

# The Spiritual Profile of



*Fr. Bertoni: the Founder and Living Rule of the Congregation*

## **St. Gaspar Bertoni**

### **Its Features and Spirit**

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#### **Part Four**

**Apostolic Missionaries in the Service of Bishops**

#### **Section 2**

#### **The Living Rule**

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**PART FOUR**  
**APOSTOLIC MISSIONARIES IN THE SERVICE OF BISHOPS**

**SECTION II**  
**THE LIVING RULE**

**Chapter 16**

**The Model and Father of the Community**

**1. Father and Teacher**

Having become the Father and the Founder of a new Family in the Church, the Saint attended with faith, love and solicitude in the spiritual formation of his sons. The most powerful lever on those willing souls, bound to their 'Don Gaspar' by profound esteem and veneration was his example, the sense of the supernatural that radiated from him. For as long as he lived, he served as the moderator of the Community, also in the long years in which illnesses confined him to immobility in his arm chair or in bed. None of his sons ever thought that some one else – while he was still alive - could ever take his place.

Rigid with himself, he communicated to his subjects with the certain fascination of his good nature that when it proved to be necessary, he never surrendered his necessary firmness. There was no doubt: the task of Superior was for Fr. Bertoni sustained by the light of that solid principle expressed in his *Spiritual Journal*:

***...The vow of obedience for one who has no superior, for one who indeed is the Superior, binds his spirit to a total dependence on God in everything...<sup>1</sup>***

His fidelity to that ideal was the secret of which he made full use to conquer the hearts and the wills of his followers and to create around him that atmosphere that was totally permeated with spirituality which the biographers, in agreement, point out. We would like for a moment to breathe for our benefit that supernatural climate.

In a rapid and exceptional note in the House Chronicle there is presented to us, the entire Community of Fr. Bertoni is presented as gathering closely around him in a particular moment for a decision which involved all. There were present, it seems 11 Priests and 4 Brothers and two Clerics. It was July 5, 1835. Four days earlier, Bishop Grasser had come to Fr. Bertoni, talking with him at some length in a private conversation. To that visit were dedicated 'all the free periods of the day and night, for discussions among the elders on the most secret level.' Finally, 'all were gathered, both young and old in the recreation room and all sat around in a circle, with the Superior standing in the center.' In this backdrop he made the official announcement formulated in prudent and somewhat veiled terms:

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<sup>1</sup> SA, Doc. 335, p. 665.

*... it is the will of God, manifested in our most zealous Bishop, that our confrere, Fr. Louis Bragato, is to be separated from us, and will leave for Vienna ... he will depart tomorrow on the quick train. Pray for him, so that the Lord might bless the work that he is going to take up...*

Bishop Grasser had asked Fr. Bertoni for Fr. Bragato as the Confessor for the Empress, the wife of Ferdinand I of Hapsburg. **The will of God, manifested in the desire of the Bishop was in the episode the decisive reason for this choice.** But, let us return to the ‘Superior.’

In the handling of affairs, in the external direction of the Community, the Founder was never an autocrat. This is confirmed in the passage just quoted above. The first men who entered the Stimmate – Frs. Marani, Gramego and Brugnoli – were in fact, his closest collaborators, constituting with him the ‘Council of the Elders’, whom he consulted in every decision regarding the life and the interests of the Institute.<sup>2</sup>

However, it was to all of his followers – Priests, Clerics and Brothers - that his frequent and inspiring exhortations were addressed<sup>3</sup>, with their incalculable fruit when we think of what it was what they themselves relate to us about these: ‘...they had never heard him speak of God and of the future life, without themselves being deeply moved and enkindled with his own spirit...’<sup>4</sup> From the traditions, from the writings of those who were the first and most faithful followers of Fr. Bertoni, let it be permitted to us to gather those more significant echoes of his wise direction and intense activity, in the hearts and souls of his sons. This will just be a type of rapid survey before individuals already known to us, but little more than their names.

## 2. Fr. Gramego, Confessor

Concerning Fr. Gramego, who came to the Stimmate, among the priests of the very ‘first hour’, we do know of his exuberant and joyful character. Fr. Bertoni thought almost immediately of making him, in addition to being a good teacher – his students were in agreement in calling him ‘the Good Master’ – a catechist for the people. However, going one time to teach Sunday catechism in the near-by Parish of the most Holy Trinity, ‘he was at times forced to support himself along the way on the wall of a house, because of the great struggle he had with stage fright and the proximity even of vomiting, because of his great worry that he was simply overwhelmed and deeply disturbed. Despite all this, Fr. Gramego did his best to overcome his terrible concerns, but in the end, realizing that this experiment was not working, the sage and discreet Superior judged that he would have to leave him in peace, taking him from **preaching, to which Heaven had not called him.**’<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> **NB:** Translator’s note: this is his own rule: consult the ‘Elders’ [CF # 151]; the ‘Sages’ [#301].

<sup>3</sup> Stofella, Biography, o.c., pp. 180, f.

<sup>4</sup> SA, Doc. 26, p. 481.

<sup>5</sup> Lenotti, *Remarks on the life of Fr. Michael Gramego*. Manuscripts in the Archives of the Stimmate.

Fr. Gramego found his **Stigmatine Apostolic Mission in the confessional**. Being of a somewhat robust nature, he could remain long hours in this ministry with incredible goodness and patience. His ‘hobby’ in free time was working around in the garden. One day while he was leaning over a favorite plant of his, he heard the familiar voice of Fr. Gaspar at the window: ‘Fr. Michael, please bring me that plant!’ What? The invitation was repeated with smiling firmness; and the gardener had only to offer his equally smiling and simple obedience.<sup>6</sup>

Fr. Michael also enjoyed animals. He had a small cage with a nest of birds. One day, Fr. Bertoni invited him to let them go” ‘Go, creatures of God; Fr. Michael gives you the freedom of the woods and the skies.’<sup>7</sup>

It would seem that St. Francis, from near the altar of the Stimate, certainly smiled at, and blessed these ‘little flowers.’

### 3. Fr. Benciolini, the Good Preacher

Of this very humble and fervent priest, all full of zeal for souls and tenderness for the poor, was justly defined as ‘candor personified’. Let us allow two little autographed incidents speak to us about the enchanting docility he had for the counsels that Fr. Gaspar gave to him, as the true father of his soul.

The following is a note he left recorded: ‘Fr. Francis, Fr. Francis: you should preach according to your own nature, nor should you try to force yourself to do what others do, no matter how more perfect that might seem; because if you try to imitate others, you may not succeed and will fall flat on your face. Therefore, rely on that good spirit that the Lord has granted you. And preach from the heart, i.e., with charity.’<sup>8</sup>

If Fr. Francis achieved in his long life a great deal of good with his ministry of the Divine Word, this is due to the fascination of his simplicity and warmth of his style. These are precisely the two qualities on which in the judgment of his Master and Father, he should depend. His ‘Master and Father’ was Fr. Bertoni, whom he loved and obeyed as his ‘God on earth.’ He once wrote:

‘... You ought to consider Fr. Gaspar as another God on earth over you. His words are as the word of God ... he is your great Benefactor, as one who has showered on you numberless benefits and spiritual maxims, by having received you in the House of God. He is your Superior, invested by God with the authority to command you. He is your Father, as the one who is the Father of your soul, who nourishes it, feeds it both with heavenly wisdom and with his holy examples. And how should you consider the corrections, which he lovingly makes to you, the acts of virtue, to which he encourages you? Obedience, then, love, respect ...’

### 4. Fr. Innocent Venturini, the Popular Catechist

Fr. Innocent Venturini was most devoted to the Blessed Virgin and to St. Joseph., and he was accustomed to defining himself with admirable humility as ‘the

<sup>6</sup> Family traditions – cf. Fiorio, *Vita del Ven. Servo di Dio, D. Gaspare Bertoni*. Type Bettinelli. Verona 1922, p. 259.

<sup>7</sup> ib.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Stofella, Biography, p. 189 – this incident was recorded in Veronese dialect.

most wretched at the Stimate.’ Under the patient guidance of the Saint, he succeeded as being a successful and much sought after preacher. For his convincing lessons of Christian Doctrine for the ordinary people, always diligently prepared and delivered in the Veronese dialect, there was always a steady stream of persons of every social level, from the furthest ends of the city. He would die the death of the just in 1864, mourned by all, and especially by the poor, who in life the deceased had called ‘his own bread.’<sup>9</sup>

### 5. Fr. Marani, *prepared for all*

Fr. John Mary Marani was the ‘right hand man’ of Fr. Bertoni, from the days of the very first Marian Oratory in St. Paul’s in Campo Marzio. He would then succeed him in the government of the Institute and would serve as his spiritual director. He directed the Community making his own the norm of the Founder: ‘... this is what Fr. Gaspar would do, say, want...’<sup>10</sup>. Regarding him, there would remain proverbial his tireless dedication to **every form of ministry**, committing himself in an outstanding manner and fruitfully. He was a prime example of the **Bertonian Ideal**:

*... Fr. Marani during the day, teaches school at the Stimate; in the evenings and on holy days, he is at the Derelitti. At the Stimate, he teaches and spends some time in the library. At the Derelitti on Saturday evenings and Sundays, he hears many confessions and with excellent results for that district. Other evenings he gives a moral conference to about 10-12 priests... After his methodical exposition, he determines and defines according to the circumstances – and this is every day – the more intricate cases. And the Lord bestows on him the light and prudence and frankness beyond the ordinary.*

*On Thursdays, he examines as usual the clerics sent to him by the Seminary; and then he receives penitents of every kind and at every hour, even interrupting his lunch, supper, and putting off his rest.*

*Likewise on feast days, he hears Confessions in St. Stephen’s choir up until the time that he then gives the Instructions [catechetical] at St. Sebastian’s. This will go on as long as it will please the Lord. The people receive him very willingly and it seems that he does not just cast the word of God about, but it is received in good ground ...*

*I have sent him also to St Zeno’s to preach the Octave of the Deceased ...*<sup>11</sup>

Fr. Marani, too, although certainly not to the extent that Fr. Bertoni did, had long periods of harsh physical sufferings. But, with what serenity he expressed in that silent suffering he endured! Fr. Bertoni, who also in this had been his teacher, wrote of him: *... may the Lord grant him perseverance in his willing suffering, as, by the grace of God, and for our edification, he has done up until now ...*<sup>12</sup> Fr.

<sup>9</sup> *Reminiscences regarding the Fathers and Brothers of the Congregation.* Verona 1886, p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> *Summarium super virtut.*, pp. 22, 27.

<sup>11</sup> SA, Doc. 35, n. 4, pp. 743, f.

<sup>12</sup> Letter Bertoni-Naudet, ms 76-19.

Bertoni in the last years of his life in his work and suffering, would commit the spiritual direction of his own soul, to this well tempered apostle.

