

**Reminiscences**

**of the Life of**

**Fr. Anthony Conte**

**of the**

**Congregation of the Sacred Stigmata  
of Our Lord Jesus Christ**

**[+ December 18, 1888]**

**by**

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**DEDICATION**

to

**JOSEPH CONTE & TERESA SERAFANI**

These pages have been written especially to satisfy the pious wishes of my venerable Confreres, and for the edification of our young students. By almost natural ties, we also belong to you, illustrious Parents, who had the enviable fate of bringing such a son into this world. Since twice he has been taken from you – once by Religious Life, and now by death – it is only just that what is written here in these *Reminiscences* should be dedicated to you. I only wish that I could have truly captured his memory here, just as it is engraved in your hearts. However, what art could ever equal the love of a Father and a Mother?

As I do not have the eloquence that his actions had, I have not sought to embellish the virtues which were beautiful enough in him, in his pure and simple way of life. His own spiritual writings in which he poured out the secrets of his heart, are inserted in the telling of his life's story. By means of these, you will hear him speak, and you will witness him praying and sighing before his God. These will manifest to you his intimate thoughts and affections. In your loving imagination, as you read these pages, he may come alive before your eyes, in that school of secret but refined virtue, by which he reaped so many merits for heaven.

The second anniversary of his death has now passed. As his memory is still fresh and alive, may these pages provide a lasting means of your consolation – may they bring comfort to pious souls – and may they bring a blessing upon this poor effort of one who calls himself, and who is honored in being

**Your most devoted Servant****Fr. Paul Gradinati  
of the  
Priests of the Stigmata**

[5]<sup>1</sup>

## Preface

On the 11<sup>th</sup> day of April 1883, a young man of 26 years of age, bade a tearful farewell to his parents and relatives and all that was near and dear to him in this world. He came to Verona to become a member of our Congregation. He lived in it for five years, and died in it as a Priest, at Pavia, on December 18, 1888. The virtues of this man, Fr. Anthony Conte, were evident to all who knew him, both in the world and in the Religious Life. During his life-time, he was considered a model, and his death evoked most profound grief, and spontaneous tribute, in Pavia, in the city of his birth, and throughout our Congregation. We will note here a few of the tributes paid to him.

Monsignor John Gobbi, the Arch-Priest and mitred Abbot of Bassano, wrote a letter to our Superior General in which he was most effusive in his praise of Fr. Conte. He stated that he was a Priest of irreproachable life, and outstanding for his extraordinary piety. While he was on this earth, he was one of the most beautiful [6] products of this illustrious Congregation, as he is now most certainly in heaven.

Mr. Peter Nosadini, former secretary of the Association of San Bassiano, to which Fr. Anthony belonged, wrote:

**May that day be not far off when his life will be published. I am sure that from his biography the faithful of Bassano, and our Association, will derive much profit. The members could well model their lives on so splendid an example.**

Bartolo Zanchetta, a fellow townsman of Fr. Conte, who knew him intimately, stated:

**In a very few words, I will give my impressions of Fr. Anthony Conte. I feel now that he is gone, that I prefer to recommend my own soul to him, rather than praying for the repose of his soul.**

One of Fr. Conte's Confreres in Religion remarked:

**As his virtues were so well known to everyone, I say only that Fr. Anthony was really a saint. I believe that now in heaven, he, with all the other Saints, contemplates God face to face, and that he is praying for our beloved Congregation that he loved so much.**

All those who knew him in religious Life are in full agreement [7] with these sentiments. Among these, we will note the Superior of the House of Pavia. In his sincere tribute, he states that Fr. Conte was a real gem. Then, the Priest who was assigned to take Fr. Anthony's place, wrote of him:

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's Note: the page numbers of the original Italian edition will be included in bold print throughout the text enclosed in brackets: [..]

**He was a mirror of virtue and zeal for the glory of God, for the good of souls and for the splendor of his temple, which was his favorite and continual haven. His memory will always be held in benediction, and the example of his virtues are a School for everyone, but in a special way, for me.**

Since a number of other tributes of his Confreres will be found in the narrative that follows, that of the Very Reverend Superior General, Fr. Peter Vignola, will serve as a seal to the ones that have been considered above. The Superior General wrote:

**The news of the death of Fr. Anthony caused a pang in my heart. His piety, mortification, and his zeal were well known to me. They gave me every hope that the Congregation would have in him a true Apostle. And now I see that I am deprived of him forever! May his example at least serve to form in my Novices others like him!**

I felt that these tributes, as laudatory as they are sincere, should be placed here before the telling of the life story of Fr. [8] Anthony Conte. In this way, those who did not know him personally, may clearly see why we wanted to write at least this *Compendium* of his life.

In truth, the activity of this Servant of God, was not news-worthy according to the standards of this world. However, his apostolate was sanctified by his abnegation, his piety and his sacrifice. To use a metaphor of St. Francis de Sales, his apostolate brought forth sacred flowers that grow at the foot of the Cross, and are watered by the Blood of the Nazarene. Their beauty and their fragrance are not noticed by those who only love themselves. They are, though, most precious before the lord, and to these souls, permeated with his spirit, and trained in accord with it.

Therefore, it seemed to me as right and just to gather here the memory of those virtues, that he diffused in abundance during his short mortal journey. They thus form a garland to place by his grave, for his ever-lasting memory, for the example and comfort of those who will come after us.

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## **Chapter 1 The Birth and Early Years of Anthony Conte – His Virtues**

Bassano is a picturesque city in the Venetian Republic, and the birth-place of many illustrious men. There on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, 1857, Anthony Conte, the second child of Joseph Conte and Teresa Serafani, was born. They were a well-to-do family, and were even more commendable for their sense of religion and upright life.

During the years of his childhood, there was nothing of note, except for his gentle nature, and his early inclination to virtue and piety. He spent many happy hours around a little altar that he had set up and decorated with extraordinary taste. From his pious Mother, he derived a devotion to Mary most holy. Even as a very

young [10] boy, he never omitted his offering of some act of mortification in her honor every Saturday. These little acts would consist in his refusal of fruit, or candy, or the prayers that he would offer to her.

What is more worthy of mention is that from his earliest years, he practiced the virtue of obedience in a manner that was far superior to his tender age. No occasion can be recalled when he was hesitant to carry out, not only the commands of his parents, but even their preferences. This is worthy of note here, when we keep in mind that total obedience is always the foundation, or the basis, of the most sublime virtues. After his First Communion, it was noted that he made even greater strides along the path of virtue.

His frequent reception of the Sacraments, his visits to Church and the virtues he practiced at home were all unusual in his childhood. To this piety, he added a love for study. He attended public school, both for the Grammar and High School levels, and he consistently gave unmistakable signs of his fine intelligence. He always won the first prize awarded for excellence in study. This was not entirely due to his gifted mind, but also because of the unusual diligence and admirable order he displayed in carrying out all that had been assigned. He performed exceptionally well in the comprehensive examinations for his High School diploma. His teachers noted that he was the finest student who had ever attended that school.

Even more remarkable was his conduct record, his refined manner of speaking and his good example. The better families of that city [11] disputed, so to speak, in claiming he was the friend of their sons. They all hoped for the benefit of his choice company. Notwithstanding all this adulation, he remained modest and unassuming. Whenever his father, out of just pride, praised his son in public, the boy was seen to be embarrassed and was evidently made uncomfortable. In a most polite manner, he would ask his Father not to continue.

When he finished school in Bassano, he qualified for the University of Padua, where he intended to major in mathematics, and become an engineer. However, his maternal grand-parents were opposed to the idea, as they did not want to see him taken away from them. They feared even more that the world would deprive them of their treasure.

Anthony, therefore, generously made the sacrifice of his aspirations, and settled down to private study. When he had finished several years of such study, he did leave the family circle. He took up his studies under a Dr. Valerius Tattara, and later with Bartolo Zanchetta. Scarcely had this latter come to know the boy, he had no hesitancy despite his youth, to entrust him with the management of his own financial affairs. At times, this would involve sizable sums of money. In the administration of all this, young Conte manifested both an ability of mind, and a meekness of character. His work became noted for its outstanding order. His beautiful [12] handwriting and his exact keeping of the financial records made his

services appreciated all the more. Mr. Zanchetta tells us that he then fulfilled honorably a position of Accountant in a most important firm.

By the time he had reached his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, he was still undecided concerning the vocation that he would follow in life. It was noted, however, that he scrupulously avoided conversations with women.

Then, his Uncle, Fr. Louis Serafini, received a blessing from his own parents, and entered the Company of Jesus. He was most pleased with this project, and there opened before him an entire new world. We find his thoughts at this juncture of his life in the private thoughts that he recorded. He describes it as though he heard 'a voice coming from heaven.'

His Uncle's actions deeply impressed young Anthony. He began to think that here was a man of considerable means, most loved and revered by his parents. He had turned his back on the world, on his own family – on every created gift for the salvation of his soul. Anthony asked himself if he was going to remain inert and lazy all his life. From that day onward, his thoughts, aspirations, and, if it is permissible to put it this way, his whole life took on a new aspect. Nothing would now sway his great soul that yearned to belong entirely to God.

He started to fit daily Mass and Communion into his schedule. He began a daily spiritual reading, and every now and then, each day, he would go apart from his family for private recollection and prayer. He was full of regret when this had to be short. His evening visits to Church were lengthened, and more than once he was [13] almost locked in by the Sacristan. A number of times, his Father discovered that some early mornings, he would put his bed in disarray. From this he deduced that the boy had remained in prayer until dawn.

This was the manner of his life during this period. He was later to write of these times which he called his 'apprenticeship for the religious life.' Being imbued with this spirit and with the desire of doing good to his fellowman. He began to take an even more active part in all the Church endeavors of the city.

He was among the first to enroll in the Association of San Bassiano, which was organized in 1874, and was then affiliated with the Italian Catholic Youth Society. From the start, his fellow members entrusted to him the delicate tasks of Treasurer, and he remained in this office until he entered Religion. This was a mark of the sincere esteem in which he was held by all. He frequently was the arbiter in little disagreements that at times would arise, and which sometimes seemed to be on the verge of dissolving the organization. Because of him, more than anyone else, there was established a 'Catholic Cabinet', that still flourishes today, and which can compare favorably with those of larger cities.

He was also a member and for several years, and the Secretary, of the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul. In this office as well, he gave proof of a zeal and an apostolicity that were far from ordinary. He was a member of the Parish

Committee from the time of its organization, and he never spared himself when it was a question of the [14] sake of the Church, and the good of his beloved Bassano. On all the holy days, he showed himself as a tireless and loving teacher of Christian Doctrine. It was beautiful to see him, always among the first to arrive, gathering the children around him, encouraging them with little rewards and his affable manner, to frequent the Catechism classes.

This Charity of Jesus Christ that burned in his soul, was equally manifest in his tender compassion for the poor. No one ever approached him and went away empty-handed. He visited a number of these poor families who used to call him the 'poor man of St. Anthony.' Even though on occasion, those who were not really poor came to him for a hand-out, and this was detected, he would go to their defense, asking that some bread and even money be given to them.

At home, he truly merited the title 'Angel of Good Counsel'. He was most diligent in helping his Father run his business in keeping the shop for him in his free time. He was often the intermediary if ever a dispute arose in the family, and among the dependents.

He was a second father to his younger brothers, in that he took an interest in their studies, their conduct, and also to train them in matters of economy. To the older of the two, Angelo, he gave a little Register in which he kept the accounts of a small poultry business. On the last page, he wrote 'Today I gave it all to my brother, Angelo, that he, too, might be able to realize some savings.'

He asked for nothing, and had no interest in amusements or luxuries [15]. He was content with everyone and everything. He never complained about the weather, or other discomforts to which we all must adjust. He was always ready to lend his help, especially in view of his beautiful hand-writing, to anyone who asked him. He did this with such disregard for himself, that what is derived only from a generous exercise of virtue, seemed natural to him.

Because of his pensive nature, he remained undecided concerning his choice of a state of life. Shortly after his death, among his papers was found a letter he had written when he was 23. In it, he told his parents that he wanted to enter Religion, but for some reason, he never gave them this letter. The young man pondered over this great step, and he imposed on himself a life of voluntary penance, that he might learn the will of God in this regard. He began to practice the more severe forms of mortification. His Mother states that after he entered Religion, she found a scourge that he used to use on himself, and which he kept hidden under his mattress.

