

The Spiritual Profile

of



*Fr. Bertoni was a notable Preacher and Spiritual Director
of Religious and the Clergy*

St. Gaspar Bertoni

Its Features and Spirit

Rev. John Ceresatto, CSS

Part Three

**The Spiritual Director
of
Religious and Priests**

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PART THREE

THE SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS AND PRIESTS

Chapter 7

Family Vicissitudes

1. Juridical Litigations

The years from 1802 to 1813 mark the almost complete decline of the Bertoni family. After the death of Mr. Francis Louis Bertoni, his only heir was the Saint. This is a story that is not lacking in its disheartening elements. There was an unfolding of law-suits and of legal maneuverings: a genuine labyrinth was created that we would like to ignore except for the fact that the central protagonist of these pages became deeply dragged into the mess. To try to sort out just how great a part, and how fully immersed in these matters Fr. Bertoni had to be, it is necessary also to take note of the deep repercussions that these terribly unhappy family events had on his priestly soul, this is a task that the conscientious biographer cannot decline.

It goes without saying that the primary root of all this contrast was Mr. Francis Louis Bertoni. That 'Sacred Agreement' of 1800 was upset just two years later, when, at the sudden death of the Notary, Anthony Mary, the elder brother of Francis Louis, this latter initiated a case against his own sister, Paula, and his own son, Fr. Gaspar. The case never reached the court room.

Then, in May 1803, Fr. Gaspar's Mother found herself duty-bound to cite her own husband in a civil suit. Francis Louis had one more time violated his formal responsibilities. This suit, too, was eventually settled somewhat arbitrarily outside of court. There were no more civil suits until the death of Madame Brunora, in 1810.

2. Flight from the Family Home

Once the Mother was dead, it seems that Mr. Louis, having returned by now to live in the city from the year 1808 on, extended to his son the invitation to remain with him, and the maid that he had brought with him from Illasi. But how could he ever agree to this? The maid, Catherine Slavier, with whom the Father had taken up, was never a servant like any other. Fr. Gaspar did not accept the Father's suggestion, and went to live rather with his maternal Aunt, Rosa Ravelli, married to Joseph Scudellini, the business man- orator, whom we have already met at Fr. Bertoni's First Mass. Fr. Bertoni's own extreme delicacy and his duty to protect his priestly dignity made this demand on him. He did not even care about that portion of the estate that was his by right of inheritance from his Aunt Paula. Nor did he even think of renting it out to someone else to generate some income. So, rather than just leaving his paternal home, he was forced by these circumstances to flee from it.

3. Further Litigations

This firm decision of Fr. Gaspar embittered his Father even more. For years he saw that he was for all practical purposes swimming in red ink due to his own debts,

and his own immediate resources continued to dwindle. He was able to quiet a few of his creditors, and was trying to save what he possibly could.

So, shortly after his Mother's death, Fr. Gaspar found himself in the terribly awkward situation of having to cite his own Father: it was a matter of laying a claim on his Mother's share, which was a paying back of sums poured out by him because of his Father, and his ecclesiastical patrimony. His Father counter-sued.

This time was settled without going to trial. The path of the court room was eventually abandoned and everything was submitted to the exchange of titles of right among the procurators of the two parties in contrast with each other. What anguish of spirit did all this not cause Fr. Bertoni, this terrible quagmire of litigations, is easy to imagine when one thinks of his admirable detachment from the goods of this world. However, he had to go through with it all, because as a Priest, entirely vowed to the divine service, his ecclesiastical patrimony was the sacred property of the Church. And it was this above all that he saw threatened.

His Father's death occurred in 1813, and this confirmed in full the many fears of his son. In the dispositions made in his last will and testament, his Father chose to privilege Catherine Slavier, leaving to her, during her natural life, the usufruct of his portion of the estate. He added also a clause which confirms for the 'nth' time his hostile sentiments towards his own son:

...If then, the person receiving this usufruct should ever be bothered by the heir, Francis Louis Bertoni, in so far as this is legally possible, intends to deprive him from every benefit of the inheritance, then all would go to Catherine Slavier ...

The succession was painful. In the end, the only inheritance that Fr. Gaspar received from his own father was nothing but endless bitterness and tribulations. The old reading of the ecclesiastical patrimony, *based on his Father's goods*, went up in smoke with the legal disappearance of the paternal inheritance. Fr. Gaspar once again had to surrogate on goods that would not come to him from his father's estate, and this attempt was made on May 1, 1815.¹

4. Repercussions

From all this knotted web of litigations and very entangled legal matters in which, totally against his own desires, the son found himself terribly involved. However, through the entire mess, he came out on top as a priest full of integrity, and not in the least stained. He gained the esteem of all and his reputation soared. It is significant that in the most acute times of family contrasts, the ecclesiastical Authorities, far from losing confidence in Fr. Gaspar, this or deal he went through, only increased it.

Fr. Bertoni took up residence with his aunt, and the Chancery Office sanctioned this. As a result he was transferred from St. Paul's in Campo Marzio to service at St. Firmus Major in 1810.

In that same year, Bishop Innocent Liruti [who succeeded Bishop Avogadro, after a two year vacancy in the See] broadened Fr. Bertoni's apostolate. He was

¹ SA, Doc. 6, pp. 28-34.

appointed to assist the **Clergy**, by being called to preach the Annual, as well as other **Retreats, and days of Recollection, the Sunday meditations and instructions to be delivered in the Seminary.**² The Canons did likewise, appointing him to assist the College of the Acolytes, assigned for the liturgical service of the Cathedral.

This family 'way of the cross' that he had to endure, in the end, actually conferred greater freedom on Fr. Gaspar, and a more evident authority in preaching God's word to his brothers in the Priesthood and to the Seminarians. Even prior to formulating any words, he was able to speak through his lived experience. Let us listen in on his Autumn Retreat of 1810 to Priests and Seminarians. St. Gaspar, following the Ignatian method, presents Jesus, Who with His example wishes to show:

1. *How we should be detached from flesh and blood and from the natural love of parents by leaving them, and by not doubting further about leaving them saddened when this will prove necessary in order to attend with greater diligence to the Heavenly Father's business.*
2. *That we should not remain with them longer than what would be God's Will. When I might suspect that my parents, or any other person of this world, are impeding that which God wants, when this is done either out of ignorance or misguided zeal, or when it is done out of malice, it is better to leave them without saying anything, even if they might be afflicted by this, or if they might find fault with me for this, by putting all this behind us with resolute and virile mind, in order to carry out God's Will...*³

His traumatic experiences of rather base cupidity rendered him a keen and lucid prophet regarding the most absolute detachment. Sometimes the blood of avarice in ecclesiastics comes to a boiling point, which renders their ministry sterile, and even wastes it entirely, by scandalizing the faithful. The words of Fr. Gaspar in this same retreat to Priests in 1810 seem to bear this out:

... The heavy chain [which impedes one from giving oneself over totally to God] would be possessions, to which so many church men became singularly ensnared ... What kind of a Pastor, or of a Father would one be toward his own children, when he is a harsh exactor, an inexorable, abject mercenary? If these wounds, like so many others, were only hidden somewhere in the Sanctuary, we would be able to dissimulate them; but, this mercenary hardness hide scandalous contrasts, and the lay tribunals resound with the shame of the Priesthood. Therefore: the Priest, or the Pastor, who is hateful and disdainful toward his flock, and toward religion, in the spirit of coarse people, has become merely a means of profit and personal gain ... Oh, how fitting it is for an ecclesiastic, obliged to

² **NB:** Translator's Note: as earlier, his Pastor thought of him as the Apostle to the Youth, here his Ordinary, Bishop Liruti, OSB, thinks of him as the Missionary to Religious, Priests and Seminarians. This is a second stage in the progressive unfolding and living out of his Founder's charism: the Youth, Clergy and Consecrated Life and Apostolic Missionaries in any ministry of the Word of God whatsoever – this last would be crowed in his unique experience in a Parish Mission in 1816.

³ Bertoni Manuscripts, Folder 16. [MssB ## 2173, ff.].

perfection, and to verify what he preaches, but his disdain of the riches of this world ...⁴

Surely, Fr. Gaspar practiced to perfection that which he preached to others also on this detachment and gospel poverty.

Let us conclude: these court trials, for Fr. Gaspar, were only a harsh necessity, founded on his rights, even though they were so disturbing, in order to bring his 'adversary' to a reasonable solution. It was just an expedient for him, in that he abandoned this contestation always, as soon as he could, in order to take up again the ways of peace.

5. *I Greet You, o my Mother...!*

His beloved Mother, Brunora, died in 1810. In treating of her, one who had in the life of her son exercised such a providential role, it would be simply unjust to limit ourselves to point out only the extreme dates of her existence. We are not able to fix precisely the progress of her final malady, but it seems that her physical decline was long and painful. The problems of the advancing years reduced her practically to inactivity. The doctors diagnosed her problem as dropsy. She lingered for a long time, watched over, comforted, assisted by her blessed son, Fr. Gaspar. It was he who administered to her the comforts of the faith, and it was he who witnessed her last breath, on February 6, 1810.

The petering out of that great heart was certainly for her 33 year old son a deep blow. In fact, in her, from his infancy, Fr. Gaspar had placed his deepest filial affection. This profound love that he had for her never attenuated, but was always sublime and strengthened with the years. Particularly in her last years, the spiritual bonds between mother and son had been elevated even beyond the natural bonds of flesh and blood.

From 1805 on, from the moment that the 28 year old⁵ Fr. Gaspar had received the faculties to hear the confessions of women, that precious mother had no hesitation of entrusting her own soul to the priestly heart of her angelic son, making of herself his penitent. For as long as she lived, he remained subject to his mother in everything, with that tenderness and spontaneity of a child. Even as a priest, he would make the time to accompany her from the house to church, always offering precedence to her as a sign of his respect. He obeyed her promptly even when there was entrusted to him some family matter. One day, they had to sell about ten sacks of grain for polenta. Once he showed the buyer the sacks, Fr. Gaspar is remembered as having said to him: 'She set the price, as I do not understand much about these matters.'⁶ Fr. Gaspar was a priest who showed and had always a profound esteem and tenderness for his mother.

Even the detachment of death produced its fruit in him. This harsh trial flowered into a sense of filial abandonment to God, and into an even more tender, vibrant devotion to the Most Holy Virgin Mary. Indeed, we do not wish to force the

⁴ Manoscritti Bertoni, l.c. – Folder 16. Autumn Retreat 1810, Meditation 6.

⁵ **NB: Translator's Note: priests had to be ordained 5 years prior to receiving these faculties.**

⁶ SA, Doc. 20, p.169.

documents: the reader may make the judgment. There are two hand-written entries into his own Spiritual Diary that we would like to bring up here. They both date from May 1810, three months after the death of his mother. The first is from May 18th:

18th MAY 1810

[154.] Is it difficult for Mary to intercede? Is it difficult for Jesus to grant us any grace?⁷

[154a.] We have to purify our minds thoroughly.⁸

Just three short lines, which, however, over a kind of *compendium* of the most elevated program of perfection founded on a solid Marian devotion. His devotion was indeed strong, but always tender.

Another day in this same month of May 1810 [perhaps some two weeks later than the above], Fr. Gaspar transcribed into his *Spiritual Journal* a prayer which he found corresponding to his own sentiments of filial confidence:

**[159.] I greet you, O my Mother: give me your blessing; bless me and all who are dear to me. Vouchsafe to offer to God all I have to do and suffer today, in union with your merits, as well as those of your Blessed Son. I offer you and consecrate to your service all my being and whatever belongs to me placing everything under your protection. Obtain for me, my dear Lady, purity of soul and body, and grant that I may not do anything today displeasing to God; I entreat you through your Immaculate Conception and your perfect Virginity [before the birth, in the birth and after the birth].
(A Hail Mary for the person who wrote this prayer.)⁹**

⁷ [This May of 1810 was the first *Month of Mary* for the orphaned Fr. Gaspar. We can imagine him even more intensely committed to making the Mother of God his own *mother*. We have two important Marian thoughts in this month. The first entry of this date shows how he put Mary in an outstanding place in his ministry. The second, on the 24th, gives us a prayer which will accompany him all throughout his life.]

⁸ [Also Fr. Stofella's note] The last line of this *Journal* entry under this date sounds as the condition for obtaining the graces from Jesus through Mary. A **thorough purification of the mind** is indispensable in order not to put any obstacle to God's generous giving. It is an expression on the same radical level as the entry of May 1809 about **universal mortification**. The ideal is noted as well on the 14.15.16.23.24 July 1809 about the absolute requirements for Perfection.

⁹ SA Doc. 35, p. 669.

[NB: Translator's note: included here is Fr. Stofella's Note from his publication of St. Gaspar's *Spiritual Journal*]:

Following some texts in his *Spiritual Journal* that are so closely linked, that we may call belonging to the reform of the Church, here – without any change in the date – we find a beautiful prayer. This is a real treasure for the understanding of Fr Bertoni's spirit. We think that this text became part of his daily morning prayers. This will then be followed by a series of Patristic texts with varied thoughts. And then lastly, two short lines from a Psalm. We have the suspicion that all these entries were placed on different days – but the Servant of God who had

This is still prayed daily in the Stigmatine world.

6. A Thorn in his Heart

This present chapter really cannot close without responding to a haunting question: did Fr. Gaspar have the comfort of assisting personally his own dying Father? The time that preceded his death was not without their problems.

With a primary juridical Act in 1810, Fr. Gaspar's Father through a suit which for all practical purposes deprived his son from the very foundation of his filial inheritance. Why did he do this? This is how Mr. Bertoni justified his position: ... *the testator has only one son, who is a secular priest, who in addition to his own Patrimony, finds himself provided with goods of fortune well beyond his own needs ...* At the same time, Mr. Bertoni made provisions for his maid that she be ... *remunerated for the assistance that she rendered...*

written this notebook for his own eyes only, does not indicate any change of date. These entries from May 24th-31st, just as they are, will round out the entries for this year 1810.

We have already noted that this prayer is a real gem, and it does not seem easy ever to exaggerate its value. The last line **A Hail Mary...** seems to exclude the possibility that it was a personal composition. He took it from some source and, finding it very proper for himself, he added also the spiritual token for the demands of honesty, with regard for the unknown author. The Founder has handed this on to us through its inclusion in his *Journal*.

If we examine this prayer, we can easily see it as an expression of the *Treatise of the True Devotion to the Virgin* by St Grignon Marie de Montfort (+ 1716). In Fr. Bertoni's time this Treatise was already written for a while, but it remained hidden until 1842. Since that year it began to be spread very widely in the Church. The wording of Fr Bertoni's prayer is very close to the expressions of *Spiritual Slavery* of St. de Montfort's doctrine.

This prayer is already in the spirit of a total dedication to Mary as the Mother and *Lady of the House*. We should greet her every day as such. Our offerings and prayers pass to God through her hands, and similarly all our daily activities and suffering, in union with her merits and those of her Divine Son. The whole of ourselves and our world, every day, are placed at her service: all under her mantle... St. Grignon de Montfort could not agree more!