## 6. Fr. Bragato, Missionary at the Royal Court.

Fr. Louis Bragato, the humble ‘lowly priest of the Stimate’, ended up as the Confessor of an Empress in the Royal Court of Auxburg, was **the disciple who more than any other had penetrated and made his own, the spirit of Fr. Gaspar**. While he was still a seminarian, and had heard a lesson and meditation, the fruit that a Priest ought to harvest with his example. He wrote of that integrity, gravity, holiness, that ought to all breathe forth, as I see in Fr. Gaspar....<sup>13</sup>

In his constant contact with the guide of his soul [as he had resolved to have recourse in all things, even the small ones, to Fr. Gaspar], this docile disciple, having abandoned all to the intensity of Grace, follows from close at hand the agile pace of his Master in detachment from this world, in his thirst for penance, in his spirit of prayer. ‘What a beautiful experience it is to be able to say with St. Peter: we have given up all things and we have put ourselves into following You.’

Nor could he choose to renounce his exceptional service of guidance when Providence, with a joke on him that upset all his personal plans, brought him to work out, as the first herald of the nascent Institute, far from the city in which it had been its crib, to Vienna and Prague, confessor and almoner of the Empress Maria Anna Carolina Pia di Savoia, the wife of Ferdinand I of Auxburg. We will read further ahead some of what has remained of the copious correspondence between Fr. Bertoni and himself, a testimony of that exquisite friendship and holiness.<sup>14</sup>

## 7. The Mission of Suffering

To this aspect of the Apostolic Mission were destined the two little angels of the Stimate, the young Fr. Louis Biadego and the seminarian, ‘little Louis’ Ferrari. Both of these seemed destined to an early of the inexorability of their illnesses [the former being slowly consumed by tuberculosis, and the latter was plagued by deep and incurable sores], suffered next door to each other. They received regular visits from their Superior, who was also ill himself, who blessed them, comforted them, and encouraged them with the sacred words of confidence and holy abandonment: ‘Whether we live or die, we are of the Lord’.<sup>15</sup>

And they found – in those words - so much of an echo of correspondence in their own souls, equally generous. The infirmarian was often deeply embarrassed, by being overwhelmed with emotion because each one of the two - as they were obliged to say it - thought that he would arrive at the gate of heaven before the other.<sup>16</sup>

From the dawn of that October 4 of some years earlier that he had planned and protected his early morning departure from his family home to enter the Stimate, Fr.

<sup>13</sup> Mss. Bragato – Archives at the Stimate.

<sup>14</sup> SA, Doc. 35, pp. 737, f.

<sup>15</sup> *Reminiscences concerning...*, o.c., p. 46. Fr. Lenotti, *Life of Fr. L. Biadego*, p. 23, ff. Archives of the Stimate.

<sup>16</sup> *Reminiscences...*, p. 46.

Biadego had walked strongly in the school of the Father. He was assigned to assist Fr. Gaspar in his long infirmities, and Fr. Louis truly enjoyed having a more intimate communion of life and thought with him: every day together they would pray the Breviary and often made their meditation together. And he had learned how to profit by this. Certain proposals of Fr. Biadego truly reflect in full the vigorous spirituality of Fr. Bertoni: *to die to oneself is everything ... abandon myself into the arms of Divine Providence ... Suffer....* And then, almost a comment on this last entry: *... Your first and principal concern is on Christ Crucified ... From such a Teacher and from such a book you will draw the desire to suffer for Christ...*<sup>17</sup>

And when the Crucified Master took him at his word, the disciple did not have a moment's regret. On December 26, 1841, at dawn, Fr. Louis experienced a kind of fit in his chest, causing a deep gurgling sound. This was repeated at various intervals. The members of his family and his doctors hastened to assist him, quite alarmed. He, however, remained abandoned into the arms of Divine Providence, committed to enduring what had to be, as he stated to his Confessor who had come to comfort him. 'I am at peace,' he smiled, 'I have placed everything into the hands of the Blessed Mother.'<sup>18</sup> And he completed his sacrifice right to the end.

When the sufferings became even more severe, he invited the one who assisted him to repeat to him at intervals the beloved phrase that his 'Superior' had suggested to him, and this is the way he died, as though cuddled by that sweet music, full of love and hope: 'Whether we live, or whether we die: we are of the Lord.'<sup>19</sup> It was the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 1842. Fr. Biadego was only 34 years old. And all who knew him, remarked: 'A saint has died.'<sup>20</sup>

As for 'little Lou', he had to wait for three more long weeks. To the Brother who, on one of his last nights, had brought him something to help him, and which also was tasty, he asked: 'But, why these things? Now I think only of Paradise.'<sup>21</sup>

No less edifying was the very sudden death of the beloved Brother Angelo Casella, who from the Stimmate had been the first to cross the threshold of eternity.

In similar manner might we speak of the two other prematurely deceased priests, Frs. Cainer and Cartolari.<sup>22</sup>

And certainly, after these most consoling examples of such peaceful passing away to the other world, that Fr. Michael, finding fervor with some of the Confreres on the spiritual beauties of the austere life that had been embraced, with that exuberance that was so much his style, very often would enter this comment into his Chronicle: 'He passed from the Cell to Heaven' [similar sounds in Italian: *dalla cella al Cielo*]. And the joy that he sang in his heart was something like a mini-ball; in his view, this is what seemed to be most in place.<sup>23</sup>

In the school of Fr. Bertoni 'we kept our eyes solely turned toward the eternal reward, toward that reward which through His Mercy the Lord willed to grant us in

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<sup>17</sup> Lenotti, o.c., p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> ib., p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Lenotti, o.c., p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> ib., p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> *Reminiscences ...* o.c., p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Gramego, *Reminiscences...*, cf. March 3, 1843, January 12, 1844, July 3, 1846.

<sup>23</sup> Lenotti, *Remarks on the life of Fr. Michael Gramego*.

heaven; that is the blessed homeland toward which we aspire and where we have been called...'<sup>24</sup>

## 8. Poor and Mortified

It would be totally wrong to think that these sick men lacked attention. To them were reserved the most choice foods, and an affection that was more than maternal<sup>25</sup>. But whoever could do so, always led a poor and mortified life. At the Stimate, the life offered of itself much mortification: as, for example, daily hard work. For the long years that the harsh manual labor lasted in the building of the new residence, in the few hours free from school and from their commitments to the ministry, those Priests-teachers enjoyed always to mix among the workers with joyful simplicity, assisting them in those most tiring tasks, as to mix the cement and to carry the bricks.

In this work, the Founder was no less involved than was his sons. Fr. Giacobbe attests that he had seen Fr. Gaspar with his own eyes, with the wheel barrow in hand, and working like a brick-layer, when the restorations in the Church were going on.<sup>26</sup>

And if for the muscular Fr. Gramego a work of this kind could represent a little more than a sport pleasing to him, for the others, as for example, for the nobleman and dutiful Fr. Francis Cartolari<sup>27</sup>, that unusual heavy labor became a genuine exercise of humility and mortification.

Other mortifications built into that early Stigmatine life, while being harmless to the body, were accepted as a precious gift for their spirits. This would be an example: at the end of December 1822, there closed in Verona, three months after its opening, a spectacular Congress. This witnessed seated at the same table sovereigns and political people from all over Europe. Thus, as it was accompanied by exceptional celebrations with dazzling lights and the first arrival and the almost idyllic display, it was only logical that this warm adjourning of that level of well off people, would be sealed then by a most extraordinary spectacle of fireworks, as this was really a farewell, with so many of these paths most likely not to cross again.

However, as these rockers blared and the explosion of different colors high in the sky, the modest windows at the priests' residence remained closed, and the shutters were sealed.<sup>28</sup>

The austerity regarding food, as the dominion of the most innocent of the appetites, was constant and simply the order of the day at the Stimate. When along the way the people might see a priest who looked thin, it would be whispered: 'He must be from the Stimate'. And often enough, they were right! One fine day there

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<sup>24</sup> SA Doc. 26, p. 470.

<sup>25</sup> **NB: translator's Note: a Benedictine [?] ideal found in Fr. Bertoni's *Original Constitutions* - CF # 240.**

<sup>26</sup> *Summarium super virt.*, p. 100.

<sup>27</sup> *Reminiscences concerning the Fathers...* p. 50.

<sup>28</sup> The practice of little mortifications of Fr. Bertoni and his companions was noted and admired by a group of persons who had taken up positions near the house to enjoy that innocent spectacle. Among those who were led by the hand by his Dad, was a 12 year old boy, the future Biographer of the Saint: Cajetan Giacobbe, not knowing at that time that Providence had chosen him... to act as a spy on this occasion. Cf. SA, Doc. 26, p. 519.

appeared at the sparse table of those Priests-Teachers a fine roast chicken. On the proposal of the Father, all offered their thanks. And this exceptional plate with its well roasted victim was returned to the kitchen so that it might serve – as only would be expected – to bring joy to an even poorer table than that of the poor Priests at the Stimate.<sup>29</sup>

While the number of those adherents to the new Institute remained always small as long as the Founder lived, the motive might also be sought in the rigor of life that attracted a few spirits, desirous of offering themselves to the Lord<sup>30</sup>. More than one friend had exhorted Fr. Gaspar to mitigate that harsh aspect of the ancient anchorites but the saint responded *that austerity can never be excessive at the beginning of an institute, as time itself would have the task of mitigating it...*<sup>31</sup> However, when this suggestion came from Bishop Grassi, Fr. Gaspar agreed, and docilely, arranged a gradual alleviation, but there remained in all the nostalgia for that serene original frugality.

During the harsh winters that Fr. Bertoni passed, actively at his desk the better part of the day, in his high and isolated room, in the northeast corner of the house, he was there without heat of any kind. He was protected somewhat by an old thread-bare overcoat that none of his sons was ever able to substitute for with a new one.

The affectionate suggestions to lead him not to exaggerate were all in vain.<sup>32</sup> With saints, in matters of this kind, often there is little one can do. There is needed a precise command from the doctor, so that at long last, the saint did give in favor of a warming flame, that would flicker in his freezing room. However, on the very date that this was imposed, Fr. Gaspar was close to reaching 70 years of age, if he had not already passed it.

## 9. One Sole Spirit, One Sole Life

In 1840, the Vicar Capitular of the Diocese, Monsignor Joseph Belloni, was able to present the Priests of the Stimate in these terms to Cardinal Patrizi:

...From their first institution, up until the present, they are the mirror and the flower of the Veronese Clergy, for their piety, their study, for their counsels, for their example and for their prudent and tireless zeal, with edification of this whole Diocese, under every regard...<sup>33</sup>

The second testimony is even more precious. It seems to have been totally spontaneous, zeroing in on the Community of the Stimate and its 'Superior', who appeared to an attentive visitor from Vienna, toward the end of 1837 and the first months of the following year: he was the learned and pious priest, Fr. Louis Schlor.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Summa. Super virt. P. 200.

<sup>30</sup> SA, Doc. 20, p.191.

<sup>31</sup> SA, Doc. 29, n. 7, p. 608.

<sup>32</sup> SA, Doc 26, h, p. 525.

<sup>33</sup> SA, Doc. 14, 3, p. 73.