However, the desire had not yet come for his decision. Meanwhile, he was promoted from the employ of Mr. Zanchetta to a position in Monte Pietà'. In a very short time, he won the affection of everyone, and would have earned the most responsible and trustworthy positions in the business. His employers and colleagues were most satisfied with him, and when they were to lose him, his departure was felt keenly.

During the office breaks, while the others would stand around chatting [16], he stayed by himself and would take out a pious book to refresh his soul. His fellow workers were not offended by this behavior because of his affable and pleasing nature.

I will bring this Chapter to a close with the words of an illustrious Priest of Bassano, Fr. Anthony Nardello, who was his Spiritual Director for a long time:

**In Anthony Conte, I always noted a purpose of mind, and an enviable maturity of understanding. These were the result, or the effect of his virtue, especially that of humility and an unquestioning obedience to all who directed him. Truly, his delight was prayer, and especially Meditation. He was most orderly in every facet of his life, both as regards his religious duties, and those of his state in life. I never have met anyone more precise and exact as he was.**

**Most innocent soul, pray from heaven for your own loved ones, and also for him, who for so many years, was your unqualified Guide along the path of virtue.**



## **Chapter 2**

### **He decides to enter the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Stigmata - He is accepted, and begins his Novitiate.**

There was one circumstance that moved him to reach his decision. He came in contact with our Fathers who had come to Bassano to direct the Student's Guild and the Boys' Oratory. Their fervor, zeal [17] and their edifying example had a strong influence on him. His mind was enlightened, and he began to work with them more intimately and found contentment in this work. After hesitating for many years concerning the choice of a Religious Institute, he was beginning to see that the will of God was being made more clear in his regard.

While his decision was forming in his mind, every evening, after his daily occupations, he would make his way to the House of the Congregation. With great enthusiasm, he applied himself to ecclesiastical studies, under the guidance of an excellent and expert Religious. On holy days, he began to help the Priests in supervising the youth. He took part in the recreation program, as well as in helping in the Oratory and the School of Christian Doctrine. In their midst, he was truly a lay apostle. He was most diligent in teaching the boys the principles of religion, the love for high moral standards, mutual peace and a particular devotion toward the Blessed Mother and St. Aloysius Gonzaga.

When the month of April in 1883 rolled around, all his doubts seem to have vanished he gave his parents a letter in which he asked their permission to consecrate himself to God in the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Stigmata. This resolution was the result of long meditations, prayers and even tears, as well as the counsel he sought from these men who were illumined in the ways of the Lord. He now felt a certainty about the will of God, and trusted more n Him than in his own weakness.

About this time, he wrote:

In the religious life, it is not strong cedars [18] that are planted, but the fragile reeds that bend at every blowing of the wind. It is true that here everything smiles on me, and entices me to remain in the world. But, what will all this avail if I should lose my soul? In religion, I will be preserved from this dangers to which I have seen so many of my companions of my early years succumb. The vocation to Religion was for a long a time the subject of my inner thoughts. This was the deepest yearning of my soul, the only goal of my desires. Furthermore, my heart, thanks to God, seemed more and more detached from the affection of worldly goods. I felt drawn to performing meritorious works.

Permit me to cite a passage from that letter he wrote to his Parents. The spirit that motivated young Anthony can be known better through this letter:

The vanity of the world, the brevity of life, the proximity of death, the uncertainty of salvation, the length of eternity, the greatness of the promised reward - all of these motives impel me to make this decision. Furthermore, the blessings and the special graces with which God has willed to enrich me, despite my lack of merit, were also reasons that influenced my decision. They inclined my heart so that I can no longer refuse the invitation, without openly contradicting His Will. By rejecting it now, I would expose myself to grave dangers, and would follow a path that is different from the one that has been laid out for me ... I know well that customarily the world, with its malicious tongue, censures anything that smacks of religion. [19] It will shout at me next to the Cross, and call me stupid a fanatic, or crazy. It will make me the object of its jokes, and will write me off as an abnormal son.

What does it all matter? I am convinced that it is not the world which is to guide me, but God. I will try to smile at these insults, and consider them as praise, or the accusations of a child, while inwardly I will cry at the sad state of our times that ascribes to insanity the desire to dedicate oneself to God, and to live according to His Law. I will take its sneers, in the assurance that I am merely following in the footsteps of Him, who suffered similar insults.

There was, however, no longer any doubt concerning the wisdom of his choice. His father prudently decided on one more proof of his vocation, and suggested that he make a voyage. However, Anthony was able to persuade him to give the permission for which he longed without further delay.

This does not mean that he was able to go away without difficulty. In saying farewell to his family, and in receiving his Parents' last blessing, he shed bitter tears. His Mother then came to understand what her brother, Fr. Louis, had said to her. She had complained to him that Anthony, with his reserve, did not show such love for his family. Her brother answered that Anthony had an extraordinary love for his family. He said that he had to exert much restraint so that it would not appear more openly, and so that the family would not have too much affection for him. His letters are proof of this, especially that the he sent back home when he had become a religious. These letters remove any doubt that there may have been in this regard.

He would write to his family from time to time and his letters were full [20] of his filial love. He wrote once: 'This love is not lost by the sacrifice of all things of this world, but it becomes deeper, more purified and more perfect.'

The 11<sup>th</sup> day of that April would always remain dear to his memory, as on that day, Anthony Conte entered the Congregation. Although he was somewhat hesitant by nature, the profound joy of his soul was readily apparent in his evident serenity and happiness. He described it this way:

**What joy there is to be out of the sin, the confusion and the chaos of the world. Because of my weakness, surely I could not have withstood it much longer. Hence, the Lord, in His inexhaustible mercy, by His incessant and evident invitations, has called me to follow Him. Almost forcefully, he brought me inside of the sacred walls of His sanctuary...**

He experienced profound happiness from the exalted regard he had for the Religious Life, as well as for the deep sense of gratitude that he felt for the grace of his vocation. He wrote:

**What a great, inestimable grace the Lord has granted me in calling me to the Religious State! This has been an entirely gratuitous gift, as there is nothing in me that has merited it. I ought to be imbued, at one and the same time, with sorrow and appreciation. I realize only too well my own unworthiness in finding myself here, in the midst of such holiness, and such fervor. Here am I, in this Closed Garden of the Lord, I, who indeed merited to spend my life among the beasts in the desert! Oh! Lord! May You be blessed a thousand times over! *One thing I have asked of the Lord, and this [21] I will require, that I might dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of my life!***

His conduct concurred in every way with these sentiments. His Superiors, and the other Priests from the first days following his entrance, saw in him a young man, of excellent spirit. He gave the highest hopes to the Congregation,. And was soon approved to receive the habit of the Congregation. He was vested on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June of that same year, at St. Teresa's in Verona. He was to remain in this House until he was ordained a Priest, and sent to Pavia .

On entering the Novitiate, he described this as being transplanted 'into a nursery of the earthly Paradise of religion.' He resolved to give every possible effort

to divest himself ever more from the 'old man', and made great strides in putting on the 'new'. He made the following resolutions:

1. To live always and everywhere in the presence of God, imagining that He is here before me.
2. To keep before my mind the thought of death, with the certainty of its arrival, as well as the uncertainty of when this will be.
3. In my thoughts, words and actions, I will reflect and ask myself: Would you do this on your death-bed?
4. I will always recall that the Supreme Master one day will demand an account for every word and deed.

As a Novice, he was convinced that the spiritual profit depends on the exact observance of the rules of one's Institute. As a result, every single week, he read over the common rules. Some of these, he even read every day to see how he was fulfilling them. He had resolved not to break any one of them deliberately, even the least [22] important rules.

During the Retreat in preparation to his Vestition, he paid particular attention to some of these rules. He pondered over the method of making his Meditation well, which is the first of these rules. He reflected on promptness at the Common exercises, the custody of the eyes, speaking in a low voice, and then only out of necessity, in the times of silence. He studied the rules on following completely the counsel of his Confessor, and doing all things with perfection. He prayed often to St. John Berchmans, and made every effort to model his life after that angelic youth. He reflected that this young man found the secret of an exalted holiness in the exact observance of his rules.

These resolutions did not remain a dead letter. Sufficient proof of this was had in observing the devoted posture he maintained during prayer. There was evident about him a modest recollection that he preserved throughout the day. He continually dedicated himself to study, and the fulfillment of the duties asked of him, as well as reading spiritual books, As for these latter, it seemed as though he meditated on them, rather than just read them. From his readings, he compiled a notebook, which he entitled: *Precious Pearls, gathered in Spiritual Reading*.

He showed contentment with all that was distributed to him, the food, his room, the clothing that was assigned to him. He seemed almost avid to mortify and to bring his body into slavery to his soul. He often asked permission to undertake harsh penances. These were usually restricted to much less than he had requested. He usually abstained entirely from wine and fruit at table, as well as from those things that were the most appetizing to him. He arranged [23] his bed in such a way that his repose would be somewhat uncomfortable. He often made the sign of the Cross on the floor with his tongue, and would seek out the most common and mean tasks. He never showed any inclination to listen to gossip, or in maintaining lengthy conversations.

He accepted with joy those mortifications that are customary in our Congregation for the Refectory, such as eating on one's knees, kissing the feet of the Priests, or publicly accusing oneself of some fault, and asking for a penance. He kept before his mind the reason why had head left the world, and often repeated to himself 'Why have you come?' He was motivated by the resolution of attending with all his strength to his own perfection. He did add these restrictions, however: 'Without anxiety, without anguish, which so often tighten the cord excessively, so that it breaks'. Furthermore, as the Council of Trent says: 'it is impossible to avoid all imperfections'.

He made great account of even small transgressions, especially concerning prescriptions of the Rule. He resolved:

**When I fall in this regard, I will make an act of contrition right away, and as soon as possible, I will accuse myself of them to the Spiritual Father and perform a penance. By accusing yourself of your failings, you overcome self-love, and you avoid the danger of a relaxed spirit, and that of going from lesser failings to greater faults.**

He also resolved that he would not put this self-accusation off from one day to the next. He believed that his enemy would then persuade him that the fault which had bothered him at first, in the long run, [24] was really not so serious that it merited his self-denunciation. He wished always to be sincere and open, and precise with his Confessor – like clear water. He would manifest to him not only his imperfections, but also his temptations, his inclinations and his heartfelt thoughts and his inspirations.

As is customary with the saints, in this austerity he inflicted on himself, he was equally condescending toward others. He would adapt himself to their temperaments, and make excuses for their faults. He was most willing to give them whatever help he could, never considering his own comforts. He had such a way about him in doing this, that it seem that he found delight in it. He once wrote:

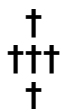
**What a beautiful virtue is charity - that is, that mutual love and respect that brothers manifest one for the other! It makes of a Religious House the waiting-room for Paradise!**

**Be very careful, therefore, that you never deride, or make fun of your companions' defects. Never embarrass your neighbor, nor say a word, or tell a joke that could wound the self-esteem of another. to avoid every act contrary to charity, consider everyone as your superior. Manifest toward all a kindness, and never nourish in your hear sentiments of antipathy, nor special attractions - because each one is your brother, and everyone is better than you.**

He kept these resolutions to such an extent that never during his Novitiate, nor after it, did he ever knowingly hurt, or upset anyone. The author of the *Imitation of Christ* considers this to be a noteworthy achievement:

*It is no small thing to live in [25] monasteries, or in a congregation, and to remain there, persevering until death, without giving offense... [Part I, c. 17].*

With this fervor, he went through his Novitiate, and completed the portrait the outlines of which he had sketched in the world. However, a longer and more painful trial awaited him, as will be described in the following Chapter.



### Chapter 3 Prefect of the Aspirants

It is not usually the custom to assign to Novices duties that will give them the occasion, or the duty of contacts with others of the House, or outside of it. However, in the case of young Conte, an exception was made. After 3, or 4 months of his Novitiate, the Director of the House, considering that young Conte was of mature age, and because of his extraordinary virtue, he named him the Prefect of the young Aspirants. They are a group of students, of high school age, who live in our House of Studies. They must show an inclination for our way of life. They are trained with special care, until they are proven for a greater or lesser length of time, depending on their age. Thus, their vocation is subjected to a rigorous scrutiny, and only then are they admitted into the Congregation as Novices.

