

C.P.P.S. RESOURCES—35
MICHELE COLAGIOVANNI, C.P.P.S.



THE COMPANY OF MIRACLES

THE LIFE OF
DON BIAGIO
VALENTINI, C.P.P.S.

TRANSLATED BY JEROME STACK, C.P.P.S.

2015
MISSIONARIES OF THE PRECIOUS BLOOD
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INTRODUCTION

The death of the charismatic founder of a religious congregation generally presents a challenge: how to maintain the enthusiasm and momentum of the early years after a powerful guiding presence is suddenly gone. This was the case when St. Gaspar del Bufalo died in December of 1837, leaving behind a community of some fifty men and a dozen houses. The Missionaries of the Precious Blood had been in existence for just over twenty years.

There was little question that his successor as superior general of the C.P.P.S. would be his protégé and spiritual director, Don Biagio Valentini. He was elected to the position unanimously, and would go on to serve for the next decade. A deeply spiritual man and an engaging preacher, some thought him to be the equal of Gaspar, the “spiritual earthquake,” in the pulpit.

One of the earliest members of the Congregation, Valentini was a newly ordained priest when he met Saint Gaspar, who was preaching a mission at the famed sanctuary of Loreto. He was thought to be in the final stages of tuberculosis at the time, and was preparing for death. He was healed through the intercession of Mary, whom he invoked at Gaspar’s urging, and went on to be a tireless and energetic Missionary until his death in 1847.

Valentini was quite unconcerned with worldly affairs, perhaps the result of confronting his mortality as a young man facing an early death. His simplicity, candor, charm, and obvious holiness gave him a charisma that served him – and his ministry – well. What he lacked in worldly wisdom was balanced by the authority of a life lived for God.

Unfortunately, that charisma did not compensate for practical skills, and his ten years as moderator general were not without problems on account of this. Even if he made mistakes, some of

which were serious, his legacy for the Congregation was to be faithful to the spirit and vision of his great friend, Saint Gaspar.

In this carefully researched biography of Valentini, Don Michele Coloagiovanni of the Italian Province of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood offers us a vivid and well-rounded portrait of this man who saw himself as a member of a congregation he regarded as the “company of miracles.”

Like his biography of Francesco Albertini (in English, *The Hidden Father*), this volume also offers an insight into a fascinating and turbulent time in the history of Italy, the Church, and of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. As we Missionaries celebrate our bicentennial this year, we do well to look back on those early formative years with gratitude and be inspired by great figures like Saint Gaspar, Albertini, and Valentini. They are still our mentors, our guides, challenging us and the Church to proclaim the good news of the Blood of Jesus Christ, a sign of God’s loving kindness, of God’s mercy, or, as Gaspar described it, a “flaming outburst of love.”

In translating and editing this volume, I am grateful to Father Jeff Kirch, C.P.P.S., who reviewed my text and offered valuable suggestions and corrections. Jean Giesige, Director of Communications of the Cincinnati Province of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood was a very helpful liaison with the Messenger Press, and also offered helpful comments. Finally, of course, I am grateful to Don Michele Colagiovanni, C.P.P.S., for his tireless and dedicated research into the history of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, and for permitting me to translate this volume into English.

Jerome Stack, C. P.P.S.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

There is a saying in Italian, “*traduttore, traditore*,” that probably sums up the experience of anyone who attempts translation. It means: “Every translator is a traitor.” In translating it is difficult to do justice to the original text, with all its nuances and beauty. One hopes that the reader of this book keeps that in mind and excuses whatever lapses or infelicitous phrases might be encountered.

A few notes on the translation are in order. In some cases, I have chosen to summarize or even to omit material that I judged would be of less interest to English-speaking readers. In particular, geographical and historical references that would likely be familiar to the Italian reader have been subject to this process.

Don Michele makes ample use of material from his research which is generally enclosed in quotation marks. This indicates that the material has been taken from original sources. At times he constructs dialog that he imagines must have taken place, and in those cases makes use of the convention of the em dash (–).

Within quotations, the capitalization follows the original text, even if some of the words would not be capitalized in modern usage. In other places, the words Congregation and Missionary are capitalized when referring to the Missionaries of the Precious or to a member of the C.P.P.S. In the early days of the Congregation, some of the priests who worked with Gaspar giving missions were known as missionaries, even if they were not formally members of the Congregation, so the use of capitalization for members was deemed useful.

The footnotes in the text are those of the translator, and have been added as explanations of various terms or situations that might be unfamiliar to the general reader. The original text contains neither footnotes nor endnotes; the author explains in his notes

that this was due to a concern for the size of the volume. The critical apparatus would nearly double the size of the text if it were included.

Quotations from the Bible are in Latin (the Vulgate) in the original text. The English translations are from the Douay-Rheims Version or the Revised Standard Version.

Chapter 1

THE VALENTINIS OF PORTO RECANATI

Don Biagio Valentini was born in the Italian coastal city of Porto Recanati, located on the Adriatic, in the region of the Marche. Today it is a popular tourist destination, and at the time of Don Biagio's birth it was known for its fishing industry. Since it is located near the Sanctuary of the Holy House of Loreto, pilgrims have passed through the city for centuries.

One of the more notable seafarers of Porto Recanati in the second half of the eighteenth century was Simone Valentini, whom we shall dub Simone Senior. He was born on October 20, 1723. His father was the *parón*¹ Giacomo Valentini, who held large sections of uncultivated land along the shore where he kept fishing equipment. On a very large tract of land near the sea he had built his house, or perhaps enlarged his father's house. Simone Senior had substantial holdings of land, and when he married Girolama Giry, born on October 27, 1726, his wealth increased, since she came from an important local family.

As was often the case at the time, several of their children were claimed by death. The two male children of Simone Senior, Crispino and Basso, attended the local schools, and their education equipped them for managing both private and public business matters and allowed them to assume the title of *signori*. They worked as employees of their father as if he were their *padrone*,² and they were chomping at the bit. For his part, Simone knew how to use his sons as "arrows in his bow," since the changing times were opening up some possibilities for people of the lower classes.

1 *Parón* is a title used in the Veneto region of Italy for someone who is in charge of a fish farm (*valle da pesca*) or fishing fleet.

2 The Italian word *padrone* can mean a boss or labor contractor who may exploit his workers.

He intended to increase the power and prominence of his family. He often carried out this plan by means of some cynical family politics which, in this case, could not be carried out. It was the custom of both the upwardly mobile and established families to choose a single scion of the family in order to preserve the family patrimony intact. The other children would, in effect, end up being barren branches of the family tree. They would have to contribute to the power of the family in other ways.

The firstborn son alone was expected to keep the family tree alive. The Valentinis would have had to adopt this practice to further their ambitions, but it was not easy. It was becoming difficult even among the noble classes, who were accustomed to the practice. Imagine how difficult it would be for the commander of fishing boats, among whom the custom was quite the opposite.

In the Valentini family, the successor to Simone Senior would undoubtedly have been Crispino, and he had the gifts to assume the role. His ability and determination were obvious from his youth. According to the laws of the day, his brother Basso, the younger son, would have had to begin a career in the Church or some kind of white collar work. He would remain single and at the service of the family. In the past, however, the family had never done this. The fishing business required workers, and the simplest way to provide them was through procreation. One might mention as well that sailors in general have a kind of buccaneering spirit and are difficult to rein in.

We do not believe that the elder Simone died of a broken heart on July 7, 1786, when he saw both sons pursuing marriage. Nevertheless, one suspects that the illness and subsequent death of the tough old sailor made the marriage of Basso more favorable, and this certainly did not please Crispino.

Crispino, who aspired to become a respectable *signore* of Porto Recanati, took the decisive step of choosing his prospective wife.

He became engaged to Maria Annunziata Ragnini, the daughter of the deceased *Signor* Francesco, of Camerano, and of Caterina Pollidori. The marriage was celebrated in the collegiate church of Camerano on February 5, 1787, by Don Giacomo Ragnini, brother of the bride.

Don Giacomo held the office of “the choral benefice of the parochial and collegiate Church of the Immaculate Conception in Camerano.” It was not a prominent position, but Don Giacomo was still young. The clerical state in itself conferred a noteworthy prestige on the family. This also benefited his brother-in-law Crispino. There had never been a cleric in the Valentini family.

The late Francesco Ragnini had landholdings and a palace on the piazza, where his widow, children, and the widow of one of his sons and her children lived. It was a typical “noble family.” After Maria Annunziata left for Porto Recanati, there remained in the palace the widow Caterina, Don Giacomo, who was thirty-three, his unmarried brother Vincenzo, thirty-eight, and the widow of Pietro Ragnini, Marianna, with her three small children. The palace was large enough that more than half the space was rented to some families.

With the marriage Crispino acquired, beyond important family ties, a substantial dowry, which he immediately invested in boats and land. It was a turning point in his life. It was the basis for his dreams of establishing a great estate. His house, located facing the sea, would now become a palace. That would show that the family was well established and well run.

The day after Christmas of 1787 the couple had their first child. In order to strengthen the title of the son on the family tree, Crispino named him Simone Antonio Melchiorre, the same name as his father, who had died a year and a half before. He will be referred to as Simone Junior. He was baptized in Porto Recanati on December 27 by Don Giacomo Ragnini.

On September 4, 1789, Maria Ragnini gave birth to a little girl, who was named Ludovica Lucia Francesca. She died at the age of nine months.

The protagonist of our story was born less than two years later, on February 3, 1792.

Biagio Gaspare Francesco Valentini was baptized on February 5 by the parish pastor, Don Giovanni Battista Michetti. He received the name Biagio, or Blaise in English, because he was born on that saint's feast day. Gaspare and Francesco were names that recurred in the family history.

Crispino and Maria Annunziata proceeded to have a child every two years or even more frequently: Orsola Maria Caterina (1794), Anna Maria Teresa Carolina (1796), Antonio Maria Francesco (1797), and Francesco Antonio Gaspare (1801).

Meanwhile Basso, who married Lucia Morsica in October 1792, was establishing his family as well. After a few initial grumblings, it appears that the families got along fairly well. Maria Ragnini stood as godmother to one of Basso's children in 1800. Perhaps Basso maintained a certain attitude of deference to his older brother.

Several of the Valentini children died, leaving Maria and Crispino with Simone Junior, Antonio, and Biagio.

Crispino was a rather important man in Porto Recanati. He is described as the boss of the port. He was motivated by an ambition stronger than that of his father, and had grown to become a complex character, in which prejudice lived side by side with his religiosity, love with cynicism, an enterprising nature along with some questionable dealings, an intellectual openness together with an outdated conservatism.

His activity was not limited to fishing and shipping, businesses that offered many diverse possibilities. He became the supplier of some merchants in Ancona. He was a major provider of foodstuffs in Porto Recanati, a seller of fish, and above all a public official

receiving a regular stipend, who would go to Porto Recanati often for civic meetings. Styling himself as a lion seeking the interests of a town that felt neglected by the capital, it was not long before he became the hero of Porto. He also became the target of the hostility of the leading men of Porto Recanati and of the jealousies of his rivals in the fishing trade.

The most significant public office that he held was that of public health officer of Porto Recanati. He had to inspect the quality of the foodstuffs and of water, as well as examine foreigners arriving in the port, in order to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

His business employed many people: fishermen, fishmongers, laborers, and women who were skilled in preserving with salt. Everyone respected Crispino, especially since it behooved people not to be rude to him. One could not pick a fight with him and win. He was not used to making a neat distinction between public and private affairs, and the notion of civil rights was still in its infancy. Thus Crispino could obtain consent from those who were dependent on him and could use his widespread popularity to his advantage.

It is hard to decide if the chaotic times at the turn of the century were a help or a hindrance to a shrewd and powerful man like him. His ascent to a position of importance certainly coincided with the French domination of the region and his oath of loyalty to Napoleon. This happened without Crispino making much of his support for Napoleon and the French. He was in command in Porto Recanati, and that implied that he would be aligned with whoever was in charge of the state.

His unmistakable booming voice was heard everywhere. Crispino provoked fear with that voice, just as dogs provoke fear by baring their teeth. He shouted at the women in the shops who were cleaning fish and those who were salting them. From the shore he shouted at the fishermen who were leaving or returning. He

shouted in the offices of Recanati to denounce presumed injustices or to claim his rights.

The most insistent problem for him was the education of his sons. He knew that it was essential for his sons to be educated for the success of his projects. There was not much by way of opportunities for instruction in Porto Recanati. He fought for the Observant Franciscans to open a branch of their school on the Lido. This seemed to be progressing well in 1803. The friars committed themselves to opening a religious house within three months. There would be two priests in residence who would be capable of running a primary school and helping the parish priests teach catechism. In return, they sought a stipend of forty scudi a year, a house with at least four bedrooms, a dining room, kitchen, basement, and a classroom with desks, and some land that could be cultivated.

Unfortunately the agreement between the municipality and the friars, signed in June of 1804, got bogged down because the site offered to them pleased neither the prospective residents nor their superiors. It was in an unhealthy area and was near a public well, where the women would come at all hours to draw water and would argue loudly, often with a less than edifying vocabulary.

In the course of attempts to reach a satisfactory solution, the demands of the friars increased. Then Napoleon returned and the Observant Friars had something else to think about, as did Crispino. With this project he had hoped to gain prestige among the population and to save himself a lot of money, since it would now cost more to educate his sons. Instead, the demands of the French general, especially after the treaty of Tolentino,³ put a strain on the meager resources of the family and it counted for nothing if they had supported Napoleon.

³ This treaty between France and the Papal States was signed in 1797, and imposed additional financial burdens on the Papal States. The pact also sanctioned the confiscation of art works by the French and the cession of Avignon and the Romagna region to France.

Sometimes it seemed that Crispino went looking for disaster; at other times, it seemed that disasters sought him like lice in one's hair, that is, stubbornly and methodically. He fell victim to the scheming of two customs officials of the port, who leveled false accusations against him.

The most serious attack against Crispino Valentini came in 1806. He was accused of serious crimes against "Customs and Finance" (*la Finanza*) and public health. These accusations had the potential for putting Crispino in prison and reducing the family to poverty.

One of the complaints involved the apparent failure to pay duty on items that Valentini had purchased from the cargo of incoming ships. The other complaint was that Valentini, in his role as public health official, had not properly inspected incoming cargo and had failed to conduct the appropriate medical examination of foreign crews.

After several months of investigation, the head of customs was obliged to dismiss the case against Crispino Valentini for lack of evidence.

Despite the allegations, Crispino was considered a good Christian. He was a lifelong member of the Confraternity of the Suffraggio,⁴ in which he held the post of secretary and had other responsibilities. Everyone wanted to be connected to a man like him, and he did not deny it. It was as if an instinct for him to poke his nose into everything, and he instinctively treated everything as if it were his private affair.

4 *Suffragio* refers to prayers or other acts performed in behalf of a deceased person for the remission of temporal punishment due to sin. The term *suffragia* is still used to refer to customary prayers for a deceased member of a religious congregation.

Chapter 2

THE ANGELIC DON BIAGIO

At the time, the cities and towns at higher elevations were considered to be more cultured, for example: Recanati, Loreto, Ancona or Macerata. In Crispino's view, the Valentinis either had to go "up the hill" to those cities or bring power down to the shore. Crispino favored the second solution, because he was so deeply attached to the coast and sea.

Academic qualifications offered many additional opportunities for young men. With Crispino's wide circle of acquaintances, it would not be a problem to obtain employment for his sons. With widely branching roots on good soil, a tree grows strong and resists the wind. It is the same with one's family tree.

Biagio seemed to be a special case. He was especially interested in religious matters. We do not know if this was the result of planning on the part of a family of the *ancien régime*. Certainly, an ecclesiastic in the family would have given the clan a step up in the world. The boy's age suited such a family policy. He was five when the French troops invaded Italy, and he was eleven when the pope and Napoleon signed the concordat. He was twelve when Pius VII crowned his future persecutor in Paris.⁵ When Napoleon seized the Marches from the Papal States, Biagio was sixteen. The following year the emperor seized the pope and brought him to France. The great project of the invaders was an alliance of throne and altar with the progressive factions.

Whatever the case, little Biagio's composure and piety were sincere. He was a serious and exemplary student. Even if special pressure had been exerted on him, he was fully predisposed and agreeable to the pressure. He was unaffected by worldly flattery and given to unusual practices.

5 More precisely, at the last moment Napoleon snatched the crown from the pope and placed it on his own head.

When he was eleven years old, for example, he found a broad, soft stone like a tablet, brought it home and hid it under the bed. He intended to use it as a pillow. At night he would bring it out and use it instead of the pillow. It was a tough experience, but it revealed his passionate nature.

What can a child hide from his mother? Maria Annunziata found the stone. She asked what it was for and, not getting an answer, threw it out. A few days later it reappeared in a different hiding place. His mother investigated and discovered the secret. She got the whole family together, including her brother the priest, to intervene. The torture was abandoned.

Biagio sought other forms of mortification. He turned his ascetic ardor to new practices: praying on his knees on gravel and severe fasts. So that his fasting would not be discovered, he hid the food and gave it to his companions, the sons and daughters of the workers employed by his father. He was touched by their miserable existence, because it was in sharp contrast with the abundance and comfort of his own house. Thus his penances came to be a kind of way of making amends, of atonement.

From whom had Biagio learned his desire for such severe mortification? In his case, it may have come from the classic *fioretto*, or pious story. It is quite possible that such stories were recounted in his family as they sat around the hearth. Certainly his mother, pious to a fault, would not have neglected her son's religious education.

When Biagio was old enough, Crispino took him to the seminary in Recanati to begin his primary studies. The boy had already learned the basics of reading and writing at home, from Don Giacomo. The priest was in Porto Recanati often and Biagio was likewise often in Camerano. Entering the seminary was not necessarily a sign that the boy was to become a priest. It was practically an obligatory step taken for a young man interested in pursuing an education. Many did become priests, either because they were forced into it or because

they lacked any other good prospects. The mere fact of entering the seminary, however, did not mean that a man was seeking to become a priest, even if there was pressure from the family for him to be ordained. On the other hand, seminaries were rather challenging for the students, because there was surplus of priests at the time.

Among the candidates for priesthood in those days there were some first-rate troublemakers and eccentric types, who got worse as time passed. One turned a blind eye toward them, because it was known that these men were not there of their own will, and that was just the way the system worked. Priesthood was, in many cases, a career, and meant that these clerics might acquire some very handsome benefices.

One seminarian with original ideas and temperament had, during the time of the French occupation, corrupted some of the young men and convinced them to lie. This was one of the memories of Don Biagio from his time in the seminary. He obviously condemned what was going on, but he was not like that. He was pious, faithful to his duties, diligent in his studies and to his spiritual growth.

Was it for moral or economic reasons that Crispino decided to remove his son from the seminary? We do not know. He sent him to Camerano to live with his uncles, in the palazzo that fronted the piazza. There he would study his lessons given by “canon Giuseppe Scarafoni, public teacher of the Schools of the Comune.” The arrangement offered a sensible savings to the family finances.

Scarafoni was a friend of the Ragnini family. Under his tutelage Biagio, and similarly Simone Junior, engaged “regularly in the study of Grammar and Rhetoric.” Don Giacomo Ragnini also had access to the school and would become head of the institution. Crispino’s sons were in a safe place there.

Camerano, also called Camurano, was on the post road between Loreto and Ancona. It was a town with walled houses, situated

about halfway between the two cities. As far as the eye could see, the countryside was covered with vines and olive trees. With its two thousand inhabitants it was smaller than Porto Recanati, even if had better credentials.

For most of the year, Biagio's real home was the Palazzo Ragnini in Camerano, and his most attentive teachers were his priest uncle and Canon Scarafoni. He lived in his mother's home, a house filled of memories of her. Maria Annunziata was not far away, since Porto Recanati is only ten miles distant. Biagio did not feel like a stranger there. The social position of the family, the quiet ambience of a higher elevation, so different from that of Porto, and the clean air that he breathed gave the boy refined manners and accentuated his native reserve.

In 1810, at age eighteen, we find Biagio standing as a sponsor at the confirmation of Nicola Scarafoni, a relative of his teacher in Camerano. This is convincing evidence that the student (and his family) now had family ties with the teacher. Crispino's son was now more than just a model student. He was already a person who had attracted the attention of many people, for one reason or the other.

In that same year his older brother Simone Junior turned twenty-three. His younger brother, Antonio, was nine. Plans for Simone's marriage were underway. Crispino was doing the planning, of course. He considered the prospective matches much as he would have evaluated the purchase of a boat. Simone remained silent, ready to marry whomever his father chose. Antonio, meanwhile, was learning the basics at Camerano.

Crispino's choice fell to Rosa Mancini of Ancona, who had property in Rimini. The roots of the family were spreading. The young woman brought Simone the handsome sum of a thousand scudi as a dowry. Crispino incorporated the money into the patrimony of the family and at the same time sought a loan of 800 scudi from the bride's father. It was a large amount, but Crispino's

plans for consolidating his empire in the port required capital. As collateral, Crispino offered some of his property in Porto Recanati.

Biagio was now a charming young man. His lean face with its severe features was softened by his heart. He had long hair that was tied in knot behind the neck. His clean and splendid attire, befitting a representative of an upwardly mobile family, made him look taller than he was. His shiny shoes with silver buckles added a touch of the upper class. At the age of eighteen he displayed a maturity and composure of an adult member of the minor nobility. He was an important piece on his father's chess board.

In 1811 the political situation became critical. Napoleon was escalating military conscription in view of the expedition to Russia, and Crispino's sons were in danger of being drafted. He began to think that it would be better to place Biagio in the seminary in Ancona. Simone's excuse would be that he was the young father of a family. Antonio was still safe because he was still a minor.

Strictly speaking, the seminary in Ancona was not any better than that of Recanati. The students came from the same area and were there for the same reasons. The city had about 20,000 inhabitants, among whom were about a hundred schismatics and fifteen hundred Jews, nine convents, three monasteries of nuns, two conservatories, many confraternities, an orphanage, a hospital, and a bank (*monte di pietà*).

Ancona had experienced some serious and recurring problems. Occupied by the French in 1797, it had been proclaimed the Republic of Ancona. In the following year it was annexed to the Roman Republic, as the capital of the department of Metauro. This caused no little confusion. In 1799 it was besieged on land and blockaded on the sea by the forces opposing the French. After six months of resistance it fell into the hands of the Germans. In the same period Pius VII was elected pope in Venice and returned

to Rome amid a spectacular welcome. In 1801, however, Ancona returned to French control and in 1808 was made part of the Kingdom of Italy.

This state of affairs led to some tragicomic events. On January 27, 1801, the English corvette *Bull-Dog* entered the port. The captain of the ship believed that the port was again in the hands of the Neapolitans, their allies. It had, however, fallen back into the hands of the French, who forced the crew to surrender and then hoisted the French flag on the vessel. The English turned the tables on June 24, capturing the French corsair *Tiger* outside the port. The city now returned to papal authority, but only for a short time.

The seminary became overcrowded, because the regime in Italy, in an attempt at conciliation with the religious sentiments of the people, began to dispense clerics from military service, although with some reservations that became more and more restrictive. Students of the principal seminaries were exempt, but those in the subordinate schools were not. Men were leaving them for the more prestigious schools.

The numbers speak for themselves. In 1808, the seminary of Ancona had 20 individuals; in 1813 that number had risen to 60, and in the following year to 110. Obviously, one wonders about the authenticity of the religious vocation of some of these seminarians. In the context, however, this at least could be considered a form of conscientious objection, because they would be exempt from engaging in combat against the pope. In reality, however, it was not idealism but the desire to save one's own skin that prompted the surge in seminary enrollment. As we will see, others turned to brigandage to escape being conscripted.

The administration of the seminary consisted of the rector, his vice-rector, five professors, and a treasurer. The professors received a stipend of 30 scudi per year. They also received room and board. The seminary had classrooms, study halls, dormitories, a dining

room, chapel, library, infirmary, laundry, business office and an archive. The seminarians paid five scudi a year.

Crispino, the worldly-wise sailor, was inclined toward the seminary in Ancona. Who knows if he had to resort to “greasing the machinery” in order to get what he wanted. The legal instructions of the seminary warned the students enrolled and their families against resorting to subterfuge of any sort. The public announcement pompously proclaimed that any attempt to subvert the process of conscription, for example, through various kinds of bribes, would render the parties guilty before the law.

Crispino had many important friends in Ancona. In our case, the appropriate “machinery” was the vicar of the chapter and the administrative council of the seminary, who knew nothing of affairs in Porto Recanati. Thus the cogwheel that he had at his disposition did not mesh with the one he wanted to move. One had to move one wheel that would in turn move another, and so on. Crispino was well placed to succeed, by greater or less force, everywhere.

Between January and February 1812, he sent a request to the vicar of the chapter, boasting of the good qualities of his son Biagio. There were probably many such requests at the time, since Napoleon was assembling his army for the invasion of Russia. The old sea wolf neglected to write that his son had been in the seminary in Recanati but had left there. Leaving out that detail could have led the school authorities to believe something that was not true. He was trying to make them think that his son was coming from the school in Camerano, a fact that was indisputable. In the request he affirmed, in the rather ornate language of the time, his son’s heartfelt desire to pursue his vocation to the priesthood at such an illustrious seminary.

The request was made through the vicar of the chapter, Luigi Bravi, who passed it on to the administrators of the seminary in March 1812. The administrators quickly made some inquiries, and within a few days gave their reply: “We have received the highest

recommendations of Biagio, son of Crispino Valentini of Porto Recanati, and we consider him qualified to be admitted to the Seminary for an annual fee of 12.5 scudi.”

The vicar of the chapter signed the document immediately and sealed it with the seal of the chapter curia. Biagio could now enter the seminary of Ancona, where he quickly distinguished himself in his studies and in his conduct. He received the tonsure in 1812, and he quickly advanced in the necessary studies for the priesthood. When he would return to Porto Recanati dressed in his cassock, it was a sight that no one would forget: Crispino carried himself with such pride side by side with his son the cleric.

The young man’s course of studies was quite regular, despite the confusion of the time. In the seminary register we find that he received the minor orders and was ordained deacon in 1815.