<sup>34</sup> Fr. Schlor was born in Vienna in 1805, was ordained a priest in 1828, and for three years served as Chaplain at the Imperial Court. He lived for many months in Verona, exercising his

In his work, *The Philanthropy of the Faith*,<sup>35</sup> he presented to the Church beyond the Alps the Veronese Church, and even zeroed in on the example of the Institute of Fr. Bertoni:

... It is quite clear that they have chosen as the principal character of their life and actions the retired and hidden way, while nonetheless there is evident the clarity of their virtue and the efficacy of their zeal is such and manifests thus that the entire city, people and clergy, holds them in veneration and love as holy priests.

'Their Superior – Fr. Gaspar Bertoni - is both a lovable and venerated old man, quite well versed in the theological sciences and especially in the government of souls – and he is, so to speak, an oracle for the city, much sought after even by outsiders, who even from distant places have recourse to him either in writing and come to him personally, to have counsel from him in theological matters or in the interests of their conscience ...

Now, this man, of such knowledge and piety, understood well that with some, it is with gentleness of manner that they are won over; for others, there is needed a real firmness in leading his Community, so that one spirit animates them all, there is only one life in all, that is spread about, so to speak.

If you get to converse with one of them, you will find that each one of them in thought, in sentiments, in their exterior conduct, each makes a perfect portrait of the other. If you want to know what it is that renders them principally notable, it is humility, charity and a most affable manner of treating with others.

They live as real poor men and mortified. The room of each one of them is very simple as is their furniture. But, throughout the house I saw such a real effort at neatness that it is a delight to admire it. The little Church is a marvel of restoration and is always outstanding for its cleanliness.

The Priests of this community preach every week in their little Church, and they hear confessions there, but only of men.

There is a lack of selfishness that is so outstanding in the priests; it places them in great reverence before all.

And truly, I would not know what more fitting name that I could give them other than they are 'the pearl of the Veronese Clergy.'<sup>36</sup>

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priestly ministry among the flourishing colony of his co-nationals. From 1842 on, until his death [1852], he was the Spiritual Director of the Seminary of Gratz. He was a writer of ascetics, who was much appreciated, and deserves the credit for putting back into vogue the *Spiritual Exercises* for the Clergy in the Diocese of Gratz and elsewhere. Cf. Stofella, Biography, o.c., p. 191. SA, Doc 13, 2, p. 65.

<sup>35</sup> Printed in Vienna in 1839

<sup>36</sup> SA, Doc. 13, n. 2., pp. 65-67.

## Chapter 17

### Encounters and Anecdotes

#### 1. Raking up

Let there be granted to us here a brief pause to gather a variety of facts, episodes and encounters for which we did not find any other place to insert them in the preceding chapters. The figure of St. Gaspar, without losing anything of his spirituality, will appear also closer to us, palpating with humanity and vitality.

#### 2. The Bishop and the Catechism Lesson

Evidence for this anecdote can be found on those sheets of paper that make up his *Spiritual Journal*. This note is dated November 20, 1808:

**[78.] The bishop came to pay me a visit to the Class of Christian Doctrine, while I was teaching Catechesis to the adults. He wanted me to carry on. My mind became completely confused. All my ideas disappeared. I decided then to summarize, as the last resort. I did that without almost knowing what I was saying. In the mean time I was reflecting within myself, wondering how would my spirit have found itself if it had to give an account of my priestly ministry in front of the tribunal of Christ. Even if I had lived in the utmost innocence, and if I had accomplished all my duties...how much would I have felt discouraged and fearful in that moment! We have therefore to get ready to stand with confidence before Christ, no longer as a "Father" but as a "Judge".<sup>37</sup>**

The great preacher becomes all flustered, but instead of thinking about the thin figure of Episcopal authority who had come to listen to him, he thinks of God's judgment.

#### 3. Faith and Reason

One day, a few swaggering men, very frequent companions of the Bar in Piazza Bra, decided to make fun of Fr. Bertoni in a particular way. One of them separating himself from the group presented himself in Fr. Bertoni's way: '...Tell me, reverend, how can it be reasonably maintained the teaching about the resurrection from the dead ...?'

With utmost courtesy and firmness, Fr. Gaspar asked his interrogator, there and them, to stand before him and recite the Creed. The Saint would not take 'no' for an answer, and the man had to recite it until he came to the article of the faith in question.

'Here we stop', Fr. Bertoni interrupted, 'and therefore this is a matter of a revealed doctrine for our faith. The Christian in order to believe in God has no need of reason; faith suffices for him. Therefore, you believe it. And these are the solid motives of credibility that the Theologians give.' And with great clarity and effectiveness from his gifted ability to explain, the Saint gave the reasons and the arguments to resolve possible objections. Because the presumed adversary was put in

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<sup>37</sup> SA, Doc. 35, p. 663.

complete check, the brazen man, far from feeling that he had just been humiliated, came to admire Fr. Bertoni and was conquered by him. From that day on, he and friends, remaining impenitent frequenters of the bar, nonetheless, whenever Fr. Gaspar passed by, he was welcomed with esteem and respect, and they often tipped their hats, with a cordial smile.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4. The Capricious and the Devout

In dealing with all who came to consult him on the more delicate problems of their souls, the Saint was a man of patience beyond compare. But, he was also prudent and knew how to discern the real intentions of certain individuals.

One such person, while concealing his own lightness of character and sheer curiosity under the veil of making believe he really wanted to become a member of the Community of the Stimmate, he presented himself punctually and politely to Fr. Gaspar, asking him information about the Rules and the house discipline and the food. Fr. Gaspar answered him smiling: 'But, it is not here where God is calling you and for whatever I could tell you, you would have one more item to add to your knowledge, but it would prove to be fruitless and useless.' And the crestfallen citizen who had come to play a tune, like his pals up on the mountains, ended up being 'taken' himself.<sup>39</sup>

Then a certain lady who is described by Fr. Giacobbe as having an intense piety of her own making, and one that depended on her own whims, came one day to consult the man of God on the reading of devout books that she felt were a necessary guide for her brand of perfection. Fr. Bertoni allowed her to speak but he understood her right away: more than her piety, the good lady wanted to feed her erudition. Fr. Bertoni gently interrupted her, saying: 'Madame, all that would be necessary for you would be the 'Philothea' [*Introduction to a Devout Life*] of St. Francis de Sales.' She answered: 'But, I have already read it.' And he answered her: 'You could profitably go back and read it again.' And then what? 'You could profitably read it again and again. And do not tire to make it all yours. If you would achieve what this golden book teaches – believe me - that would suffice for whatever it is you really want.'<sup>40</sup>

And his respectful greeting put an end to that consultation.

#### 4. The First and Ultimate Service

At the conclusion of a course of the annual Retreat, preached by Fr. Bertoni to a crowd of priests, Bishop Joseph Grasser, only recently come to the Diocese, wished to put his seal on Fr. Gaspar's work in a brief talk. His allocution – despite a bit of a German accent - surpassed all expectations. Even in those days there were prejudices that made their rounds: Bishop Grasser had the major fault of being from another district. This scene took place in the sacristy. In the silence that was almost embarrassing for those who were there, Fr. Gaspar got down on his knees and kissed the hands and the feet of the new Shepherd. Following this gesture, the situation

<sup>38</sup> Stofella, Biography, p. 90.

<sup>39</sup> SA, Doc. 26, p. 414

<sup>40</sup> SA, Doc. 26, p. 494. Stofella, Biography, p. 236.

became quite calm, and all noted that the eyes of the new Bishop were moistened. This proved to be a fruitful lesson for all.<sup>41</sup>

Later, during the final hours of the saintly Bishop, we find a very moving account of this in a report made by Fr. Camillo Cesare Bresciani. He remained in the dying Bishop's room for more than 15 hours by his bed: he stayed until the Bishop died. It was touching to witness a type of honor guard at the Bishop's door, as they all expressed the desire to be near the bed of this illustrious patient in order to help him in any way they could, to weep and to pray.

In this marvelous document, there is interest of us in its mention of Fr. Gaspar. It seems clear that from that encounter of St. Gaspar, who was also ailing himself, in the room of the dying Bishop, those present thought of this to be little less than a miracle. The marvel is that if he might not have made the visit, this in no way would have touched the high estimation in which Fr. Bertoni was held.<sup>42</sup> At any rate, Fr. Bresciani records that 'little by little all the heads of the religious Orders, and that I presented them to the illustrious dying Bishop. Two of these presentations made a very sublime and edifying impression on me: that of Fr. Bertoni and the other, the visit of Cardinal Odescalchi. Fr. Bertoni came, almost being carried by Veronese priests as though he were a saint.' So, I said: 'Your Excellency, here is Fr. Bertoni, who has come to visit you.' The dying Bishop said: 'What a distinct favor you do me, my Fr. Gaspar!'. But, the holy old man was so overwhelmed with sorrow, that he just sobbed and wept, and could hardly even offer a little prayer.' Fr. Bresciani then concluded: 'This gave us the sign that God wanted the victim already mature for heaven.'<sup>43</sup>

When at dawn on the following day, the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1839, Bishop Joseph Grasser died. Throughout the City and the Diocese of Verona both clergy and people found themselves together in their profound sense of loss. And there was a unanimous sense that their beloved and holy bishop had been exalted, and was loudly acclaimed as the 'Angel of Charity.' The faith of Fr. Bertoni, with his casting himself on his knees before his newly promoted Shepherd, had securely opened the way to the acceptance, the esteem and the love of all Verona toward their Bishop.

Fr. Bertoni and Bishop Grasser: two men who deeply understood each other and loved each other. Between the two there was a profound and mutual esteem. Fr. Bertoni described Bishop Grasser as a 'Man of God', and Bishop Grasser, in his turn, considered Fr. Bertoni as 'his Fr. Gaspar'. He had such veneration for Fr. Bertoni that the Bishop felt that 'he would not in the least be surprised if he would one day find out that the Church had designated him for the honors of the altar'. The Bishop's thought has been verified.

## 6. Fr. Rosmini and Fr. Bertoni

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<sup>41</sup> SA, Doc. 25, p. 285; Doc. 26, p. 554.

<sup>42</sup> Stofella, Biography, p. 206.

<sup>43</sup> Letter of Fr. Camillo Cesare Bresciani to the Countess Julia Guarienti Buri, November 22, 1839. SA, Doc. 16 d, p. 91.

### a. A Cordial Relationship

‘In Verona, I met Fr. Gaspar Bertoni who with six priests does a great good.’ This is what Fr. Anthony Rosmini wrote in his own *Travel Journal* under the date of February 26, 1826. This was his first personal contact with the Superior of the Stigmatine Community.<sup>44</sup> This was not some mere casual meeting as the laconic note might seem to insinuate. St. Madeline di Canossa had discussed for years with the young Abbe’ of Rovereto, regarding his plan for a Congregation of Priests who would be, something like the masculine branch of her Daughters of Charity. To resolve a certain dissent that had developed regarding a detail in the apostolic program of the projected Institute, the holy woman ‘sent’ Fr. Rosmini to take Fr. Bertoni’s counsel.

