

COMPONENTS OF THE SOMASCAN SPIRITUALITY IN THE BIOGRAPHIES OF THE EARLY SOMASCAN RELIGIOUS

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1. "THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE CONGREGATION RESPLENDENT OF HOLY LIFE"

Miani, "as a lamp placed on the lamp-stand, sent out so much light of good example that he drew many to run after the odor of his virtues and join him."(1) In less than five years he had established institutions for orphans; boys and girls, and for redeemed women in different cities of Lombardy, stirring up admiration but also distrust and criticism. With his charitable work, our Founder launched in the society of his times the upsetting message of transforming the Church in order to bring her back to the holiness of the Apostolic times.

At his appeal, answered priests and lay people, noble and learnt ones, merchants and humble people, and even those who were helped by being taken from the streets, where would roam miserably "losing their souls and bodies," and "becoming scoundrels," in order to be raised and educated, "so that they may always live in the fear of God." (2)

They were thus born the Congregation of the Orphan Boys, the Congregation of the Virgin Orphans, the Congregation of the Redeemed Women, the Congregation of the Procurators, and the Company of the Servants of the Poor, or better, "of the Poor Derelict," commonly pointed out as "the Miani's Poor" and, later on, "the Poor of Somasca." The Company used to gather in Bergamo, at the Maddalena's Hospital, since 1532. The proposal for its disciples was to literally fulfill Christ's word: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have, give it to the poor and then come and follow me," which was concretely implemented in the notary deed of the donation "among the alive (inter vivos)" of one's goods to his family members, and in living and dying at the service of the orphans.

The example and model was Jerome, "first father of those poor," "noble man of great wealth who had given up all the honor of the Venetian republic and who had given away all his goods to the poor, whom he particularly cared of both spiritually and materially; he taught them the Christian living and helped them in their material needs, such as illness or other; he kept them with himself with great love and did not spare any inconvenience to himself so that they could be treated well and raised in sacred fear in the God's service." (3)

In their introduction, our most antique Constitutions invite us to look at the foundations of the Congregation, which were resplendent of holiness, and offer us the early disciples of Miani as models, because they distinguished themselves for holiness and fidelity to the charism of their Founder. All of them were personalities belonging to noble families, all endowed with extraordinary education and relevant patrimony: the priests Agostino Barili and Alessandro Besozzi "who lived till old age in holiness;" Monsignor Federico Panigarola, Apostolic Protonotary, and Angelo Marco of the Gambarana Counts of Pavia, who both "lived on scarce means, very poor ,and with great love for their neighbor;" Vincenzo of the Gambarana Counts who "did not lack in less doctrine and holiness than the above mentioned (Marco), lover of poverty;" Mario Lanzi

from Bergamo, "man of great zeal and holy life," and many other pious priests and fervent lay people who, once they joined this holy Company, lived "as a good example for this world." (4)

Archives researches have brought to light other names, less famous but equally sensitive to the invitation of Miani and members of the Company of the Poor: Antonio de Robertis, Cristoforo Muzzani, the crucifer Pietro Ruzzati.

Despite fervor and determination in serving Christ in poverty, the Company had to suffer, since its inception, because of the instability of some of its members and, probably, because of the extreme ascetic austerity imposed by its Founder. Holy people, but always men with their own difficulties, contradictions, and doubts; at times misunderstood because of their radical choice of that life, and therefore, "troubled, afflicted, tired and, at the end, despised by all." (5)

In the Miani's letter to Ludovico Viscardi is alluded the fact that the Servants of the Poor in Bergamo were not men of mortification and that at the orphanage were happening things that could not be tolerated. During the Chapter of Brescia of 1536, the inflexible Fr. Barili would cry aloud: "Too little mortification, too little attention to the souls, too little vigilance." (6) Miani, aware that only God is good and that Christ works in those instruments who let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit, and that the disciples are according to their Master, took provisions, without hesitation and without making distinction of people, against those who would refuse to obey: "It is better that one suffer rather than the all Company be troubled or assume some evil habits." (7)

