

## 15. A YOUNG PRIEST FULFILLS HIS DUTY

On 31 July of 1808 Gaspar was ordained a priest in the church of the Missionaries of St. Vincent de Paul in Montecitorio, in a private ceremony, by Cardinal Despuig, the Pro Vicar, together with some other of his friends and companions: Luigi Gonnelli, Francesco Annivitti and a religious of the Mission, Giacomo Semeria. The ordination was private because of the sad political circumstances of the moment, for the pope was a “prisoner” in the Quirinal.

On 1 August each year it was the custom to expose in the Basilica St. Peter, the “Shroud of the Holy Martyrs;<sup>1</sup> and Gaspar was the one designated to give the sermon.

He did so with very profound feelings. That which was happening in Rome, and even more that which was foreseen, was enough to set him aflame. The theme that had to be treated had a profound affinity with what was happening in the City. The pope, up to that moment, had not yet been expelled from the city, but, as we have said, he was a recluse, the cardinals had been dispersed and everything pointed to a persecution that would spread.

This was, for the most innermost feelings of the new priest, as a preparation. On the following day Gaspar celebrated his first Mass in the Basilica of St. Mark.

Up until now he had been a young untiring apostle; but from that day his energies multiplied. His zeal had a new character - priestly; in his lengthened prayers and meditations Gaspar treated the foundation of all that concerned himself by means of

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<sup>1</sup> This linen cloth or shroud, in which were buried the holy martyrs. It was exposed for public veneration in the Basilica of St. Peter for Vespers of the Ascension, and remained there until the first day of August.

these sad circumstances, that is, his mission, his probable future. As a priest of Christ he was ready to suffer and die; for that reason he ought to intensify even more his apostolate; the more grave was the threat to the church, so much the more should he make his keen internal resistance. A young man could not take part in the meetings which took place on the highest levels among the great ones, but he could validly contribute as a Catholic to consolidate the plane on which he would enter the fight. It was necessary to do everything possible that the religious “ground” not become dry and that it not become contaminated; he had to act, he had to serve Christ among the humble that were gathering around him.

In this sense Roman life continued being ever coherent and organized; there were apostasies, that you have in every sphere, but down deep the people remained faithful to Christ in his Vicar.

In Gaspar there followed a lively spirit of fraternity and association for the service of Christ. He understood that you cannot work isolated, in such a way that he tried to maintain united to others as “brothers” with whom he had in common a spirit and zeal. They established themselves among older priests of Rome in those years: Gaetano Bonanni, Luigi Gonnelli,<sup>2</sup> Antonio Santelli and various others. They were the first collaborators of the Gaspar the priest.

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<sup>2</sup> Luigi Gonnelli, born in Rome in 1784, was one of his most beloved childhood friends. Together with his brothers Giuseppe and Filippo, both later ordained priests, they visited the house of the Del Bufalo family. In the years of Gaspar’s deportation, Gonnelli was his most faithful correspondent. Once the Congregation was founded, he went to live for a time at Giano, and in 1820 entered the Institute as a missionary. In 1829 he left, for reasons of health, the active ministry but he remained always with the interior spirit of the Congregation as he himself declared in the Ordinary Process of Beatification of the Founder.

Bonanni was a Roman and he was twenty year older than Gaspar; he was considered as one of the preachers most efficient of those times. Gaspar was happy that he could count on him in his numerous works of the apostolate; he wanted to inscribe himself in the Company of the Most Holy Name of Mary in the Trajan Forum, and in the Company of St. Gregory Thaumaturgus that met in a little oratory not far from the church of St. Mark; he also wanted to belong to the White Sacconi, to the Red Sacconi, and other associations.

He dedicated himself with special attention to the care of needy priests. There were many and other new ones were always arriving in Rome at this time. The City was not only the city for Monsignors but also the grand fatherland for poor priests, and an adoptive fatherland, if you will, but a fatherland of hope and for this reason was more sought after and more loved.

In the Hospice of Santa Lucia dei Ginnasi, for example, poor priests from other dioceses were sheltered, who came on pilgrimage to the tomb of the Apostles or some times simply to admire the Eternal City. And Gaspar was drawn there, he did the cleaning, assisted the sick, helped those who wanted things in the immense capitol.

