lire...”

The Father did not notice or pretended not to notice the trick. The worker wanted to take advantage of his well-known generosity.

“Well, here is your 50 Lire but stop swearing if you want to escape God’s punishment.”

The swearer took the money but did not care to amend his ways. One day, not too long after, unfortunately, he was crushed to death between the bumpers of a train.

19. A Mosquito Net for the Little Girl

Once, in the orphanage of Taormina, the Father noticed that one of the little girls was pale.

“Do you feel sick?” he asked.

“Father, I cannot sleep at night because of the mosquitoes.”

Father Hannibal called the Sister in charge of the orphans, told her to get the mosquito net prepared for him and to place it over the bed of the girl.

Then, he admonished the Sister, *“Be vigilant in asking the educators an account of the girls’ health.”*

He concluded repeating, *“The smallest of the little orphan is worth more than the Founder and the Mother General.”*

20. The Shoes for Tommaso

Among the poor who frequently came begging at the San Pasquale convent in Oria, we remember one named Tommaso, almost reduced to blindness more because of his poor hygiene than from a real illness.

One day, Father Hannibal had him cleaned and clothed anew. Only the shoes were lacking. He ordered a search among the several pairs kept in the storeroom.

The keeper, Saro Marchese, tried them all on Tommaso but none fit. He went back to the Father to report it. The Father told him:

“Go to the Church and say three Our Fathers, three Hail Marys, and three Glory Bes to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and you will find the shoes.”

They recited the prayers, but the result was negative: the shoes were all too small. Marchese went back to the Father who sent him again to pray with faith...

Marchese muttered, *“Prayers are alright, yes, but there are no shoes that fit him...”* Discouraged and a bit agitated, he returned to the Father for the third or fourth time.

The Father said, *“Come with me!”* They went together to the Chapel to pray again, then back to the storeroom, where Tommaso was still waiting. Father Hannibal looked at the pile of shoes and pointed to a pair, *“Wear these!”*

The shoes seemed custom made for Tommaso!

Marchese concluded, *“I left the Father and cried...”*

CHAPTER 19

TOWARDS THE HOMELAND

1. The Longtime Dream: a House in Rome

Towards the end of Father Hannibal's life, the Lord wanted to crown his longtime dream: to open an Institute in Rome.

He had tried repeatedly but for one reason or another, the result was always negative. However, he never gave up. Rome remained his goal. He wrote, *"This is not for human ambition; may God spare us! - but to be able to raise the banner of that forgotten command of our Lord Jesus Christ: 'Pray, therefore, the Lord of the Harvest to send out laborers into his harvest (Rogate...). To raise it, I say, in the eternal city, which is the center of the Catholic faith, where the Supreme Pontiff, the infallible Vicar of Christ is, and where the entire evangelical doctrine is deposited. Besides, according to the meaningful words of the Holy Father Benedict XV, whose memory be blessed, when I knelt at his feet: 'It is the Supreme Pontiff himself who, more than anyone else, must take interest in this great command given by our Lord Jesus Christ.'"*

We can see how his passion, the fixed idea, and the star of Father Hannibal's life was always the *Rogate!*

In October 1924, he was able to purchase a suitable building with a wide expanse of land, outside Porta San Giovanni, in the Appio neighborhood, on Circonvallazione Street. The negotiations for the contract, a complex of exceptional efforts for the renovation of the place, and, additionally, his dwelling in a damp environment during the cold winter of 1924, shook his body, worn out more by the flames of zeal than by age. He remained in bed for forty days and was only able to return to Messina, entirely worn out, on December 15.

On January 20, 1925, when Messina celebrated the feast of Blessed Eustochio, and the little orphan girls went to the Church to pray for the recovery of the Father, he began to recover, so that soon, he was able to resume his activities and travels to the Italian mainland.

He prepared the special issue of *"God and Neighbor"* for the opening of the House of Rome, which he inaugurated on the morning of May 24, the day of "Mary Help of Christians," consecrating the House to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Most Holy Virgin, and presenting to the Holy Hearts the first orphan boy. That foundation thus started as a male orphanage, run by the Daughters of the Divine Zeal.

