

# BIOGRAPHY ST. JEROME - FR. PELLEGRINI

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## I

### **Religious Life in Italy in the First Half of the XVI Century**

The first half of the sixteenth century, in which St. Jerome Emiliani lived, was quite a lively time in the history of the church in Italy. It was in that period that new spiritual forces began to form and develop. They were to bring an effective remedy to the numerous and grave problems which were afflicting the Church.

The religious and moral conditions of Christian life were troublesome. The appointment of ecclesiastical offices on the basis of economic reasons was detrimental to pastoral action. Often, clergymen were incapable or unworthy and the religious led anything but an exemplary life. Christian people lived in dreadful ignorance of their faith. Devotion to religion, while still deep and sincere, expressed itself in a practice that was often coated with superstition. Moral discipline was quite poor and participation in sacramental life was very weak.

The quest for deep renewal of life and customs is the theme that recurs with impressive frequency in the writings of the end of the fifteenth century and beginning of the sixteenth century. It can be summed up in one word: Reform. For a variety of reasons, several attempts at reform designed in the fifteenth century by Martin V, Nicholas V, Pius II, Sixtus IV, and Alexander VI did not achieve satisfactory results. However, the need for reform was beginning to stir up various components of the church. The monastic and mendicant orders began partially to go back to their ancient observance. In some dioceses, zealous bishops started to exercise their pastoral ministry. In many towns, clergy joined small congregations of "reformed priests."

Even among the laity, an interesting awakening could be noticed. Numerous brotherhoods began to flourish. The Italian lay movements had the distinct common characteristic of implementing reform through deeds of mercy. Among the Italian brotherhoods, one was particularly renowned: the Society of Divine Love. Its goal was to "sow and root love in hearts, by moving the Brothers to true humility, from which all good habits proceed." The Society of Divine Love is duly remembered for many reasons: the numerous foundations established in Genoa, Rome, Vicenza, Verona, Brescia, Venice, Padua, Naples and other Italian towns; the enthusiasm and fervent activity of its members; from its womb were born some of the most remarkable characters of the reform, such as St. Catherine of Genoa, St. Cajetan Thiene, Peter Carafa, who later became Pope Paul IV, John Matthew Giberti, St. Jerome Emiliani, St. Angela Merici, and many others who worked for the renewal of Christian life; and it had connections with the Somascans and Theatines, and with other Congregations of the Catholic reform, such as the Jesuits, the Capuchins, and the Ursulines. When the Papacy under Paul III decisively placed itself at the head of these lay movements, many scattered rivulets took the shape of a wide and mighty river, which finally produced the authentic reform of religious life. In 1545 the Council of Trent began.

It is in this frame of reference, very rich in ideals and enthusiasm, that the character and work of St. Jerome Emiliani must be placed.

## II

### **St. Jerome's Family and His Youth**

St. Jerome was born in Venice in 1486, of the patrician Emiliani (Miani) family. The Mianis belonged to the Grand Council and, in their history, they could number people who had given important services to the Republic. Moreover, Jerome was related, through his mother, to the illustrious Morsosini family.

St. Jerome's family lived just behind the church of St. Vital. The family consisted of the father, Angelo, the mother, Leonora, and four children: Luke, Charles, Mark, and Jerome. The family was actively involved in public life. In 1483 Angelo Miani had been captain of the galleys in La Marca. In 1486, he was podesta' (governor or chief magistrate) and captain in Feltre. Later on, he was superintendent in Zante and Lepanto. He was also a member of the Senate. His sons followed his political steps as soon as they became of age.

The Emiliani finances were fairly strong, the family owning properties near Castelfranco Veneto and in the Piave Valley, as well as some small buildings in Venice, and being involved in the woolen trade on the main land and in the Levant.

In 1496, when Jerome was ten, he tragically lost his father. As far as education is concerned, Jerome pursued a course of studies befitting his family's social class. However, he never was a scholar but a man of action. In fact, he had the characteristics of a man of action: making friends and keeping friends easily, and being cheerful, strong minded, and enthusiastic. "His intelligence allowed him to hold a conversation with his equal," an anonymous friend wrote of him, "but in him love surpassed intelligence." With such a nature, no wonder that in the magnificent Venice of the early 1500s he spent his youth "variously" and in some bewilderment. His niece Helena, who had become a nun, described him as "a youth who had a good time".

At twenty-five, Jerome was involved in the events of the war against the League of Cambrai. The League was established against Venice in 1508 and brought together the forces of Maximilian of Austria, Louis XII of France, Julius II and, later on, the king of Spain and the duke of Ferrara.

In the last months of 1510, Jerome was entrusted the directorship of Castelnuovo of Quero. Placed on the straits on the Piave River, where the hillsides become very steep, Castelnuovo overlooks the road that connects Feltre to Treviso and guards the course of the river. It was an important place both in the time of peace because of its control on the trade route with Germany, and in the time of war because it was a passageway toward Treviso and Venice. In those years it had become the theater of war activity and had been lost and retaken several times.

Jerome went to Castelnuovo in the early days of 1511. The most important events of his regency occurred on August 27, 1511. From the French camp in Montebelluna, the mercenary captain Mercury Bua moved his troops and attacked the fortress. Abandoned by the soldiers who were supposed to defend the castle, Jerome took the military power upon himself. But he could not resist the attacking forces. He survived with only three other men and was taken prisoner.

His imprisonment lasted one month. On the morning of September 27, Jerome showed up, completely free, at the gates of Treviso. What happened the night between September 26 and 27? The prisoner had been locked in a tower. For precautionary reasons, his feet had been bound in chains. A stone ball had also been hung at his neck. In this condition, Jerome addressed the Blessed Virgin of the Madonna Grande's shrine. With humble heart he promised to make a penitential pilgrimage if he would be saved. "A woman clothed in white" then appeared to him. She handed him the keys to open the chains and the door of the tower. Once he gained his freedom, he had to pass through the hostile army. Moreover, he did not know the way. He again beheld Mary and she led him to the sight of Treviso's gates.

Jerome kept serving the Republic until the end of the war in 1516. He was engaged in several military actions. At first, he stayed in Treviso to defend it. In 1513, he was in Padua. In 1514 he was in Friuli at the side of

General Provisioner John Vittori. At the end of the war, he again took the directorship of Castelnuovo, which he held until 1527.

During these years, some family events had occurred and need to be registered. In 1514, his beloved mother died. In 1519, his brother Luke died leaving three children. The oldest was only four. Mark and especially Jerome took custody of them. In 1523, his "no-good" brother Charles got married. At the end of 1526, his brother Mark also died. Thus, on Jerome's shoulders rested the care of all his orphaned nephews and nieces.

He was forty years old and he had not produced a family of his own.

### III

#### **"When It Pleased God to Move His Heart..."**

In the meantime, a deep spiritual transformation was taking place in Jerome's soul. We cannot say exactly when this transformation occurred, but it must have been about 1525. Neither can we establish what event determined it. A very close friend of his, whose name remains unknown, gave us this information in a biography he wrote soon after Jerome's death. He started his story with these words: "When it pleased God to move his heart and by holy inspiration draw him from worldly occupations to himself...."

Listening to God's word was the starting point. "By often listening to the word of God, he started to recall his ingratitude. He remembered his sins against the Lord. He wept often and, at the foot of the Crucified Lord, prayed to him not to be his judge, but his savior."