There was another hospice, more famous and characteristic, near the Sixtus Bridge, and the foot of the Janiculum, and was called "The Hospice of One Hundred Priests"; its purpose was similar to that of Santa Lucia, but it was larger; it received sick priests, fed them and maintained them when, because of age, they could no longer work; and they accompanied them, even after death, with prayers. This work passed in the XVII century to the Order of Malta, but at the end of the same century, Innocent XII installed it in an Ecclesiastical College, but because of the size of it, he added a hospital. So there you found

the young and the infirm: the young learned the value of suffering seeing the sick suffer, and these were happy for the help that the young ones gave.

There also existed, for priests, the "Work of the Four S's" (Sagrada Sociedad de Sacerdotes Seculares = Sacred Society of Secular Priests); it was a confraternity of mutual aid among ecclesiastics.

To these groups, often very needy, Gaspar dedicated his work. And soon, from adults to children, from ministers of God to poor kids of the street, could be seen in the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, that had arisen by initiative of Cardinal Baronio dell'Oratorio, under the pontificate of St. Pius V. Its members met in the church of St. Apolinar and they named among themselves the "deputies", who were to promote and watch over the teaching of catechism in the parishes of Rome.

Gaspar was put in charge of the parish of St. Mark, and organized, together with the pastor, a small world, with classes, prizes, promotions and above all, with great enthusiasm and love. In this way he made the children and young ones love the catechism and observe silence, recollection. At the same time he took care of, in the same parish, the "Congregation of Youths" and the meetings of the "Oratory of St. Mary" founded by Benedict XIV. Gaspar spoke to the ones gathered, and his manner of speaking, which was in sharp contrast to his youth, was very efficacious. For example, he proposed the theme: "How to prepare for a Happy Death". His hearers thought to themselves: "How can someone only 22 years old, know so many secrets of life and death, things profound and mysterious even for the old? But in the word of Gaspar this conflict was resolved in a serene light and a harmonious way: a good life, hopefully from the beginning, prepares one who is faithful and constant for a good

death; and this opens the door to a splendid life in Paradise. Those present, rather than assist at a dramatic and irreconcilable antithesis, would learn of a connection in the fundamentals of life and death, a connection that little by little is transformed by fusion; life is a subtle, incessant and imperceptible death; death is an ineffable and imperishable life in the Lord.

On how many occasions did Gaspar speak to the devout Roman crowds! Each day there were different listeners; each parochial community met in the church, but Gaspar knew very well that the souls of the people were the same. The more practice he acquired in preaching, the more did it appear that he was speaking to one and the same conscience, face to face, in a varied conversation and at the same time identical, restricted and diffusive; the people of Rome was one, perhaps as is one the people of all the regions of the world. Gaspar had discovered the heart of "his" Roman people, he knew its secret.

On 14 September he preached before a relic of the Holy Cross in St. George in Velabro, where the people came in an interminable procession. Here, the word of Gaspar was not oratory; it was emotion, it was tenderness. He said that on the cross Jesus had died. It was the great theme of the Blood that he announced and which later on was the essence of Gaspar's preaching and sanctity.

There were also difficult places, strange hearts, extraordinary souls not precisely because of virtue but for precocious complications and - sometimes without a solution; and so in Santa Balbina were kept young boys, ungovernable, rebelling against their parents, or guilty of true crimes.

Gaspar cried for these youths in danger of corruption. Only separation, the mixture of distinct grades of culpability, could one focus the contagion and lessen the danger; and in those times neither the educators nor

the very parents were aware of the precedents which many times lead to such sad consequences of evil and iniquity. They did not recognize the outside responsibility of these unhappy ones, the blame of the parents or the virulence of the living conditions, which had influenced the infancy and adolescence, leading them off the good path. The adults, therefore, saw only one who was blameworthy: the wayward boy. The only remedy that they knew was to lock him up, to trim the evil with violence. They did not foresee that this could suffocate the soul, injure in a mortal way. Gaspar, on the contrary, captured the secret of those fallen ones in their mistakes so premature, he treated them with kindness and tried to open for them another kind of horizon.

And what were those horizons? It was not the unfolding of human possibilities, it was not the first early dawn of a strictly civil redemption, but faith. He spoke to them of God and he explained Jesus. These poor boys carried too prematurely the weight of blame; it was necessary to transform this weight into an act of love and sorrow. He had to resurrect them as Jesus had been raised.