Meanwhile, Simone and his wife Rosa began to have children. Given the nature of the family, it would only proper that Rosa give birth to grandchildren for Crispino. The first was born in October 1813. It was a little disappointment for the *padrone* of the port: it was a girl. Both families were hoping for a boy. The girl was baptized by Don Giuseppe Scarafoni and was given the name Antonia Elisabetta Matilde.

In November of the following year the first boy arrived, who was given the name Valentino Pio Luigi Alessandro. He was baptized by Don Giacomo Ragnini. The string of names is evidence of the importance of the event. At last, Crispino knew that there would be someone to carry on the family name and fortune. It was no secret to anyone that he would rely more on the grandson than on the son, not because the latter was incapable, but because Crispino thought that he would live a long life and thus be more in need of a grandson. As far as he was concerned, Simone had done his filial duty by providing a grandson. Simone and Rosa continued to produce more sons and daughters.

In the meantime, some momentous events had taken place. Napoleon was defeated by the winter weather in Russia. Pius VII had returned to Rome, an event that that involved Loreto and Recanati. All the citizens of Porto Recanati turned out to greet the pontiff as he passed through Recanati on March 17, 1814. All of the streets of the town were covered with greenery and flowers. Children dressed in white linen and carrying olive branches came to welcome the pope, even while he was at some distance from the city.

Simone and Crispino were watching the spectacle. Biagio and Antonio had participated in a similar event in Ancona. Could Crispino feel entirely at ease with the celebration? He had sought to profit from the French occupation. He was certainly in good company. At Ancona, even the ordinary of the diocese, Cardinal Vincenzo Ranuzzi, had gone along with the invaders. The apostolic administrator who succeeded him, Monsignor Francesco Saverio Passari, had also maneuvered to his advantage during those tumultuous times. People knew that Pius VII was returning from exile with kind intentions. He said: "All of us have something to be forgiven." But there was an integralist group that was ready to make the faithless collaborators pay dearly.

In Porta del Mare

...there were the clergy and the confraternities with their ancient insignias. After the wide road amid incessant acclamations and general commotion, [the pope] stayed for two hours in the magnificent Palazzo Carradori, where many came to kiss his feet or, in the case of the counts Carradori, his hand. They had the honor of offering some refreshment, which Pius VII was pleased to accept. Then, from a richly adorned balcony, the pope shared the papal blessing with the immense throng of people. He came to the public piazza in a grand carriage, and there on a splendid throne gave another blessing to the multitude. He went to the cathedral, where one could read the inscription *Felix*

Ecclesia Recanatensis ‘The Blessed Church of Recanati.’ The door was decorated with tapestries and gold cloth and illuminated by numerous candles in bright lamps. At the threshold, the bishop, Stefano Bellini, received the pope under an exquisite baldachin carried by eight elderly canons. At the main altar the pope received the blessing with the Blessed Sacrament from Archbishop Morozzo. In a chapel, again under a noble canopy, he received the clergy to kiss his feet. They bathed them with their tears out of inexpressible joy at seeing him returned to his states after such noteworthy sufferings.

This was the brief but intense stopover of the pope in Recanati. Pius VII continued on his way to Tolentino and Rome. The triumphant welcome would seem to signal the return of Recanati and its port to the Church. But it did not happen. Napoleon’s escape from the island of Elba in July and the efforts of Gioacchino Murat, convinced that he was able to unify Italy, delayed the re-establishment of the status quo.

In all of this, Crispino Valentini returned to the old regime unscathed. It was indubitable proof that he was someone to be reckoned with in Porto Recanati.

As Napoleon was falling from the altar he had constructed for himself, Don Biagio was ascending the altar of God in Ancona, “to the God who gives joy to my youth.”⁶ Some clouds were gathering, however. The ascent of the steps of the altar took place in a festive setting, but the road that had brought the young man there was marked by significant strains on account of his fragile constitution.

With regard to his physical constitution, we have already seen that he was short of stature, rather thin, with a pale complexion. His hair was tied back behind his neck, which exaggerated

6 A quote from Psalm 42, which, in the Mass of Pius V, or Tridentine Mass, is said at the foot of the altar before the priest ascends the altar for the first time at the beginning of Mass. This would, of course, have been the ritual of the Mass at the time of Valentini’s ordination.

a precociously receding hairline. He was not the picture of good health. Some bouts of coughing indicated tuberculosis, an endemic illness that was transmitted easily in places like seminaries. His ordination to the priesthood was anticipated to allow him to die a priest in case the illness got worse. It was the young Biagio's great desire. In his own words he tells us: "I have no illusions, and given the probability of an early death, I asked and obtained the grace of being ordained priest before the canonical age. The hard work of preparing for the final examinations and of the retreat in preparation for my priestly ordination consumed the little strength that had remained in me, and I fell gravely ill and the doctors declared that I had arrived at the third level of pulmonary consumption, which is not possible to cure."

On August 1, 1814, Pius VII restored the Society of Jesus. There was much favorable discussion about the news in the seminary. Biagio Valentini had entertained the idea of becoming a follower of St. Ignatius for some time. In the seminaries and in the universities it was the ambitious dream of many students: to enter into the prestigious and powerful congregation, which now needed a second founding. For Don Biagio, everything would depend on his health. The coughs became more irritable and worrisome, and we already know that they had become so severe that an early ordination was advised. He had no illusions and limited prospects beyond those that were of another world. That existential experience made Don Biagio all the more indifferent to worldly things, such as a career, his inheritance, or honors.

In 1815 Ancona returned to papal authority. In the city there were tensions, as in the rest of the Papal States, over the new arrangement of power. The families and clerics who had compromised themselves wanted to restore their reputation. Those who had remained faithful were thinking about reaping the advantages of their fidelity to the pope.

Pius VII, in retaking possession of his state, had put forth a plan of moral renewal, which placed confidence in preaching to the people and the evangelization of the working and military classes. In this initiative of the pope, it was difficult to separate his pastoral and political concerns. Depending on their interests, people would carry out the project of renewal from either perspective. This was evidence of how closely united the spiritual and temporal powers were in the Papal States. Could one stand in the way of the pope's concern for the souls of the people? Could one not wish for a calm and harmonious state?

In September 1816, a distinguished group of priests arrived in Ancona to preach a popular mission: Monsignor Carlo Odescalchi, Don Gaspare del Bufalo, Don Antonio Piatti, Don Antonio Muccioli, Don Andrea Butirroni, and Don Pietro Antonio Cristianapoli. Pius VII gave such strong support to the ministry of the popular missions that many zealous priests and even bishops were devoting themselves to this work. This was very edifying to the people. At that time Biagio, already ordained, was back in the seminary to finish his studies. His health improved somewhat, but not to the point of his being able to participate in the various activities that would take place during the mission.

A member of the curia of Ancona, frightened by the possibilities and threats of the liberal and sectarian faction, went to meet the missionaries in order to try to convince them not to enter the city and conduct the mission. "But Canon del Bufalo, trusting in God, did not alter his plans and fearlessly went ahead with his initiative." Such courage made the missionaries into heroes. The mission created a big stir in the city and was spoken of highly even in the seminary. In the classrooms, Don Biagio heard his superiors and teachers lauding the virtue of the preachers, particularly that of Don Gaspare del Bufalo.

Few were aware that this Roman missionary had, along with three companions, just founded a congregation of secular priests living in community, called the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. They were engaged in precisely the same activity as they were undertaking in Ancona, an activity so dear to Pius VII: the evangelization of the people by means of missions and retreats. The Missionaries were eagerly seeking men to join them in the new congregation, which they planned to be decisively involved in the reform of the Church that the pope wanted.

It was not an easy undertaking. Bishops were not willing to release their most competent priests, and such a delicate and risky undertaking would not be possible with those who were less capable. For the moment, Gaspar was a general without an army. None of the members of the missionary team in Ancona were members of his Institute. For the moment he was entrusting the work to temporary collaborators.

The mission lasted from September 8th through the 29th. At the end, the judgment of the people was more enthusiastic than that of the ecclesiastics. The people were of the opinion that the “Gospel workers” (*operai evangelici*) were saints, and that their zeal would be sufficient not only to convert Ancona, but even Geneva, the capital of Calvinism and of antipapal propaganda.

Chapter 3

A LEANING TOWER

Don Biagio left the seminary in Ancona without human ambitions and without many prospects. Crispino did not agree. He began to press his son to get the recognition in Porto Recanati that the culture and family prominence demanded. At home he talked of nothing else, day after day. Don Biagio found his father's wishes tedious. The only attraction he felt was to the apostolate. It would not be good for his body, but would be beneficial for his soul, just like the stone pillow or the fasts of his youth.

He plunged into unrestrained activity. He established an oratory for fishermen. Crispino was not fully aware of the seriousness of his son's physical condition and did not rein him in. It was also a way for the son to get back into the family business, because his ministry was creating lot of good will. But Don Biagio did not limit himself to that stressful activity. He helped the parish priest with confessions and religious education. In Porto Recanati there was a great need for such pastoral care.

He loved solemn preaching, and the people were eager for it. It was not a tradition in Porto Recanati. To hear good preaching one had to go to Recanati or to Loreto. Once again we encounter the perception that one had to go "up the hill" for such preaching, because Porto Recanati was a spiritual lowland. Biagio especially liked preaching from a platform, not from the pulpit. A pulpit seemed to be professorial, pompous, and detached. Biagio preached from a platform that was on the level of his audience, a sort of stage. Here the preacher became a total communicator: he preached with his entire body and, if he had some acting ability, could win over the crowds emotionally. As one can imagine, this kind of preaching required a greater expenditure of energy.

The parish priest of Porto Recanati would only set up the platform for feast days, not so much out of concern for Biagio's health as for the cost. He did not want to spend fifty baiocchi for a stage each time the young priest preached. Biagio went to his father, and Crispino had his employees construct a very beautiful stage, so that day after day he could take pleasure in seeing how it showed off the talents of his son. He would remark, triumphantly: – My son was always first in his studies. Soon Porto Recanati will become too small for him, you'll see. In the meanwhile, he has a nice position with us here.

Since the fifteenth century there was a literary academy in Treja, founded by Bartolomeo Vignati, bishop of Senigallia. According to the custom of the time, this association had taken on a curious title: *i Sollevati* 'the Uplifted.' Beginning in 1778, the Academy, under the auspices of Pius VI, became the *Società Georgica*, then unique in the Papal States. It produced meteorological almanacs, an agricultural newspaper, promoted the improvement of farming, and the introduction of very useful arts and trades. Soon both Italians and foreigners sought to enroll there, among whom was the future Pius VIII.

In June 1817, the president and examiners of the *Società Georgica* of Treja admitted the young priest from Porto Recanati. We do not know if it was Don Biagio or Crispino who made the request, although it probably was the father. In any case, the certificate he received was recognition of his achievements. The diploma, issued on December 3 of the same year, noted that the Academy was to promote the sciences and the improvement of agriculture and that its illustrious members sought to contribute to the public and private well-being by their teaching and their eagerness. The diploma stated, in the ornate and pompous language of the day: "In view of the luminous talents and sublime views (*le sublimi viste*) that we have seen adorning Signor Don Biagio Valentini di Porto

Recanati, he was aggregated to our Society by universal consent at the General Meeting, with the hope that personally or with his learned writings he will assist in carrying out our mission.”

“Luminous talents and sublime views.” We know that the young priest was extremely well versed in Thomistic philosophy. He had a prodigious memory and would cite the *Summa* by chapter, paragraph, and even page number. He was also well versed in the study of Sacred Scripture. He knew how to insert quotations from Scripture into his talks. They were always appropriate and quoted exactly. He also was a student of literature. Composing poetry on various topics was a favorite pastime of his, according to the fashion much in vogue in the schools of the day.

It was probably just this last specialty that led the academics of Treja to invite Biagio to be a colleague. They were hoping that he would compose some lyric poetry about healthy air and water, the fertility of the earth, fish, and domestic animals.

Meanwhile, his health grew worse and worse. Finally, even Crispino took note of it. As the officer in charge of health and well-being, he had the means to assure that his son would have the best medical care. At that time, however, there were many illnesses for which the science of the day could do little or nothing. Don Biagio’s illness was becoming a desperate case.

The patient did not listen to the advice of the physicians and was letting nature take its course. Biagio began to cough up blood and bits of lung tissue.

Now what would happen? His family prevailed. They treated him almost as an object. But Don Biagio was able to escape the family’s protection, even if rarely, and thus they were confronted with an accomplished fact. His gravely delicate condition would become an inevitable fact of family life. The life of the newly ordained priest, like the Tower of Pisa, was leaning without falling over. When this happens, a defect becomes a quality, and the weakness, a strength.

The leaning of the Tower of Pisa made a rather ordinary tower interesting. Its original charm combined with the peculiar leaning and a sense of impending doom over the potential catastrophe lent it a certain fascination. Don Biagio was a kind of Tower of Pisa for Porto Recanati. Everyone grieved for him, but they all wanted to benefit from him, and this pushed him even closer to his death. To see the young man of great promise now dying, so very weak even as he worked, even harder than many priests in good health, drew universal admiration. His renown caused his work to increase, and his work increased his renown. More people came to his sermons and he heard the greatest share of confessions.

Even in good deeds adverse forces are at work. To be involved means to spend oneself. Health is not that different from any kind of capital. When one has spent everything, one has nothing to rely on. In the course of a few months, Don Biagio reached the end of his resistance. He was a wick that wavered without smoke, gasping for air, which seemed to say to those who lived in its light: "I am about to be extinguished! Either give me some oil or prepare yourselves for the darkness!" The oil that Don Biagio needed was a miracle.

His father and mother did not know what to do. They had consulted the best doctors in Recanati. They called in a specialist from Ancona who had taken care of him when he was in the seminary. All were pessimistic. The sickness had spread and was incurable, and there was no talk of a cure. He would have to live with the illness until he died. Leading a regular life could prolong the end: "Healthy food, good air, no work!" This was the unanimous recommendation of the doctors.

In 1817 they advised the patient to rest in the better, drier air in the hills. Porto Recanati did not have that kind of atmosphere. In the winter, the air was very damp, and in the summer it became very unpleasant, with the stink of rotting fish and open sewers. Camerano was suggested, but Biagio preferred Loreto. "I decided

to go to Loreto to die, under the eyes of the Blessed Virgin, near the Holy House.”

It was only three miles to Loreto, but he suffered greatly on the trip. Here is how he described it in his own words: “The journey was painful. As soon as I arrived in Loreto, I dragged myself to the Holy House to pray fervently to the Madonna, so that she would assist me in my final journey.” It was a heartbreaking situation for a young man of twenty-five who once had such a promising future.

Now that he had entrusted his life to God, he waited quite peacefully for events to unfold. With a sense of liberation he recognized that his condition was becoming worse each day. Soon he would be casting off the moorings, and his suffering would be over. The cough that convulsed his chest and the fever that burned his bones would cease, and his soul, like a pure white dove freed from its bonds, would fly off to its true home.

No one has a lasting dwelling place on this earth. For years Biagio, grown prematurely wise by his illness, entertained the thought of his death, an early death. From that meditation he arrived at an absolute detachment from the things of this world. What does it mean to live ten, twenty, or a hundred years, if the aim of life is to seek eternity? The best life is the shortest.

The bishop of Loreto, Monsignor Stefano Bellini, in view of the success of the mission preached in Ancona the year before, wanted the same for his own diocese. In the shadow of the celebrated sanctuary more than a few problems had sprung up, so that the bishop did not hesitate to describe the conditions of the city as “heart-rending” and that he feared “divine punishments” for the profanation that even breached the vestibule of the temple.

A commercial atmosphere seemed to surround the Holy House. The businessmen hired “attractive young women” to inveigle the pilgrims to buy things. Those sirens were so bold as to take the pilgrims by the arms and bring them “into the shops, to force them

to make a purchase.” Even priests and religious were subjected to the “gentle violence.” Even if the “violence” would end when the poor innocent would stock up on rosaries and holy images, the operation was marked by heated words and was considered scandalous. The pilgrims were being plucked like chickens. The fact that the young women were chosen because they were so attractive suggested that something else might be going on, and so the pleasure of being surrounded by such charming hucksters hardly enhanced the sacredness of the place.

In July, all the agreements were made, and on August 5 the popular mission began. Don Gaspar del Bufalo and Don Antonio Muccioli conducted the mission. With them was Don Pietro Antonio Cristianopoli, who by happy coincidence was already at the sanctuary of the Holy House.

Don Biagio heard del Bufalo only on the feast of the Assumption. The sermon made a great impression on him. “It seemed to me that I was hearing a Saint Bernadine of Siena or the Mellifluous [Doctor, Saint] Bernard of Clairvaux,” he would say twenty-five years later as he recalled the event. He felt himself inspired to request a meeting with the famous preacher from Rome. This he was granted, through the intervention of Don Anacleto Gigliucci, who was already acquainted with the missionary.

They went to the room where Gaspar was staying. They were received with unexpected courtesy, all the more remarkable because the Missionary was sweating heavily and was tired. Don Biagio, who had been advised to avoid even the least bit of perspiration or draft, was edified by Gaspar’s saintly forgetfulness that appeared to be indifference to risk. Don Biagio revealed his desire to open his soul to Gaspar. Gaspar was delighted. Don Anacleto left and the two remained alone together.

We do not know what prompted Don Biagio to ask for the meeting. He tells us that he had a problem, and it must not have

been something of little importance. We know that Don Gaspar consulted Don Francesco Albertini, his spiritual director, to be certain that he responded properly. Was it a question of Biagio's vocation and destiny? We do not know.

For Gaspar it would have been a great opportunity. He was desperately looking for priests for the missions being given by his new Institute. Nevertheless, on that occasion he remained silent. Biagio's health was an issue that seemed to preclude his joining the Jesuits. He was formed to be a diocesan priest and his illness had led to a more domestic style of life. He needed to be in a protective family situation. His mother's care had been essential during his first experiences as a priest. Now the seriousness of the illness required another kind of mother. Don Gaspar, knowing this intuitively, did not believe that it was the opportune moment to suggest to Don Biagio: "Join the Missionaries of the Precious Blood!"

The hour of the conference for the clergy was approaching. Don Biagio was amazed that Canon del Bufalo had no signs of being in a hurry or of being annoyed. He lingered over the questions, exploring the soul of this priest. He wanted to know about his family and about the activities he was engaged in at Porto Recanati. They agreed to have another meeting and went to the conference together. Certainly, Gaspar had a plan in mind.

Don Biagio's admiration for this Roman priest was great, and it grew during the conference. He paid attention not only to the words spoken but also to Don Gaspar's appeal. The Roman Missionary was a man full of energy, which he communicated directly. Don Biagio felt that he had been listened to as if "they had been acquainted for a long time." He had seen Gaspar deal with his issues "with great benevolence" and without concern for time. He appreciated Gaspar's suggestion that they meet again. In the conference for the clergy he judged Gaspar to be straightforward in his language, but

at the same time respectful and humble. In sum, Gaspar was the perfect man for someone interested only in the Spirit.

The soul of Don Biagio easily became passionate over spiritual matters. Strangely, in this case, his body did not sustain his rising spirit. It was a final proof of the gravity of his condition. He wanted to be like Del Bufalo, a spiritual earthquake, but instead he had to attempt to “fly without wings.” He was not of this world. His hour was about to come.

On August 17, Don Biagio came to see Don Gaspar once again, as promised. This time Gaspar offered that famous invitation: – Why don’t you dedicate yourself to the work of the missions?

The proposal came like a punch in the chest. Don Gaspar had need of collaborators. His programs were intense and recruiting “workers” remained difficult. Perhaps someone had spoken to him of the extraordinary oratorical gifts of the priest from Porto Recanati. Don Biagio was forced to reiterate his condition more forcefully. If his health were better, he would have been working in Porto Recanati, where there was a great need. The population was growing and there was a shortage of clergy. The people there were difficult, and they were hardened through their work in the maritime industry. Unfortunately, Don Biagio asserted, he did not have enough energy even for that. How could he preach missions? Yes, he would like to, but...

Don Gaspar would not admit defeat. He made the young, sick priest an “aggregator for life” of the Archconfraternity of the Precious Blood, and he invited him to participate in the next mission at Recanati.

News of the invitation to participate in the mission of Recanati reached the family and was met with strong objections. How was it possible to motivate a sick man to engage in such a demanding and tiring ministry? It would strain his lungs, limit his sleep, and deplete his physical energy. Doctor Bellini declared: “If he goes along with this Missionary from Rome, he’ll be dead in three days!”

Meanwhile, the preaching in Loreto was coming to an end with unexpected fruits, which filled the bishop and the clergy with enthusiasm. "The popular mission is an extraordinary means for calling the people back to God," was the common opinion. The preparation for the mission in Recanati was well along, but Don Gaspar needed help and was not finding it. Nevertheless, there was time to hope that it would come, so that the new ministry would continue without interruption. Once again he thought about the young priest from Recanati.

"One morning when I felt a little stronger," Don Biagio relates, "I went to the Holy House and, according to my custom, I knelt down, leaning against the wall." In making contact with the rough wall which, by tradition, had been part of the house of the Incarnate Word, the sick priest was expressing the desire for a womb. Had this house not been a womb that had received Mary, Joseph, and Jesus? Poor Don Biagio needed protection. "Here I am," he probably said to himself. "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word." He knew what he was asking: to pass over to eternal light.

Absorbed in prayer, he did not notice another young priest who had knelt down beside him. He became aware of a familiar presence and heard the priest say: "This man must also make the next mission! Holy Virgin, this man must at least make the next mission!" Don Biagio looked in the direction of the voice and saw Don Gaspar murmuring the strange prayer.

He noticed that in praying, Gaspar was gazing at the Virgin and then pointed to her with a nod of his head: – This man must also make the mission! Holy Virgin, this man must make the mission!

– I will do it willingly," replied Don Biagio, – but as I have told you, I am here to die. I have a respiratory illness and the doctors have given up on me. I often cough up pus and blood.

– Let's trust in the Madonna. Let's say a Hail Mary together, – replied Don Gaspar.

When the prophet Elisha told Naaman the Syrian to bathe seven times in the River Jordan to cure his leprosy, Naaman balked, thinking that the remedy was too simple to be effective. His servants made him realize that it was exactly the ease of the remedy that made refusing it inexcusable. Don Biagio did not need someone to make him realize the reasonableness of the attempt. What could the Madonna not do when she is invoked with confidence? He recited the Hail Mary with a certain disappointment that nothing was happening. He felt flushed, as usual, along with the same biting urge to cough and the feeling of complete weakness. The sickness persisted. Death was inevitable. It would be too easy if some intervention by a saint could change the course of events.

Gaspar rose and helped Biagio get up. Then Gaspar invited Biagio to follow him out of the sanctuary. They needed to speak again and the church was not the place for conversation. The few pilgrims who were heading toward the church would be scandalized. In front of the sanctuary and facing the piazza, Gaspar repeated what he had already said several times. The pope had given him the task of preaching a series of missions in the Marche, “to wipe out the unhappy consequences of the revolution.” He wanted to begin the missions in Loreto, to commit the Madonna “to the holy work.” He needed collaborators for the mission in Recanati. He wanted Don Biagio’s help. He could not refuse!

Don Biagio now saw the Missionary in a different light. He appeared to be a poor and naïve man. He needed help for an exhausting ministry, and he turns to a dying man for that help. Valentini was trying to put his interlocutor in an unfavorable light in order to annul the invitation that he had given. Don Gaspar cut him off: – You will come with me. We start the mission tomorrow!

Don Biagio thought: “And what if this is my Elisha?” At the same time he asked himself: “What if this is putting God to the test?” With these conflicting thoughts, he turned to Vincenzo Strambi, the

famous Passionist who was esteemed as a saint and who had come to Loreto to join Don Gaspar in the mission.⁷ Don Biagio yielded to the spirit and dismissed his doubts. If he had to die anyway, was it not better to die with the greatest dignity, like those warriors of old, in the thick of battle?

When the decision had been made, Doctor Bellini, at the urging of Don Biagio's parents, offered the young priest his personal and authoritative judgment, that he would be dead in three days.

The doctor pronounced the sentence in the presence of Don Gaspar, who drew near to Don Biagio, who was now wavering, and said to him:

– Let us go in the name of Jesus and Mary. Do not fear!

⁷ St. Vincent Strambi was a Passionist priest and friend of St. Gaspar. At the latter's encouragement, he wrote a book of meditations for the month of the Precious Blood. Gaspar had a close relationship with the Passionists, and spent some time in their house in Rome.

Chapter 4

THE COMPANY OF MIRACLES

The canons of Recanati liked to stay in the choir stalls of their churches. When they learned that they had to inconvenience themselves to meet the missionaries, among whom was the spectral Don Biagio, they rebelled. They said: “Who do they think they are? They are priests like us, canons like us. This del Bufalo, who claims to come in the name of the pope, does he think that he is the Roman Pontiff in person? Why should we go to meet him in a solemn ceremony?”

In the days before their arrival, people were talking only about the missionaries, and this annoyed to the canons. The mission presented them with a series of inconveniences: preaching, conferences, extra functions, and processions. One can imagine how much zeal they harbored for the vineyard they were supposed to care for. Some of them were more interested in the wine than in the vineyard.

The emphasis on the beginning of the mission was part of the method. The missions all began with a celebration that served to highlight the role of the heralds of God’s word, to advertise their ministry, and to make people understand that the mission was a favorable time. The triumphal entry was not for the benefit of the messengers, but rather for the message and those for whom it was intended. This was evident in the way that the missions closed, with the messengers leaving unobtrusively, to show beyond a doubt that they had not labored for applause and personal success, but for the Lord and for the salvation of souls.

The canons dug in their heels, along with some of the local gentry and some heads of the confraternities,⁸ and this threatened

8 A confraternity is a voluntary association of lay people that promotes some special works of charity or piety.

to wreck the mission. The bishop had little success in trying to quell the rebellion. Not knowing what arguments to marshal, Bishop Bellini went to the cathedral of Recanati, convoked the chapter, and with a rope around his neck and embracing a crucifix, moved toward the gate of the city to welcome the missionaries. Only then did most of the reluctant canons begin to move, all the while chewing tobacco and mumbling snide comments.

The mission in Recanati also involved Porto Recanati. During the mission, Don Biagio moved often from Recanati to his house, and everyone was amazed at his activity. He felt his strength coming back in a way he could not remember. His family and the doctors did not know what to say. The new recruit, both enthusiastic and fearful, was tempted to overdo things, to determine whether things were going as well as they seemed to be.

