

8. A YOUNG MAN IN THE ROME OF PIUS VII

Gaspar, in these years, continued going to the Roman College; he also attended the Ecclesiastic Academy of “Abbot” Marchetti and the lessons of Msgr. Bacolo, in which he learned sacred eloquence.

Msgr. Bacolo was a well known preacher, whose fame was widespread. He was soon named bishop of Famagusta. While in Rome he taught in the Ecclesiastical Academy of Marchetti, and as we have said, Gaspar went there to receive special lessons in religious preaching.

Msgr. Bacolo helped him greatly and influenced the young preacher. When Gaspar, after many years, reached the height of his preaching skills, there were those who believed that they could see in his inflections of voice, tonalities and thematic structures those of Msgr. Bacolo.

Some even pretended to say they saw the content and arguments of the bishop of Famagusta and they then murmured:

“This is not the product of Del Bufalo, but that of Bacolo. Del Bufalo is only repeating what he committed to memory and he puts on a show, just repeating that which he had learned.”

Other learned experts will say the contrary: during a sermon of Gaspar in Ascoli, the teacher of eloquence Francesco Amici, who personally also knew the preaching of both of Bacolo and that of Gaspar, would declare that even though he recognized in the talks of Gaspar the resonance of the teacher, he did not encounter the same concepts or phrases which were found in the thoughts of Bacolo. After a more thorough examination of the writings of Gaspar, made by Biagio Valentini, neither did he find material copied from nor used by Bacolo.

In any case, it is certain that the twenty years of Gaspar were surprisingly “full”: the

most varied works of the apostolate occupied much of his daily schedule, even though his studies were his principal preoccupation. He was capable of treating problems in Dogmatic Theology, Moral Theology, Canon Law, Sacred Scripture and Patrology.

These were the themes among which he moved in order to reach his goal. He treated these themes and studied their solutions. In other words, he was a student that did not limit himself to the programs but sought wider horizons.

In Gaspar, as De Libero clarifies, was manifested very soon the typical character of a student, namely, the love of documentation and the scientific proof of the past. This love took him into the archives, which most flee from; he was not content with less in the circumstances in which he found himself.

When he became interested in the Institute of Santa Galla, he realized that letters and books and papers would make time and circumstances disappear; some parchments closely bound to history had been lost. He took the time to reassemble them; as a researcher he looked for these documents, and often found them. He would use his own money to pay for them, and he carefully reconstructed the archives.

He soon found himself in the same situation when he was named, though very young, sacristan of St. Mark Basilica in the Venetian Palace. This archive enjoyed a greater prestige than that of Santa Galla, and was more complete. Here too Gaspar was able to organize and recover many valuable documents.

He seems to have the ability to multiply his time. At 18 or 20 years of age, Gaspar made history in Rome for Christian charity: the rejuvenation of the work of Saint Galla, which had fallen down or was suffocated by revolutionary events.

But what, really, was the church and institute of Santa Galla?

A beautiful legend takes us far away: to Galla, the daughter of Simaco, a learned and wise man who Theodoric murdered.

After the death of her father, she abandoned the world and locked herself up in her house; she led a contemplative life and had sweet and solemn visions: the holy Virgin appeared and consoled this afflicted daughter.

Down through the years there arose a church dedicated to the saint and on the side of the church were some houses with galleries serving as a hospital for the poor, pilgrims and the sick. In the obscurity of the Middle Ages the charity flourished around the image of the Virgin now venerated in the church.

In 1601 the church was demolished, possibly because it had not been cared for; the social work fell in ruins and the image of the Virgin was transferred to Santa Maria in Campitelli, on the plaza of the same name.

In the seventeenth century it happened that Santa Galla could not resurrect itself. In the last decades Livio Odescalchi, prince of Sirmio, was moved by this abandoned place and proposed to reconstruct a new church with a hospital attached. He was the nephew of Blessed Innocent XI, pope from 1676 to 1689, who is well known for combating "nepotism". It is said that one time in the Roman court someone said to the pope: "But Your Holiness has Livio outside of the Vatican and the Quirinal, and he is the only nephew Your Holiness has. ...". The pope replied courteously: "Our nephew Livio is very dear to Us, but it is well that he is where he is." In reality, Livio came from a very wealthy family.