In its communities the usual shortcomings were evident: "In almost all the hospitals there are many disobedient members and such irregularities that the people are scandalized and misled." (8) "The supervisors are indiscreet, do not have zeal for the souls and have little care for themselves;" some are not "steadfast in the works" and therefore, it was stated categorically: "See to it that another journey will be found for them, or that they will go to stay with others, and that another better way be their salvation." (9)

In February 1536, even Carafa intervened with a letter in which he begged Miani to "comfort the friends and to settle the uproar." (10) Some months later, the Theatine Bernardino Scotti, in writing to Stefano Bertazzoli, hoped that Sir Jerome had made "some good progress for the peace ... while we will address the Lord for that Company." (11) The Saint's last letter to Viscardi represents a pressing and passionate exhortation to be faithful to Christ and to be coherent, to bear with one another, to be "meek and benign with everybody, especially with those who are in the house." (12)

Despite the fact that difficulties increased after the death of the Saint, the Company got better because of the work of the Fathers Mario Lanzi and Agostino Barili. The secret of success is. to be found in the clarity and severity of the conditions required for being admitted. "Those who come but do not want to carry the cross and live according to our regulations are not made for us." (13) This norm recalls the previous one of the Chapter of 1547: "Those youth who would like to stay in the institutions must be at least eighteen, determined to want to obey and serve in the institutions, and must have been with us for one year divested of the world." (14) The orphans who were candidates for the sacred orders were rigorously required to have intellectual abilities, moral virtues and "that they come to serve God and not for other reasons." (15)

2. “OUR GOAL IS GOD, SOURCE OF ALL GOOD”

To serve his divine Majesty with all one's strength was the goal that Miani proposed to his companions. The constant search for evangelical perfection required devotion as first priority: "Lacking devotion, everything is lacking;" "if the Company will stay with Christ we will meet our goal; otherwise everything will be lost." (16) Union with God was attained, above all, in the Sacraments. "They used to say in our places that to go to Mass every day was a precept and an order left by father Miani for the all Congregation," stated Fr. Novelli in the trial in Milan. (17) The "General Orders for the Institutions" enjoined to the priest to celebrate daily and to go to confession frequently, "in order to be pure in approaching the sacrament;" they advised the study and reading of the Word of God, frequent prayer, the aid of a good spiritual director "with whom one could get advice in his doubts." (18) Fr. Angiol Marco Gambarana, despite being blind, "celebrated Mass until the day before the night he left this life."(19)

Devotion was fed by an impressive number of vocal prayers. On every day the Office of the Blessed Virgin was said, on Sundays the Seven Penitential Psalms, on Mondays the Office of the Dead for the souls of the benefactors, on Wednesdays the Gradual Psalms, on Thursdays the Office of the Holy Spirit, On Fridays that of the Cross, on Saturdays the Rosary. (20) The devotion to the Eucharist was cultivated with the practice of the Forty Hours. It was ordered: "After the Blessed Sacrament is ready, they must have a little procession, at least around the church; once the Sacrament is on the altar, they must sing the praises of the sweet Jesus; the procession has to be made with the mysteries of the Passion if they are there, otherwise without. And at the end of the Holy Queen, they must say "Deus qui nobis sub sacramentum mirabili;" and it must be said also during the Mass." (21)

Besides saying the Psalms and praising God almost all day, as Fr. Novelli remembered it still well, Miani prescribed the mental prayer, morning and evening. The boys too were educated on the meaning and manners to fruitfully practice meditation. The priest would read to the orphans "few words from any book," "which may excite and elevate the mind to God and to consider His sacrifices," and then each one would practice meditation on what the Spirit would dictate. (22)

The Saint had also composed a prayer that his companions would recite with the orphans morning and evening. With it they would ask the Lord to reform Christendom through the return to the state of Apostolic life, and to have confidence in God and not in others. From this prayer derived the particular devotions of Miani:

- Devotion to Christ's wounds, by saying with one's arms in the form of a cross, three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys "in memory of the three nails with which He wanted to be crucified," in order to attain the grace to despise all the things of the world and oneself, the reform of the Church, the true peace and harmony among the Christian princes, "so that united in holy peace they may march against the infidels and heretics, so that they may convert themselves and return under the yoke of the holy Catholic Church"
- Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary "that She may pray to Her benign son to grant us humility, meekness, love for God and neighbor, to be able to uproot our vices and increase our virtues, and to give us his holy peace;"

- Devotion to the Guardian Angels, that they may defend us from any temptation of the world, of the flesh, and of the devil, may present our lukewarm prayers to God and pray to Him that "He may listen to us and defend us from any complaint and judgment against others, and make us journey in truth on His holy way." (23)

This spirit of prayer was deeply assimilated by our Fathers. Of Fr. Angiol Marco Gambarana it is said that walking, standing, sitting, and working, as far as the work did not prevent the use of his hands, he always had the Rosary in his hands. (24) Fr. Francesco from Trent, "who was admired and spoken well by all the elderly because of his desire for devotion and of his frequency to prayer," was seen by Fr. Novelli "sometimes so fervent that he would cry, sigh, and groan in such a way that he would draw the others to cry and sigh with him." (25) The same was said of Fr. Vincenzo Trottì who had received from God the gift of tears. Contemplative and devout of the Eucharist, "by finding his delights in the sole love of God, he used to foretaste the sweetness of the heavenly things on earth and he used to long to end his life and stay with Christ." (26)

"To stay in continual prayer" was one of the main points of the life project presented to Bishop Pietro Lippomano and approved by him in 1538. It was not, however, a question of many devotional practices. Devotion was supported by a solid spiritual formation. In the Library of Somasca there are currently eighty volumes with the label "Pauperum Somaschae (belonging to the poor of Somasca)," acquired mainly by Fr. Angiol Marco Gambarana: "He procured, therefore, different books of holy doctors and of Church history some of which he sent to Somasca and others he kept in San Martino." (27)

There are all the works of St. Augustine and St. Ambrose (edited by Erasmus of Rotterdam); the commentaries to the prophets of St. Jerome, the "De Institutis" of Cassianus; letters and treatises of Cyprian; works of St. Gregory the Great, John Crysostomus, Dionysius Aeropagytas; the "In Exaemeron" of Gregory from Nyssa, the sermons of Peter Crysologus; works of Fulgentius and Sedulius.

The study of the Saints was encouraged by the knowledge of the life of the saints with the text by Domenico Cavalca "Lives of the Holy Fathers."

There are, then, various commentaries to the books of the Bible: commentaries to the letters of St. Paul, to the Acts of the Apostles by Dionysus the Cartusian, and to the Gospel by Ioannes Ferus, the "Commentarium super Psalmos" by Arnobius and Haimone; the commentary to St. Paul by Theofilattus; the "Enarratio Evangelica" by Pietro de Palude; the Psalterium of Rainerio Snogoudano "illustrated with paraphrases, according to the translation of Jerome," with the addition of a booklet "In Psalmos" by Athanasius; the illustration of the Bible by Antonio Rampeglolis.

Among the works of theology there are: "Opuscula de Gratia et Libero Arbitrio" by Prospere of Aquitania; the "De Bonitate Divina" by Peter of Leida and three copies of the Provincial Council of Colon. This one was considered one of the best texts to fight the theological errors of the time. It is a witness a letter of the Theatine Bernardino Scotti to the priest Stefano Bertazzoli, written on October 4, 1539, where he advises his friend not to read "Union of the soul with God" by Bartolomeo di Citta' di Castello, with a preface by the Capuchin Girolamo da Molfetta, because "one of my friends, learnt and respectable, tells me that this book is very dangerous and suspect of heresy. Instead, it has been issued a very good and important book against these errors of our times. It is called 'Concilium Coloniense' etc. I would like you to have it. Any way, tell Sir Bartolomeo