In return for this service, we expect every day *purity of mind and body* and that *we should not do anything which can displease God*.

A strong foundation for our petition to Mary is her great privilege as the **Immaculate Conception**. Fr Bertoni supported the doctrine of Mary's *Immaculate Conception* long before the dogmatic definition of 1854.

In all the research, this text of this prayer has not yet been uncovered. This is so despite having pondered the prayer manuals of many Marian Congregations. A partial text, though, perhaps even the substance of the second part of the text. Might be found in an invocation that was in use of the old **Preces Matutinae** [Latin for **Morning Prayers**] often used by Priests and Seminarians. The title of one of these prayers was dedicating to that of commending the living of chastity. The text reads: *By your Immaculate Conception, and most pure Virginity, cleanse my heart and my body, a Mother and Virgin before the Birth, in the Birth and after the Birth*.

With this in mind, does not the deMontfort devotion pertain quite closely to Stigmatine Spirituality?

Thus, in September 1813, in drawing up his will, Mr. Bertoni completely bypassed his own son, and mentioned only the maid, in order to benefit her with his part of the estate. Finally, a few days before dying, he inserted a codicil was inserted regarding one half of the value of the house, which for 'his reasons' would serve as a guarantee for his debts toward Ms Slavier.

These decisions on their joint patrimony did not lessen the son's love and the truly tender priestly compassion of Fr. Gaspar, who accompanied the last days of his Father in prayer. There is some hint of these times in a letter that Fr. Gaspar wrote to Mother Leopoldina Naudet on December 14, 1813. He wrote: ... *I recommend to your Reverence, my poor father who has become quite ill...* There seems to be implied in these words a real insight into the priestly heart evidenced by the genuine anguish of his filial piety, suffering under two accounts.

The Parish Register in St. Paul's of Campo Marzio notes that on December 27, 1813, Francis Louis Bertoni passed to a better life, 'strengthened by the sacrament of the Eucharist.' The deceased received from his disinherited son a solemn funeral and very many suffrages.¹⁰

The anguish suffered for the conduct of his father, the sacrifices, the tears, the prayers raised up to God for the eternal salvation of the one who had given him earthly life, remain a secret that the Saint guarded jealously in his heart, and bore with him to his grave.

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¹⁰ Stofella, *Life ...* o.c., pp. 72, ff.

Chapter 8

Interior Riches

[1808-1813]

1. A Revealing Document

The life of St. Gaspar Bertoni was universally recognized as an incessant ascent toward God. However, testimonies in this regard, even though they are in agreement, with the passing of long stretches of time, lose something of their bite: no matter how authoritative they may be, they become rather cold, and may seem less convincing. This moves one to look to draw from authentic sources, capable of communicating even at a distance, a reflection of the holiness recognized by contemporaries, to the man of God, of whom already more than a century later, any writer whatsoever would want to illustrate his life.

Providentially, such a source is not lacking regarding Fr. Bertoni. His spirit radiates outward from his ***Spiritual Journal***, a hand-written document, some how preserved – and no one knows how – from the insatiable appetite of the flames, to which Fr. Bertoni consigned his every note that might provide for us an echo of his inner soul.¹¹

This has come down to us as a few hand-written pages, from July 1, 1808 until June 26, 1813, in which he entrusted the secret confidences of his own soul: proposals, his state of soul, rapid notes from his meditation or spiritual reading of the day; it has recorded what it was that was nourishing his priestly soul over these years, or what poured forth from this piety. In developing our efforts here to illustrate his life, and ignoring these revealing notes, would mean – in our view - to try to give life to a body, abstracting from its soul. To avoid repetitions, we will omit those passages already cited, as well as those which we might have occasion to cite more opportunely in another context. As much as will e possible, we will sacrifice chronological order for that order of ideas, grouping his notes according to themes. Of our own, in this chapter, there will be nothing other than what is purely accidental. Most humble Fr. Gaspar, please pardon the mischievous joke ... This will be necessary, because when he drew up these very personal spiritual notes, for his own exclusive and personal use, he never imagined that he was writing for those who would come after him, the most beautiful chapters of his holy life.

2. The Concern of his Soul

The diligent quest for perfection in everything is the constant challenge of Fr. Bertoni's soul:

8th OCTOBER 1808

[58.] Inner movement to fight against small defects as I did, on other occasions, against big ones. [Determination] to rise towards virtue with all

¹¹ SA, Doc. 35, pp. 656-672.

diligence. The time in which I can serve God and promote His glory and sanctify myself is running short more and more.

The fleeting nature of time is a thought that was most familiar to Fr. Gaspar, and served as an efficacious spur to his spiritual undertaking which does not admit of delays:

24th JULY 1808

[13.] "Making the most of your time" (Ep 5, 16). Time never comes back. We have therefore to use it with great diligence.

In the Retreat of September 1808, at the Meditation on Death, he noted:

17th SEPTEMBER 1808

[49.] Meditation. Death. The past is no more. The future has not yet arrived. Only the present is here. And it is in my hands. Let me live day after day, or rather from morning to midday and from midday to evening. Let me do every single thing with all possible perfection. Perhaps I will have no more time in which to glorify God.

Regarding this central concern of his soul, there is still one more testimony, from December 1808:

17th DECEMBER 1808

[85.] While browsing again over Scupoli's [*Spiritual Combat*] and reading the *Imitation of Christ*, I felt a desire to acquire perfection and to wage war upon any negligence.

3. Temptations

His note of August 31, 1808, even in its brevity, does bring out the fact that temptations have the character of testing: if in mediocre spirits these tests too often are experienced as stumbling blocks, obstacles for the climb, in souls who know how to give themselves generously to God, they become powerful thrusts towards the heights. Our great spiritual teacher explains to us:

...Great temptations are the matter and the means of great holiness, if there is at the same time courage and strength ...

Again from Dom Scupoli, under March 27, 1809, he noted:

...Temptations return when we have given in to them the first time, in order to give God the occasion to draw from them that fruit which we lost before hand ...

Four months later a reflection of his seems to be the corollary of the preceding note:

... If you had had the heart to resist, by this time you would have finished with temptations ... [July 29, 1808].

In the delicate area, there are two significant observations. The first is from August 17, 1808. The arduous problem is resolved by the boldness of saints, through which the remedy that heals and preserves is the love of God. This is the note:

... In a soul in which Charity enters, libido flees from it ...

Also these temptations, therefore, are interpreted in the light of charity, which is the bond of perfection. This, in substance, is explained in his note dated September 13, 1808. The Saint wrote:

... God calls us to emulate angelic purity. It is necessary to be prepared for greater temptations, and to make up for defects already committed, and to arrive at that point that God wants for us ...

He closes the discussion on temptations in general with an original commentary on *watch and pray*, of the Gospel. It is this note:

28th APRIL 1811

[167.] Watch and pray: This summarizes all the advices of Scripture and of the Gospel.

WATCH: This means we have to be fully awake and strong: but without weapons. One could not resist if attacked: we shall be conquered.

PRAY: This means to be well armed, but asleep. If we are to be attacked we shall be stripped of our arms and killed by treachery.

Watch and pray! This is a man who is strong, awake and well armed. He won't be conquered.

4. In order to be saved: will it!

On February 22, 1809, there is an ordered and well nourished note that suggests the secret to anyone who wants to be a saint:

[111.] Three are the things needed for salvation:

1. Avoid small sins. *He who contemns little things shall fall little by little. They are like little thieves who enter by the window in order to open to door to the big thieves.*

2. Convince ourselves that we shall not go to Heaven without the cost of much labor and effort. *The Kingdom of God suffers violence. Make an effort to go in. If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.*

3. Have the good will to go [to Heaven]. *He, who has good will, has everything.*

There is a beautiful commentary on this last point:

[112.] If the matter of our Salvation would depend on God alone, no one would ever be damned: *I do not want the death of a sinner...*

But since it depends also on our cooperation, and this is lacking, and so, many are damned.

More explicit is the note for July 30, 1808 – and continues on March 22, 1809:

[19.] All depends on the resolution of wanting to serve God at any cost. It is necessary to guard against *velleity* [wishful thinking]. We can distinguish *velleity* from the will by their consequences. In front of difficulties the former shrinks back and gives up, while the latter persists, gains stability and is strengthened.

22nd MARCH 1809

[132.] Those who make a resolution without the determination [of taking practical steps] are similar to those soldiers or hunters who are portrayed in the pictures. They are always on the point of wounding and killing but in fact they never unleash the blow.

"He who has good will has everything, but it is not good that will which does not want to do what it can".

5. Proceed with Caution

When the fragile human will finds itself exposed to oscillations and re-thinking decisions made, a salutary fear can prove to be an efficacious stimulus of not turning away from the enterprise:

... If we do not accept the loving invitations of Mercy, what else remains to us, if not that of falling into the terrible hands of Justice ... [March 14, 1809].

The next day this same salutary thought returns with efficacy of a conclusion which does not admit of rebuttal:

... In this world, penance is brief, light, useful; in hell, it is very long, enormous, useless. Who does not repent in this life will have to repent uselessly in the next...

In fact, God is infinite goodness, but also infinite Justice and: **Whoever does not want to know God as just, only knows Him by half ...** [September 13, 1809].

6. Correspond to Grace

Emphasizing the value of the will, St. Gaspar by no means intends ignore, or diminish the preponderant activity of Grace in the sanctification. His insistence wishes to be only a spur to a correspondence, as perfect as possible, to the divine munificence, with the persuasion that:

...We ought above all to be vigilant not to fail the Lord on our part, being sure that on His part, He certainly will not fail... [December 2, 1808].

We do fail when we unintelligently pretend to construct by ourselves our own perfection/ What is necessary then is rather a total adherence to God's Will and to His plan for us. He noted on July 14, 1808:

...Do nothing other than for the glory of God and for His holy love; from this proceeds disdain for the world, the proclamation of all vices...

And on July 15, 1808, he stated:

... To work solely out of an instinct of nature, even for an instant, this would mean that one would impede what God is doing, in order to make room for the activity of creatures ...

He adds to this idea on July 16, 1808:

[139.] Lose the habit of doing your own will. Do anything as moved by God's will with the intention of pleasing Him and giving Him honor. (Scupoli, *Addition to the Spiritual Combat*).

For Fr. Bertoni, to correspond means not to inject any impediment to the transforming action of grace. This means that we need to allow God to carry out His loving designs on us. These are his words:

... Very few are they who understand what it is that God would do with them, if He were not impeded in His designs by them...¹²

In his 'Instructions' to the Seminarians, this beautiful Ignatian maxim returns almost with the same words, but clarified just a bit:

...We cannot even imagine what God would do with us, and how much He would achieve in us and for us, as we are the pupils of His eyes, if we did not place an obstacle to His grace, but were we to remit ourselves freely and totally into His hand ...¹³

7. The Face of Perfection

The quest for perfection for St. Gaspar means in the last analysis: the search for God in every creature:

[91.] We have to seek God alone and nothing else: no consolations, no gratifications. [December 23, 1808].

An even more demanding proposal is found on February 26, 1809. Here the perfection toward which the saint is vowed manifests its visage: it is the face of Jesus Himself:

...We must draw in ourselves a portrait of Jesus Christ ...

This bold proposal for St. Gaspar is simply his response of love for Jesus Christ, Who – and not for just one time – had led him to taste the ineffable sweetness of **a mystical union**. On October 25, 1808, St. Gaspar made this entry:

¹² **NB:** translator's note: this is an often repeated Ignatian principle in Fr. Bertoni's Journal [July 15, 1809, May 18, 1811] and life.

¹³ *Instructions on the Book of Kings*. Commentary on the words: *Loquere, Domine...!* Bertoni Manuscripts, n. 23.

... [72.] During Mass: short but vivid enlightenments. Intense feeling of the presence of God. Trust, love, desire to transform myself into Him. That Jesus may live in me, no longer myself. After Mass this grace of Union would pass, but it came back while [walking] along the street, on family business, just as when I was in Church.

Christ is the divine model toward Whom St. Gaspar constantly directed the eyes of his soul, reinvigorated with so much love that he yearned for His sacrifice and shame, in order to be the more assimilated to Him. He noted on February 1, 1808:

... Frequent memory of Jesus' life with a tender love of correspondence...

On July 11, 1808 he wrote:

... After Mass, there were very vivid sentiments of faith in the presence of our Lord and much confidence: and further a sentiment of offering myself to suffer vexation with him and for him...

Then, on September 25, 1808:

... Today's Meditation was on the Reign of Christ; I experienced a powerful inspiration to follow Our Lord more closely at the cost of life for His poverty and shame ...

The desire to be as similar to Christ in the **humiliation** that came to occupy His mind and His heart:

... While meditating on the Incarnation ...I experienced a sentiment of great love for the Trinity in handing over the Son and great tenderness toward Him, together with a very vivid faith and a great desire for union and association in His sufferings and shame: with the petition for grace in order to suffer in being disdained for Him ... [September 28, 1808].

The **offering of himself** in suffering out of love of Christ, reached in his desires the reached the summits of immolation:

... I experienced the desire and expressed the petition also of martyrdom and a great internal exhortation...

The Lord did not fail to slake in His Servant the thirst for humiliations. There was this episode noted above about his 'furious' adversary who attacked Fr. Gaspar on a public way, with a tempest of poisonous invectives. They provoked in the Saint such a violent reaction that in the inner struggle to restrain himself, he actually collapsed along the side of the street, is certainly around this period in his life. It might even be said that his note of September 29, 1809 is a faithful commentary on this:

... There was some knowledge of the great good which is to suffer something out of love for God ...

There follow in Latin the comforting words of Jesus for those who might experience some suffering of malediction and disdain of the world out of love for Him:

29th SEPTEMBER 1808

[57.] The recognition of what great good it is to suffer something for the sake of God. *Blessed are those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice. Blessed are you when they will curse you and insult you and reject your name as bad and they will say any evil against you, falsely, for my name. Be glad on that day because your reward is great in heaven.* [Mt 5:11].

8. On the Crest of God.

With devotion and respect, we now enter into the most profound secret of Fr. Gaspar's soul. We will feel the presence of God so close and tangible that it is quite inebriating. Let us read with much calm and silence inside and outside of us, dispensing ourselves from any comment¹⁴:

2nd JULY 1808

[2.] *Feast of the Sacred Heart. During Mass, at Consecration, at Communion and throughout the whole thanksgiving time, many tears of compunction and affection. In particular during Communion I felt for a moment as if my spirit was snatched away from all creatures, at the service¹⁵ of its Creator.*¹⁶

¹⁴ cf. instead: Nello Dalle Vedove, *Un modello di santo abbandono*. Verona 1951, pp. 188-196.

¹⁵ **NB:** Translator's Note: For the first time in this document, St. Gaspar uses the word *ossequio* [cf. *obsequium*, in: Rm 12:1, ff.] – one of Fr. Bertoni's favorite words. Cf. '{Published Studies' under St. Gaspar Bertoni's *Trinitarian Charism of Hope, on this Web-site*.

