

27. THE REPERCUSSIONS OF THE
 DRAMA OF FONTAINEBLEAU.
 THE PRISONS OF IMOLA AND LA
 ROCCA

On 12 January 1813, that is, seven days before Napoleon started to converse with the pope in Fontainebleau, Gaspar was transferred from Bologna to the prison of Imola together with seven other companions.

It has always appeared to us the rather mysterious reasons for these successive transfers; a possible explanation is overcrowding. Because the 600 refractory priests who rejected the oath were parceled out to three cities, Bologna, Parma and Piacenza - cities in that time that were not well populated and in which each inhabitant knew what everyone else did - which made it easier to administer, so much so from the point of view of logistics and providing food, as for the psychological effect on them and on the citizens: their being many and all compact, would infuse in the individuals a community force difficult to destroy.

In the prison of Imola, the treatment was less severe. The population was permitted to give a certain help for the detainees, since they were priests, and they were surrounded with respect on the part of the inhabitants.

In Imola, one of the principal families was that of the Ginnasi: Monsignor Annibale and Count Alessandro married to Lucrezia, of the Count Gamba family. When Gaspar and his seven companions were transferred to Imola, a Canon Pietro Francesco Muti of Rome, who also had been deported and imprisoned in Bologna, being a friend of Monsignor Ginnasi, wrote him in order to recommend him warmly to the recent arrivals. Monsignor visited them: at that time there was a certain tolerance and freedom in the concessions for the detainees, for they could

receive visits, gifts and food.

Ginnansi realized that these detainees were almost heroes. But more than anyone else, Gaspar was called to his attention, in whom he found the signs of sanctity.

He tried to help him and took him all kinds of help for everything, interesting himself especially in the problem of the celebration of the Holy Mass, which the detainees longed for "as the stag longs for the fountain".

Together with the Monsignor was a group of his brother Alessandro and his spouse Lucrezia and also other persons: Sebastiano Casotti, Teresa Scandellari, the father Alessandro del Pozzo, Don Crispino Quintavalli, Monsignor Demenico and various others.

These benefactors divided themselves into various types of attention: some helped with food, others with vestments; Gaspar was able to make with his own hands a new pair of slippers with the material they had brought him.

Alessandro and Lucrezia Ginnansi competed with their brother and brother-in-law in showing interest. They came with everything for the prison, including money according to their needs. But many times they lacked the best of all: Mass and the Eucharist. Monsignor Ginnasi celebrated Mass various times in the chapel of the prison and the prisoners could receive the Eucharist. Later they received permission of celebrate the Holy Mass and in truth it seemed to be the anteroom of paradise.

Between Gaspar and Monsignor Ginnasi was established a bond of friendship, elevated and spiritual. A bundle of letters written by Gaspar remains for us as a testimony of the grade of appreciation which the future saint had for the three Ginnasi; they reveal above all the state of soul, absorbed in

the supernatural; in Gaspar there was not only resignation, but also the happy acceptance of sorrow and of renunciation.

In these days the news arrived that his dear friend, the Canon Del Sole, had died in Corsica. Gaspar wrote to Monsignor Ginnasi¹ “My hopes for the life of my very beloved Del Sole have completely vanished! He is already enjoying the fruits of his labors and merits in the blessed homeland of Paradise, where he will pray much for my eternal salvation, and where one day I hope to see him again on an exalted chair of glory... ; what I have enclosed will give you details of his illness, etc.; this was given to me by Canon Petrucci who was entrusted yesterday morning with this charge by a letter from Countess Bentivoglio. I leave it to you to imagine how we have been affected and moved by such a loss, and (in order not to deprive myself of the merit of conformity with the Divine Will) with what violence I should hold resentment against humanity. *Hotocausta medullata offeram tibi*, etc.,² I will continue to repeat with the Prophet, and in the desolation of my heart I will not cease to adore the heavenly dispositions of the God who disposes all things for good. Let us concern ourselves meanwhile in offering suffrages in as far as possible for this blessed soul, and let us pray for each other to the Almighty that there may be granted also to us such a holy death, precious in his divine sight, and thus have the lot of the just in blessed eternity. (From the prison of Imola), 20 February 1813”.

Two days later Gaspar wrote again to the Monsignor and this letter reveals to us all the need of spiritual communication and of the apostolate: “In the last letter that I addressed

to you I was on the point of asking you to do me a favor, but then I did not dare.

“Now, however, I want to follow through on that impulse and ask you the following. With my friend Del Sole, *cuius memoria semper erit in benedictione*³, I used to have several spiritual pacts, which I would be eager to carry on with you. In the first place we would communicate with each other particularly in the good; reciprocally each morning in the Holy Mass we would make a distinct memento; and then at the elevation of the Chalice we would recommend our souls to the Divine Eternal Father, etc. This is the plan of spiritual life that I would like to continue with you, and I am hopeful that you will go along with me.

