

## 19. FROM PIACENZA TO BOLOGNA

It was necessary to gather the prisoners, who in Bologna had reached the considerable number of 200 priests, as Gaspar wrote to Maria Tamini on 12 December 1810, expressing his satisfaction at being one of the 200.

When he got to Bologna, as we have said, during the first decade of December, Gaspar and Albertini found lodging in a modest inn. Gaspar, much later, found hospitality among the Philipense Fathers.

On the 18 January 1811 he wrote a letter<sup>1</sup> to Santelli in which he clarified the vivid experience in Piacenza, especially his sickness, which he describes as "by nature mortal". Through this letter we are able to know what he suffered during the previous months.

"Bologna, January 1811

"Most esteemed Fr. Santelli

"My distance from Rome has not diminished at all (my dearest and most beloved Fr. Antonio) my remembrance both of our Pious Works and the beloved individuals of so great interest to me; I do not fail to recommend them, miserable sinner that I am, in the Divine Sacrifice.

"My rather long illness, of its nature fatal, which had afflicted me for almost three months during my stay at Piacenza, impeded me from manifesting to you my sentiments of true and cordial friendship which will exist unchangingly between us even to the grave itself and then on for all eternity in heaven. I wanted to keep my sickness a secret in order not to bring further affliction both to my people at home as well as to those who have been kind to me. But it was not possible to

carry out this desire, despite always doing violence to myself in keeping from writing.

However, you probably got my greetings regularly through Canon Gonnelli (under the present situation, I thought it best not to be of useless bother to other people).

"My dearest Santelli, if you love me, take charge of S. Galla and of the Oratory; I await an answer to this letter, giving me details concerning the status of these holy institutions. I have written to Gonnelli and I hope that by the first part of February he will be back, aware of my concerns. Give your entire thought to it so that all will be handled in the best way possible, letting no abuses enter in, and have it remain entirely in the spirit of its initial institution.

"In this matter, speaking now of the Oratory alone, I have begged Gonnelli, upon his return, to take over its direction. In case he will not be able to do so for some reason, do me the favor of looking out for it yourself, of helping it, of directing and governing it. Please do not deny me this favor for the great love that you bear for Jesus, and grant me to be in this whole matter consoled. I promise that on my return, when it will please the Almighty, that I will resume the job; you need have no doubt about this. Recall everything that we worked for in the opening of the same, of the benches constructed, etc. Works are very easily closed, but to re-open them takes a great effort. Remember the great good that is accomplished by preaching in the open squares, which will be taken up again in due time. Remember, once that locale is lost, strong support for the project of S. Galla will be gone, and especially for the Communion of the poor country-folk.

"Finally, I supported your most holy yearnings. The Lord knows how to compensate you. If it is poorly attended at the present time, little by little, it will become a place where the name of God is praised, and the good farmers

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<sup>1</sup> *Epistolario*, No. 13.

in opportune times come to frequent the Sacraments. Please, I am putting my trust in you. Make these sentiments of mine known to Canon Carboni, whom you will greet for me. If it should ever happen for the benefit of the Oratory that I should re-enroll in the Pious Union of Charity, from which I dropped out on leaving Rome, I am ready for anything; use me in any way that may affect the care of souls, so necessary at this time. Of S. Galla, I will say nothing else.

“Greet all the friends and acquaintances whom I always have present in the divine Sacrifice. Tell Gianolli that I am still waiting for an answer to one of my letters sent to him some time ago, and greet him with distinction. Please do me the favor of seeing Fr. Bonanni, to whom you will give news of me, and express my sentiments to him. Then, ask him to be kind enough to write me a letter in which he will indicate to me where he is going to preach for Lent and also to let me know the condition of his health. I am awaiting all very anxiously. Give my warmest regards, when you have the opportunity, to Fr. Costanzi, Msgr. Odescalchi, Mugnaj and absolutely everybody at S. Galla and the Oratory, with Father Stracchini, Marini, etc. See to it that the Founded-Masses Chaplaincy is in order. *Viriliter age et confortetur cor tuum.*<sup>2</sup> I also greet Fr. Bianchi, Visconti, Vitelli, the most worthy Father Arana, and whoever else retains a memory of me.

“Take care of yourself and love me, while with the liveliest sentiments of love and gratitude, and embracing you tenderly, I remain in the Most Holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary

“Your loving friend

“*Gaspar C. del Bufalo*

“P.S. On occasions, console my relatives at home. Greet master Pepe, Giuliani, and anyone else that I know at the Oratory, Brambille and his mother, etc. Tell me everything that may bring joy, and have them pray for me. I do not write to many in order not to burden them with the mail; this letter is written in haste to be on time for mailing.

“I hear that Gianolli is a Pastor, and so he will not be able any longer to help at the Oratory, etc. Goodbye.”

In Bologna Gaspar experienced some relief. The city seemed to be welcoming, and its inhabitants courteous. This is how he writes to Maria Tamini on 24 January 1811<sup>3</sup>:

“By divine mercy and as the fruit of your prayers as well as those of your good companions, whom you will greet with distinction for me, because if you do (and if your companions were to do the same, a thing which I cannot believe) I would certainly get sick again. Yes, I trust greatly in your prayers and petitions. You can be sure that in the Holy Sacrifice I do not forget to reciprocate, recommending you all to the good God, in as far as I am able.