¹⁶ **NB:** Translator's Note: Fr. Stofella notes: In his entry on this Feast of the Sacred Heart, we have the first indication of some characteristic mystical gifts which God was going to grant to Fr Bertoni. If we may say, here one sees what theologians call **Piety as a Gift of the Spirit**. It is very clear **that the Sacred Heart is also near Fr. Bertoni's final entry in his Journal** [cf. **June 26, 1813 he also noted a mystical grace, his ecstasy regarding the Sacred Heart on May 30, 1813**]. For Fr. Bertoni, his devotion to the Sacred Heart often served as his vehicle for the presentation of his integral understanding of the Paschal Mystery – both its sorrowful aspects as well as its glorious dimensions. A few days after his May 30th, 1812 ecstasy, he spoke on the Sacred Heart – emphasizing the wound in the side retained in Christ's Risen Body [cf. MssB 1755-1778] [cf. J. Henchey, 'Una Speranza Missionaria formata ed espressa nelle sue divozioni e nel suo servizio ecclesiale', in: *Symposium Bertonianum*. Verona: Edizioni Stimmgraf 1990, pp.143-160. This idea is found in his parishsermons [cf. MssB ## 464; 475; 490;494; 517; 1300; 1305; 1308; 1312; 1314; 1315; 1317; 1318; 1322; 1759; 1771, , ff. In his Letters: MssB 9510; 9689; 9707. In his preaching to priests and seminarians: MssB ## 2632; 2635; 2637; 2647. It is found often in Fr. Gaspar's Meditations on Primum Regum, based on St. Gregory the Great: MssB ## 4899; 4957; 4984; 4991; 4999; 5094 and 9707 – among other texts. The integral theme of the Paschal Mystery is found from his earliest written documents: his parish sermons up

On the Sunday dedicated to St. Aloysius, the Day of the Maternity of the Virgin Mary, St. Gaspar wrote:

9th OCTOBER 1808

[59.] **Feast of St Denis and the Maternity of the Virgin Mary.**

During the Eucharistic prayer of the Mass near the time of the *memento*, it seemed that my mind opened up to know with Whom was I speaking. I felt great affection and an enthusiasm of love in prayer. Then some outbursts of my heart for God and some impulses of my spirit towards God. I seemed to be like a person overwhelmed by the appearance of a great friend who had not been seen for a long time and on seeing him suddenly, he wants to throw himself at him and embrace him. Then I felt a desire that the vision could increase and an impulse to be able to reach the Supreme Good. Since I was in public I feared [the feeling of] some vanity and I [made an effort to] think of my most serious sins. As a consequence [I felt] an increase of knowledge of goodness and love which dissolved in most soothing tears which lasted until after Holy Communion. In the meantime faith and confidence increased very much together with humility and loving reverence. Lastly, at Communion, a very intense devotion and sentiment similar to that of my First Holy Communion: an experience that I am not aware of having felt since. The recollection lasted for another hour and it remained for the rest of the evening.¹⁷

through his last letters to Fr. Bragato [cf. Web-site. *Stimulate Integre*]. [cf. also Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove, *Un Modello...* pp. 53, 186.].

[Under the studies for the *Original Constitutions*, there is offered a reflection on the Ignatian and Stigmatine spirituality contained in the word: *obsequium* – Studies on St. Gaspar's *Compendium Rude*].

Hence, in his Journal, he notes the many tears of compunction and affection. Compunction is intended here as a blend of *spiritual illumination* and a consequent feeling of one's own inadequacy in front of the divine. What stands out here is that gift of **the spirit snatched away from all creatures, at the service [obsequium] of its Creator**. To this experience Fr Gaspar had contributed also by his own spiritual attitude

St. John of the Cross teaches that "the soul cannot receive the light of divine union unless it first rejects affection for creatures". He also teaches that "every soul who wishes to climb the mountain of the Lord in order to make of himself an altar for the offering of pure love, of praise and service [*ossequio*], should have already fulfilled three conditions. The first is that it rejects from itself all affections and desires which are foreign to God. The second is that it should purify itself from the consequences of those affections which still remain by continually denying them and doing penance. The third condition is that it should change *habits*: only then the Lord himself will clothe it anew' [Fr. Stofella's note].

¹⁷ **NB: Translator's Note:** Fr. Stofella's footnote here:

It was the second Sunday of October, the 18th after Pentecost, and Fr. Bertoni's birthday. He was 31 years old. It was also his name-day because Denis was the third name given him on his Baptism day. That day the commemoration of St. Denis had to give liturgical precedence to the celebration of the feast of the Maternity of the Virgin Mary. That feast was commemorated in the regions under the Venetian Dominions on the second Sunday of October. Could not all this have had some bearing in preparing the soul of Fr Bertoni for **the visits of His Divine Majesty?**

Then on December 4th, a Sunday of Advent:

... During the Mass, I experienced a vivid sentiment of the presence of Jesus Christ, inspiring much confidence, but this was short. The recollection, however, lasted also afterwards and devotion went through the entire day ...

Again, on the following Sunday:

11th DECEMBER 1808

[84.] During the Canon of the Mass, at the *Te igitur*, a very lively, reverential and loving sense of the presence of the Father. A vivid confidence and love towards the Son. Again a sense of the priestly dignity during Consecration as I was acting in the person of Christ before His Father. Even more tenderness and deep humility immediately after Consecration when I was holding Christ tightly in my hands. There it was: the utmost Goodness joined to the utmost wickedness. The most pure to the most impure. The most holy to the most sinful. That sentiment lasted until after communion. The compunction until evening.¹⁸

It seems that one should read this day's entry on one's knees! What can we say? Fr. Gaspar found himself taken over by a very special state of grace. Let us note first that **opening** of his mind and heart. This prompted these **outbursts** of his spirit toward God. Such a desire and impulse reached Him. Then, on the apparent threshold of ecstasy, in order not to fall into vanity in front of the public, he made an effort to **think of his very serious sins**. This reminds us of what St Teresa of Avila used to say to her nuns :

... Let us be on guard when we are taken by these great impulses of such desires, not to add anything nor to increase them. We have to cut the thread gently with some other consideration...

However, it seems as though Grace took firm hold of Fr Gaspar even after the ecstasy. He was given a certain consciousness of the Divine Goodness. He experienced gentle tears, and an increase in virtues. He was being granted literally what he prayed for in that familiar Ignatian prayer written for his own private use: **Give me humility and loving reverence** (cf. 12 July). What can be said about his remembrance of his First Holy Communion day? ... The sway of grace in his soul seems to go back a long time in his life.

¹⁸ **NB: Translator's Note** - Fr. Stofella's note here:

It was the Third Sunday of Advent. Judging from the notes of this *Journal*, it seems that God had favored Fr. Bertoni with his gifts often during Sunday Masses. What shall we say now? Perhaps what we said on the feast of the Maternity of Mary (which was his birthday). We need to fall on our knees and read the note again and again.

This was another experience of the Presence of God, pondering anew the mystery of the Trinity (cf. above, the 24 of August), reviewing the Persons of the Father and the Son. Therefore at the words of the Canon of the Mass, Fr. Bertoni felt **vivid confidence**. At the Consecration he felt the loftiness of his priestly dignity: **reverence, love, confidence, tenderness and deep humility**, and each of these sentiments immerse Fr. Bertoni into the abyss of **compunction**. His innate feeling of wretchedness and culpability in any contact of his joined to God's supreme goodness, Infinite Purity and Infinite Holiness! Those expressions can be judged by us, who are far from those lofty experiences, as excessive. St. Teresa of Avila

Then, a few weeks later:

11th JANUARY 1809

[96.] During Mass, at the Consecration: a very lively sense of the presence of Christ as a friend who talks with another friend. I also felt the presence of the Father, while perceiving also, in some way, the distinction of these Divine Persons in only one nature. Great reverence and love! This recollection continued for half an hour afterwards, not the experience, though, which...

Fr. Bertoni's pen end right here, without any further comment on his part.¹⁹ Then, near the end of his Journal, St. Gaspar wrote:

30th MAY 1812

[171.] While in prayer before Mass I was taken over by some drowsiness and I heard from the Crucifix these words addressed to my heart: *Look at this Heart of mine!* Those words immediately brightened my mind with light and my heart felt suddenly a great fervor. Then it was as if my spirit rose up to see the lovable object which was indicated. I felt a shivering throughout my whole body. I found I had my eyes and mouth closed but my soul was wide awake and full of delight.

had similar compunction for her faults, and ingratitude, due to those special *caresses* and favors which God so often poured out on her. She said: *When I see that I receive daily more and more graces, and since I correspond so badly to the past ones, I feel a sort of terrible torture.*¹⁸ This Sunday in the life of St. Gaspar with all of its ministries, rendered him full until evening. Would that the Lord might grant also to us a similar gift of light!

¹⁹ **NB: Translator's note:** Fr. Stofella's thoughts follow:

The note remains interrupted – the word *which...* indicates incompleteness. And yet here we have, laconically expressed, one of the most noteworthy graces recorded in the *Journal*. Christ, as *friend*, reminds us of those outbursts and impulses of the heart towards God, like a person overwhelmed by the appearance of a great friend, as in the entry of 9 Oct. 1808.

With regard to the presence of the Father and the experience of, in some way, the distinction of these Divine Persons, let us hear what St Teresa of Avila said out of her personal experience:

... As regards the Three Divine Persons, I clearly perceive that they are distinct among themselves... it is, though, a strange certainty. As a matter of fact I do not hear and I do not see anything. Neither with the eyes of the body nor with the eyes of the soul. Yet it is felt when the Three Divine Persons disappear. However I do not know how does this happen. What I do know is that this is not my imagination. Sometimes, in fact, after receiving this grace, I made an effort to bring [the Three Persons] back again, by myself. But I never succeeded. I therefore do know this by experience...

It seemed that my soul wished to separate itself from my body. It seemed to be dying and yet to enjoy this. When it turned again back with desire towards the one who was talking to it, I had another episode of shivering and the feeling of a sweet painful death. My soul was then confused about what to do. If the experience had continued it was going to die or at least to be separated from the body. In such inability to act, it rested with delight in the hands of the Lord and finding great peacefulness it was ready to die in that very moment. Then, in an instant, it regained contact with the senses.

The effect of this was a very tender devotion to the Sacred Heart. During Mass I was full of sentiment. My soul was moved to tears at Holy Communion. After Mass I kept much recollection and gladness for the whole day with an increase of Faith, Hope and Charity.²⁰

²⁰ **NB: Translator's Note:** The text is worth reading and meditating with devotion. This would be sufficient to understand it and to savor it without pretending to penetrate the deep phenomena which it narrates. However some remarks are helpful. We take from what Fr. Dalle Vedove wrote with regard to that mystical experience of Fr. Bertoni:

... It is probable that he was preparing in those days the homily for the Feast of the Sacred Heart, the following Friday. Spending nights in work, study and prayer makes one somehow drowsy early in the morning. But Fr. Bertoni's drowsiness was not just natural: it was that *turgidity* and tying up of the human faculties which is characteristic of mystical experiences. The words *Look at this Heart of mine!* were heard distinctly. What followed was like a flash of lightning: an irresistible desire to **see the lovable object which was indicated**.

Fr. Dalle Vedove notes further:

... The sudden and almost violent way in which Fr. Gaspar was taken by this mystic gift showed that it was not a simple ecstasy, which should have developed slowly and pleasantly, but rather a real *rapture* or *flight* of the spirit. The effects of this extraordinary experience invaded not only the spiritual faculties of mind and will but also the physical ones with characteristic phenomena like shivering of the body and shutting off of sight and voice. He even reached, twice, the state of *alienation* close to death. Yet the whole experience was described as **delightful** and in great **quiet**. The *rapture* in front of the Crucifix marks the height of Fr. Gaspar's extraordinary spiritual gifts. After this mystical experience he was no longer sure what he should write down on paper. He will record only seven more short notes and will leave blank the remaining 90 pages of his JOURNAL. The reason could be that a new phase of his life was opening up.

... Within few months he will be struck by a sickness which will accompany him for the remaining forty years of his life, marked by intense suffering. From the ecstasy in front of the Crucifix which showed him the Sacred Heart, a new journey began. It will lead him to the total sacrifice of self. Just like Jesus who, after his Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, took decisively the road to Jerusalem for his sacrifice on Mount Calvary... [Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove, *Un modello...* o.c., pp. 191, ff.].

It is interesting to note that in these days, Fr. Bertoni was thinking integrally also of the Glorious Wounds retained in Christ's Risen Body. In St. Gaspar's sermon on the Sacred Heart [June 5, 1812], he stated: His side, opened after His death, is used to show us that Heart, that same Heart wounded by the lance, that WOUND RETAINED IN HIS GLORIOUS BODY, render the Heart so sweet, evident, divine, so much so that it is

These are the revealing fragments that we have wanted to offer to the reader, convinced that, better than every other testimony, they can illumine us regarding the spiritual physiognomy of the saint, at this time in his 30's. When we read these carefully, it would be indeed the prodigious ardor of his apostolic soul, the extraordinary success he realized in the most varied fields of sacred ministry. There is no surprise for us here. We know the secret flame that has erkindled and fed these.

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impossible to venerate ***the Wounded Heart without remembering and venerating His immense love*** [cf. MssB # 1771]. This ***integral*** theme is much in evidence in Fr. Bertoni's spirit - cf. J. Henchey, CSS, 'S. Gaspare Bertoni: una speranza missionaria...', in": ***Symposium...***, pp. 143-160.

Chapter 9

At Mother Canossa's Convent

[1808-1810]

1. The Appointment

The official suppression of the Marian Oratories brought about by the well-known Napoleonic Decree of May 1807, notably reduced Fr. Bertoni's activity amidst his beloved young people. But, this did not disarm him. In the limits allowed by the new circumstances, he continued to assist them spiritually; he filled his days sitting at his table of study, or in the city libraries, head-first into sacred and profane studies.

The Cenacle of the Bertoni home, under interdict by the local place for the youth which kept the law in the name of the new France, was transformed into a fraternal evening **gathering of priests**. The soul behind this initiative, of course, was Fr. Gaspar. As in prayer, as well as in the works although now reduced of his priestly ministry, in intense study, Fr. Gaspar, as was his norm and practice, awaited serenely for some indication from God. And arrive it did.

In May 1808, Bishop Innocent Liruti appointed Fr. Bertoni as the first Confessor of Mother di Canossa's Convent²¹. The Confessor-elect was then just about 30 years of age. Such was the esteem placed in him by the new Diocesan Shepherd. The history of that Convent is written in letters of gold by two extraordinary Women, outstanding for their holiness of life and the fruitfulness of their works: St. Madeline di Canossa, and the Servant of God, Leopoldina Naudet.

The former had extraordinary contacts with Fr. Bertoni who also served as her Confessor, without becoming her regular Spiritual Director. Mother Leopoldina, on the other hand, found in him the Father of her soul, the Angel sent to her by God to sustain her in the foundation of her Community, and to guide her step by step in the old ascent for her spirit.