From that day on, between these two men of God an immediate friendship blossomed, nor did the distance of some twenty years in age stand in the way that remained for various *lusters* a cordial and almost fraternal relationship. They wrote back and forth a number of times.<sup>45</sup> In offering his counsel on ‘the Plan for the Priests of Charity, in the encouraging the practical realization of the Plan, St. Gaspar played such a determining role that later, Fr. Rosmini himself would state that ‘in some manner, his Institute was born at the Stimate.’<sup>46</sup>

Every now and then, in his frequent journeys and he was passing through Verona, Fr. Anthony would make his obligatory stop at the Stimate. And he was always received as a beloved friend of the house. Often he spent the night there. Once he himself had become a Founder, Fr. Rosmini was happy to take advantage of each occasion to offer to his most beloved sons the desired comfort of meeting with ‘the most venerated Fr. Gaspar’, so that they might benefit spiritually from him.<sup>47</sup>

With the passing of the years, this friendship became even closer and more fruitful. Fr. Rosmini looked on Fr. Bertoni as one of his most trusted confidants and sources of encouragement. He seems to make some reference to this as a part of his studies and publications: ‘I recommended myself to the Lord’, he wrote among other matters on November 22, 1831, ‘and asked for the prayers of those close to Him, as I have such need. And when possible, please read the book...’<sup>48</sup> Fr. Gaspar, on his part, held Fr. Rosmini to be that holy man, and person of sublime value, that he indeed was.

However, when in Verona there arose the rumors of the imminent designation of Fr. Anthony as the Arch Priest of Rovereto, regarding the opportunity of accepting or not, this honor, to the chorus of not a few friends of Fr. Rosmini, happy or resigned to see him governing the Arch-Priesthood of St. Mark, the opinion of Fr. Bertoni was in sharp contrast with so many others, and his disagreement was beyond discussion. A man of such exceptional talents should not – in Fr. Gaspar’s judgment – should not deny himself to the good of the whole Church, rather than limiting his activity only to

<sup>44</sup> Rosmini, *Opere edite ed inedite*. Roma: Editoriale 1934. Ed. Nazionale. Vol. I, p. 243.

<sup>45</sup> SA, Doc. 15, pp. 79-83.

<sup>46</sup> Letter to Monsignor Bragato, May 18, 1846. cf. SA, Doc. 15, n. 7, pp. 83, f.

<sup>47</sup> Rosmini, *Epistolario Completo*. Ed. Pane, Casale. 1905. Vol. II, p. 468, n.900; Vol. III, p. 774, n. 1467; Vol. IV, p. 9, n. 1479; p. 116, n. 1551; p. 223, n. 1630.

<sup>48</sup> *Ib.*, Vol. IV, n. 1479, p. 9.

the advantage of the Church of Rovereto.<sup>49</sup> However, in the end there was no choice – Fr. Rosmini had to accept the appointment and he became the Arch Priest of Rovereto. This went on for only 12 months – this was a year of incredible crosses and bitterness. Then, in October 1835, he resigned.<sup>50</sup> When he left Rovereto, Fr. Anthony stopped for a while at the Stimate, finding there in the anguish of that period in his life, a certain balm and comfort with his venerated friend.

### b. The Irreconcilable Dissent

No one could have foreseen it: and yet, after a while that holy and fruitful friendship was broken off for good. The initiative for this separation was Fr. Gaspar. It was not so much Rosmini's philosophical direction, but two separate manners of understanding the discipline of the individual with regard to the Church.<sup>51</sup> Regarding the episode, there are no documents. In its place, we do have a valid Stigmatine tradition<sup>52</sup> on the basis of which the facts which led to the unpleasant break might be reconstructed as follows:

In a visit to the Stimate during the autumn of 1841, Fr. Rosmini alone with Fr. Gaspar, or perhaps also in the Community itself, shared some thoughts in anticipation of the content of two works that he had written still not printed, entitled *The Constitution*, and *The Five Wounds of the Church*.<sup>53</sup> Devoted to the Church's authority, almost to a scruple, Fr. Gaspar was alarmed. He would not even admit as possible any discussion on such delicate arguments. Being so upset with these two works, he predicted that one day they would find their way on to the Index of Prohibited Books.

The earnest clarifications offered by his holy friend, inspired on his part, with the purest of intentions, were not sufficient to resolve their dissent. Fear for himself, and also for his followers, Fr. Bertoni admonished Fr. Rosmini that *for the spirit of novelty*, there was no place at the Stimate.<sup>53</sup> Both of these men, heart and soul were

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<sup>49</sup> On June 19, 1834, the Rosminian Priest, Fr. Oberrauch [who was then assigned to the spiritual care of the 'civil Germans' resident, or passing through Verona], thus wrote to his Superior and Father: 'Already for some time here there are rampant the rumors that you most probably will be named Arch Priest of Rovereto. We, from the first moment, are resigned to the Most Holy Will of God, as is His Excellency, Bishop Grasser and other persons. **However, Fr. Gaspar Bertoni does not choose to consent to this and to surrender,** and the reasons he brings forward are most just, since, as he told me among other things, that he sees in you a more suitable area in which to work for the glory of God, not being bound to the Arch Priesthood, than you would be able to do if you are so bound...'

<sup>50</sup> Pusineri, *Rosmini*, end ed. Domodossola 1929.

<sup>51</sup> Stofella, Biography, p. 220.

<sup>52</sup> SA, Doc. 15. Intr., pp. 78, f.

<sup>53</sup> Stofella, Biography, p. 221. ['Fr. Ceresatto, following Fr. Stofella, admits that the break between Fr. Bertoni and Fr. Rosmini happened in the fall of 1841, and that this had been occasioned by the latter's sharing in anticipation of publication of his two works, the *Constitution* and *The Five Wounds of the Church*. It is our opinion, however, that the disagreement happened 6 years later.

dedicated to the triumph of the Church. However, they found themselves on divergent paths and they did not agree on the realization of their generous plans.

## 7. Too Humble

It was said at the Stimate and beyond: ‘Fr. Bertoni is too humble!’<sup>54</sup>. To remain habitually immersed in the sentiment of one’s nothingness had become for Fr. Gaspar a profound need of his soul. It was enough to show him esteem and veneration to make him suffer.<sup>55</sup>

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In 1841, there was an attack on Fr. Rosmini’s *Tract on Moral Conscience*, in a polemical work: ‘Some Affirmations of Fr. Anthony Rosmini, a priest of Rovereto, with an essay of Reflections written by Eusebius Cristiano’, which was really written by one Fr. Pius Melia, SJ. Immediately, Fr. Rosmini responded in his own defense: ‘A response to the imaginary *Eusebius Cristiano*, by the Abbe’ Anthony Rosmini - Serbati, or Rovereto’ [Milano 1841].

In September of 1841, Fr. Rosmini was in Verona to preach in the Seminary a course of Retreat and Fr. Bertoni sent his cleric, John B. Lenotti, to hear him, as he was preparing for the Sub-diaconate.

The Professor of Philosophy, Fr. Settimo Arrighi, after a sojourn at Rovereto, as a guest of Fr. Rosmini, as soon as he returned to Verona, came to see Fr. Bertoni. Therefore, on November 23, 1841, Fr. Arrighi wrote to Fr. Rosmini: ‘I spoke with Fr. Gaspar, and while conversing with him, I touched on the matter that concerns me: afterwards in excusing myself in not having had the time to read the copy I sent him as a gift’. [‘In the Response to the Imaginary *Eusebius Cristiano*], he added his praise regarding the merit and person of your Reverence.’ [cf. Nello Dalle Vedove, Vol. 6, p. 144]. Therefore, there does not seem to be here any break between Fr. Bertoni and his sons with the Philosopher].

There is further confirmation of this in a letter dated March 18, 1846, which Fr. Rosmini wrote to Fr. Bertoni to seek his support for founding a House in San Zeno. He confided to the Chaplain at the Royal Court that Fr. Bertoni had given in times passed counsel and help so that it could truly be said that the Institute of Charity in some manner was born in your house, i.e., at the Stimate [p. 359]. I would hint it would seem counter-productive for one intimately bound to Fr. Bertoni, if the break between the two had already happened. The same might be observed through a letter from Verona, where he was that March, and Fr. Rosmini was writing to Monsignor Bragato, on September 14, 1847, for material assistance.

When on October 15<sup>th</sup> there arrived in Verona the response from Vienna, Fr. Rosmini had already departed for Stresa, but not without, we believe, having been at the Stimate to meet with Fr. Bertoni. Here, therefore, it would seem opportune to bring up the conversation on the work ‘The Five Wounds of the Church’ which Fr. Rosmini had every intention of completing as soon as he got back to Stresa, and this in fact is what he did. Fr. Bertoni remained disturbed by the information he had received from Fr. Rosmini in anticipation, especially regarding the election of Bishops by popular ballot, and he strongly counseled Fr. Rosmini against publishing it [cf. Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove, *Vita di S. Gaspare Bertoni*. Vol. 6, p. 1991.] [This note of Fr. Dalle Vedove was inserted by the Editor of this second edition of Fr. Ceresatto’s work].

<sup>54</sup> SA, Doc. 20, p. 167

<sup>55</sup> SA, Doc. 26, p. 540.

One day, a Monsignor Dionisi, of the noble Dionisi Marquis family,<sup>56</sup> was the one to play his role in his own words not hesitating to proclaim Fr. Bertoni ‘a Saint’, sometimes in a joking manner. For some years, Fr. Gaspar was at the Stimate as Founder and Head of that Community. To the Monsignor, therefore, someone floated the great idea of proposing Fr. Bertoni with an honorific title: Canon of the Cathedral.

At even the mention of this, Fr. Gaspar was much disturbed. He discouraged it, pleased but – it seemed – uselessly. The night passed with no decision made, and then two more. Then, in the end, Monsignor Dionisi was convinced that it would not make much sense to insist on this idea. In his old, and often repeated saying, *Lowly, lowly, to our dens and crags...* a humorous manner of expressing the depths of the humility of his heart. Fr. Bertoni continued to consider that which so many times he had declared in his Letters to Mother Naudet: ‘Gaspar Bertoni, unworthy Priest.’

He never succeeded in seeing to it that never at the door of his room, that of a poor and failing old man, that there might ever come to knock at his door the likes of the Emperor Ferdinand I<sup>57</sup>, Count Maruffi Villa of the Royal Court of Parma, and so many other civic personalities, as well as Bishops and Prelates. Among these we could name Cardinal Monico, the Patriarch of Venice; Monsignor Soldati, Bishop of Treviso; the Bishop of Mantua, Bishop Belle’ and the Armenian Archbishop, Aristace Azarian.<sup>58</sup> And all this, without bring up again the Bishops of Verona: Liruti, Grasser and Mutti, who were at home at the Stimate.

In the second half of August 1839, Verona was paying tribute to her Patron, St. Zeno. His remains were exhumed, and most solemn celebrations were held. Among the 7 orators designated to celebrate for the occasion to offer worship to the Patron Saint, on 7 consecutive days, was included the name of Fr. Gaspar Bertoni. He made his intervention with a good essay of ecclesiastical and sacred eloquence, composed in the style of the times. The question was raised why not print all these. A young priest knocked at the door of the Stimate with a precise order from Bishop Grasser: the manuscript of the discourse was to be handed over to be printed. Fr. Bertoni offered no resistance. This time over his old motto: *Lowly, lowly, to our crags and nests...* there prevailed the motto of his entire Apostolic Mission: *in the service of Bishops*. But the price was his tears.<sup>59</sup>

For some time there had circulated with extreme caution the idea of having a portrait done in order to hand on to the heirs of that early Community the beloved likeness of their Founder. When he got wind of this loving plan of his sons, the Saint blocked every initiative, but with such firmness that the thought was not even brought up in the house. The humble man of God did not think of himself as one whose likeness should be immortalized on canvas.