The success was such that “all the clerics,[and] the lords and ladies” had great admiration for Don Gaspar. The missionaries had to stay an additional three days to accommodate all those who came for confession.

Along with the favorable comments about the mission was the amazement at the conduct of Don Biagio. No one knew where he found such resources of strength. He did not know either, and he volunteered for the mission in Montefano, where another grand mission was planned.

Once again, his parents and the doctor made some attempts at dissuading him. But then, considering the most recent events, it seemed that they were biting the hand (literally, “spitting in the plate”) of the one who had had given them an unexpected cure. They decided that it was wiser to let God’s will be done, at least for this time.

Don Biagio did not dare consider himself cured. He limited himself to saying that things were going along beyond what he could have dreamed. He could allow himself to engage in normal

activity. He preached all day. He ran from one place to the other and did not notice problems. "It's a miracle! It's a miracle!" he began to say to himself.

The citizens of the town confirmed this when they saw him on his return, along with the mission team, on September 29. The people of Porto Recanati could not believe their eyes. They thought that he would return to them a corpse, and instead Don Biagio was alive and well. He was full of life and had the color of health, and he was ready to take greater risks.

In the Valentini household, where the missionaries were staying, were Signor Crispino, his wife Maria Ragnini; Antonio, his seventeen year old son; Simone Valentini, now thirty; his wife, Maria Mancini, and their children Matilda, four, and Valentino, three. The team of missionaries consisted of Don Gaspar, Don Francesco Piervisani, Don Antonio Muccioli, Don Filippo Saverio Grimaldi, Don Anacleto Gigliucci, and, of course, the new recruit, Don Biagio. The family was proud to welcome the heroic team to their home.

Crispino, not believing his own eyes, called the doctor, more to confirm what he was seeing than to get a response from him. In Porto Recanati they were saying that Don Biagio had received a miracle. Doctor Bellini was more convinced than all of them, and he did not object when he heard people describe how his patient was to follow the missionaries that very day to the mission of Civitanova.

The people of Porto Recanati wanted to hear Don Gaspar preach again. A meeting was quickly called in the church of San Giovanni. The missionary, "having ascended the stage, produced an extraordinary emotional response, reanimating the good people."

The new mission was opened that evening. It was a difficult engagement, because the town was known for its secret societies. The missionaries decided to use a popular repertoire of activities for the occasion: penitential processions, self-flagellation in public, and functions with elements of the popular theater.

Among many in the Church there was a great deal of bias against those methods. They were seen as inimical to faith. The fear of many of the clergy was based on the fear of offering their adversaries, so full of their enlightenment principles, any pretext for making fun of religion. The methods of the missionaries were judged, with some justification, to be emotional and medieval.

They produced results, however. The proof of this could be found at Civitanova. Those members of the anticlerical circle, previously so feared, converted in mass. They were seen in the first rows of those functions that they had until then been deriding.

How can one evaluate conversions obtained by whipping oneself or by means of the rope around the neck and the crown of thorns on the head? The missionaries were certainly not faking it. They were not actors at carnival. They beat themselves to the point of bleeding, moved by their love for souls. This was a fact. They were, in general, persons of some prestige who could have lived a comfortable life. One could take the case of Don Biagio, for example. He belonged to one of the most promising families of Porto Recanati. What need did he have to go about shouting himself hoarse and beating himself bloody, if not because of his ardent faith and the love welling up in his soul?

The “spectacle,” however, even if created by actors who were not pretending, remained a spectacle. What does a conversion by emotion mean? One must consider the methods in light of their aim. The self-flagellation was not the message. It was an instrument for breaking down defenses. It prepared the soul for the preaching, which was either apologetic or catechetical, but always solid and convincing. It was always the word that brought about the conversion.

Don Biagio immediately became very useful to the missionaries. They were not entrusting the major preaching to him yet, but he was eagerly waiting in the wings, like an impatient understudy. He was useful in a hundred ways. He knew how to sing, could compose

poems that were easy to learn and easily suited to popular melodies, and he heard confessions and held instructions.

Those were wonderful days for Don Biagio. He was firmly convinced that he had received a miracle. This exclamation, with all the psychological implications that it carried, became more and more the key for him to project and interpret his existence. It was a miracle performed by the Virgin of Loreto, but also by Don Gaspar. Don Biagio accompanied the priest from Rome, wanting to emulate him. He found in him “rare talents, very wise and eloquent.” He was engaged in “apostolic efforts” with his whole heart. God was with him. He had proof of this: he himself was the proof.

He was struck by Gaspar’s organizational skills. He forgot no one, and it also appeared that he would do what he expected others to do. Every day he went to the port of Civitanova to meet the fishermen. Then he was in church for the main sermon, then in the confessional, then seeing to moral reforms, then in processions and the evening oratory. The life of the missionary began to get into Don Biagio’s blood like a challenge to the devil and to death.

Two events made indelible an impression on him in those days, “one terrible and frightening, and the other edifying and of the greatest consolation.” Both confirmed that God was with his messengers and that the miracle, even if not the norm in life, was still normal.

A beautiful young woman had insisted on thwarting the missionaries. She wanted to convince the people not to listen to the “comical performances” which, she said, were taking place those days in the churches and piazzas. “They just talk about dancing and love affairs. Sins, all sins!” she would say, mocking the tone of the sermons.

The young woman did not have to say much to refute the content of the sermons. What she showed about her own life would have been enough to convince a person that there was a more festive and pleasing way to live one’s life, and that there were town criers

(*banditori*) more seductive than priests. If most people found these discourses horrifying and lamented how terrible the manners of the young woman were, more than a few were taken in by her provocative statements and by anticipating some kind of gratification.

No one could have foreseen the stroke that struck down this aggressive adversary of the missionaries. No author could have invented such a dramatic turn of events that would be more timely and effective. Had this been in a novel, it would be judged an artificial solution, a *deus ex machina*, but it did happen. When word spread that the young woman had died, it appeared to be an invention, a joke created by pranksters. When it turned out to be true, it was judged to be a punishment from God.

Even more striking was the inexplicable change that happened to her body. The attractive woman became deformed. "Like a fury from hell," said those who saw her. The pious persons who took care of her tried in vain to make her presentable, so that she could be viewed in the church, according to custom. They were unable to fix up her face and they had to display her as she was. No one wanted to miss the funeral.

Don Gaspar gave the discourse on death. It is not possible to describe the grave and terrified silence that greeted the words of the missionary. Wisely and charitably, he did not descend to talking about the particulars of the private and public life of the deceased and did not even allude to the theme of the possible punishment from God. For the rest, "just the face of the poor woman...was enough to fill the entire audience with horror, as they saw in the unfortunate woman manifest signs of God's anger toward her. It was a low-key but very eloquent sermon for stirring repentance in every heart." Now the mission was complete.

The protagonist of the edifying episode was a "maiden" companion of the deceased. She was converted from her vices by the preaching and fell gravely ill, after making a general confession

and communion. On her deathbed she was dressed in white with the crown of thorns on her head. She blessed God who had called her back to the right path just in time. She died and was waked in church dressed in the same white garment and with the crown of thorns on her head. She was in the same place where the body of her evil mistress had been on view. Her countenance was as soft and peaceful as that of the other young woman was horrible.

Valentini had been with del Bufalo for less than a month and already had three miracles to recount: his own cure and the inexplicable deaths of the two women. But there was another event to be added to the list. It was discussed among the people over and over again.

It was harvest time, and the laborers involved wanted to hear the preaching. Don Gaspar had asked the rich owners of the vineyards to give their workers an hour off so that they could hear God's word. Some had granted the hour requested and even more; others refused, offering various excuses. It turned out that the landowners had harvests in proportion to their generosity. It appeared that the grapes from the vineyards of the generous owners had sucked the juice from the vines of those who had refused. "I heard this with my own ears from those owners, and there is no doubt about it," Don Biagio attested.

After the mission in Civitanova, the mission team left the Marches and disbanded. Don Gaspar and Don Antonio Muccioli returned to Rome. Don Biagio returned to Porto Recanati, changed in body and in spirit. Don Gaspar had entrusted him with preaching in the future that was yet to be defined.

Don Biagio was full of energy and saw himself as a missionary to the core. The people who came to know him in Recanati, Montefano, and Civitanova came to him for confessions and for his counsel. They called on him to preach. They saw Don Gaspar in him, and he felt obliged to continue the work of the one who had given him life and a reason to go on living.

The mind of Don Biagio was attuned to the supernatural, and sometimes he had a feeling of anxiety as he walked the streets of the town. It was a feeling of nostalgia, almost claustrophobia. Porto Recanati sometimes seemed to be too small a space, because he saw the people of the Papal States being left to their own devices. On the other hand, by his nature he did not like to travel that much. He was brought up to be, as is said, a “priest of the house.”⁹ In addition, the years that he had lived with death created a dislike for traveling. He did not want to die on the road or in some strange place.

As Easter approached, the missionaries were caught up in a flurry of activity. Don Gaspar invited Don Biagio, by a letter that has not come down to us, to join the team. Don Biagio responded “that after dealing with the confessions of Easter he did not have the heart to abandon his home town, since it was lacking sufficient priests to hear confessions.” In a way he was saying that he was not just standing there with folded hands, and that he had been doing the work of a missionary, but it was also a way of saying that as soon as the extra work of Easter was behind him that he would discuss the matter again.

Don Gaspar caught the implied meaning of Don Biagio’s words and suggested some missions not far from Porto Recanati. He invited Don Biagio to be in Cerreto in May so that he could participate in the mission in Matelica. Don Biagio replied that he would gladly go along with him.

At this point, the chorus of friends and families began to persuade him not to go. This time they pressured him not only with the argument about his health (wouldn’t he be putting God to the test by taxing his newly regained health?), but with an argument about the good of souls. Who would continue the wonderful initiatives that he had begun in the town? To all of them, Don

9 The Italian phrase is *prete in casa*. This, or the variant *prete di casa*, is a common term for a diocesan priest. Here the author suggests that the phrase fits Valentini well, since he preferred to live at home rather than to travel.

Biagio replied: “I cannot doubt my vocation after being healed, which you yourself judge to be miraculous, and which occurred by the intercession of Most Holy Mary and by the prayers and the blessing of Canon del Bufalo.”

Contrary to what one might be thinking at this point, Don Biagio’s decision did not mean that he was entering the Congregation. It does not seem that anyone knew of the existence of an institute headed by Canon del Bufalo. Don Biagio simply decided to make himself available to the requests of the dynamic Roman priest and, for the moment, he was available to preach the mission in Matelica.

Chapter 5

AN AGGRESSIVE MISSIONARY

The religious and moral problems created by Napoleon's occupation of the Papal States have been noted. New ideas and new behavior, following the French political system, had disconnected large strata of the population from their traditional ties to the Church, which also had to accept political dependence on the French. Even those who had remained faithful to the throne of Peter appeared confused. In the Papal States a political problem also became a religious problem, and vice versa.

Of course, when Pius VII chose the popular missions as a tool for restoring the moral level of his state, he was also expecting to establish political and social stability. The ambiguity of spiritual and political power united in the figure of the pope had received a sort of legitimacy, so that in one way or the other, any dissent ended up being morally or politically unacceptable.

On the social level there were two emergencies: ordinary violence and political violence. Ordinary violence, or brigandage, was endemic along the main roads of the Papal States, generally in the south. Political violence took place in the urban centers of the north, where people had become accustomed to a secular state. There the administrative responsibilities of government were in the hands of a larger number of government workers. With the Restoration¹⁰ they would be relegated to subordinate positions. Freemasonry was involved in various maneuvers against the Church.¹¹

¹⁰ The Restoration is the name commonly given to the period after 1815 (until roughly 1835) in which attempts were made to restore the political and spiritual life that had been disrupted during the Napoleonic occupation of Italy.

¹¹ In a climate where political dissent was not tolerated, secret societies like the Freemasons afforded a place where revolutionary ideas could be discussed and espoused. Masonic practices often became the basis for other secret societies, such as the Carbonari or "charcoal burners" that advocated a liberal and united Italy.

There were good Catholics among those who supported the new political reality, and bad Catholics among those loyal to the pope. Ercole Consalvi, the able diplomat who got the Papal States back for the Pius VII, approved of many of the innovations introduced by Napoleon. Among the bandits of the south there were some who fiercely maintained some of the exterior trappings of practicing their faith, despite their aberrant behavior. Some of them, for example, were fanatically devoted to their saints and some prayed the rosary.

There were striking differences between the two kinds of violence. Political attacks were acts of war. They were part of a plan to change history. The activity of the bandits was ordinary delinquency. Politics was generally a remote or proximate cause of the phenomenon of violence. The brigands had no interest in politics, however, and any attempt at inserting politics into discussions with them or introducing politics into the phenomenon of brigandage failed.

In the Catholic vision of the day, all these problems ended up being linked together. The ideal citizen was a good Christian. The best reform of the Papal States? It would be converting citizens to living their faith. The ideal nation was the holy nation. True enough in theory, probably, but somewhat simplistic. The weak point was that the Papal States could not wait until all its citizens converted to become radical Christians, to become saints. Nor could this be tried, and Christ himself did not attempt it. He limited himself to calling for conversion and holiness, and only a few followed him. Besides, some representatives of the Church herself offered an incarnation of Christianity that was barely believable and hardly convincing.

In this sense the project of Pius VII, of Gaspar del Bufalo and others, to effect the reform of the Papal States with preaching that called for a conversion of the heart, was partly utopian and simplistic. This does not mean that it did not have results or that it could not contribute to change, sometimes even significantly. It was

not long before Gaspar del Bufalo gained the nickname “hammer of sectarians” in the political sphere and of the “spiritual earthquake” in the religious sphere.

In truth, the great Roman Missionary showed an independence from political authorities and became angry when those authorities meddled in his apostolate. He did not like to visit government offices (*le delegazioni*); he stood with the bishops. When he spoke to the people he avoided discourses and problems connected with the administration of public affairs. He entered into the problem by treating it with the clergy and with the authorities he trusted, for example, with Cardinal Cristaldi. It was not always easy to tell the difference between a bishop and a delegate of the pope, since both were clerics.

When Don Biagio reached Cerreto, Don Gaspar and his team were there, preaching a mission. The group was composed of Monsignor Francesco Piervisani, Don Antonio Muccioli, Don Pietro Moroni, and Don Antonio Pascucci. The new recruit was punctual. From his new companions he learned of other miracles that had taken place in the recent missions and he was ready to have some inspiring experiences.

The citizens of Matelica, an industrious and populous city, were nevertheless apathetic. Its many mills produced fine woolen cloth. Agriculture was also important, since the area was favored with a fertile valley and plenty of water. The industrious nature of the people fostered some doubt about the mission. Even among the most devoted of the faithful there was skepticism over the usefulness of the mission: there would be remarkable preaching that would necessarily be provocative. According to some, it was better not to stir up a hornet’s nest and remain quiet, saving what could be saved.

“*Quieta non movere!*”¹² warned the elders. This was a maxim often cited by the ecclesiastics of the era. It was, however, foreign

¹² This is a Latin legal phrase meaning: “Don’t disturb the undisturbed.”

to the psychological makeup of Canon del Bufalo, a man on the attack. He knew that the enemies of the Church were not, in fact, “undisturbed,” and that it was an illusion to hope that in not bothering them that they would abandon their projects. Gaspar had two significant strengths: a great confidence in the Word of God and great confidence in the spirit of the people. The Word of God was now identified with the Blood of Christ. It was that all-encompassing Word that was to be proclaimed and theologically, Gaspar saw it as central and most effective.

Gaspar was aware of the reluctance of the clerics of Matelica, and that it was confusing to the people there. He decided to attack with the universal remedy: the discipline and stirring penitential celebrations. It was a decision destined to make the attacks more virulent. Preaching like that was regarded as a provocation. It was insulting to reintroduce forms of religious activity that were “medieval,” but he would not give up means that were so effective. He carried it out the penitential celebrations with unusual insistence.

The reaction of his enemies was strong, as foreseen. There were rumors that pregnant women in the city had aborted from the fear sparked by seeing the use of the discipline in public. It was a lie circulated on purpose, perhaps for the sake of derision or as a deterrent. In any case, it was meant to discredit the preachers. It was not difficult to debunk the rumors. The emotional impact of the ascetic practices on the spiritual lives of the people was revealed in quite different forms that no one could deny. The city was stirred up, carried away by enthusiasm, by their need for the transcendent. Additional priests from the surrounding area were called in to take care of all who wanted to confess.

One of the priests called to help was Don Gregorio Ambrosi, a Silvestrine monk residing in Fabriano. A mount was dispatched to him so that he could come as soon as possible to Matelica. The good monk mounted the beast and set off for the city. When he was a certain distance from the walls, he distinctly heard the voice

of Canon del Bufalo, who was addressing the crowd in the piazza. “He was filled with wonder and awe and got down from the horse to listen with devotion” to the entire sermon. When he finally arrived, he recounted the miracle that had taken place, and news of another miracle strengthened the mission.

During the mission in Matelica, Don Gaspar began to apply pressure on Don Biagio. Gaspar judged that it was now the time to inform Valentini of the new Institute at San Felice di Giano. The moment had come to propose the next big step. Valentini should not simply be a secular priest who made himself available for the missions, but a full-time Missionary who would leave homeland and family behind.

Gaspar began by getting his disciple to reflect on how he viewed the activities he was involved in each day and the success he was enjoying in those activities. Such activities were not extraneous to the ministry of a secular priest, but represented a very suitable outlet for them. The secular clergy, numerous and unemployed, needed to stop being so homebound and unmotivated. He cited the case of Bartolomeo Dal Monte, a diocesan priest of Bologna who was famed for preaching missions in that city during the eighteenth century. He added that a certain Don Gaetano Bonanni had started a mission house in Giano dell’Umbria with an association of secular priests, to which he, Gaspar, belonged.¹³ In the light of many such proofs, he believed that it was God’s will that Valentini enter the Congregation.

Don Biagio confided to Gaspar his former intention to enter the Jesuits. He had been inspired to do that while he was in the

¹³ Gaspar would attribute the founding of the Congregation to others, like Bonanni, out of humility. On the other hand, Bonanni was the first superior in the house in Giano, and he was also the founder of the so-called Gospel Workers in Rome, an association of priests who were dedicated to preaching, and he invited Gaspar to become a member. It would not be a stretch to call him, along with Pius VII, Albertini, and Cardinal Cristaldi, co-founders, even if Gaspar certainly deserves the title of founder of the C.P.P.S.

seminary, when the pope agreed to restore the Society of Jesus. He had not acted on his desire on account of his health and because of additional commitments. Don Gaspar responded that he had the same desire at the time, but later judged it better to remain a secular priest. He added that the new Institute in Giano was “very Jesuit.” He added other arguments. Don Biagio’s cure was a sign from God. He, Gaspar, had received counsel from a great spiritual director in Rome, to whom he had spoken about Biagio.¹⁴ Besides, having put his hand to the plow, he should not turn back. What sense would there be for him to return home after each mission? The missionary had to have his house, a missionary house. At San Felice there was calm and very healthy air.

In the face of such impassioned arguments, and above all because of the determination of Don Gaspar, Don Biagio gave in, as many fine priests had done and would do. The twenty-six year old priest from Porto Recanati decided to become a stable member of that Company of Miracles in which he had been an occasional participant. He continued the mission with spirit of one who sees himself as a full-time Missionary and member of an Institute which up until this point was almost completely unknown.

The mission in Matelica was followed by those in Sanseverino and Sant’Elpidio a Mare. At the end of the last mission, Don Gaspar gave the mission team fifteen days of rest in Ancona. First, however, he wanted to take a day’s rest and went to Don Biagio’s house in Porto Recanati.

The intent of the visit was quite evident. Don Biagio was having difficulty telling his father something that would not please him. Don Gaspar wanted to accompany Don Biagio, so that the two together could fight the battle.

We can well imagine how Crispino, father and *padrone*, would receive the news of his son’s decision. He would receive the content

¹⁴ This is presumably a reference to Albertini, who was Gaspar’s spiritual director from about 1810 until Albertini’s death in 1819.

of the news, and also because the decision had been reached without his knowing anything about it. Nothing happened in his house unless he decided it would happen.

It was quite an encounter, with Don Gaspar glorifying the vocation of the missionary, listing all the arguments for Don Biagio's vocation, and appealing to the desire of the pope for the preaching of the missions. A frowning and impassive Crispino listened to this. Don Biagio remained firm in the decision he had made, and confirmed that it was a source of joy for him. He had found his true vocation. Now he knew that he had come into the world to be a missionary!

Crispino, for all his blather, accepted that it was a question of a project of the pope, which was being carried out on a vast scale and had the support of the highest authorities of the Papal States. This new bit of information led him to think that it could mean expanding his business in the port. He relented and gave his consent. This was enough to bring a festive note to the family for the day, because Crispino even set the tone for the family mood.

It seemed a miracle that such an important piece of news would be handled so quickly and so well, but it happened. The family mood was sad but calm, knowing that Don Biagio would be leaving. For now no one in the town knew. He would no longer be in Porto Recanati. He enjoyed perfect health. They had to await the reaction of the people. Each time that he was absent to participate in a mission there was a protest. What would happen if word got out that he would be leaving the town forever?

Don Gaspar, happy with this "fishing expedition," wanted to linger a bit along the Adriatic. Far from the shore were the fishing boats with men busy pulling in the nets. When one was silent and held one's breath one could hear them talking. They worked for Crispino. Catching fish is exciting. Catching men is something else. Gaspar's heart sang.

After lunch, Gaspar looked out the windows and contemplated “part of the Sanctuary of Loreto on a little hill on the one hand, and on the other, a tranquil sea full of fishing boats.” Now he wanted to go down to the shore and get on a boat. It would be his first time. Don Biagio stood by his side, an expert sailor. His brothers Simone and Antonio were at the oars and were better sailors than Biagio. Crispino was in charge on board. Maria Ragnini, Rosa Mancini, and the little children watched the scene from a window of the house.

Someone warned Gaspar that he would hear some bad language from the fishermen. They were rough characters, used to blasphemies.

The wooden hull glided through the water and rocked gently. The strokes of the oars were executed with skill and did not jerk the boat forward. The slight instability created a kind of dizziness in Don Gaspar, which he experienced as something of a spiritual rapture. The boats were circling them, like so many chickens heading toward their feed. Caught up with the emotion of the moment and with an emotional sincerity, the missionary addressed the fishermen:

– Let me fish for your souls, just as you go fishing for the fish in the sea. What consolation it would be for me if I could catch some big sturgeon!

Don Biagio’s emotional state was very much like that of Don Gaspar. The dizziness, in his case, was not caused by the rocking of the boat, but by the feeling of being uprooted. He was becoming aware of his new life. As a boy he had selected a rock for his pillow. In the future he would be able to say: “I do not have a stone on which to lay my head.” He would worry about one thing: to communicate the Word of God, as Don Gaspar was doing, and as he had begun to do, to people yet unknown and in faraway provinces. Don Gaspar was talking again. Don Biagio heard his words without making them out. He was too lost in his own thoughts.

The people in the boats and on the shore began to shout out ejaculations as a kind of salute: “*Viva Gesù! Viva Maria! Viva tutto in paradiso!*” Don Gaspar used the occasion to urge them to respect the name of God, of the Virgin, and of the saints. When speaking the name of God he raised his right index finger to heaven. At the name of the Virgin he fixed his gaze on the sanctuary of the Holy House, closer now than before.

Someone felt the need to justify himself. In the name of all, he said:

– We use blasphemies without wanting to. The urge is stronger than we are. Without blaspheming we don’t know how to talk.

Don Gaspar suggested that they use alternative expressions, innocent or harmless.

– Better to offer prayers, he added. And then he concluded:

– Jesus chose his apostles from among you!

Signor Crispino probably sensed himself to be a missionary for a moment. He told his sons to row out further. He did not want to lose face in front of his men. Good heavens, he was moved!

Don Biagio watched the scene and it seemed to him another miracle. There they were, touched and attentive, these ex-convicts, men hardened by the sea, corroded by the salt, brutalized by poverty. Suddenly they seemed to be so many altar boys. The extemporaneous sermon was concluding with the blessing. Don Gaspar imparted the blessing with the crucifix that he had taken from his cincture. Don Biagio collected himself from his thoughts. He signed himself, like everyone else.

– Yes, – he concluded. – This is also a miracle!

Don Biagio remained in Porto Recanati for a few days, wearing the insignia of the Missionary: the cincture which he would wear for life and a crucifix hanging from a long chain suspended from the neck. The crucifix was tucked into the cincture like a weapon. It ended up being very decorative, because the chain and the figure of

Christ, like the rest of the symbols on the cross of dark wood, were of gilded brass. Only the dimensions of the crucifix and its place on the cincture differentiated it from a bishop's cross.

Some people found it laughable. They accepted that they wear the mission crucifix while they were engaged in ministry, but the Missionaries like Don Gaspar wore this distinctive garb all the time, even in the house. This custom, immediately adopted by Don Biagio, did not pass without some witty comments in Porto Recanati and in the diocese. Perhaps the son of Crispino Valentini had pretensions toward the episcopacy!

– *Profetavit nesciens!* He has prophesied without knowing it! – said a canon of Loreto to a colleague, when he saw Don Biagio pass by dressed thus.

It was a witty comment. He was suggesting that Don Biagio was dressed in the feathers of a peacock. He judged that the true motive of his vocation was to be able to wear the “fringes and phylacteries.” Don Biagio, who was well acquainted with such miserable members of the clergy (and the canon was probably speaking out of envy), turned and replied fiercely:

– *Scio cui credidi. Tenui eum nec dimittam!*¹⁵

“I know well whom I have believed. I held him and will never let him go.” A fitting response, and above all, genuine.

¹⁵ A reference to 2 Timothy 1:12: ‘I know whom I have believed,’ and to Song of Songs 3:4: “[I found him whom my soul loves.] I held him and would not let him go...” (RSV)

Chapter 6

THE ADVENTURE

Don Biagio joined Don Gaspar again at Ancona, toward the end of the spiritual exercises being held there. From Ancona they would preach a series of missions in nine towns. It was nearly a continuous succession of missions, and it was a trial by fire for the body and spirit of the new Missionary. They were difficult missions, especially those in Romagna, a land permeated by an anticlerical spirit. Don Biagio was able to participate in a series of remarkable events that tempered him like steel.