The holy Marquess enjoyed a much deserved notoriety which dispenses us from treating of it in a specific manner. Mother Naudet, however, is much less well known. The very close spiritual relationship that the Saint had with this soul, totally of God, demands here a page that might present in its essential lines, the life and the spirit of this exceptional woman.²² The biographical notes that we present here are taken from the official collection of documents for St. Gaspar's Cause of Canonization, called the **Summarium Additionale**, and of the official **Positio**, submitted to the Vatican on the virtues of Fr. Bertoni. Even though presented here in a rather concise form, they do offer the characteristics of an indisputable authority both for the bibliography and due to the direct sources that the compiler employed.²³

2. From the Royal Court to the Religious Convent

Leopoldina Naudet was born on May 31, 1773, of a French family which was established in the Tuscan capital within the Hapsburg-Lorena realm. She received the

²¹ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 364, ff.

²² **NB: Translator's Note: cf. the website: www.st-bertoni.com – under 'Mother Naudet'.**

²³ SA, Doc. 5, Introd. Pp. 11-16.

name of the Grand-Duke, Leopold, who held her at her Baptism. For as long as her mother lived, she was a most pious woman who offered her infant daughter every day to the Virgin, and took every care of her. When her beloved Mother died, Leopoldina was only five years old, and she was sent to school in a Monastery in Florence. There, when she was eight, she received her Confirmation and a year later her First Holy Communion. Despite the Jansenism of the time, she also received permission to receive frequent Holy Communion. At 12 years of age, she moved to France and there completed her education with the Mesdames of the Congregation of our Lady, at Soissons, the city of origin of the Naudet Family. With her, was her inseparable older sister, Louisa.

With the humility of his demeanor and the good reasons of her heart on fire for the Eucharist, she disarmed her Ecclesiastical Superiors where she lived, obtaining – a favor unheard of in that Jansenistic enclave - to continue also there her practice of frequent Communion. This first success, her beautiful traits of mind and heart, her excellent success in studies and, of course, the Grace of God which worked almost visibly in that soul, all contributed to make her an irresistible center of attraction. Leopoldina profited by this, inspiring her companions in their piety for the Blessed Virgin, often being with them to constitute a small Choir in the praying of the Little Office of Mary.

At the death of her Father [1789], the two young orphans were sent back to Florence. In 1790, on the decision of her august God-Father, who had become the Emperor of Austria at the death of Joseph II, the two young girls, Leopoldina and her sister, Louisa, moved into the Royal Court at Vienna, as Ladies of Honor to the Archduchess, as the instructresses of the Archdukes. Later, then, from Vienna, the two sisters went to Prague, assigned as Ladies in Waiting to the Arc-Duchess Maria Anna Fernanda, the sister of the Emperor Francis I, who succeeded Leopoldina.

In many trips undertaken by the pious Princess, Leopoldina was always at her side. Her ardent piety, the incomparable modesty of her demeanor, made her everywhere the object of esteem and veneration at the same time. An ecclesiastical dignitary stated: 'We will one day celebrate the liturgical Feast of Leopoldina Naudet!' In reality, the Grace in that elect soul worked without repose to transform and to direct toward good every tendency that might have been less than perfect.

This is true also for Leopoldina, as for every soul called to perfection, holiness has to be the end-result of struggle and conquest. Referring to the very turbulent life she had in the Royal Court, she wrote in 1801:

... Even in the world I experienced my rebellious nature that would have chosen at times to seek human satisfactions and to love creatures. However, sustained by the intimate sentiment that convinced me that I was already of God, so I overcame every affection, every thought ... If I had ever allowed my passions full sway, what would I have been and what would have I become...!

Therefore, precisely in the pomp of the Royal Court she already felt that the Lord had chosen her for His Spouse. However, even though this Voice was clear, the path ahead remained enveloped in darkness. She once thought of the Trappistines. Her first attempt, through no fault of her own, did not succeed. And in her heart, she

experienced a sense of regret over this for a long time. The dream to become the Spouse of Christ in a religious Institute seemed impossible to her until about 1800.

The following year, she found herself in Rome at the Corsini Palace, in the Mother House of a forming Institute, as its Superior. The Institute was called 'the Beloved of Jesus.' The Founder of this new group appeared to be considered almost a second St. Ignatius of Loyola come to life once again. In the end, he is judged by history as being nothing more than an ambitious visionary. His name was Fr. Nicholas Paccanari. Because of the adherence to him of the Archduchess Maria Anna of Austria to his enterprise, Fr. Paccanari was able to find some support and credit. However, this Institute, after a very travailed and ephemeral existence, lasted only six years, or so, and then petered out. The Archduchess was recalled to Austria and the Roman Community living in the Corsini Palace, was just about dissolved.

Mother Leopoldina with a few Sisters very faithful to her, left Rome in 1806, and moved to Padua and they gathered there a group of these ex-'Beloved' with the secret proposal of bringing into reality the dream that the Archduchess saw vanish. From Padua those simple women remained tenaciously faithful to an undertaking, which from a human perspective seemed desperate, and they moved on to Venice. It was there in Venice, she who was the linchpin of this lean band of souls in waiting, ran into Monsignor Pacifico Pacetti, the zealous Missionary who already for some years had established in this city of St. Mark the general headquarters of his very fruitful apostolic campaigns.

From 1804, Monsignor Pacetti was the Spiritual Director and the counselor of the holy Marquess di Canossa, who for some time had been developing the idea of an Institute of Sisters dedicated to the apostolate for poor and abandoned young girls. She herself, assisted by some volunteer companions, from the year 1801 was taking care of a small group of girls who had been assembled in a humble dwelling first for the '*Filippinis*' and then in the most poor and wretched parish of St. Zeno.

The meeting with Mother Naudet with the Marquess di Canossa seemed quite providential to the Canon from the Marche region of Italy, as he, too, was able perhaps to look ahead to make use of these two women of God the corner-stones of a very special edifice he was thinking of establishing.

3. Two Different Charisms

In October 1807, in the first months of the following year, Leopoldina was in the city of the Scaligers, as secretary to the Marquess for various letters pertaining to the acquisition of a former Monastery of Augustinian Sisters, called the Convent of Sts. Joseph and Fidentius, situated in the area of San Zeno in the periphery of the city.

On May 8, 1808, St. Madeline di Canossa, with a few of her companions sharing her ideals and proposals, took possession of that ancient Convent. Madeline did not want to occupy the first place – she reserved this for the virtue and the experience of Leopoldina. On Monday, May 9th, Mother Leopoldina, in her role as local Superior, gave her first conference to the nascent Community, and the holy Marquess with all the other Sisters were gathered in a circle around her as disciples listened to her. In the space of a few months the little Community grew, thanks to the efficacious impact extended by the two Foundresses on souls desirous of offering themselves to God in the exercise of charity towards their neighbor.

The local statistics of 1809 present us with a Community of a good 18 women; and the number of the girls they had gathered there to keep them from the dangers of the street, was no less. An attempt at union was made after only a year of living together, but this revealed that there were clearly two distinct charisms, and this effort of union could not get off the ground. Between the two Foundresses, of course, certain ideals they held jointly, but there were likewise radical divergences.

St. Madeline aimed always at the good of the poor girls of the populous districts: she and her Sisters, in their Convent and in the parishes, in the popular schools, and trained the young women in the domestic arts. There was a very active life for the Sisters. Mother Naudet, on her part, while not excluding the poor girls, intended to offer preferentially her charity to the upper classes. She excluded hospital work, courting more the cloistered life. Since their attempt to work out something together, the two groups continued in that union of theirs which was quite precarious, until November 1816, when Mother Leopoldina would depart from the Canossian Retreat with her faithful followers to the Convent in the city, which was once inhabited by the Teresians, the Contemplative Carmelites.

4. The Confessor

The first spiritual guide of the nascent community, which was called the Canossian retreat, was the 30 year old Fr. Gaspar, considered to be mature enough for that delicate ministry. In the first two and one half years, there is very little to note, other than the extraordinary diligence, and the exceptional spirit of sacrifice demonstrated by the Saint in his commitment to his new office. Spiritual assistance, as he understood it, imposed on him very soon sacrifices and challenges which, joined to the whole tenor of his mortified life, led to weakening irreparably his physical make up, which when he undertook all this was considered to be robust. Precisely in those years, there were not a few who had been gathered in that holy Recovery who fell ill, and some of them, in grave manner. The Registers speak of this: from 1809 until 1812, four of these young women after long and painful illnesses, flew off to heaven. The Saint, with his admirable dedication, lent to them his every spiritual assistance; it was he who would comfort them, to bless them on their beds of death. It was stated that to take special care of one of these little dying creatures, he kept the vigil over here for 30 entire consecutive nights. One thinks of the distance that intervened between his home in St. Paul's Parish confines, and then later to where he lived in St. Firmus' parish boundaries, and the peripheral neighborhood of San Zeno, and the streets of that time in history in Verona.

He would be there in response to every request, by day or night, whether it rained or snowed, always without his umbrella, wrapped in a stitched mantle, hung over his shoulders, even when it was already soaked with rain and mud. No one in that Convent ever persuaded him to have a cup of coffee, or some spirits, or even a glass of water. He did have a room there and his bed would be prepared with every diligence so that on those nights that he kept vigil, he might be able to catch at least some cat – naps. However, the bed always remained untouched. Fr. Gaspar preferred the prayer stalls of the little Church there, where in the flickering candle light, he would remain for long stretched of time on his knees in prayer with his eyes fixed on the tabernacle, or seated with a spiritual book in his hands. This is how he would remain

until morning, when he would return to the Parish, to pick up his day in that rhythm and in the spirit of which we are already quite familiar.

St. Madeline di Canossa, and the Servant of God, Mother Leopoldina Naudet and Fr. Bertoni: they were like three sails at the full responding to the breath of Infinite Love. There can be little surprise in the statement that the good ship of the Canossian Retreat aimed resolutely toward the ports of heaven.

5. The Meeting

Fr. Bertoni continued that assignment at the Canossian Retreat for eight years, a precious and much appreciated service. With that spiritual sensibility which was characteristic to her, Mother Leopoldina Naudet had certainly noted from his first coming there that in the humble priest God was already at work as absolute Master. She was able to take advantage of that delicate discretion of one who, in approaching souls, never went beyond the limits of Spiritual Director, nor gave the impression of being the master. She had seen him anxiously concerned with the sick girls, and noted his treasures of charity, as he was recollected before the altar of God.

However, it was not until January 9, 1811 that this woman of God, obeying an inspiration that seemed to her to be divine, took that young Priest as her own spiritual director. From that day, out of a loving disposition of Divine Providence, two elect souls became companions in the journey toward a common goal. To follow along the essential stages on their spiritual itinerary is such a bold undertaking that borders on presumption, but we should undertake it.

6. The Precedents

Leopoldina Naudet's life, before her meeting with St. Gaspar Bertoni, has the very clear traits of a loving plan, traced out for her by Providence, in order to dispose that elect soul for the specific goal to which her Spouse was calling her: a life of loving abandonment to Him.

Her early orphanage, her journeys through half of Europe, 10 years of turbulent and insidious Court life, but always with her heart fixed on Him, the tempestuous events that broke over her dream to be the Spouse of Christ. These storms would often occur precisely when her dream seemed to be actually becoming a reality. So often on this journey for the most part, she would be alone without any spiritual guide. There were surely times along this arduous path that she felt the lack of strong guidance, but yet, the plan of God for her made itself known to her, to draw her ever onward toward that goal which she had lovingly fixed for herself.

In the generous soul of this exceptional woman, steeped authentically in the vivid sentiment of her own nothingness, the divine voice of her Guest was heard, After an early suspicion, that force of impetus in the inexpressibly sweet stamp, those mysterious words, but so clearly distinct, aroused in her heart the humble and surprised marvel of an extraordinary fact. And she corresponded with the cordiality of a dialogue among friends.

Just when all this happened remains a secret within God. Of these hidden voices, she remained always the jealous custodian, convinced that 'certain interior matters given to her to understand are something like a bottle of precious liquor that if

one disturbs the cork, the goodness evaporates. But, even if she wanted to, how can anyone express certain mystical experiences of the spirit? She once wrote: ‘Certain matters, it seems to me, are so much in the depths of the soul that no one could ever express how they are’.²⁴

Before her meeting Fr. Bertoni, not a little did she have to suffer because of the lack of understanding she had to experience from the one who was directing her, so much did she experience a clear natural reluctance to share spiritual confidences with the Ministers of God. Over the years, this increased, rather than diminished. She then abandoned herself to God’s action Whom she chose as her only Master and Guide in matters of the spirit.

Once again, we read from her notes from her Retreat of 1801: “... Share all with the Lord in Prayer, since He is the true Spiritual Director of souls, and afterwards if the thought comes that something should be shared with the Confessor, then do it...”

7 By Divine Command

Therefore, January 9, 1811 marked a decisive stage on the spiritual journey of Mother Naudet. Moved by the Spirit of God, for the first time she opened the secrets preserved in her own soul to the one who up until then had been her ordinary Confessor, Fr. Gaspar Bertoni. The decision was made by her without any interior contrast. Up until then, she was getting along quite well by herself, that soul in the school directed by her Lord. In her prayer following that first meeting, Jesus Himself dissipated the ultimate uncertainties of that humble Servant. Let us read from the Diary of Mother Leopoldina, on June 10, 1811:

... Last night [following her meeting with Fr. Bertoni] I prayed and this busied me for two and one half hours. This time passed for me in what seemed to be continuous communication. It seemed to me that the Lord was consoling me for having willed that I should submit myself to that external help. I would almost say that all passed in justifying myself, leading me to understand that He would not have asked this of me, of submitting to any other person. And it was only to this one [Fr. Gaspar] that the Lord asked this of me. I simply followed what He wanted of me, and He assured me that this is what He, the Master of my spirit, desired of me. He led me to understand that in order to help me, it would only be of Him that I would ask counsel and trust that He would make sure that I received the proper light. I then, came to understand the good of this and I experienced supreme consolation, that all had come to pass from the Lord Himself, as the Center and Principle of all. It seemed to me that He was saying to me that in order to direct me, there is not needed learning, because only one quality is at work in me, and that is Love.’

At the same time, to His Faithful Servant, the Lord imparted also the same directives. In his *Spiritual Journal*, under the date of June 12, 1811, we read:

...The fact is that you do not have to study for the spiritual direction of ... But, you need to have recourse to the Font of all Light. With this, much good will also come to you.

²⁴ These personal notes of hers are from 1801. They were written during her Retreat. General Archives of the Sisters of the Holy Family. Verona.

You must never precede, but always follow the Lord, as He illumines her, and from you, He will suggest to you, once recourse has been placed, with which He will make her proceed and correspond ...²⁵

As all can see, we are here in the introductory phase of a marvelous journey of two, willed and planned by Heaven.