Scaino that I would like that he too may have it. We are waiting for them in Venice. It costs nine liras or maybe less." (28)

Among the works of ascetics we have the "Rosarium Aureum B. Mariae Virginis" by Guglielmo Pepin and the "De Vita et Laudibus Deiparae Mariae virginis" by Francisco Costero. The seven books "De Castitate" by the priest from Padua Bernardino Scardeonio are dedicated to Cardinal Pietro Carafa, with a preface dated October 4, 1538, rich in praises: "admirable is your renouncing to all things so that, by despising the public honors, you retired to private life... Therefore, as previously you did not give up the office of Bishop but the affairs, so now drawn by this divine vocation, you did not think about receiving either glory or a meaningless name, but the annoyance, fatigue, authority, and the task of defending Christian piety for which you felt obliged for your whole life"

The "Climax" by Giovanni Scolastico, translated from Greek by the Camaldoli's monk Ambrogio Traversari, the soul of the Council of Florence for the union of the Greek Church with the Latin one; it has the dedication to the Prior of the Trinity, Andrea Lippomano, by Giovanni Antonio and "frates Sabienses." The writers of the preface define him as a very religious and holy man and they wish that from the frequent reading of such a book "discant homines umbras rerum terrenarum aspernari et ad veram felicitatem quae in Dei contemplatione sita est, totis varibus aspirare."

There are, then, some meditations on the passion of Christ and the preparation to a good death by Taulerus, and the "Horologium Sapientiae" by Enrico Susone, issued in Venice in 1539 with the authentic signature of Fr. Trottii. Some titles of the chapters will illustrate the content of the work. In the first book: "De quibusdam Christi passionibus et qualiter verus amator debet se eisdem conformare et qualiter Deus per talem mortem voluit genus humanum redimere" (Chap 3); "Quam utile sit passion Christi iugiter habere in memoria" (Chap 14); "Commendatio singularis beatae Virginis et de dolore eius inestimabili quem habuit in passione filii" (Chap 16). In the second book: "Formula compendiosa vitae spiritualis" (Chap 3); "De scientia utilissima homini mortali quae est scire mori" (Chap 2); "Qualiter Christus in sacramento Eucharistiae sit devote recipiendus" (Chap 4).

There was no lack of works on morals like the "Summa Confessorum" by Alessandro de Ariotis, and manuals for preaching: the "Sermones Quadragesimales quam de Sanctis" by Gabriele Barelete, the sermons on the saints by Ludovico of Granata; the sermons of Lorenzo from Villavicencio and the sermons of Luigi Lippomano.

Finally, we need to point out the revelations of St. Matilde.

3. "*THEY DELIGHTED IN POVERTY FOLLOWING CHRIST*"

Miani chose, for himself and his followers, absolute poverty as a means to attain intimate union with God, to imitate the naked Crucified, and to fight the corruption of the fleshly nature. To renounce goods was the pre-condition to be welcomed into the "poor of Miani." Riches were thorns, obstacles to serving God with all one's strengths; the heart, therefore, needed to be freed from attachment to the goods of this world.

Among the different notary deeds to give up one's goods, I would like to point out the one of Fr. Leone Carpani. Having decided to serve God, he came to the conclusion that all his properties be distributed as alms in charitable works, especially for feeding,

clothing, educating the poor children of the Deanery of Incino and the city of Como, "not only in letters and doctrines, but especially in morals and Christian life." He declared Primo Conti, Bernardino Odescalchi, and Giacomo Bagliacca as his universal heirs. The fruits of the goods were to be used for the poor children of Merone or of the city of Como, "either if they come or if they do not come from other places according to the decision of the priests of the Somascan Congregation." The heirs were also to provide food and clothing for the priest, the teacher and the other operators of the institution of Merone (29).