Hence, it is clear that the one assigned, as it were, as their 'Guardian Angel', both day and night has no small task. He must supervise their study, their recreation, their conduct in the Refectory [26], on walks and in the Dormitory. He must correct their bad inclinations and must maintain them in love for order and discipline, In a word, he must guide their every step.

If this is a formidable task for everyone, for Anthony, it was a cross. On the one hand, he had a most delicate conscience, and he felt the weight of responsibility keenly. On the other hand, his nature was such that it abhorred the thought of being in authority, and demanding submission. Only he who has had experience in training young boys, can know the effort it cost him to maintain discipline.

Nevertheless, the Superiors were most content with him. He was always most attentive, solicitous and on the alert to correct the transgressions of the rule. Furthermore where there was a failing in a point of order, this was abundantly made up for by the great good he presented to the young boys, by the efficacy of his example and his loving and patient zeal.

Evidence of this is found in the life he led in that office, which I present here from the testimonies of the boys who had him as their Prefect. One of these has stated:

For all the time that Bro. Anthony was my Prefect, as I was a mischievous lad, I did not pay much attention to his goodness. But, now I realize his admirable virtue and my own ingratitude. I was somewhat stubborn and very slow to give in to my companions. As a result, I frequently argued. He often admonished me, and time and time again, he exhorted me to correct myself, but I only felt annoyed and bothered. After a long time [27], I was finally persuaded by him, and was told to observe my rules better. He no longer yelled at me, but rather treated me with a loving kindness. He said that as I was devoted to the Blessed Mother, he asked me to say a *Hail Mary* for him.

At the end of this rather lengthy tribute, this young man concluded:

I say, then, for all that he suffered because of me and others, and because of the austerity that he endured in his own life, the two and a half years that he was Prefect, were for him a sorrowful martyrdom.

This tribute only referred in assign to the mortification of his Prefect. Another student stated this:

I daresay that Fr. Conte spent his entire Novitiate observing a fast, as he ate so little every day. Before sitting down to table, he would say the usual prayers with the Aspirants. While they were eating their soup, he would remain standing, saying other prayers, or finishing the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. Then he would begin his soup, which he often ate on his knees. He would often get up and go along the tables to see if anything was missing. It seems he frequently was praying, as his lips were always moving. He most often knelt in the Refectory. He would make the sign of the Cross, and seemed to be absorbed in prayer.

He would take a few mouthfuls of polenta, and only would eat the first course. He ate very little bread, and as for wine, he either did not drink it at all, or merely poured a little into a glass of water. It seems his mortifications would have been greater, but the [28] Director, having been informed by the Students, kept a tight rein on him.

He had other ways of practicing his self-denial. When food was served that was poorly seasoned or even distasteful to him, he seemed to prefer it to everything else. One day a meal was served in which the cook had inadvertently put too much salt into it. Hardly anyone could swallow it. Anthony, however, welcomed this occasion to mortify himself and seemed to eat it with the avidity of a gourmet.

He seemed to give such very little time to eating. The rest of the period he was in the refectory, he would give to prayer. He also often substituted for the reader. I do not remember him every tasting a fruit in the garden during his Novitiate, or afterwards, even though permission had been given for this. He never ate the things that the Aspirants' families sent to them, although these were always offered to him.

In the morning after chapel, the Students would go to the Study Hall. He would always stay with them. He often knelt at his place, and alternated study and prayer. While on walks along the streets of the city, his modesty was evident.

At night, before going to bed, and after he had taken off his cassock, he would kneel for a long time on the cold, bare floor. Many times, he would also kiss it. I think that often he went to bed dressed. During the night, we often saw him in the candle light of his room, or in the near by Study Hall. He would continue these vigils until the dead of night. I often would see him through my half-closed eyes; in the dim candle light, he seemed more like a spirit, making his way through the Dormitory. To me, this was a clear proof of the conscientiousness that he brought to this office, and the little sleep that he permitted himself.

This same student continued his tribute, and stated that his good Prefect, no matter how cold it was, never wore a cape. On his bed, there was only one woolen blanket, which he used even during the summer months. I believe this was an act of penance, and not for what he used to say, that it was because of the coolness of the summer nights that bothered him more than the cold of winter. It is very true that with the warmth of his spiritual life, he could withstand the inclemency of the seasons, and this love made everything relatively easy for him.

He also gave other examples of his virtue to the young aspirants. He always spoke well of everyone, both of his Confreres and externs. There would be trouble if anyone mentioned in his presence the faults of anyone else, even though these may have been evident. He would rebuke this conduct, and always found a way to cover the flaws of others. He did not even want the natural defects of other discussed. One day, a student told him that a certain Priest had a very poor singing voice. His answer was that he had a strong and good voice.

This trait of his came not only from his sincere charity, but also from his humble conviction that others were better than he. He considered himself unworthy to live among innocent souls, such as [30] these young Aspirants were. He used to say that they were like angels, or doves. When he sat among them in study this conviction of his was most evident. He enjoyed helping them, following the example of Jesus Christ, who had come not to be served, but to serve. He copied the example of the Divine Master, Who washed the feet of the poor Fishermen.

Another of the Aspirants wrote of Fr. Conte:

Many times, he would wash and sweep the rooms, and make the beds, even though he was a Deacon. Often, too, he would take on even more humble duties. Once, one of the Priests saw him doing these chores, and he told him that he should leave them for others. Somewhat embarrassed, he answered: 'But, Father, since I am not strong enough for other chores, I do these little tasks that are no bother to me, so that I will not be idle'.

His former students also recorded this recollection: during the summer of 1885, all the Students were out at Sezano in Valpantena. As young boys enjoy hikes, and the longer the better, they persuaded their Prefect to accompany them to a very distant mountain called *La Purga*. Although they were full of enthusiasm in the morning, a broiling sun accompanied them along their way. When they had arrived at the foot of the mountain, they were utterly exhausted, and no one wanted to carry the lunch basket any further, as it was quite heavy. Up to this point, they had been taking turns with it. All they had thought about was the joy of reaching the top of the mountain, as such is the pride of youth.

**[31]** Anthony was even more tired than they were, and he had come along on the hike, not for his own enjoyment, but to acquiesce to their requests. Without saying anything, he picked the basket up, and strapped it on his back, and started the ascent. The trail was very uneven, and strewn with stones, and overgrown with a thorny bush. Dripping with sweat, he finally reached the top, more dead than alive!

An indication of the little account he had of himself, and the meekness of his heart, can be found in the following anecdotes. These were recorded by one of the Aspirants. One day, they had gone for a walk, and had stopped in the shade, somewhere outside the city:

While the Prefect was saying something, I was tearing up little pieces of paper, putting them on his hat. Just then, one of our Priests passed by, and as Anthony took off his hat to greet him, all those little bits of paper fell to the ground. The Priest stopped and asked who had done this. When he learned that I had done it, he looked at me severely: 'Is this the respect that you have for your Prefect?' Anthony if you do not want to report it to the Director, I will!

'Don't do it this time - let's forget it,' Anthony answered. 'By the way, it is quite warm today, isn't it, Father?'

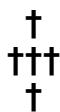
'Oh, no', the Priest said, 'do not make excuses for him, or try to change the subject. If you do not report it, I will!'

Anthony looked embarrassed, and when he came up to me to comfort me, I was crying. He did not give me the penance that I deserved. When we arrived home, and the Director came to reprimand me, Bro. Anthony asked that for this time, I not be punished.

Another time, he did not want to wait for the barber. He gave one of the Aspirants the scissors and a razor and told him to cut his tonsure. The Aspirant was something of a rogue, and cut the sign of the Cross on the back of his head. Anthony was apparently absorbed in prayer, got up, thinking that the boy was finished, got up to leave. The boys, who were standing around started to laugh, and when he found out why, he laughed, too. He then called the boy who had made the Cross on the back of his head, and asked him to round it off, and form the customary

circle. When this was completed, for a while, his tonsure was much larger than was customary<sup>2</sup>.

Anecdotes like this one, rather than lessening his popularity, only increased the affection that the Students had for him, and the reputation that he enjoyed among them.



#### Chapter 4 His Perpetual Profession – His Studies

There is no wonder, that for such a Novice, as his two years of probation came to an end, everyone gave a favorable opinion. He was approved for Profession in the Congregation, and thus became their Confrere. As he had his Retreat, to prepare himself for this solemn act, his heart expanded in genuine sentiments of [33] appreciation. He expressed his heart-felt desire of correspondence to such grace, by the perfect observance of his vows.

During this Retreat, he wrote:

**Now I desire those Vows that will so bind my heart to the most Sacred Heart of Jesus - that the breath of pride may never lessen them, nor the fire of concupiscence ever consume them, nor even weaken them ... I will remember always that the Religious Life is the only one for me. Anywhere else, I would be a fish out of water, and I would die.**

In addition to the increased conviction that he had been called by God, the lofty esteem that he had always had for the Religious State had also grown. He remarked:

**I came to know that this state is most excellent because of its dignity, it is most useful, because of its merits, and it is most happy, because of its peace ... what beauty and sublimity there is had in the religious State! It is a paradox on earth - it is as great a grace as is creation, because it picked me up from nothing, from the snares of the world, when they most attracted me ... I came to know that the religious Life will have the reward of martyrs. The martyrs give their lives rather than renounce their faith. Religious, so that they will not fail in their resolutions of following Christ closely, accept similar sacrifices throughout their entire lives.**

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<sup>2</sup> **Translator's Note:** In the 1950's, the custom among the American Stigmatines in Rome, was understood thus: for an ordinary cleric, the Tonsure was to be the size of a small Host for Mass; for a Bishop, the Tonsure had to be the size of a large Host!

Desiring to offer himself to God, with perfect indifference to created things, in the silence of this Retreat, he gave serious thought to his own inclinations. In his words, these inclinations were that he showed a tendency to 'self-love, and to natural weakness.' When this is well pondered, his realization indicates a genuine detachment from all creatures.

In his humility, he wrote: 'If I am indifferent to some things, this is a natural tendency with me, and not the result of virtue.' His spirit yearned to belong entirely to God, and in those days of Retreat, his heart cried out:

**Yes, o my Lord, time and time again, I have offered myself, dedicated myself and consecrated myself entirely to you. You have given me free will, and I offer it back to You - accept me as an eternal sacrifice.**

The Day of his Holocaust fell on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul in 1885. For him, it was a day of Spiritual Nuptials, and he noted this in those precious Memoirs of his life. The paper from which he read the Formula of Profession, he later kept as a memorial of that day. He used to take it into his hands many times, and repeated his consecration to God. With the passing of time, it became quite worn with use, and he continually repaired its torn edges. Furthermore, he kept a copy of this Formula on his chest, near his heart. From that day, he seemed to be dead to all his own personal desires. He never missed an occasion, or opportunity to increase in holiness.

His efforts for interior perfection, and his manner of living the Vows and the Religious Virtues, I will recount later on. From what has already been said, though, these can easily be deduced, just as a beautiful morning presages a splendid day. Meanwhile, though, I do think it would be worthwhile to say something of his studies, as these are the particular occupation of the Professed Students.

As we noted above, after the 7<sup>th</sup> Class of the *Giannasio*, Anthony's formal education ended. He took up his studies again with the ardor of a fervent soldier, who had stopped along the march, and who then hurried to catch up to his battalion. He might also be compared to a miser, who gives his every effort to make up for the gains he did not realize.

While he was still living with his family in Bassano, and had made the decision to become a religious, he took up his studies again, under the direction of one of the Priests stationed there, as has been said. When he later came to the Congregation, he dedicated himself to them wholeheartedly. He never would have taken recreation if obedience had not obliged him to it. He began to steal time from his sleep to dedicate it to study. In his studies, he was never ruled by his own tastes of personal preferences by concentrating on one subject more than another. Under obedience, he applied himself with the same love to those studies which were considered necessary, as well as to those that were only useful, or helpful. He also applied himself to those fields that he enjoyed, with the same ardor that he applied himself to

those he found difficult, or dry. Once his Greek teacher suggested that as he was older, and burdened with other studies, that he should just read over Homer. He felt, though, that more was necessary for him, so that he would not look out of place in front of the other students. He listened to the counsel with respect and expressed his gratitude for it. Without neglecting his other work, he still found time to carry out with minute diligence all of his Greek assignments. He took notes of every explanation and comment that he heard in school.

