

CHAPTERS' ORDINANCES AND DECREES
From 1547 to 1568

In the XVIII century, the Somascan Father Giambattista Riva wrote Gli Atti della Congregazione Somasca (The Acts of the Somascan Congregation), a summary of the minutes of the Chapters held by the Congregation in the early years of her development. These three handwritten volumes give information about houses and profiles of illustrious religious, but essentially they provide list of deliberations made in the chapters. The information is taken from original sources, the Minutes of the Acts of the Chapters, which unfortunately was lost. In the 1547 the Somascans joined the Theatines. Therefore, some Chapters were held under the supervision of the Theatines' Father General and some decrees are meant to regulate such a collaboration.

Only a selection of deliberations is given here.

1547

On October first of this year, our Fathers, the Servants of the Poor, went to St. Nicola in Venice to meet by force of the mentioned union with the Theatine Fathers about the needs of our Company and the institutions administered by us. At first, because of the mentioned union, each one of ours expressed obedience to that Father General, who welcomed and accepted them as children, since Cardinal Sabinese reminded them that that was the will of the Holy Father

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It is decreed that every year in September, while someone would be in charge of the houses, priests and lay will gather to elect the Vicar and the Councilors. That the Vicar, in case of extraordinary needs, will summon lay and priests of the two or three closest institutions.

It is again decreed that all the institutions will be visited twice a year and that the visitors will invite and persuade the children of good disposition and intelligence to learn grammar.

The children and adolescents who work will be made to read in the morning for an hour and the same in the evening.

In the institutions the new Office will be said.

At meals, the older children, especially when they work, will have more portions of food, and of better quality.

Children above thirteen will not be accepted unless it is obvious that they come to serve God and not for other reasons.

The older children who are in our institutions will be well trained and eat their bread [earned] with sweat.

Everybody will be solicitous in cleansing ringworm and other impurities of the body, but above all those of the soul.

Money can be kept for some sudden need, especially in the institutions where people come and go, but the priest and the "Com messo" must know about it.

Regarding adults who come into our institutions, especially priests: when there is a hint and hope that they want to serve God, they will be welcomed as guests, until Father General and the Vicar are notified.

The adolescents will not say the lesson at meals unless ordered by the Superiors, making sure, though, that everybody will say something.

When the priests are absent from the institution, the children will not be allowed to be confessed by other priests, but they have to wait for their return, unless the other [priests] have authorization.

Permission to give communion to the children will be sought from Pastors and Msgr. Episcopal Vicar.

The Visitors will have their orders executed in each institution; and they themselves will obey the priest and the “Comnesso.”

The wayfarers will consult the priest and the “Comnesso” about where to lodge; they will travel in simplicity and especially for the benefit of the institution to which God will lead them.

Customs will be read and observed; and everyone will sleep alone, and at least with linen pants in the summer.

In the hospitals, even though people there are friendly, you will lodge the least you can.

The Company should often visit the children who have left our institutions and exhort them to go to confession, and to register them in a book designated for that purpose.

Anyone who has been dismissed or has escaped will not be taken back if there is no need.

The officials of the house will meet and each will report on something related to his office.

All, especially the priests, will use the same Rite for Masses, office, and other practices.

The priests in each institution will consult the “Comnesso” and the other adults in the things that regard the children.

The “Comnesso” will obey the priest and will ask him advice in the matters that require it.

The others of the family, then, will be obedient to the above mentioned “Comnesso,” but more to the priest or superior.

Impertinent matters or things harmful to the institution and Company will be avoided.

At the beginning and end of every operation, a prayer will be said.

The priest and “Comnesso” will consult each other when they want to go out, to see if they need companions.

The offices of the house will be entrusted to devout and intelligent people.

The priest will make sure that no one in the house wastes his time, and that those who are capable and indebted to the Lord, practice mental prayer morning and evening.

Welcome no one who goes from an institution to another if he does not carry a letter or a message from the priest and “Comnesso” of the place where he comes from.

The priest and “Comnesso” will meet every week with those of experience and understanding to read the ordinances which regard them; in the same way they will meet every month with the others of the community.

Children will not be used as messengers without serious need; other people should be used to send letters and other things.

The institutions will be cleansed of those who are not orphans and of those who use the institution wrongly; in the future, better judgment should be used in seeking out only orphans.

The preceding ordinances and decrees, as I gather from an old book found in the Pavia’s archives, were not all determined in this Chapter only but also in others which followed.

In this year Chapter the governance of the Company was deliberated as follows:

The Superior of the Company of the Poor will be appointed Vicar and be elected by the Company itself and confirmed by the Father General of the Theatines. He may remain in office for one year and be confirmed until the third year.