The Carpanis belonged to a noble Lombardy family very branched out. One of these branches was represented by Deodato, son of Galdino, citizen of Milan and member of the parish "San Vittore and 40 martiri." Other sons of Galdino were Marco Antonio, the doctor Pietro Francesco, and Giovan Giacomo. Deodato had a son, Leone, and seven daughters; of them, five became nuns: Maria Maddalena and Scolastica in the Benedictine monastery in Pavia; Maddalena also in Pavia, in the Benedictine monastery of St. Teodote della Pusterla; Ludovica and Febronia in the Dominican monastery of St. Mary of Nazaret in Como, where Sister Ludovica became prioress in the 40s. The other two daughters got married, but we have news only about one of them, Margherita, who married Fioramonte Parravicino, widow of Chiara Conti from Valtellina.

Leone Carpani was born in the early years of the century and was heir of a huge real estate in the Deanery of Incino. Seeing Miani cross his lands singing psalms and litanies in the company of his orphans, he converted himself to become a new man.

According to Albani, our Saint came to Merone with twenty-eight little orphans. Here he had sojourned for some months with other religious and people of good spirit, "where they discussed to choose a place that would be the center of the congregations of the orphans; some liked Merone, others Vercurago, a place near Somasca; for the latter it was committed strongly Pietro Borella of Vercurago, a pious and well-do to man, inseparable companion of Miani; at the end, they chose Somasca as the center and, therefore, for the future it will be the headquarters." (30)

Carpani put at the disposal of the Company of the Servants of the Poor his home in Merone, "for instructing the poor children in letters and good customs," under the guidance of Fr. Vicenzo Gambarana. In 1540 he was in Pavia at the service of the orphans of the Colombina, where he dictated his first testament. In 1543 he was in Vercelli to start a new orphanage in a house donated by the brothers Rosarini. He became a priest between 1543 and 1544. In 1545 he was at the orphanage of San Martino in Milan where he dictated a second testament to the notary Stefano Baroggio. In 1548, on the example and praxis of the "poor of Somasca," he renounced all his goods.

From 1550 to 1553 he was the Vicar of the Congregation. In the Chapter held in Somasca on April 19, 1551, with Fr. Barili he was given the task "of laying down the first foundations of the observance of the Company, that it must first purge itself."

Right after the Cardinal Carafa was elected Pope, he went to Rome: "The Reverend Father Don Leone, who was a good pillar, came to Rome;" he will remain until his death, occurred in 1568 in the San Silvestro house of the Theatines. He was friend with the Barnabites and Theatines, he recited the Office with Pope Paul IV, who died in his own arms.

Pope Pius V offered him to be the Bishop of Naples, but he refused it; he was instead head of Sancta Sanctorum. He was in charge of the orphans of Santa Maria in Aquiro. In

A meeting of January 7, 1561, he proposed to have someone teach the children some skills or to send them with some good artisans. The administration of the charitable place decreed to give him twelve escudos "to use for his needs," but he was content with half.

Bernardino Odescalchi witnessed this extraordinary love for poverty in a writing to Lainez, where he considered the possibility of establishing a Jesuit college thanks to the goods of Carpani: "Now the Divine Goodness mercifully deigned to make us find the way through one of his good servants; he lives in Rome and works in holy institutions because he wanted to adopt and follow our Savior's counsel that says: If you want to be perfect, go and sell everything you have, give it to the poor and follow me; therefore, willing to give himself to the Lord and leaving behind the impediments of the world, he has given us a building of his, which has been sold for four thousand golden escudos." (31)

St. Charles had a deep esteem for Carpani, "according to our taste," and he would have liked to entrust to him the task of replacing the Vicar Ormanetto from his tiring duties "which, however, you need to continue to carry out to clean up the mess." In a letter he thus wrote: "This is the Reverend Don Leone from Milan, whom certainly you have met because he has been in Rome for many years, where he is universally well respected and where is seen continually occupied in spiritual and charitable works, such as the care of the orphans and such. However, for me he is important especially for his goodness. Even though he was, as we say, very much loved by Pope Paul IV, he always was alien from desire of honor and thus he lived and lives without any ambition, only serving God. I greatly hope that this holy man could do much good here both for his expertise in good works and for the zeal in serving God. And the fact that he is from Milan should make him more welcomed by those people, and also because he is young. Therefore, I am working to try to have him and the thing is already to the point. that I hope to send him to Milan shortly." (32)

The lives of the other followers of Miani were not less noticeable for their commitment of faithfulness to the legacy of the Saint.