8. Under the Guardianship of Love

The secret Voice of the Guest, speaks to His Servant, inviting her to protect and defend that Center of her soul where there had already taken up residence – even in sensible manner – His love:

... The day after the Lord led me to understand that in order to guard that Center where He dwells within my soul, it was proper for me to put up a barrier. It seemed, in order to put a name on it, that this should mean mortification. And just as my health did not permit me to do any, I reflected upon this somewhat. But, I know that the Lord was not asking penance of me, but rather protection. This can only be done by means of those virtues which can protect that Charity which the Lord has placed in my soul...

However, the practical realization of that divine command has shadows of uncertainty. There was not disturbance: whoever is vowed to Love, whoever of this Love has made himself an impassioned pilgrim, ought to keep in custody in his saddle-bag the precious breads of confidence and expectancy. In fact, a few days passed and the light was as bright as the sun. There came to her –without him ever being aware of all this – the Minister of God.

... A few days later, since it had been suggested to me to make a particular examen – to consider myself always in the presence of God, and to do that which is known to be of His good pleasure – I came to understand, in beginning to practice this, that it would be that barrier which externally might protect that Center ...

The divine promise finds its seal: the voice of man is in perfect harmony with that of God. For whoever is vowed to Love, Love no longer gives a truce:

... Asking one night of the Lord, after one or two hours of prayer, the permission to be able to sleep, fearing that the length of the vigil might be harmful to my health and that as a result I would not be able to serve Him during the day, and I heard these words in response: 'I want you to be a Slave of Love, not of health.' I did not make any further reply. To live simply in habitual Charity is not enough for one, who has given herself to him, only asks for the grace to love him, and the commitment to please Him in all things... [February 16, 1811].

These loving thrusts want our souls present to every word, every slogan, every least activity. This is to be a love that would vivify the fleeting activity of which life is made up: from beginning to the end of everything. However, nature is always in

²⁵ SA, Doc. 35, p. 670.

ambush. On February 5th, Leopoldina's Diary contains a humble accusation which vibrates with loving compunction:

... To have neglected that vigilance ... which is the sole means with which I can show Him how little gratitude for so much love that He bears toward me ...

Her haste to repair this was immediate. The Minister of God counseled her to repeat the Examen of Conscience each hour, and this most fervent handmaid of the Lord would obey him:

February 8th. This morning, for a while after Communion, in the prayer that I offered, I came to know the great good of the frequent examination that I have undertaken, which recalled to me an even greater vigilance over myself, brought me the contentment of being able to do something that is proof of the desire that I would have of being able to correspond to the graces of the Lord, and to that particularly His love for me, and hence, I experienced so many affections...

9. In the Enclosure of Charity

There was no more time to pay heed to the Barrier, it is necessary to fix the eyes yearning for the Lord in the soul, even more within the Enclosure of Charity. The Minister of God made it easier for Leopoldina to attain to that goal, illuminating for her the way to follow. Up until now, she had looked to the Lord in order to do that which is known to be of His good pleasure. Now, her soul must rivet on Him her gaze in order to make herself a copy as conform as is possible to Him:

... It was said to me to begin the particular examen on these words of St. Gregory²⁶: That soul walks securely in the presence of Christ which in its every action looks constantly toward Him, modeling its own perfection on that of Him, who with His Humanity is the Species of the elect ...

It was this passage from the great **Commentary on First Kings of St. Gregory the Great**, which precisely in those days that Fr. Gaspar was explaining to the Seminarians and Priests in the Diocesan Seminary. And Leopoldina felt happy to 'have one more means in order to consider the redeemer more often', while through her own experience she recognized how 'difficult it was to consider Him without being drawn toward Him.' The flight is made easier, when it was being watched over by the timely counsels of the Minister of God, always in harmony with the secret Voices of her soul's Guest. This constant and perfect recognition has something of the marvelous about it:

... To see that the lord comes always to the support of what His Minister is telling me, and that he indeed follows the Divine Will in my regard in all that he counsels me: I renewed within the desire to obey always further...

²⁶ *Expositio in Primum Regum*, c. 2.

In her every perception of an even deeper appreciation of her own nothingness, in the consequent loving confidence in Him, her ascent continued. Thus, also in those days that were the most difficult because of all the business she had to handle, Leopoldina was by now living in solitude with her God:

... I experienced in this day on which I had many occupations a perfect peace and quiet in all, which seemed to me to come from this continual recall to internal solicitude with my God alone, without Whom nothing can penetrate in me, unless it is He... [October 7, 1812].

Her soul could already see a port, the next to the last: that which precedes that definitive landing on the shores of eternity:

...Now it seems to me that it is no longer me, but that it is He. There is only some remnant of me which I should expunge – and I move to do this in order for Him alone to remain, with nothing of me...

This luminous point of arrival is noted on October 17, 1812. Her young Guide, called expressly by God to direct into deeper Love this privileged soul, resolved with fidelity his delicate mission. In 22 months of illumined spiritual direction, this Adjutant of God deluded neither her Master, nor did he delude this directed soul. What was the secret of this happy result? -

... It is only because this person has followed that which He wants from me...²⁷

10. The Route in the Dark

Now solidly established in pure Charity, Leopoldina had to go through the waves in order to offer the supreme attestation of love for her Divine Spouse, Who wanted her totally abandoned in him. The trials were already at the threshold of her soul and these would not give her respite until that day on which her spouse would invite her to celebrate in the harmony of Heaven that Canticle of Love which was her 'Act of Abandonment', that could flower only from the soul in the anguish of exile. In this final phase, by a mysterious joke of Providence, Fr. Gaspar would be both her light and her cross at the same time. These are the secrets of God which give form to the Saints.

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²⁷ Mother Naudet's hand-written Spiritual Diary, as also part of her letters, also hand-written by the Saint to the Servant of God, are conserved in the Archives of the General House of the Sisters of the Holy Family, in Verona. The notes of the above-mentioned Diary that appear here are taken from the publication of Fr. Joseph Stofella, *The Spiritual Diary of Leopoldina Naudet. The Foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Family and the Venerable Gaspar Bertoni, Founder of the Stigmatines*. In fact, this entire present chapter bespeaks of the dependence on that precious work. Cf. Supplement to the *BERTONIANO*, a periodical reserved to the Stigmatines. 1930, pp. 80; 293-372.

NB Translator's Note: an English translation of Mother Naudet's *Spiritual Diary* may be found on the web-site, under Mother Naudet: www.st-bertoni.com

Chapter 10
From the Plants to the Cultivators
[1808-1812]

1. ‘Yes’ to the Quest

The expression which provides the title for this present chapter is not ours, but is that of Fr. Camillo Cesare Bresciani.²⁸ This seemed to us to be a kind of compendium of the two-fold task which in the City and the Diocese of Verona, Providence chose to entrust to Fr. Bertoni with in the early decades of the tormented 1800’s: **the salvation of the youth** and **the renewal of the ecclesiastic spirit in the Clergy**. Having already pondered the first apostolate, we now wish to shed some light on the second.

In the writings of the Saint, we write: *... It is not necessary to find, but rather to form companions of one’s own zeal and to draw them along, even the most timid ...*²⁹ Before beginning a warm exhortation to his Confreres in the Priesthood, the beautiful maxim was and remained to be for him a vital program of his apostolic soul. The organization of his first Marian Oratory, the rapid flowering of all the others in the city and outside the city, very shortly rendered Fr. Bertoni the center of a solid band of priests and clerics, dedicated to the youthful movement raised up by him.

The plan of a kind of trip to be undertaken with other Priests, probably in the form of a pilgrimage to Our Lady of the Rosary, organized by Fr. Bertoni, in the autumn of 1806 is a clear confirmation of this.³⁰ Nor was this an isolated initiative. Fr. Louis Bragato, a very well informed witness, assures us of this. He was a most pious cleric in those years, and he was much inspired by the actions of the Saint³¹. When the Decree of Suppression came out in May 1807, the Marian Oratories were forced to disappear from the streets and the recreation fields of the city. However, that battle-group of Priests and Clerics, who thought of Fr. Bertoni as their leader, while they were diminished in number, intensified their active spiritual and intellectual activity around him.

The Ecclesiastical Cenacle at the Bertoni home was thus born. First it met at the home in St. Paul’s, then moved to his residence in St. Firmus, always following the path of its animator. It was not an empty academy of vain ‘know-it-all’s’, but it manifested rather an admirable dedication and a committed program of study, all aiming at integrating souls and minds in the service of an innovating apostolate that was much needed. We cannot offer the names of all the participants at those fervent evening gatherings, because a complete list has not come down to us. A few names do emerge.

The unfailing trio from St. Paul’s Parish: Fr. Farinati, Fr. Allegri, Fr. Marani. Fr. Michaelangelo Gramego joined in certainly after Fr. Bertoni left St. Paul’s parish confines for those of St. Firmus. Then there was the already mentioned seminarian, Louis Bragato. Among the very first members in order of time and fervor was the

²⁸ Camilo Cesare Bresciani, *Collection of Funeral Orations*. Vol. II. Verona 1866, p.19.

²⁹ Bertoni Manuscripts, n. 23. *Primum Regum*.

³⁰ Stofella, cf. his cited study in the *BERTONIANO*, 1942, pp. 11-59.

³¹ SA, Doc. 25, pp. 286, f.

Servant of God, Fr. Nicholas Mazza. This last mentioned, from the time of his seminary life, chose in Fr. Bertoni as the Father of his soul, and he served also as his illumined guide for his sacred and profane studies.

2. A Clear Rejection of all Rigorism.

In Verona, the Ecclesiastical Cenacle in the Bertoni home became the center of a shrewd and courageous offensive against the heavy-handed, most pernicious heresy of Jansenism. This heresy, and the spiritual rigorism derived from it, suffocate all loving thrust of the soul toward God with the oppression of a terror that is as false as it is sterile. These evils could only find in Fr. Bertoni [whose soul had deeply experienced the most tender abandonment to Divine Love] the born adversary. These wrongs commanded an intelligent and constant action, directed toward beating back the artificial barriers that have been raised up to separate as much as possible those redeemed by the Redeemer.

He gave no attention to these poisoned enemies whose influence was spread far and wide. Beyond all human regard, for him as a Priest, what was important was his sacred duty to diffuse everywhere the rights of Jesus in souls. In this arduous battle his Ecclesiastical Superiors were with him. In a reorganization of the 'Colleges' for the discussion of Cases of Moral Theology and the Liturgy, in 1809, Bishop Liruti named the 31 year old Fr. Bertoni as the Definitor Theologian for the College of St. Nicholas.³² This was the direct result of the reputation that he was gaining for that Cenacle gathering of Priests, due to the sagacious initiative of the Saint. This had found an immediate, favorable repercussion on the Chancery Office.

The faithfulness to the accomplishment of this new responsibility remains verified by direct documents treating of it and confirmed by a number of episodes that have been handed down to us. The solutions of not a few moral cases – written in good Latin - are able to be read and evaluated even today. His exposition is clear and gifted, his doctrine is solid, which he always refers back to St. Thomas and in the practical solutions, allows itself to present the tempering influence of St. Alphonsus Liguori.³³

The episodes echo that red-hot climate in which the discussions were sometimes held, provoked by the rather threatening intervention on the part of an ecclesiastic present, perhaps infected by Jansenism to some degree. In the meeting of January 14, 1814, the discussion of the Moral case had run its course, and the conclusion was reached among the participants, when a religious whose name, the community to which he belonged, the historians have not related to us, arose to contradict this. He read out a flood full of sophisms, poorly hiding the most noted Jansenistic propositions already condemned by the Church.

Fr. Gaspar listened to him attentive and patient until he had ended. Then, he spoke up: with a firmness that impressed all that gathering of priests, and point by point rebutted the pseudo-dissertation, placing his errors and the misconceptions before the view of all. When then his theological adversary tried to get out of being cornered in this rebuttal, Fr. Gaspar took him on with such an abundance of proofs as

³² SA, Doc. 16, pp. 85, f.

³³ Manoscritti Bertoni, n. 38.

to reduce him to silence and to confusion, while all the others present simply admired his presentation.³⁴

The Jansenists on their part moved against Fr. Gaspar a very heavy and tenacious campaign, in full harmony with the ideas they proposed. Directed against the Saint, they launched vulgar pamphlets in the public ways and even came to the extent of insulting him in his own dwelling. Fr. Gaspar defended himself, opposing this livid violence with his dignified calm. When he felt it might serve some purpose, he would willingly accept a discussion one on one, with that serene peace of mind which aims solely at the triumph of the truth and seeks to illumine the one wandering from it.

One day a real rabid opponent took on the Saint near the Church of St. Firmus Major. Seeing him along the way, he interrogated him suddenly on a point of doctrine somewhat in controversial manner, provoking him to pronounce himself right there on the street. Fr. Bertoni's response was immediate: calm, clear, exhaustive. The adversary seeing himself defeated, did not know how to respond. Having been beaten on the doctrinal level, he sought to gain new ground on a less noble level, by unloading against him a torrent of invectives and villainy. Fr. Bertoni understood that in those insults, doctrine had no place; these were directed simply against him. What difference does it make if one's whole frame trembles? This is the hour of God.

The faithful disciple knew how to find himself with the Master in the dark hours of his own Passion, overwhelmed with shame and insults, and responded with silence, as Jesus did in His dark time. An heroic silence which for the second time was too much for the fragile frame of Fr. Gaspar – once again, he collapsed.³⁵ In this humiliation, this holy desire of his seems to have been heard:

...While Meditating on the Incarnation ... I experienced a very vivid faith, and strong desire of union and of association in the sufferings and shame of Jesus: with the petition of graces in order to suffer and to be disdained for him...
[September 28, 1808].

However, in his great heart as an Apostle, the thought that pained him the most was that this vituperation was inflicted on him by his brother priest, and what bitterness of soul this brought him. Fr. Gaspar loved **Priests**, so much so that **he reserved the best energies of his soul, pouring himself out with no reserve in an apostolate that lasted as long as his life did, directed to recalling to the good way those who might have wandered off, to instill fervor into the tepid, and to encourage the good.**³⁶

³⁴ Summarium, sup. Int., p. 28.

³⁵ SA, Doc. 26, p. 532.

³⁶ **NB: Translator's Note: in Fr. Bertoni's Apostolic Mission, a central aspect was reserved for ministry [as confessor, and personal retreats, spiritual direction] among his brother Priests and Seminarians. This ministry lasted as long as his life did, as Fr. Ceresatto reminds us – and is codified in his *Original Constitutions* :**

SEMINARY

- privileged Stigmatine apostolate 164
- chairs of teaching in s. accepted 67

The official beginning of this methodical apostolate goes back in his life to the autumn of 1810³⁷. St. Gaspar was assigned to preach for the first time a course of Spiritual Exercises to the Seminarians, and to a substantial group of Priests of the City and Diocese of Verona. The result were of such efficacy that the 32 year old Priest was immediately entrusted with the spiritual direction of the Diocesan Seminary, with the task of preaching the regular annual and other retreats there, as well as the monthly Days of Recollection, the Sunday, feast day and holiday Meditations and Instructions during the year. The Canons of the Cathedral also had recourse to him for their College of Acolytes.

