

PART TWO

THE WITNESS

17. THE TEST

On June 12, 1810 a note from the chief of the French Police arrived at the Del Bufalo home: Canon Gaspar was to present himself on the following morning in the police station to swear fidelity to the Emperor in the presence of the agent assigned to this duty.

At the same time a “selection” of clergy has started in the city of Rome. Not all priests were asked to take this oath, but only pastors and those with a benefice, such as canons and bishops.

We have already seen how dramatic these different “oaths” in France were, when they were demanded more or less by the enemies of the Church. There were selections, unfortunately, and what a selection! Napoleon was at the height of his power and he made Rome submit to the same test; and he did so just when the Pope had been taken prisoner and the cardinals had been scattered.

But it must be said, nevertheless, that if the French clergy showed considerable resistance, that of the Roman clergy was not any less. In Rome, the imperial initiatives had worse results than the revolutionary initiatives in France.

Gaspar presented himself punctually on the following morning. His father wanted to accompany him, having gotten permission to take off work from the Prince. He did not want to leave his “Canon” son alone (actually Gaspar was 24 years old) to face the imperial bureaucracy.

Both, Antonio and Gaspar, were received in a very neat office. Behind the desk was seated an Italian gentleman entrusted with this private duty, case by case, with the Roman clergy. His name was Olivetti and he

showed a certain courtesy with the people. At his side there were two others, probably helpers or lawyers from the Police Prefecture.

He offered them a chair and began to explain the business. For the security and unity of the Empire, it was necessary that the clergy give good example. It is always the shepherd that should guide his flock well; the people assign importance to the conduct of the ministers of worship and follow their footsteps.

From this series of arguments they arrived at the inevitable conclusion: the priest should, both in France and in Rome, take the oath to the established authority, in this case the most glorious that could be desired: the French Empire.

While this was being said, Gaspar was thinking of the visible head of the Church of Christ, who had been humiliated, deposed, imprisoned and reduced to complete silence in some part of Italy ... The details of the capture and deportation of the Pope were known to all and ran from mouth to mouth and from heart to heart. Thus, while Olivetti spoke, Gaspar felt in himself a rebellion that kept getting stronger. He, a priest of Christ, had to approve, and with an oath, the treatment given to the Pope!

When the official ended, he read the formula for the oath and he raised his eyes and looked at Gaspar, waiting.

Gaspar, master of himself, responded with three simple and historic words:

“I cannot, I should not, I will not.”

A heavy silence followed. The bureaucrat had never expected such a forceful reply from a 24 year old youth. He looked at

him from head to foot, with a contemptuous curling of his lips. Antonio, from his part, remained silent, but in his heart he was boiling: different from his son who was able to control himself. Instead he would have liked to tell them what was on his mind, those faithless men; but it was fatherly love, or fear of causing damage to his son, that in this case he kept silent.

The official began to speak again: evidently he insisted in using his persuasive method, in accord with the orders received. So he continued in a courteous tone. He began with words of admiration for the conqueror of all, the emperor. He had returned the people to religion and religion to the people.

“You, Canon, surely will not compromise your conscience in taking this oath to such a Lord.”

Gaspar repeated slowly the same words, emphasizing each one, with perfect calm:

I cannot, I should not,” and with still more force, “I will not.”

So Olivetti stood up:

“Do you know, citizen Canon, what you will encounter if you persist in this denial?”

Then he turned to Antonio and tried to persuade him to influence his son to take the oath.

It was a moment in which to this simple man nothing could be contained. He stepped forward and put his hand on his breast and said:

“Citizen official,” he shouted, “shoot me first and then him, but he will not take the oath.”

The audience was over; the official groaned contemptuously:

“Therefore, leave!”

In reality, this example of strength had caused admiration in the three bureaucrats; both father and son, one so different from the

other, had shown the same Roman force. With everything, even though he wanted to save him, nothing could be done. The orders were absolute. The priests who refused to take the oath were to be deported immediately.

For Antonio there was no punishment; as a citizen he had acted freely; but for Gaspar, it meant exile. When they returned home, Annunziata waited for them at the door; she looked at them and understood immediately, from the look on their faces, she, mother and wife, could read the state of their minds.

“So it did not go well?”

Gaspar embraced her.

“What are they going to do to you, my son?”

Gaspar’s silence confirmed what she already knew: he would be taken from the house, from Rome, and from many good things he was doing. But, to where?

She closed her eyes, and trying to control herself, she broke into sobs. Gaspar upheld her and had her sit down until her sobs diminished. After a humble and tiring life Annunziata had already experienced a profound sorrow five years previously when her son Luigi died, leaving his poor wife, married just the year before, expecting a child, and now the young widow and child Luigia needed much help, especially from her ...