Under the guidance of an expert spiritual director, a regular canon of the Convent of Charity, Jerome began to associate with friends who could help him with counsel, example, and prayer. He started to go to church, listen to homilies, and attend masses regularly.

In a remarkably radical decision Jerome engaged himself in the imitation of the Crucified Jesus with much self-discipline and many charitable works for the poor. He was particularly touched by the Gospel passage, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Overwhelmed by God's grace, he therefore "resolved to imitate his dear Master Jesus Christ with all his strength." He began to conquer gluttony by moderate fasting. He kept vigil at night. He read, prayed, and worked energetically. He dressed, talked, and conversed with humility. He thought of himself as worthless, knowing that whatever good was in him was by the grace of the Lord. He endeavored to control his language, aware that speech had been given to him to praise God and help his neighbors. He kept constant guard over his eyes. Whenever he could, he helped, counseled, visited and protected the poor.

Using a method very similar to St. Ignatius of Loyola's "particular exam," Jerome achieved such unexpected results that his friends were amazed. His endeavor to imitate Jesus led him to endure any injustice, he who was so quick-tempered. One simple episode gives an example of the interior mortification Jerome was inflicting on himself. One day, in St. Mark's Square, he was severely and unjustly insulted. Among other things, his abuser shouted that he would pluck his beard out bit by bit. Jerome, whose beard was very long and well kept, only answered, "If God wills, do so! Here I am!" Bystanders commented that if he were his former self, "he would have torn the offender to pieces with his teeth."

As his struggle for interior perfection kept making progress, Jerome was more and more compelled to do good, "so that he grieved over nothing except when an hour passed without doing something good." Later on, when the thought of God took total possession of his soul, he completely retired from public office.

## IV

### “Universal Father of the Poor”

What seemed like retirement from worldly events for Jerome exploded into a sweeping activity for others.

In the year of his spiritual transformation, Jerome had the chance to encounter the Company of Divine Love. Its members were famous because of their ability to draw unlimited energy for charitable works from their renewed Christian life. Founded by St. Cajetan in Venice in 1521, the Company gathered Venetian noblemen and noblewomen around the Hospital for the Incurable. Friendship and common living with the Brothers of Divine Love enkindled in Jerome, like a consuming fire, the ideal of charity.

On June 17, 1527, escaping the horrors of the sack of Rome, St. Cajetan Thiene, Bishop John Peter Carafa, and their first Theatine companions came into Venice. Such a sad event was a golden opportunity for an encounter that became decisive for Jerome.

Throughout Italy, a very great famine broke out in 1528. Tens and hundreds of people, sometimes-entire families, in many villages of the mainland died of starvation. People were seen to eat dogs, asses, grass, stale hay, and even the straw from the thatched roofs to satisfy their hunger. The documentation is shocking.

Hearing that in Venice there were more chances of finding food, crowds of poor rushed in. “... Then numberless men women from the countryside came in. And they stay on the bridge at Rialto carrying their babies in their arms and begging. And many came from Vicenza and Brescia...; at night, they go knocking at the doors and cry out, ‘I’m starving.’”

Civic authorities and the most affluent, who indulged themselves in lavish parties, did not seem to notice what was going on around them. Now was the time for the brothers of Divine Love to start pouring financial means and energy into the hospitals in order to relieve such misery.

Among them, Jerome’s personality and activity excelled. He fed, clothed, and sheltered the poor in his house, comforted the sick, and, at night, carried to the graves the bodies abandoned by the city. In the meantime, bread was baked in his house, which he would deliver the next morning. “In a few days, he had spent all the money he had on this work. He even sold his clothes, tapestries and furnishings, using it all for this pious and saintly work.”

Relatives and friends spoke of him in these terms. His niece Helena used to repeat to her sisters at the Convent of St. Alvise that she had a holy uncle who sold everything he had and gave it to the poor. The other niece, Dionora, used to say that one day, since he did not have anything more to give, he gave away his silver-belt buckle, and that the people who saw him in that way laughed at him as they do with fools. To his sister-in-law, Cecily, who complained about his squandering and was worried about him, he used to say that God would not be lacking to him.

While Jerome was giving all his belongings to the poor, another activity required his care: overseeing the Bersaglio Hospital. It had almost miraculously come into being in a few months’ time in order to face the famine and make up for the insufficiencies of the other hospitals. Jerome shared the management with his friend Jerome Cavalli. In a few months the hospital opened its arms so wide that it had become a real refuge for any kind of poor: people from the mainland, convicts, sick soldiers and sailors, the poor of the city, abandoned children, orphans, widows and the destitute of any class and sex. A list of one hundred and three “poor of Jesus” gives us an idea of the cosmopolitan world that crowded the barracks of Bersaglio in those days.

Jerome's attention was directed particularly to the fate of boys and girls who were either orphaned or without a family. He not only took them into the hospital, but he also began to search for them throughout the city. He used to carry them to Bersaglio and to feed them with either his own means or with what his friends or other people gave to him.

Feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless were already sizeable activities, but for Jerome they were not enough. He thought that children needed opportunities to learn a job so that they could take care of their future. Consequently, Jerome took over a shop in the St. Basil neighborhood. He started by working with wool and then he introduced other jobs. He found craftsmen for this kind of activity; among them was Archangel Romitan from Vicenza, a clever inventor, who, among other things, designed and patented a machine for wool carding.

In addition to all these problems, a contagious epidemic broke out. It was more serious than the usual plagues which afflicted Europe frequently. Among the remedies arrived at by the Venetian Senate to tackle the problem was the institution of a special tax. From its revenues an allowance was given to the poor on the condition that they should return to the mainland, with the threat that if they were caught in Venice again, they would be chased and whipped from Rialto' Bridge to St. Mark's Square.

No doubt private charity was a better relief for those who were stricken. The ardent nature of St. Jerome did not need stimuli to respond to this situation. After devoting his day to assisting the victims of this disease, he also found a way to occupy his nights. He went through the city "and he helped the sick, and everyone else as well, in any way that he could. At times, he found bodies of the dead in the streets. As though they were something very precious, like gold, he, unseen and unknown, carried them on his shoulders to cemeteries and sacred places."

In doing these works of mercy, Jerome himself contracted the plague. "He received the Sacraments and committed himself to the Lord, who was his only hope and refuge. He spoke no more of himself, as though the illness was not his. He patiently awaited God's will." When the doctors despaired of his life, he unexpectedly recovered in a few days. Though not entirely healed, he resumed his charitable works with even more zeal. "After this experience, he felt even more secure that the Lord never abandons those who endeavor to serve him."

The small house of the Theatines in St. Nicholas from Tolentino, the dwelling of St. Cajetan and Peter Carafa, was the hospitable meeting place of the brothers of Divine Love. On January 6, 1531, the Papal Nuncio Jerome Aleandro and Bishop John Matthew Giberti arrived there, finding Vincent Grimani, Augustine from Mula, Anthony Venier, Jerome Miani, and Jerome Cavalli, "all upright people who dedicated themselves to increasing piety and religion through good deeds." This meeting had historical value for St. Jerome.