Between the missions in Montelupone and Montecassiano in August of 1818, Don Biagio was able to get away to visit his mother, who had taken ill, and to baptize the last of his nieces, who was given the name Francesca Maria Clotilde. When the mission of Montecassiano began on August 24, he was back with the other members of the mission team.

The mission in Forlimpopoli was the most difficult of all the missions in the series. The prologue to the mission was worthy of a Greek tragedy. The missionaries were met by a messenger in Ancona who delivered a threatening note, full of blasphemies. In the message there was a list of those who made up the mission team along with their respective personal data. Each was threatened with death. Don Biagio was among those who were about to die. He was happy with this. Being excluded would have been a disappointment to him, as if they did not consider him to be a full member of the Company of Miracles.¹⁶

Don Gaspar, very saddened by the blasphemous language, was indifferent to the threats. "We are not worthy to suffer for Christ," he

¹⁶ In a Greek tragedy, a messenger often introduces the drama to follow. Also, in the paragraph the author uses the Latin word *morituri*, translated here as "about to die." This is an allusion to the cry of the Roman gladiators to the emperor: "We who are about to die (*morituri*) salute you."

said. This was the “antiphon” for their journey to Cesena. Everyone was in a very good mood. This did not escape the notice of Don Gaspar, who was keeping an eye on his disciple, ready to intervene and encourage him, if the initial difficulties of the ministry would take him by surprise. Don Biagio, however, ended up being among those who were most animated. It was not the spirit of adventure, but the impetuous courage of the neophyte.

At Cesena there was a second messenger, actually a whole chorus of messengers. A deputation of clergy and well-wishers from Forlimpopoli had met there and were waiting, fearfully, for the missionaries. It was a familiar scenario. The chorus stuck to its part. The members of the chorus told the missionaries that if they loved peace that they should turn back. They said that the sectarians of Forlì had become very irate with the priests from Rome, and that they had conspired to slaughter them. This would happen either at Forlimpopoli or Meldola. An attack was certain. The missionaries should return to Rome and tell the pope that there was no need to challenge the sects. It would be better to let the fire die out of its own accord.

Don Gaspar responded for all:

– The mission is legitimate, because it was ordered on the authority of the pope, as you are well aware. We have not come to challenge anyone, but to call the people to follow Christ. If they kill us, it will be so much gain for us.

It was the feast of the holy apostles Peter and Paul, a coincidence that appeared providential. Christianity had been confirmed by their blood. Blood speaks with great authority. The chorus fell silent.

The entrance into Forlimpopoli was not as imposing as in other places, although formal and correct. Don Gaspar, in the introduction, took the bull by the horns, developing the theme: “For me to die is gain.”¹⁷ This was not just theater; it was neither

¹⁷ A reference to Phil 1: 21: “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

in his interest nor in the interest of the Reign of God to provoke the people.

In the following days things went better. A team of jokesters had material for ridiculing even the sermon on hell, which concluded with a robust self-flagellation by four missionaries. Such an orgy of medieval piety in progressive Forlimpopoli! Imagine, they said, the use of the discipline in the piazza, followed by the burning of books contrary to faith and morals.

Something amazing occurred. The team of jokesters, guided by the head comedian, mounted the platform and asked forgiveness, and the leader, dressed in a sack and barefoot for the rest of the mission, wanted to carry the crucifix in the processions.

This event, which must have seemed quite unlikely, demonstrated how certain new ideas were false and that, on the contrary, the heart of the people remained profoundly Christian. Even sectarians were Christian at heart, and they decided to go back to their roots as a kind of liberation.

The event created a stir and moved the populace. At Forlì, the enemies of the missionaries were grinding their teeth. They decided to take action. They sent four assassins, one for each missionary. Given what happened, it seems that they chose four incompetents for the task. It could not have been possible to carry out the assignment in a more careless manner. One assassin entered the room of Don Gaspar, who was waiting for him. In the presence of the Missionary the man got confused, muttered a few words, and left quickly. According to some accounts, he made a confession right then and there. The second man went to Canon Muccioli, who was hearing women's confessions. He engaged in a few acts of bravado with the penitents who were waiting, pretending to be a confessor in the little room of the bell tower, and then went away without harming the priest. The third was supposed to kill Don Antonio Pascucci, who was about to begin preaching. The assassin

did not think that was the right moment and stayed to listen. When he saw that the sermon was going to last a long time and that he did not care for what was being said, he went off, muttering, looking for his friends.

The fourth designated victim, Don Biagio, was hearing men's confessions. The assassin pretended to wait his turn to confess. Just as his turn came, the men from the confraternity arrived to take the missionary for the *svegliarino*, or "wake up sermon." One of the confraternity members told Don Biagio that the next penitent was a sectarian with evil intentions and to avoid him.

Don Biagio said to the man: "Instead of leaving me stunned, you have energized me and you can reply to your brothers that nothing matters to me except embracing that unhappy man when he comes for confession," after the *svegliarino*. At that moment the man he was talking about drew near to Don Biagio and loudly lamented that he had sinned. The Missionary replied that he needed to give a short *svegliarino*, and that he would return quickly. The assassin followed the priest, heard part of the sermon and then, for some reason, went off indignant. Perhaps he came to the realization that his colleagues had failed, or perhaps the *svegliarino* took longer than the time planned for the plot.

The next day it was learned that the carriage that carried the assassins returning to Forlì overturned on a bridge and the four fell into the river, without being seen again. After this the mission took on a triumphant course. At the closing, a stream of people came from the nearby towns. It was a complete victory. It was only one battle won, however, for the war continued.

Word spread that the Freemasons had postponed their encounter for Meldola, the next stop. That fortress of Freemasonry was really conquered even before the missionaries arrived because of what had taken place at Forlimpopoli. At the end of the initial

sermon, the members of the lodge, in the judgment of Don Biagio, were defeated. In fact, “all of them placed their weapons in the hands of the missionaries.”

The pharmacist of Meldola had been asked for poison to get rid of the preachers. Repentant, he revealed the plan to Don Antonio Muccioli. The assassins intended to put the poison into the *semata*, a refreshing drink made of pumpkin seeds or barley, used by the missionaries in the summer heat. Don Antonio rushed to the house where the other missionaries were. In a dramatic scene, there he found Gaspar with glass in hand, ready to drink the *semata*. He shouted to him: “Don’t drink it! It’s poisoned!”

Don Gaspar looked at Don Antonio, stunned at his sudden entrance and at the seriousness of the words he had shouted. What did this mean? Don Antonio reported what he knew. Don Gaspar reflected that it was possible to poison the drink only with the complicity of the family whose guest he was. It did not seem probable to him that such good people had given in to the devil and welcomed the suspected assassin. He said casually: “It is written: ‘...if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them’” (Mark 16: 18).

Having blessed the full glass, he drank it in a single gulp. Don Antonio Muccioli, Don Biagio, Don Antonio Pascucci, and the servant Vincenzo Severini, as well as the heads of the house, looked on with astonishment, ready to see some sign of illness in the face of Don Gaspar, who began talking about something else. No one ever knew if the poison had actually been put into the drink, but the news of this courageous act made the rounds of Meldola and it was as if the drink had actually been poisoned and had been miraculously rendered harmless. The mission was carried out and was a success.

The missionaries were leaving town without fanfare, as was their custom. It was about eleven o’clock at night, and just as

they thought that they had been successful in leaving stealthily, people with torches filled the streets and the city band shattered the silence with its playing. The clergy, the municipal officials, and the people were all there. Despite their protests, the missionaries were accompanied as far as Forlimpopoli, where the people got up to welcome them. In what seemed like an instant, lights appeared on the windowsills and there was an impromptu festival. The initial sermons of greeting were delivered, and there was a great commotion followed by a triumphal procession as far as Cesena, where the missionaries left for Castelfidardo.

It could be said that Don Biagio had finished his novitiate and was now ready to become the “second lead” (*comprimario*). He had now made a place for himself. His penchant for poetry and music had given him a central role to play in the ministry. He made great use of verse to communicate moral and spiritual ideas in the missions. Saint Alphonsus Liguori was his model, even in this area.

The Missionaries of the Precious Blood already had a work by Don Francesco Albertini, *Sentences Appropriate for the Study of the Virtue of Humility* (*Sentenze analoghe allo studio della santa virtù dell'umiltà*). These were short verses in a rather naïve style, intended for a kind of compendium of proverbs.

For example:

Quando sarai dagli uominini ingiuriato
Pensa a quell fango di cui sei formato.

When you are insulted by other people
Think about the mud from which you are made.

The Missionaries had adopted other texts, drawing on the common repertory of popular pastoral ministry. With Don Biagio, they began to create a specific corpus of such verses on the theme of the Blood of Christ.

Viva viva Gesù
Che per mio bene
Tutto il Sangue versò
Dalle sue vene!

Long live, long live Jesus
Who for my sake
Poured all the Blood
From his veins!

This was a recurring refrain, used in simple rhymes and in psalmody on various themes. The melody of the refrain, even though it did not change, from time to time had a different effect. It had the lightness of the jet of a fountain if it was intoned by a single person. It became a torrent when all of the people sang it. It sometimes was in contrast to the more serious or somber melody of the strophes.

Don Biagio was not a bad looking man, but one could not call him handsome, at least by modern standards. People consistently overstated his age. Almost everywhere they called him “the old man.” He joked about this. Sometimes he would ask one of the faithful: “How old do you think I am?” They would generally respond: “About sixty.” He would be delighted when they would say this. He would not have liked to be considered a handsome man. He wanted to be sure not to seek personal success. Sometimes, and for the same reason, he would put his short cloak on crooked or would wear his skullcap inside out or askew.

The result was just the opposite of what he expected. His success was irrepressible, especially with women of all ages. Don Biagio was quite a sensation, an absolutely unique phenomenon.

Perhaps the secret of that success was that he was one of those persons whose interior life prevailed over the exterior. The spirit triumphed over the flesh. And then there was his dynamism,

the singing, the poetry. Above all there was his candor, which he expressed with gentle manners, receptivity and esteem.

Don Biagio did not have an artificial or conventional approach to women, such as that advised by many spiritual directors of the day: "Let your conversation with women be brief and strict." Where those spiritual masters found such advice in the Gospel is a mystery. Following the example of Jesus, who had a variety of ways of approaching women, Don Biagio always conducted himself with a naturalness that made him appear uninhibited. His natural candor complemented the other elements of his personality.

Sometimes his naturalness involved being harsh on occasion. This happened in Cerreto.

There was a woman there who had created a reputation for holiness for herself and who claimed to have supernatural gifts. She had won the approval of the local church authorities. She flaunted this approval in order to get people to agree with her. She claimed to have been directed by four bishops. She wanted to add the approval of the head of the Missionaries to her curriculum vitae. Don Gaspar gave the case to Don Biagio.

The woman presented herself with the arrogance of a person convinced that the Spirit radiates from herself as the heat from red-hot iron. After an initial conversation, the woman realized that things were not going the way she planned. The second meeting shattered all her illusions. The request for a third meeting, on the grounds that were some matters that needed to be better understood, annoyed the woman, who began to lose her self-control. This was evident proof that she lacked the charism.

The woman, who in the past "had faked stigmata, visions, ecstasies," and had prided herself "in having infused knowledge," was disappointed in her expectations. She began to boast that she could, in an instant, fly away twenty-five miles and return.

The next morning, she arrived for the last meeting. Don Biagio

did not mince words and called her “deceived and a deceiver.” He told her “that the stigmata, ecstasies, and visions were neither from God nor from the devil.” The phenomena were the inventions of “her pride and spiritual vanity.” She was “the soul most in need of conversion in the mission.” She should repent, therefore. He would be very happy to place her once again in the grace of God.

With a mocking smile the woman responded that she had had many illustrious examiners. She could laugh at such a ridiculous little priest.

– Are you perhaps putting my virtue to the test? – she asked finally.

– No! replied Don Biagio. – I cannot test virtue that you don’t have! I want to prevent you from committing further sacrileges and avoid making myself a collaborator in your sins.

She attempted to trick Don Biagio, who replied curtly:

– I don’t have time to waste. If you admit your sins and want to go to confession and change your life, I am available. If not, I’m going to move on to more productive activities.

After this attack, he softened. To find a way into her heart, he told of a similar case of a woman who was a member of a Franciscan Third Order (*una bizzoca*) who returned to the faith only at the point of death, after having deceived many poor people. He added:

– No one, however, is guaranteed a favorable moment for repentance at the point of death. Besides, whoever believes that she can deceive God, planning on conversion at the last moment, probably will not be successful.

The woman did not accept the help that the Missionary offered her. More irritated than ever, she thought to manage the situation with indecipherable chuckling. But when she saw that Don Biagio was serious and was leaving, she erupted in a series of invectives against him and the missionaries in general.

Don Biagio then turned and said to her:

– If you are willing, there is still time to mend your ways. If not, I tell you that we will see one another on the day of judgment.

Since she gave no signs of a change of heart, he went off without another word. He would have wanted to shake the dust from his shoes. Who knows if he might have had a passing thought that lightning might strike the wretched woman? He certainly did not pray for that to happen. God does desire the death of a sinner, but rather that she be converted and live. He abandoned the woman to her destiny and hoped that she could repent. One of his maxims, on this very point, was this: “God treats his creatures with great respect. He desires, he begs, but he always respects free will.”

Of the events in all of the missions preached in those months, the most significant in the life of Don Biagio, after his healing, happened during his ministry in Gualdo Tadino.

Already during the mission of Serra San Quirico alarming news about Maria Annunziata Ragnini began to arrive. The news was given to Don Gaspar, who passed it on with some delicacy to his disciple, giving him the freedom to decide if he wanted to go the deathbed of his dear mother.

Don Biagio could not make up his mind. The commitments of the mission were numerous and already planned. The serious illness of his mother was not planned. What was he to do? The notices seem to be building to a dramatic crescendo. Her illness was said to be mortal. She was only fifty years old. A letter arrived in Gualdo Tadino indicating that her death was imminent.

Don Biagio did not have the heart to quit. What kind of missionary would he be then? Besides, how could his confreres carry out the program? Once again he resisted the very human impulse to run to his mother. He held firm, saying to himself more than to the others: “I can help my mother now by prayer.”

Such composure might seem to be unfeeling, were it not similar

to that of Jesus, when he said: “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” And he himself responded, pointing to the crowd that had gathered around him, hungry for the Word of God. We, however, suggest another interpretation of that saying, more human and more consistent with the personality of Don Biagio. He was now accustomed to expecting miracles and thus persisted in this heroic act, convinced that God would reward his generosity by curing his mother.

Something else took place. Maria Annunziata Ragnini was truly very sick. From her deathbed, with heartbreaking insistence, she asked to see her far-off son. Her husband, Crispino, her sons Simone and Antonio, the daughters-in-law Rosa and Lucia, all reassured her, promising that he would arrive soon. Meanwhile they bombarded the Valentini with messages.

One morning, she surprised her son Simone, who was at her bedside, by saying: –Thanks be to God, that he has given me the consolation of seeing Biagio again.

– Biagio? asked Simone.

– Yes, she said.

– Your brother just left the room. He came and helped me find peace over some scruples that I had. Go, go and greet him and tell him to rest before he leaves....He is tired, because he came in great haste.

Simone ran after his brother through the rooms, even if he knew he was running after a ghost. He told the family what happened. They were dumbfounded. The woman was not delirious, yet in full possession of her faculties she would not be talking about her Biagio and how good it was for him to come and comfort her. The family, gathered around her, did not want to disillusion her. Yes, Biagio had come, they said, and was resting in his room, because he had made a long and tiring journey from Sassoferrato.

Maria Annunziata Ragnini died on September 24, 1818. At the hour of her death Don Biagio, not knowing of her passing, had just

begun the mission in a little town that was considered as industrious in matters of farming as it was apathetic in matters of the spirit.

The venerable Leopoldo da Gaiche had pronounced a less than flattering judgment on the inhabitants of Sassoferrato, based on the meaning of the two Italian words that make up the name of the town: *sasso*, rock, and *ferro*, iron, as applied to their hearts. Metalworking was the principal activity of the community. A stranger was assaulted by the uninterrupted ringing of the anvils coming from the shops. The locals no longer noticed the noise. Also, one part of the topography was rocky, on the hill near the castle.

Don Biagio, grasping what was said in jest about the population, thought that the judgment should be modified. He said that in the mission he preached with Don Gaspar, the inhabitants showed themselves to be as soft as wax. And it could not be otherwise where the Company of Miracles was operating.

News of what had happened in Porto Recanati arrived a few days later. Don Gaspar, “blushing, quite happy,” commented: “Blessed be God who has provided.” Don Biagio was convinced that Don Gaspar had begged for the miracle. Gaspar was convinced that Biagio had deserved it.

News of the bilocation spread through the town and was a factor in the change of the population. What’s more, apart from this unusual incident (however one might judge it), it was no less extraordinary to see a young priest, grieving over his mother, continuing to work for the good of the local populace.

After the following mission, in Gualdo Tadino, which, like the others, was a success, the mission team headed for Rome. When they reached Spoleto, Don Gaspar sent Don Biagio and Don Antonio Pascucci to San Felice, while he continued on to Rome with Don Raffaele Brandimarte, a new member of the Congregation. He gave the two young priests that he sent to Giano

recommendations for preaching the triduum of All Saints and for the feast of the martyr Saint Felix.¹⁸

The house in Giano was entrusted to the care of Don Gaetano Bonanni. He was rarely there, however, since he was constantly on the road preaching. Don Gaspar took advantage of Bonanni's habitual absence to install his now healthy disciple as the *de facto* head of the foundation, which would continue to be unique and an example for those that were to follow. The abbey was situated in a vast solitude. Don Gaspar called it "my dear solitude," and Don Biagio took to calling it "beloved solitude." They both had similar tastes.

The mission house was structured to carry out four functions: it was a place of permanent formation for the secular clergy who lived there; it promoted the apostolate of the public church attached to it; it welcomed groups of persons for periods of retreat or spiritual exercises; it was home to the bands of preachers who went out to give missions in various places. Don Biagio had the capacity to engage in all four types of apostolate. He did not have the aptitude to direct such a house. He lived in one dimension, that of the spiritual. He neglected the material, and always been inclined toward spiritual detachment.

The house had been abandoned and was in need of serious repair. It would require a great deal of capital to restore those walls to the splendor they had seen centuries before, a splendor which the frescoes on those walls depicted. The abbey had belonged to the Cassinese Benedictines, then to the Augustinians, and briefly to the Passionists. The Missionaries of the Precious Blood began occupying the house in August 1815. The current state of the house was fine with Don Biagio. He would have preferred not to lift a finger for the renovation. Everything was fine in the spiritual realm!

Meanwhile, in Porto Recanati, there were bad feelings about Don Biagio's choice to leave the town. Those feelings grew stronger

¹⁸ St. Felix (Felice in Italian) was martyred near Giano and is buried in the crypt of the church there. There continues to be an annual pilgrimage to his tomb.

as they learned of the fame that their fellow citizen had gained in his ministry. Eleonora Politi, of the local nobility, became the spokesperson for the protest. She wrote Don Gaspar a letter, strongly reproaching him for having taken such an able worker from their midst. Don Gaspar could have responded that when he took Valentini from them, he was dying. He limited himself to responding that “it was a better for him to belong among the number of the missionaries,” who served the universal Church, rather than remain bound to “particular individuals.” He added that the apparent loss had even been a gain for Porto Recanati.

The bishop, called to the cause by the bold lady, also sent a message of rebuke. Monsignor Bellini loved Gaspar and held a high opinion of his ministry, but he had his diocese at heart. The intervention of Monsignor Cristaldi, a powerful prelate of the curia, protector and promoter of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, resolved the problem once and for all.

In inviting Cristaldi to intervene in the matter, Don Gaspar wrote the following flattering words:

Father Biagio Valentini has those qualities that give me hope that he will serve the Lord in a particular way in spreading the work in Giano. Though he may have worked very well in his own hometown, he could do a great deal more good in animating an institution which, by its very location, could be of even greater help, in time, to the whole province of the Marca which adjoins Umbria. For this type of work surely requires persons with merit and men who are suitable for this ministry. It is a matter of an institution which has so important a work as giving Missions and of providing to the clergy, good examples of apostolic life. In seeking to give greater glory to God, therefore, we must come to the conclusion that the Holy Father would be greatly content to have such a man involved in this excellent endeavor. Presently, another priest has gone there who, since he is young, of

good will and at the same time capable, with the help of Fr. Biagio, could perfect himself and learn everything that relates to the exact execution of the ministry. But, if the oft-mentioned Fr. Biagio does not go there, I do not see how we could provide for the needs of this holy undertaking. Add to that the fact that this man is in love with Mission work and Retreats.¹⁹

One can see that Don Gaspar had identified the charism of Don Biagio: he was a spiritual person and well-suited for ministry, one who loved the missions and retreats. Not included in the description are terms like qualities for leadership, wisdom, and organization. Don Gaspar needed a follower who had those gifts at his disposal. He himself had them, but was too involved and frustrated by his frenetic apostolic activity to exercise them. Don Biagio did not have those gifts.

It is necessary to understand this point, in order to appreciate clearly the personal journey of Don Biagio. Many aspects of his life would be incomprehensible if one did not enter into his world and did not understand his psyche.

Even though he was young, he was an indisputable authority in matters of morality and would become even more astute in that area. He was capable of stirring up the crowds. He was also capable of directing souls who sincerely wanted to grow in the life of the spirit. He would have been wonderful as the head of a group of volunteers who were attracted to him. He would not, however, have been able to direct a group of persons who were simply entrusted to him. He lacked an inclination to the study of human behavior. He was not predisposed to use methods involving patience, to value the thoughts of many in order to reach a synthesis. He did not have the wisdom to arrive at a consensus through lengthy and skillful process.

19 Letter 196 to Monsignor Belisario Cristaldi, January 26, 1819.

An example will serve to understand this point. The communities of Missionaries expected there to be varieties of responsibilities. There was the president, the most important position: he was the point of reference, a moral authority without real power. Then there was the superior, whose duty it was to manage the community. He may not have had the prestige of position, but had to have certain abilities (but reputation did not hurt, if it derived from specific abilities). There was the economo, who administered the financial resources, an archivist, and other positions. Don Biagio would have been a superb president, a mediocre superior, even worse as an economo, and would have been a confused archivist. In sum, if he were not able to stir people up by the appeal of his example, he would have simply left them to their own ends.

It is good to keep in mind that this is not meant to be a reductive characterization of Don Biagio. In a way he was like Jesus himself. Jesus was not the superior in a juridical sense of the community that he gathered around him. To those who wanted to follow him, he would say: "Do you want to leave? Then do it!" At the same time, he recognized the validity of juridical power and respected it, not having abolished even an iota of the law.

It is a matter of differing charisms, both necessary for human life. Simplicity is the crown of complexity and prophecy gives impetus to the law. Law alone would build a military community. Prophecy alone would feed only the extremes. Lacking the certainty of law, which assures an acceptable standard, even a community of heroes would live in a human jungle of bullies (*prepotenti*).

Chapter 7

ALWAYS LACKING A MIRACLE

In April 1819 Don Gaspar called Don Biagio to assist with the mission in Pievetorina.

There was no respite for the Missionaries, and the lack of members forced those who were available to travel a great deal. One must always take this into account when one evaluates the work of Gaspar and his first companions. Their activity was of two kinds: part of their ministry was in the mission house, and part was being “on the road.” It was inevitable that one ministry might compromise the other when the Missionaries had to switch between them frequently.

Besides Don Gaspar and Don Biagio, Don Adriano Tarulli, Bishop Francesco Luigi Piervisani, bishop of Nocera, and a diocesan priest from his diocese preached the mission. “The mission bore great fruit, and the heavenly blessings were evident,” according to Giovanni Merlini.

In those days there was much talk of an opportunity to open a house in the convent of Sant’Agostino in Pievetorina, abandoned by the Passionists. For a time they tried to open the house, and Gaetano Bonanni was interested in the project, but it seemed that the project hit a major obstacle. Merlini noted, with a bit of sarcasm, “The people of Pievetorina outdid themselves with their impassioned petitions.” Time passed without any solid progress. The hope of establishing of a house had been reduced to a mere glimmer, and all that was lacking was someone to snuff out that little candle. The mission fed the flame and it grew. It was precisely Don Biagio who worked the “miracle.” He said to the principal promoter, Signor Francesco Ceccarelli, who was becoming discouraged: “The Work is of God, thus it has so many thorns, obstacles, and difficulties; but I assure you that you will succeed in this undertaking!”

These words were enough to give the benefactor the determination he needed. Merlini, who had characterized both the citizens of Pievetorina and the Missionaries who had dealt with the issue in the past as halfhearted, explained what happened.

The missionary [Valentini] had such a determined way of speaking that in this mission he achieved a reputation for being a holy man. He galvanized Signor Ceccarelli and others into action. A special deputation was created to take up the collection and prepare what was needed for opening the house. Meanwhile, the missionaries who had left for the missions in the Marca and Romagna had promised to return as soon as possible to live there. A holy enthusiasm gripped the spirit of all in the town as well as of the surrounding villages.

These words surely describe Don Biagio: an incendiary, who with his fire sometimes resolved problems that an intellectual approach had failed to accomplish.

Officially, it was Bonanni that was supposed to carry out the project, as in the past. Don Gaspar made Don Biagio responsible for it. It was not, as already noted, his accustomed terrain. On May 6, after just returning to San Felice, he wrote to Gonnelli, the designated superior, that the way had been smoothed. Now they had to find the community. He offered his opinion about the house and those who would live there. He communicated the possibility of recruiting a young vocation who had been identified by Don Gaspar. Regarding the candidate, Giovanni Quintili, Valentini wrote: "He is a young man of seventeen years, in a fair state of health, physically able enough to preach, not without talents, but not finished with his studies. He has good manners, as one can see from the letters of attestation, and has the best intentions. He has brothers and sisters, and he can also afford to spend a hundred scudi."