He did, though, give the majority of his time to sacred studies, the importance of which he understood well. Proof of this is had in the considerable amount [36] of his papers that contain philosophy notes, dogma and moral notes, Patrology, Exegesis and Canon Law. His papers abound in citations from the Fathers and Catholic Doctors. Whatever he felt could be useful to him, he noted. He wrote down anecdotes and the sayings of famous scholars, and passages from modern orators. He recorded statements of unbelievers concerning the beauty and evident credibility of our holy religion. He noted many examples derived from the lives of the saints, which he always enjoyed reading.

His notes also included physics and the fine arts. From various books and even from newspapers and periodicals, he gathered useful observations, and arguments concerning false philosophies, the fallacy of rationalism, the slavery of liberalism and in the freedom enjoyed by evil, while being denied to the good.

He dedicated many pages in these notes for all that served to defend the Church and the Pope, for whom he manifested a profound love. He was convinced that a **Missionary** needed a profundity of learning to oppose the ready, but shallow reasons of unbelievers, who so easily spread their infection among the people. How quickly does specious reasoning provide arms to fight against that truth and morality that are upheld by the Catholic faith and the Papacy. He was willing to defend these even to the shedding of his own blood.

It was, therefore, the spirit of faith and devotion that nourished his devotion and faith. He never experienced the temptation to take [37] time from his Spiritual Exercises, to provide more time for study. He used all his free time for prayer. Above everything else, he employed great diligence in his daily meditation, observing those inviolable laws and rules prescribed by St. Ignatius of Loyola. The grace to make it well was one of those for which he continually prayed.

He used to say:

**Meditation is the mirror in which the soul looks at itself, just as the examen of Conscience is the water with which it washes out its stains, or the knife that cuts out the weeds. Meditation is the life of the religious, and for no reason whatsoever, should he omit it, no matter what it might cost him.**

He was not content with the half hour prescribed by the rule, but every day, he used to make a second half hour, according to the suggested method. He was thoroughly convinced of the need of prayer.

In this regard, these words of his are memorable:

**For the religious, prayer ought to be his special occupation, his greatest delight and his comfort. He has renounced by Vow all that the world offers to please and comfort him. And to whom will he turn, then, in his afflictions, if not to the God of Consolations - to Him, exposing as to a Father, all his needs, his sufferings, his defects and his desires? If a religious does not pray, or if he prays badly, very soon he will lose his vocation, or he will lead a dissolute life in religion and will become a scandal to others.**

Since the spirit of prayer cannot remain in a soul that is subdued by the senses, he gave this reason why he restrained and mortified himself [38] so much: 'Every act of abstinence is a blow to his flesh and to his appetites. From this, the soul more easily rises to taste the sweetness of prayer.'

Whenever he felt that the fervor of his study had lessened because of his studies, he took comfort in this passage of a letter of St. Ignatius. The Saint wrote it to his sons concerning their Aridity of Spirit. Fr. Conte copied it down on a scrap of paper:

**The application of the mind in the speculative sciences somewhat drains, or dries up the affection. Nevertheless, these very studies are directed purely for the service of God. Of themselves, they are excellent devotions. Whenever the foundation of virtue is not neglected, and there is given to prayer that time that is prescribed by the Constitutions, it makes little difference whether or not it is disturbed by this. We should rather take from the hand of God, and accept whatever He is pleased to give us. We should always be concerned with what is more important, namely patience, humility, obedience and charity.**

Anthony coupled his scholastic efforts with those of his piety. He did his best to attain the exalted purpose of his vocation, which is to glorify God, and to sanctify himself and others.

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## Chapter 5 Minor Orders – Major Orders - Priesthood

The soul of the just man is the heaven of God , says St. Gregory the Great [cf. *Hom. 38, In Evang.* ] It is there that He places His throne. If the soul is faithful to His love, or rather to the treasures of His grace showered upon it, He renders it majestic. It is adorned in an ineffable way, with a myriad of stars, even more than is the firmament.

Whoever strives to reach the sublimity of the Priesthood, God himself prepares such a soul, to receive the divine configuration of His Son, the Eternal Priest. He infuses into it a stupendous flow of graces and such an abundance of favors, that all that is needed is the fidelity of man, and this omnipotent liberality continues.

Anthony was just such a faithful soul. Hence, we can have some idea of the abundance of graces that God showered upon him, as he ascended like steps to the Priesthood, the Major and Minor Orders. In his papers, however, he has only provided us with a glimpse of these favors. He has noted only his deep conviction of his own unworthiness, and disregard for himself. As these were the thoughts uppermost in his mind, he shows repeatedly his desire [40] to humble himself all the more, as God elevated him in Levitical honor.

On his part, he neglected nothing to dispose himself for the effusion of the Divine Spirit. He made the prescribed Retreat before receiving Minor Orders. These were conferred on him the same month that he made his Perpetual Profession. From his notes, we know that he prayed to Mary most holy, to St. Joseph, St. Anthony his Patron, to his Guardian Angel, to St. Aloysius Gonzaga and to St. John Berchmans. He wrote:

I ask you to present my needs to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, that He might take me under His protection. From this, will I have the light, the strength and the grace to know always better the true purpose for which I came to Religion, the true importance of the Holy Vows and the dispositions that are necessary to set out on the path to the Priesthood... I realize that I merit none of this, and I would not even dare to ask for it. However, I ask You for all this in view of the merits of my beloved Father and Founder, Gaspar Bertoni. For him, I ask glorification, and that I will not be unworthy of him, but rather that I may be animated by that same priestly spirit.

Impelled by the continual desire he felt to reform his own life, he wrote:

Since true holiness does not consist in doing great things, but in doing the ordinary things well, and with a spirit of sacrifice - and for me, as a religious, in the exact observance of the rules - I will review my every action of the day, beginning with the rising in the morning to see how I am conducting myself.

He made these resolutions:

1. Be prompt in getting out of bed, in dressing modestly, quickly. I will recite the prescribed prayers attentively. I will also say a few prayers of my own choosing, but I will say them well.
2. Diligence in Meditation, tranquility and recollection.
3. Do all things in the prescribed time and places, and with the right intention. Do not mention yourself, neither your faults, nor your virtues.
4. During Spiritual Reading, be attentive to God, as in it, He speaks to us.
5. Use kindness, and be not over-bearing, even in giving corrections, to avoid embittering anyone.
6. Keep custody over your senses, and do all things carefully.

At the close of this Retreat, he noted: 'By the intercession of Mary, my Holy Patrons, and my Father Founder, I passed these days in much peace'.

On March 20, 1886, he received the Sub-Diaconate. From his notes, we see that his sentiments were still much the same: 'O, happy day! what graces have been bestowed on me! I see in them the work of the Lord. Who will keep me from giving my all to Him?'

In this exulting state, he also made note of the new sacred ties that bound him more closely to God. He wrote:

**How you are indissolubly bound! O! what pleasure I experience in seeing fulfilled so fully my ardent and long-time desire to consecrate myself entirely, by an eternal oath to the Lord. Lord, You affix the seal, and implant the nail with Your Grace.**

By his Sacred Ordination, and by his Religious Vows, he felt himself entirely departed from this world. He felt as though he had been placed in the very heart of the Catholic Church, and that he was enclosed [42] within the very soul and spirit that vivifies it. In this spirit, he wrote:

**O Lord, how great is my gratitude, my contentment and my joy in finding myself in the bosom of the Roman, Catholic, Apostolic Church, and to be planted in one of its most choice gardens! How alive has been my faith, how beautiful the resolutions and proposals, how generous my act of oblation during these days of my consecration through the Sub-Diaconate. O! how much have I esteemed the great grace of my religious vocation! To see myself doubly bound and consecrated as a holocaust, and to find myself without effort and anxiety living in the environment of virtue and good!**

In this continuing state of soul, he received the Diaconate on June 19, 1886. On this day, the heaven of his soul was inundated with peace and light, and was overflowing with love. These were the effects of the multiple grace with which the Lord adorned His choice Minister.

However, as the day of his Ordination approached, these joyful sentiments vanished. In their place, there arose in him a most violent agitation of spirit. It became so acute, that it brought about an intense, interior suffering with which, except for rare exceptions, he was to endure throughout the remainder of his life. We will note, as our narrative continues, the descriptions of this that he has left in his writings. There were doubts, periods of dryness and temptations against the faith that sorely tried him. He prayed and begged for help, he had recourse to Mary, with the confidence of a son. He also invoked his Holy Patrons. This trial in no way led his soul off the path, but he steadfastly went on in preparation for his great day. His heart was more decided, and his will more resolute in the work of his own sanctification, no matter what it would cost him.

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This was a time of great difficulty for young Anthony. Ordinarily, the newly anointed of the Lord, especially during the first days after their Priestly Ordination, experience the joys of Paradise. For him, though, these were days of struggle and trial. Surely, whoever looks at it in the light of faith, as is but proper, can profit from it. In suffering, he only deepened his virtues, and his resolute soul acquired an even stronger fiber. If the Lord, rather than leading him to Mount Tabor, had instead brought him to a bloody Mount Calvary, He did it to bring out in him an even greater similarity with the Eternal Priest and Victim, Jesus Crucified.

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## Chapter 6 His First Mass and Assignment to Pavia

Anthony Conte was ordained a Priest by His Eminence, Cardinal di Canossa, Bishop of Verona, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of August 1887. It was the Feast of St. Cajetan of Thiene, the Wonder-worker, who was one of his heavenly Patrons. On the following day, Fr. Anthony offered the Bloodless Sacrifice for the first time, in the Church of the Stimate in Verona. His First Mass was celebrated at the hour when the young boys of the Marian Oratory were assembled there for their customary practices of piety. At such an occasion, as a First Mass, much edification is derived. Perhaps during it, in some of the boys, the first seed of a vocation is planted.

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On such an occasion as this, the Church and the House are permeated with an extraordinary and most pleasant spirit. This particular service, however, was especially moving, and more than a few shed tears. On that day, his fellow students and Confreres manifested their happiness in the verses and the compositions that they presented. There were also many people from Bassano who expressed their affection and consideration for their fellow townsman.

His parents merit special mention, as on that day, they wanted to do all that they could to increase the splendor of their son's day. The entire family was present for the Mass, and all received Holy Communion from his hands, with exemplary piety. On this day, however, Fr. Anthony was the center of attraction. In all the honor shown to him, and the best wishes and congratulations heaped on him, he indicated his sincere and grateful appreciation. His customary unassuming and humble manner, was in no way altered. The sublimity of his new state, rather than gladdening him, only caused him to tremble. It was as though, that fear of the saints, that inspires fortitude and gives the soul the courage to undertake even the most difficult services for God.

Fr. Anthony sought to attain this divine strength from the Eucharistic sacrifice. From that day onward, he celebrated it every day with the utmost devotion. He prepared himself for the apostolate to which he was very soon to be assigned by obedience.

He was just 30 years of age, and a priest of but a few months, when the Superior General assigned him to Pavia. He was sent to assist **[45]** the two Priests who had been stationed there in 1885, to work under the present Bishop of Pavia, His Excellency, Augustine Riboldi. This celebrated Bishop has renewed in our times the example of St. Charles Borromeo, to elevate the state of that Diocese. It has suffered much from Jansenism, which now, thanks to God, has just about spent itself. It has also been plagued by disbelief, which unfortunately, is still firmly entrenched there, and which wants to be the absolute mistress.

This was made very clear when our Fathers first arrived there. The whole city was up in alarm, because of the rampant and wild radicalism. Hand-bills were in

evidence along the streets, insults, derision and appeals to the excessive patriotism of the people. Articles appeared in the press, and terrible threats were leveled at Religious. Whatever the art of evil could conjure up, was thrown into the fray. Formal protests were registered with the public officials.

These officials then sought information from Verona, and were informed that these men were but poor Religious, and that they were harmless and peace-loving citizens. Freemasonry was forced into silence, and had to restrain its fury.