At that moment, a mysterious presentiment filled these two who loved each other; the mother Annunziata could not endure a new torment. Gaspar knew this, and he cried bitterly.

But now it was the mother who took control; she did not want her weakness to weaken her son. Death was nothing in comparison to being a traitor to the church. She stood up and said:

“May the will of God be done. You must fulfil your duty. He will take care of the rest.”

The conversation was over. There was nothing to add. Annunziata was a Roman woman and above all a Christian, and she took things seriously.

Gaspar got ready to leave; he did not know the day, but he foresaw that it would be soon. He knew that he was destined to go to Piacenza.

For now it was necessary to make arrangements with his obligations - and how many there were - which he had in Rome: Santa Galla, Santa Maria in Vincis, Saint Mark, the Hospice of Santa Lucia, the "One Hundred Priests" ... all of them important and beloved names, works to which he had given his best, in his adolescence, his youth. And the wagoners, the straw sellers, and all the other spiritual "clients" that were scattered in the shops and businesses.

It all had to be cut back. There are moments in life when the earth seems to be pulled out from under our feet. Gaspar felt that he had been cut in half and he had to empty himself. Then he thought: it is better this way. In this way God can fill the void with himself and thus he could repeat more easily with St. Paul: "I live now, but not I, Christ truly lives in me."

Perchance did not Christ himself have the same unpleasantries, these same privations? Was it not the case that He, the God-Man, was violently interrupted in his peaceful preaching, separated from his disciples and those he loved and led to the cross?

This was a consolation for Gaspar. At certain moments this affinity was not only a consolation; it was power to resist; it was a joy. To suffer for Jesus, in imitation of Jesus, was to realize that which he himself had said: "Blessed are the persecuted for the sake of justice because of them is the reign of heaven."

He recommended, with all the love of

which he was capable, to his friends that remained in Rome - that they attend to his beloved and most needed works, and the souls to which it was necessary to give help; then he felt at peace.

He knew that his departure had been scheduled for the first days of July; the precise day had been determined to be the eighth. Should he tell his parents? Or should he protect them, at least his mother, from the sorrowful news for a few days more?

He saw her bent over her work, preparing his underclothing and his shirts for living in an unknown city. Piacenza seems so distant for his mother. She probably had never heard of such names before. Someone told her that northern Italy was humid and cold; so she began to prepare something that would keep him warm just in case they decided to keep Gaspar there all winter. In any case Gaspar would not have to leave Rome before that.

He knew that it was necessary to prepare the way: he spoke of a possible date, maybe during the first part of next month; meanwhile he gave notice that he recommended his poor parents to the Lord. "Lord, be their consolation," was Gaspar's prayer.

And still he had time, during these last days of his Roman apostolate, to live an experience that would influence his whole life.

The Canon Albertini, who also was condemned to deportation for having refused to take the oath, had founded in the church of San Nicola in Carcere a "Confraternity of the Most Precious Blood" which brought together many pious persons. Albertini asked Gaspar to speak to the members of the Confraternity and to those who attended the Church on July 1st on the theme of the devotion that Gaspar had already spoken on, namely, the Divine Blood, when he spoke on 8 December 1808. This time he spoke again of the passion of Jesus,

the Blood poured out on the cross for the salvation of humanity. On this occasion he outdid himself, and the faithful felt pierced with a burning piety; while he explained the mystery of the Blood of Christ, he explained the adoration, the contemplation the love of this ineffable truth. He almost revealed to himself the profound theme that was germinated in his soul. It was as if to receive a very significant charism: the total consecration to the precious Blood. When he left, this grace enriched him with a new and decisive theme which gave body to the orientation of his spirit and apostolate.

On July 4th his departure was set for the following day. On July 5, 1810 he celebrated Mass early in the morning and then he waited. Around eight o'clock they came to tell him that his carriage was ready and that the other deportees were in the Piazza San Marcos.

He kissed the hands of his father and his mother, feeling the same as when he was a little boy; up until then they were his whole world. He wanted to say something to comfort them, but he felt a knot in his throat and he could say nothing. He left rapidly, accompanied by his father, toward the Plaza San Marcos.

Annunziata had the strength to follow them, with her daughter-in-law Paolina. They took a back street behind the Palazzo Venezia, and got there just as he was climbing into the coach. In the coach already were Canon Francesco Albertini, the canon from San Nicola in Carcere, and his companions Gambini and Marchetti.

The horses started to move and the coach disappeared into the narrow streets which at that time were around the Plaza San Marcos.

Annunziata and Antonio returned to their home, which now seemed so empty.