The pope by his diplomatic action of great foresight was able to stimulate Catholic princes of Europe and he formed a network of alliances (in which there were even some Protestant German princes) to put up a fight against the Ottoman invasion. When three hundred thousand Turks - the largest army that had ever been seen up until then -

marched with its insignia of the half-moon against Vienna and laid siege in 1681, all Europe was afraid and panicked before the fear that if Vienna fell, the grand Vizier would have free run to the West and South. "After Vienna, then Rome!" repeated Christina of Sweden, and in the palace of Lungara where she resided, she prepared her suitcases to flee to France or Spain. Everyone who could, in the Rome of that time, prepared traveling bags, ready to flee.

Then there began to function a system of defensive alliances, promoted by Pope Innocent XI through his Apostolic Nuncio Bounvisi.

Catholic Generals of Central Europe under the orders of Charles, Duke of Lorene and John Sobiesky, King of Poland, together with many other Germans went with their armies to defend the last bulwark of Christianity, and a victory, and very great victory, smiled on the Christians. The Islamic forces could not touch the ground of Vienna, even though they had been for dozens of years sovereigns of Hungary and for centuries sovereigns of the Balkans.

Emperor Leopold I, to show his profound respect to the pope, considered naming Livio a Prince and Supreme Highness, giving feudal rights to Sirmio, with its 62,000 hectares.

It was an act of kindness that the pope accepted kindly, but we do not know with what kind of thankfulness, since they thought differently as far as titles, grandeur and wealth - such that he did not want to elevate his own nephew - as his predecessors had done - with the dignity of a crown.

To the principality of Sirmio Livio added the duchy of Bracciano, which he received from Flavio Orsini. He was thereby one of the more powerful men of Rome, and he had no children. He was a good man, and was given to doing good.

And so we have him reconstructing the

church and hospital of Santa Galla, but with “modern” criteria, that is, that of the end of the seventeenth century. In the middle was the church, with a beautiful baroque facade and on each side ample pavilions for the rectory and hospital. A group of priests took care of the cult and helped the poor; these poor were helped either permanently or were sheltered only during the night. For more than one hundred years there was the daily practice of wishing them “Good Night” and giving them a coin, that is, the priest on duty would make the rounds down the corridors greeting the poor and giving them the gift of a coin. In the morning and sometimes in the afternoon the poor would meet in the church for religious functions and recite prayers that they had learned as children, which gave them peace of heart.

This center of charity, both spiritual and temporal flourished still in 1798, when the revolutionary forces got to Rome. But in a few weeks Santa Galla was reduced to a desert. The last priests and the majority of the poor disappeared. The work could hardly continue, and the director Abbot Diotallevi, an old and sick priest, was just waiting - so says De Libero - for death.

But Gaspar, 18 years old, put his fingers into the mess. He had read about St. John Baptist de Rossi and the venerable Andrew Parisi, the great apostles of charity of Rome, and he tried to formulate a plan to resurrect Santa Galla.

He was no Livio Odescalchi - he did not have much money, not even the little coin to give the poor - but he used a very simple method: he exhorted, he invited, he pleaded, he extended his hand for the institute and he found young men to help in the ministry. Really, his recruitment of young men was carried out in a rather extraordinary way: those that were invited to form part of the group at first said: “Santa Galla? ... a work blessed and made holy! ... and Gaspar, a crazy

mad man pretending to busy himself with it.” But the conversation ended almost always in that the young men ended up becoming friends and going to Santa Galla to offer their services.

The re-birth was rapid. Fr. Diotallevi could not believe his own eyes: and all this done by a cleric only 18 years old. He closed his eyes in peace and serenity, praising God and blessing all these young men; he died in 1806. This was a paradoxical situation: in order for the institution to recover its importance and to succeed, the cleric Gaspar Del Bufalo, hardly 20 years old, was put in charge.

He doubled his forces; and while on one hand he fed the poor and sheltered the sick, his work began to increase with a new apostolate: teaching catechism to the children and ragamuffins of the streets. He personally searched them out and ran after them, calling each of them by name, and promising them gifts. In this way set it up that the church would be filled at certain hours with these little heads that almost miraculously remained captivated.

But he also had another problem: to find suitable priests that would be ready to sacrifice themselves humbly for the humble; in this search Gaspar looked up many contacts that he had made years before in his apostolic work. For example, there was a great help from the “Ecclesiastical Help” in which he was inscribed in 1800, and which was established to help priests and poor clerics; he belonged to the parish of St. Mark, where Gaspar was a deacon in 1807 and where he became a canon the following year (on 30 July 1808, the day before he was ordained a priest).