Carafa was the leader of the group. He was a pure and noble man, haunted by the reform of the Church. He had devoted his life to this ideal. Jerome chose him as his spiritual director and Carafa guided him through his many activities with a strong but sometimes tough hand.

On the day of the meeting, Cajetan was missing. Cajetan was different from Carafa. His zeal, in fact, was mostly interior. He kept himself in the shadow, not because he was lacking in initiative, but because of a reservedness and moderation which came from a deep humility. He was the soul of the group.

At the side of Carafa and Cajetan stood Bishop Giberti and Nuncio Aleandro. Giberti was creative and shrewd in practical affairs, as well as being fervent and zealous. He was one of the most fascinating figures of

the Catholic reform. He committed himself to this ideal in his Diocese of Verona with such an enthusiasm that he was taken as a model of reformer bishops.

At that meeting there were also the leading men of the Venetian charity of those years: Vincent Grimani, son of the former Duke, Augustine from Mula and Anthony Venier, the directors of the Hospital for the Incurable, and Jerome Cavalli, administrator of the Hospital of Bersaglio and the Hospital for the Incurable.

Two saints, a future pope who was great despite his shortcomings, a reformer like Giberti, the pope's envoy to the Worms Meeting in 1521: these were a handful of men of the best families of Venice, who subordinated a safe public career to the practice of good deeds for Christ's poor.

The Brothers of Divine Love of other cities of the Venetian Republic, such as Verona, Salo', Brescia, Bergamo, Vicenza, and Padua, were in touch and met with this extraordinary group. In this way, Jerome had the chance to meet some of the Brothers of Divine Love of those towns.

It was through these meetings that a new idea of Jerome's came to maturity. He had left a public career for charity. He had devoted his goods and energies to the poor. Why couldn't he leave his house and family and become one of them?

This idea became a firm and irrevocable decision on February 6, 1531. For the last time, let us enter with Jerome his fatherly house. There were Luke's widow and three children: sixteen-year old John Alvisè, fifteen-year old Dionora, and fourteen-year old Helena. Before a notary, Jerome gave an account of how he administered the goods of his nephews and nieces. "I am fully conscious of having administered such goods with honesty and uprightness, as though they were mine." He made a deed of gift of the other real estate, removed his patrician clothing, donned the habit of the poor, and left his house never to return again.

Jerome opened a craft shop at St. Rocco, where he started the first family of orphans. In this way, he separated them from the other poor, sick, and beggars, and gave them a home.

The anonymous friend describes the life Jerome led there with his children. Religious instruction, prayer, and work were the pivots. "He taught those children to fear God, to put everything in common, to live from their own labors and not from alms. He said that begging was not the Christian way to live; that begging is for the cripples, who cannot live on their own work. Everyone, on the contrary, should support himself by the sweat of his own brow, and according to the saying, 'If one does not work, he should not eat'".

His charity, however, did not remain enclosed in the walls of St. Rocco. As "Universal Father of the Poor," Jerome managed to convey to the needy all the help he could. He delivered much relief himself, or through some of his friends. He was able to reach the poor not only in Venice but also in Mazorbo, Torcello, Burano, Chioggia and other places of the lagoon.

After opening St. Rocco's in February, two months later, on April 14, 1531, Jerome was requested to transfer to the Hospital for the Incurable to serve those unfortunate people. He saw God's will in this and he accepted the task. On a page full of many memories, his anonymous friend, who often went to visit him there, tells us of Jerome's new life. "People in charge of the hospital are witnesses to all the saintly work he did. Many times I visited him. During the pious conversation he had with me – the Lord knows the pure and Christian love he had for me – he also showed me his handiwork. He pointed out the talents of a group of children. Among others, four, I think, were not eight years old yet. Jerome said: 'These pray with me; they are pious and find great favor with the Lord. These others read and write well, and these work. That one is very obedient, and this other

one observes silence. These are their leaders, and that one is the Father who hears their confessions.' He showed me his small bed, which was so narrow that it was more like a coffin than a bed. He urged me to live with him."

Jerome already went beyond the ideals cherished by the Brothers of Divine Love. He was at the mercy of Divine Providence who was preparing him for other events.

## V

### **A Mission of Charity**

The Bishop of Bergamo, the Venetian Peter Lippomano, had planned to reorganize the works of charity in his diocese, to establish others, and to incite renewed enthusiasm in them. Therefore, he wrote to Venice, and Carafa sent him Jerome. It was intended to be a mission for a limited time. On the contrary, that mission went well beyond common anticipations.

Jerome left Venice, probably in the spring of 1532, "without any worldly goods." He stopped in Padua, Vicenza, Verona, and Brescia and was hosted by the Brothers of Divine Love in the Hospitals for the Incurable.

In Verona he met Bishop Giberti who asked him to jot down some guidelines for the hospital and the children who were sheltered there.

One journal contains a recollection of his passing through Brescia. It was May 9, the Solemnity of the Ascension. On that day, Jerome participated in a meeting of the members of Divine Love in St. John the Baptist church. He was introduced by Master John Bardinelli. He left a deep, positive impression. "He displayed such humility and devotion that I don't know who could do the same." After Mass, they engaged in spiritual conversations. Bystanders were struck above all by the fervor of Jerome's words. In the journal there are also some recollections of his thoughts. Among them, there is the following statement: "During prayer, in which mind is lifted up to heaven, no other thought should interfere, not even the concern of almsgiving."

Jerome's goal was Bergamo. He finally reached it, where he was eagerly expected by Lippomano. His word aroused lively enthusiasm and enkindled "the fire of love for God and neighbor, and the desire for salvation of souls." Many people volunteered to help him. It seems that he established some schools of Divine Love in the city.

In St. Leonard's neighborhood, Jerome gathered the orphans and the destitute in a section of St. Magdalene Hospital. The orphaned girls found a home in St. John's neighborhood. As in Venice, he cared for the sick in the hospitals and everywhere, and he approached every kind of poor. He particularly took care of the widows. Another misery that he openly attacked was prostitution. He set himself to seek these women in the streets, confronted them, and talked with them at length. He succeeded in convincing a great number of them to change their lives, and he gathered them in a house in the neighborhood of Pelabrocco. Some noble ladies volunteered to assist them. Jerome's activity was untiring and kept producing never-ending initiatives.

Eventually, Jerome left the city and started to reorganize hospitals in the countryside. During his frequent journeys, he observed the extreme ignorance of the country people, who were practically abandoned by unprepared clergymen. Poverty (Bergamo's territory could produce cereals to meet nutritional needs for only five months), moral degradation, and religious ignorance made these people vulnerable to the innovative Lutheran ideas, which tried to pass the Alps into Italy. Jerome, then, designed catechetical missions. He prepared and instructed some of his own children. With the help of the Dominican Brother Reginald, he translated the truths of faith and the principles of moral life into simple formulae that were easy to learn by heart. With these



children he journeyed through Bergamo's territory, venturing as far as Crema. During the day, he shared hard labor with farm workers. Then, he gathered them to listen to his children, inviting "them to ponder the blessed life of the holy Gospel," and taught them religious songs to accompany their daily labors.

During the winter, Jerome briefly went back to Verona because he was called there by Bishop Giberti to take care of the problem of the prostitutes of that city. Jerome talked to them with such ardor and efficacy that thirty of them – as a witness states – decided to change their lifestyle, all in a matter of a few days. Then Bishop Giberti continued to take care of them by sheltering them in a house in the Citadel and nominated Dorothy Quistella from Mirandola as their caretaker. In 1536, the bishop moved them to the former Convent of the Trinity.