A text like this would seem to contradict what we have written about Don Biagio. He seems to have the ability to strategize. There

is a plausible explanation. That letter was suggested by Don Gaspar. If one has a little familiarity with the mode of expression, one can detect certain hints of this.

Some days later, Don Biagio left to join Don Gaspar at Caldarola, and from there they went on to San Ginesio, Esanatolia, Apiro, Camerino, and Sarnano. It was the usual round of towns and villages. Everywhere they encountered enthusiastic crowds, extraordinary events, and genuine miracles. It was a distraction which Don Biagio found emotionally pleasing: to sow, to speak, to encourage, to bless, and to open up possibilities.

There was a great desire to reform the world, and during the missions it seemed that the world would indeed be reformed. The Company of Miracles had no doubt about this.

There would be many needs and good vocations. In the eyes of the Missionaries, the people were in a state of agonized expectation for the word of salvation, even if they were not aware of it. In their letters they spoke of unspeakable consolations, of conversions, and of tears. But how would they accomplish this? How many would be needed to reach out to all the sons and daughters of God, for whom the Blood of Jesus was shed? The members of the Company of Miracles had a strong sense of urgency and were tempted to overdo things. The probable result of this was to shorten one's life. Don Biagio was most in danger of doing this.

At Camerino the Company of Miracles was judged to be a company of fools by one person. In the city there appeared a poster, quite similar to those that would be put up to advertise shows. Under the title "Lyric-Comic Theater," the performance of a farce was announced. It listed the players and their roles. Don Gaspar was the romantic lead (*il primo amoroso*). Don Biagio and Monsignor Guglielmo Aretini-Sillani were the tenors, Tarulli, the bass, and Piervisani the soprano. Monsignor Vincenzo Strambi, who was not doing any of the solemn preaching, was assigned the role of walk-

on. Even if this intended to be derogatory, the part of the tenor given to a consumptive (even if now cured) ended up being something of a badge of honor.

After the mission of Sarnano, the Missionaries returned to San Felice. In the middle of July they were again traveling, on to Comacchio, in the delta of the Po River.

It was not a pleasant place to visit in the summer. The Po spread at that point and there were no banks. The region was made up of patches of land and stagnant expanses of water, and every year there were epidemics of malaria. Mortality was high during these epidemics. Monsignor Albertini, recently made bishop of Terracina, had purposely delayed his arrival in the diocese because the Pontine Marshes there were very similar to those in Comacchio.²⁰ The holy bishop, knowing of Gaspar's intention, advised prudence. He was resigned to Gaspar's decision when he learned that it was possible to meet with the faithful only during August.

The journey there was a disaster. The driver of the carriage, unfamiliar with the labyrinth of ponds and canals in which Comacchio was nestled, decided to take the coastal route. The dirt road was very wet and the wheels of the coach sank in the mud. When they finally reached their destination, the lodgings were not ready. For two days the Missionaries had temporary living quarters and meals that were scraped together. Don Gaspar delivered the introductory sermon. The vast cathedral appeared to be as empty as the stomach of the preacher, who had been fasting since morning.

The city, located on thirteen large islands connected by bridges, had incredible charm. One got the sense of an unfinished creation, as if God had forgotten to separate the water from dry land. The effect was that of an immense mirror, in which everything was duplicated with great exactness: the banks, the houses, the bridges

²⁰ It was of no avail, as he contracted malaria and died in November 1819.

and the fishermen who slid along on their flat boats, using poles to propel them. The unreal stillness of the water made it seem like oil.

As the days went by the mission began to take off, and one could see that the people were no different than people anywhere. They came from the neighboring towns to hear the Missionaries. There were even some groups from the Venetian States. Since they could not cross the border, they crowded along the bank of the river Mesola to hear the sermons. They had an incredible longing for God. In an environment that made the cares of daily life even harsher, there was a need for the transcendent.

The vicar general, Don Carlo Manasse, was won over by the mission. He was forty-nine years old, a native of the place, and became an enthusiastic admirer of Don Gaspar, who in turn held him in esteem.

From Comacchio the team went immediately to Canonica, which is near Rimini. From there Don Biagio, in his role as founder of the new house, wrote to Gonnelli that the foundation of Pievetorina had to conform to the pattern set by Giano and was to be arranged

...by you, by Canon Moscatelli, and by Marquis Tani The latter would at least be able to do a little good there on the occasion of the opening. You will consult with them and then you will please confirm the information with me as soon as possible. You and the two aforementioned members are to be ready to leave around the first days of October, after you hear from me again.

On September 18, Don Biagio wrote to Gonnelli again, since he had received no reply from him. He interpreted the lack of communication in a favorable light, thinking that everything was going along according to the instructions he had given. He encouraged them and sent along his best wishes. But things were not as he thought. In the meantime, Don Gaspar was traveling to

Rome to participate in the celebrations for the solemn entrance of Monsignor Albertini into the diocese of Terracina, Priverno, and Sezze. According to a detailed plan that had been worked out, that diocese was to become an example for all the other dioceses, and the entrance of the new bishop was to take on the characteristics of a popular mission meant to inaugurate an ongoing movement.

The event was a triumph. Albertini sent news of the occasion to Rome with letters full of great joy. The people were coming day and night to participate in the missions preached by his spiritual son Gaspar. Grace was triumphing everywhere; the world was changing. The Blood of Christ was washing away sin, curing sick souls, and endowing them with the splendor of holiness.

But on November 24, Monsignor Albertini died. Don Gaspar got word of the death from Terracina while on his way to Rome. He could not believe the news. For Don Gaspar it was the heaviest loss that he could have endured. Monsignor Francesco Albertini was his inspiration, his spiritual father.

It is revealing that he felt the need to give the news to Don Biagio with these words: "*Sacrificia medullata offeram tibi* 'I will offer you sacrifices full of marrow.' ²¹ All the same, let us not labor any less. Even if we have lost our common father, let us now have even greater courage, confident that he is assisting us with his prayers from Heaven, and let us be effective in seeing to the new foundation of the House of Pievetorina." In the moment in which he lost the support of Albertini, Don Gaspar clung to Don Biagio, who was now divided between San Felice and Pievetorina.

The house in Giano needed more money to continue in operation. Don Biagio did not know what to do. Prior to becoming a priest, he had all of his needs met in Porto Recanati when he lived there. After his ordination, believing he was about to die, he had developed a total lack of interest in the things of this world. Don

²¹ Cf. Psalm 65 (66):15. The Vulgate has *holocausta* for *sacrificia*

Gaspar told him to go to Cristaldi. Don Biagio decided to write to Cristaldi to request assistance on December 3, the feast of St. Francis Xavier. He composed a very well-reasoned text, in which he alluded to the honor that the new Institute was acquiring. He concluded by sending Cristaldi the best regards of all of his “dear companions.”

In Pievetorina, the Missionaries wanted the house to open at all costs within the octave of the feast of Saint Francis Xavier, since he was the principal patron of the new congregation. Impatient, Ceccarelli and Germani headed to San Felice to bring Don Biagio and the others to Pievetorina. They spent the night “in Bastardo, a place not far from San Felice.” The next morning they left for the abbey, but found only the young Pierantoni, who had been left to care for the place until Don Raffaele Brandimarte arrived. Don Biagio and the others had left for Pievetorina and had spent the night in Foligno.

The men from Pievetorina wasted no time and set out quickly in the hope of catching up to the Missionaries on the road. The latter were already on their way from Foligno to Pievetorina. According to Don Biagio’s orders, the group was made up of Don Luigi Moscatelli, Don Luigi Gonnelli, Don Adriano Tarulli, and Don Raffaele delli Franci. The party from Pievetorina met the Missionaries at Serravalle, where they had stopped.

The solemn entrance was scheduled for December 9. Five angels would not have been welcomed more warmly. “On entering Pievetorina, people shouted ‘Viva!’ They blessed God and there were tears everywhere. The sound of the bells and the firing of guns lasted for quite some time. The carriage was surrounded by a great crowd of people as they reached Sant’Agostino.”

Always cheerful, zealous, and full of enthusiasm, Don Biagio ended up being the unquestioned head of the community, because he had moral and not just juridical authority. By the express recommendation of Don Gaspar he also was tasked with supervising

the house in Giano. For one who had bilocated on one occasion, it would not be difficult. He promised to carry out orders “as he was able,” but that meant that he was swearing to carry out his orders completely. The role suited him. It was a logistical situation that suited the priest from Porto Recanati well.

During the first days of January, Don Biagio sent Don Gaspar a long letter, bubbling with enthusiasm. It was a report on the progress of the community, but also a declaration of profound filial affection for the rich life he enjoyed ever since he began to follow Gaspar.

The new house was “a continuous mission.” He added: Instead of diminishing, the crowds continue to grow at the functions of the church, at the confessional, and in the reception of the sacraments. With the help of God this is becoming a miracle. We are thankful for the Lord’s goodness. He wanted this work, entirely his, in this setting and it has been especially blessed by him. It was needed for Pievetorina as well as for the people in the surrounding area...Oh admirable providence of our most loving God...O ineffable consolation that I experience with my most beloved companions as I engage in such sweet reflections that are more pleasant than all the pleasures of the world.

He continued:

Now it would appear to me to be the most monstrous ingratitude were I not to have you participate in this by giving you frequent reports, while perhaps you find yourself bitter and anxious over other areas of the work. I am bound both by duty and by my affection for you to acknowledge that I must bring you some relief, and to let you enjoy what I am enjoying. I say this from the depths of my heart and without a hint of affectation, but by the true and pure sentiment of my spirit. I will not neglect telling you that I am very happy again with the fine companions with whom I live, not excluding Don

Vincenzo Bertoni, who is young and who should not be allowed to leave our houses since he is a man of great hopes and of irreproachable habits.

Pievetorina was very different from San Felice di Giano. It allowed the Missionaries more direct and continuous contact with the people. The apostolate was predominant. At San Felice, because of its solitude, the internal life of the community and its needs predominated. Of course, Don Biagio felt more at ease in Pievetorina. In his letter to the founder he noted that the air of Pievetorina was more suitable than that of Giano. In saying this he did not want to influence the will of his superior: "I wish to carry out only God's will, and thus I am totally in your hands, and with you I will recognize what is more in conformity with the divine will in all things."

With twelve men like Don Biagio, Don Gaspar could truly have changed the world. But he did not have them. He and Don Biagio were forced to spend their energy on hundreds of minute details, on a thousand problems, to deal with the organizational needs. Pievetorina and San Felice di Giano, while different, required no small commitment from Don Biagio, in addition to his enthusiasm.

Among other matters, there was the great number of legal issues to deal with in order to reclaim the ancient rights and income that would permit the ongoing existence of the house. This was not a strong point for the priest from Porto Recanati. Don Gaspar knew this well, just as we do now. Valentini was a charismatic person, capable of convincing anyone, but if someone were to present him with a sheaf of papers and begin to turn page after page with arguments and deductions, with protocol numbers and data, with rights and previous privileges, with transactions and so forth, Don Biagio would be lost. This was not because he was not intellectually able to follow the proceedings, but because such matters were foreign to his nature, antithetical to his way of thinking. He was a

poet of life. The poetry of the body was the soul; the highest poetry was a miracle; or the greatest miracle was poetry. Paperwork, if not an indication of sin, was certainly its consequence.

In April of 1820, Gaspar was traveling north of Rome, near Civitacastellana and Fabbriaca, not far from San Felice. He spontaneously decided to call Don Biagio to assist with the mission, and the disciple was happy to go. He wanted to be involved in the apostolic life again.

For some time, Gaspar had been confiding in Valentini, and he had chosen him to take the place of Albertini as his spiritual director. This meeting made that relationship official.

Meanwhile they were on the road again, but when they came in view of the lovely little town, a deputation came to meet them to find out what kind of mission they were bringing to them.

They asked:

– You don't mean to put on the kind of clown shows (*pulcinellate*) that the Passionists are accustomed to put on in their missions, do you?

Don Gaspar was disappointed. He defended the Passionists and their zeal. He also defended those methods that were being questioned. During the mission, he said, God calls the people to penitence. This is not only an internal and private act, but also public and physical. It thus seems reasonable, useful, and even necessary to involve the body, since it is the means for committing sins.

He was truly surprised at how certain prejudices had spread and were defended even in little towns located far from the cultural debate. It was the fashion. Don Gaspar continued to instruct the messengers while they approached the town. He was very effective and convinced them. Although initially prejudiced, they became enthusiastic supporters of the discipline. Many were seen whipping themselves during the mission along with the Missionaries on the platform. Was this also a miracle?

The mission in Spello followed and genuine miracles took place there.

A grand procession in honor of the Madonna was organized. With the solemn sermon, this rite would last at least three hours. The confraternities, invited to participate, let the Missionaries know that they would take part with unlit torches. Using lighted torches would be too expensive. Don Gaspar exhorted them to be generous.

– Be generous, and the Madonna will be generous with you!

Nothing else needed to be done, according to Don Biagio. The three confraternities, moved to obey like the servants at Cana at the words of Jesus, bought all the wax from the local stores and participated with their torches lit the whole time. The function lasted more or less three hours. When they took what remained of the wax back to the stores, instead of weighing less, it actually weighed more. The wax was weighed several times, since no one could believe what happened, but they had to accept the evidence. The shopkeepers actually had to pay the confraternities for the additional wax. It was regarded as a miracle.

One would not expect that Don Biagio would find an explanation for this. He could only note the event and keep it in memory, for his own consolation and that of the faithful. As the son of a miracle, he continued to become more acquainted with miracles. In his view, the apostolic times were being repeated. The preaching of Jesus was accompanied by many miracles. Don Biagio thought it normal that these would occur again. Jesus had promised that they would occur.

The miracle is the most convincing proof of the reign of God in the world, because it is an act by which he violates the laws which human experience considers governing the entire universe. Miracles are to be found in all religions. In the Bible, miracles serve to demonstrate the dominion of God over the world and the laws that govern it. This is the fundamental meaning of a miracle.

Christ worked miracles to confirm his divinity and to back up his words. The contrary occurred, however. The excitement over the miracles made his words appear boring. "Don't just talk," they seemed to be saying, "give us deeds." He told them he had water welling up for eternal life, and that he would give his body to eat and his blood to drink. He multiplied the loaves and fish; he healed people, transforming life itself.

Don Biagio knew this risk well and he saw it growing day by day around himself. At the same time he considered it natural, because the word of God cannot be severed from its power. Without miracles, he thought, preaching would lose its momentum.

Most of Valentini's miracles served to support his preaching. Performing a miracle was the positive resolution of the work of evangelization, in the sense that the multitudes would receive the message without further resistance and they would become hardened for their interior struggle. Miracles are for the most part unexpected and are not requested: the sudden death of a sinner, the voice heard many miles away, the incident of the assassins who wanted to kill the Missionaries, the wax that increased rather than being consumed by the flames. They are not a response to a precise question, but to the general question of the coming of the Reign of God. Miracles are primarily the result of God's initiative, to give a hand to his workers.

In Christ, this dynamism of miracles seems to be the opposite. The miraculous event, rather than tending to support faith, demands it. It is faith that works a miracle. And the greatest miracle, in that sense, is a life lived as an event that is fully saved: even in death which by itself alone appears to be complete defeat.

This type of miracle was also present in the experience of the Missionaries. The miracle of the wax is in this category, because the members of the confraternity were asked to sacrifice their candles for a vague promise of experiencing the generosity of God.

A completely unexpected and unsought miracle caused the people to shout. At the moment of blessing, two brilliantly shining stars shone over the head of Don Gaspar. Don Biagio was in the crowd. He heard the cry of astonishment, but said: "...I was being careful to observe good order and I did not notice the appearance of the stars."

The mission in Fiammenga followed, and afterwards the Missionaries returned to Pievetorina for the first official meeting of the members of the new house, on June 7, 1820. Seven members took part in the meeting. "A number pointing to a mystery," commented Don Antonio Santelli, "for the devotion of the times that is the object of the new Institute." It recalled the traditional seven sheddings of the Blood of Jesus, the basis for the principal prayers of the devotion. In the meeting they decided on some norms that would serve to fulfill the provisional rules of the Congregation.

Leaving Don Biagio at Pievetorina, Don Gaspar continued on to Giano, to give a series of exercises to lay people and clergy. In July, he became acquainted with a young priest from Spoleto, Don Giovanni Merlini, who would become one of the two pillars which, in Gaspar's words, would support the Institute.

Don Biagio did not stay long in Pievetorina. In the middle of July he met up with Don Gaspar and, after a course of spiritual exercises for the clergy, went on to give missions in Torricchio and Mergo, together with Don Innocenzo Betti and Don Luigi Moscatelli. He returned to Pievetorina, while Don Gaspar and the others went to the mission of Montemartano, where the Company of Miracles would add to its number a new member who would be of decisive importance: Don Giovanni Merlini.

Valentini devoted himself to preaching again during the first days of September, participating in the mission of Cannara, with Don Gaspar, Don Innocenzo, and Don Francesco Pierantoni. After

two weeks he went to San Felice and stayed there for a few weeks. In the same month he visited Pievetorina.

Unfortunately, the traveling life would not allow his projects to take root. The house in Pievetorina, born with such high hopes, ended up in the hands of two men who had not been well trained and integrated into the community. Merlini wrote: "We cannot exaggerate how many misfortunes beset this house in the first decade of its existence; we can only say that hell seems to have had a hand in this. We wanted it to close." In town they were asking that Valentini, Gonnelli, and Betti stay on. They were all able men, but they were needed for the missions.

In need of miracles, Gaspar called Valentini to Rome after Easter of 1821 so that he could accompany him on missions in Viterbo. Betti and Tarulli assisted in missions in Chiaravalle, Ascoli Piceno, and Offida.

They were memorable missions, no less than the other that preceded them. At Chiaravalle, right in the middle of preaching, a whirlwind arose that seemed to be about to sweep away everything, even the platform erected in the crowded piazza. Was this not the work of the devil, angry with the Missionaries? In the sacristy at that moment, many were uncertain what to do. Don Gaspar gave the order to carry out the crucifix and to process as if nothing happened. As soon as the crucifix appeared on the piazza, "the wind ceased and the air remained calm." The people acclaimed this a miracle, and the preaching was a great success.

Taking advantage of the sanctuary of the Holy House of Loreto which was nearby, Don Gaspar wished to go to thank the Virgin. Don Biagio also had a very special motive for going to "his" Madonna. There his adventure had begun, and it had changed his life. The Mass that the two celebrated was a time of great happiness. During the thanksgiving Don Gaspar confided to his spiritual director, Don Biagio, that he had heard an inner voice saying to him: "Prepare to

suffer! Prepare to suffer!” What mystery did the mysterious words conceal? Don Biagio replied: “We are ready for everything. *Portae inferi non prevalebunt!* ‘The gates of hell will not prevail!’²²

The premonition was quickly confirmed in the mission at Ascoli Piceno.

From Loreto the Missionaries went down to Porto Recanati, where the Valentini family was waiting anxiously for them. They were intercepted by messengers from the bishop, who ordered them to stop until they received further orders. Don Gaspar and his companions then journeyed to Civitanova and there, in the convent of the Reformed Franciscans, they waited for a more detailed explanation. Since this was not forthcoming, Don Biagio and Don Innocenzo Betti went to find the bishop to find out how things stood. He requested a mission and the unexpected change in his attitude was perplexing.

What was at the heart of the problem? The bishop, Monsignor Giovanni Francesco Capelletti, had allowed himself to be convinced by certain objections. He said to the two that he did not want a superficial show (*esteriorità*). At that time of the Enlightenment the most enlightened cities did not want this “trash” (*anticaglie*). Once again, the phrase “clown show” appeared in the bishop’s words. The bishop enumerated some of the elements he objected to: presenting snakes, devils, etc.

Don Biagio and Don Innocenzo replied that the accusations were false. They had never engaged in those practices. If, however, he was referring to the use of the discipline, to penitential processions, yes, they were part of the mission, and produced great spiritual fruit. Could his Excellency deny the value of penitence?

The bishop replied curtly:

– None of that. I want you to preach in the manner of the apostles. Did they engage in that sort of mischief?

²² Cf. Matt 16: 18

Don Biagio replied, half serious and half joking,

– If your Excellency could obtain for us the power of miracles, as the apostles had, we will renounce our methods.

The bishop did not respond to the provocation. Don Innocenzo insisted:

– If we cannot make use of our method, we will fall back on the spiritual exercises.²³

He thought that the bishop, who was committed to the mission, would be convinced. Instead, he allowed them to conduct the spiritual exercises, as long as they were devoid of the clown shows. The two Missionaries were returning to Don Gaspar to relate the conversation to him, when the Oratorian Vincenzo Giovannelli, who had a great deal of influence on the bishop and who was taking care of some necessary business at the bishop's house, learned what had happened. He went to the bishop immediately and convinced him to allow the Missionaries free rein to preach the mission in their accustomed manner.

– You will see that you will have nothing to regret, he said.

The bishop gave in, but not to the point of participating in the introductory ceremony. A light rain gave him the excuse to absent himself.

A noted sectarian, who had gone to hear the sermon with the intention of being provocative, began uttering derogatory phrases in a theatrical manner. He died soon after, uttering those derogatory phrases. The news of the tragic event made the rounds in the city. The mission made such an impression that a large part of the citizenry went to Offida, for the beginning of the mission there, to attest to the miracles they had witnessed.

After this and other preaching engagements, the Missionaries returned to Pievetorina for a few days of rest.

²³ This could be a reference to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius.

Chapter 8

IN THE WILDS OF LAZIO

Don Gaspar, with a fledgling Institute that counted only a few members, thought that he could take on an immense geographical area: the entire Papal States. The Missionaries were not able to take care of the internal needs of the two mission houses at San Felice and Pievetorina. But Don Gaspar was who he was, and Don Biagio, now his confessor and spiritual director, stood by his side, bold and confident. He was certainly not the man ready to rein in the irrepressible founder. Rather, it was the founder who had to be the one to put the brakes on the disciple.

In their conversations they planned to focus on southern Lazio, where it was not the sectarians, but the bands of criminals, who were harassing the people. They would commit themselves to ridding the area of brigandage, a project dear to Albertini, who had in a certain way already attempted to do this when he was bishop of Terracina. The project was harshly interrupted by his untimely death.

Brigandage had rendered the southern provinces of the Papal States so corrupt and unsafe that they were known as “Italian Africa.”²⁴ Even Don Biagio used this expression, which seemed to him to be the most appropriate. The ferocious beasts, which popular fantasy placed in a generic Africa, were the criminals of Campagna and Marittima.²⁵ The barbaric customs, that had come to be attributed to the peoples of the mysterious continent of Africa, flourished in the area south of Rome.

After the death of Albertini, there was a rumor that Gaspar himself might be created bishop of Terracina. He declined, instead promoting Don Carlo Manasse, of Comacchio, a man resistant to

²⁴ This could be taken as an offensive comment in our world today, but it reflects the misperceptions and prejudices of the era.

²⁵ This is the title of an administrative district of the Papal States, encompassing an area in the southwest of the Province of Lazio.

the malarial climate of the area.²⁶ Unfortunately the beginning of the episcopate of Manasse coincided with the kidnapping at the seminary of Terracina.²⁷ It had a traumatic impact on the bishop and instead he deserted his see. Don Gaspar had to work hard to convince him to return. Italian Africa needed more than bodies hardened to malaria. What was needed was hearts trained to deal with such violence.

The towns of the diocese, in particular Sonnino, presented a barbaric image in themselves. The walls around the gates, for example, were covered with severed human heads. The macabre trophies were meant to glorify the success of the forces of justice against the criminals. These were the heads of the bandits who had been captured and brought to justice, or of criminals killed in the frequent skirmishes. Besides glorifying the suppression of banditry, they were to serve also as a deterrent to those who harbored the illusion that they could make their fortunes through criminal activity. Don Gaspar said rather graphically that “in certain towns there were more heads hanging than there were stones.” It was evident, however, that this method was not working. The number of brigands, rather than diminishing, grew larger.

The project for ridding the area of bandits was called “the project of moral and religious culture” of the provinces of Campagna and Marittima. There were plans for the founding of six mission houses in the area and for the continuous preaching of popular missions. The idea was to present the Gospel again in order to break down the hatreds that were the foundation of brigandage. Such banditry was originally a reaction to obligatory military conscription, but by this

²⁶ As noted in the previous chapter, Comacchio had a climate similar to that of the Pontine Marshes. He may have developed a resistance to malaria or was naturally immune.

²⁷ This is a reference to the kidnapping and murder of a professor and two seminarians by the brigands of southern Lazio.

time the resistance had degenerated into a network of crimes like theft, murder and vendettas.

Gaspar now went to Rome after the challenging missions in the Marches and after a difficult time spent at Giano and Pievetorina. In Rome he gathered his most able missionaries: Biagio Valentini, Innocenzo Betti, and Giovanni Merlini. Cardinal Pietro Francesco Galeffi, bishop of Albano, wanted them to spread the Gospel throughout his diocese. For five months a mission house had been open there, the third house of the Congregation. The missions of Albano were to be a test in an area bordering on the heartland of brigandage as well as an example of the effectiveness of the cure, prior to going to the heart of the bandits' territory.

The mission in Albano took place in August and September 1821. A mission in Genzano followed in September. After this mission, the Missionaries returned to their responsibilities in the mission house, waiting to see what would happen. Don Biagio and Don Giovanni Merlini waited in Albano. The project for the salvation of Campagna and Marittima was approved by Pius VII in October of 1821. Two weeks later, Gaspar and Merlini departed to reconnoiter the area, to identify the sites where they would locate the work and where it would have the greatest results. In a short time Don Biagio was in charge of the house in Albano.

The preference accorded to Merlini on this occasion was a recognition of the personality differences of the "two champions" of the Institute, as Gaspar began to call them. In Don Giovanni, those attitudes lacking in Don Biagio were striking, and vice versa. Merlini was not swept away by enthusiasm; he was a man of few but sometimes cutting words, meticulous, and introverted. He had a preference for mathematics and for the arts. As for the rest, he had the same strong faith, the same impassioned admiration for Don Gaspar, and a profound sense of self-denial.

