

16. THE ORATORIO OF SANTA MARIA IN VINCIS

On the left side of Montanara Street from the Campidoglio, past the arch called the Saponarios (all suggesting the Roman ruins, which today have been torn down to make room for the “Avenida del Mar”), there was a little medieval church, dependent and a filial church of San Nicola in Carcere: Santa Maria in Vincis, years before part of the “University” of the Saponarios.

The rector at that time was don Rocco Corlini, secretary of the Vicariate, a very pious and apostolic priest.

The four asked for the use of the little church; he reflected and replied:

“With all my heart, it would be a pleasure. But there is a difficulty. I, with a lot of effort, have formed a small association for the good of the more serious and needy sick, under the name of “*Salus Infirmorum*”, and I just started to draw up some statutes. But your work is very different from mine. What can we do so that both associations can live together in one chapel like this?”

“Let’s join the two into one,” suggested the petitioners.

Don Rocco accepted: “I will insert into the rules a chapter, instituting a nocturnal oratory, and a brother priest will be in charge.”

In this way the two works of the apostolate reinforced each other; and the ones in charge of the nocturnal oratory were Gaspar and Luigi Gonnelli.

From some letters of Gaspar we can know the humble principles of the work and its first development: on 11 October 1808 he wrote “Abbot” Santelli, who was in Castel Gandolfo:

“With this letter I do not fail to remind you of how we are were in agreement in Rome concerning the great project, very well

known to you. It will begin on Sunday, the twenty-third, with the Retreat that Bonanni will give. Afterwards, there will be a continuation of the Oratory every night. For your information, realize that you have been selected to speak on Saturdays on the most holy Madonna. God bless your efforts; you cannot imagine the contentment that I feel about it, together with all our most amiable friends. Wholeheartedly I thank God and beg him to grant us those graces of which we a indispensably in need, in order to obtain a successful outcome of the undertaking.

“The expenses are presently piling up and are very numerous, but let us not lose heart. Fr. Antonio Giordani is acting as Treasurer and Economist. We recommend to your dexterity and energy, together with that of all the workers on this project, the collecting of alms. It is scarcely possible to get five *scudi* beyond that little amount that has been gathered from the charity of others in order to take care of what is purely necessary. Therefore, even while you are on vacation, please stimulate interest in this project, and in imitation of the Apostle, see to it (through some other person) that a collection is taken up to provide in that way for everything as well as reimburse those who will take care of the expenses.

“Let us never tire of prayer. Enjoy yourself a good deal, so that later with greater enthusiasm you can take up your work again in the holiest of commitments and exercises. When you return to Rome, you will find everything underway.”¹

Don Antonio Santelli was a contemporary of Gaspar; he was born in Rome in 1786. He knew Gaspar in 1805, when he attended with him the course of

¹ *Letters of St. Gasar Del Bufalo*, under the care of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, Italian Province, Rome, 1968, Vol. I, pp. 78-80, f. 61, Letter no. 38. Cf. also *Epistolario*, Vol. I, No. 1.

theology at the Roman College. He cooperated with him in various works started by Gaspar in Rome, especially in the Hospice of Santa Galla, in the instruction that he gave to the straw-workers and wagoners, and especially in the foundation of the nocturnal oratory of Santa Maria in Vincis.²

In another letter to the same Santelli, written shortly after the one cited, that is, on the 26 of October 1808, Gaspar gives good news about the oratory: "I cannot with words express the pleasure which I experienced in seeing your handwriting. It has served as a further proof of your care and concern in all that pertains to the honor of God and the good of souls, in particular of course of our Oratory. Sunday, we opened the holy Exercises with great success and they are continuing as such. Every night the people flock to it, and up to this point, every night you can count sixty persons or thereabouts. I hope that God in his mercy will continue to bless it. This hope will increase even more in me when I see you in Rome, for with your enthusiasm you will continue even more to seek to propagate the glory of the Lord. Let us continue to recommend each other to the Lord, and in spite of all opposition, let us pursue the project assumed."³

The little church began to receive the

² Santelli, once the Congregation was founded, did not enter the Missionaries of the Precious Blood; nevertheless he followed it, being an intimate friend of Gaspar, whose apostolic works were in accord with his own feelings. He gave testimony in the Process of Beatification in a cautious, vigorous and detailed way. In 1843 he started to write the life of Gaspar, but he never finished it, for he died in 1856. The work, even though unfinished (we have only two incomplete volumes of a projected three, 1173 pages of compact, small writing) is of tremendous value, because the author was an eye witness to a major part of the happenings narrated, or he was told of them by the very protagonists.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 81, f. 62, no. 39; *Epistolario*, Vol. I, No. 2.

people who came at all hours of the day; they were local people who found there the word of God, and many went to confession. When they returned to their homes, whether in Rome or elsewhere, they went in search of their own pastor and told him of the marvels: "In the Plaza Montanara there is a young preacher that makes things clear ..."

From then on Gaspar went back and forth between Santa Galla and Santa Maria in Vincis and preached, in an apostolic style, as often as there were people there. The complete district began to know him and he benefitted from this rapid popularity: he went from business to business to asks for money to help the Oratory and he even went into the taverns to invite the ones who were hesitant.

Meanwhile there was a very singular incident. Gaspar gave one of his talks on the total love of God and neighbor and all people, in the chapel, and he was heard with open heart. After one sermon, a man went to the sacristy and said: "Reverend, please hear my confession."

Gaspar was alone, and answered: "I am very sorry, but I still do not have faculties to hear confessions."

The man looked at him, surprised and surely thought: "What?, how can this be? This man knows more than a professor; how could he not have faculties to hear confessions?" And then he said in a loud voice, "With faculties or without faculties - you just do not want to hear my confession!"

He left and Gaspar was very sorry, so much so that he went right away to get faculties to hear confessions; he prepared himself and passed the examination on 13 February 1810, and from that day one he very assiduously went to the confessional.

The daily and nocturnal Oratory of Santa Maria in Vincis lasted for a time and was always the center of apostolic preoccupation for Gaspar. We will shortly see

how his thoughts even when he was in exile, flew back to this good work.

Meanwhile he tried to multiply his “street” preaching, which always produced positive effects, because of its familiar simplicity for the popular setting. The assigned preacher (whether it be Gaspar or another) placed himself in a precise place (especially in the Plaza Montanara, which was the most important of the district) and began to speak humbly about God. The people began to gather around, grew in number, and at a certain moment, the preacher exhorted all to go to the church and he served as the leader for those who had gathered.