In 1533, Bishop Lippomano wrote a letter to the people of his diocese. He wanted to make Jerome known to all and to promote and maximize his works. After a long introduction on charity, the bishop described the "ideals and practice" Jerome had set for himself and the generosity with which he had carried them out. The bishop said that his example was providential for he had been raised by God and put on a pedestal so that his life would recall people to "the just, honest, and Catholic way of living, especially for today's men whose hearts are hardened and deprived of every meekness and piety." The fruits of it could already be seen either in those women who made sin their public profession or in many other people engrossed in worldly life whose souls Jerome attracted and bent to piety and mercy.

The letter then went on to consider the organization and the needs of the new works. In Venice Jerome had only been a fervent collaborator; in Bergamo he had become the initiator and the propelling center. He put into his varied and productive activities all his ardent nature, but more and more people and means were needed. Moreover, Jerome also had to reassure some concerned people that helping the poor, orphans, sick, widows, and prostitutes was not a pretext for making money or for any other interest.

Enormous approval welcomed Jerome. In only ten months, he captured the hearts of Bergamo's people and his activities spread over the entire diocese. Here we can note one of the most remarkable features of his personality. He possessed such a charm that he won to his favor those who approached him. He was very creative, one of those spirits who is destined to overcome easily insurmountable difficulties and to arouse the most hidden energies. Jerome had consulted with Bishop Lippomano at length on how to organize those energies. A new confraternity was born in this way. To those people, Jerome entrusted every material care while he kept the assistance, service, and moral education of his poor for himself. Particular care was required for those organizations which were dealing with prostitutes, the sick, orphans, and poor girls. Some ladies volunteered to help, following the example of the noble sisters of Divine Love in Venice.

However, this enterprise could not interest only Bergamo. All the diocese and environs needed to be mobilized. Therefore, Jerome had cooperators in many parts of the diocese who collected alms and, above all, reported the needy cases of any kind so that they could provide the proper remedy. It was a wonderful program!

The organization had to support itself only on Divine Providence. The members could not capitalize on anything. Everything had to be delivered to the poor, day by day, following the Gospel.

Among the people who cooperated with Jerome in Bergamo were the priests Augustine Barili and Alexander Besozzi; the noblemen Dominic Tasso, John Francis Albani, John M. Rota, and Mario Lanzi; and the merchants Jerome Sabbatini, John and Amadeus Cattaneo, and Ludwig Viscardi. They formed the first of the

Companies of the Orphans, which later on in many cities of Lombardy and Veneto and in Genoa wrote wonderful pages of charity in this century of Catholic reform.

In order to understand why Jerome succeeded so rapidly, we must also report that there was a rumor that he performed miracles. Here is one of them, as told by a witness, John Paul from Seriate, a child Jerome sheltered in Bergamo. "I was there only a short time. One morning, we were twenty-eight at St. Magdalene Hospital and we were praying. Since we had nothing to eat, father Jerome told us, 'Do not doubt, my sons, the Lord will take care!' And while he was still praying, we heard the doorbell ring. They went to open the door. A person wanted to see father Jerome. He went to the door and came back with four loaves of bread and repeated not to doubt because the Lord would not abandon us. When the prayer was over, we went downstairs to eat. So, he fed all twenty-eight of us with only those four loaves and fresh water because he did not have anything else. And everybody had enough. And the father kept saying we had to eat cheerfully because the Lord would never abandon us."

## VI

### **From Bergamo to Milan, Somasca, Como**

One day in November of 1533, a group of boys left Bergamo and took the road to Milan. They traveled in a small procession. The first one carried a wooden cross and they all sang the litanies of the Blessed Virgin. Their leader was a man dressed in a long black robe. He wore country boots and protected his head with a black hat. With a knapsack on his shoulders, this poor man, for God's love, was begging for himself and his own. This beggar was Jerome. The bishop of Bergamo had granted him permission to leave the town.

The group crossed the Adda River and came into the Duchy of Milan. It was not an easy journey. Many of his children were stricken by fever. He found shelter in a roofless, abandoned old hospital where there was but straw. A friend happened to pass by and entered there. He recognized Jerome and offered him hospitality in one of his nearby houses. Jerome answered: "My brother, I thank you for your generosity and I would like to accept your hospitality as long as you invite also these my little brothers with whom I want to live and die." The request could not be met. The friend, however, upon his arrival in Milan, spoke to the Duke Francis II Sforza about Jerome and his activity. The Duke sent Jerome what he needed and had him transported to the city.

Milan, to where Jerome was heading, was no longer the rich, prosperous and industrious ducal city that had aroused the admiration of Italian and foreign contemporaries of the previous century. Wars, plundering, plagues, and famines had ravaged the city with horrifying simultaneity during the early decades of the 1500s. Armies always ready to plunder, robberies, and violence had paralyzed industry and trade, provoked mass exoduses, and subjected the population to unbearable taxations. Shops were barred, streets deserted, buildings abandoned, mills and bakeries shut down. People were lamenting in the churches because they were tormented by the pangs of hunger. Bodies were lying numbed by cold on the cathedral's square or in the city's streets.

However, in spite of these problems, charity flourished in Milan and many miseries found their proper assistance. Jerome added his own activity. He began his first shelter in the attic of St. Sepulcher church. With the usual zeal, he began to gather orphans. His first concern was to heal their illnesses which often troubled those unfortunate children. In order to feed them, he himself went begging from door to door. Then, he soothed the moral wounds that misery and neglect had provoked in their tender souls by raising them in the Christian life, teaching reading, and writing and marketable working skills, according to their individual potential.

In Milan, the admiration of Jerome was so great that on January 13, 1534, the Duke Francis II wrote to his ambassador in Venice to thank Carafa on his behalf and to beg him to mediate with Bishop Lippomano, who was constantly requesting that Jerome go back to Bergamo. Nevertheless, some envious people instigated several youngsters to throw stones at Jerome. His genuine charity, however, triumphed over distrust and hostility and the "Milanese reputed him a saint and admired his humility and charity.

From the Church of St. Sepulcher, the orphans moved to the deserted hospital of St. Martin. Hence, they were called "Martinit." At first, he lodged the girls with the boys. Then he moved them to a house close to the Church of the Holy Spirit. From there, they went to live in the old Monastery of St. Catherine in 1542. In that period, it seems that Jerome worked with Brother Bono from Cremona in establishing the institution of St. Valerie for the converted prostitutes.

Also in Milan a handful of friends gathered around his projects. Among them were the Apostolic Protonotary Augustine Panigarola and the noblemen Mark Strada, Francis Croce, Jerome Calchi, Ambrose Schieppato, Francis Visconti of Guascona, and John Baptist Lattuada.

Toward the end of April 1534, the Duke gave Jerome a commendatory letter for all the Bishops, Prelates, Ecclesiastics and the civil authorities of the Duchy to foster the activities that Jerome was planning to undertake.