Vincenzo Gambarana, who previously enjoyed a good military career at the service of the king of France, Francis I, after he met Miani, he followed him "volens parvus pro Christo fieri, a saeculi plurima bonorum copia Christi Iesupauperum sequitur." (33) His nephew Ippolito, in the trial for the beatification of his uncle in Pavia, witnessed: "I then heard from my father that, being they two brothers, in the splitting of their goods, he did not want to touch any money but he appointed someone else who would touch it, and he distributed it to the poor." (34) Detachment from everything led him to love for the poor, as Fr. Novelli recounted: "Journeymen during the winter, when the snow and ice cover the ground, he gave his socks to a poor who had his legs full of sores, because he begged him for God sake; and when the poor received them, since the Father went ahead, he was not seen anymore." (35)

Angiol Marco Gambarana followed our Saint by abandoning the great income coming from his feud of Montesegale, which "had been granted with its villas, territories and belongings, as well as with the people who lived in those borders, with the mere and mixed command and power of sword, with any jurisdictions, both civil and criminal, with exemption from any jurisdiction of the town of Pavia or whatever else city, land or place and from their official rulers, so that Montesegale with its villas, territories and belongings would form a unique body, free, exempt, separate from any subjection, power

and obligation of the above mentioned town of Pavia and with every exemption from ordinary and extraordinary, real, personal and mixed exemptions," except for some taxes that the Ducal Chamber had reserved to it. (36)

Gambarana, with a testament of April 22, 1559, left his goods to his nephews Baldassarre, Guizzardo, and Giovanni Andrea. To his brother Ludovico he left the revenue of them with the obligation of constituting the dowry for their nieces and some legates for the priest Dario Gambarana, the niece Ludovica, nun at the monastery of Pusterla, and for the confreres of the Company of the Body of Christ of Montesegale. The inventory of the good was to be done in two months; otherwise, all the revenues, in the period of delay, would have to go to the benefit of the orphans of the Colombina. (37)

A consequence of poverty was to put everything in common: "what one brings will be put in common and no thing will be no longer his, and in leaving he will not demand anything as his." (38) In Somasca, on the books of the early religious, there is this caption: "for the use of the poor of Somasca." Miani in a chapter dictated some ordinances about poverty, as Fr. Novelli gave a testimony. He ordered that on the table there was supposed to be "those things collected through begging; they followed such a rigor that never they bought meat; if by chance they could find some and that would not be enough for everybody, he ordered that it would be given to the sick and the elderly; the others, less old and sound, were to be content with bread and water. He ordered that the rectors, though priests, were to live on what the orphans lived on, and were to wear but what the subjects used, and that they were to acquire the food with the sweat of their brow and through the work of their hands. He ordered that no one was to use in traveling either carriages or horses or other comforts, but that everybody, except the sick and very old ones, were to go by foot." (39)

The Chapter made laws in this matter also about small details: not to have silk bookmarks, to be content with small napkins at the table, prohibition of eating meat, moderation in using condiments for the soup and using wood for the fire, obligation to wear wool shirts and excluding those made of silk or "saglia." Even after few years later, the rule of not exceeding was repeated: "The honest way to dress according our status, is to be on guard against delights and great expenditures." (40) "The priest must have their attire of rough cloth or linen or poor "sarza". The supervisors must use vile and poor cloth." (41)

This lifestyle was practiced also by Fr. Angiol Marco Gambarana, "who dressed poorly, using vile cotton, the one the orphans used during funerals." Fr. Francesco from Trent, Fr. Bernardino Castellani, Fr. Giovanni Scotto "had the same way of dressing poorly and simply, way that they learned from father Jerome." (42)