“Other things I reserve for telling you in person. I can however assure you that my affection and attachment to your most worthy person is inexpressible, and if it were not for a certain disparity in rank, I would say that the Lord has perhaps granted me the favor of knowing you as an intimate, in order to make a compensation to me in this world for my deceased friend and brother. Recommend me then often to the Lord so that I become holy as I should; let us always live in the spirit of the Sweetest Heart of Jesus, and from now on, let us never cease to inspire each other in the acquisition of blessed eternity. This morning Msgr. Domenico favored us with a visit, but I did not have the good fortune of seeing him, since I was in my room and no one advised me of it. So, be sure to express my respects to him, together with all the others in the house, and ask them to pray for me. I am sending you the letters of St. Xavier which I hope you will enjoy very much; and always assuring you of my gratitude for all your favors, with fullness of esteem and respect. (From the

¹ *Epistolario*, No. 34

² I will offer you a holocaust of marrow, etc.

³ Whose memory will forever be in blessing.

prison of Imola), 22 February 1813.”⁴

It is clear, as we have said, that the significance of this letter is twofold: it shows on one side the spiritual sociability of Gaspar but also, without doubt, his desire to help his friend by increasing in his fervor of prayer and his surrender to God; five days later there arrived some more news of other funerals: this time it treated of the pastor of San Giovanni della Malva, of the order of the Croziers and of another priest “deported to Alexandria” coming from the diocese of Sutri but originally from Bracciano. While Gaspar gave the sad news to Monsignor Ginnasi, he made use of the occasion to remind him of his request of spiritual solidarity, proposing the faithful remembrance on the days which the Monsignor wished to indicate: “This life of the spirit was the foundation of our union, (with the deceased Del Sole). I thank God for having made the acquaintance of this man and learning from him thereby the practice of those virtues which I need.”⁵

A few days later he sent another letter⁶ which contained an exhortation: “*Adveniat regnum tuum!*”⁷ But it is not enough that we merely have a desire for virtue and perfection in the conduct of our spirit; it is necessary that we have a hunger and thirst for it.” And in one of the letters⁸ of the first days of March in 1813, Gaspar speaks to Monsignor of the power of example which he saw integrally and exclusively as that of the apostolate:

“If good example were not exceedingly necessary to lead souls to God, I would not know how to see, says a great Servant of God,

Father Segneri the elder, how the Lord could make so much of it from the very beginning, when he founded his Church.

Everybody knows what two means were used in the defeating of idolatry: preaching and miracles. God willed that these two means be placed at the disposal of persons who were not only good in their personal lives, but most exemplary, as though without this they would not have had sufficient power to move anyone with their preaching nor convince anyone by their miracles. Having established this fact, one can well understand the reasons why the Apostle recommended so often an exemplary conduct of life: *providentes bona non tantum coram Deo, sed etiam coram hominibus*⁹ (Rom. 12, 17), and why Jesus never stops repeating those divine words: *Sic luceat lux vestra coram hominibus ut videant opera vestra bona et glorificent Patrem vestrum qui in Coelis est.*¹⁰

“This is that battering and shaking of wings of those animals that the prophet Ezechiel saw: *et audivi voces alarum animalium percutientium alteram ad alteram*¹¹ (Ez 3 - 13), that is, at a time when good example moves another’s heart to compunction, to devotion, to a desire for virtue.”

We have seen what happened in Fontainebleau between 25 January 1813, the date when the preliminary documents of the Concordat was signed, and 24 March, the day when Pius rejected them and annulled them.

⁹ Foreseeing good things not only before God, but also before men.

¹⁰ Just so, your light must shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.

¹¹ And I heard the sound of wings of living creatures striking one another.

⁴ *Epistolario*, No. 37.

⁵ *Epistolario*, No. 39.

⁶ *Epistolario*, No. 41.

⁷ Thy kingdom come.

⁸ *Epistolario*, No. 42.

While in the months of February and March the conditions of the prisons were mellowed, but after March the atmosphere was overcast in different centers of detention, and with the following modification: Napoleon made public and obligatory for high and low clergy, by way of the decree of 25 March 1813, the preliminaries of the Concordat; he put pressure on the ecclesiastics both those free and those that were prisoners so that they take the oath, since now “the pope and the emperor had come to an agreement”.

The propaganda about this was high because of a very astute and insistent manner. Berthier, commandant of the military forces in Corsica, sent a memorandum to the commandant of the fortress of Bastia, where the detained priests were to be found, that was to be read solemnly on 23 April and the following: “All those that have insisted in not taking the oath, will be considered as rebels to the Holy Father, your spiritual leader. They will be declared responsible to God, to men and to Religion for all that happens”. And he added: “The Gospel imposed fidelity to the Sovereign”. From now on the conscience will not have any pretext: it will be necessary to take a vow of recognition to the emperor for his clemency, and to do so by taking the oath.

The same pressures were applied on the detainees of other centers, but on different dates.

Gaspar had to suffer like the others two transfers in two months: on March 5th he was taken out of the prison of Imola and imprisoned with his companions in the Rocca of the same island; it was a hard prison and some prerogatives disappeared which the detainees had enjoyed in the other prisons, especially thanks to an understanding and human warden.

In May arrived the third demand to take the oath, based this time on the propaganda of the “established peace”

between the pope and the emperor. Gaspar refused one more time and this refusal was considered more than ever a relapsing and insulting act, according to the imperial police.

For this reason Gaspar and his companions that remained “reactionary” were transferred on 16 May 1813 from the Rocca of Imola to a prison more severe, that of Lugo in Romagna.