“I recognize, however, in your dear letters the virtue which resides in your heart and which animates all of your actions. May you be blessed by the Lord, to whose will we must always be conformed. Paradise, St. Francis de Sales used to say, is a mountain that one scales better with broken legs than with healthy ones: that is, much better by means of tribulations than by prosperity. Blessed are we, therefore, to whom it is granted to drink some little drop of that bitter chalice, which Jesus drank in love for us to the very last drop. The reward prepared for us in heaven is great; the present life is extremely short.

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<sup>2</sup> Act manfully and may your heart be strengthened.

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<sup>3</sup> Letter number 14.

“Marchetti wrote me not too long ago from Empoli, and he is very well. Here, we have been having continual snowfalls and quite noticeably cold weather. The same is probably happening where you are. I am living with some members of the Congregation of St. Phillip, who have remained in this place to take care of the church, and I am quite happy.”

In Bologna Gaspar saw the possibility of joining spiritual organizations and to resume some mode of apostolic activity that he loved so much in Rome.

It was all that he needed to lift himself up morally. Nevertheless, this consolation was overtaken by the sudden death of Canon Francesco Gambini, which, as we have seen, also belonged to St. Mark in Rome and was the companion into exile with Gaspar.

He died suddenly on 29 January 1811 from a collapsed heart; the witnesses in the process declared that he had died because of the hard conditions, the sufferings and the cold climate. Gaspar gave him absolution and probably administered to him the Anointing of the Sick conditionally.

Gaspar remained very saddened. He knew his companion, thought highly of him, and saw with his own eyes when he suffered. Meditating on his death, which had traces of a martyrdom, he wanted to celebrate the funeral rites solemnly for the deceased, but, how to do it? Gambini and he himself were only exiles, rejected, whose death would eventually be covered over with indifference and silence.

Nevertheless, he collected his strength and went to the French commandants to ask them for the faculty to celebrate the funeral rite publicly. The answer was positive. The remains were transferred from the Philipense church to the Carthusian monastery. No one would have been able to foresee the meaning that this funeral march had. The people were moved; the clergy came together, public

opinion spoke of the sacrifice near that of martyrdom: 200 priests followed the casket.

There were the exiles, there was the clergy of Bologna. This participation, this genuine affliction expressed a great truth: not just a few would be ready to die in exile, such was the death of Francesco Gambini. There was a silent and vigorous protest in the name of Christ for the salvation of the Church and the safeguarding of the liberty of conscience; those present understood the significance in following the casket of a poor exile and the sad expressions of the liturgy of the dead.

The body was interred in the Carthusian monastery; it would be surrounded forever with prayers. By themselves these funeral rites had been a work of the apostolate. It was like a sign to Gaspar of the restarting of that grand apostolate that he came to realize in whichever place he found himself.

In Bologna he could know people of all social conditions. He had freedom of movement, and he made use of it to show concern for the poor and humble and to get close to every person who accepted him, of whatever level, without discrimination of classes nor of human categories.

Some women of the ranking aristocracy of Bologna sensed the value of that priest who said “no” to the powerful of the world, and that said “yes” to the Lord with so much generosity and force of will. A mother and her daughter, the Countess Bentivoglio Segni and her daughter the Countess Orse Bentivoglio, wanted to show hospitality to the exiles; Canon Albertini and Gaspar and others were received into their home.

The Benivoglios had ruled in Bologna during the fifteen and sixteenth centuries and their prestige was great.

In the palace, the exile could see the prominent people of the city come to the home; and by his manner of acting he was able to win

the sympathy of all. The Marquess Tanari entrusted the spiritual education and the directing of studies of her children to him.

Gaspar began to preach, to the great satisfaction of the crowds; he began to direct spiritual exercises, retreats, spiritual talks in the churches, in private oratories, in homes, in whatever place he could.

There was, in this free exercise of his sacerdotal ministry, a grave danger that he did not ignore: the French could look down on all this. But he did not take notice of the dangers; he spent himself as lavishly as he could and this conduct of his reveals to us a characteristic in the development of his personality: in Rome his apostolate had been varied, assiduous, faithful, but tranquil. No one was watching his movements, no one was making him scared. Here in Bologna things were different; they spoke of arrests, they were openly threatened with deportation to Corsica, or of being locked up in a prison.

Among these threatening voices, Gaspar moved in a humble way and as the great owner of himself that he was; he did not take a position of provocation, but neither did he march behind some grand movement. The exile and suffering led him to maintain a strict and enlightened bond with the grace received. At 25 years of age Gaspar had reached a growing maturity, a more intense love.

The world fought, in that historic, sad hour, against God; it could be that the very actors did not even know they were doing it. But that did not prevent that the political action would not only compromise earthly values, but that they would be developed, between heaven and earth. And Gaspar offered himself in a conscious manner. When he left Rome he had cried; now, those natural bonds that tied him to the good works in the City consumed him, and gave place to a full and free surrender, to a zeal each time more supernatural.

The formation of that which will become the Gaspar from now on, the great missionary embraced by the love of God and neighbor, advanced and developed during the years of exile. He knew only one thing, namely, that he took a position before the ruler of the world. In 1812 we were in the shadow of the campaign in Russia; Napoleon until now had never known defeat and his name glistened, like the Pharaohs at the height of a pyramid of rulers, of potentates, of suppressed peoples.

Opposing the despot, for fidelity to the Church of Christ, Gaspar in those years [1811-1812] could see, humanly speaking, his own future, a kind of a triptych: persecution, prison, tears ... but with the help of God he changed the order of this antimony of sorrow-happiness, or better said, he transformed it into an admirable unity: to suffer with joy and to cry with happiness.

This is what we find in his letters. Gaspar had arrived at this height at the time of which we are speaking.