An extremely interesting historical document is the minutes of the house of Mercy in Verona, dated July 18, 1540. First Fr. Agostino Claudio in 1539, then Fr. Federico Genovese in 1540, who were in charge of the orphans, complain that "living was different from his institute and it was a profession of complete poverty, with hope in God alone." They demanded and obtained "the title of poverty without depending on the usual distribution of the weekly allowance," that is, by refusing a fixed income, "wishing that living would depend only on God through the daily begging for alms and the means of work, with the advice of three procurators who were to be elected by them." (43)

Confidence in the Providence pushed our early Fathers not to accept inheritances of a certain value, such as the goods of Carpani, which were offered to the Jesuits for the

establishment of the college of Como. Thus, also Fr. Novelli witnessed about Fr. Gambarana, who was enjoined expulsion if he had not renounced the church of Canepanova in Pavia, and he stated that he had seen in Milan and outside "huge orchards, fields, houses which with generous contempt were renounced or refused." (44). Visiting some churches in Milan for a spiritual recreation, Fr. Bernardino Castellani showed to Fr. Novelli a beautiful vineyard "and a spacious wide plan, where woolen clothes were drying" and told him that it had been generously refused by the old Fathers, because the contempt for riches "was an unbreakable rule of father Jerome, guarded by him and handed down to the Congregation." (45)

Love for poverty was going hand in hand with austerity, fasting, penitential rigor of discipline in order to incite one "to follow our Lord Jesus Christ naked on the cross." Fasting was very frequent and strict. Fr. Francesco from Trent, Angiol Marco Gambarana, and Vincenzo from Borgo were content, as their Founder, of little, stale, black, hard bread that the orphans begged for in the villages. Fr. Agostino Barili, of incredible abstinence, would fast on bread and water, would eat "those little and scarce pieces of bread left over by the family of the orphanage of Bergamo." (46)

This general practice was codified in the Chapter of 1547: "They will fast every sixth day in memory of our Lord Jesus Christ, on Saturday of the first Sunday of the month and on the Saturdays during the Chapter. During Advent, they will abstain from dairy products" (47)

In order to mortify the flesh, Miani would discipline himself very frequently. This practice was passed to the Congregation and was already sanctioned in the Book of Proposals: "And it is proposed that everybody in the Company, on the Fridays, discipline himself, in secret and away from others, in memory of the passion of our Lord." (48) Even the orphans "who are a little older" had to discipline themselves on Friday evenings "for the length of a Miserere, De Profundis, Our Father, Christus Factus, Iesu Christe Fili, three times, with the prayer Respice Quaesumus." (49)

Another means wanted by Miani for humbling oneself was the every-week public community confession of faults. "That was done with such a humility and prompt will that blessed was considered the one who knew better accuse and subject himself to the corrections of the Superior." (50)

4. *"AND IN THIS TO GREATLY WORK IN RAISING CHILDREN IN CHRISTIAN LIFE"*

Consecration to Christ had to be manifested not only through renouncing money and riches, "which are not really ours, but under the unstable fortune are entrusted to us by God alone," but also through serving the orphans and the poor in the naked Crucified; with the dedication of strengths of body and powers of soul, they were to commit themselves to the honor, instruction, education, protection, and defense of the miserable, and "quam maxime, (especially)" of the widows and orphaned children.

Miani, inflamed by the desire "to draw and unite to God any status, level, and condition of people, for the love of the Gospel and for the growth of the kingdom of God," started from the orphans in trying to realize that project. With a spiritual militia of children, instructed in the divine worship in order to lead people to do good, he went

from town to town in order to establish the institution of orphans, a very religious school, that had the goal to return Christendom to the Apostolic times.

He evangelized the poor through catechetical activities and the rural missions.