It was to this thorny field that young Fr. Conte was sent in October 1887. On his arrival, he was assigned to teach in the night school, and to preach on holy days to the Men's Oratory of San Dalmazio. At first, he experienced great difficulty and even repugnance in this ministry. He wrote: 'I have come to know the truth of these words: *The Lord is my helper in my struggle!*'

He experienced an even greater reluctance in hearing Confessions, especially [46] of women. Nevertheless, he obeyed with his usual docility and promptness. He saw for himself how the Lord leads the obedient soul to triumph over every obstacle. I think it would be revealing to note here a candid letter he wrote to the Superior General, dated June 6, 1888. In these letters to the Superior, he frequently gave an account of himself, and his work at Pavia:

During these days, I have been very busy. It seems that I am becoming an experienced Confessor. All kinds of people come here for Confession. They say that in obeying, one never errs, and I confess, that I have clearly experienced the help of the Lord in some of the more intricate cases. A day never passes that we do not land some big fish - that is, some long time sinner returns to the Sacraments.

In August, he wrote to a friend of his:

This is my life: the House and the Church - up and down the 60 steps to the Sacristy, the Confessional and my room. Last week, however, I was more out of the House than in it. First, there was the Diocesan Synod, which we all attended. then, I went to the Canossian Convent to hear the Confessions of the young girls who are on retreat there. At 5:00 every morning, there are people waiting at my Confessional. It is good for me that I am accustomed to getting up early, even at the cost of my rest. I read during these days that to be a good Confessor, there are needed 25 ounces of learning, 50 of patience and 100 more of prudence. This is certainly a strange proportion, but a true one. I know that I am lacking in the first two ingredients, but I make up for it with the third, that I often have to employ.

[47] He developed these same thoughts in a few lines which I will cite from a letter that he wrote to one of our Priests, who was his Director in Verona:

Every day, I am more convinced that above all, because of the modern ignorance of Religion, and the false teachings that are imparted so openly, the

**3 Volumes of Gury are no longer sufficient. A fourth is needed, that would include a Tract 'On Mercy' . Compassion is so necessary, as well as kindness and charity - and to be content with accomplishing just what we can**

Who cannot see in these words the heart of a true Father and Pastor of souls? His style has a certain grace, that is both pleasing and edifying. Here is another example of it, that even better reveals the blessing of God on the works in which Fr. Anthony was a witness and had a part. This letter was written in November 1888, to one of his Confreres:

**I heard that there was a possibility that you would be coming here as a Companion for me, but now all this is changed. How much you would have rejoiced in the Lord, and what consolations would your delicate and religious heart experience, especially this month. We celebrate during these weeks the principal Feasts of our Church - that is, the Patronage of Mary most holy, and the Octave Memorial for the Poor Souls.**

**They were most beautiful and edifying days under every aspect, and also most fruitful. There was an excellent attendance at the sermons - in fact, the Church was filled to the brim. It was not just the pious old women who came, but also men and those of the highest station. There were great conversions of both men and women, who for 22, 15 or 10 years had lived bad lives. How beautiful it is to see not only the ordinary people, but also those of importance coming here in penance to confess their sins.**

In another letter, he manifests a similar spirit:

**I can only bless the day that I was assigned here to Pavia. I am all the more happy about it because I know that I never manifested any preference, but only an absolute indifference. Therefore, what has happened is the result of the infallible way of obedience.**

He was imbued with a grasp of the two great means of meeting with success in work for souls: prayer and learning. He was a most diligent student of moral theology. Sometimes he even brought a Volume of Gury into the Confessional, or the synthesis he had made of it. In whatever time was available to him, he would read it on his knees, bare-headed. He rarely went for a walk, but was most often in his room, the sacristy with a book in his hands. Every day, with special prayers to the Holy Spirit, he asked for the necessary light for the direction of souls. He alternated his study with prayer, which therefore, can be said to have been continual with him.

He often knelt before the Blessed Sacrament or a Crucifix, and would remain in the same position for a long time. He would beg mercy for himself, and on poor sinners. He inflicted on himself all those penances he was permitted to perform. Such was his zeal that it often brought him to forget his breakfast. Many times, it was necessary to call him for dinner, and to remind him to eat.

His virtuous life soon was very well known. Many came to admire [49] him, and were moved to repentance by him. His life was a continual sermon, silent but

eloquent. He brought many souls to God by his words, but many more by his example – and still more by his prayer. The Holy Doctor, St. Bernard says that prayer is the greatest weapon in the apostolate: *word, example and prayer, but the greatest of these is prayer!*

His sincere charity appeared to externs as the fire of zeal, but to his Confreres, it appeared under the form of kindness, patience, diligence and thoughtfulness. One of these men said of him:

Once I was very upset and was on the verge of tears. Fr. Anthony stood by me, and did all he could to console me. He never left my side, until he saw that this crisis in me had passed. He stayed with me, and even gave up his recreation. As his room was quite distant from mine, many times after night prayers, he accompanied me to my room. With his great kindness, he made sure that I could retire for the day at least somewhat encouraged. He suffered more for me than I did for myself. What charity he had, and what kindness. I will never forget his words, nor his solicitude.

I will bring this Chapter to a close with a tribute paid to Fr. Conte just after his death, by the Director of Pavia in his letter to the Superior General:

I implore you to send us someone with the spirit of Fr. Anthony. This beloved Confrere was for us a gem. In our Church here, he was everything. When I knew that Fr. Anthony was in Church [and he was usually there, either hearing Confessions, distributing Holy Communion, or praying], I was at ease, whether I was in my Confessional, or otherwise engaged. I could always be sure that everything was all right, and that everyone was being served.

Such was the life that Fr. Conte led in Pavia for 14 months – the last of his mortal life. As he increased the more in interior perfection, there still remains something to be said about those virtues which were outstanding in him. We will treat of these separately.

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## Chapter 7 The Humility of Fr. Conte

***For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God*** - says the Apostle, St. Paul [Col 3:3]. These words seem to summarize what the saints call the interior, or the hidden way. Substantially, this consists in detachment from all creatures, and not allowing oneself to be motivated by nature, but only by the inspiration of grace. In this life, the soul seeks the divine good pleasure. The soul

accustoms itself to look at temporal things, as it were, with one eye, while it keeps the other eye focused on eternity. It comes to consider itself as a Temple of God, in Whose presence, with loving solicitude it fulfills its duties.

Such a life does not produce weak men, that are of no use in this world, as the followers of a haughty system of thought believe. This way of life produces the genuine Christians, the apostles and the saints [51]. In the last analysis, this life is merely the Reign of God in souls. Such was the life of the Virgin Mary on earth, and that of Jesus Christ Himself. He never left that humble workshop of Nazareth, except to follow step by step, the will of His Heavenly father.

This was the ideal toward which Fr. Conte struggled to reach. In renouncing the world, he lived the hidden life in the cloister to live for God alone. Uppermost in his mind was his resolution to keep Jesus Christ before his eyes. He wrote once:

**He is the Divine exemplar - His words are the model and the reflection of what is to be done. Therefore, meditate and meditate often on the words and actions of His life. You will then be secure that you have done your best, as God certainly has taught which are the better and most suitable means to attain this established end.**

In this **School of Christ**, Fr Conte learned that the Reign of God on earth was restored by the mysteriously profound humiliations of the God-Man. In like manner, the spiritual structure of the soul must rise over the foundation of humility. He wrote: 'Let your humility be the continual theme of your reflections, your meditations, your devotions and your resolutions, because you have much need of it.'

However, since humility can so easily have a false front, and pride itself often wears the guise of humility, Fr. Conte noted this:

**The greatest grace that I implore with all the strength of my soul [52] recognizing, O Lord, under Your inspiration, my own weakness] is humility. Not that artificial humility, but humility of the heart and judgment that acquiesces and submits to all things. It is not preoccupied with its own self-interest, or personal advantages. It is that virtue that keeps before my mind and in a most practical way, that everything comes from You, O God. It has us understand that faith and chastity are Your gifts, and that humility itself is not won by my efforts, struggles or exertions. It knows well how to distinguish always, that whatever I have is from You, and that to You is =due whatever glory or praise is derived from my own good, or that of others.**

Totally imbued with love for this virtue, and hatred for pride, he exclaimed:

**'Oh! If humility was brought to this earth by Our Lord, Jesus Christ, if it was practiced and taught by Him and left to us as an inheritance, it is the Pearl of heaven. It is a magnet that attracts all graces, and it is a sign of Predestination. On the other hand, pride is the cause of evil, and the root of all sins. It is an inheritance of the devil, and a sign of reprobation. Have pity on**

me, O Lord, make me put aside the spirit of pride, and to practice instead the virtue of humility.

He made the following resolutions for the practice of humility:

1. **In Thought**: Never give in to self-satisfaction, nor aspire for honors or greatness. Nourish humble thoughts, and do not feel you are worthy of anything.

2. **In Word**: Never speak of myself, neither of my virtues, nor my shortcomings. In both instances, the true motive could be pride [53], especially when I speak evil of myself, with the intention that others will speak well of me. This is the pride of a real expert[!]. Always speak well of others, and overlook their defects. Think of them as better than you are, because before the Lord, it remains to be seen who will be the more acceptable to Him.

3. **In Deed**: Never undertake anything, except for the glory of God: 'Do all things for the greater glory of God.' This is what gives value to all actions, even the most mean. Have a holy indifference to whatever obedience assigns to us, and undertake everything with the same spirit, even that which is repugnant. Never neglect any duty out of human respect, but say to it: 'You have come too late - I have not begun because of you, nor will I do anything because of you.' Strive especially to perform acts of humility that are in accord with your rule. If you are accused, do not make excuses for yourself, as this is a sign of self-love. Give in always, and immediately, and do not be the source of contrasts in your opinions. Practice both interior and exterior humility - in private and in public. Do it in secret for the greater merit of humility, and do it in public for good example. If you commit a fault, accuse yourself right away, and ask for a penance. This will serve as a reminder to keep you from falling again.

I resolve to kiss the floor three times every morning, as soon as I get out of bed, with the intention of thanking God for the blessings received. This will also serve as an act of re-dedication to [54] Him, so that He may protect me and aid me in all the actions of the day. This will serve to direct them to His glory, without voluntarily committing defects and errors: 'Confirm these resolves, O Lord, with Your blessing!'

These resolutions that he made, he kept. He had such an unassuming way about him that he never displayed the least semblance of presumption, either as a Novice, or Professed Student, or as a Priest. In the very first letter that he wrote to the Superior General, manifesting his desire to enter the Congregation, he began by expressing the secret manner in which his vocation had developed. He not only did not de-emphasize his defects, but he even exaggerated them. He said that he had little intelligence, that his studies had been discontinued and that he had a timid nature. He considered himself as a great sinner, and that he was unworthy to live among religious men, even for the very reason that he had decided to leave the world so late.

He used to say:

How lucky are they who enter Religion early! If they only knew my deformity, they would never come near me for fear of being contaminated ... With all these sins, I have had so much grace! How much greater is my duty of corresponding! No matter how much good I may do, I can never make up for the scandal I have given.

What these 'scandals' were we have already seen. We will cite here some more of the same. A Brother states:

On many occasions, I saw that he genuinely considered himself as the last in the House. I have heard others say that they saw him kiss the very ground that his Confreres had walked over. He used to say to me: 'If I only had [55] a fraction of the holiness that he has! I would then be most content!' He would say this about the Priests, but more often about the Brothers. He gave me much edification.

He had a great love for the Brothers, and he used to enjoy conversing with them. He felt that they were simple men, such that are ordinarily more receptive to devotion and the favors of God. Of the likes of these, it is written: ***His communication is with the simple.*** [Pr 3:32]. He used to volunteer to do their chores, as Porter, Sacristan, Janitor or help out in the kitchen.

It was observed, especially at Pavia, that before the Fathers he spoke but little. He manifested a reverence for them, and never contradicted them. In his pleasant way, he would agree with their statements. He was often seen dusting the banisters, and sweeping out the Confessionals, and would help clearing the table.

There was an Aspirant who had to stay at Pavia for a number of reasons. He has said:

On opening the door of Fr. Conte's room, he seemed a little embarrassed in what I had discovered what he was doing. It was evident that he had been studying on his knees. Other times I saw that he had been praying, prostrate on the ground, or that he had kissed the floor. He did this often in his room, in the Sacristy, in Church - or, wherever else he felt he would not be seen. There were times that the dirty from the floor was evident on his face.

A Brother stated: 'Once I asked him to see a copy of his beautiful handwriting [56]. He immediately changed the subject, and began talking about something else. This is how he would act in such situations.