He tried to take them to the Most Holy Sacrament; but he wanted them conscious and prepared; they could understand the sacrifices of Christ and they made an exact act of looking at their own drama.

The results were surprising. Young hearts that opened themselves up, hard faces of adolescents that again could smile. When Gaspar heard a laugh that was open and sincere, he felt a true happiness: how long has it been since he laughed so much, and in a manner so healthy?

Each time he was more "Salesian" in these adventures; he used the same language that St. Francis de Sales had used.

There was also another glowing light that flowed from Gaspar, and that we have

seen he used with the wagoners and field workers and the humble merchants of the plazas and streets of the City.

This orientation extended itself even more, was more precise. In the evenings, when Gaspar returned to his home to rest and when he passed through the streets in which sounded hoarse voices and rude language mixed with cursing and blasphemies, in which he saw men playing cards and drinking and fighting among themselves; he became aware then of a misery more stinging than that of the wagoners, of the straw sellers and the other sellers of herbs: here the evil was alive, breathing, and it could not be reduced to simple ignorance; it was coming from consciences that were gloomy, blinded.

He had to intervene; but, in what form? Certainly Gaspar could not go with his cassock of a cleric into the shops where drinks are served to give counseling sessions. He consulted with Cardinal Bonanni and together they devised a plan; they observed that that which ruined these poor drunks was the ambience; they had to move them away, to take them to a different place where they would encounter company without the need to get drunk nor to blaspheme; the rest would come afterwards by itself, and it would be most of all a church where they could get together to pray; thus would be born a nocturnal oratory.

It was urgent to find a church with some extra rooms, at least with a room in which it would be possible to gather these people.

Between Plaza Montanara and Santa Maria in Cosmedin, at the beginning of the street of the Circles, there was a small abandoned church, San Aniano, attained on concession by Msgr. Alejandro Nicolai by the "Association" of Santa Maria in Pianto.

The group of friends of Gaspar, Santelli, Gonnelli and Gaspar himself, all very

enthusiastic, asked Monsignor Nicolai for the use of the church. Msgr. Nicolai reflected for a moment, and then expressing disappointment, refused the request. He had for his "associations" only these four walls; he feared that once installed another work as projected, it would make a grand development and the oratorio would be absorbed by the group of Gaspar and his friends. And so, how could I throw them out?

"No, no, I cannot let you use it. You will just have to continue to look for another place."

There was another church with a room next door and a little larger than that of Msgr. Nicolai; it was dedicated to St. Homobono and it was near that of St. Maria of the Consolation, which since the end of 1573 pertained to the "Sartori University", constructed the same century.

The Sartori existed still, and also its "University", which we would rather call a corporation; its president was a prelate with the ancient and noble name: Monsignor De Carpegna.

Near there, on the Street of the Silleros, to the side of the beautiful "Sapientia" which was designed by Michelangelo, was build the Carpegna Palace, famous in the XIX century and the first four decades of the XX century, because there was the seat of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Rome. In the courtyard, a silent winged horse, not of marble nor of bronze, but of humble ancient plaster, trotted in middle of a fountain covered with ancient moss and fed by a graceful spurt of water.

The four friends arrived at the door of the Carpegna Palace and rang the bell calling the private chamberlain of the monsignor. An intractable domestic opened the door, leaving them standing in the ante-room.

"We would like to speak with monsignor" says Bonanni, the oldest, and with

more authority than the rest.

“The monsignor is sick and cannot receive anyone,” responds the chamberlain.

“Then we will speak with the secretary.”

“The secretary is busy. Tell me what you want and I give the message.”

Bonanni decides then to explain the motive of the visit and hands over a note with the request prepared for the monsignor.

The employee goes and returns a little after, saying with a shout:

“The monsignor does not want any nocturnal oratory, and he does not even want to hear talk of it.”

Then Bonanni became irritated:

“We have come here,” he says with vehemence, “only for the glory of God and not for secondary ends.”

But the other does not give them time to speak and pushes them outside, closing the door on their backs.

The four look at each other. They feel mortified, as if they had received a blow with a hammer; but Gaspar smiles:

“Do you see the weak forces of hell trying to scare us? No, we will not be frightened; we will look for another church;” - and turning to Bonanni who was more quiet than the rest: “Our visit has not been a failure, because we have been judged worthy of suffering humiliation for the name of Jesus.”