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<sup>56</sup> Monsignor Dionisi, the Vicar General of the Diocese of Verona from 1807; he was Vicar Capitular, 20 years later following the death of Bishop Liruti. He was re-confirmed Vicar General by Bishop Grasser, and died in 1831. cf. Stofella, Biography, pp. 165, f.

<sup>57</sup> This visit to the domicile on the part of the Sovereign in the summer holidays of 1838.

<sup>58</sup> Stofella, Biography p.239.

<sup>59</sup> Stofella, Biography, p. 205. ‘Description of the Solemnity celebrated in Verona from the 15<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> of August, for the most happy re-discovery of the body of her 8<sup>th</sup> Bishop and Principal Patron, St. Zeno,’ etc. Verona: Libanti 1839. Fr. Bertoni’s sermon is found from p. 103-126.

Fortunately, there was an extern friend, one Mr. Michaelangelo Smania, Fr. Bertoni's legal counselor, who took the matter into his own hands. He came one day to see Fr. Bertoni, realizing that the dear old man, now rather ill, was also suffering from very poor eye sight. Mr. Smania introduced a friend of his to Fr. Bertoni, who, of course, was his artist accomplice. Then, the lawyer introduced a very animated discussion at table and the talented artist drew some outlines of the much desired image. This innocent snare respected the Father's sentiments, and with a simple and venerated painting he nourished the piety of his Sons. The community has ever since been grateful to the Attorney, Mr. Smania.

## **8. Leave it up to God**

Fr. Bertoni was well known to all, in the City and through the Diocese, either by direct knowledge, or by reputation. His reputation as a saint was even known to the open-minded. There is the incident of a man who despised priests, and everywhere spit out his awful invectives against the Clergy. In order to close off his conversation, it sufficed to ask him: 'What do you have to say against Fr. Gaspar?'. He would respond: 'The man is a saint ... we are not treating here of saints.'<sup>60</sup> And the fanatic, from that instant, together with Fr. Gaspar, began to spare even the less than holy.

From all sides there came to the Stimate with full confidence to obtain from the intercession of the man of God special graces, if not miracles. On February 17, 1827, Mrs. Rose Storari suffered from one of the more virulent attacks of military fever. The doctors attending to her became very worried. On March 18<sup>th</sup>, the sick woman was found to be in the extremes. She received Holy Viaticum in the morning, and then in the evening, Extreme Unction. Her despairing husband, Mr. Joseph Ferrari, had asked Fr. Bertoni to make a visit to the sick room, in the secret hope that the intercession of the Saint would rescue from death that life which was so dear to him. Fr. Gaspar was himself confined to his own bed, because of a relapse of his old infection in his leg, and he sent word back to Mr. Ferrari, expressing his deepest regrets that he could not come personally, but that since the morrow was the feast of St. Joseph he should find great courage, placing all his trust in St. Joseph. Later, Mr. Ferrari would state: 'It was a genuine prodigy.' That very night, as the new day the 19<sup>th</sup> was dawning, there arose a 'crisis', but one that was most benign. The woman suddenly began to get better, and her convalescence from then on proceeded rapidly so that the sick woman in a few days could get out of bed, and she was restored completely to her pristine state of health.<sup>61</sup>

In August of 1834, Mr. Joseph Tubaldini, having already lost his wife, had to watch his son, Marino, with his precarious constitution, and in a state of habitual flux, and still at a very young age – suddenly lapsed into a terrible illness that was declared incurable. The desperate father begged from the saint for the comfort of his visit. Fr. Gaspar in fact did go, saw the sick boy, and prayed over him, blessed him, and exhorted the family members to have confidence. He left, 'leaving them full of hope'. Nor did this hope prove vain, as Mr. Tubaldini later testified, because on the following

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<sup>60</sup> SA, Doc. 26, pp. 571, ff.

<sup>61</sup> Stofella, Biography, p. 325.

morning the doctor found that the lad's condition of health. There was an immediate improvement and a complete cure within a few days.<sup>62</sup>

In the year 1839, Mr. Sante Mariotti, who was working for the Sisters of the Holy Family, for a few months had been subject to excesses of a very robust fever, that withstood ever remedy. One day, when he was struck by this fever as he walked along the street, not far from the Stimate, he was struck by the malady before he got to the House. He dragged himself into Fr. Bertoni's room to take care of an errand for the Sisters. Seeing him visibly ill, the Saint said to him: 'Come in, my dear Sante!'. He took a small vial full of blessed oil and anointed the suffering man with the Blessed Oil of St. Zeno, Patron of Verona. Fr. Gaspar also suggested to him that for a few days that he be confident in praying a few Our Father's; Hail Mary's and *Gloria's*, in honor of the Saint. Sante responded: 'Why should I do that?' as Mr. Mariotti remarked a few years later: if the grace of my healing had already been granted? At that very instant, the fever ceased, and I began to feel well, and it has never come back to bother me.'

Naturally, these and other outstanding graces were received through the faith of the Saint. Those who benefited by them rejoiced, but without wondering very much about them. It was simply a matter of fact: the faith of the saints can accomplish wonders. Fr. Bertoni himself showed no surprise over these incidents. Precisely because in those facts he did not believe that he was the cause of them. For him, the solution lay always in the faith of the petitioner, the Providence of Heaven, and the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints. Let us all trust in God.

## **9. *You will go to St. Zeno's, but not yet to the cemetery!***

At the Stimate, certain lively exchanges that appeared only in a joking manner between Fr. Bertoni and Brother Paul Zanolì have left their mark in our traditions. It was a few days before August 19, 1838. Fr. Gaspar, on that date, had made the commitment to deliver the panegyric honoring St. Zeno, in the monumental Basilica dedicated to him, and he found himself in bed. To Brother Paul, who was taking care of him, he asked in an enigmatic manner: 'Paul, will we be able to go, then, to St. Zeno's?' With some hesitation, Brother Paul responded also enigmatically: 'We will see.' And Fr. Bertoni picked up on him, and sought further: Paul... is it to the cemetery? Tell me, is that where we are going?' And the good Brother answered: Of course; you will go there like all the others!' Fr. Bertoni answered: 'See, Paul, how frankly you answer me!'

This refrain, then cut off then, even after August 19, 1838, right up until a few months from the death of the Saint, all the testimonies of the Fathers and Brothers, remembered this incident in a happy way. Was it a prophecy? Or a mere presentiment?" Fr. Lenotti commented: 'The fact was that Fr. Gaspar did go to St. Zeno's and preached: and in time, he did not go to the Cemetery.'<sup>63</sup>

And so it was at the death of Fr. Bertoni [June 12, 1853] all was arranged by Fr. Marani for the normal burial in the local cemetery. At the end of his extraordinary funeral services, two influential admirers of the venerable deceased, to the joy and happy surprise of the entire Stigmatine Community, made of themselves promoters of

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<sup>62</sup> ib. p. 326.

<sup>63</sup> SA, Doc.20, p. 195.

a blessed initiative, with a view to providing a worthy entombment to the remains of the Man whom all of Verona was unanimous in thinking of him as a Saint.

For a while, the body was kept in little chapel of the Parish Church of the Most Holy Trinity, while the long and drawn out negotiations with the civil authorities were conducted. Finally, on July 30, 1854, the mortal remains of Fr. Bertoni were placed in the center of the Church which was his own <sup>64</sup>, to the great comfort of his sons, who continued to consider themselves as being under his gaze and still disciples in his school, which he had lived personally, as the **School of God.** Brother Paul was always happy that in his views were correct!

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<sup>64</sup> Stofella, Biography, pp. 297-304.

## Chapter 18

### From Immolation to Glory

#### 1. Final Words from his Soul

The texts of the epistolary correspondence between Fr. Gaspar and Fr. Louis Bragato allow us to fathom the true depths of the interior riches of his great soul, by now close to his goal in heaven. Those letters date from 1835 and bring us up to 1848 provide the soul with those moving testimonies of sons who discuss the most troubled final years of the venerated old man. We will limit ourselves to choosing a few passages.

The Saint reveals himself in the blessed fullness of that spirituality which is already interpreted by us as holy abandonment practiced in a constant climate, even one that was intensifying, due to indescribable tribulations, crosses, and physical sufferings. In fact, if the trials, the bitterness, the illnesses were a bit always part of his life, in the last three *lusters* of the life of the Saint, they simply moved right in and took up residence now at the Stimate. And with such peace he received them all:

*...My very dear Fr. Louis,*

*Following this [the death of a dear and holy friend in the house], I will not tell you all our other tribulations as these are not few, and I do not mention them so that I will not excessively burden your soul. 'Let us glory in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings patience, patience brings proof, and proof brings hope: this hope does not confuse, because the charity of God is poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit Who has been given to us... [Rm 5:4, 5].*

*Farewell, dear Fr. Louis, beloved and greeted by all 'in a holy embrace.'*  
*From Verona, December 1, 1837.*<sup>65</sup>

At the end of 1839, with a view to the new year about to dawn, with the punctuality of a devout son, Fr. Bragato wished to the Father of his soul and to his fortunate brothers who lived near him, 'a thousand benedictions, and not excluding the crosses...!' In his response, Fr. Gaspar manifests the emotion of a saint who had chosen to love and serve Christ in suffering:

*... I thank you, above all, for your benevolence, especially spiritual. Indeed, what greater good could you desire for your friends other than Crosses? Certainly, as far as I am concerned, you could not have pleased me more; it is not that I have already the strength to carry them, but may the lord grant me the grace to embrace them, and I await from your prayers and from divine mercy, together with suffering, also patience. Now, since I am forewarned already from these early days of the year that is coming, as a man told beforehand, I will give them a hearty welcome, and I say: here are the crosses that my Fr. Louis told me about: may God be blessed ...*<sup>66</sup>

<sup>65</sup> SA, Doc. 35, pp. 744, f.

<sup>66</sup> ib. Letter of January 29, 1840, p. 746,

Is this one further introspection into the marvelous depths of the spirit of Fr. Bertoni? His beloved Fr. Louis was still in exile, at the Royal Court of Vienna, where he had participated as the guide of souls in the joy of a clarification, after the anguish of a spiritual dark night that had brought him agony of soul and heart.