His personal writings are full of his sense of humility. I will record here a few of his statements:

I know full well without the help of God, I know nothing, I can do nothing, I am nothing! Always remember, Anthony, how much evil you have done. Remember, too, the little good you have done - and if you do it at all, it is not you, but it belongs to God, Who assists you with His grace. If You do not help

me, I will fall, O my Jesus! - Humble me, O Lord, that I might fulfill exactly Your holy law.

When he had done a good action, he would say: 'I thank You, O Lord, for giving me the grace to perform this good act!' He always tried to hide these things out of his instinctive humility.

In his letters, he would always ask for the prayers of others. He used to refer to his own need of them in a most candid and unaffected way. Here is a passage from one of his letters to the Superior General:

I take this occasion to recommend myself to your paternal prayers, and ask for a *Memento* in your Mass - that the Lord may never take His hand from my head. As I am so weak and fragile, I am capable of doing any evil.

From this can be understood his fear that those pages to which he entrusted his secret thoughts might one day fall into the hands of others. He was afraid that his writings would change the views that others had of him, so he wrote:

I state that I keep these pages on which I write my most intimate thoughts and resolutions [57] only so that I alone may read them, according to my needs. They will be especially useful to me in the times of my temptations, that I might refresh my memory of what once was, and what I thought and reflected. In a particular way, will they recall to me the providential hand of God in drawing me to Himself [this I will always consider as a miracle]. From these pages, I will acquire greater strength to reaffirm my position, and as a means of getting up again, if I have fallen because of my weakness, and lack of confidence. I declare this so that if by accident these pages should fall into the hands of anyone, he would be so kind as to burn them. This is my intention, because in all truth, whatever I have written here, no one is to believe that I have ever achieved any of it ... There are many words, but they are just words ...

Another effect of his humility was his profound and continual sense of regret for his own faults. In his own mind, they were far more serious than they were in reality. It was a regret, however, that was soothed by his profound hope in God, which often brought him to tears of joy. Thus, the Holy Spirit states: ***the just is the first accuser of himself.*** [Pr 18:17]. Even as a Priest, he used to write to his parents asking them pardon for the hardships he feared he had caused them. In October 1888, just two months before his death, his Mother wrote to him:

Why do you always think of asking pardon for offending us? Do you not think that your Mother does not know how to forgive and forget? Words like that from you make me [58] very sad. They make me think that I, too, ought certainly to ask your pardon, if perhaps, not because of my lack of love, but rather because of my weakness and frail nature, I have failed in any of my duties towards you and your brothers. Please forgive me, Anthony, and let us live trusting in the good God, Who will supply for everything in which we may have been found lacking.

Such was his mother, who was truly worthy of this son.

The clearest indication of his genuine humility is that he kept himself meek and patient in every task. This is unusual, in that Fr. Anthony was of an irascible temperament and very sensitive. He was never seen arguing, or at odds with anyone. I do recall one time when he was angry with a Confrere, but in a short time, he asked pardon in all sincerity for it.

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## Chapter 8 His Poverty, Obedience and Chastity

The interior and hidden life of God resembles an enclosed garden in which beautiful flowers are abundant. These are the acts of virtue and good works. This is why the Beloved of the Canticle of Canticles, the symbol of the just soul, is called a 'Closed Garden'. She invites the Heavenly Spouse to come into this garden, to partake of its mature fruits in the sun of His divine Charity" ***Let my Beloved come into his garden, and eat the fruit of his apple trees*** [Ct 5:1]

**[59]** The heart of Fr. Conte was just such a garden, and we have seen, here and there, the choice flowers growing in it, in the course of his life's story. We have perceived their fragrance – as in the preceding chapter, that of his humility. We will now treat briefly of those three virtues which form the substance of the Religious Life.

We will first treat of Poverty, which is the sister of humility. He once wrote:

**Consider Jesus Christ, Who from His birth until His crucifixion was a poor man, and deprived even of the necessities of life. I, too, must practice this beautiful virtue, because only then will I have the true religious spirit.**

He was really dedicated to the acquisition of this virtue. He was always content with what he had, even though his clothes were old and thread-bare. He ate only frugally; he not only never asked for anything, but sincerely felt he was living the life of a king. He once remarked after supper to one of the Priests: 'Don't you think that polenta and beans make a fine meal?'

As for his eating habits, we have already discussed them. If obedience had not restrained him, he would have observed the diet of a most austere Carthusian. When he entered the Congregation, he had a silver watch chain that was quite ornate. When he became a Novice, he gave it to the Director, and used instead one of copper, or tin. Later, he substituted this with a piece of string.

The pens he kept for his use were those that had been discarded by others, and he gathered them in a box on his desk. Although he was quite near-sighted, he never wore glasses. To trace the Gothic style letters, in which he was quite proficient, he would [60] use straws from a broom, or turkey feathers. His notebooks were made of scrap paper, folded in half, and sewn together. He would write in them in his very small and neat penmanship.

Even though he could have had whatever he wanted by merely asking for it, out of his love for poverty, he kept for himself only what was the most abject. In his faith, he considered everything to be of great value.

When he arrived at Pavia, he was brought to the room that had been prepared for him. At the head of the bed, he noticed a large pillow such as are used there. He removed the bolster, and said that the pillow would be enough for him. In his room, there was a little table, that was always neat and clean, the bed, a Crucifix – one, or at the most, two chairs, and a few necessary books. These were all the furnishings that he ever had.

Through this same spirit of Poverty and Mortification, as a Novice, and then as a Professed Student in Verona – and later as a Priest in Pavia, he would shave without a mirror, or shaving cream. He would use plain water, and many times, he gave himself a hair-cut. It is very evident that he kept this resolution that was found among his papers:

**Take good care, because so many times, religious, after having left far greater realities, in Religion, become attached to insignificant goods. Let this not be true of you. Uproot your heart from every attachment. If you find that you are becoming attached to anything, give it to the Superior so that you can conquer yourself.**

He had also firmly resolved not to keep anything that was not absolutely necessary, not even if he had permission.

He had a like affection for Obedience, the virtue he felt was the focal point around which every community revolved. He noted in his Diary [61]:

**Obedience is the synthesis of the life of Jesus at Nazareth. It is described in these words: *He was subject to them*. It should be noted that to teach us all the other virtues, He used only three years, but to teach obedience, he took 30.**

Elsewhere in his Diary he noted:

**Obedience is better than heroic acts. He who obeys, never errs, and even if he should, he will always have merit, and great merit. Hence, we must obey whatever the Superiors command, as they are invested with the authority of God. We must see in them the ray of divinity.**

All that he wrote in his personal papers, he lived. What Superior was there who found in him the least resistance to his orders? Moreover, he would only manifest his difficulties, but would always add that he only mentioned them, so that the Superior might know his entire situation. His intention was never to influence the Superior to change what he had ordered. He had also resolve to anticipate and carry out what he felt the Superior would ask.

One of our Priests, who had been his Master in the Novitiate, said of him: 'He was a young man without a will of his own. To obey, he would have thrown himself into the fire!'

It was not only in exterior matters, but he submitted his judgment in all that pertained to his spiritual life and the exercises of virtue. Whenever he had doubts or anxieties, one word from his Director would restore peace and serenity to him. His spiritual fathers attest that he subjected himself to them with the serenity of a child

The Obedience that he gave to his Superiors was as evident in his **[62]** observance of the rule, that he considered to be the indication of the Will of God. This commitment of his to the rule began as a Novice, and he fulfilled it until his death. the young Aspirant who was with him at Pavia tells us:

**Whenever I went into his room and closed the door, he would get up from whatever he was doing, and open it again. At that time in Pavia, the bell did not ring for the common exercises [due to some existing circumstances]. He would always tell me what was next on the schedule. In the times assigned for silence, if I had gone to see him, he would explain this to me in a few words. In this, too, I came to see in him, a genuine religious.**

How could a soul that was so humble, so mortified and so obedient be one that was not most beautiful and adorned with extraordinary Purity? If the lily of purity blooms vigorously among thorns, what fragrance would it not have for him who was so dedicated to mortification? Even though he had a most delicate conscience, nevertheless in all his spiritual writings he does leave in this matter of Chastity the least shade of self-reproach. Rather, he refers to it as a special favor from God. After nothing that chastity is a gift from heaven, he directs to himself these words: 'And you who amidst so many dangers have been so blessed, what is your gratitude?'

However, he was far from the fallacy of abandoning himself to any sense of security. He remained faithful to the following resolutions that he recorded:  
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- 1. Custody of the senses, and especially of the eyes: look only at what is necessary, and do not focus your eyes on any object.**
- 2. Avoid anything that might be an occasion for you for any thoughts that is less than pure. If these should occur, remember your resolution that you are not to reject them with words, but by immediately elevating your thoughts to Jesus, Mary and Joseph - to St. Aloysius, St. Anthony, St.**

Philip, and to other Saints and recommend yourself to them in a particular way.

3. In speaking with women, observe the rules of our Venerable Founder. Be modest and end these conversations as soon as possible. Remember the example of St. Aloysius, who even feared to look at his own Mother.
4. Avoid particular friendships, even under the guise of doing good.
5. Avoid idleness - tire your body, and thank God for all the obligations and duties that we have, as these are a providential remedy. They provide thoughts of a higher level, and greater peace.
6. Avoid occasions. If you find yourself in them out of duty, be cautious, but do not neglect your duty. The Lord will help you so that you will not be attracted by them.
7. Manifest your temptations to your Confessor immediately. A temptation that is exposed is half conquered.
8. Go to confession frequently. Bring to it sincere sorrow, and do not be satisfied with the penance imposed by your Confessor, but add others. As Communion is the Bread of Angels, and the wine that germinates virgins, it will render your soul more candid. Have no fear of receiving it, but live well and approach It often. Have devotion to Mary most holy; take refuge under her mantle, and she will defend you as a special Protectress.
9. Also, observe this law, if ever in your reading, concupiscence is aroused, discontinue that reading - it is better to remain ignorant of some things, and to live innocently.

These were the defenses that he sought for purity. He added:

If every once in a while, this most beautiful flower is not watered, it will soon wither. Therefore, you must nourish it with the water of prayer. This is the principal means to draw upon us from heaven the necessary strength and constancy that we might not be found wanting.

We have already noted and we will see further how he watered this garden of his heart with the heavenly fruit of prayer. I should mention here this short and beautiful prayer that he often said from his boy-hood days:

O my God, You see me everywhere! Keep guard over my eyes, my tongue, my ears, my hands and all my thoughts, that I may never use any one of them to offend you.

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### Chapter 9 His Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, to the Virgin Mary and to the Saints.

The Eucharist is the center of the Universal Church, and the heart of her divine life. It is also the Object that strongly and sweetly attracts to itself the love of choice souls. The elect, drawn by their God, hidden in the shadows of this mystery, taste some droops of that torrent of delights. In heaven, the unveiled drops of that torrent of delights. In heaven, the unveiled Majesty of this same God, inebriates the chosen souls. Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament showers upon them a secret manna, a balm for their wounds, a light for their journey, a fire that purifies and tempers them, and the food that nourishes them. By It, He also becomes their Master of the interior and hidden life. He instructs them with the language of secret inspirations. He continually renews under their very eyes the example of His own hidden life of Nazareth. He teaches them His prayer of Gethsemane, and His sacrifice on Calvary. He inspires them and comforts them to love obscurity, and the sufferings of their state of life. He sanctifies them in It with recollection and prayer.

These were the reasons why Fr. Conte found such delight in conversing with his Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. The world would disappear from his view. Nothing else would matter to him. He would experience neither hunger, nor thirst, nor cold nor any disturbance of any sort. He would remain there on his knees before [66] the altar. He could seem suspended, most recollected with his eyes lowered and his lips moving. He would stay there for long hours, whenever his duties allowed, and it seemed as though he never wanted to leave.

He once wrote that the Blessed Sacrament was a furnace in which he wanted to be recast and tempered. For him, the Heart of Christ was truly his repose. He desired to be a Victim with Him. In dying to himself and to the world, his wish was to be buried in Him, and to live by His spirit alone. He yearned for no satisfaction, not even for those that are licit in earth. His sole delight was to bring good pleasure to his beloved Christ.