Now Jerome had a considerable number of cooperators around him and working with him. It was necessary to find a unifying center for all these forces. The issue was addressed in the summer of 1534. These cooperators and friends had their first official meeting in Merone, in the Brianza territory, in a villa of a wealthy friend of Jerome, Leo Carpani, who was converted to God and the poor by his word and example. They decided to select a place that would be the heart of all the organization, a haven of tranquil solitude for those men who were launched on the world's roads in incessant activity. They chose Somasca, a tiny village on the border between the Republic of Venice and the Duchy of Milan. Politically, it was Venetian, but spiritually, it was Milanese.

Jerome moved to Somasca and settled there. In Somasca, the Company of the Servants of the Poor had come into being, which gathered those who intended to give up everything for the service of the poor. Later on, it became the Order of the Somascan Fathers.

Their first dwelling was "la Rocca," the fortress. It could only be reached by a path, which started from Somasca and ended at the entrance of the tower. It had been inhabited by an officer with a few soldiers until 1509. After the War of Cambrai's League, it was abandoned and destroyed. At first, Jerome tried to make those ruins habitable. He built a few bare, narrow rooms with partition walls made of reeds that were kept together by willow wickers and crusted over with white plaster. He restored a chapel dedicated to St. Ambrose. The people of Vercurago used to go up to that chapel in procession twice a year: during the Saint's feast day and the day of the Finding of the Cross.

In Somasca too the main concern of Jerome was the orphans. He sheltered, cured, and taught them. He fed them with the bread he received from begging. Nevertheless, they learned to live on their own work. For this reason, he introduced them to different activities. For example, they bound books, wove wool, worked with the lathe, and raised sheep and goats.

From Somasca his work extended to the St. Martin Valley. With his children, Jerome travelled across those villages, assisted the poor and sick, and rushed to help those in need. They used to go into the fields to cut forage, to harvest wheat, to help the farmers, all because of love. In Somasca he established a "Spiritual

Congregation" at which a great number of men convened from all over the valley on Sundays. He also developed a strong structure for teaching catechism.

All this work was accompanied and supported by long hours of prayer. With some reeds Jerome had enclosed a "grotto" under a mountain buttress and created a hermitage, where he used to retire to pray before a wooden cross. Those who knew him gave emphasis to the strict penitential life he lived. For example, he ate the driest and stalest bread he could find in the house, he very rarely drank wine, he fasted often, he scourged himself, and he slept on stones, straw or rocks.

In the beginning of 1535, Jerome left Somasca and went to Como, invited there by pious and charitable people. Among them were the brothers Francis and the learned humanist Primo de Conte, the nobleman and champion of charity in Como, Bernard Odescalchi, and the noblemen James Baiacca and Paul Rovelli.

In Como, Jerome repeated what he had already accomplished in Milan. A Chronicler writes: "He founded a very religious school in St. Leonard, where they stayed until 1537, when they moved to St. Gotthard.... In that school the above-mentioned Sir Jerome gathered abandoned and sick children and sheltered them in that house. Here, first he washed them, fed them with love, and cured some of them from tinea and others from other illnesses. He then trained them in some jobs. A few times a day, they went to St. Gotthard church where they sang hymns with such purity that the faithful were astonished and delighted. And when the children had regained health and had been taught good manners and customs, they were entrusted to craftsmen to learn a job."

His activities went beyond those at St. Gotthard church. In fact, at the same time, he also founded a house for girls in the St. Mary Magdalene neighborhood.

Moreover, in 1536, at St. Leonard, even the first Capuchins, who arrived at Como to establish a convent, found hospitality. However, the mission in Como was very brief. Entrusting the institution into safe hands, Jerome went back to Somasca.

## VII

### **Father of Orphans**

Only in light of the facts of his life it is possible to understand the importance of St. Jerome as an educator. His unique project took shape from the urgency of the events and from the continual challenge of daily life. It was also enlightened by deep religious faith, inspired by love, and supported by Jerome's uncommon wealth of human qualities.

The problem that challenged Jerome and that he addressed by devoting all his energies to it was the one of homeless, abandoned children who were deprived of either or both parents, or who had none who could take care of them. The years of destruction and famine of the early 1500s dramatically emphasized this problem in all its urgency.

For these children there was no solution but living in the streets or finding shelter in the open-house hospitals. There, they lived among all kinds of needy people: men and women, young and old. Mostly, they could have been cured of their illnesses, fed, and temporarily sheltered. It was unthinkable to provide for their future. Jerome was very aware of this situation because of the work he had done at the hospital of Bersaglio in Venice. Therefore, he embraced the most obvious of the solutions: gather these children, build a home for them where they could live as a family, and give them what their non-existing families could not offer them.

They needed a “father,” and Jerome made a choice for his life. Like every father in a family, he had to find a solution for all the problems that children have: cure their illnesses, provide food, raise them as good Christians, make them honest people ready to face life, teach them, find them a job, and bring them in to the mainstream of society with dignity.

Because of the sad conditions of those years, the number of children who knocked at his door grew and grew steadily. Jerome could no longer make it by himself. As a result, he started to have the older and more experienced children help the younger ones. But it was not enough. He needed other people who were willing to devote themselves to this unusual family, as he did. His fascinating personality and the Lord’s inspiration drew others towards his way: his friends. However, he also needed priests to educate his children in Christian truths and to support the perseverance of his cooperators. As the need arose—the friends and the priests came.

Later on, circumstances led Jerome to extend his activity to other cities. These friends needed to meet together to support each other and to guarantee that the seed that was sown would bear fruit even beyond the life of one single person. To do so, they founded the Company of the Servants of the Poor. The chosen name summarized what they were about, that is, to promote the poor, especially the least and the neglected, toward a more humane condition by becoming poor and sharing life with them.

Because of the urgency of the numbers and problems, it did not take Jerome too long to realize that he and his companions’ energies were still insufficient. It was necessary to sensitize and involve the society in which his children would have to develop. Everywhere, he found people who showed sympathy and interest in his plan and who were eager to cooperate. He then thought of a distribution of tasks and roles. He reserved the education task to himself and entrusted the economic and administrative task to these willing friends. They would also provide for the mainstreaming of the orphans into the city environment by protecting their interests and guaranteeing their success. These people also joined in associations, which were called “Companies of the Orphans.”

Like a spontaneous growth, Jerome’s enterprise came to take the shape of a well-structured organization: the orphans, who were the heart, the Company of the Servants of the Poor, and then the deputies of the Companies of the Orphans.

Jerome’s aim was to bring man to God. Therefore, his educational methods fostered the material and spiritual growth of his children and enriched them with virtues according to each individual’s vocation and potential. It was, first of all, a true Christian formation. According to St. Jerome, the human being’s fulfillment could occur only through Christian life. His own personal experience was the positive proof of this truth. He wanted to hand down this experience to his children. Therefore, Christian formation was the end that inspired and enlivened every stage of their upbringing.

Religious education was in the foreground. It consisted of having knowledge of the Gospels, and Sacramental life, training in prayer, developing tender devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and learning catechism. All this was supposed to promote a strong faith, a serene confidence in God, and a lived love.

The moral values were, above all, loyalty, goodness, spirit of self-sacrifice, responsibility, industriousness, and desire for self-improvement. Children were encouraged toward these values through continual reminders, vigilance, self-control, supervision, and training of the will.