3. The Desolated Vineyard and the Drowsy Workers

When Fr. Bertoni began his apostolate among the Clergy of the Diocese, the Seminary of Verona was in the midst of an exhausting renewal from a very destructive financial and moral collapse. This ruin was brought about by a number of factors: one of course, was the truly deleterious example of priests who were all involved in the outcome of the French Revolution, and they showed much enthusiasm for the 'new times', and not even keeping their names, in some instances, from the Massonic lodges. From the end of 1807, the Diocesan Authorities had entrusted its direction to a man who for his excellent qualities of mind and heart, for the energy of will in his character, showed all the requirements to become its providential reformer: Fr. Louis Alberghini.

The appointment of Fr. Alberghini as Rector was the first step of the urgent reform: the choice then of Fr. Bertoni as the Spiritual Director of the Seminary [a choice due to the hidden influence of Fr. Louis Trevisani³⁸], smoothed the path for ultimate success.

The plan of that first and also for other Retreats, the copious material that collected outlines for meditations and instructions, preached between 1810 and 1812 by the Saint to the Priests of the Diocese, for the Seminarians and for the College of Acolytes, offer a synthesis that proved quite successful in this arduous apostolate, that imposes upon us at this point a certain pause for the reflection it merits. Only for those who would take the time to look over those many pages will feel taken up by their apostolic spirit that inflamed his priestly soul.

The apostolate among the Clergy Fr. Gaspar felt immediately that this was a particular mission entrusted to him from on High. Otherwise we would be at a loss to explain his uncanny tone of authority that he employs throughout [... *I have the honor and the duty to say to you...*], nor the frank approach with which he analyzes and denounces in the Priests of his time, for their sins, their lack of commitment and their weaknesses. There seems to have danced within his heart that

So many of his 'private conversations' were aimed at spiritual direction, directed retreats of priests - **STIGMATINE APOSTOLATE: 163/2 255 277, f.**

³⁷ **NB: Translator's Note: like building blocks, these aspects of his Apostolic Mission flowered at the behest of his ecclesiastical Superiors: 1802: the youth [his Pastor]; 1810, Religious and Priests [his Bishop] – all summarized in his *Apostolic Missionaries* codified in his *Original Constitutions: 1816.***

³⁸ Bresciani, o.c., p. 106.

counsel of St. Paul to Timothy: ... **proclaim the message and, welcome or unwelcome, insist on it. Refute falsehood, correct error, call to obedience - but do all with patience and with the intention of teaching** ... [2 Tm 4:1, f.].

We would even dare to say more: there is something prophetic in that impassioned appeal of the Preacher when he inexorably demolishes all that there is in Priests of the worldly and merely human spirit, in order to re-build there in their souls, unencumbered now from sin and from the trash of sins, the wonderful structure of that holiness required of their state. In his spirit of renewal of the ecclesiastic spirit, it might be said that Fr. Bertoni might constantly have his eyes of his soul riveted on this well-known passage of Jeremiah: ... **There! I am putting My words into your mouth. Look, today I am setting you over nations, and over kingdoms, to tear up, knock down,, to destroy, to overthrow and to plant** ... [Jr 1:9 b, f.]. His writings seem to so echo in a faithful way that action, and they vibrate still today with his bold program.

This seems all the more true in that this biblical passage just referred to here was cited and commented on by Fr. Bertoni in his Instructions to the Seminarians, precisely where he is presenting this theme:

...The Vocation of the New Ministers of the New Spirit, called by the innovating and restoring Spirit of all. Their Vocation is to renew and to restore their priestly ministry and through this, the Church, by abolishing the old, merely human spirit, exciting the new and the divine, in the ineffable rectitude of the First Stone ...³⁹

4. The Renewal

The Meditations and the **Instructions on the First Book of Kings** [1 S today] is a concatenation of trumpet blasts and recalls for the urgent reform of the priestly spirit. Fr. Bertoni was not one who when confronted with such ruin and mediocrity, would fold his arms in discouragement: he courageously denounced the failures, very wisely pointed out the remedies: wept over the betrayals, but inspired trust and resolution. His voice was one of an incessant and trusting appeal to his confreres who had wandered off course, but was one also who shook up the tepid and those without energy, when with fervor and also in a more impassioned manner, he would repeat his challenging word of order: **Renewal for the sake of renewal – and sanctification in order to be sanctified.**

His bold plan of reform bore the seal of the time: 1810-1811. The Church once again was reliving her indefinite Passion under Pontius Pilate of its time: this time he was called Napoleon, known as the 'Great.' May God pardon him. Pius VII, after his unworthy arrest on July 6, 1809, remained at the whim of the despot who impeded him from all free contact with the ecclesiastical world. The astute Napoleon thus hoped to be able to bend the Cardinals, Bishops and Prelates to his ambitious goals. Among the faithful and the clergy, the sense of loss was enormous.

In a period precisely in which so many Priests, even good ones, sent themselves somewhat cut off from the bonds of unity with the Roman Pontiff, Fr. Bertoni's plan of ecclesiastical *reform* began with an essential premise: full and total adherence to the Vicar of Christ. We read from one of his pages:

³⁹ *Instructions on 1st Kings.* Bertoni Manuscripts, Folder, n. 23.

...This is the Plan of Reform through which, in the indefectible firmness of the First Rock, the old minister is reformed and is ascribed to the new...

- [I] *The open confession of faith without weakness and fear.***
- [II] *Imitation of the Passion of Christ without the comforts of life, disdaining even death itself.***
- [III] *Join in with authentic Priests to see together for the glory of God without being isolated out of self love or love for one's own family bonds.***
- [IV] *Desire Heaven, and no longer the revenues of this earth, or the honors of this world.*** ⁴⁰

In the final analysis, right after the suppression of the religious Orders, sanctioned and very rapidly made the law of the land by the Napoleonic laws [April-May 1810], the bold program inspired the diocesan Clergy to an integral return to the practice of the evangelical counsels. And the ideal of priestly holiness with a view to an heroic apostolate very soon came back to animate the Clergy, after the wandering of that unhappy decade. In this time of spiritual malaise in which many ecclesiastics of his time debated, Fr. Bertoni was able to perceive a secret yearning to go back to the abandoned summits. And he enlisted all those experiencing this:

...God begins to abolish and destroy manifestly the ancient and human spirit, both in the faithful as well as in the ministry, carefully inspecting the grain and separating it ... ⁴¹

The fraternal invitation for renewal and to collaborate in this renewal program, through Fr. Bertoni's words, became an ardent heart-beat of divine charity which embraces all, even the most distant. The lines dedicated to illustrate the paternal solicitude of God in initiating the encounter with a fallen Priest, do indeed touch one's soul:

... Almost immediately following even a hint of being converted, and After the first steps have been taken in this return, God hastens forward with His grace. For that little humiliation he sees to it that the first restorations and almost the outlines are established for a better way of life, there proceeds an example that edifies many souls. From one's sermons there blossoms forth an abundant fruit after only those first days of silence. And all of this is done in order to lure one into carrying through on the enterprise [of each one's own spiritual renewal].

Oh, who would ever realize how much do the souls of Pastors stand in the heart of God! Who would not further the loving goals of His Providence! If God would do this much for one who is not yet really converted, but only would hint at the first steps toward conversion, what would He not do with an authentic and perfect convert? We see this in Peter... ⁴²

How difficult in that wasted and disorientated society that the temptation to pessimism and inertia remained always a threat to entrap the thrust also of those most

⁴⁰ ib.

⁴¹ ib.

⁴² ib.

willing. Pessimism, however, is not the sphere of the saints. The calamity of the times, far from discouraging, should ever ore inflame a genuine apostle of Jesus Christ:

... those whom God calls in this time He disposes them to great services for his glory... [provided, of course, that they wish to docilely to abandon their soul to the transforming action of His grace] ... **We cannot even think of what God would do with us and how much He would achieve in us, as we are the pupils of His eyes, if we did not place an obstacle to His grace, but if we would remit ourselves freely and totally in His hand...**⁴³

This is already the note of his own Spiritual Journal, but reappears here with an addition which is a canticle of confidence in the merciful tenderness of God toward His Ministers, as we are *the pupils of His eyes*.

The 'reform' of the ecclesiastic spirit which Fr. Bertoni proclaimed with all the ardor of his apostolic soul, in the City and Diocese of St. Zeno was coming into realization with quickened stages. Fr. Bresciani, who had described the Seminary in 1807 as a 'desolate vine-yard', in 1841, without the slightest shadow of rhetorical exaggeration, could praise it 'for the splendor of its re-born ecclesiastic education'⁴⁴. And Fr. Sommacompagna, around 1815, could refer to it as a monastery of monks, rather than a retreat of young ecclesiastics.⁴⁵

To attribute all this to Fr. Bertoni's presence would mean to commit a real wrong to the objective conscience which he had of his own personal mission. True men of God are simply incapable of reserving for themselves any monopoly at all. Both very zealous diocesan Shepherds, Bishops Liruti and Grasser, contributed efficaciously to the rapid and complete re-healing of the Veronese Clergy. They did this through an elect band of hard-working and holy Priests, such as Fr. Leonardi, Fr. Fortis, Fr. Provolo, Fr. Steeb, Fr. Mazza, Fr. Bresciani, glorious standards of the Veronese Church who knew how to chirp in harmonious accord to the divine breath of charity. Divine Providence did reserve for Fr. Bertoni the honor of pointing out in spited manner the path and the mission to sustain it even to the very last days of his long existence.

5. Guide and Recall

The infirmities that came to him rendered less frequent his fruitful appearances in the Seminary. However, as these diminished, there increased at his home the visits of Clerics and young Priests, who by now knew that for anyone in need, he could be approached in order to enkindle and to increase the flame of priestly zeal. In 1820, Bishop Liruti appointed Fr. Gaspar the **Examiner of Ecclesiastical Vocations**. Bishop Grasser re-confirmed this appointment. Thus, for almost 20 consecutive years the young candidates to the Altar matured their irrevocable decision in the light of his counsels.

⁴³ ib

⁴⁴ Bresciani, *Funeral Orations*, Vol. II. On the death of Fr. Louis Alberghini, p. 95.

⁴⁵ Sommacompagna manuscripts. Communal Library. Folder n. 113.

Those for whom their scrutiny offered the occasion for their first meeting with the Saint, as Fr. Giacobbe tells us, remained ‘subjected to the unction of his zeal and charity that shone through him from sparkling eyes, from his face enkindled and with his attitude of full attention, surprised with the supreme gift of an immediate penetration into the very depths of their souls’⁴⁶. To return to him became for many of them a necessity. Here the testimony of his first biographer acquires a special value, as in this, he is making known his own personal experience.

In carrying out this delicate office, Fr. Gaspar employed ‘zeal and charity in comforting’ those who in this process of sifting he believed were called by God, but also with firmness in excluding others, resisting impassibly their reasoning, influence they might bring to bear, and the recommendations they might receive. And often enough he would receive sooner or later the serene gratitude of those who were not approved. Very often, once their ambitions were unmasked, they believed that the inflexibility of the Saint was the right path for them, and they recognized that he was much moved by God.

After he had withdrawn to the Stimate [1816], his apostolate among the diocesan clergy did not experience any slowing down. He was always tireless in preaching retreats, both to groups as well as to individuals, to seminarians or to Priests, either in the little Chapel of the Transfiguration, next to his poor room, or in his room itself, from his bed of his long and very painful illnesses.

It would be no exaggeration to state that Fr. Bertoni, in his city and Diocese, for as long as he lived, **exercised the most powerful challenge to priestly souls**. The most beautiful prodigies worked by Grace in this apostolate, through St. Gaspar, remain a secret known only to God. However, two episodes of this era have come down to us.

6. Through Less Traveled Paths

The unpleasant story of Fr. Gaziero merits here at least a reference: it serves for nothing other than an implicit confirmation of the illumined dexterity of the Saint in guiding souls, as a witness of the unconditioned trust placed in him by his Superiors in his counsels and decisions. Here is the story in brief.

During the days of a Retreat, which would be offered just before the reception of Holy Orders, the young and very pious Seminary, one Joseph Gaziero of Soave, was the victim of a deep disturbance which, overwhelming him, had a deep impact on his even physically, as was evident. He returned home to his family. The affectionate appeals addressed to him by his Superiors and by Bishop Grassler himself, who tried to bring him some peace, and bring him back to the Seminary. All were ineffective in overcoming his indecision.

However, just a single word pronounced by Fr. Bertoni in charity- persuaded the hesitant cleric to continue his ascent toward the altar. In that correct soul, but one who was easily the victim of anguish of spirit, Fr. Gaspar had received a deep insight. After a year’s absence, the young man returned to the Seminary, bringing with him a letter from Fr. Bertoni, with the request that this be shown to his Superiors and kept with him always. In that sheet of paper, Fr. Gaspar prohibited young Gaziero from participating

⁴⁶ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 407, ff.

in the future in annual retreats, commanding him rather to distance himself whenever the Last Ends would be preached. For his daily meditations, Fr. Gaspar prescribed to him to use only the well known book, *Manna for the Soul*.

He remained faithful to these particular directives of the Saint, and so Fr. Gaziero lived serenely and contented for 35 years, as an exemplary priest and pastor. However, in 1867, he was struck by the bite of a poisoned accusation: a confrere of his accused him of liberalism to his Bishop, Louis di Canossa. The Diocesan pastor, badly informed, relieved that he had discovered a confirmation of this accusation from the fact that Fr. Gaziero always stood out through the years by his methodical absence from the obligatory annual retreat.

The Bishop wrote him a very strong letter, threatening him among other things, with suspension if in that year and in the following years he did not present himself for the required Retreat. Because of the terrible sensitivity of this pious Priest, that accusation and the strong letter from his Bishop were mortal blows. He fell ill. In an indescribable bitterness of soul, the poor man found in Fr. Cajetan Giacobbe, his close confidant and friend, one in whom he could confide. It was through the hand-written letter of Fr. Bertoni, no deceased for many years, that was sent to the Bishop. Once he had realized that a misunderstanding had occurred, Bishop di Canossa sent Fr. Giacobbe to him, with grave concern, to the bed-side of his afflicted friend to comfort him, encourage him to follow from then on with tranquility of conscience, the directives of Fr. Gaspar. With his superior insight. Fr. Gaspar had understood the particular needs of this delicate soul.

In February of the following year, the poor man died. His regret was that he had not made known in good time the special letter he had received years before for his good friend, Fr. Bertoni.⁴⁷

7. A Bridge over the Abyss.

In the early days of July 1813, in Verona, the name of Angelo Allegri was on the lips of all, because of the drama of a priestly life that had been profaned by apostasy and by crime⁴⁸. He was an ex-religious and priest, who from the muddy waters of avarice, he found an easy and short cut to his crime. He was hoping to inherit the goods of a step-brother of his, he had prepared poison for him to eat, and by a tragic error, it served to kill his own mother.