The Blessed Sacrament, then, for him had a marvelous attraction. On certain days of the year, when the Eucharist was reserved in the Novitiate Chapel, he could feel this presence of his Lord so close to his room. He not only went there for adoration as often as he could during the day, but he was hardly able to sleep during the night, so strong was his desire to keep His company. Many times, he would get up from his bed, and would spend a good part of the night before the Tabernacle.

At Pavia, many times he went behind the main altar, to where the Tabernacle was. There he would pour out his soul more intimately, and more freely. He alternated his interior prayer with exterior acts of devotion, and gave the appearance of a person who truly loved his God.

An eye witness who saw him in these acts has stated: 'There was such a look [67] on his face, and from the comportment of his person, his interior, secret joy seemed most evident.'

If this was the flame that burned within him during his visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and then, as a Priest, in the celebration of Holy Mass. Before receiving the Sacred Host from the hands of the Priest, his attitude was one of profound adoration. He prepared himself to receive this Sacred Guest with such piety that his edified companions considered him like an Angel.

After he had been ordained a Priest, he spent a long time in preparing for Mass, as well as much time in making his thanksgiving after it. In its celebration, however, he was not scrupulous. He noted this thought in his Diary: 'If you are asked as a Priest what you are doing, your answer should be I am thanking God for my Mass – after dinner, it should be, I am preparing for tomorrow's Holy Mass.'

To ascend the altar worthily, he implored the mediation of her, who on Calvary stood unmoved, next to the Cross of her Redeemer. She bore in her soul the sea of sorrows that submerged the divine humanity. She participated intimately in the great sacrifice of universal expiation, of which the Mass is a continual renewal. She thus became as a Priestess and a **Co-redemptrix**, intimately united to the Priesthood of the New Covenant. For this reason, of all those devoted to Mary, the first place is reserved for Priests.

It is certain that all the faithful, almost instinctively are inclined [68] to venerate Mary, the Mother of the Redeemed, the Hope of the Afflicted, the Refuge of the Suffering, the Ideal of Virginity and Mercy. All souls have a need from time to time for her, for a breath of fresh air, outside of the impure and difficult atmosphere of this world. The more one approaches to God through grace, the more must he love this beloved Mother, who is His most pure and perfect image. A tender devotion to Mary is the distinctive mark of the elect, and the genius of the saints.

From his childhood, Fr. Conte loved Mary sincerely and considered her always as his Heavenly Mother. He had a special devotion to her Immaculate Conception. He compiled a list of more than 200 glorious titles, relative to that mystery, taken from the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. To her, and to her most chaste Spouse, he attributed the grace of his having been preserved from the dangers of the world, and led finally to the door of religion.

During his notes, were found these supplications to her:

**Mary, Mary, my Hope and Comfort, come to me always with your counsel, through the darkness - be the guiding star that points the way that leads to heaven. O Mary, fulfill the office of Mother, by inspiring me to live in the holy fear of God, and in the exact observance of His Law. O Mary, ask God what it is I am to do here on earth.**

His heavenly Mother soon let him know what he was to do, and assisted him to carry it through. When he entered Religion, to put His servant to the proof, allowed his spirit to be permeated with fears and darkness. In these difficult moments, he would turn to his Heavenly Mother and he would often receive from her such comfort, that he made a note of it in his diary, in most sincere expression of gratitude.

Not only as a Novice, but also as a Priest, in addition to the Rosary, and the other customary devotions, he also recited her 'Little Office.' At the striking of the hour, he used to say a *Hail Mary*. On Saturdays, and during Novenas in preparation for her Feasts, he would add some penances to his prayer. God alone knows his aspiration and ejaculations that he continually directed to her. On her Feast Days, he opened his heart to her in most tender affections, and with his filial requests. He would ask her for the grace to live only for God. It would be better to cite his own words:

**Today, the Feast of the Annunciation, I prayed much to Mary most holy, through the intercession of St. Joseph. On this day, she, by her humble and trusting consent, brought down from heaven the Eternal Word, Who became incarnate in her, thus beginning the Redemption [under this aspect, this is the greatest Fest]. I prayed that as I received this same Eternal Word in Holy Communion, that He might be incarnate within me, and take flesh in me, by having me live a new life, by infusing His spirit into me. May this, then, be the principle means and the end of all my actions.**

He used to delight in talking about her to others, especially with children and uneducated persons. Many times, he would then persuade them to pray with him to her.

His devotion to Mary led him to a devotion to St. Joseph. He wrote: **[70]**

**I always prayed much to St. Joseph for his aid. To him, I owe so many extraordinary graces. Among these graces I consider the greatest, my devotion to the Blessed Mother. [I will also say that through this devotion to her, and in relation to it, I came to love St. Joseph.**

He then enumerated a rather lengthy list of what these 'extraordinary graces' were: having been preserved from the corruption of the world, and having been able to break all chains that impeded him from giving himself entirely to God. He considered as graces that he had entered a Congregation, placed under the protection of the Holy Souses, Mary and Joseph, his Vow of Chastity, his being able to educate youth and his constancy during Novitiate.

Of this Novitiate, he wrote: 'Because of my tepidity and negligence, I truly merited to be dismissed.' He also noted his Profession, Ordination, and many other graces of his are on this list.

He used to exhort others to be devoted to St. Joseph, and to hope for all things in the intercession of a Saint, who was so good and powerful before God. He

chose this Saint almost as the Director of his soul, as he was persuaded that St. Joseph was not only a model, but that he was the master of those souls who lived the interior life. He often said this following prayer:

**O blessed St. Joseph, I entrust myself entirely to your protection. As once you were the vigilant Guardian of the Child Jesus, guide me in all my actions. Recommend me to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, that through this gate of salvation, I might take refuge in the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.**

A young man who was often in Fr. Conte's company, remarked:

**How much he loved St. Joseph! He often used to say to me: 'Pray to St. Joseph to obtain the graces you need.' I told him sometimes that I had prayed much and had obtained nothing. His reply was: 'Faith is what is needed, Faith!' He always gave me courage, and would suggest devotion to this great saint. He would often cite the example and the words of St. Teresa to whom he was most devoted.**

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, therefore, were the 'triple cord' that bound his heart. Under a little picture of the three of them, he wrote:

**'May Jesus, Mary and Joseph be the theme of your thoughts, the sigh of your soul, and the object of your affections - your strength, your anchor and your sure refuge.'**

In addition to the Guardian Angel, and St. Anthony, he was also very devoted to St. Teresa, whom he believe obtained for him many graces. He attributed his intact purity to the intercession of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, and St. Philip Neri. In St. John Berchmans, he found a model of heroic perfection in regular observance, whom he imitated. In St. Stanislaus, he admired the resolution of giving himself to God at a tender age. Fr. Conte always regretted the fact that he has so long resisted similar graces in his own life. He was devoted to St. Bassiano and Blessed Joanna Maria Bonomo, the Protectors of his native Bassano. He emulated St. Francis de Sales, and was a perfect imitator of the Saint's meekness and kindness. He prayed to St. Francis of Assisi for his love of poverty. He was devoted to Margaret Mary Alacoque, and prayed to be inflamed with devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He also prayed to St. Francis Xavier, St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Alphonsus Mary de Liguori [72], and St. Vincent de Paul. He also had a special devotion to the Venerable Cure' of Ars, John B. Vianney.

There were also other saints to whom he prayed, according to his needs. In his prayer, he would call on the merits of our own Venerable Founder, to whom he attributed more than one grace that he received. He admired the Founder's heroic virtues, and was proud of them, as a true son. He earnestly hoped that he would see the Founder one day raised to the honors of the altar.

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## Chapter 10 His Charity toward God

Lastly, something should be said concerning his Charity. This is the supreme virtue, the fire enkindled by the Son of God on earth, and which is the summit and the crown of holiness. It is the Breath of the Holy Spirit, that in the enclosed garden of the hidden life it nourishes, vivifies and beautifies everything. It is the one virtue that includes all the others, and elevates them to a divine level. Every other virtue is merely a different manifestation of it. It is the virtue that, without which, were I to speak all tongues, possess all learning astonish the world with extraordinary prodigies, I would still be nothing. On the other hand, when it is possessed a simple laborer, a mother of a family, in which Providence has placed them, can be elevated to the merit of heroes.

Just what is a saint? He is a person full of charity who loves God for Himself, one who lives himself in God and his neighbor [73] because of God. When this flame permeates a soul, this detaches itself from everything else, to fly freely to the embrace of the Supreme Good.

This is a description of Fr. Conte. The comforts of life, its pleasures, its enticing allurements, friendships, freedom and the strongest affections of his heart were all sacrificed out of love for God. For this reason, mortifications were dear to him, as were dependence and the obscurity of his humble room. How many times, after his Profession and Ordination, his good parents desired to have him home for a few days. He certainly had nothing to fear from them, and his Superiors granted him permission. However, he had a fear of interrupting his pious exercises even more of taking back the least particle of the holocaust he had made on the altar of divine love. Therefore, he never acquiesced to the requests of his parents.

He not only sacrifices the things that were his, but even more so, did he sacrifice himself. From the morning until night, he was motivated by the impulse of obedience and charity. He did not have, as has been stated, a will of his own, but rather gave every effort to contradict it. Among his resolutions, this one was found: 'Do always that which you find repugnant, and avoid that to which you are inclined.'

What more could be asked? He even denied himself willingly his spiritual inclinations, in accord with the divine good pleasure. He preferred rather the God of Consolation than the consolations of God. He wrote:

**You know that I love You, O Lord, above all things, even without those consolations. This not because it is my duty, or because of any fear of you - but, because You merit it, [74] O infinite Goodness. It is only right and just that all I have, and all that I am, should return to you, thanks to the magnet of Your love. Because of Your love, I came into being, and through Your love, I am all that I am. Bind me to You, with tight chains, that I may never depart from You, the way, the truth and the Life.**

His devotion to the Blessed Sacrament was founded in sentiments such as these. These explain his spirit of prayer, which could be seen in the near continuous movement of his lips, and which only stopped with his last breath. These sentiments also have us understand his love for penance, as it is said: 'without sorrow, no one lives in love.'

Although the Superiors were very hesitant in granting him permission for bodily penances, the Lord was more willing to try him with sufferings of the soul. It is through these that God strongly proves them who love Him. From his writings, we see that Fr. Conte's heart was often as dry as the desert, and his mind was clouded with darkness. He was severely tried by doubts and anxieties, and was tempted to lose all confidence in God. All that he did, seemed to an illusion to him, and he felt that faith and hope were empty dreams. There were times he felt that there was no solid ground under his feet, and the fury of violent passions were unleashed against his heart, that he was much like a small boat caught in a raging storm.

He once wrote to the Superior General:

**I feel such a bitter struggle of various passions and temptations, that oppose every desire and effort to free myself of them ... it seems very clear that as the Lord is hurt, that He wants me to repay in this life for my long resistance to His grace.**

He wrote to an aunt of his who was a Nun:

**The enemy of all good [77] employs all his might to obstruct my path. He uses every means and will to oppose every good that I undertake in my own behalf, and that of others. It seems his intention is, if not to tire me, at least to lessen my physical and moral strength. Now that I am going through a period of interior struggle, a dark night and a glacial avalanche.**

Elsewhere, he referred to these experiences as 'the dead of night, an abyss of confusion and darkness, most painful anguish.' In the midst of such tempests, he would increase his acts of faith, and abandonment into the arms of God. He would strive to invoke Him as a Merciful Father, while considering the devil as a ruthless tyrant. When his troubled heart would keep him from such sentiment, he would take his pen in hand, and compile protestations of fidelity in God, of adherence to His infallible Word, of promises to live and die as a true son of the Catholic Church and as a Religious.

Sentiments such as these, he wrote often, as the considerable amount of his papers attest. It is true that in all his contacts with others, he gave no indication of his internal conflicts. He seemed always to be the same. However, anyone who came upon him during his solitary prayer, and who noted his unusual comportment or the expression on his face, would get some idea of his interior agony, and they would be moved to compassion.

The following notes were found among his papers:

O Lord, I do not merit consolations; I am content to remain in this state throughout my life - Give me Your love, and I wish nothing more from You.