The project about to be launched enjoyed the benefit of public financing to the tune of a thousand scudi for each foundation, to be paid out of the military budget, which was huge. The six mission houses were to have enough staff so that each would carry out twelve missions each year. In successive cyclical waves, each area would be subjected to a forceful invasion of evangelization, with popular missions of a new type, which would assure that the results of the mission would continue by means of permanent associations that would include both laypeople and clergy. The chain of vendetta would be broken; love would be re-established by the rule of law, the reign of true religion.

In order to carry out this plan, the new Institute would need about thirty additional Missionaries. At the time, there were not even twenty, counting both permanent and temporary members. The notion that preaching could change the world was held as a given; the weak point in the operation was the lack of forces to carry out that preaching.

On November 16, 1821, Don Biagio went to Sermoneta to take possession of the place where the mission house was to be established, while Don Gaspar was making more frequent contacts so that the sites already identified would be available to him. Bishop Manasse had made available old convents, similar to that of Sermoneta, in Sonnino and Terracina. They were the very sites already identified by the late Albertini.

While this was taking place in southern Lazio, Don Biagio's younger brother was married in Porto Recanati, in November 1821. Without a doubt the times were changing. Not even an oligarch like Crispino could keep his sons under his thumb.

On December 3, the first of the six mission houses was founded in Terracina, after a mission preached by Don Gaspar, Don Biagio, and Don Giacomo Gabellini. The house was within sight of the enthusiastic bishop. In the cathedral of Terracina, Bishop Albertini,

the founder of the devotion to the Precious Blood and the man who envisioned those mission houses, was sleeping the sleep of the just. Gaspar was taking care to found those houses with strict adherence to the wishes of his spiritual father and teacher. The beautiful seaside city seemed to be on its way to becoming the heart of the missionary Institute. There, through the efforts of an auxiliary missionary and with the determined support of the men of the Archconfraternity, a community of women was established, a dream of the late Bishop Albertini. Bishop Manasse, very much a man formed by Don Gaspar, saw his episcopate as a continuation of that of Albertini.

Unfortunately, in Terracina Gaspar was stricken with violent fevers. "In the course of that illness," relates Valentini, "I took him to Rome to escape the unhealthy air of that city." The once moribund Valentini, the simple soldier, was now caring for his hyperactive commanding officer. The misfortunes of life force ordinary soldiers to take the initiative. While Gaspar was convalescing, he entrusted the care of his troops to his favorite disciple. They were Don Luigi Achille, Don Luigi Mosconi, Father Barsotti, Bishop Piervisani, Don Francesco Pierantoni, Don Adriano Tarulli and Don Vincenzo Mancini. With the help of Bishop Manasse, they continued the planned preaching in Sonnino and Sermoneta and established the remaining foundations.

When Don Gaspar thought that he had recovered sufficiently, he went with Don Biagio to Albano, where Merlini was, to continue his convalescence. There he preached the Christmas novena and the vigil, and, with his faithful companion, set off for Segni, where he had promised the bishop that he would preach a popular mission. He hoped to open the fourth house of the Congregation there.

Heavy rains were falling, along with a raging and icy wind. It seemed as if they were within the bellows of powerful organ with an infinite number of pipes. It was mournful music, insulting,

satanic. With every step the Missionaries risked “being thrown to the ground from their horses in those steep mountains.” Bundled in their cloaks, with the water soaking them, they let their mounts take the lead. The horses followed the road and advanced methodically.

Those were the mountains of the brigands. They were somewhat on the periphery, but the brigands came there frequently, since the area offered a good hiding place in the thick woods. Within those forests lived dozens of the bandits, organized into bands, who controlled the social life of the area. Banditry had always been present sporadically along the lonely and wild roads between Rome and Naples. Now it had become widespread in the troubled years of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Harsh laws dating from darker earlier periods were now being invoked.

Many young men wanted to escape the obligatory conscription imposed by Napoleon, and they were forced to become criminals. They needed to survive, and this led them to illegal activities. Habitual criminal activity had made them professionals in a trade that guaranteed them an income that would have been unheard of through honest work. The number and extent of these criminals had convinced many that this population was beyond redemption.

The Missionaries firmly believed in the possibility of saving these marginalized men who still preserved some strange forms of religious practice.²⁸ Don Gaspar and Don Biagio went to Segni in the downpour to lay the foundation for making that possibility a reality and to convince as many as possible that this was a good decision.

When Bishop Francesco Stracchini, who had called the Missionaries to Segni, saw the two, he was surprised. He said: “on such a horrible day...not even wolves leave their caves.” Don Gaspar could have replied that the good shepherd is at the side of his sheep even when the wolf does not leave his cave. But he answered simply

²⁸ The author may be referring to possible links to Freemasonry and other secret societies. These often drew on concepts and practices from Catholicism.

that the Lord had saved them from all danger and that they were ready to begin the mission.

The preaching went well, but they were not able to establish a house there as they had hoped. With unwavering determination they pressed on to Carpineto, but they were not successful there, either. The missions, as usual, produced great results that were considered remarkable where they counted most: conversion. The proposed foundations were another story, since they required suitable sites, ready funding, and a secure income.

The renown of the amazing preaching combined with the affection sparked by the foundations in Sonnino, Terracina, and Sermoneta. The favorable acclaim led to great interest in the themes of the Missionaries' preaching. Those who were most favorable were the poor, the class to which the great majority of the brigands belonged. The more humanitarian approach to brigandage was making its power felt, and it was identified with the Missionaries, who pursued the path of recovery and who opposed those who advocated harsh legal measures. There was no need for special laws, but rather respect for existing laws, but on the part of all involved. In particular, what was needed was a sincere conversion to the law of God, in the light of which all stood guilty – even the Church, the Papal States, and its civil servants.

Not all would understand the effectiveness of the Missionaries' ministry, nor would they value the effect of the so-called "pious works" that the Missionaries initiated at their mission houses and at the end of each mission. These works consisted of gathering the faithful in five different associations, called *ristretti*:²⁹ boys, girls, women, men, and clergy. Anyone could join these associations and they enrolled many who had been excluded from the old and sclerotic confraternities of the day.

²⁹ From the Italian *restringere* meaning to restrict. They were called *ristretti* because they were associations with inscribed members, hence a "restricted" membership, even if they were open to all.

The idea of taming the so-called “human beasts” of the mountain region excited Don Biagio, who was very successful in dealing with people on a personal basis. The idea of putting an end to the “Italian Africa” made him feel even more fully to be a missionary. He dreamed of the great miracle of universal reconciliation. It did not seem impossible to him. He had been present at too many miracles to think that this was impossible! He had come to know that in the case of miracles, one could not reject the collaboration was also required for them to take place. In the case in question, humanly speaking, the project was truly unbelievable.

Brigandage in its final stages was seen as especially wicked from a religious viewpoint. There were rumors that it had links to Freemasonry. In the past the criminals had always been respectful of ecclesiastical institutions and religion, but now sacrilegious acts were beyond counting. The recent kidnapping at the seminary in Terracina and the attack on the Camaldolese monks in Frascati were only the most notable episodes among many other similar acts.

The kidnapping of the Camaldolese monks had caused a great stir throughout Italy. In Porto Recanati this had elicited a particularly emotional response, because it involved Bernardino Carradori, the superior of the community, a relative of Pius VII, and a native of Porto Recanati, with ties to the Valentini family. Thus, when word arrived that Don Biagio was about to take on responsibility for redeeming these same bandits, there was a great uproar in Recanati and Porto Recanati. Father Bernardino was still convalescing from the injury he had received while he was being freed in the territory near Sonnino. He feared for his life. His healing, which was accompanied by some unusual events, was attributed to Saint Francis Xavier.

Brigandage was breaking with its own roots and more and more often took aim at church institutions. In order to avoid a repetition of these sad events, in December of 1821 the Secretariat of State ordered that the mission houses exposed to assaults by the

bandits be closed until matters improved. This peremptory order was to be carried out within twenty-four hours. The provisions of the order had prompted the closing of the three foundations that had already been made, since all were in isolated places, exposed at night to danger from the brigands. In Sonnino and Sermoneta, the houses were established inside the town walls. In Terracina, the Missionaries had to move in with the bishop in his residence. It was not a good solution because the presence of the Missionaries interfered with the functioning of the cathedral and vice versa.

The above facts made the change of direction in the conduct of the brigands undeniable, but they did not change Don Gaspar's attitude toward the restoration of those wayward men. For him, their hearts, like those of all people, remained Catholic. This conviction became a neuralgic point in the activity of the Missionaries, especially on the social level. Such a conviction would kindle enthusiasm in Valentini's heart and lead him to dream of universal conversion.

After the mission in Carpineto, Don Biagio followed Don Gaspar to Sermoneta. It was now the end of January 1822. The mission house had been arranged in the hospice abandoned by the Capuchins in the city. The Missionaries went to the house daily in order to maintain their right to hold on to it. In obedience to the law, they would come back to the city only to spend the night there.

One night some bandits, who were not aware that the house had been transferred, but who knew that Canon del Bufalo was in Sermoneta, came to the house and climbed the fence. Cautiously they knocked on the gate. No one responded, no one shouted out. Certain that no one was in the house, they left. On the following night, having been informed that the Missionaries were now within the city, a smaller number went to the hospice of the Capuchins and asked to speak with Don Gaspar. One can only imagine how efficient the surveillance of the police was.

Don Gaspar assured them if they would surrender immediately, their lives would be spared. He could not guarantee any kind of pardon for them, nor did he think that would be just, given the crimes they had committed. A few years in prison, in a safe and benevolent site, would be necessary, both as expiation and to demonstrate that their repentance was authentic, as well as to protect them from other brigands. After a time the fierce hatreds would die down. Such hatred had been one of the chief triggers of brigandage in the first place.

The proposal seemed to disappoint the expectations of the bandits and perhaps also those of Don Biagio. If it were up to him, he would have thrown himself headlong into the corner of those men who showed their intention to reform themselves, and he would have stood guarantee for them before the whole world.

The response of Don Gaspar was wiser and more considered. This was also to be a norm for all the Missionaries. He wanted to head off any excessive zeal on their part, since he knew it would not always be as innocent and disinterested as that of Don Biagio. Obtaining the surrender of the bandits had become a lucrative business, especially for priests and the local gentry, because the surrenders brought with them the rewards of money and honor. The Missionaries had to keep themselves clear of that aspect of the problem. They limited themselves to proclaiming the gospel. The negotiations went beyond their mission. They invited the State to be magnanimous and the brigands to surrender, according to the principle of Pius VII: "everyone has something for which to be pardoned."

Don Biagio developed a genuine affection for the poor criminals. Who knows to what lengths he would go for their redemption? Rather, he judged them to be animated by better attitudes and thus already saved. In the following months it appeared to him that they did not wish to frighten him and thus hid themselves when he passed by. For the same reason they laid down their arms before

presenting themselves to talk with him. He was completely opposed to the soldiers, who, when they would encounter the Missionaries, and him in particular, put their hands to their weapons with a certain nervousness and hostility.

Before resuming their preaching, Don Gaspar and Don Biagio went on a round of visits to see how things were going in the diocese of Terracina. Certainly, the three houses were not what they were planned to be in the plans of the famous project. The house in Terracina was about to close, because provisional accommodations could not be found in town. The houses in Sermoneta and Sonnino were in somewhat precarious positions.

In the following months Gaspar and Valentini preached missions in Acuto, Frosinone, Vallecorsa, Norma, and Piglio. The mission in Vallecorsa would become famous for its connection with Saint Maria De Mattias. The future foundress of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, according to the testimony of Merlini, saw the zeal of Gaspar del Bufalo for the salvation of souls and conceived a great desire to imitate him in this. Elsewhere, we have tried to deal with the problem of a certain tendency to mythologize the event and the role of the founder. We must highlight the part played by Don Biagio on this occasion and point out how an accumulation of events are attributed to a single protagonist.

A reliable witness assures us: "Don Biagio, who went together with the venerable del Bufalo to the mission in Vallecorsa, earned the esteem of all as a holy man." What follows here regarding the bond between the people of Vallecorsa with Don Biagio Valentini will confirm that in that mission, forever famous and linked to the name of Gaspar, Valentini was no less famous or decisive than Gaspar.

In Frosinone and Vallecorsa the preaching bore the fruit of two new bases for establishing mission houses. The base in Frosinone was a problem and was entrusted to Don Giovanni Merlini, who was called there suddenly from

Albano. The house in Vallecorsa which, by contrast, enjoyed the people's enthusiastic support, was entrusted to Don Turibbio Lenta. At first glance this project seemed to a question of adapting previously existing structures and was thus more modest in scope.

Unfortunately Merlini became seriously ill in Frosinone, just before Easter, in April 1822. Don Biagio and Don Luigi Gonnelli arrived to help out. Don Gaspar was on his way from Norma to Piglio. Don Biagio did the best he could between Frosinone and Piglio, where the needs of the mission were most pressing, while Merlini went back to Albano to recover.

In Frosinone Don Biagio had left the people with fond memories of his participation in the mission. On Easter of 1822, no longer "overshadowed" by the personality of the founder, he took the field and became a central character in his own right, without, however, wanting to do so. After a few weeks he became, in the collective estimation of the people, the wonderworker par excellence of the Company of Miracles.

By now we are acquainted with his personality. He was outwardly charming, which was something of a miracle, given his exterior appearance, and in addition he was a man of action, always inspired and prophetic. His confidence in Providence was confirmed by others' confidence in him. He was effective and also a risk taker, because the miracles did not always happen.

In addition to those miracles, one must take note of some "failures," a term not quite accurate but which will have to serve for lack of a better term. Don Biagio did not promise miracles; he preached and practiced a faith that could lead to a miracle. When one occurred it stirred up the excitement of the people. A hundred unanswered prayers did not lessen Don Biagio's confidence, nor did this discourage the requests of those in need. For his part, the Missionary had other resources, which he instilled in others, to strengthen the force of a natural dramatic event.

His rising prominence was not a phenomenon limited to Frosinone. It was confirmed wherever he spent some time in the missions. Even Don Gaspar joked about it, saying with feigned sadness: “Now everything is *Don Biagio! Don Biagio!* And we are nobodies.” In his meetings with Merlini, who was also proving himself to be a talented man, although in different ways, Gaspar revealed how pleased he was with Merlini. “The Blackbird is flying high!”³⁰

Don Gaspar had entrusted the prickly problem of launching a feminine branch of the Archconfraternity of the Precious Blood to Merlini and Valentini. Attempts at founding an order of sisters had already been made. Albertini had chosen Countess Caterina Bentivoglio Orsi of Bologna, with whom he had become acquainted during the exile imposed by Napoleon on the priests who refused to swear an oath of fidelity to his regime.

A school for girls had been open in Frosinone for a short time. It was being run by a very virtuous woman, Teresa Spinelli. Guided by a priest of the Congregation of Christian Doctrine (*un padre dottrinario*), Teresa did not conceal her plan to found her own religious institute. She had not yet decided on the rule and spirituality for the institute. She felt drawn to Augustinian spirituality. Her encounter with Valentini produced, inevitably, a profound understanding between them. The appearance of the two institutes in Frosinone at the same time appeared to be providential to Don Biagio. He proposed that Spinelli adopt the spirituality of the Precious Blood. She was enthusiastic.

He did not put up any opposition when he became more familiar with the plan and learned that a foundress was already waiting in Rome, ready to go to Frosinone at the right moment. For him, Spinelli’s humility was a guarantee. The foundation in Terracina, which was much further developed, experienced greater difficulties because of the recalcitrance of the founder, Don Luigi Locatelli, when saw his own importance waning.

³⁰ This is a play on words in Italian. The Italian word for blackbird is *merlo*.

Don Biagio, with his natural tendency to act without delay, had a large crucifix on which the blood had been painted brought from Rome. The little community of Spinelli now became part of the family of the Archconfraternity, accepting its prayers and rules. In November, the holy woman, now being directed by Valentini, went to Rome to meet the Countess, and with her returned to Frosinone.

Bentivoglio made a deep impression on the people of Frosinone, especially on the upper middle class. The attraction of her social class, her provenance from “learned Bologna,”³¹ and the fact that she had left her family to dedicate herself to religious life, confirmed her deep spirituality. She was truly a very religious woman who sincerely desired to become holy. She was, however, not successful in freeing herself from her noble conditioning. The veneration given her by the people of Frosinone was generally limited to some of the upper class, in contrast to the ordinary people, who found Spinelli more acceptable. Unfortunately the disagreements called for the intervention of the Missionaries (because the Countess was considered their creation) in a work that began without them.

The popular clamor, the factions, and Valentini’s distance from the scene, led to the failure of the enterprise, which had been born with such high hopes. The Countess expected that the Missionaries would line up to support her. Both Don Biagio and Don Luigi Gonnelli, seeing that the dissension was intractable, kept their distance, while openly supporting Spinelli. An embittered Bentivoglio decided to return to Rome. Spinelli went back to what had inspired her originally, and her institute took another direction.

All of this happened while Don Biagio was preaching an extraordinary series of missions in Teramo, Campli, Civitella, Bellante, Montorio, and Corropoli. These kept him busy from the beginning of November until the end of December 1822.

³¹ Because of its venerable university, Bologna is often referred to as *la dotta*, literally, “the learned.”

Chapter 9

THE POET AND THE BANDIT

The Missionaries of the Precious Blood carried out their work in the territory of the bandits, as part of the plan of “religious cultivation.” Their activity was, and continues to be, attributed to Don Gaspar del Bufalo. The phenomenon has been pointed out here and elsewhere: a process of simplification and the creation of myths, initiated by the very men who followed Don Gaspar. They were often his principal collaborators on the practical level, but were indebted to his leadership. It was homage and spontaneous recognition, certainly deserved, for the role Gaspar played. He was sometimes as a pioneer, sometimes offered moral support, and sometimes forcefully defended the project before the government.

We see the same phenomenon if we pay careful attention to Gaspar’s treatment of his mentor, Francesco Albertini. According to Gaspar’s comments, it would appear that the activity of the founder would have been limited to the scrupulous and obsessive implementation of the will of his spiritual father and teacher, both while he was alive and even more so after his death. It is as if his death had rendered Albertini’s will sacred and irrevocable.

This phenomenon of simplification and myth creation holds true when examining the life of Gaspar. Reading the deposition of Don Biagio on Gaspar’s missions, or the biography of the founder written by Antonio Santelli, who relied on Valentini, it would seem that Gaspar carried out the missions more or less by himself, and that the other Missionaries followed him only to help, amazed at the wonderful results and at the miracles that accompanied them.

Of course, it did not happen like that. This is quite apparent when examining the activities in Campagna and Marittima. If one takes a close look at the letters, calculating the dates and the individual ventures that supported the effort to win back the

brigands, one discovers that Gaspar participated in these in a rather marginal way compared to some of his Missionaries. This was due to reasons that were beyond Gaspar's control, but they are reasons that should be noted for a complete account of the facts.

For example, Don Biagio, in his deposition, felt the need to defend Gaspar from the accusation of absenteeism. This is a sign that such an unjust rumor existed at the time.

From all that I have said up to this point, one can see that, even though he was not always present in every area of the provinces, he was, however, subjected to all of the usual sufferings with all the other confreres, and he kept in contact by letter from one point to another to prepare them for dangerous trips, either with him or with other confreres, so that they would keep up the preaching which he had planned for the spiritual cultivation of those people and even the brigands themselves who wanted to hear once again the sermons and the missions given by the missionaries.

In giving an account of the operations that took place in the territory of the brigands, one should note that Don Giovanni Merlini, Don Camillo Rossi, Don Luigi Gonnelli, and Don Biagio were more directly involved in the ministry there than Gaspar. The presence of Don Luigi Locatelli and Don Pietro Pellegrini (we might call them "hybrid" Missionaries), was unusual. Although the work of these two was not carried out in conformity with the criteria established by the Missionaries, it still fell within the bounds of the humanitarian undertaking that they promoted. In the end, their work came to model the charismatic figure of Gaspar del Bufalo in his work on behalf of the brigands. It was ministry that he was responsible for, because he had persisted in wanting to see it carried out.

The historian can at least narrate events truthfully, attributing actions that myth has lumped together to an individual responsible, and, at the same time, making note of the myth, which is even of

historical value. It is a message codified for posterity. It is beyond discussion that humanly speaking, zealous priests, and even saints such as those who encouraged Don Gaspar, would not have been who they were had they not encountered the great Missionary. In the same way, Don Gaspar, humanly speaking, would not be who he is, nor would have accomplished what he did, if he had not met Albertini and had not collaborated with those whom he won over to his ideas.

Unfortunately we know little about the concrete activity of Don Biagio in Campagna and Marittima during the period of brigandage. This fits with his usual behavior, since he appears to be concerned with eliminating every trace of himself, whether out of humility or because of that disinterest in worldly things already alluded to. "We are nothing but a rough cloth on which God embroiders a magnificent design. We must not stand in his way and we must not forget that by ourselves we are and remain rough cloth."

The saddest chapter in Valentini's ministry with the brigands was not with the criminals themselves, but with the army that was sent to fight them. This is a summary of his view:

First of all...the soldiers do not appreciate the sacred ministry, as if it were without results... But then, when they become aware that little by little brigandage is diminishing, they begin to fear that their double pay and the other extraordinary compensation that they receive will also diminish with the end of brigandage.

As a consequence, the soldiers were arrogant and obstinate. One should not forget that the state financed the expenses of the mission houses from the military budget, and that there was a very lively dispute about whether to use force or understanding to solve the problem. The military was, of course, the armed fist of the law.

When they found themselves having to pass the time in such a lonely situation, with the brigands on one side and the soldiers on

the other, the Missionaries did not know whom to fear more. Don Biagio feared the soldiers more. He is quite harsh in this regard. No one has words clearer and more cutting than his. "The armed forces who are to stamp out brigandage require double pay and substantial sums for each captured brigand's head. There is, additionally, the Extraordinary Commission, which consumes the public finances and those of the municipalities respectively."

No less severe is his judgment of the civil servants. These, by way of "politics and scheming," placed many obstacles to the conduct of the popular missions. They were prejudiced, and they accused the Missionaries of fanaticism. They said that the pope would have done better if he had sent "executioners or teachers to refine that barbaric province and civilize it." He marveled at how the municipalities would incur "immense expenses for dance halls and two beautiful theaters, while for a pious work of the sort that the Holy Father was backing, they would refuse to grant the small sum of forty scudi."

As far as the brigands, the vision of reality on the part of Don Biagio approached that of the *Fioretti* of Saint Francis of Assisi. We are assured that the brigands had such affection for the Missionaries that they would hide themselves when they saw them passing by, so as not to frighten them. If they would have been able and had they a more acceptable appearance, they would have thrown themselves at the feet of the Missionaries "in an act of their devotion." From the mountains where they were forced to live, they wanted to know the content of the sermons, and "hearing about [the sermons] from those who knew the content, they wept from compunction."

Don Biagio's disdain for the military was promptly returned by them. Since they were agents of the Papal States, they could not vent their spite against a priest, especially against a priest who was widely considered to be a saint. Their opposition was disguised.

The closure of the isolated mission houses revealed a false solicitude for the Missionaries, for example. Using the pretext of the welfare of the Missionaries, they had sought to cripple their activities and to suppress the institution of the mission house.

One time, while traveling between Sonnino and Sermoneta, Don Biagio found himself surrounded by a group of soldiers. He was accompanied only by a servant. The captain was speaking harshly and disrespectfully. His intention appeared to be good:

– How can you permit yourself to travel without our escort? If they kidnap you, it will be our responsibility to save you or it fall to the state to spend thousands of scudi to ransom you, as already has happened.

Don Biagio knew nothing of diplomacy and his abandonment to God made him strong and bold to the point of being provocative. He replied that his mission was legitimate and the seminarians of Terracina, as well as the Camaldolese of Frascati, were kidnapped from their houses in the middle of the night, when the military should have been watching out for their safety. Why do they persist in opposing the activity of the Missionaries during the light of day if they do not know how to take care of them while they are together in one place and locked in for the night?

The captain would have liked to hit the Missionary and perhaps even strike him dead, had they been alone. He could not do this in the presence of his troops. He vented his anger on the servant. He had him imprisoned and took him to the jail of Priverno. Don Biagio protested in vain, saying that he would assume all responsibility for his assistant. It took a few days before Don Biagio, through an angry complaint, could spring the poor man from jail.

The opposition between the military and the Missionaries grew. Because of the malevolent rumors and the pressures of the government apparatus, the financial support of the mission houses was reduced. The subsidy of a thousand scudi included the

maintenance of the houses and the offices of the churches. The buildings occupied by the Missionaries had been abandoned for more than a decade as a result of the suppression of religious orders during the Napoleonic era. They needed radical restoration.

The reduction in the subsidy and the psychological climate that led to this was a difficult test for their missionary vocation and for their economic wellbeing. Thus Don Biagio commented: “Many of our companions are discouraged at the horror of that Italian Africa, because of the situation and the lack of what is needed to live, as well as out of fear of losing their lives at the hands of the brigands and of the army.”

What discouraged the others had the power of stirring up Don Biagio’s enthusiasm. When someone would suggest that he moderate his efforts and the risks he took, he would reply with one of his maxims: “One must not clip the wings of the dove, that is, of the Holy Spirit!”

One who was not acquainted with him might have judged him a fanatic: one who believes the Holy Spirit is behind every action completed and every thought that goes through one’s mind. In reality he maintained: “In the path of perfection one must begin with suffering love, then one continues with a committed love (*amore operoso*). One ends up – only at the end of the path – with triumphant love.” He considered himself to be in the phase of committed love.

He was constantly on the move along with his other companions, but with greater passion and inspired emphasis. He spent time in all the mission houses where brigandage existed: Terracina, Sonnino, Vallecorsa, Sermoneta, and especially Frosinone.

His role, as the closest collaborator of Don Gaspar, could not be anything but directive. He was like the alter ego of the founder, as well as being Gaspar’s spiritual director and confessor. As such, Don Biagio was privy to Gaspar’s innermost life.

It was no secret that he was the de facto vice director general. In that role, but above all because of his nature, he was more creative and less passive than other Missionaries.

This was not the case with Merlini. The two were radically different. Merlini preferred to depend strictly, almost obsessively, on the rules. He had begun following Gaspar through a rather impulsive decision, which was foreign to his mentality. His subordinate position was a kind of rational response to that. It was as if he said: "Have you made this decision to follow him? Now you must abide by what he decides, no more, no less."