However, by then the Father was already weak. He never recovered but, up to the last moment, he did not want to abandon his activities, his Works, and orphans. They remained the constant thought and worry of his days, and whenever there was anything concerning the salvation of people, he always found new energy in the flames of his zeal.

2. Now Let Your Servant Go in Peace!

The year 1926 was for Father Hannibal the year of the Divine Mercy towards his Work: the two religious Congregations of the Rogationists and of the Daughters of Divine Zeal finally received the canonical approval.

Mons. Francesco Parrillo, an Official of the Roman Rota, a Vatican tribunal, assigned by the Holy See to inspect the Institutes, arrived in Messina. He had biases against the Father's Work, and it seemed that his objections did not disappear after his visit. However, after talking with Father Hannibal, whose appearance, attitude, and spirit left a deep impression on him, he had a sleepless and tormented night...

When, on the following day, Fr. Vitale went to see him for some explanation, the Monsignor opened fully and honestly his heart. Previously, he had thought of suppressing the Institutions, but now he was convinced that in so doing he would go against the will of God. *"Last night, I was unable to close my eyes. I had in front of me the figure of a holy man saying to me, 'God is with me!' I reviewed in my mind what I had seen and heard, the words of this man of God, the right purpose, and the way of life of his Works, and I felt an inner voice that reproached me for my intentions. I had to convince myself that I was wrong and that I had in front of me a holy Work which the Lord wants and which must be helped at any cost."*

Upon returning to Rome, he worked actively on the processing of the necessary steps so that the Archbishop of Messina, Mons. Angelo Paino, on August 6, 1926, the Fast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord and first Friday of the month, could issue the two decrees establishing the two religious Congregations and approving their Rules.

In 1910, in a letter to Fr. Palma, Father Hannibal had written, *"I pray God to enable me to say, 'Now let your servant go in peace' [nunc dimittis...] when I will see the small plant blossom, becoming well-rooted and giving fruits. Let us trust the Most Gentle Heart of Jesus, our Supreme Good, His Holy Mother, and our dear Angels and Saints. Meanwhile, whatever we can do, let us do it in the Holy Name of Jesus!"*

He had done all he could and thus had arrived at the *nunc dimittis*...

Also in that year, he had made his customary visit to the Houses. The news of the canonical approval reached him in Trani, where after some days, on August 15, the Feast of Our Lady's Assumption, the Lord imposed on him another sacrifice with the death of one of the first and most faithful Sisters, Maria Carmela D'Amore. He assisted her in her illness and for her funeral made a wonderful eulogy that was later printed.

Then he reached Rome, went back to Oria, and on October 15, returned to Messina.

3. His Last Illness

On the morning of January 24, 1927, the Father did not get up from his bed. That night, his illness had started to agonize him and the alternating changes in his health brought him to the end.

On February 20, the 'Sexagesima Sunday', he celebrated the Holy Mass for the last time. From that day on, he had to content himself with the Holy Communion. It was a very great sacrifice for him, but he consoled himself saying, *"I want to do God's will. The Lord's will is above all things, even the Holy Mass."*

On March 15, Tuesday, he asked for the Anointment of the Sick, which was administered to him, according to his desire, by Fr. Ernesto Fochesato, a Camillian. He thought of securing the particular protection of St. Camillus for his own final hour.

Don Orione, upon learning of the Father's illness, on March 16, sent him *"a telegram full of brotherly love"*, to which Father Hannibal responded *"as his heart dictated."* The next day, he gave him an account of his condition, *"I became unable to read, write, and to concentrate. By night and by day I am in between life and death. I want only what Jesus wants."*

Many prayers are offered for me, miserable as I am, but I donated nine-tenths of them to those sufferings like me who do not have the means and assistance that I have."