Fr. Bertoni was much experienced in the ‘jokes’ that his Most Loving Lord plays on souls loved particularly by Him. In his response, he inspires his own beloved disciple toward the heaven of perfect abandonment with the unmistakable accents of one who for many years habitually lived in that supernatural atmosphere:

***...What tongue is capable to praise God as much as He merits, and to bespeak of the love with which He loves us, and the most diligent care that He takes of us, even more than that of a mother for her babies.***

***Let us accustom ourselves well in this day of light with which God consoles us by revealing over us his loving face, and to entrust ourselves totally in Him also for those moments where He remains hidden, as a mother who entertains herself with her little children, rejoicing in making herself sought and desired and called with sighs and even tears.***

***O how blessed is this Father of ours!***

***What could he do for us, after having passed through so many trials, in Heaven, if even now He shows us so much, and such tender benevolence...?<sup>67</sup>***

## 2. Failures?

After 1843, at the Stimate there circulated a climate of failure. The Stigmatine Community was diminishing before the eyes of all.<sup>68</sup> Of the eleven priests in just a few short years, three had died: Fr. Biadego, Fr. Cartolari and precisely, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January 1844, Fr. Modesto Cainer. Fr. Gramego recorded this in his House Chronicle: ‘After four illnesses that were quite extended and one after the other, supported with much patience, he, too, slipped away silently. At the Stimate he had been the willing and loving servant of all. He was 46 years old.’

However, these deaths, while they deeply sadden the heart, they offered to the reflective soul only reasons for peace – giving joy. However, the men who left brought only sadness without much comfort. Two Coadjutor Brothers, after having served the Lord respectively for 13 and 8 years, returned home; other Brothers entered and left; only one of them persevered. In the meantime, not a single cleric, no priest came to take up the last three rooms that death had emptied on us. But this was not all: there were two other departures that proved the most painful:

These were Fr. Vincent Raimondi, who left in June 1843; and Fr. Charles Fedelini, the pupil of Fr. Gaspar, left in August 1847. Both of these for years had served the Diocesan Seminary. They were most esteemed teachers of Church History – and the latter, the much appreciated Professor of Moral Theology. They stated that the reason for their leaving was health. If that were the convincing reason why would not the others also leave: Fr. Marani, the newly ordained Fr. Lenotti, and of course the most ailing of all, Fr. Gaspar himself?

<sup>67</sup> SA, Doc. 35. Letter of August 27, 1840, p. 748.

<sup>68</sup> SA, Doc. 29, p. 608.

Fr. Raimondi would die in 1855, as an approved Scholastic of the Company of Jesus. Fr. Fedelini, though, would come back to the Stimmate during that same year, re-enter the flock, warmly received by Fr. Bertoni's first successor, Fr. John Mary Marani.<sup>69</sup>

And Fr. Gaspar's comment was: 'And do you, too, want to go?' - he would say to those who remained. And the question was addressed with a calmness that was disturbing. On other occasions, however, he would encourage them: 'Let us trust in God.' And something of his unchanging peace would pass into the depressed spirit of his sons.<sup>70</sup> These poor men! Forty years of generation dedication to the common ideal seemed to be crumbling towards a total disintegration. The school had closed in 1843, the ministry of the Fathers had been necessarily reduced to the assistance of the Pastors, and the Superior was immobilized by his illnesses. The others were sick as well, and there was not a recruit in sight ...

However, this was a temptation that Fr. Bertoni helped them to overcome: beyond all appearances, the Work of God was simply in its most fecund phase. And he put himself in this dark hour to writing the Constitutions, entrusting the Institute to nothing less than *anywhere in the Diocese and the World!* In the School of God he had for some time learned that even the works of the Lord often enter into the loving game of providence, being subject also they, as are individual souls, to days of sun, and to nights without stars. He would maintain: ***It is not for this the Providence is slowed down; often all this better it, confirms it and perfects it.***<sup>71</sup> A passage from a letter dated March 26, 1829, to read it again today seems to provide an anticipated commentary on the harsh trial that his Institute would one day endure:

***... the works of God have their trials, with which God shows His hand, in ruling them and leading them to His purposes. He accomplished with the difficulties He permits, to take hold of the hand of man, and to give way humbly to His Providence, from which the man sees clearly and how conservation and success to depend only on Him...***

Also the attitude of confident assurance expressed by Fr. Bertoni in the apparent agony of his work, finds in this same letter his earlier explanation:

***...When, though, it is night for us it is day for Him Who knows what is to be done. And we should raise our hands to heaven when we do not know where else to put them ... 'in the nights extol your hands toward the holy': this is the Latin that God teaches to anyone who is in His school. 'And the night will be illuminated as the day.' This is another Latin phrase that the good Father has explained to us from the beginning, by drawing light out of the darkness...***<sup>72</sup>

Such blind confidence is never deluded. Shortly after the Founder day, a period of some light came also for his family<sup>73</sup>. To comment on the long phase of trial

<sup>69</sup> Stofella, Biogrpahy, p. 253.

<sup>70</sup> Zara, *Cronache*. Archives at the Stimmate. Verona

<sup>71</sup> Letter of Fr. Bertoni to Mother Naudet, October 16, 1808.

<sup>72</sup> SA, Doc. 35, pp. 729, f.

<sup>73</sup> Stofella, Biography, pp. 316-322.

overcome heroically in the love and confidence of their Father, the sons said of him: **'He hoped against hope...'**<sup>74</sup>. And they could only echo what Fr. Gaspar himself had written to Fr. Bragato in 1840:

**... How different are the ways of God from the ways of men! Who learns these well so as not to be disheartened, when it is necessary as happened to Abraham, the father of all the faithful, to 'believe in hope against hope!' Blessed are they who close their eyes to short vision when the most wise hand of God takes ours to direct us and to govern us ...'**<sup>75</sup>

Writing these inspired words, Fr. Gaspar without realizing it, sang to his distant son and to his heirs the beatitude of his own soul: **Let us trust in God, as this is a beautiful trust.** And in this saying that uttered forth from his lips. He offers us a synthesis of his life, his work and his message, all of a great Saint.

### 3. A Slow Martyrdom

In that overwhelming passage of making himself more in conformity to Christ, from the very first years of his Priesthood, Fr. Bertoni had no hesitation in vowing himself to suffering and to martyrdom.<sup>76</sup> Nor would Heaven delay in showing gratitude for that offering. The period from 1812-1853, his was a single, fatiguing and suffered itinerary of his body struck and lacerated with illness, but at the same time also the incessant ascent of a blessed soul in all that suffering.<sup>77</sup>

One curious ailment, which seemed also invented to have frustrated the medical experts of that time taking care of him. They did not seem to understand very much about his problem. He wrote once in a rather clear manner concerning this: **'Many say many things'. And I do not say a thing and I let those who know what to do to do their thing. It is enough that 'whether we live or die we are of the Lord.'**<sup>78</sup>

He understood that the Lord did not yet want him 'dead', but only 'wounded'<sup>79</sup>, a disciple who was very attentive and diligent in His School, in the purifying class room of suffering: **Please, Reverend Mother, pray that I might gather some fruit from the School to which the Lord has assigned me, indeed so that I might dispose myself to serve Him...**<sup>80</sup>

And the profit must have been top grade to judge from the occasional hints of Fr. Gaspar himself and of the testimonies which refer to this – to cite a single example – on that long suffering in his leg from which the Saint suffered atrociously from 1821 until 1828, with only some brief period of respite in 1826. That poor limb was almost 'de-fleshed' with more than 200 surgical interventions: a repeated deep lancing,

<sup>74</sup> SA, Doc. 29, n. 7, pp. 608, f.

<sup>75</sup> SA, Doc. 35, p. 749.

<sup>76</sup> SA, Doc. 35, *Spiritual Journal*. July 24, 1808, p. 657; September, p. 661.

<sup>77</sup> SA, Doc. 26, p. 424.

<sup>78</sup> Letter to Mother Naudet, without date. *BERTONIANO*, 1933, p. 126.

<sup>79</sup> Letter to Mother Naudet. Manuscripts n. 75-2.

<sup>80</sup> Letter to Mother Naudet, June 1, 1814. *BERTONIANO*, 1932, p. 323.

piercing, cauterizations, draining: long years of sophisticated martyrdom, caused by a mysterious malady and from an indeed superficial knowledge of surgery inflicted on patients, which still had no knowledge of anesthesia. In December 1827, the malady got much worse, so much so that it again brought Fr. Gaspar to the very lip of the grave. To hold back that terrible loss, still another time, it was the supplicating faith of an entire people.<sup>81</sup> With a Saint in toe, also an entire city feels that it is making sure and better progress toward the sunset of eternity. And his improvement, almost instantaneous, seemed to be a miracle. It was not, however, a healing. And the weight of that lacerated and suffering limb continued to make itself felt.

His flesh weakened as he was more wasted by infirmity, but the vigor of his spirit grew in the loving acceptance of that bitter chalice: *... the Lord is keeping me in bed under the irons and the knives: may He be blessed! 'I will bless the Lord at all time.' As long as He is served, this is what suffices for me...*<sup>82</sup> He had a way unique to himself in resisting the most atrocious fits of pain. When the incisions penetrated mercilessly into his flesh even to the bone, prayer came to his lips on a higher level. But even for this expression of his weakness would find him asking pardon of his doctors. One of them, who was quite well known at the time, testified: 'In the many operations on him that I did, I have never seen a patient like him: I believe he is a Saint.'<sup>83</sup>

The suffering in his leg seemed to spend itself out in 1828, but it took much longer to restore Fr. Bertoni to health of his better years. He was able to achieve some periods of relative wellbeing but there were periods of time, and these were not brief, when he was obliged to remaining his room, or in bed. Then there came that, which his first biographer has called his last illness. It included the last 11 years of that holy life, years that were the most severe, the most fruitful: these are what brought him to the summit of immolation.<sup>84</sup>

#### 4. In the Breach until the very End

With his Panegyric honoring St. Zeno in August 1839, Fr. Gaspar said farewell to his solemn preaching assignments. In the Introduction to that final discourse that he had worked out, there is a clear presentiment of this<sup>85</sup>. And indeed, as it was from his bed he dragged himself to the pulpit, so, from St. Zeno's he returned to what would

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<sup>81</sup> On this occasion in Verona there was repeated the moving spectacle of 1812. To rescue Fr. Gaspar from death, all resources were mobilized: Eucharistic expositions in St. Firmus Major and in St. Paul's of Campo Marzio; the extraordinary exposition of Our Lady of the People in the Cathedral; private and public prayers in the Churches and homes; good works, sacrifices, repeated pilgrimages. [cf. Stofella, Biography, p. 163.]

<sup>82</sup> SA, Doc. 35. Letter to Mother Naudet, p. 727, Intr.

<sup>83</sup> SA, Doc. 21, n. 2, p. 164.

<sup>84</sup> Stofella, Biography, p.164.

<sup>85</sup> *If for my entire life I have made use of my tongue to bring to you the fruit of my little knowledge, exhorting you to a good and perfect activity, according to the office to which God has called me: so, it is so sweet to close my career, serving and pleasing you in such holy affection and with the praises of our saint in my mouth...* See the description given, pp. 105, f.

prove to be almost definitive confinement, with the only alternative he could use, either his arm chair or his bed.