If Don Giovanni Merlini had the greater practical skills, Don Biagio was the more charismatic and more attractive. In those early days this was important. It was like falling in love, a time when emotions dominate. Over a long period of time, uncritical generosity could become risky. A love like that of the Song of Songs does not name and does not seek those indispensable resources needed for living, which involve hard work. Would the romance of Valentini with the brigands have come to an end, given that on the one hand he was a man who probably maintained his baptismal innocence and on the other, they were a mob inured to every kind of crime? He was unreservedly dedicated to the good of the neighbor, and they were cynical gangs, who wanted only to gain the maximum benefit by words or deeds.

Let us take into consideration the paradoxical confidence that Don Biagio entrusted to a nun in the last years of his life. He told her that the founder sometimes threatened to dismiss him, because in the missions he was creating a problem with his miracles. To which he would reply "that I had no part in them, and that they were the work of the Madonna." Now, if the Missionary from Porto Recanati was operating "piously" and "dangerously" outside the limits in the ordinary mission, what was to happen in the missions that were by their nature risky and full of intrigue like those of Campagna and Marittima!

The threat of dismissing a person like Don Biagio on the part of Don Gaspar was really a joke. In reality, the founder considered the “conquest” of Don Biagio one of the greatest graces of the Lord. That is not to say that he did not see how the personality of Don Biagio might be very risky in the terrible chaos that now plagued the provinces of Campagna and Marittima. The bandits were shrewd and experienced. *Manuntengolismo*, that is, secret collaboration with the bandits, had become an intractable problem that permeated the entire society.

Don Biagio was accustomed to say: “When evil interferes with something good, one must immediately remove the evil, but one must continue doing good.” It was difficult to apply the maxim to the situation of brigandage, because in his behavior there were no perverse elements interfering with the good. It was the good itself that ran the risk of becoming something bad. The alternative to this was to continue preaching the Gospel, without “political” and “sentimental” involvements, as some characterized a merciful approach, or to cynically seize the opportunities presented for a solution based on force.

Don Biagio was incapable of doing either, for those alternatives were morally repugnant to him. When he was confronted with a willingness to surrender on the part of men notorious for the crimes they committed, he became passionate and maintained that the pardon of the pope was needed. The pope would surely give a pardon, and Don Biagio acted on that conviction.

Was this was the reason why Don Gaspar removed Don Biagio from ministry with the brigands and sent him to San Felice in 1824, while those humanitarian initiatives were in full swing, particularly since 1825 would be a Jubilee Year? We have no proof to substantiate this, but enough to offer a hypothesis.

The process involved in bringing about the end of brigandage provided an opportunity for removing Don Biagio from of the

picture. That process was, under the guise of correctness and morality, a shady compromise that the government was never proud of. The procedures and the successive celebrations that took place in an attempt to reach an agreement among the various parties did not satisfy anyone. The military demanded to organize the surrender, but had to entrust this to those who advocated a more humanitarian approach. They sought the latter among the ranks of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. More precisely, among those who passed for Missionaries, having left the Institute or who attached themselves to it temporarily. They were Don Pietro Pellegrini, Don Michele Calamita, and others.

These mediators were then accused of betrayal, because they made promises that they were not able to keep. It is not known whether they made these promises knowing that they would not be able to keep them or whether they were themselves victims of the duplicity of the military. The first hypothesis seems more probable. The brigands were promised that they would return to their homes immediately after a process and a light sentence. The process came to a halt at the point of the judicial inquiry. A sentence was never handed down, and the brigands remained in prison.

When these things were taking place in lower Lazio, with universal rejoicing as if humanity had conquered, Don Biagio remained in the tranquility of San Felice, trying to establish a seminary for future Missionaries. What would have happened if he had been in the area? It is difficult to propose a hypothesis. Certainly he would not have accepted the trap set for his “beloved” brigands, but he would have been easily deceived. The military would have been able to profit by his naivety. The brigands would have believed him more readily than they believed Don Pietro Pellegrini. The result would have been the same, but with what bitterness for that man of God!

Chapter 10

ON THE STAGE

Don Biagio was now preaching fewer missions together with the founder. In 1823 there were missions in Priverno, Maenza, Prossedi, and Veroli; in 1824, Alatri and Gaeta. Now the management of the houses as “permanent missions” took precedence, and Don Biagio found this to be a congenial undertaking. In preaching and in the confessional he was a master. He had, indeed, placed himself at the service of Gaspar, the “spiritual earthquake,” with great enthusiasm and with great results, but by nature he was inclined to a more stationary apostolate. This was also true for Don Giovanni Merlini.

Don Gaspar used to say: “*Adolescentulus, juxta viam suam, etiam cum senuerit non recedet ab ea.*” In good and in bad, an adolescent, when he is fixed on one path, does not leave the path even when he is older. Don Gaspar had invited very zealous priests to follow him, but they came with the perspective of secular priests, sometimes referred to in Italian as “house” or “domestic priests” (*preti in casa*). Merlini, Valentini, Betti, and Fontana were so zealous that they would have done well at anything, especially alongside a force of nature like del Bufalo. At the same time, they had to do violence to themselves, in a manner of speaking, when adapting to a style of life that was not more stable and “domestic.”

Enrico Rizzoli³² has something to say about Valentini’s preaching style. Rizzoli got his information from those who knew Don Biagio well.

His style was elegant without being affected; clear, sometimes brilliant...He had the grace for moving hearts in such measure that in the judgment of many he even surpassed del Bufalo. When he preached the

32 Enrico Rizzoli was moderator general of the C.P.P.S. from 1873-1890.

meditation on the last things...he exhorted, prayed, and entreated the hearers to repentance for the good of their souls, so that they would not incur the divine wrath. It was impossible to resist his words with a dry eye. He was so seized by that truth that he preached not only with the sound of his voice but also with his glance, his countenance, his gestures, and his bodily posture. It seemed that he saw and heard all that he had described. The shiver of fear that ran through one's bones communicated it all to the audience in a marvelous way.

We do not know if he had studied oratory in the seminary. His preaching was certainly well received. It was less fiery and forceful than that of Gaspar and was more varied, more modulated and aesthetic. The emphasis in his preaching was never excessive, and he presented the content in a linear style that made it comforting and pleasing to hear. He knew how to adapt his preaching to an audience, as attested by Bishop Guglielmo Aretini Sillani, who had this to say about him:

With children he is a mother who uses baby talk with them and persuades them with caresses, all the while instilling in them the principles of the fear of God that had been changed into milk. With rough types and the developmentally disabled he is a father who breaks the bread of life to adapt it to their capacity. In the pulpit he is a representative of God, who with inner authority reads, promises, threatens and shakes the hardest hearts with the thunder of eternal truth.

Something of his oratorical style may be found in some verses he composed on the theme of the passion. Here is an example in which one can hear a fiery discourse to sinners who have shown contempt for the Blood of Christ and insulted his merciful love:

Mira sospeso in alto,
Mira con guardo fisso

See him hanging on high
Look on him with fixed gaze

Il morto Crocifisso,	The dead Crucified one,
Miralò o peccator!	Look at him, O sinner!
Se non ti penti ancora,	If you have not repented
E se no spargi intanto	And have meanwhile not
Stille d'amaro pianto	Shed bitter tears,
Hai d'una tigre il cor.	You have a tiger for a heart.

One can see him, on the platform, clinging to a large cross, showing the blood-stained Redeemer to the audience, with the acumen of a great rhetorician and the conviction of a great ascetic.

In his ministry he gave all, to the very last of his resources of energy. At the end, "one would see him breathing heavily, drained by such great exertion, dripping with sweat." According to an eyewitness, "it seemed as if smoke rose from his head, like an emanation of that fire of love, of the desire for the salvation of his brothers, for whom his generous soul burned." "Most judge that the Lord gave a special gift of his divine mercy to his minister." In truth it was a gift that the Missionary gave to the Lord. It was a costly gift and also one that was a source of joy.

This was the spectacular part of the mission. The mission produced a number of different results. Sillani lists some: "Bad habits are eradicated, hatreds are quashed, enmities are extinguished, injustices repaired, families are restored to harmony and a thousand other precious fruits are harvested from the missions." Such effectiveness places the Missionary "among the leading benefactors of humanity."

The mission in Alatri was memorable for a miracle that was somewhat humorous, and that remained firmly fixed in the mind of Don Biagio, because it led him to recall the beginning of his own ministry.

A certain Don Pasquale Aloisi presented himself to the Missionaries. He was a canon of the cathedral and Don Biagio judged him to be "of a very advanced age and worn out with his health problems and gout." In reality, he had just turned fifty. He

asked to be accepted into the Congregation, because he wanted to dedicate himself to the missionary life. While waiting for a reply, and worn out by the effort he had expended, he settled heavily into a chair and with his hands on the knob of his cane, his head on the back of his hands, he fixed his gaze on Don Gaspar and Don Biagio from that curious position.

The two Missionaries looked at one another and could not keep from laughing. Good will was certainly greatly to be admired, but on the other hand, this was too much. How could such a person do anything useful in a mission, such a human wreck? It would take a notable miracle to give the canon a reply that would make him happy.

Don Gaspar said to the “postulant”:

– Walk a little.

Don Pasquale “did not know what to do, convinced that he could not walk without a cane.” He remained in that position, as if challenging them. The two Missionaries took him by the arms as if he were a dead weight and made him walk around the room a few times. The poor man, who recently had suffered from paralysis, felt himself more solid and secure with every step. At the third or fourth trip around the room, “he was free of every ill,” threw away his cane and walked quickly. “He was accepted and worked tirelessly in the missions for many years.”

At the end of the year 1824, the Institute opened a boarding school for the formation of candidates at San Felice di Giano. Don Biagio was the ideal candidate for the task. There was no one better acquainted than he with this budding initiative, given his frequent spiritual conferences with the founder. No one had greater moral authority for the task of educating new generations of Missionaries.

Don Biagio appears in the registers of San Felice in a meeting of the community held on December 13, 1824. He is listed as president and economo. Since he is also recorded as participating in a meeting

in Sermoneta in November, as president of that community and vice director general, his move to San Felice occurred between those dates. Nothing needs to be said about his responsibilities as president. We have already explained that this role seemed to be modeled on the personality of Valentini. The office as economo, on the other hand, is puzzling. Why had Don Gaspar not appointed a very able lay brother, Alessandro Pontoni, to that office?

The community of San Felice was numerous because of the presence of the students of the boarding school and a good number of lay brothers. It was about to become even more crowded with the arrival of other young men. In all, it was a beautiful family of more than twenty persons, “all of whom had a good appetite,” explained Don Biagio. There were only three Missionaries. Along with the president were Don Vincenzo Maria Fontana and Don Luigi Achille. Don Pietro De Victoris and Don Vincenzo de Nicola were soon to join the others.

The Missionaries were a congregation of priests on loan by their bishops. At any moment the bishops could call their priests back to their dioceses. The problem also arose in the case of the young men whom the Missionaries were preparing for the priesthood. At the time of their ordination, they had to be presented to a bishop, who incardinated them into his own diocese. It was not likely that a bishop would recall a priest who had not been formed in his diocese. On the other hand, a bishop could be forced to accept into his diocese a priest formed by the Congregation who was no longer disposed to live in community. In the light of these risks, bishops had to be genuine friends of the Missionaries. This explains the ongoing move of the boarding school from one diocese to another in order to take advantage of benevolent bishops.

There was also another problem: the fragmentation of the boarding school into many smaller schools. This fragmentation was due to the jealousy of the diocesan curias, which did not always look

kindly on the opening of a boarding school. They feared that these would draw candidates from the diocesan seminaries. This was an objection that the curia in Albano advanced forcefully.

Don Biagio remained at San Felice a little less than two years. He wrote beautifully about the life there. Life in the country suited him. The rolling hills of the countryside were like those of Porto Recanati. Even the ochre color of the earth was similar. The sea was missing, of course, but he did not feel its absence. One would say that the sea, however attractive, never had tempted Don Biagio. Naturally these were years of miracles.

The house of San Felice, in a sad state of decline, could be a jewel box of treasures to someone who knew how to live the interior life. In the nine years that had passed since the foundation of the Institute, they had tried to take care of the structural problems in a somewhat superficial way. If every religious institute that had occupied the building left their mark, the Missionaries of the Precious Blood also left theirs. The walls were covered with ascetical phrases, urging the virtue of humility, the virtue dear to Albertini. The deceased founder of the Archconfraternity of the Precious Blood had composed an ascetical manual on the virtue of humility.³³

The square cloister, illuminated by wide arcades, presented the miraculous stories from the life of the titular saint, in frescoes executed by a naïve but adequate painter on the walls and on the webs of the vaults. There were also medallions of saints who had lived there or whose lives inspired the residents of the abbey. The activities of Don Biagio and his confreres, in a certain sense, seemed to be the natural continuation of those colorful and lively legendary figures. It is a pity that there was no one to paint those stories on the walls. Don Biagio could have been a personality in the resulting frescoes.

³³ The work was entitled *Introduction to the Humble Life*, an homage to the classic work of St. Francis De Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*. De Sales was a spiritual author much beloved by Albertini and Saint Gaspar.

Don Gaspar, in appointing him to run the house, reminded him jokingly, but also from his knowledge of Don Biagio, of the power of miracles. “In case of need, bless the stones and they will become cash!” The suggestion almost immediately became the sole resource for the strange economo.

A decree of Leo XII suspended the payment of the municipality of Spoleto to the abbey. This was a dramatic decline in the finances, just as had happened in Campagna and Marittima. There were quarrels with the local government. This forced the interruption of whatever improvements to the building were taking place. It also meant a lack of funds to support the local community.

Don Giovanni Merlini said that “it will be taken care of in another way.” He did not say how. It would not be the norm, but sometimes it was through miracles.

On day Don Biagio found himself without provisions and without money. He had to pay for some needed shopping to the tune of five scudi. He had the money in the cashbox counted. Brother Alessandro Pontoni said disappointedly:

– There are only fifty-five baiocchi. We need more.

Don Biagio remembered the words of Don Gaspar. He said:

– Let’s do as Canon del Bufalo suggested.

He blessed the few coins. After this, with a naiveté that was beyond folly, he told Pontoni to count the money again. There were five piasters and five paoli, ten times what had been there originally.

– Just what was needed! – exclaimed Pontoni, who began laughing in joy and disbelief.

“Together we thanked God who had provided for us in a surprising way; it was a miracle before our very eyes.” So recounted Don Biagio. He added: “The copper was no longer copper, but had been changed into Roman piasters, of the coinage of Pius VII.” He recounted this while attributing all the merit for this event to Don Gaspar. We know that even when Jesus performed

a miracle he attributed it to the faith of the needy person: “Your faith has saved you.”

Less amazing but even more theatrical was an episode that took place when the wine ran out, and the community members, at their usual places in the refectory, were not in a good mood as they ate the soup. To make matters worse, the reader was reading a passage from the *Exercise of Christian Perfection* by Father Alfonso Rodriguez commenting on the wedding feast of Cana.

Suddenly they heard an excited stamping of hooves in the courtyard. Everyone realized that it came from the shod hooves of some quadruped. The half-closed doors of the refectory burst open. A donkey had opened them with his muzzle and immediately rushed onto the scene with two barrels of wine hanging from his pack saddle. A donkey had never been seen in the middle of the refectory, and it was an unreal, incredible scene.

The donkey did not speak, even if he had the demeanor of someone who had a lot to say.³⁴ In his own way he was aware of being welcome. The donkey’s driver appeared behind him. It was the servant boy of an unknown benefactor. The boy explained that his master had sent him to bring the wine as a gift. The members broke into applause at this sign of divine providence.

Don Biagio’s days were full. He was not only president and economo, but was also the spiritual director of his students and their professor. Canon Fontana, calm and corpulent, took on some of the load, but the greater part of the instruction fell to Don Biagio.

The organization of the boarding school was less than ideal. There was too much solitude for young men who were still fully involved in their psychological formation. There were too few opportunities to develop a balanced view of the world. The world as seen in San Felice ended up being rather narrow and neurotic

³⁴ Possibly a reference to the talking donkey of the pagan prophet Balaam in Numbers 22.

(*ossessivo*). It was a good situation for someone who had already developed his values, but not for someone who still developing those values. There was also the poverty. After the reduction in the financial subsidies the situation had become unsustainable.

Recreation was both joyous and a bit sad. Don Biagio would lead his young men into the mountains. They would return carrying dry wood that would assure some heat for the long winters. When he was staying at San Felice, Don Gaspar also liked to participate in this industrious form of recreation that made the community look like an anthill. One recalled that well-known psalm³⁵ in all of this, except that the situation was the opposite. The young men went out rejoicing, and returning, carrying their bundles of logs, they would be weeping a bit. However, they did sing devout songs, improvised by their president.

Don Biagio the poet probably composed the seven strophes for the Chaplet of the Precious Blood in those years. Wonderful for their concise thought and the fluid verse, they centered on the seven sheddings of the Blood of Christ. Here is a sample:

Spine che il capo augusto	O thorns that ring
del mio Signor cingete	the noble head of my Savior
e il Sangue ne traete	and draw from it his Blood
ohimè! senza pietà.	alas! without mercy.
Di Sì bel Sangue intrise	Soaked with such beautiful Blood,
venite alle mie tempia	come to my temples
e trafiggete ogni empia	and pierce through every evil
idea di vanità.	and vane idea.

Don Biagio also toyed with the idea of a bolder poetic project: a poem about Saint Francis Xavier meant as edifying reading for the young. He entitled the work *Saveriade*. He did not fail to invoke the muse that inspired him, which, for a Christian poet, can be none other than the Virgin Mary. This was even truer for a Christian poet

35 “He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him” (Psalm 126:6).

like Don Biagio, who was so very devoted to the Madonna from his infancy and who lived in the shadow of the sanctuary of Loreto, where he had experienced a miraculous rebirth.

A poem he penned to the Virgin stemmed from an otherworldly heart. There could be no place further from worldly delights than San Felice. The walls, the vivid frescoes, the tomb of the holy martyr Saint Felix, and the memory of the men living and dead who lived there over the centuries, all spoke of holiness. The lay brother Giosofat Petrocchi, a model of service, was buried in the church. Above all, the educators living there spoke of holiness. Their example was a continuing school of life. There were genuine tales of holiness to be told.

Once, while traveling, Don Biagio lost his watch. It was a rare timepiece and had been a gift. It was worth more than the gold from which it was made. He noticed it when he wanted to check the time. He shared the loss with his companion with an air of indifference. The lay brother who accompanied him was distressed and suggested that they turn back and attempt to recover it. Don Biagio thought about it for a moment and then decided:

– Perhaps the Lord has permitted me to lose the watch because he wants some needy poor person to find it. Let us not impede the designs of Providence.

One time a boarder, in a moment of youthful enthusiasm, permitted himself to roughly chastise Don Vincenzo de Nicola, a holy man, for “an act of carelessness.” Don Vincenzo was very concerned about this. He was not so much concerned with the arrogance of the young man as he was with the disturbance that he had inadvertently caused. He knelt before the one offended and asked his pardon. The gesture was worth more than any reprimand. The entire community was edified and the impulsive youth was ashamed.

On May 25, 1825, Don Vincenzo died suddenly while preaching for the Marian month in the little church of Santa Maria del Fosco,

near San Felice. He was taken to San Felice with honors and buried in the church next to Brother Giosafat Petrocchi, who had been buried there on December 20, 1823. They were both holy men, in the opinion of the community. They were referred to as models of life and the events of their lives came to be part of the patrimony of the community.

Among the brothers was one who spent all his time in church. He left only to go to the dining room for the midday meal. He was asked to at least dust the church. He was not even willing to do that. He said that he wanted to be in communion with God, in conversation with Jesus. Don Biagio had a maxim that applied to the situation: "He who ignores his duties for much prayer does not find God but only deceives himself, because to fulfill one's duties is to pray. In praying one does not necessarily fulfill one's duties."

Confronted with the situation, he ordered that they not set a place for the "contemplative" at the table. When he asked why this was done, he was to put the question to the superior.

– Send him to me, he said, smiling.

When the bell for the midday meal rang, the man ceased his ecstatic prayer and went to the dining room. He saw that his usual place at the table was empty. He began to ask:

– Where shall I sit?

Everyone tried to keep from laughing. Someone said to him:

– Go to the superior.

He went to Don Biagio and asked him:

– My place at the table is empty. Where shall I sit?

– Where you were until just now, – replied Don Biagio.

– I was in church praying! – he replied with the triumphant tone of one who knows how to speak of something he is proud of.

– Then continue to pray, – said Don Biagio, as if he were concluding a syllogism.

– But it's time to eat!

- You are living the life of the angels, and angels don't eat.
- But I need to eat. I'm hungry, - replied the brother.
- He who eats needs to work. Do you see what the others do?

They have different tasks, but they work together.

- If I knew that I had to work I would have stayed home.

In his reply the brother unintentionally revealed the true nature of his vocation.

- Very well, - Don Biagio replied curtly, - you can go home when you want to.

So the months and years passed at San Felice with a hundred little stories (*fioretti*) like this. Don Biagio showed himself to be a good mentor. The spirit of Saint Francis de Sales blended with a Benedictine style: gentleness along with authority. On the other hand, he also showed a certain inadequacy in managing so large and complex an operation. Next to the abbey were fields to be cultivated. Within, there were walls to be restored. The community of twenty persons was composed of individuals who could not always be handled with witticisms. What was needed was someone like his father Crispino or the versatility and concreteness of Don Giovanni Merlini.

Now it was time for Don Biagio to mount the platform again. He was aware of this desire, and he wanted to dispel the heartbreak caused by much bitterness from his family back in Porto Recanati.

Chapter 11

ONCE AGAIN, THE COMPANY OF MIRACLES

It was a sad time for the Valentini family back in Porto Recanati. Rosa Mancini had given her husband Simone another four children: Daniele Lorenzo, Maria Mafalda Settimia, Clorinda Olimpia Teresa, and Giulia Geltrude, in the space of about five years. In 1826, as she was giving birth to her seventh child, serious complications developed. The baby had to be extracted by force and was dead. It was baptized conditionally, without a name. The poor woman was despondent and was losing a great deal of blood. Two weeks later she died. She was only thirty-six years old.

Don Biagio received the news from his brother with Christian resignation. He wrote him: “I can help you more by my prayers than with my presence.” He carried on his missionary activities without allowing his private grief to interfere with his public ministry. At the time he was about to leave Albano, where he was now the president of that community.

From its beginning, the mission house of Albano was considered the most suited to host a boarding school for seminarians. As rumors of the intention to open the school began to spread, the officials of the diocesan curia criticized the plan and opposed it as an attack on the diocesan seminary. That was enough to quash the idea. “Let’s wait for more suitable times,” they said. Perhaps those times had now arrived. Don Biagio was transferred to Albano precisely with the opening of the school in mind.

Meanwhile Don Gaspar went to San Felice at the end of October for the examination of the students there. He remained in the house whose solitude he so loved until December, when he met with Don Biagio. They came to the decision to return to the former practice of placing the young students in those houses that were suitable to

host them. At the moment the prospect of opening a single large boarding school did not seem likely. They could have opened one in Sermoneta or Sonnino, if Bishop Manasse were still alive, but the good bishop died on August 26, 1826, and his successor appeared to be anything but benevolent.

They decided to place smaller groups of the candidates wherever possible, in places that would not be seen as a threat to diocesan seminaries. The problem would be reconsidered at a later date. The decision made Don Biagio available immediately for the ministry.

In May, the founder went to Tufo, in Abruzzo in the Kingdom of Naples, near Pietrasecca, for a mission that involved all the local towns. He went on to Poggio Cinolfo and Pereto. In June he returned to Albano to consider taking on a project that would require a significant commitment.

In June 1827, Monsignor Belisario Cristaldi, already made a cardinal *in pectore*, was named the commendatory abbot of Santa Maria di Farfa and San Salvatore Maggiore. This consisted of a vast territory composed of more than fifty farmhouses and villages. Independent of any diocese, it had belonged to the Carthusians and Cistercians before becoming a commendatory abbey.³⁶ The two abbeys had been united since 1629. They were places rich in history and in art and had not always had spiritual assistance proportionate to their celebrated reputation.

Cristaldi immediately wanted to renew his abbey spiritually, beginning with the clergy and eventually with the renewal of the sheep of the flock entrusted to him, through the ministry of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood led by Canon del Bufalo. Cristaldi did not want to be seen as an apostle who, after exhorting

³⁶ A commendatory abbot is a cleric or lay person who is entrusted with a benefice that has become vacant. The abbot receives the income from the commendatory abbey, but generally has no jurisdiction over its spiritual affairs. Sometimes abbeys functioned like a small diocese (the *abbey nullius*), and this was apparently the case with Santa Maria di Farfa and San Salvatore Maggiore.

others, ends up being slow to take care of his own affairs. In his pastoral solicitude the pious prelate also wanted to motivate diocesan bishops in the renewal of the Catholic faith through his good example. He saw a great need for this and strongly emphasized it. He was convinced that he could obtain those results with the missions. "But not with any missions," he used to say, "but with the missions of Canon del Bufalo."

Those who were most resistant to the preaching of the priests were the priests themselves. The abbey of San Salvatore Maggiore was certainly not ideal for hosting about twenty priests. There were some attempts at delaying the matter, and it was getting cold. Don Gaspar and Don Biagio, with their usual determination, plunged into the work of getting the place in shape, transforming all available spaces into habitable rooms. In the end, three courses of spiritual exercises took place.

All that Cristaldi received for his efforts was an avalanche of insults, some of which concerned Don Gaspar and his chosen companion in the project. It was necessary to give them "a wise person outstanding in evangelical prudence" so as not to ultimately annoy the clergy. The latter, in the judgment of Valentini and despite everything, did achieve "the reform of customs and good harmony." On that occasion, there were no miracles.

The two Missionaries went to preach a mission in Pratojanni, which was part of Concerviano, in order not to waste time between the retreats. After the third retreat to the clergy, they joined their confreres, among whom was Merlini, and preached many missions in the area along the border with Abruzzo. The area was marked by steep hills and mountains in whose valleys livestock were pastured. This extensive operation lasted all of November and December.

The nature of the territory, lightly populated in small villages, and the terrible weather, with frequent rain and snow, required additional effort and suffering on the part of the Missionaries.