The Company was born in the Church "for the ministry to the orphans, that is to take them out of the miseries of the body and spirit." During all the XVI century, it remained faithful to this mission because "this is what will draw many to our Congregation, if we will preserve our vocation of being ministers of the poor of the Lord." (51)

The Chapter Decrees were categorical. "The works (institutions) of the Lord must clean themselves of those who are not orphans and of those who are taking advantage, by using greater diligence in the future in admitting such orphans." (52)

The final goal of the institutions was Christian formation. Therefore, were not accepted those born out of wedlock or foundlings. The disciples of Miani would pursue evangelical perfection in raising children in Christian life: "And in this to greatly work in raising children in Christian life," (53) "ready to clean ringworm and other similar illnesses of the body, but most of all those of the soul." (54)

In Verona, in 1540, Fr. Federico Genovese wanted to be free to educate the orphans in a way that would give maximum result, that was "only children of the same age and apt to live the same life, that is from five to ten or even twelve, freedom to accept, refuse, transfer from one place to another as usual and according to the age proposed." (55)

As the Founder who, "in order to draw everybody on the right path, became the most humble and miserable of all, and, though a noble and old man, he followed the same rule of the littlest orphan in imitation of the benign Jesus," (56) so the disciples would have done the same.

Fr. Francesco from Trent, who was Superior General and Dean of San Biagio in Monte Citorio in Rome, where he left a reputation of singular meekness, goodness, and patience, "would sow, cut the clothing of the children, work in the orchard, and give haircuts." (57) Fr. Angiol Marco Gambarana, tough very old, would write, counsel, teach the children of the house, earn more than those who were much younger, dress poorly, "using vile cotton, the one the orphans use during the funerals." (58) Fr. Francesco Pesenti said that Fr. Vincenzo Gambarana "was of venerable aspect... of singular virtues and customs and had the fame of a holy man. They said that he took care of the orphans and that he doctored them and often he went to the Congregation of San Martino and to spiritual exercises." (59) "He dressed poorly with worn clothing and, traveling, he walked... he was assiduous in prayer and he predicted his death," gave witness Ippolito Gambarana. (60) He fell ill while he was celebrating Mass in the monastery of the redeemed. He died on June 27, 1561. On the door of the church of San Domenico an epigraph, dictated on the day of his funerals by the Dominican Fr. Paolo, thus remembered him: "Adornment of the Order of Priests, Vincent of the Counts Gambarana family of Pavia was considered the greatest in this world because of his goodness, but willing to become little for Christ, he completely dedicated himself in the humble Congregation of the Somascan Fathers to the ministry to the orphans, where he excelled in that Christian virtue, and taken away from this world as a bright star left his own very sad." (61)

This ability of sharing, of getting down to the level of the orphans, of living and dying with them by working for and serving them, was the main aspect of the spirituality of our Congregation, raised by the Lord "for the ministry to the orphans." "We - wrote Fr.

Angiol Marco Gambarana - do not want to be masters but servants for the love of the Lord Jesus Christ." (62)

Our early Fathers had the awareness of serving the Lord in those creatures. "I greet everybody - wrote Fr. Francesco Spaur to the Protectors of the orphanage in Vicenza and each one of you brothers, and I wish you fervor of Spirit in order to serve the Lord in those creatures." (63)

CONCLUSION

Our early Fathers, by following the journey of holiness proposed by Miani, committed themselves to reach their assimilation to the Crucified Christ through an exemplary austerity of life, inspired by love for the cross and manifested in absolute poverty, in afflictive ascesis, and in the service to the orphans.

That was a unique and unrepeatable season, at which already at the end of the XVI century people looked with nostalgia and admiration.

Today, incapable to follow in their footsteps, we at least lift our thoughts to them that "they may pray for the prosperous success of this Congregation and for the spiritual profit of these holy works (institutions), which the Lord may deign to increase in number and merit for the glory of God." (64)

And may the exhortation of Barili to Viscardi be useful to everybody: "Wake up all of you and apply yourselves to the holy works: now we will see who are truly founded in Christ." (February 12, 1537?)