Some days later, on April 11, upon receiving from Don Orione the assurance of prayers on the tomb of the St. Anthony of Padua for his healing, the Father answered with this short letter, which is a sort of farewell to the friend of his heart and seals his entire epistolary. *"A thousand thanks for recommending me to our glorious St. Anthony. My condition is severe, but the great Saint is very powerful. I feel like a destroyed man. I am extremely weak and need extreme effort even to eat. Interior condition: spiritual desolations! However, first, let God's will be done in me [fiat in me voluntas Dei], and may my Jesus' love consume me!"*

Meanwhile, even amidst desolations, his spirit united ever more intimately with our Lord. *"Thanks be to God! Thanks be to God!"* he always repeated, especially in his pains and adversities, which never lessened until his last moments. *"Let the adorable will of God be always done!"*

4. Your Will be Done, Lord!

His nurse wrote about him, *"He liked to listen to readings inducing him to desire this gentle submission, and he used to say, 'That's it, even my illness is God's will. He is keeping vigil over me. I am pressured by the Divine Will, and He tightens and loosens my sufferings at will. Lord, let your will be done, on earth as in heaven'".* At times, he prayed, *"I am sure of your will, I know that my destiny has been decreed, however, my Lord, I am asking with fervor for my healing, because the obedience to my superiors imposes it on me."*

He certainly earned the reward for obedience, but the Lord wanted the sacrifice.

How many lessons we received from his virtue in those terrible days! He told me one day, *"Son, I ask the Lord never to let you suffer as I am suffering now!"* Another time, *"How much I am suffering! Our Lord suffers every time He sees his chosen ones suffering. However, I tell Jesus, 'This is nothing, Jesus, this is nothing! I don't want you to suffer for me.'"* He stated again, *"How visible is the effect of the prayers being offered for me! At times my sufferings are so sharp, but I feel great strength in me, and all comes from our Lord!"*

5. Death is Changed into Life!

He loved the Holy Child Mary with a very singular love. He had written: *"How beautiful you are, my heavenly little Child, with the smile blossoming on your lips! Could I kneel by that cradle, kiss the edge of the blanket covering you, and die because of love at the sparkle of those purest eyes!"*

His devotion found many brilliant initiatives to honor her.

According to a pious belief, the Virgin entered the temple of Jerusalem at three, remained there for twelve years, and then married St. Joseph.

Father Hannibal built a small Chapel in the House of Taormina to represent the temple in Jerusalem, where the heavenly Child was growing up year after year. The Sisters represented the Hebrew girls of the temple who had to serve this sublime Lady, Mother, and Mistress. November 21 was for Father Hannibal a fixed appointment. He would leave the place where he was, so as not to miss the appointment with his Most Holy Lady. When the Virgin reached her fifteenth birthday, the Father celebrated her wedding to St. Joseph, and there was a feast,

in the presence of the Saints Joachim and Anne. That small Chapel, honored by the presence of so many famous personages, was and is still called '*The Room of the Divine Superior*'.

Now that her faithful servant was approaching the end of his earthly exile, the gentle little Child wanted to give him a sign of her appreciation for the veneration he had for her.

One morning, some days before his death, the Father's face brightened suddenly as he glanced at a spot in the room... enraptured, exclaiming: *Brother, look! See how beautiful the Child Mary is!*" The Father remained absorbed in that sweet vision.

In this way, the Father's prayer to Our Lady found its answer:

*In that hour without respite,
When everything disappears,
Change then the terrible agony
In Your loving presence, O my Mother!*

The earthly days of Father Hannibal was coming to its end. On the evening of May 31, after reciting the last prayers with the help of Brother Michelino Lapelosa, the Father blessed him and went to bed. He spent some hours with increasing breathing difficulty and visibly suffering. Suddenly a quiver shook the bed: Brother Michelino went closer and called, "Father! Father!"

The Father did not answer. He was already in agony, and this lasted the whole night. Fr. Vitale came and started immediately the prayers for the dying, with the Religious and the Sisters. At 6:00 AM, Fr. Gandolfo celebrated the Mass for the agonizing. At 6:30 AM on June 1, 1927, Wednesday of the Octave of the Ascension, the good and faithful servant, Father Hannibal Mary Di Francia, passed to his eternal rest.

Watched over by our Lady, Father Hannibal had also sung this:

*The day of passing away is hastening,
I sense the touches of death...
Who watches over me? Oh, the Beloved
Of my heart closes my eyes!
Let no one tell me at that moment:
'He is dying, he is already gone!'
With Mary here in the heart
Death has changed into life!*

We can piously believe that he already enjoys this full, blessed life in the bosom of God.