Training of the mind went along with the shaping of the will. Children must not remain illiterate, which unfortunately was almost the general condition of the populace. The children, on the contrary, were helped to

learn at least reading and writing and to acquire the basic rudiments necessary to learn the Christian truths and lead an autonomous life. When their intellectual abilities demanded it, they were started in higher education.

The future that Jerome and his companions envisioned for their children was mainly craftsmen's activities. Therefore, it was imperative that they have a gradual introduction to a profession. Hence, emphasis was put on work in all the institutions. However, this did not prevent them from starting someone on a different journey, such as the priesthood, for instance.

Life in those houses was austere, even if it is difficult for us to compare it with the life of the poor classes of those times. It was, however, an austerity moderated by discretion and softened by love, a poverty that never confused itself with misery. Otherwise, these children who were in the process of growing up would not have found an easy life but a very challenging, difficult one. Only with earnest and conscious self-sacrifice and training could they be successful.

Other elements of the orphans' upbringing were attention to their personal interests and responsibility. Attention to and respect for individual tendencies and vocations was a constant concern. Education had to be personalized, attentive to the qualities of each child so that he could develop fully in the Christian view of man and reality. For this reason, it was necessary to observe the behavior of each child with "a very prudent eye." The same accurate care was employed when children were started off on a career and it was time to provide for their future life.

St. Jerome had conceived of his organization as a big family. Therefore, it was natural that children, once they grew up, took on some responsibilities. One of the main concerns was to introduce them to active participation in the business of the household and to prepare them to assume tasks. Jerome mentions some of these tasks in his letters: guardian, doorkeeper, sacristan, janitor, and the person responsible for washing the heads of the youngest.

The foundation of everything was love: "Work, devotion, and love are the foundation of our enterprise." Jerome poured into this work his rich personality, "in which love surpassed ingenuity," and the gifts of grace God bestowed on him. His entire life was motivated by love for Christ and the poor. His life can be understood only if it is read with this key. In fact, because of love, he gave away all his possessions, abandoned his career, his home, his country, and became a pilgrim on the roads of Venetian territory and Lombardy. He became poor, a servant of Christ's poor.

His life is rich in episodes of love. His letters express it. He demanded the same frame of mind and heart from his companions.

The Venetian friend who wrote his biography, after talking about Jerome's friends and naming some of the most distinguished ones, concluded with: "But above all, he loved his dear poor. They better represented Christ to him." In a prayer Jerome composed and recited every day, he asked, "for the love of the Lord, perfect love, deep humility, and patience." To some of his companions who did not behave correctly, a few days before his death, he wrote: "Don't they know that they have called themselves Servants of Christ's poor? How can they do this without love, without humility, without bearing with their neighbors?" For Jerome it is a love, therefore, born from God's love, a love that demands faithfulness and dedication until death, a love that is based on humility and meekness, full of understanding and patience. It is attentive, tender and ready for self-sacrifice, like a mother's love. Yet, at the same time, it is strong and capable of recalling one to his responsibilities, without any weaknesses.

## VIII

### Return to Venice

Jerome had left Venice for a mission of love. Its results had surpassed any expectations. However, in Venice his presence was called for, and he received the order to come back. He took the necessary precautions to keep the organization running and departed.

His arrival in Venice moved his friends deeply. His attire had changed. Above all, he himself was spiritually transformed. He spent long hours with his friends. "It was striking to see a man in such cheap clothing, like a beggar. Yet, he was adorned with such a sublime soul, such modest and chaste manners that he radiated an inexplicable combination of virtues.... We were together often and many holy memories of Christian hope still come to mind."

He stayed at the hospital of Bersaglio, carrying out his old activities. Because it was more and more necessary that he stay in Venice permanently, he kept postponing his return to Lombardy. Meanwhile, various difficulties crept into the institutions of Lombardy. It was to be expected in institutions that were founded so quickly. He did not have the time to consolidate them. The personnel who staffed them, even though sincerely dedicated, had not been adequately trained. As long as he was present, everything ran smoothly because of the prestige of his personality. Now, because of his frequent absences, some of the collaborators had become discouraged and others could not understand his absence. There was a certain feeling of dissatisfaction.

In his heart he experienced deep anguish: the creature he gave birth to was in danger of dying, and he had to be far away. However, he felt absolutely certain that this work was God's work and it would not fail. But this did not decrease his suffering. The two letters he wrote to his companions, on July 5 and 6, 1535 are a reflection of his interior struggle of those days.

Jerome wrote that, despite his forced absence, his heart was with his own people, above all, in his prayer. Yet, he was wondering if his presence was necessary. What did he count? It is Christ who raised and continues to guide the Company. Jerome, however, felt the weight of responsibility on his shoulders and wanted detailed information about everything. He had a word of recommendation or encouragement, a memory, a recollection for everyone. His friends toiling in the "works" paraded in front of his eyes. There was no useless word in his writings. He went straight to the core of the subject. His recommendations were motivated by essential reasons. "If the company loves Christ, is with Christ, it will achieve its goal; otherwise, everything is lost." How much ardor was in his heart! He remembered each one of his friends, their work, their needs, no matter how little. In many of the passages, he recalled the importance of work. He became eloquent in speaking about prayer. With loving persistence, he wrote to the priest Lazzarino, and in small details suggested how he was to behave with children because the essential values were at stake: "Don't let the fire of the spirit grow cold, lest everything get lost."

In a letter of July 21, which is rich in feeling despite its strong and decisive tone, Jerome wanted to comfort and encourage his brothers of the Company, "Poor, troubled, overwrought with toil, despised by everyone and abandoned, even by the physical presence, but not by the heart of their poor and beloved dear father." They had to trust only in God, he said, as he had proved to them in words and deeds when he was with them. Jerome recalled that trials increase faith because the Lord wishes to make use of them for his works. God has His own plans, even when his directions seem not to be the best ones to carry out. Contradictions and trials

are means of sanctification. Trials are necessary to purify faith. Every hope should be placed only in the Lord. Faith and hope fill the soul with love, from which only great things can come. Suffering delivers the soul from dross and increases its value. Yet, God grants a hundredfold even on earth.

Unexpectedly, on July 22 or 23, Jerome left Venice. He asked the priest Pellegrino from Asti to say goodbye to his nephews and nieces. He asked them to pray for him because he was going to do penance and the end of his life was near. He spent one day in Vicenza, and then he reached Bergamo through Verona and Brescia.

## IX

### 1536: New Foundations in Pavia and Brescia

#### Organization of the Company

Jerome was back in Lombardy just for one month when a letter from Bishop Jerome Aleandro, Apostolic Legate for the territory of the Republic of Venice, arrived at Somasca. It was dated September 1, 1535, and was addressed to Augustine Barili, Jerome Miani, and the other Servants of the Poor. In the letter, the Nuncio gave them the faculty to choose a priest to take care of their souls. This faculty was equivalent to the first legal approval from ecclesiastical authority. That was a major boost to help them continue in their enterprise.