The election will take place in this way: the brother elector will place the name of the candidates for the office of Vicar in the hands of the Superior present and he, with his Councilors, will manifest the names of the candidates to the office; then, they will be voted on; the one who receives more votes will be elected.

The same procedure will be followed in electing the new Councilors; if one is confirmed in office for the second year, it will be enough to be voted with more than half of the votes.

It is ordered that everyone will confess his faults to Father Vicar and that the latter will give a salutary penance to each one. If by accident, one were greatly at fault, the Father Vicar and Councilors will have the authority to notify the Company about this, to submit him to the vote of the brothers; the majority of which will determine his dismissal from the Company and the cleansing of the institution.

Then, those who participate in the Chapter are to be elected; they will less than a third and more than a fourth of the brothers present at the meeting or congregation, without counting either Father Vicar or the Councilors. Those elected to participate in the Chapter, together with the officials, will deal with the things concerning the public.

When something is proposed in the Chapter, anyone will be able to object, and certainly at least one of the Councilors. The opinion of everyone will be heard and any deliberation will be always taken by the majority of opinions.

The Father Vicar and Councilors elect the “Commissi;” they will elect to this office the most pious, meek, and humble persons, those who walk the straight way and are fit for the task; they should counsel them with good advice to be the first in the Company as far as rank before men, but much more as far as virtues before God. These, with humility, will notify the Father Vicar of all the irregularities and defects they might observe; and they will always dress in poverty. Father Vicar will have special care of them.

Regarding spiritual life, it is enjoined that every day vocal prayer will be performed, morning and evening; before that, the elders will spend at least a quarter of an hour in mental prayer, and will go to confession and communion once per week, while the younger, every fifteen days.

There will be fasting every sixth weekday in memory of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saturday before the first Sunday of the month, and the Saturdays during the chapter. During Advent, there will be abstinence from dairy products.

Those youths who want to join the institutions must be healthy and at least eighteen-years old, must be determined to obey and serve in the institutions, must have been with us for one year around, and divested of the world. These youths having such qualities will be welcomed by the chapter and, if priests, they will wear the round biretta and a beard; if lay, they will wear a mantle according to the custom. These will be able to be officials in the institutions, participate in meetings, and sleep in the children’s dormitories.

The novices will be welcomed by the Father Vicar or at least by one of the councilors; they will wear their own clothes as long as they are honest; they will stay for one year as guests, living on their own, if they can afford it.

In accepting an institution, we will pray and fast for three days. We will consider if there is the honor of God, the salvation of any souls, the consent of the public, that is of the Ecclesiastic or secular authority, in any of the towns where we are invited. Then the Father Vicar and Councilors must be in full agreement with the majority of the Chapter’s members in the will to accept it. The intention must be pure and simple and only for God’s glory and zeal for the

salvation of the souls. The conditions which will have to be proposed are the following: that we will be free to administer the Sacraments to the orphans, teach them Christian life, instill in them habits, orders, and practices we deem necessary, with no opposition whatsoever. If this independence were to be hindered, and if the Protectors or Ecclesiastic and temporal authorities, after being notified by us, were not to provide for this, we will be free to depart with our workers and to leave the institutions and the orphans in their hands. In the same way, if they observed us stray from the right way and, after evangelical correction, they found us unrepentant, they will be entitled to fire us. However, it will be good if before that they could notify the Chapter of the defect of the person, so that provisions to either correct him or change him may be made.

1548

The 19th of September, the Congregation of the Poor met in Verona and the following ordinances were issued:

Priest will have cassocks made of poor cloth or linen, humble texture. And those which are brought from home will be of the same type of cloth, that is twill. Likewise, the “Commessi” will use poor and humble clothes.

Mules or asses will be kept for the benefit of the house.

Institutions will be visited often and diligently. The Visitor must not depart if he does not see the institution in order.

The care and governance of the house primarily will rest on the priest; the “Commessi” will be like the lieutenants to whom the priest must express the reason for his opinion when it is contrary; all must strive to preserve unity.

In order to help the brothers and instill in them spirit and mortification, each will be taken to Somasca for at least a month.

The priest, with the knowledge of the “Commessi,” will be allowed to keep a ducat in those institutions where the brothers come frequently; it is to be spent for extraordinary needs.

The priests will invite the children to go to confession once or twice a year with the Visitor or others sent by our Vicar or the head of the Congregation.

The meeting in the institutions will be held in the house every week; in it the faults will be reported, the officials who are changing will be elected, everyone’s progress will be discussed, and ways to improve the institutions will be dealt with.