6. The Funeral

The news of his death spread like lightning. Crowds came rushing from the city and from the countryside to see '*the sleeping Saint*'.

All the stores were closed and the walls covered with large black-edged banners announcing, “The ‘*city mourns the death of Canon Di Francia*’ and an endless river of people flowed to the church to venerate the Father’s remains.

The Archbishop of Messina, Mons. Angelo Paino, in his announcement, wrote, “*We express our sorrow for the very sad news that had fallen upon us: Canon Hannibal Mary Di Francia is no longer with us! The liveliest flame of Christian charity that has enlightened the earth for so many years has ceased to burn. The priest of God, disdainful of worldly comforts, consumed only by the zeal for souls, has flown to heaven loaded with merits, carrying in his heart the love for his orphans, for his suffering people, for an ever brighter and more Christian future for his Messina.*”

The Vice Mayor reminded the citizens, “*Father Di Francia spent his entire life and properties to relieve the human sufferings; with Christian humility and with a sublime spirit of humanity, he realized and established magnificent works for the public welfare; for fifty years he knocked at every door to gather the flower of charity. He was a man whose whole existence was a mission and a continuous sacrifice; such a man does not disappear without leaving a deep furrow, a bright track of gratitude, and unanimous veneration in the city.*”

Messina experienced in those days the profound and intimate depth of this mourning. “*L’Osservatore Romano*” the official daily of the Holy See wrote, “*Messina cried as she has never done before.*”

On Saturday, June 4, the funeral was a triumph with the participation of all the associations, schools and Religious Orders of Messina, with the entire Seminary, the Chapter of Canons headed by the Archbishop, and civil and military authorities; an impressive two-kilometer-long funeral procession, and then an enormous, overflowing crowd. The entire Messina was there reverent and moved, with her 200,000 inhabitants, scattered along the roads where the funeral passed, to say farewell to her great son.

We recall the words written twenty-five years before, by the priest Fr. Silvio Cucinotta, about the military carts used for the beneficence walks, “*Someday another cart will carry Father Hannibal’s remains...then from the balconies, verandas, and terraces, roses, and lilies will rain down in the triumph of the hour....*”

The Father’s remains were placed to rest in the artistic temple of the Evangelical Rogation – Shrine of St. Anthony that he built.*

The fame of Father Hannibal’s sanctity increased by the years as many people and his followers prayed and worked for his proclamation as a Saint.*

* EN. Father Hannibal’s incorrupt body lies in the crypt of of the Temple of the Evangelical Rogation. The distinguished incorrupt relic of his heart is permanently exposed for public veneration at the Parish of Saints Anthony of Padua and Hannibal Mary at Piazza Asti in Rome.

* EN. Pope John Paul II proclaimed Father Hannibal Mary Di Francia a Saint on May 16, 2004 in St. Peter’s Square.

EPILOGUE

(of the English edition)

At the time of Father Hannibal's death, the community of the Rogationists was very small, and the Daughters of Divine Zeal were about three hundred.

After his death, they grew and expanded, following the footsteps of their Founder. Their charism is rooted on the divine words of Jesus, "*The harvest is great, but the laborers are few; pray, therefore, the Lord of the harvest so that he may send laborers in his harvest.*"

They put into practice this command of the Lord by praying daily for priestly, religious, and lay vocations, and spreading this prayer all over the world through the '*Priestly Alliance for Vocations*' and the '*Union of Prayer for Vocations*'. Several "Rogate Vocation Centers" and magazines support this work for vocations. However, in line with the spirit of Father Hannibal, their prayer also becomes human promotion and evangelization in educating the little ones, especially the poor and the orphans through boarding houses, schools, vocational centers, and other social and charitable activities.

As of 2019, the Rogationists and Daughters of Divine Zeal are present in many parts of the world, and everywhere they bring the same spirit of love for '*God and neighbor*' according to the teachings of their Founder.