Far from any salutary remorse, his condemnation weighed heavily on his heart, hardened as he developed a paroxysm of hatred and despair. While awaiting execution, pious and zealous Priests, with their fraternal hearts, approached him in his cell, in the confidence that the unfortunate might find salvation, but casting himself ship-wrecked into the sea of Divine Mercy. However, at every visit there followed a rejection that was ever more disturbing, and to every invitation, his response was a

⁴⁷ SA, Doc. 33, p. 640.

⁴⁸ In the Chancery Office files of Verona [Prot. N.1806, December 13], there is registered the laicization of one Fr. Angelo Allegri, dei Geronimini. In the register of Deaths [State Archives, July 8, 1813, there may be found this note; ‘Angelo Allegri, the son of the late Bartholomew, and the late Victoria Trevisani, ex-Friar of the suppressed Monastery of Victoria, was condemned to death on March 27, 1813. This sentence was carried out on July 8, 1813.’

decided ‘no’, with insults of horrendous blasphemies. It seemed as though nothing could be done.

In the meantime, all were talking. This case even disturbed the civil authorities. Anthony Smancini [Prefect of the Department of the Adige] came in person to visit the Vicar General, Monsignor Dionigi, in order to solicit from him a certain provision that might put an end to the public scandal. The Vicar thought of Fr. Bertoni. To medicate certain deep wounds in one’s soul, there is needed the gentle hand of a Saint. And the Saint responded immediately, even though the time was late.

Fr. Bertoni’s visit to the condemned man was arranged for the following morning. That night, Fr. Bertoni could only spend it in a vigil of prayer, i.e., with utmost confidence, he exercised his ‘violence’ toward Heaven for the return of that wayward priest brother, for he, too, had been a minister of God, *the pupil of His eyes*. At dawn, he offered Mass for the unfortunate man, certainly one of those Masses in which the Disciple and the Master talked together.

At the prison, in the precise moment when Fr. Gaspar was on his way toward the cell of the condemned man, this prisoner, overwhelmed by desperate anger, rejected furiously all visits from Priests, who had presented themselves to him in an extreme attempt to save him. However, as soon as he recognized Fr. Gaspar at a distance, he cut off half way in his own throat one more imprecation. His wide open eyes changed their expression, and they shone with a new anguish, a sudden deep sigh of liberation. And his voice came forth in deep sobs to bless the one whom the Mercy of God had sent to him to lift him up out of the abyss.

In the Sacrament of Divine Pardon, that abominable life was renewed in an act of repentance poured forth from the depths of his contrite soul. In his tears, he implored incessantly pardon of God and of his fellow man.⁴⁹

Perhaps never before had the voice of the Saint beat so profoundly with charity and tenderness, as in pronouncing over that poor soul, almost annihilated under the weight of his own sins. *I absolve you!* These words renewed him. Perhaps never before as in this instance had the hand of the saint so trembled at the flood of a secret joy, as in tracing over that head, bowed down now, the sign of the Cross, and to seal that soul for all eternity with the merciful pardon of God.

On Jul 8, 1813, in Piazza Navona, Allegri rose up onto the scaffold. The scandal was in great part repaired. That conversion in Verona was considered to be miracle. But in order to bring it about, Grace had chosen Fr. Bertoni, which surprised no one:

... We cannot even think of what God would do with us, and how much he would achieve in us, and for us, as we are the pupils of His eyes, if we did not place any obstacle to His grace ...

Fr. Bertoni did not place any obstacle: he gave his all.

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⁴⁹ SA, Doc. 26, pp. 485-486.

Chapter 11
In the Canticle of Abandonment in God
[1812-1834]

1. A Necessary Preface

Before illustrating that which in Fr. Bertoni was the coronation of his holy apostolate [the Religious Family founded by him], we think it opportune to approach to some extent his soul, in order to garner there in the part of his life which extends from October 1812, until August of 1834, those definitive lines of his spirituality.

There is no second *Spiritual Journal* to guide us on this decisive pathway of his soul, in his itinerary traced the 'Master' for his faithful servant. This will involve pondering the rather copious correspondence between Fr. Bertoni and Mother Naudet⁵⁰. Of the Letters written by the saint to the Servant of God and kept in the Archives, the first one is from November 1812. And the final note in his *Spiritual Journal* is June 28, 1813.

For the knowledge of Fr. Bertoni's spirituality, the point of chronological connection of two documents does not offer in and of itself any absolute guarantee to that continuity of development upon which only an attentive examination can decide. However, in our view, this examen ends in a positive manner. The dominant spiritual attitude that the letters to Mother Naudet reveal in Fr. Bertoni [her confidante, for her loving abandonment in God], more is found in germ, in the *Spiritual Journal*. What is very revealing is this note:

12th OCTOBER 1808

[63.] *Whoever is drawn by the Spirit to a way of greater perfection - as it is that of being totally abandoned to God, - should not resent others who are of lower virtue and use lesser means [for their perfection], which are also good.*⁵¹

This expression, **that of being totally abandoned to God**, points out what would be in Fr. Bertoni, on that date, the secure orientation of soul.

In December 1808, he wrote: *Let God alone be sought and nothing else; not consolations, not pleasures*⁵². On the 16th July 1809, he wrote:

⁵⁰ The veneration of Mother Leopoldina toward the Father of her soul is evidenced in the 190 Letters [some of them brief notes, including just some fragments] written to her by Fr. Gaspar, from the end of 1812, until mid-1834. She died in August of that year. For the most part, these are letters of spiritual direction; they offer counsels on the Rules of the Institute of the Holy Family **[NB: Translator's Note: there is an English translation of her Original Constitutions in the website: www.st.bertoni-com]**. Here and there can be found biographical indications of the particular moment in which they were written. A number of these, united to the few remains of the correspondence between Fr. Bertoni - Fr. Bragato make up in some manner for the lack of any *Spiritual Journal* at this stage of his life, the mature years of Fr. Gaspar. As for the Letters of Mother Leopoldina Naudet, there could only be found a very few of them and some fragments.

⁵¹ SA, Doc, p. 662.

[139.] Lose the habit of doing your own will. Do anything as moved by God's will with the intention of pleasing Him and giving Him honor. (Scupoli, *Addition to the Spiritual Combat*)⁵³

These are the principles that offer the prelude for this goal which is now near at hand, towards which his spirit is extended. Moved by grace toward this blessed goal, Fr. Gaspar arrived by following the paths of Ignatian asceticism. This brings the human soul to a holy 'indifference', through which one does not want *on its part, health rather than illness, wealth rather than poverty, honors rather than dishonor, a long life, rather than a short one...*⁵⁴ In brief, this leads the soul to the threshold of Holy Abandonment. This is that spiritual attitude which better has us understand and to love the soul of St. Gaspar Bertoni.

2. An Unequal Pace

From the time of his Mother Brunora's death, there was no one to temper in a loving manner in her son, his thirst for penance, his mortified life in him had assumed of increased rigor. **The very varied activities of the Sacred Ministry**, the assiduous vigils at the Canossian Retreat and in the Seminary, the little rest that he took, and this with chosen frequency, and often on the floor of his own room with the foot-stool as his pillow, his little nourishment, the long hours consecrated to his piety and study⁵⁵ - all this, little by little had weakened the once robust frame. For anyone committed to Love, this love allows no truce. He seemed to have a thirst for mortification, also in its external form, that was never slaked, this was one of the aspects of the man which the more impressed those who had the good fortune to live along-side the Saint. The biographers refer to this, but perhaps they made the mistake of not referring sufficiently to the secret flame from which this proceeded.

It seems that this flame proceeded from his 'great desire for union and for association with the most shameful sufferings of Jesus'⁵⁶, so that the 'portrait' that his soul was committed to drawing of Him within itself, might succeed as the most perfect possible⁵⁷. He was totally committed to such a vibrant program, that it was logical that also in the area of external mortification Fr. Gaspar was ensnared in the usual 'imprudence' of the Saints. The result was that by mid-October 1812, his body cried out that it had had enough, but this was in a tone so severe that it seemed to be the death-sentence, without any possibility of an appeal. What he suffered was a very grave attack of military fever, which [as appears in the Spiritual Diary of Mother Leopoldina Naudet], reached its crisis on October 26th.⁵⁸

⁵² ib., p. 665,

⁵³ ib, p. 667.

⁵⁴ Bertoni Manuscripts, n. 16. Retreat to the Clergy – 1810.

⁵⁵ SA, Doc. 16, p. 417.

⁵⁶ SA, Doc.35: His *Spiritual Journal*, September 27, 1808, p. 660.

⁵⁷ ib, February 26, 1809 – p. 667.

⁵⁸ Stofella, *The Spiritual Diary of Leopoldina Naudet...* o.c., in: *BERTONIANO 1930*, p. 332.

Then, the disease gradually diminished bringing such a sense of relief about the middle of the following month, to the happy surprise of all who cared for him. It seemed as though the ship-wreck in some manner was brought to the shore. The first letter of the convalescing Fr. Gaspar to Mother Leopoldina is dated November 16, 1812.

3. Between Life and Death

The serious illness of Fr. Gaspar was a worry to half of Verona. The possible departure of this man was looked upon a city calamity and to avoid, there was an authentic mobilization of generous and pious souls. Public prayers were raised up in various Churches of the city, arousing a moving plebiscite of affection and esteem⁵⁹. The parishes of St. Paul in Campo Marzio and St. Firmus, tied to the apostolate of young Fr. Bertoni, the youth of the city, the Marian Oratories, the Seminarians, the Acolytes of the Cathedral, the pious women and young girls living in the protection of the Canossian Retreat – all these souls were committed to bring 'violence' to bear on Heaven to obtain a favor, which brought its pressure on all in an equal manner.

During those days of the more serious phases of his terrible illness, some young Priests and a few seminarians, offered their services, forming a kind of crown at his bed-side, which manifested in their trepidation a deep sentiment that each of them had for him of sincere reverence and filial affection. For some years, Fr. Gaspar had given them a secret word which bound them to a work that he hoped to bring to realization for the greater glory of God and for the good of the Church.

In that sick-room also, very punctual every evening, would be the visit of a vigorous old man: the most beloved figure of a Priest and Master, whom the seriously ill man had known from the years now long gone of his own youth: Fr. Louis Fortis. Often gently bending over the patient, the ex-Jesuit often prayed in a soft voice, but clear, that beautiful in which the soul offers itself to God, abandons itself to a boundless trust into the loving arms of God:

.... Take, o Lord, and receive through the hands of St. Ignatius, all my liberty, understanding and will. All that I have and possess. You, Lord, have given all to me. I now give it back to You, O Lord. All of it is Yours. Dispose of it according to Your Will. Give me Your love and Your grace for that is enough for me ...⁶⁰

And this is what sufficed. The serious illness of 1812, which came upon him so suddenly, was certainly, among the most efficacious lessons on holy abandonment imparted to Fr. Gaspar by the Divine Pedagogue⁶¹.

⁵⁹ SA, Doc. 20, p. 138; Doc. 26, pp. 416, f.

⁶⁰ **NB: Translator's Note: this is a slight paraphrasing of St. Ignatius' prayer, his *Suscipe* - cf. *Spiritual Exercises*, n. 234.**

⁶¹ This lesson [of full and loving docility to the Divine Will] it seems that the Lord wanted to repeat this to me in my ears, when I was so seriously sick in these recent days. Every evening, He had me hear from the lips of my old Teacher, Fr. Louis Fortis, offer that excellent prayer which I followed in my heart .. *Receive, o Lord, through the hands of St. Ignatius, all my freedom, etc.* [cf. SA, Doc. 35, Letter of November 26, 1812, p. 68].

4. *In the School of God*

Fr. Bertoni reached the heroic practice precisely because he had learned how to be an attentive and loving disciple in the School of God. The infallible traces of the Divine Instruction are in him the dominant biblical language in his letters which are the guide of this present Chapter. There is simply no spiritual situation that does not find its adequate commentary in Sacred Scripture, which had become the perennial font of light and by this time, the almost exclusive nourishment of his soul.

The sudden collapse of his once strong physical nature, but which had been used to excess, rather than just facing, made way for his authentic physiognomy, by despoiling it of every element that might induce him to illusion. If Fr. Bertoni had been only a man of action, that cruel sickness which even with the salutary care he received, would have brought him truly to the extremes. The traces of all this would stay with him for the remaining 40 years of his life, and would have made of him one who was washed up for good. On the contrary, though, from that holy external and much mortified dynamism, there flowed an even more profound activity that was all spiritual. This rendered him an even more refined collaborator of God, in his work of working out in himself and in others the marks of Christian perfection. In the light of an Ignatian thought, Fr. Gaspar had for some time uncovered the admirable simplicity from the divine plan in working out the sanctification of the soul.

The sole Architect of all holiness is God Himself. God, ever ready to work wonders in every soul who does not place hindrances to his divine action. Fr. Bertoni committed himself to this divine plan with all his soul, contributing his collaboration in absolute docility: he would thus live out personally a canticle of abandoned love to the Loving Providence of God.

5. *In the Game of Providence*

His first letters to Mother Leopoldina assure us by their reverberation in St. Gaspar of the ineffable impression of finding himself under the dolorous, but intelligence bearing of the Divine Farmer⁶², who was gradually detaching me from the world of persons and activity, in which up to that present moment, he had been completely absorbed.

Would his first meeting he had in his convalescence with the Bishop been the occasion for his appointing the priest to even more delicate tasks, that would require him take leave of the Canossian Retreat? He explained to Mother Leopoldina that she should not be disturbed at all about this, because *perhaps God is taking from her work a great obstacle and impediment... All concurs to the good for one who loves God ...* [His own response in all this was] *to say with every affection: 'Thy will be done.'* and *since it was to serve his Divine Majesty that I came to St. Joseph's, and so with that same will to serve Him, I take my leave ...*⁶³

The incidents and the disappointments, the more they seemed to take human light from the future, so much the more did they render in Fr. Bertoni a more vigorous hope in that God Who makes all concur unto good for those who love Him. And he

⁶² SA, Doc. 35. Letter of November 16, 1812, p. 676.

⁶³ ib.

was so taken over by that ‘blessed trust’ that is most efficacious in comforting and sustaining anyone who in the anguish of trial might experience the impression of traveling in the dark:

... Do not be afraid, Reverend Mother, in Paradise it will always be a very clear day. You will not be able there to lose sight of your Lord. But, for as long as we are on this earth, there are days and nights that succeed one another. May you follow His path; even by night, the lord will make sure some star shines ...