However, this still was not the end of that busy life. The opposite is the truth of the matter. The resistance to intellectual activity and to continual truly qualified ministry offered by Fr. Bertoni in his cell is more than surprising. As the flesh was more and more being destroyed, the more was did there flare up also the ardor of his soul.<sup>86</sup> And in his love for God there was enkindled the flame of apostolate. After his tenuous and fragmentary repose during the night – when it was that the nights were not passed by him without any sleep at all - how full would his day be! Once he had completed his morning meditation, if the doctors allowed, to whom he always offered a most perfect obedience, he would **celebrate Mass in the Domestic Oratory of the Transfiguration, next to his room.**

It would be then that his spirit would come back to him to immerse himself in the ocean of God. The singular devotion, the thrusts of his heart which enkindled in him even the features of his pallid face, would recall to those at Mass with him that they were attending a celebration offered by the likes of a St. Alphonsus Liguori or by a St. Philip Neri.<sup>87</sup>

However, most of the time he had to limit himself just to following from his arm chair, or from his bed, the holy Sacrifice which others would celebrate for him. Woe to anyone who would try to deprive him of this supreme comfort. He received communion every day and fasting. Every energy of soul for him arrived from this.<sup>88</sup>

And once, with the help of Fr. Marani, he would have taken care of all the business pertaining to the direction and to the administration of the Institute, this 'Man of Counsels'. Forgetful of his own tiredness, his suffering, remained at the disposition of all. And in that little cell, in need of light and comforts, the souls came and went almost uninterruptedly until late evening.

From his bed, or from his armchair, the Saint gave many **retreats and Spiritual Exercises to groups of priests, or seminarians about to be ordained. This was his 'routine'** up through 1849, a little more than three years prior to his death. It was surprising how much light of wisdom and how much apostolic warmth could spill forth from a soul that was so bound to an organism, by this time, pretty well spent with suffering.<sup>89</sup>

Condemned to confinement, Fr. Bertoni was happy to conserve as long as possible of a periodic contact with the young of his this-born Marian Oratory. On Sundays, the group of the 'Perfect' would file silently up to the little Chapel of the Transfiguration. Then all would visit the room next door and would gather around the bed of the suffering Fr. Bertoni. He then, would speak to them. How much warmth and how much fruit would be derived from his words! At times he moved them even to tears.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> SA, Doc. 20, p. 188.

<sup>87</sup> Summ. Super virtut., p. 124.

<sup>88</sup> SA. Doc. 26, p. 539.

<sup>89</sup> Stofella, Biography, p. 262.

<sup>90</sup> Summ. Super virtut.: the testimony of a Dr. Anthony Caprara, a former student of the Stimmate, p. 133.

All through the years, on the second Sunday of July, the Marian Oratory of St. Paul in Campo Marzio with most of its members present, would arrive punctually at the Stimate, as in sacred pilgrimage, also to state that the remembered its origins and past splendors. Once the devotions had been completed in the main church, all those young boys – this is the testimony of the priest who guided them – prayed for ‘the grace’ – as they would call it – to see the Saint. However, as would be expected, only a modest representation of the group would go up into the room of the Saint. And what about Fr. Gaspar? That meeting almost seemed to sweeten him further, as they would share their flood of memories. There would be relived the humble beginnings and the unexpected developments and growth of a work that was born almost by surprise, right there at St. Paul’s in the vigorous years of his early priesthood.

Just think of the jokes of Divine Providence! The assignment of long, long ago, from Fr. Girardi, that first little squadron of youngsters admitted to their First Holy Communion. Then the little encampment, the small Church of the ‘little Paul’s’. And later, the Marian Cohort, the band, the green fields of Campo Fiore ... And then based on the example of this first-born Oratory, how many others sprang up throughout the city and the Diocese! The light in the setting sun would come alive again in those instants in the splendor of the luxuriant afternoon.

The older lads, gathered as a crown around his bed, he would call them affectionately by name. For the little group there would be a small souvenir. There would not be a long discourse, but a few touching words that came from the depths of his soul and which remained with some of those men forever.<sup>91</sup>

Fr. Gaspar’s active day in his final illness was no spent entirely in audiences. There was also his regular study; that personal, in response to a soul thirsty for God which could never be slaked, as well as that necessary for the delicate commissions received from the Chancery Office.

When there did not come to him priests or religious, struggling to find their way, to be re-directed on the right path, with some **Retreat**, there were always books to review, questions to resolve on the more disparate problems hat the direction of the Diocese could ask of him.<sup>92</sup>

When he could no longer write, he would dictate judgments, or solutions, with a clarity of exposition and assurance of doctrine which were admirable. He would always sign these documents personally. The last document of this nature which the Archives have kept for us is January 28, 1852. Thus, amidst his diligent and fervent practices of piety, the audiences, his study, the sick man would end his day. Then, the long night would begin. This is often a time for nightmares for those suffering who have to measure it with the seemingly interminable loneliness. For Fr. Gaspar, insomnia was not a torment. He would say, ‘with affection’, his Rosary, slowly, meditating for long hours and hours on the ‘Our Father’, and on the ‘Hail Mary.’ And the light of the new days would often catch him by surprise.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> SA. Doc. 31, n. 1, p. 616.

<sup>92</sup> Stofella, Biography, p. 277.

<sup>93</sup> SA, Doc. 20, p. 188.

## 5. Tribulations

The hostility of certain churchmen that accompanied the first developments of the Community of the Stimmate, who were then mortified by the well known intervention of Bishop Liruti himself, came back little by little to make itself felt in the Saint's last years.

The occasional writings of the Saint hint about this with a certain frequency.<sup>94</sup> But we do not have much precision regarding this. Fr. Bertoni had a special delicacy in simulating and in wishing that his followers might forget the wrongs they received. Being an adversary of his was one way of being assured of his charity.

There were also tribulations of another kind, indeed: the sorrows of 1848. It is not that Fr. Bertoni was a politician. However, loyal to his principle that all authority comes from God, he considered the 'sin of revolution' to be very grave, and in his time he did not hide this in his sermons.<sup>95</sup>

The promoters of the New Italy were on the march, and Verona, tranquilly hidden behind her walls, will never pardon them. In 1848, the Stimmate, as Fr. Lenotti testifies, were considered a sign of conspiracies and plots of the 'libertines', who, since revolutions are supported on nothing other than what they confiscate from others, counted on the goods of the Community, seeking its ruin.<sup>96</sup> On March 18<sup>th</sup>, just before the 'Five Days of Milan', there was also at Verona a brief skirmish of the insurrection. The appointment of those rebelling and the crowd manipulated by them, took place under the pacific windows of the Priests of the Company of Jesus in the College of St. Sebastian's.

The cry: *Viva Italy!* Alternated to other cries, less edifying, to say the least, '*Death to the Jesuits!*' To disperse the unruly crowd [there is record of a stone having been thrown] was not the police, as they were nowhere to be found that night, nor on the following days. Nor was there any sign of the rather imposing military force, but the surprise of a providential burst of thunder with a torrent of pouring rain and hail, only a single burst, and this was providential. All of a sudden, the breath of the winds offered to those in the maneuver the way of escape.<sup>97</sup>

In the matter of revolution, the highest point was of 1848 in Verona was just the above. The disgusting episode which obliged the Fathers of St. Sebastian's to an immediate dispersion. This did not succeed at all to convert Fr. Bertoni and his spiritual sons to the cause whose cry, '*Long Live Italy*' as they intended to serve, as their fidelity to the constituted authority remained unaltered.

<sup>94</sup> Stofella, Biography, pp. 248, f.

<sup>95</sup> His sons followed the same line. In 1866, when the passions of 1848 had burned out, a good liberal with unexpected serenity, of the Community of Fr. Bertoni would write: 'It was said that they were adversaries – those Priests of the Stimmate – to our every progress in constituting ourselves as a free people. I do not know how they think in their hearts, nor do I have any right to ponder them. I do directly to the fruit of the tree, and where there is good fruit, I hope that this prospers.' John Baptist Montanari. His work: *Che fare?*. Verona 1866, pp. 44, ff. – cf. Stofella, Biography, p. 265.

<sup>96</sup> SA, Doc. 20, p. 173.

<sup>97</sup> *Brief History of the Venetian Province of the Company of Jesus*. Venice 1914, pp. 82; 247, ff.

And yet – and this is the height of irony! - the most serious tribulation of 1848, for Fr. Gaspar and his companions was precisely the military command of His Apostolic Majesty stationed in Verona. The evening in July 2<sup>nd</sup>, with seven other priests, two Priests of the Stimate were arrested, while there were in St. Stephen's Parish hearing confessions, by a detachment of soldiers, veterans of the battle of Santa Lucia. On Fr. Benciolini's person, they found a certain sum of money: the money was necessary for purchases for the small Stigmatine Community at the Derelitti, and Fr. Venturini was with him. The investigators for military security thought instead that this was money that would be used to bribe the soldiers, in the effort to persuade them to desert. They were all brought into prison, and treated harshly. Among the phrases bandied about was that they would all face the firing squad.

Fr. Gaspar did all he could to intervene to save his spiritual sons from this terrible misunderstanding. Influential persons made their voices heard beginning with the Bishop himself. But all was a state of siege. After four days of anguish the first rays of the light of hope intervened. The decision was to await the return of Field-Marshal Radetsky. He came back on July 13<sup>th</sup>, in a certain euphoria – perhaps – because of his victory at Mount Berico. On this occasion, Radetsky proved to be good. The two priests of the Stimate and the other seven were released into freedom, after having been given – as would be expected – a severe admonition.<sup>98</sup>

Thus troubled rained down on the few Priests of the Stimate from the left and the right. Fortunately, for St. Gaspar, he held it to be 'of faith' that 'for all those who love the Lord, everything works out unto good.'<sup>99</sup> After a brief interval there was a further proof of this.

When in fact, in 1850, on the request of the Austrian Military Command, Bishop Mutti requested two priests from Fr. Bertoni to serve as chaplains for those condemned to death, and those assigned were precisely Fr. Benciolini, and his companion of adventure, Fr. Innocent Venturini.<sup>100</sup>

They accomplished a great deal of good, also because at least in the memory of those bad memories that they both had endured, they were able to serve the poor victims of an Empire that now ruled only on the strength of tired bayonets. From March 6, 1850, also the ground floor of the Stimate was taken over by a small detachment of soldiers, whose presence was most annoying.

This presence of a military detachment in the house was most annoying and a source of suffering for Fr. Bertoni, who was now gravely ill, as it was for the fathers and Brothers of the House. However, it was also a period of spiritual wealth, thanks to the incomparable Brother Paul. With his fine manners, he knew how to make friends with his boyish spirit among the soldiers, and led a good group of them every Saturday into the Church for confession.<sup>101</sup>

Contemporaneously, Fr. Bertoni had to suffer even great disconcerting afflictions caused him by a series of wicked and dramatic deeds that had forced Pius IXth to flee to Gaeta. First Pius VII, and now Pius IX: Fr. Bertoni opened and was now concluding his priestly life on the Calvary of two Popes, he who in all times

<sup>98</sup> Thomas Netti, *Castelnuovo e gli austriaci nel 1848*. Venice 1914, pp. 82; 247, f.

<sup>99</sup> SA, Doc. 20, p. 173.

<sup>100</sup> Giacobbe, *Remarks on the Life of Innocent Venturini*. Verona 1864, p. 13.

