

THE CONSTITUTIONS OF 1555

The Constitutions which are observed by the Somascan Congregation dedicated to the ministry of the orphans in the cities of Lombardy.

Origin of the Congregation and Life of Its Founder

1. In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and of the glorious Virgin Mary.
2. It is sung that the holy Church has her foundations on the holy mountains, that is, the apostles and prophets. Since we are concerned with this Congregation, that is a particular Church, we need to show its foundations, those who have been resplendent with sanctity and perfection of life.
3. This Congregation, dedicated to the ministry of the orphans, began in Bergamo in the year of the Lord 1531 by the work of Sir Jerome Emiliani, a Venetian nobleman. As a young man, he gave himself to the world and its pleasures. Later on, he turned to God. By having the Most Reverend Bishop of Chieti as spiritual director, he became so inflamed with the love of God that, having left the world, he put himself at the service of the wretched poor and dressed himself very poorly. For a long time, he performed this humble exercise in Venice, his hometown.
4. His spiritual fervor increasing, he left the city out of obedience to his spiritual director. Impelled by the Spirit of the Lord and eager to do things agreeable to Him, he went to Bergamo where he gathered numerous abandoned and miserable orphans, some covered with ringworms and scabies, and affected by other diseases. They gave him a place in the hospital of the Maddalena where with great love he cleaned and cured them both from corporal misery and, with saintly teaching, from spiritual misery. Similar to a lamp on the chandelier, he radiated so much light of good example that he invited many to run after the fragrance of his virtues and to follow him. Among these there were the reverend and worthy priests Sir Agostino Barili from Bergamo and Sir Alessandro from Besozzo, and some good and devout lay-people.
5. Since the number of the orphans increased, this holy man was not content to perform this pious deed only in Bergamo, but he started to expand his activity by going to Somasca, then to Como, and later on to Milan with a good number of his own. There, after more and more suffering, either because of illness and material needs, or because of mockery, harassment, and persecution, at last he was given as a shelter for those creatures a property of the Major Hospital, called San Martino. When the institution was established and running, he accepted into his Company Monsignor Federico Panigarola, Apostolic Protonotary, and Angelo Marco, count of Gambarana, who became a priest later.
6. Having established a stable administration in this institution, the servant of God, invited by Sir Bartolomeo Borello, returned with some to the village of Somasca, on the border between the territory of Venice and Milan. There being no other means to live, he went to work in the fields with the beloved poor. He led a very austere and tiring life. To draw everyone along the right way, he became the most humble and the lowest of all. Even though he was a noble and venerable man, he followed the rules of the lowest orphan, imitating the benign Jesus. Such deep humility and love, fervor and fragrance of virtues, attracted distinguished souls from different places. Besides those mentioned above, two other young men from Pavia [joined in]: the first, Sir Marco, a man of great learning who lived as a priest with great fervor of spirit and holiness of life; he second, Sir Vincenzo, a count of Gambarana, who was not of lesser learning and holiness

than the lover of poverty mentioned before. Then, Sir Leone Carpani, from Incino's parish, converted and dedicated himself to God's service by following this holy man in the works of piety. Many other priests and fervent laypeople joined this holy Company, and some of them still live in it to the edification of the world.

7. To these servants of the Lord gathered in Somasca the holy man Sir Jerome revealed his intentions: to bear fruits in the world not only by establishing these communities of orphans, caring for them and rescuing them from corporal and spiritual miseries, but also by assembling for the same goals associations of citizens and noblemen. They were to take care of the temporal aspects of the institutions and their temporal administration while the priest of the Company would handle the spiritual aspects. All together, they were expected to obtain the grace and glory of God.

8. After this holy man had assembled these companies and established institutions for orphans in Bergamo, Somasca, Como, Milan, Brescia, and Pavia, he lived in great austerity and poverty with such a vibrant faith that he performed miracles because of it.

9. Called to Rome by the cardinal of Chieti to perform the works of the Lord, he assembled those brothers who were in Somasca at that time. After the customary prayer, he told them he had been called to Rome and to heaven, and he said: "Brothers, I think I will go to Christ." And he suddenly fell sick with an epidemic fever. In a very few days, he came to the end of his life, giving great example of holiness. As his children and brothers wept, he said: "Do not cry because I will be more helpful to you from there than from here." Having received the Holy Sacraments, he went over to the Lord on February 8, 1537.

10. About the same time, the Reverend Friar Tommaso of the Order of the Preachers passed happily to the other life. He had been with Sir Jerome and preached very successfully to the neighboring people, fostering peace and harmony among them, in cooperation with the servant of the Lord. Also after many years an excellent physician from Piemonte died: he had been in the Company of those just mentioned. All were buried in the church of St. Bartholomew in Somasca. We believe that their souls, because of their good deeds and the mercy of God, are seated in heaven where they pray for the success of the Congregation and the spiritual profit of these holy institutions, that the Lord may deign to increase them in number and merit, for the glory of God.

Authority in the Congregation

11. The death of this servant of the Lord, who had been the leader and foundation of this Congregation, left all the brothers, priests, and laymen like sheep without a shepherd, fearful sailors without a pilot, not knowing what they should do: should they go ahead and steer the boat themselves or each one return to his former state of life. The favor of the Lord did not abandon them in this quandary because they gave themselves up to fervent prayer and remembered that their deceased father had said not to doubt at all but to continue the enterprise with courage. Therefore, confident in divine help and in the prayers of the pious servant of God, since the Company had grown with priests and laymen (among whom there were two reverend and worthy priests, Sir Mario de Lanzi from Bergamo, a man of great zeal and holy life, and Sir Francesco della Mora, a nobleman from Piemonte), they all together took courage and appointed as their leader Father Agostino and devoted themselves to the service of the orphans. Many of the priests remained in Somasca living in common as poor religious, in prayer and spiritual fervor, practicing virtue in peace and tranquility.

12. However, those who went to the cities found it difficult to work. They considered necessary apostolic authority in order to strengthen and stabilize the Congregation. Therefore, they chose Father Angelo Marco from Pavia to go to Rome. There he remained a long time and he requested a brief from Pope Paul III of happy memory: to be able to elect a superior pro tempore who, once elected, would be the superior of the entire Congregation with the authority to command and to transfer the brothers from place to place; furthermore, it gave the priests the authority to administer the Sacraments and absolve their subjects even from episcopal cases; it submitted them directly to the Apostolic See; finally, it gave authority to the Congregation to draw Constitutions in its Chapters and to amend them, as it is customary and necessary in Congregations.

13. The Congregation being strengthened and stabilized by this authority, the present Constitutions are drawn and established for the observance of all, priests and laymen, who want to stay and persevere in this Congregation. They were approved in the Chapters by the majority of votes. These Constitutions intend nothing but to make us live devoutly for God, temperately in regard to ourselves, and justly and without scandal in favor of our neighbor. Therefore, may the grace of the Holy Spirit possess our hearts, so that we may always accomplish things pleasant to the Divine Majesty, forever and ever.