With surprising assuredness he indicated the tactic that the Master preferentially follows in attracting certain souls to Himself. A little at his own expense, Fr. Gaspar had already learned to recognize God’s loving joking with souls who pertain to Him in a more intimate manner:

...While I was quite ill, and after other prohibitions had come to me, it seemed to me that the Lord was making use of me for one of His jokes of His loving Providence, with which He now is exercising you. At that time, this matter kept me quite content, as it does now, since I could never have pretended to displease you, due to the motive of it seemed to me to know what is pleasing in His Divine Majesty and of greater use that would result for you...⁶⁴

As for the object – and no longer just the instrument - of God’s joke, the Saint’s attitude does not change; because rather than just a sentiment of profound humility provides harmony and robustness to the canticle for the soul that is abandoned and trusting in the ‘Divine Providence’, to Whom serve equally

... all things, both prosperous as well as adverse, and the good wills as well as those that are perverse, of human beings ... If I did not have so many sins that should make me tremble, I would now have more than ever a better taste, while since I have done almost nothing, I am just watching what the Lord is doing. Oh how good He is! Oh how He surpasses our every praise! We, however, should never cease to praise Him in so far as we can, because this is what He deserves, and it is only right that He should be admired, blessed, loved and praised by these wretched, lowly vermin...May He be thanked, blessed and loved forever...!⁶⁵

Docility to the action of God, his confident abandonment in Him, makes no accusation of wavering, not even under the most bitter torments of his physical pain. A serious and very painful infection in his leg is described by him as *a little tumor*, in 1821. This would immobilize him for 8 years, and almost continuously between his arm chair and his bed. Some of those surgical interventions [and just think of the surgery of those times!] had to be as deep as the bone, and they are beyond count. Fr. Giacobbe stated that there were more than 200 of them. In a letter to Mother Leopoldina Naudet, almost incidentally, he hints at the absolute fidelity to his supreme torture on the crucible of an extremely painful, but loving experience:

⁶⁴ ib.

⁶⁵ ib, Letter of January 15, 1813, p. 688.

... the present life, beyond serving God and suffering for Him, is seen through experience not to have any other allurements that would commit our desires ...

⁶⁶

This is the tract:

... The Lord keeps me in bed, and under the irons and the knives; may be blessed. 'I will bless the Lord in all times.' As long as He is served and this suffices for me. However, I do recommend myself to your prayers, so that God might continue in me the patience He grants me. 'Without Me you can do nothing'... ⁶⁷

Crosses, adversities, physical sufferings for Fr. Gaspar remain always:

...the better portion which God reserves for those dear to Him; this is not the mouthful for all... ⁶⁸ [rather, this is the most suitable diet for the soul, which in the spirit of Holy Abandonment where one is...] **a bit up, and a bit down, a bit straight and a bit bent, but go ahead in the wake of Him Who precedes us with His Cross on His shoulders ...** ⁶⁹

6. Loving Confidence

The formal commitment of the soul possessed by Divine Love and totally abandoned in him, Fr. Gaspar reduced it essentially to emptying out and defending the soul from all that might 'impede', or even to slow down God's action. With this, then one is called to collaborate with the divine action, offering

... here on earth [through prayer] the perfect and perennial sacrifice and the holocaust of oneself which the Blessed Spirits and the Saints in Heaven before God offer.... ⁷⁰ Of prime urgency, therefore, it to prepare one's soul to conquer the **first nature**, so that **it does not impede the holy and stupendous effects of the second nature communicated to us by the grace of adoption of the children of God ...** ⁷¹

In the last analysis, all is reduced to establishing the soul in the loving disposition to carry out in every instant

... not in part, but in everything, the Divine Will, in what pertains to our sanctification, and what is useful for our neighbor and His Glory ... ⁷²

This is the ideal disposition for the action of God:

⁶⁶ ib., Letter of August 24, 1813, p. 718.

⁶⁷ ib. Letter of May 11, 1827, p. 727.

⁶⁸ ib. Letter of December 14, 1812, p. 687.

⁶⁹ ib., Letter of December 14, 1812, p. 687.

⁷⁰ ib., Letter of December 5, 1812, p. 689.

⁷¹ ib., Letter of February 1813, p. 691.

⁷² ib., Letter of 21 December 1812, p. 689.

... May His Divine will reign, also free in our hearts, and that there be verified in all its meaning: 'The reign of God is within you'; 'I the Lord your God strong and zealous.' This is the love of God, active and committed to so take over our hearts, that God alone might reign there as a free Master and that He not remain just a Guest with His hands tied...⁷³

Defects, weaknesses and the miseries of soul for Fr. Bertoni do not already constitute an obstacle, but rather offer a right for 'loving confidence':

... Our defects were already well known to the Lord, even before He invited us. And if these are now becoming better known before our own eyes, we should also even more to have known His Goodness and Omnipotence; so, it is necessary and dutiful for us that together with our humility, confidence should also increase...⁷⁴

Let us allow that loving confidence should mature its attitudes. This will become **filial confidence**, sure in the maternal love of God:

... An infant is never surer than when it is asleep in the arms of its mother, and abandons every thought and solicitude about itself ...

This loving confidence will become **a spousal abandonment**:

...Let us freely allow God to enter and take possession of this soul which He loves and seeks to unite to Himself. We know the time of His visit; let us put aside all creatures and our senses and not disturb this soul when she reposes in her Lord. Not is anything else required. In His time, she will produce a fruit that is so precious, so high, so noble – worthy of nuptials that are so holy, so sublime...⁷⁵

This is the sublime style of mystics who express through images the experience of communion with the Inexpressible. The practice of loving Abandonment has brought Fr. Gaspar to holiness.

7. The Refusal which was not a Whim

In June of 1819, Fr. Gaspar ended – like a lightning bolt out of a clear sky - his spiritual direction of Mother Naudet. His decision did not have any shadow of uncertainty. One sole letter of spiritual direction was the exception, specifically granted to confirm her Rule⁷⁶.

The repeated and prudent appeals made by the Servant of God were to no end. Certain letters of hers in this long period show the deep regret of her soul in finding herself simply bereft of that comfort of a sure guide as was the 'Minister of God' to

⁷³ ib., Letter of December 5, 1812, p. 683.

⁷⁴ ib., Letter of June 28, 1813, p. 711.

⁷⁵ Ib., Letter of February 1813, p. 691.

⁷⁶ Ib., Letter of January 10, 1828, pp. 727, ff. **[NB: Translator's Note: an English translation of her Original Constitutions may be found on this website: www.st-bertoni.com].**

her, the one whom the Lord had expressly assigned to her. There is an echo of her sorrowful cry, but one that is full of love and hope, which dominates her 'Act of Abandonment' of 1820: *I need a guide for myself and for this enterprise; My love, you think it over.*⁷⁷

And yet, the Saint remained firm in his decision. He responded to the Servant of God, who was seeking some light in the choice of a new Spiritual Director, in an unusual laconic manner:

... It is fitting for me to say that I see only obscurity, and from every side, except from one alone, where I see quite clearly: that is that I cannot assume, nor maintain any direction, except for that little bit which I hold in my hands ...⁷⁸

To temper somewhat the increasing anguish of Mother Leopoldina in her long and fruitless search for a new guide, Fr. Bertoni, while remaining unmoved in his decision, offers words of supernatural comfort, always inspired by the most trusting Abandonment in God:

... As you do not have at present any person to whose prudence and experience you can confide entirely, as it is said, and in every matter: prayer is to be offered to God so that He might deign through His goodness provide you with one; and for this end, and for whatever these prayers are and are able to be, I offer also my own prayers, as will all of my followers, as something for which I am in debt to your charity, since I am not able to offer my own services nor may any of my men,

⁷⁷Stofella, *The Spiritual Diary*, l.c., p. 365.

NB: Translator's Note: An English translation of Mother Naudet's Act of Abandonment:

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Ignatius.

Act of Abandonment

O my Lord... from this moment, and for always, I abandon all my interests into Your hands. I entrust myself entirely to Your infinite goodness, being sure, to the extent that I am able, that You care for me and of all that You have entrusted to me. So, from now on, I wish to live without anguish and fears, to do whatever I can for You, to serve You, and to make You loved and served by others, to the extent of my ability. I wish to work for Your glory and Your service and You think of me... To You, I abandon everything. You are able, You know how, and You will - all this suffices for me to be sure of what You will do. Give me Your holy love, zeal for Your glory; increase always in me trust and confidence in You. I ask all this through the merits of Your Most Holy Mother, Mary, to whom you can refuse nothing of what she asks of You. I ask it through the merits of St. Joseph, Your foster-father, and of my advocate, St. Ignatius [July 1820, f. 108].

[The Act of Abandonment is the document which expresses the entire spirit of Leopoldina and which distinguishes the most personal characteristic of her spirituality - cf. Adami].

⁷⁸ SA, Doc., 35. Letter, prior to February 20, 1834, p. 724.

*either now, or ever. In the meantime, where you see clearly that which has to be done, then do that in all freedom, trusting fully in God who, where it might be necessary for the salvation of your soul and for the souls who are under your care, I would not want to deny the light of the wisdom to His Minister. He is able to accomplish even with the tongues of infants a certain eloquence to speak well of Him... for the rest, the Lord, Who is the Father of all consolation, grant you tranquility and peace, and fort you with his grace and love...*⁷⁹

The years passed slowly and Mother Leopoldina found herself in a rough sea, always buffeted about by trial, and she followed here route in darkness. Jesus was assuredly in the boat with her, even in the very 'center of her soul', but, as on the lake in the storm, He gave every impression of being asleep. This loving game continued. In her heart that felt suspended, the lost soul knocked again another time at the door that would not open. His response, this man who had been her illumined build of yesterday, explain in unmistakable terms the reason for his persistent refusal: ***When the Lord says: 'Enough!' to someone, he cannot respond: 'I will continue'***.

The fact that Fr. Gaspar overcame without any sign of regret, with assuredness and decisiveness, the common manner of reasoning, shows how profoundly he experienced the dispositions of Providence and as such, he did not intend to withdraw from them in any manner.

From this long trial which anguished the life of the Servant of God in these last 14 years of her life, Fr. Gaspar understood anew how ***the Lord might make use of him for a game of loving Providence with which to exercise*** one in the heroic practice of Holy Abandonment, the very one who had offered herself to His Love. The very harsh anguish that Mother Leopoldina experienced could have indeed moved her guide who had resigned this office, but certainly not to the point of bringing displeasure to the Lord. He did all to ***please God,*** and for ***the greater good*** that he could not return to that great soul so deeply immersed in trial. These were the divine plans that Fr. Gaspar knew and had to further to he did.

And Mother Leopoldina furrowed along on the 'capricious' waves that her Divine Lover raised up around her so that she remained always in His power, without the help of any other guide, she reached her home port in peace on August 17, 1834. That very day, in a truly caring letter of condolence, with perfect understanding of its cause, Fr. Bertoni did not hesitate in describing this very holy woman who had now passed to the eternal embrace of her spouse:

*... She was one of those souls who was not ordinary – to keep her in this life is a very great grace that God our Lord does make. It is a life not reserved only to those few with whom they live, but are so much good for the multitude for whom they live ...*⁸⁰

8. A Gesture of Incoherence?

In the first days of August, 1813, Fr. Bertoni suffered a relapse. It seems that this time, his illness did not have that alarming character of the year before, since, by

⁷⁹ SA, Doc. 35, Letter of October 16, 1825, pp. 724, f.

⁸⁰ ib., Letter to Sophia Gagnere, Sisters of the Holy Family, p. 730.

the end of that month, Fr. Gaspar was already undergoing a quiet convalescence in the quiet country district of Colognolla ai Colli. However, even at that peaceful sojourn a touch of bitterness reached him from the Chancery Office:

... I have received the news that they are thinking in the Seminary to appoint me Vice Rector there; this is something that pierces me to the core and causes me supreme sadness and embarrassment ...

This is how Fr. Gaspar related the case to Mother Leopoldina. As the letter goes on, he submits his views to the decisive judgment of the Servant of God, in a rather detailed presentation, that seems to have been a kind of thinking on paper with some dexterity showing how this responsibility is repugnant to him, since it is something *alien to his vocation*. The particulars of this ‘plan’ of his are not of interest here.

However, it is of interest to explain why it is that he would experience such repugnance for that office. It is necessary to become disavowed of the matter to see if, and to what point, his own retiring nature played a part in the plan which, in all reality, was one that was trying to elude dispositions in his regard that came from legitimate superiors.

The energetic renewal going on in the local Seminary, led by the Rector, Fr. Louis Alberghini, was not lacking in its excesses, which created in the long view of the matter, a real unpleasant climate of heavy-handedness, both among the seminarians as well as among the faculty. Fr. Gaspar, who from 1810 on had been the Spiritual Director there, was better informed on this matter than perhaps anyone else. He understood clearly, that a Vice-Rector, whoever he might be, would have been immediately under the thumb of the authoritarian Fr. Alberghini.

Even more so that which rendered him absolutely hesitant before such an appointment was that in his mind it was simply impossible with his position as Spiritual Director.⁸¹ Furthermore, an in particular, precisely in those years, this man of God felt deep within himself to bring into life an Institute of Priests. This adds further strength to his statement when faced with the possibility of being appointed as Vice Rector that this office was ***alien to his vocation***. He was convinced that the inner causes of his own dissent, he could not, nor should he say, so that he would not find himself ***committed in some explanation that would bring with it not insignificant consequences***. Furthermore, he laid claim to ***the argument of his own health*** which in reality, turned out quite well], as the most convincing to save him from that responsibility that he felt so deeply that he had to avoid. Can it be asked: did this trembling before a responsibility also reveal in him something merely human? So he wrote on to Mother Naudet:

... If you should think that these fears of mine are vain, or excessive, or too human: I do not withdraw from the Cross, nor from the consequences that these times connect to offices of this kind; and in your prayers I trust to enter for the Divine Glory into a conflict that is above my abilities: since, if on the one hand I might be lacking in generosity – on the other hand, I could be temerarious. And to take counsel from others is a little bit dangerous, not so much to me, but that

⁸¹ This is what he expressed in a letter without date. Manuscripts 73-6.

would be to them, because it would be like one waking up sleep-walkers, which is something better left to the Lord and to them, little by little...⁸²

Therefore, he left up to the Servant of God the free initiative to act, or not to act, being sure that there would not be lacking in her both the prudence and the light to decide in accord with the supreme interests of God in mind. Fr. Bertoni then concluded:

... However, regarding all of this I want to know whether you think that this is fitting for the Glory of God, and whether you do judge these steps of mine to be false, or perhaps just too human. I hope it is not a difficulty for you to write to me, and to let me know; whether I should do this, or not, as the matter seems to you to be for the greater glory of God ...

If in the first part of this letter there seems to be the more evident a certain restlessness, and whether his subtle plan of avoiding this obedience is suspect because of his excessively human reasoning – the rest of the letter then dissipates all doubt as Fr. Bertoni seems to return on powerful wings to his habitual climate, as one still and always at rest in the arms of a loving Providence. Blessed is anyone who dwells above with the Most High, and places in God his assurance:

... It is seen that the Lord wishes that we remain mindful of Him, and in Him and let our every thought and affection be in Him perpetually firm and concentrated. And if for this we forget other matters: He will either remind us of these realities, or with His Providence will conduct the matter than we, with all our remembering and thinking, could have done on our own. In fact, we are always diligent when 'we love [diligimus] God'. Blesses is anyone who loses himself in this abyss! Blessed is anyone who casts himself spiritedly and ship-wrecked into this ocean!⁸³

Amen! Amen!

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⁸² SA, Doc. 35, Letter of August 24, 1813, p. 717.

⁸³ SA, Doc 35, Letter of August 31, 1813, p. 719.