<sup>101</sup> *Reminiscences concerning the Fathers and Brothers ...* o.c., pp. 79, ff.

maintained that calm of soul, through his loving, indefectible devotion for the Vicar of Christ and His Church.<sup>102</sup> In fact, there was no sorrow and tribulation of the Church for which Fr. Gaspar did not suffer the more than if it were his own suffering and tribulation – as there was joy, or victory of this same Mother that would not bring him exaltation and tender happiness, sometimes even to the point of tears.<sup>103</sup>

In the painful Roman happenings of 1848-1849, Fr. Gaspar was also much comforted visibly in the filial attachment shown by the faithful of the entire world toward the persecuted Pope. The triumphant return of the Pontiff to Rome<sup>104</sup>, his early announcement of the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God, were two great joys that sweetened Fr. Gaspar's sorrowful sunset of his earthly day.<sup>105</sup>

## 6. In the Light of a Great Love

From that , prayer offered before Mass in ecstasy, on that long ago May 30, 1812, the Crucifix had said to him: **Look at this heart, this My heart!** It was the Crucified Christ, speaking with his impassioned disciple who would remain a prisoner of His for ever, being pressed by an overwhelming yearning and an incessant thrust towards a loving total conformity to the sublime Model.

In particular in the last 30 months of his earthly pilgrimage, the last, and the most beautiful strophes of his Canticle of Abandonment to the Father. These were stanzas that no pen ever fixed on paper, but St. Gaspar formulated them in communion with the Divine Agonizing Lord of Golgotha. Thirty months, just think: this is how long the final phase of his illness that would bring him to the tomb lasted. We might ask anew the formal name of that final malady” however, there is no clear indication concerning its nature. The popular terms in those days would be ‘miasma’, and ‘malign humors.’

However, the Saint himself offered his own diagnosis: he called it a ‘malady not curable by an earthly doctor.’<sup>106</sup> In January of 1850, he was forever riveted now to his arm chair. There remained to him now only his harsh pallet. Condemned from now on to the humiliating trial of an immobility that was almost absolute, and the ailing man himself called this ‘exquisite suffering.’ The spasms of acute suffering came more than formerly, almost surpassing the limits of human endurance – he was under attack from the insidious onslaught of desperation. He gave expression to this at times for a rather an unusual tone of lament. But this was only to implore from his sons the charity of a special prayer. He would say: *‘If you only knew my sons, what suffering and what anguish!... O, if the Lord does not help me with His grace ... Pray much for me that He might give me the patience to handle this trial ...’*<sup>107</sup>

His eyes were wide open from his torture, sought refuge and relief **in the Wounds of the most loving Savior**, Who opened wide His arms to him from the bare

<sup>102</sup> Stofella, Biography, pp. 182, f.

<sup>103</sup> SA, Doc. 26, p. 505.

<sup>104</sup> SA, Doc. 20, p. 172.

<sup>105</sup> Stofella, Biography, pp. 270, f.

<sup>106</sup> Letter to Mother Naudet, n. 143.

<sup>107</sup> SA, Doc. 20, p. 143; Doc. 26, p. 423.

wall. <sup>108</sup> On his lips there would often return those consoling, comforting expressions, the most beautiful of loving trust: ***Your Will be done... May the Lord be blessed ... Jesus, Mary ...!*** In the presence of His Master, nailed and crowned with thorns, the sufferings of the disciple appeared to him as something less and he would say: *Strike, o Lord, and buffet me, as I merit it and I merit even worse ...!* <sup>109</sup> His was a suffering without any thought that he was being heroic, nor certainly masochistic, full of compunction. <sup>110</sup> One night he was not sleeping, and he murmured a few ejaculatory prayers under his breath, but loud enough to interrupt the sleep of Brother Ferrari who was sleeping in the next room. 'Father, do you need anything>', the good Brother asked. 'No, Louis, I just need to suffer...' <sup>111</sup>

His courage and patience did not fail, and neither did the loving attention of others. He would have recourse also to his inherent good nature in order to mitigate the sadness of those who would visit him. <sup>112</sup> This long martyrdom of confinement brought o him next a deep bed sore that became infected, and brought enormous discomfort. In the last four months of his life, this had developed into a terrible oozing back ulcer. The Saint did not complain, and it was not known how long he had endured this. The infirmarian discovered it, and of course, made it known. When the doctor looked at that terrible raw wound that penetrated to the bone, he could only sigh. The care of this, then, proved to be long and quite painful, because his forced immobility was a crucifixion, and only to touch him was a piercing. His poor body was reduced even further in its extreme situation. And what about his spirit?

Three weeks prior to his death two Professors of the Seminary came to see him to comfort him. In response to the usual pleasantries, with a half smile he said: ***Here I am, in School!*** <sup>113</sup> *'Blessed is the man whom You instruct, O Lord'*. This is the scriptural phrase that is the most current in the Saint's letters, an almost unconscious chant of his own beatitude. <sup>114</sup> This is the way it was. From the bare wall, the Crucifix imparted on the disciple the last and most sublime lessons of confident love. To abandon oneself blindly and lovingly to heaven even when it seems all closed off and it is night, as happened to the dying Jesus Himself on the Cross, means to reach the most sublime confines of perfect Abandonment. And for the saint, those outer reaches caressed him, already heroic in loving compunction, while the anguish experienced in this trial which suggested to him thoughts of despair for his own eternal salvation. <sup>115</sup>

Having guessed the tremendous dark night of the Spirit that the Founder was passing through, the Brother Infirmarian sought to comfort him, by reminding him of

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<sup>108</sup> SA, Doc. 26, p. 539.

<sup>109</sup> SA, Doc. 26, pp. 143; 452, ff.

<sup>110</sup> Stofella, Biography, p. 279.

<sup>111</sup> SA, Doc. 26, p. 301.

<sup>112</sup> SA, Doc.20, p. 144.

<sup>113</sup> SA, Doc. 26, p. 423.

<sup>114</sup> One example might be noted in one of his letters to Fr. Bragato: *Since you are no longer teaching school, keep yourself in the School of God; 'they were all taught by God. Blessed is the man whom You instruct, O Lord, and regarding Your Law You instructed him...* [SA, Doc 25, p. 753.

<sup>115</sup> Dalle Vedove, *Un modello di santo Abbandono*. P. 255.

the great good he had done in his life. This kind gesture, though, only increased his discomfort and torment in his anguished soul: *'Don't say that, Brother, for heaven's sake! Do you not know what a poor sinner I am? If you wish me well, please don't say those things, but pray much to the Lord so that He might extend His Mercy to me.'*<sup>116</sup> Then, in that quieting thought of the Lord's Mercy, the clouds seemed to thin out, and to his soul returned splendidly the serene heaven of his long-suffering and loving waiting. Can we think that maybe the Crucifix inspired him and said to him anew: ***Look at This, My Heart....?***

## 7. His Meeting with the 'Good Father'

It is not altogether temerarious to think something along these lines. It is certain that in his final days, the Saint seemed to experience a peace and a serenity without precedent. It seems that his eyes shone in the light of an imminent certitude. Whatever happened in that room during the night when the venerated patient asked the Brother Infirmarian assisting him, and in a tone of voice that translated perhaps the interior melodies of his soul, asked him: ***Louis, did you see anything?***

Was it the Crucifix? Or was it perhaps the Blessed Virgin, who had come to comfort and to return his devout and confident greeting to her every morning in his prayers: ***I greet you, o my Mother, give me your blessing...?*** Certainly, for Brother Ferrari this was neither a delirium, nor a vague dream, but some inexpressible reality of a 'heavenly vision.'<sup>117</sup>

By the end of that May, the terrible bed sore that had brought such discomfort to his back had in some way healed over, but now his body was afflicted with an invincible nausea toward every form of nourishment and his body declined visibly. He was gradually also losing the feeling of pain that had been most acute for him. His mind however, did not show any signs of wandering or confusion, nor did his spirit lose anything of its readiness and strength. This is based on the statements of those close to him and those who had recourse to him for counseling, or for some other need right up until the day before his departure.<sup>118</sup>

This arrived on June 12, 1853, his last day on earth. In the morning, he had received Holy Communion, fasting, as always. This was to be for him his viaticum for eternity. A little after noon, he suffered a real crisis of a very serious listlessness. At the signal from the Brother Infirmarian, the Community which was at table, gathered around the bed of their Father with much trepidation. Very gradually he seemed to come to. He responded to them all with courtesy and serenity, but now just by means of very slight movements of the head and his eyes, to their words of comfort and devotion that each of them present expressed to him. With full use of his senses and his sentiments, he confessed for the last time to his beloved Fr. John Marani. He seemed happy to see Extreme Unction being administered. He responded to this sacred ritual, at which his sons assisted on their knees around the bed as though it were an altar.

<sup>116</sup> SA, Doc. 26, p. 469.

<sup>117</sup> SA, Doc. 20, p. 192; Doc. 26, p. 433.

<sup>118</sup> SA, Doc. 26, pp. 431, ff.

He entered into his final agony. It was Sunday, and time for preaching. A little before 3:00 p.m., three of the Priests of the Stimmate, with their hearts broken with this sad happening, left the Founder's room as he agonized, because they were to keep their regular Sunday assignment of teaching Catechism to the People.

The sweet and sorrowful duty of assisting the dying man was entrusted to Fr. Brugnoli. Just after 3:00 p.m., Fr. Marani re-appeared, as he had someone else go to teach his lesson, which he was giving at St. Luke's, and he came back into the sick room. The eyes of the first-born sought with trepidation signs of life on the agonizing face, and discovered that the soul of their gentle 'Father and Master' had already taken flight toward the bosom of the Lord.

Bent down over the lifeless body, with the little liturgical ritual open between his hands, Fr. Brugnoli was still reading, with much emotion and devotion, those prayers for the dying.<sup>119</sup> There returned to the memories of those present those most fervent bursts of his soul, on the tempestuous waves of the exile [but, how it all was a game of loving Providence!], he yearned for the final embrace of his Lord at the Port of that Peace which will last forever: ***O admirable secrets of divine love! ...A profound abysses of His Charity! ... When will it be that we will be so shipwrecked and abandoned in this immense sea, that we no longer see the shores of this wretched earth of ours...!***

In the very hour in which our Divine savior expired on the Cross, the blessed soul of His faithful disciple, abandoning himself ship-wrecked in the immense sea of Charity, lost sight of the shores of this earth. His pilgrimage lasted 75 years, 8 months and 3 days.

Breaking a long series of days that were obstinately grey and stormy looking, suddenly Verona exploded in the light of the returning sun, and the room was inundated with light, just as the Angel of Life passed through.<sup>120</sup> The visage of the large Crucifix, hung on the wall, and the sweet, almost smiling remains of Fr. Gaspar Bertoni, inclined gently in the sleep of the just, seemed to be identified, as though transfigured by a mutual infinite love.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> SA, Doc. 20, p. 191; Doc 26, p. 435.

<sup>120</sup> This pleasant particular is documented: Fr. C. C. Bresciani [cf. *Collection of his Funeral Orations*, Verona: 1866, Vol. II, pp. 29, f.] noted this almost as heaven's homage to the passing of a just man. There reappeared in those hours a most beautiful spectacle, the serenity of the visage of God, after a flood of rain, as though the prayers of the faithful had been all poured out. – Stofella, Biography, p. 290.

<sup>121</sup> SA, Doc. 21, - . 210.