They have expanded to Brazil, the United States, Spain, the Philippines, Argentina, Rwanda, India, Poland, Albania, Cameroon, Paraguay, South Korea, Bolivia, Papua New Guinea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Colombia, Angola, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Portugal, Germany, England, Colombia, Australia, and Canada.

Their main activities in these nations are:

- prayer for good laborers to the Lord's Harvest; *they raise their daily personal and community prayer for this purpose, invite people to pray and spread this spirit of prayer with all their means;*

- *Vocation orientation initiatives and campaigns, Vocation Discernment Centers, Rogate Spirituality Centers (Retreat Houses), Pastoral Institutes for Vocation Formation;*

- *Seminaries, Postulancy Centers, Novitiates, Theology Centers of Studies;*

The majority of their energies, however, are devoted to charitable, pastoral and missionary activities like:

Orphanages, Boys Villages, Educational Assistance Institutions, Parishes, Missionary Stations, Schools, Urban Poor Community Organization, Shelters for the urban poor, Meals for the poor, Feeding programs, Cooperatives, Small Clinics (for indigents), Sunday Apostolate (Catechetical formation of children...

Through the years, the odor of sanctity surrounding Father Hannibal has been constantly increasing and the generations of beneficiaries, witnesses, admirers, and followers of his sanctity and charity also solicited for his glorification on earth.

On April 21, 1945, the Diocesan Process for the Canonization of Father Hannibal Mary Di Francia started in Messina. After the approval of his writings in May 1974, John Paul II promulgated the *Decree of the Heroic Virtues* of Father Hannibal on December 21, 1989, and declared him as 'Venerable'.

Before that, on March 8, 1987, the Ecclesiastical Tribunal of Guaxupe (Brazil) opened a Process about the presumed miraculous healing of a girl, Gleida Ferreira Danese, through the

intercession of Father Hannibal. On July 27, 1990, the Holy Father recognized this event as miraculous.

This opened the way for the solemn day, October 7, 1990, when Pope John Paul II proclaimed Father Hannibal Mary Di Francia a Blessed.

On October 24, 2002, the Diocesan Tribunal of Jaro, Iloilo, Philippines opened the process about the presumed miraculous recovery of a child, Charisse Nicole Diaz, through the intercession of Blessed Hannibal. On February 19, 2004, John Paul II recognized it as a miracle and allowed the canonization of Blessed Hannibal Mary Di Francia.

Finally, on May 16, 2004, Father Hannibal Mary Di Francia was proclaimed a Saint of the universal Church.

With his canonization, the people of God have more reasons to venerate and invoke this Saint as the Apostle par excellence of Prayer for Vocations, as the Father of the orphans and the poor, and as an intercessor to obtain more and holy priestly, religious, and lay vocations for the Church.

The good laborer who totally spent himself for the harvest of the Lord, the outstanding hero of the Rogate, the father of the orphans and of the poor, the man who never said 'no', has become a shining star in the firmament of the Church, for the 'greater consolation of the Heart of Jesus', and for ours as well.

APPENDIX

Chronology of the Canonization Process of St. Hannibal M. Di Francia

1945 - April 21

Monsignor Angelo Paino opens the Ordinary Informative Process concerning the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of Di Francia.

1952 - August 6

The Ecclesiastical Tribunal of Messina, presided by Archbishop Mons. Angelo Paino, closes the Ordinary Information Process.

1960 - December 6

Decree approving the first collection (51 volumes) of the Writings of Father Hannibal.

1974 - March 12

Decree approving the second collection (11 volumes) of the Writings.

1975 - September 17

Presentation of the *collection of all the documentation*, the so-called '*Positio*', for the Introduction to the Cause of Canonization to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

1979 - January 19

Decree of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints authorizing the celebration of the Apostolic Process.

1980 - March 8

Mons. Ignazio Cannavò, Archbishop of Messina, opens the Apostolic Process for Father Hannibal's Cause of Canonization.

1981 - December 2

At the Vicariate of Rome, Cardinal Ugo Poletti opens the Apostolic Process, to examine the witnesses residing in Rome and its surroundings.

1983 - November 18

The Ecclesiastical Tribunal of Messina establishes a Committee of Historians to research and study some aspects of Father Hannibal's life.