The novices accepted in the Company will have no voice in the Chapter until they are expressly authorized by the Father and the Councilors with the participation of those who will belong to the Company.

It will not be necessary to write to Venice, that is to the Father General of the Theatines, unless we would like to accept institutions or other enterprises, or welcome somebody in the body of the Company outside the time of the Chapter; in fact, besides the statement of the father General, our Father Vicar can do the other things with only the participation of the brothers or closest Councilors.

1549

On May 5th, the annual meeting of the Congregation of the Company of the Poor was held:

It is decreed that Christian doctrine will be taught to our children with seriousness both for their good and for making them able to be sent out to teach others, after testing them well at home; only safe people will be sent out.

When Father Vicar and Councilors are concluding some important affair, they will send some brothers to pray.

1550

On Mai 1st, the brothers of the Company convened with the Father General of the Theatines and our Father Vicar in Brescia. It seemed to them that it was better then to elect the Father Vicar, even though before he used to be elected in September. Then the decree was established. Moreover, it was established that next fall our Father Vicar will gather those priests and lay brothers whom he would deem capable of examining those things which were to be done. However, the decree mentioned previously remained intact that the main meeting, in which the Vicar and Councilors were supposed to be elected, and the representatives of priests were to be present, was always supposed to take place at the beginning of May or toward the end of April of every year.

1552

The Company, gathered in Brescia on May 13th, confirmed.....

In church or oratory, no other prayers will be said in public but the usual ones, especially allowing that anyone can say them in freedom. However, it will be up to the "Commessi" to have the children say Hail Mary while they travel, and five Our Fathers for the Holy Wounds of the Lord, and a Hail Mary when they go to bed.

The fourteen-year-old children and under, as well as those who have breakfast or snacks, will stand at the table, unless they are tired, according to the superior's will.

The mother of the girls will be elected by the Father Superior or Visitors, without needing any votes from the girls themselves.

1556

On April 20th, the priests and the brothers gathered in Milan....

It was decreed that, if some extraordinary donation would come, the Father Superior will be notified so that he may provide for that institution which he knows is more in need.

1557

On April 27th, in Milan, the Company of the Servants of the Poor....

Decreed that women will not converse where the children are.

The Protectors, without our authorization, will not admit children into our institutions lest they may admit those who are either too young or sick.

They will not dismiss from our institutions anyone older than sixteen without Father Vicar's knowledge, unless he/she is entrusted to some persons.

No construction of certain importance will be made without the Company's knowledge.

1559

On April 10th the Brothers gathered in Brescia....

Discussing spending and handling money, they considered to be a necessary thing in those places where manufacturing has been introduced, as in Venice and Pavia, especially when the secular people do not want to take upon themselves such a trouble. It was also determined to free

ourselves from such a task as much as possible. Where it is indispensable to undertake it, the priest and the “Comnesso” must agree, and everything must be registered in a book.

During Lent, on Fridays in March, processions will be organized; in Milan, our orphans will participate in the general processions of the town. They will do it also in the summer, when the weather is good, and during Lent only for this year.

In the institutions the old customs already introduced will be observed, while these ones transcribed will be read in the meetings of the adults.

That in every institution the book of the Christian Life will be provided for.

1560

On April 28th, the Company of the Servants of the Poor gathered in Milan, and the following decrees were established:

All the brothers, according to the old customs, will be voted on every three years; in the other years in between, everyone’s faults will be reported openly. If someone were guilty of grave things, according to the Superior’s will he will be voted on even before the time.

The following provisions were decreed:

In Somasca only the adults who are called to Ecclesiastic life will remain; these must wear cleric garb when they have received the sacred orders.

In all our institutions, children with talent will be instructed in reading during meals and in Donato’s grammar, in writing, during the feasts.

They will not be sent from town to town to buy things, such as knives, booklets, or other things.

When the meeting or the chapter has ended, everyone will seek information from experts about the best way to go about his assignment.

They will avoid as much as possible eating out with friends.

They will not provide the house with pots without the Company’s permission.

The night before the holidays of obligation, they will suspend work and go to bed early in order to get up before dawn.

If by chance one of them wanted to leave or were dismissed, Father Vicar or the superior will be able to absolve him from the obligation of any promises, according to our privileges and by common agreement of the Company.

1565

On May 8th, the Company gathered in Triulzio and issued the following decrees:

The superior will be allowed to transfer the brothers from one place to another during the year and to send people to help in any town, always though with the consent of one of the councilors or other brothers of the Company, and in case of need.

When the Superiors as well as the Councilors end his office or charge, they will submit them to the hands of the Company and will ask forgiveness for their mistakes in governing.