In the meantime, Jerome had formed strong relationships with a few priests and religious especially Dominicans and Capuchins. Some of them used to accompany him in his travels, exercising their priestly ministry. In Bergamo, Como, and Erba in Brianza, the Capuchins were assisted in establishing their monasteries by either Jerome or his companions. The last months of 1535 were filled with a multitude of activities. Among them was the foundation of an institution in Pavia. Jerome entered Pavia through the gate of St. Mary in Pertica with a handful of children who marched as if in a religious procession. They walked down New Street. The town was gloomy. He looked for hospitality and found it in the hospital of St. Rocco, which was run by the Brothers of Mercy. It was a hospice that mainly gave a bed to pilgrims. To make room for him, the staff had to dismiss some of the guests. When Jerome knew about that, he moved to the "Sala Grande" (Great room), which was an open place in the Citadel of Pavia where soldiers practiced maneuvers. After a few days, he was sheltered in a small hospice, run by the Brotherhood of St. Gervase.

In Pavia, Jerome started as usual to gather orphans. Here also he was soon surrounded by enthusiastic friends who supported him with their means and cooperated in his work. Among them there were two cousins of one of the most famous of Pavia's families, Angiolmarco and Vincent Gambarana. Here Jerome founded the Company of Orphans, whose members were, among others, the Protonotary Jerome Pellizzari, the noblemen Bernard Sacco and Ottone Parenti, and the lawyers John Baptist Palma and Bernard Bosco. To them Jerome entrusted the new institution when after a month he left for Somasca.

His life had become a continuous traveling. The demands Jerome received and tried to satisfy multiplied so much that Carafa felt it was his duty to restrain him. He wrote a very harsh letter to him: "I cannot deny that even I was puzzled by so much stir and turmoil in Milan, Como, Bergamo and Pavia, with so many legations and matters.... And do not dwell in the wrong assumption that everybody has to do everything...." The letter was provoked by some misunderstandings among Jerome's companions. The hardship lasted a few months.

In Brescia, during Lent of 1536, the Capuchin John of Fano had preached. He was an old friend of Jerome whom he knew from the previous year when he introduced the Capuchins into Bergamo. At first, this Capuchin



was a strong adversary of the Capuchin reform. Then he became a fervent supporter. He was a much renowned orator. In rhetorical skills, he was pugnacious, lively, and popular. During that Lent, in Brescia, he had gathered some children who were begging around the city. Since he did not have any shelter, he housed them in the Dome. On April 16, he was able to move them to Mercy Hospital. They were about seventy in number. Jerome was requested to provide for their care. Also, in Brescia, he enlarged the ranks of his friends: Jacopus Chizzola, Augustine Gallo, John Paul Averoldi, John Baptist Luzzago, John Baptist and Bartholomew Scaini from Salo', and a priest, Stephen Bertazzoli.

In Brescia, on June 4, Jerome summoned a chapter of the Company of the Servants of the Poor. From the minutes of the meetings we can see the problems, which afflicted the rising organization. Among the topics that were discussed in those days were the rules for common living, reminders of self-sacrifice, formation of the youngsters, and the chapter as a body to coordinate all the activities.

It was necessary to illustrate to those who joined the Company the conditions and main duties of their new life. Jerome was given the task of writing down a "capitulary" to be read to all those who entered their houses. He himself wrote the paragraphs regarding poverty, obedience, patience, mortification, prayer and love.

In the same manuscript, a prayer composed by Jerome is also preserved, that in his letters he calls "Our Prayer, the Holy Prayer." It was repeated twice a day: upon rising in the morning and at night, before going to bed. It was preserved in Somascan institutions for more than two centuries and the first part of it is still recited today by the devotees of the Saint. It reveals a deep spirituality based on God's word and in perfect agreement with the liturgy of the Church. It deals with the rights of God and the needs of men, divine mercy and the fatal human failures in the encounters with grace. It asks for the coming both of the kingdom of heaven and justice on earth.

In the text of "Our Prayer," invocations to the Blessed Virgin are frequently used. The glorious Virgin Mary is associated with the Trinity and is asked to accompany her children on the way of peace, love, and prosperity. Almost all the invocations end with "Hail Mary" to Mary, Mother of Graces. They are for friends, members of the Company, collaborators, benefactors, and the deceased. If we place this prayer with all the others that were recited during the day in the institutions for orphans, Mary was so often invoked that it would seem to be too much. However, who else could fill up the emptiness, which too early had opened in the souls of those little ones at the early death of their mothers?

At the end of September 1536, Jerome was in Verona as host of Bishop Giberti. He had gone there to greet Carafa who was about to depart for Rome with Reginald Pole and Giberti. They were summoned by Pope Paul III to work on the draft of that courageous document that was the "Consilium de Emendanda Ecclesia." The theme of the conversations during those days revolved around the reform of the Church, heresy, and the council. St. Jerome participated so actively in those impassioned conversations that Bertazzoli, who was one of the bystanders, always remembered his inspired look and words, even forty years later. The reform of Christian life had been Jerome's "ardent thirst," the wellspring of his actions, and the frequent aspiration of his prayer. The "Holy Prayer" he had composed started with this invocation: "Our sweet Father, Lord Jesus Christ, we pray that in your infinite goodness, you reform the Christian people to the holiness of the time of the apostles."

### **“Their Names Are Written in the Book of Life”**

Without slowing down the pace of his activity, Jerome started the process of organization. This preoccupation is evident from the few preserved documents. In the spring of 1532 he arrived in Bergamo, alone, “without any of the things of this world.” In four years he had carried out an impressive number of activities. Like an “incendiary,” he had traveled the roads of Lombardy, awakening the fire of divine love and gathering around his poor many people enthusiastic for the ideal of charity. The anonymous friend who wrote his biography speaks of them saying: “Their names I do not want to publicize so that the glory be for the Lord. They are known to the Holy Spirit and their names are written in the book of life.” A “Taccuino,” a kind of notebook preserved until the early years of 1800, contained a list of almost three hundred people, consisting of prelates, clergymen, nobles, lawyers, physicians, merchants, and more. Many of them are well known in the world of Catholic reform. Here some are remembered who, like Jerome, gave up everything and chose to share with him a life of poverty at the service of the poor.

Augustine Barili was a priest from a rich family in Bergamo. He was “infected” by the zeal of Miani, who, in his turn, was deeply struck by Barili’s moral energy. While Jerome was still alive, he wanted him as Superior of the Company of the Servants of the Poor. After the death of Jerome, Barili led his companions with love in the service of the poor. Striking was the austerity of his life, the simplicity and candor of his soul, the spirit of his devotion and love, and the prudence of his counseling. He carried on his activity mainly in the institutions for orphans in Bergamo, Somasca, and Milan. In 1561, he was called to lead the religious community of Theatines in Venice. He devoted his energies to the Bersaglio Hospital and always signed his correspondence: ‘*Augustine, useless servant of the poor.*’ He died in Padua in 1565.

Angiolmarco of the Counts of Gambarana was from a noble and rich family in Pavia. He had degrees in both civil and ecclesiastical law. He met Jerome in 1536 and followed him. He spent most of his life in Pavia and in St. Martin in Milan. He became priest in 1538. In Pavia, besides dedicating himself to the orphans of Colombia, he took care of the converted prostitutes of St. Mary Magdalene, the orphaned girls of St. Gregory, and the shrine of St. Mary of Canepanova, and he founded the Hospital for the Incurable. Because of his work in Milan, St. Martin became the center of intense religious activity. Angiolmarco became a friend and counselor to priests and laymen, nobles, merchants, and craftsmen, who through prayer, sacraments and merciful deeds wanted to live a genuine Christian life. He was a counselor to and cooperator with the members of the Company of the Orphans, the priests of St. Corona, Castellino from Castello and the Schools of Christian Doctrine. He had been Superior of the Company. He wrote books of prayer and dialogues on catechesis for the orphans. Eyewitnesses praised his virtues of humility, charity, patience, and poverty. When he died in Milan in 1574, many people who went to his funeral said: “It really seems that a great saint had died, the true father of all.”