1985 - June 15

Cardinal Ugo Poletti closes the Apostolic Process concerning the Canonization of Father Hannibal, celebrated at the Vicariate of Rome.

1985 - October 2

The Ecclesiastical Tribunal of Messina receives the reports of the Committee of Historians after their works.

1985 - December 7

Archbishop Mons. Ignazio Cannavò closes the Apostolic Process of Messina, in the Temple of the Evangelical Rogation of the Heart of Jesus and Shrine of St. Anthony.

1986 - May 9

The Ordinary Congress of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints entrusts the Cause of Canonization of Father Hannibal to the Very Rev. Relator, Father Valentino Macca, OCD.

1987 - October 13

Mons. José Alberto Lopes de Castro Pinto, Bishop of Guaxupé (Brazil), opens the Process on the presumed miracle attributed to the intercession of Father Hannibal, concerning the miraculous recovery of the child Gleida Ferreira Danese.

1987 - November 20

At the Ecclesiastical Tribunal of Guaxupé (Brazil), Mons. José Alberto Lopes de Castro Pinto closes the Process on the presumed miracle attributed to the intercession of Father Hannibal.

1988 - June 11

Pope John Paul II, on a pastoral visit to Messina, kneels and prays at the tomb of Father Hannibal.

1989 - June 23

The Special Congress meets at the Congregation for the Causes of Saints and concludes the discussion on Father Hannibal's heroic virtues with the unanimous affirmative "Vote" of the Theologian Consultors.

1989 - November 7

The Cardinals and Bishops gathered in the Ordinary Congress of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, after the report by Cardinal Eduardo Francesco Pironio, express unanimous affirmative opinions regarding the heroic practice of the virtues of the Servant of God Hannibal Mary Di Francia.

1989 - December 21

Pope John Paul II promulgates the Decree concerning the heroic virtues of Father Hannibal. From that moment, Father Hannibal becomes Venerable.

1990 - June 1

Exhumation and identification of the body of the Venerable Father Hannibal, in the Temple of the Evangelical Rogation of the Heart of Jesus and Shrine of St. Anthony, in Messina. His body is admirably incorrupt.

1990 - June 30

Meeting of the Medical Board, presided by Professor Raffaello Cortesini, at the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. After the discussion, with a unanimous favorable opinion, the Presider declares scientifically unexplainable the healing of the Brazilian girl Gleida Danese.

1990 - July 14

The Special Congress of the Theologian Consultors, gathered at the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, after the result of the Medical Board, expresses a favorable unanimous opinion and defines the healing of Gleida Danese, attributed to the intercession of Father Hannibal, as miraculous.

1990 - July 27

The Cardinals and Bishops gathered in the Ordinary Congress at the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, after the Report of Cardinal Eduardo Francesco Pironio, express unanimous affirmative opinions on the miracle attributed to the intercession of Venerable Father Hannibal.

1990 - 12 September

Promulgation of the Decree concerning the miracle attributed to the intercession of Father Hannibal.

1990 - 7 October

In Rome, in the square of St. Peter's Basilica, Pope John Paul II proclaims Father Hannibal a 'Blessed'.

2000 - August 23 to 2002- October 24

Mons. Angel N. Lagdameo, Archbishop of Jaro (Philippines), instructs the diocesan inquiry on the presumed miraculous healing of the newborn Charisse Nicole Diaz in Iloilo City (Philippines) in 1993. In ten sessions, the tribunal hears 15 witnesses. Twelve witnesses are doctors, including the mother and the father of the child.

2003 - October 15

A unanimous vote of the Medical Board considering scientifically unexplainable the presumed miraculous healing of the newborn Charisse Nicole Diaz.

2004 - January 15

The Special Congress of the Theological Consultors held at the Congregation for the Causes of Saints declares that the healing of Charisse Nicole Diaz, considered unexplainable by doctors, is to be attributed to the intercession of Blessed Hannibal.

2004 - May 16

John Paul II enrolls Father Hannibal Mary Di Francia in the register of the Saints in front of an immense crowd of pilgrims from all over the world in St. Peter's Square.

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