

## 25. IN THE PRISON OF SAN GIOVANNI IN MONTE IN BOLOGNA

This prison was the old monastery of the Canons Regular of San Giovanni in Monte, which was adapted to become a prison for the priests who did not take the oath.

Gaspar was led into a “horrible and bad smelling cell, small, humid, without air and without light, with only a transom protected by a double grate.”<sup>1</sup>

Canon Pedro del Frate from Marino was assigned the same cell.

Two boards and on them two straw mattresses: these were the beds, the seats, the chairs, the bureaus, in a word, they were everything.

Their first impression was that they were entering a tomb; but shortly, rather immediately, the thought came: in reality, this was a grace, because here you could really pray. Already it seemed possible to think or remember nothing in the nature of a trap into which they had been gobbled up and enclosed; but to think of God, that was possible, or even better said, it was something natural and indispensable; the spirit desired to fly to the Lord more than it was accustomed to do.

“This is a grace,” thought Gaspar, and he felt grateful to the Lord more than he had ever felt until then. Wasn’t it a sign of predilection, that which Christ had lifted him up to this condition, denying him of everything? It was a privileged situation, that of being able to talk with the Lord alone, away from attachments, of memories, of action, of free air, of temporal light; was not he in these conditions more than a monk, than a Carthusian, or a Trappist? And all this Jesus had given him because he, Gaspar, a poor

man, had given testimony of his faith.

His withdrawal was like that to the mountain of Elias and to the lions’ den of Daniel; it was, above all, the truth in Christ. His soul was flowing filially and happily to God: “Lord, only you!” It seemed to him that Christ was present as a visitor, a friend, and consoler, a companion of the prison. With a brother in prison called Christ, what could make you fail?

He wanted to take his breviary, and he started to look for it ... but he remembered that they had taken it away from him when he entered the cell, and who knows why? He thought about those things he had been given, and therefore, he found the things taken away to be a grace that he was enjoying. He prayed for them. That the glory of God would be present also in them and that they change from a roaring lion into a meek lamb. That they would learn to say “no” as lions in order to be tamed into being lambs.

His preoccupation with the works that he had abandoned in Rome kept him alive, but this new abandonment was softened even more. It seemed to him that God was in him, made small, useless, tied up, in order that he could dispose of love; “I live, however no longer I, but Christ lives in me;” and with a profound searching into himself, he understood that before this very instant he could never have been able to say truthfully, without the veil of human fog, these words of the Apostle.

The door opened and the rough voice of the jailers asked:

“What do you want to eat?”

“Whatever the rest are eating.”

A dozen ounces of black, hard bread, a bowl of soup that caused nausea: Gaspar ate it all. Afterwards, raising his hands toward Del Frate, who surely was not expecting it, he said:

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Notizie del Fundatore*, I, 191-192.

“Behold, the manna has descended for us.”

We will never know the face that the canon from Marion put on at that time. We do not know enough in order to deduce it. In any case, it was evidence of the faith of Gaspar, and being near him created an irresistible osmosis. It was difficult being near and not take advantage of that irradiation that issued forth from his very person.

The first weeks were spent without books, without mail, without contact with the other detainees. They lived almost without air, with the grate closed day and night. After a certain time the isolation was lessened; the door of the grate remained open during the day and the detainees could enjoy the air outside, but only that which collected in the corridors of the prison. But at least they could breathe.

Later came other pleasures: nothing less than the permission to walk a little in the patio, in which they could see a little of the sky. But the goodness of the jailers went even further.

“Do you want to see “the others”?”

“The others”, naturally, were the rest of the prisoners. It was a very moving moment. They all agreed among themselves and none had gotten any thinner. Interchangeable impressions were not there, for all had the same experiences. They ended up laughing and sharing their joy reciprocally. Finally they were given the supreme permission, wanted by all: one person every day would celebrate Holy Mass.

Why just one Mass, by turns? Would it be that several masses at the same time would tear down the walls? The mentality of the one who controls the prison can be very strange.

The detainees greeted this announcements with “hosannas” and afterwards they became contrabandistas of the

Eucharist. It was arranged. Instead of only one each day, they could celebrate various Masses: at that time they did not use concelebration, but love taught them to conceive things for themselves; in one way or another all of them were able to celebrate Mass every day. And in this way the ancient monastery returned to the same functions as of old: it was filled with Masses.

And even more boldly, the prisoners got together and sang, although with soft voices, the holy office, the psalms, hymns and praises, for the breviaries had been given back to them. These canticles in a soft voice caused a profound impression on the jailers. But they did not understand the meaning - because of evil interpretation? - and they called them funeral rites.<sup>2</sup> Whose funeral rites, and for whom could they be singing the priests joined together?

About certain themes they could not joke, and these poor men, rough and superstitious, did not wish to have anything to do with these old songs: they were the same, according to them, that would contribute to the sudden attacks in the church. It was, therefore, absolutely forbidden. They were very old, but to sing a funeral before time, that was not acceptable. Thus the priests had to praise the Lord in silence and celebrate their offices as if they were deaf and dumb.

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<sup>2</sup> Armellini, 91; en Rey, *op. cit.*, I, 174.