[76] Christ, however, did not always have Fr. Conte drink from the bitter Chalice of His Passion. There were times in which He infused into His soul that consolation that is reserved for His Chosen ones. He did receive a few drops of it that overpower all the delights of this world. On such occasions, Fr. Anthony would exclaim: 'Oh! How good it is to be with Your grace, O my God!' This was the re-echo of St. Peter's words on Mount Tabor: ***How good it is for us to be here!***

At such times, the light of faith, which shortly before seemed to give such little light, shone again with its customary splendor. In one such moment, he wrote the following:

O holy faith, sublime gift and stupendous miracle of Divine Omnipotence, and splendid light that guides me securely along the way of the Eternal Truth! You bring light to the darkness of the extraordinary chaos of this world. You are the medicine for the dolorous anxiety of my ruthless uncertainties, and you bring serenity everywhere with your blessed rays You envelop all things in the divine harmony of Your profound mysteries - you are peace and happiness. From you, I know whither I have come, and that for only a little while, will I remain here, and where ultimately I am to go.

I would say that this prayer seems to be a Hymn taught to him by God and echoes the words of the Prophet: ***My lips will sing the Hymn, since you have taught me Your justification*** [Ps 118].

These periods of light would also pass, and the obscurity and tedium were not long in returning. Fr. Conte would then impose prayer upon himself all the more. He took extra care not to neglect a single point of his usual exercises, but rather increased them. He would find comfort in recalling the happy times of his spiritual peace, and followed blindly the path of obedience.

[77] He would find consolation in doing all he could for God, and he noted this resolution: 'I would prefer a thousand times over to suffer with Him and to follow Him to Calvary, then to enjoy for a single day the delights of this world!'

He was sustained by the grace of the Heavenly Spouse, Who from time to time would hide from those who loved Him, so that He would be more avidly sought by them. He abhorred the thought of belonging to the large, but vile number of mercenaries. Such souls, when they discover that they are not being rewarded with sensible consolations, turn back to find their delight in the diversion of the senses, in creatures and in miserable satisfaction.

From his sufferings, he found a motive to re-ignite his fervor. He would renew his resolutions to amend his entire life, nor did he waste any time in so doing. In addition to the Community schedule, he had one of his own that regulated all the

actions of his day from 5:00 a.m. until 11:00p.m. He felt that he was no longer the master of his time, as he had consecrated it all to God by his Profession, Therefore, he worked assiduously to make the work of his day a buckler against the attacks of temptation, as St. Jerome states: *The shield of the heart is hard work.*

As if to keep himself armed, he wrote a kind of personal memoir, or list of protestations of faith, hope and charity and of the other virtues. These were also intended to be prayers to God, to Mary most holy, to St. Joseph and his holy Protectors. He placed all that he wrote, together with an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus next to his heart. He wrote: 'I intend by this to be so enclosed in this sacred Sanctuary, and enveloped with thorns [78], that I will be unable to find its exit.'

He also copied down the Formula of Vows, and the 'Testament of his Soul', which is a strong avowal of wanting to die with the dispositions of a perfect Religious and Christian. He asked that this testament of his, after his death, be placed in his grave with him.

He kept these documents close to his heart, as though to guard its entrance and to withstand the blows of the enemy. At the earliest suggestion of any temptation, he would bring his hand to his heart. This would serve as a reminder for him to renew his virtuous protestations and acts that were contained in these pages. He would thus find refuge and contentment in carrying out tranquilly what he was doing. It was, as it were, a powerful weapon with many degrees of effectiveness, that would exterminate the enemy onslaught. It was also a reminder of the obligations he had assumed before God, Whom he had resolved to serve: 'without exercising my own liberty, but rather as a slave enchained by His holy fear and love.'

So great was his desire that burned within him of uniting his will to God, that whatever adversities befell him, he would accept joyfully. To those around him, it seemed that such occasions were actually his will, and not only his acceptance of the will of God.

His sense of charity brought him to despise tepidity, and even the least offense in the service of his beloved God. He once wrote:

**How terrible, how harmful is tepidity to a Christian soul, not to mention the soul of a Religious! - How terrible it is to see a Religious freely commit venial sins. Such a soul pierces the Sacred Heart of Jesus. To see a soul, so favored by Him correspond [79] with such little generosity, and to go to the very brink of offending Him seriously, to his own great harm! What courage does such a one have in receiving Holy Communion! How poorly must he receive it. He will not notice Him avoiding him, and bestowing His graces on others who are more worthy than is he!**

This explained his earnest desire of destroying sin in souls, of setting them on the path of virtue, and of bringing them to the Redeemer. For this, he sacrificed his time, his repose, his every diversion, his food, his health – and his life. He resolved never 'to ask for graces that would benefit only himself, that is, those that would be

for his own sanctification, and without any benefit for his neighbor for the glory of God.

Fearing that he might be useless for this, he often recited this following prayer that he kept close to his heart among his other papers:

**In case, O Lord, You should see that being so unworthy, I am unable to bring about any good, either because of my imperfections, or because of my insufficiency, in good time, then, please accept the offering of my life as a sacrifice, or as an exchange for the life of any of my Superiors, or Companions, who may be useful for Your glory, for the defense of the Holy Church and the good of souls. Amen.**

Whether it was because of this humble sentiment of not being able to love and glorify God as much as he should have, and wanted to – or, if in him was verified that saying of St. Philip Neri, who to inspire all to perseverance, asserted that our Lord did not usually send death to a spiritual man, without first sending him a warning of it, or giving him an extraordinary spirit [cf. Baci, *Life of the Saint*, Chapter 21] – the fact is that he, as though he had a presentiment that his last day was near, he spurred himself onward, to sanctify himself in a short time, He would remind himself that soon he would die. Unfortunately what he feared, came to be a sad reality.

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## **Chapter 11 His Death**

Despite his delicate constitution, and his yearning for penance, Fr. Anthony generally enjoyed good health in all the time he lived in the Congregation. He was never so indisposed that he had to spend a single day in bed. At Pavia, he never complained of feeling sick, although that region is often over-cast and damp. He accepted the ordinary discomforts, and often joked about them.

I will cite only this one passage of a letter he wrote to the Superior General, dated October 26, 1888, just a few weeks before he died:

**I send you these few lines for the sole purpose of offering to you, as Superior, my whole being, and to send my sincerest best wishes. I want you to know of my affection for you - [you who have always been, and are a good Father to me]. I sincerely appreciate the many wonderful graces that have come to me in you, and my beloved Congregation.**

This letter then goes on with many other sincere expressions of his deep affection. He then stated:

On the Feast of St. Teresa [October 15], I completed one year here. It went so fast, that this seems like the first day. The bad weather is no bother to me, except that 'Lady Fever' has paid me a few visits. Now, however, that 'Sir Cold' has arrived, I am feeling better.

In his assignment, therefore, Fr. Anthony enjoyed good health. Spiritually, too, he was happy in the thought that he was at the post that God has assigned to him. He entrusted himself entirely to God, with filial abandonment, and would not have changed places with the happiest man in the world. He rejoiced in the great harvest that he saw flourishing before his eyes. Although now, his mortal sojourn was coming to a close, no other thought, or preoccupation moved him other than working on, while there was still light. He wanted to reap as much of his harvest as he could before the fast approaching night.

The Superior General had noted that Fr. Conte had overcome the obstacles of his retiring nature, and he saw that he no longer had an inordinate fear of failing. The Superior heard of the great strides he had been making in the apostolate, and came to nourish the highest hopes for the young priest. Fr. Vignola, therefore, was most desirous of having this beloved Priest near him, and had thought of recalling him to Verona. Although Fr. Conte was indeed young in years, he was much proven in spirit. The Superior General therefore wrote to him:

With sincere gratitude, I answer your letter. I am grateful for the sentiments of affection you extend to me, and for the happiness you find in the duties of your assignment that our Congregation imposes on you. In due time, I will recall you to Verona, as an established *Missionary*, ready to take on some formal *Missions*.

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Such was the encouragement of the wise Captain that made the good soldier forget his every fatigue, and to redouble his efforts. These were the hopes held for him here on earth, but God had other plans.

At the beginning of winter, an epidemic of small pox broke out in Pavia. It infected many, and a good part of them died. Our entire Community there, including Fr. Conte, were vaccinated. That same day, he began to feel quite indisposed, but little attention was paid to it. Three days later, he was confined to bed, and vomited almost continuously. The doctor was summoned, and after examining Fr. Conte, he stated: 'It is nothing to be worried about; I will stop by again tomorrow morning.'

The following day, however, the doctor diagnosed his malady as small pox, and that it had entered an advanced stage. The doctor took the Director aside and told him that Fr. Conte was bleeding internally. On hearing this, the Director became very concerned, and made sure that all the remedies were carried out. He never left Fr. Conte's bedside, as he was his Confessor.

A few hours later, he noticed that Fr. Conte had become quite restless. He was moaning and no longer able to talk. From his appearance, it was now clear that his end was near. The Director bestowed upon him all the spiritual comforts, and repeatedly gave him absolution. Fr. Conte was aware of what was going on, and responded with a nod of his head. When the Director asked him if he wanted Extreme Unction, he indicated that he did. There was now such serenity that shone on his face that it seemed much like the light of the future joy that was awaiting him.

Without any delay, the Director administered the Last Sacraments to him, and then sorrowfully began the prayers for the recommendation [83] of Fr. Conte's soul. The other confreres had been summoned and were kneeling around his bed, overcome with grief.

These prayers had just concluded, when Fr. Conte, as in an attitude of prayer, serenely expired. It was just about noon, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 1888.

The doctor, who had been hastily summoned, then arrived a few minutes later. He could not believe that the end had come so quickly. His examination revealed that there had been a massive internal hemorrhage. It was then too late but it was now easy to assign the cause of his rapid deterioration. However, for a good many years Fr. Conte had not been motivated by human considerations. He considered all that happened as the provident hand of Him, Who governs all things, and Who treats with regard to all of us as sons of His Blood: ***With great favor He disposes of us*** [cf. Ws 12:18]. He lived his life in an atmosphere of faith and love of God. He investigated, adored and fulfilled His will, and with the total sacrifice of himself, he concluded his days.

As death is the echo of one's life, faith lit the candle by his bed in death. He was a Priest who lived his ordinary life in the light of this faith. He lived in the conviction that God did not count the days of one's life, as he did their works. In our piety, we are constrained to believe that God had found that his good and faithful servant, in the prime of his life, had achieved the perfect measure of merit. Hence, He did not want to delay taking him from the midst of the miseries and the iniquity of this earth. He chose to call him to dwell in the blessed company of his saints: ***Being made perfect in a short time, he fulfilled a long time: For his soul pleased God: therefore, he hastened to bring him out of the midst of iniquities...*** [Ws 4:13, ff.]

The grief that followed Fr. Conte's death was reflected by the Director of the House of Pavia, in a letter to the Superior General:

Yesterday, in our profound sorrow, we accompanied our beloved Confrere, Fr. Anthony to the cemetery. It is impossible to tell you the grief that everyone felt at his sudden and unexpected death.

His excellency, Bishop Augustine riboldi, wept bitterly, and with him, everyone who knew Fr. Conte, during the short time he was at Pavia. Almost the entire Chapter of the Cathedral, and the Bishop himself, said Mass yesterday for our departed. The Rector of the Seminary, and its Professors, also offered a Mass for him, some in the Chapel, and others in our Church. A

number of others did likewise. In all, About 30 Masses were offered as Suffrage for the soul of Fr. Conte. And yesterday, more than 100 Communion were received for the same intention.

The Procession to the cemetery was subdued, although many took part in it. The Professors of the Seminary, with the rector, were present as well as the Curates of the Parish, and those of the neighboring parishes, as well as other Priests. They all came without any special invitations being sent out.

A number of families sent their servants to carry the torches. I can tell you that the sorrow was felt throughout the entire city. Some of our students at the University delayed their departure for their Christmas vacation so that they could accompany Fr. Anthony to the cemetery.

I petitioned the city government to have a special tomb, or a lot, or crypt in the cemetery, but this was denied. The answer received was that there were none available, as the gallery of the arch in the cemetery would have to be constructed at our expense. There would also be the further requirement of erecting a monument. Therefore, we had to bury him in the common area.

Thus, the Priest, who out of love for Christ, made himself poor and humble in life, now lies in the public cemetery, 'whose remains on the last day will arise in splendor -

When each one of the blessed will come forth  
From his lowly tomb, to that choice band,  
Singing their alleluiah, with voice restored.

[Dante, *Purgatory*, c. 1, v. 7; c. 30, v.15]

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