Vincent of the Counts of Gambarana met St. Jerome in Pavia when he was in his early thirties. He abandoned a military career and he preferred “the littleness and poverty of Christ to the greatness and abundance of the world.” He dedicated all of his life to the service of the orphans in Pavia, Merone, Genoa, Mantua, and Vercelli. In Bergamo, where he died in 1561, he spent the longest period of his activity in taking care of the orphans, both boys and girls, and the converted prostitutes. His activity embraced the entire city. He was known and highly esteemed because of the sanctity of his life. Popular devotion was nourished by recounted episodes of his delightful simplicity. Some were collected for a beatification trial. They include persecutions by squires because he redeemed a maiden from prostitution, episodes of heroic charity towards the poor, and healing

performed on the sick. At his death, the simple popular devotion was much more evident. On the day of his burial, an epitaph written by the Dominican Fr. Paul and posted on the door of St. Dominic church remembered him in this way: "Glory of the priests, Vincent of the family of the Counts of Gambarana, once great in the goods of this world, wanted to become little for Christ and totally devoted himself to the service of orphans in the humble Company of the Somascan Fathers. He has been taken from the world, where he shone as a star in every Christian virtue."

Today, the bodies of Vincent and Angiolmarco Gambarana rest in the church in Somasca beside the relics of their father and master.

Leo Carpani also was noble and rich. He was converted to God by St. Jerome. He gave up everything and with enthusiasm consecrated himself to help the orphans. He had been in Pavia, Vercelli, Genoa, and Savona. In 1557, he went to Rome where Paul IV introduced him to the Pontifical family. He was a friend of the Theatines and Barnabites. He was loved by Pious V. Charles Borromeo, who met him in Rome and tried to bring him to Milan with him, regarded him highly. In 1565, St. Charles wrote of him: "He has been in Rome for many years, where he is held in high esteem by everyone because of his continual commitment to spiritual and charitable deeds such as he performs in taking care of orphans and other similar people. For me a proof of his goodness lies in the fact that, being loved so much by Paul IV, he always shied away from any desire of honor. He always lived without any ambition, just serving God. Now, I truly hope to have him because this holy man can do a lot of good in Milan either by his practice of good deeds or by his zeal in serving God."

John Cattaneo was a merchant from Bergamo. Tradition has handed him down to us as the image of a second Jerome who traveled through the towns of Italy founding and organizing institutions for orphans. Mantua, Rome, Naples, Ferrara, Reggio, Modena, and Siena are some of the cities where he worked very hard. His soul was fervent with love and full of dedication to the service of God and the poor.

Primo Conti was one of the most outstanding figures of the Milanese culture of the XVI century. He was called by his contemporaries "Glory of our city, new Socrates, excellent theologian, one of the greatest scholars of Italy". In 1534, he met Jerome. Then, his past appeared as though clouded in darkness to him while the true light was coming from the teaching of Miani. As a theologian at the Council of Trent, he was held in high esteem by St. Charles who wanted him as a cooperator in his reform of the Milanese diocese and his clergy. Because of St. Charles' persistence, he became a priest at sixty-seven. No one was believed to be a better expert in Holy Scripture. He was over ninety years old when he died toward the end of the century. In him, the youngsters saw the living image of St. Jerome. He used to repeat to them "that, if in him there was something good, it was because of the inspiring conversations he had with Jerome. Whenever he mentioned him, he referred to him as his master in Christian life. So great was his love and respect for the dear memory of Jerome that, when he had the chance to mention him, which was frequently, he bowed and bared his head."

## XI

### "I Will Go to Christ"

By Christmas of 1536, Jerome went to Bergamo for the last time. He was exhausted from works and penances. He went to visit the Vicar General, John Baptist Guillermi from Feltre. He kneeled in front of him, "entrusting the faith of Christ" to him and he asked for forgiveness.

At the same time, Jerome had received a letter from Carafa who had been appointed Cardinal by Paul III. He invited Jerome to Rome to entrust to him the reform of some charitable organizations. Having read the letter, Jerome gathered his companions who were alarmed. After having prayed, he told them that he was called to Rome and to heaven at the same time and he concluded with: "Brothers, I think I will go to Christ."

Even the moral sufferings had not ceased. On January 11 1537, Jerome wrote a letter to some of his cooperators in Bergamo who were not behaving. As a father, he sent his warm but sad words of warning to the offenders. He requests, begs, warns them to rely on spiritual strengths, on the ideal of love to which they devoted themselves, on the fear of divine punishments he threatened could occur: "Don't they know that they gave themselves to Christ, that they are in his house, eat his bread and allow themselves to be called servants of Christ's poor? How, then, do they wish to do this without love, without a humble heart, without caring for their neighbor, without seeking the salvation of the sinners, without mortification, without shunning money and women, without obedience, without observing the rules...? I do not know what to say but to beg them, by the wounds of Christ, to be eager to mortify their outward deeds, to fill their souls with humility, love, and devotion... to bear one another's burdens, to be gentle and kind with everybody, and to pray regularly before the Crucified Lord, asking him to open their eyes and to be merciful..."

It was not even a month when his voice would be silent for good. Toward the end of 1536, an infectious disease struck St. Martin's Valley. Once again, Jerome was ready to help everybody both at home where many had been stricken by the disease and elsewhere. As eight years before, he contracted the plague

On February 4, 1537, he was lodged in a small room of one of his friends, on a bed that did not even belong to him. Before lying down, he drew a cross on the opposite wall. Four days later, during the night between February 7 and 8, he died.

"It seemed that he held paradise in his hands," wrote Bergamo's Vicar General to a friend. "He made different recommendations to his own, always with such a cheerful and smiling face that those who were present were drawn to love Christ.... He exhorted everyone to follow the way of the Crucified, to despise the world, to love one another, and to take care of the poor. He repeated that those who did such deeds would never be abandoned by God."

The news of Jerome's death spread rapidly. His body lay in state for eight days to allow proper time for viewing. His friends came from all over. The poor came. The sick came. His coffin was the site of prodigious recoveries.

Thirteen years later, in 1550 Lawrence Davidico, who had met Jerome in Milan, recalled his memory in such terms in one of his books: "Master Jerome Miani, fervent, and refuge of the poor".

Saints never die.

Their lives remain as models for all Christians. The Church proclaimed Jerome Blessed in 1747 and Saint in 1767. Pius XI declared him the Universal Patron Saint of the Orphans and Needy Youth.

Jerome's mission of love continuously renews itself through his sons, the Somascan Fathers and Brothers, who humbly carry on his service to the poor in Italy, Spain, Poland, Romania, Albania, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, U.S.A., the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Australia, Mozambique, and Nigeria.

His love for the suffering and needy is still reflected in those numerous people who, after more than 450 years, visit his shrine everyday. They come to lay down their anguish in his heart and to seek inspiration from his example.