Don Biagio took care of four villages with fewer than five hundred souls. The local capital city of one area numbered thirteen municipalities and nineteen smaller units that together amounted to ten thousand inhabitants.

At one mission, Don Biagio was invited by the founder to pray intensively for the Congregation. They did this together. After the celebration of Mass Don Gaspar told his friend that he felt that he would be placing two heavy crosses on his shoulders. Time would tell what these would be.

Don Biagio, with some of his companions, went to the territory of Poggio Mirteto. There he preached in Montopoli and Foglia, with about five hundred souls in total. Don Gaspar and Don Biagio alone concluded the missionary activity on January 1, 1828. They then went to Poggio Mirteto, Castelnuovo di Farfa, and Fara Sabina in January and February.

These were four months of uninterrupted preaching throughout the entire winter and in difficult territory. Other than for the sake of the Lord, the Missionaries did it for Cristaldi. He deserved special treatment. If the Institute was alive and expanding it was also his doing. The Missionaries counted heavily on his support. Gaspar assigned the title of founder to him on more than a few occasions!

Meanwhile Don Giovanni Merlini was heading to Frosinone, because there was a rumor that the three houses of the diocese of Terracina were to close. The new bishop was beginning to notice their presence. Were these the crosses that Don Gaspar was talking about? And why two? If the premonition referred to the bishop, that was one. If to the houses to be closed, that would make three. If the reference was to the difficulties in general – they were innumerable.

After the middle of February, Don Biagio followed the founder and was on the way to Romagna. With him was Alessandro Pontoni. This lay brother was now a candidate for the priesthood and was eventually ordained. They were headed to Rimini, where a mission

house (the eighth) had been opened in 1824. It was the occasion for a trip to Porto Recanati.

Home was no longer what it had been. There Don Biagio found his seventy-seven year old father, always tough and strong-willed; his brother Simone, a forty-year old widower; his other brother Francesco, now married; his nephew Valentino, aged twelve; and five nieces. There were women to take care of the house and nothing was lacking, but the atmosphere was troubling and sad. When he left Porto Recanati, Don Biagio insisted that it was important for a priest to break ties with his own family so as not to be entangled in family matters. The family of the Missionary is all humanity; his home is the world.

In Rimini he gave a retreat for the clergy of the city and two nearby towns. In April the boarding school of Rimini was opened. On May 30 he began the mission in Soanne, because of the fervent prayers of Don Vincenzo Poeta, the archpriest of Santa Maria.

The inauguration of the mission was among the most festive. There were fireworks, and the entire population was present along with nearly everyone from nearby Pennabili, along with the entire seminary. The clergy took part, and processions came from the nearby towns.

The principal church of the town could not contain the crowds. On occasions like that preaching was done in the piazza, but no one had thought to put up a platform for the purpose. It rained heavily, but it would be said that not a drop of water could hit the ground, so closely crammed together were the attentive people there. Don Gaspar climbed up a wall along the street and preached from that pulpit.

In the course of the mission Don Biagio had a way of putting himself in the limelight. An inhabitant of Soanne offered this portrait, in which the odd language does not lessen the substance of the message:

A man who showed such seriousness and order in his manners, who did not show others anything that could be

evil or less than serious and honest, he was so temperate and given to holy docility, to being agreeable, to integrity, to an innocence of life, that he was a mirror of virtue and a sun of holiness to all those who saw him and heard him preach on the platform, where in clear light one saw that he was wearing *cilizi* (*era coperto di cilizi*).³⁷

Valentini's mortifications, to the point of shedding blood, came to light involuntarily a few days later. "He left during the night," so our informant tells us, "and because it was so dark he could not clean his room very well. Many drops of fresh blood were seen here and there on the floor, even some small pieces that were dripping warm blood." This was no simple Missionary who awaited miracles to rain down from heaven. Don Biagio sought those miracles with an asceticism that was too passionate to remain a secret, as he would have wanted. His physical suffering showed that for the Missionary, miracles were not showers of perfumed petals, but rather possible interventions by God, rare and mysterious.

At the end of the mission, Don Biagio was taken to a certain Maria Gentile Lazzari, thought to be possessed by the devil. The Missionary tried various forms of exorcism without success. At the end he placed his stole on her head. The woman cried out to him:

– You are holy, but not enough!

From Soanne, he followed the founder and returned to Rimini and opened a boarding school there. In the meantime, another was opened in Albano, the work of Merlini. The decision stemmed from the need to accommodate the young men of Sonnino and Terracina. The two houses were supposed to close at the wish of the bishop, who, however, now said that he had been deceived. Sermoneta was safe for the moment. The premonition of Gaspar was being realized. These were the two crosses that would weigh very heavily on the

³⁷ The term *cilice* can refer to a rough garment designed to irritate the skin, or to a kind of chain with barbs that serves the same function.

spirit of Gaspar as well as on Valentini, who had strong ties to the people of the area.

Meanwhile, the mission house of Rimini, with the presence of Gaspar, Valentini, Don Pietro De Victoris, Don Vincenzo Fontana and Don Elzeario Senesi, was having a strong impact on the city. In July, Don Biagio and Don Gaspar left for the mission in Sant'Agata Feltria, memorable for a miracle which, in this case, could be called "sensational" in every sense, in which Valentini was the central figure.

Shortly before midday it grew dark. It seemed that suddenly it was the dead of night. Between the clouds, dense and very dark, a terrific whirlwind began forming. It appeared as if an immense dust cloud had caught fire, or that another portion of the angels had rebelled and were fighting against God. There were blinding flashes of fire among the masses of clouds, and the thunderclaps came rumbling and crashing one after the other. The moaning wind completed the scene, and it battered the rain against the windows and made the window frames of the houses creak.

That day Don Biagio was having stomach problems that led to bouts of vomiting. He was at the table with Don Gaspar, fearing that he would need to throw up. He got up to go the window. The panes of glass were lit up by the lightning strikes, and behind the fragile barrier of the window the elements of the universe were clashing and making a constant racket.

– What is happening? – Don Gaspar asked him, seeing him opening the window.

There was no time for a reply. An enormous bolt of lightning burst into the room, hitting the chair where Valentini had been sitting. The lightning bolt discharged on three people who had sought refuge in the gallery below, along with their merchandise. Two of them were stunned, and one was thought to be dead, burned by the lightning.

There were cries in the streets, either to beg for help or out of sheer terror. Don Biagio hurried below to offer help. He blessed the three stricken victims with the relic of Saint Francis Xavier. One after the other they regained consciousness. Even the one who was thought to be dead “let out a cry, asking where they had brought him and looking for his things. When they told him what happened, he said that he did not remember anything and continued asking about his things,” which had been scattered by the great clap of thunder. When he finally realized that he had been hit by lightning, he exclaimed, terrified: “Poor me! I was in a state of mortal sin!”

“Having returned to his senses and having seen his goods, which were items of jewelry, all transformed by the lightning, he became contrite and made a sincere confession.” That day “was for the people and the whole diocese a special appeal from God to a change of heart and to repentance.”

God’s actors (*i commedianti di Dio*)³⁸ went on to the mission of San Leo. Then they preached missions in Misano and Faenza, using Rimini as their base of operations. Don Biagio then headed another team and preached missions in Forlimpopoli, Sogliano, Mercatino Torricella, and Montebello.

One event in Sogliano was truly amusing. Gaspar was supposed to have gone there, but at the last moment he decided to send Don Biagio along with Fontana and De Victoris. The people knew nothing of this last-minute change, and they crowded to see the famous del Bufalo, the hammer of the sectarians, the trumpet of the Divine Blood, the spiritual earthquake. The band was in full dress, uniforms perfect, and had gathered to give the salute. It was just this interest in his personality, that expectation, curious and triumphalist, which may have led Gaspar to withdraw from the mission team.

³⁸ *God’s Actor (Il commediante di Dio)*, is the title of a biography of Saint Gaspar by the author.

The carriage approached. The band, one eye on the hand of the band leader and the other on the gate, was ready to play a festive march. A ceremonial coach arrived, and the coachman jumped down to the ground from his seat and opened the door of the coach.

There were peals from the trumpet and the rumble of drums at the appearance of the first Missionary. They thought that the order of precedence would put the leader in first place, but that was not the case. It was Don Pietro. The maestro quickly stopped the music. Then there were new peals from the trumpets and drumrolls as the second Missionary emerged. Again, the maestro stopped his players, as a very corpulent priest emerged, and the carriage rose noticeably, almost appearing to utter a sigh at being relieved of the weight. It could not be del Bufalo. In fact, it was Don Fontana. At that point, they reasoned that the third man out of the carriage would have to be del Bufalo. The band now played on with confidence, until they became aware of the buzz among the crowd that this was not Don Gaspare either. It was poor Don Biagio.

The buzz grew louder and became an open complaint. Where is Don Gaspar? Don Gaspar would not come! The band members, “having learned that del Bufalo had not come, stopped playing and went off to play a ball game.” The rest of the faithful prepared themselves for an event that they imagined would be exciting and that suddenly promised to be boring.

For Don Biagio this was hardly a rousing beginning to the mission. A few days were enough to change the opinion of the people, however. They knew that there was a new del Bufalo in the world: a hammer, a trumpet, an earthquake like the original. The mission ended up being “very fruitful.” Because the information comes to us from Don Biagio himself, we know little more, but certainly it was not lacking in miracles.

In November Don Biagio gave some spiritual exercises in Cesena, in the recently opened mission house, for the clergy, the

seminarians, and the upper class. Immediately afterward he gave a retreat to the community of Rimini and to some nuns.

While these events were taking place in Romagna, opposition to the Institute was mounting in Rome. At that point not even the powerful Cristaldi, now a cardinal, was able to head it off. The houses in Terracina and Sonnino were closed, and an even greater disaster was in the making for the expansion of the Congregation. Pius VIII was elected, who knew that the archpriest of Frascati, Don Gaetano Zapponi, was now a Missionary. Pius had trouble with him when he was bishop, and became very angry when he learned that Zapponi was now a member of the Congregation. Impulsive by nature, the pope now threatened to suppress the Institute.

Don Gaspar had to hurry to Rome. After a disastrous encounter with the pope, he was finally able to persuade him. He made an ally. The responsibility for dismissing Don Zapponi from the Institute was entrusted to Don Biagio. The Missionary from Porto Recanati was becoming more identified with the Institute. The office of vice director general, which he had held for some time, was growing in its responsibilities.

In May 1829, Don Biagio and Don Gaspar, who had in the meantime returned to Romagna, now headed to Rome. They passed through Pievetorina. On the 15th they were in San Felice, where they participated in the monthly meeting of the community. The Institute was becoming more stable and saw some modest growth. The most pressing problem was the formation of the members. Could they continue to recruit priests from their dioceses? They had produced good fruit, but there was no guarantee that this practice would meet future needs. Moreover, this tied them to those dioceses that had “loaned” them one or more priests. Sometimes the missions and other various activities were demanded by bishops in return for permission they had given for one of their priests to be part of the Institute.

For all of these reasons, it was necessary for the new Congregation to obtain full approval from the Church. It was now urgent to prepare the final draft of the rule and present it to the Roman dicastery for a decree of approval. This would give the Institute its needed autonomy and the same freedom of action enjoyed by other religious congregations.

The certainty of law was needed above all to determine the overall plan for the structure of the Institute. Don Gaspar, heir to the ideals of Albertini, had for some time been compiling rules. After the death of his spiritual father and teacher, he had continued to reflect on the project, carefully evaluating it in the light of the facts, with an attachment to what Albertini had dictated that bordered on the fanatic. Of late he was reexamining those ideas with his most capable followers, perhaps only for the purpose of having them absorb those ideas. He always would want to have at his side the most able disciples: Valentini, Merlini, and Betti. If they were formed properly, the work could count on a solid structure.

Betti, who was the most active in the editing of the rule, was somewhat detached from the process now, because he was sent to Benevento to head a mission house that was very highly regarded in the city. His work, consisting in a summary of the instructions that had come from Gaspar, ended up being the basic document. The drafting of the definitive rule would surely make changes in that text, and the reaction of the proud priest from Benevento was to be feared.

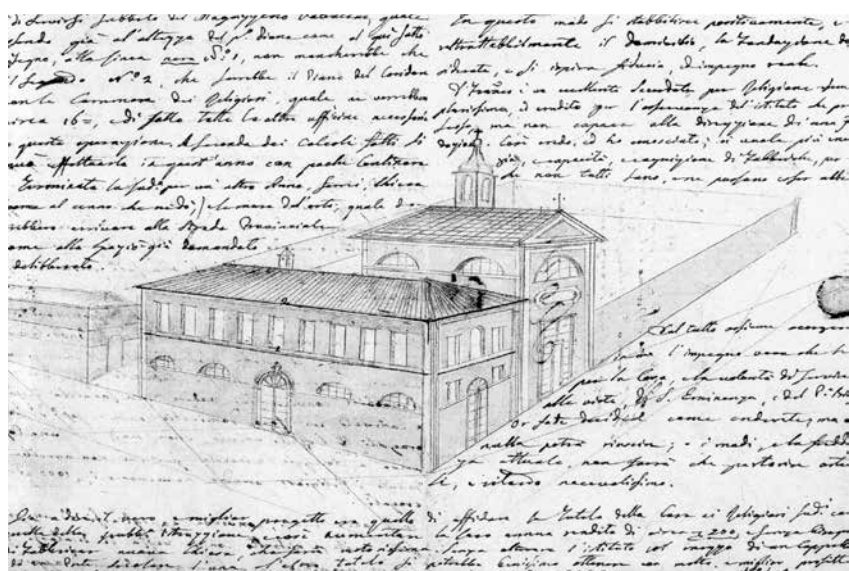
The drafting of the summary was not painless, and Betti had protested at some of the changes. He would not admit innovations to a text on which he had labored. He considered himself to be like a father, and he guarded the text like a zealous dog. He considered the manuscript, the fruit of his work, to be like a contract. He had sent this to Don Gaspar, and got it back with approval, in October 1830. For him, it was like a Bible.



THE LIFE OF DON BIAGIO VALENTINI, C.P.P.S.



Porto Recanati circa 1800



Proposed plan of the mission house in Porto Recanati



The church of
Santa Maddalena
in Quirinale



The church of Salvatore in Campo



Venerable John Merlini



Saint Gaspar del Bufalo



Sister Maria Luisa di Gesù



Princess Zenaida Wolkonsky

Chapter 12

THE INGENUOUS DEMIURGE³⁹

The transfer of Don Biagio to the south involved transferring Don Giovanni Merlini to the north. The pillars that bear the weight of a building cannot be placed without planning. They will be installed where they will support the weight. Besides weight-bearing pillars there are also decorative pillars. If you remove a weight-bearing pillar, the building can fall. Removing a decorative pillar can obscure the identity and charm of a building. In pointing this out, we do not wish to assert that Don Biagio was decorative more than supportive, and that Merlini was more supportive than decorative, but the comparison has some validity.

The rotation was logical. The houses of the north needed a strong-willed, wise, and meticulous man. The communities there needed structure: taking care of the financial situation, asserting legal claims, and establishing the archives. The most pressing needs were juridical in nature. Don Biagio was not inclined to deal with these matters.

The paperwork had to be addressed. It was boring but essential. Charisma might be appealing, but the certainty of law was needed. There had not been much attention to legal matters. No one seemed aware of them except when a crisis arose. In the south, matters were sustained more by suggestion and personal charism. An authoritative word, we might say even a kind of self-certification, often took the place of supporting documents.

The change occurred at the same time as profound political upheavals in Europe. In Italy, these were known as the Revolutionary Movements of 1830-1831. In the Papal States, these broke out first in Romagna and later in the Marches and in Umbria. They did not

39 In Plato's *Timaeus*, the demiurge is a being who fashions the world by bringing order from chaos.

involve Don Biagio directly, as he was already in Rome. Members of his family in Porto Recanati were involved, however.

After the Revolution of Paris, which put Louis Philippe d'Orleans on the throne, the cities of Modena, Bologna, Parma, Ferrara, Ravenna, Forlì, Rimini, and Ancona revolted. An area so convulsed could not remain peaceful in the face of a movement that seemed to be bent on establishing new and permanent social structures. Porto Recanati also called for republican structures, in opposition to the newly elected Pope Gregory XVI.

Could an aggressive man like Crispino just sit by while his peers were taking advantage of the situation? When the revolution broke out, he also joined in, heading into whatever direction the wind was blowing. And he was in good company, along with Counts Leopardi and Carradori. Together with his son Simone, he joined a provisional committee started by the municipality and awaited the outcome of the confrontation.

Fortune favored the pope when Austria intervened. The principal characters in Porto Recanati made a complete about face, bowing to the pope and his temporal power. There was a great celebration when the revolt had been put down, and in Ancona the last rebels were arrested and were in the hands of the papal legate, whom they had previously imprisoned.

On March 29, 1832, Crispino was worried and took the initiative. He announced that a hotbed of revolution remained active in Civitanova, according to the report of a certain Angelo Lucangeli of that city. He said that the bells were sounding the alarm and that the populace was committed to repelling the provocations of the rebels. Crispino organized some patrols for the safety of Porto Recanati and the newly reinstated papal power. If a tribunal had wanted to establish on which side Crispino (and many others) stood in this period of transition, it would not have been easy to hand down a sentence that could not be appealed.

Now that he was back in the south, Don Biagio was often in Frosinone, the house on which the other houses of the famous plan were dependent. The houses in Vallecorsa and Sermoneta remained. He was present in these communities for periods of time because of duties that required his stable residence.

Don Biagio was now meeting often with Don Gaspar to write the rule. It was predictable: as soon as the first changes to the rule began to leak out, Betti raised such a ruckus that it shook the foundations of the very institution which he wanted to be solid. Gaspar and Betti had been largely in agreement in the past, and Gaspar had great admiration for Don Innocenzo. Don Biagio was given the task of intervening. He was to ask his stubborn confrere to bend a little. From a distance, Don Biagio sent several letters to the recalcitrant Betti.

The correspondence, even if incomplete, helps us understand the two personalities. Don Innocenzo emerges as a petty polemicist, obstinate and cantankerous. Don Biagio distinguishes himself by his greater maturity and an unflappable gentleness. He speaks with authority and candor, without qualms. But he also expresses himself with calm and warmth; he shows sympathy to his interlocutor even as Betti resists him. He invites Betti to do as much, beginning with moderating his polemic outbursts.

Don Biagio defends the innovations with such passionate commitment that Betti soon makes him a scapegoat, suspecting that it was he who decided on the innovations. Merlini was called in to try to reason with Betti, and he also was subject to Betti's accusations. The same happened to Don Camillo Rossi, and little by little, to all those who did not think like the tyrant from Benevento.

The rebellion became bitter when it came to deciding on the habit of the lay brothers. Don Gaspar thought it was time to modify a provision that he himself had established, and to give the brothers the same habit as the Missionaries, but with some small variations. He wanted to show that they belonged to the Institute. Until now

they had worn secular dress, with the result that they simply looked like servants. The decision of the founder, noted in a circular letter of December 3, 1830, was opposed by Don Innocenzo with a determination that could break out in open rebellion.⁴⁰

Betti's position is revealed in this selection from one of his letters to Don Biagio: "either we love Canon del Bufalo more than the Institute, or the Institute more than Canon del Bufalo. If we love him more than the Institute, it will be all right for him to make innovations and reforms... If we love the Institute more than Canon del Bufalo...we must... support those laws which we have embraced and have made others embrace as well."

What were the reasons for the drastic opposition Betti? He thought that the lay brothers, either because of their social position or because of the duties they were called to perform, would expose the cassock to ridicule. What would happen if someone, believing them to be priests, went to them for problems of conscience? And what would people think when they saw them with bags in hand as they went shopping in the market?

Don Gaspar felt that he had to assume the entire responsibility for the decision, writing to Betti: "Please do not attribute to Don Biagio or Don Merlini that which is my decision. I am ready to give an account to God and to men if the Lord, who knows my heart, so disposes." As far as the question of decorum, Gaspar said that the cassock would be insulted by participation and dances, worldly festivals, theatrical performances, and not by humble service.

40 That letter, number 2103, notes: "...the Brothers are to have clothing both for summer and winter made of material fitting for them after the fashion of the Missionaries. Therefore, they will wear a cincture, and ecclesiastical style hat, however, without a ribbon on it, but at most, if necessary, a black cord, and nothing more. The hairstyle likewise shall be similar to the ecclesiastical one. Their vesture will differ from that of the Missionary in the things that follow. They are forbidden to have the use of buckles of any type and to be content to lace their shoes with a modest cord of flosssilk. Furthermore, they are never to use the supercollar, or white material which ecclesiastics are accustomed to place over their collars."

The more intense role in the matter was undertaken by Don Biagio. Writing to Betti, who accused Gaspar of stubbornness in the decision he had taken, Don Biagio writes:

No, dear [Innocenzo], we are not speaking of scandal and of stubbornness, because this would be very offensive to our Companions and legitimate Superior, who could with reason accuse you of the same things. You do not value his reasoning, in spite of so many legitimate reflections and loving exhortations, paternal hints, and prayers and tears which he has offered, not because of a mean spirit, but to be useful to you and to the Institute, so as not to sever the unity with the true head.

Don Biagio's arguments are very forceful. An institute is what the founder decides that it is. Whoever does not recognize that must draw his conclusions and let it go. One cannot assert that either the founder or the foundation must give way to one's viewpoints. He writes:

Precisely this is the strongest reason of all, and the most conclusive: this is what the founder judged best, and thus he has decided and willed it. In this case one should take care to maintain in force his spirit and what he has established, and to revive what has grown weak or extinct. This is why the Lord wanted a St. Hyacinth among the Dominicans, a St. Peter of Alcantara for the Carmelites, etc.⁴¹ While the Founder was alive, however, everything depended on his word...in matters spiritual, formal, material, in everything.⁴¹

Don Biagio, even with his radical logic and asceticism, did not rule out dialogue. In his judgment one can and must "set forth one's own beliefs, modestly but forcefully, and describe whatever

⁴¹ St. Hyacinth was one of the first members of the Dominicans and spread the congregation to Poland. St. Peter of Alcantara was actually a Franciscan friar, but was very important in supporting and encouraging St. Teresa of Avila in her reform of the Carmelite nuns.

is inconvenient or difficult that could arise in different situations.” Only, he adds, that if the observations, the strength, and the wisdom of the exposition are inconclusive, one must “give in to the one who knows more than we do.” For those who are united not only by name but in the name of Christ and of his Blood, dialogue is seeking the will of God and not a fight to insist on one’s own viewpoint.

Don Biagio’s observation was on the mark, but Don Innocenzo would not recognize Gaspar as the founder. He considered him to be the director general. Given that perspective, the argument of Valentini would go in his favor. A director general cannot change substantial features of an institute. The superior of Benevento was adamant that the matter could be decided only by a general assembly of the members.

The central role of Valentini in the controversy demonstrates beyond all doubt the soundness of his appointment as vice director general. But there was more. As the spiritual director of the director general, there was no one better able to read the spirit, to interpret the ideals, and to understand the history of the new Institute. That history was not linear. It was a response to the times, and many contributed to shaping it. Deciding who the true founder was could only fall to Gaspar. Out of humility he would name others as founders, even though they were less responsible for the founding than he, but he could not keep the truth from his spiritual director.

Don Biagio, like an elder brother who stands in for the father (Gaspar did not want to take an active part in the controversy since it involved him), was ready to explain better than anyone else the reasons for the brothers adopting secular dress at first and later taking up the cassock. He knew how to put forward the arguments which demonstrated how Don Gaspar had to be considered the founder and to claim for himself something of Gaspar’s charism.

Valentini’s arguments and the interventions of many members did not convince Betti. He became even more stubborn, and the

polemic grew even more bitter. He also mobilized his troops, as had Gaspar, and he came to the point of actually taking concrete steps to detach the house of Benevento from the rest of the Institute. He was thinking about placing the house under the diocesan Bishop, and this, of course, would have been an innovation much more substantial than the matter of the habit of the lay brothers. A letter from Don Giovanni Merlini was also of no use.

The matter dragged on for several years and was never completely settled, since Don Innocenzo continued to assert that he was right and he maintained that conviction in the deposition he gave during the process for the beatification and canonization of the founder. It was a source of bitterness for all, but it revealed that in Gaspar's Institute there were two champions, two pillars: Valentini and Merlini. They were like the two lobes of a brain: one was reserved for intuitive activities, and the other for calculations and deduction. Both were needed for overall unity.

Don Biagio's family life brought more sadness. A strange fate hung over the Valentinis of Porto Recanati. Except for the tough Crispino, all of the rest had fragile health and died at a young age. The widow of his brother Simone died of a cerebral hemorrhage at 45, in 1833. Don Biagio could not help but think of the sadness of his father Crispino, now in his seventies and alone with seven nephews. It is true that there was another brother, Francesco, but one could not rely on him because he suffered from some kind of mental disorder.

In Albano, Don Biagio became the demiurge of Campagna and Marittima. In Frosinone, he added more miracles to those attributed to him in the past, and his fame spread throughout the province. Unfortunately there is no accurate documentation from this time. Some episodes, evidently more spectacular than others, have come down to us. The details were written down many years afterward.

A tearful woman sat down on a bench in the church of the mission house. She had a bundle in her lap. Don Biagio approached her and asked her:

– Why are you crying?

The woman uncovered her own little girl and put her on her knee, and responded:

– Father, she is blind!

– Don't cry. Kiss this image. It is St. Francis Xavier. Kiss it with devotion.

After the mother and daughter had kissed the image, Don Biagio blessed the girl with it, and at that very moment she recovered her sight. The girl's name was Chiara Forti.

As one can imagine, this created a great sensation. The woman had a votive painting made, and it was hung in the church in memory of the miracle.

Raffaella Sodani had pregnancies that ended in stillbirths. She went to Don Biagio. The missionary told her: "Your next baby will be a male and will be born alive. You will call him Francesco." The woman was amazed, because she did not even know that she was pregnant. This was confirmed in the following days. She did give birth to a son who was alive and well. She named him Francesco. From then on all of her children were born in good health.

On one occasion Don Biagio heard some cries. He ran toward them. A child had fallen into a well. The mother and others were desperate and did not know what to do. Don Biagio called for silence. He took off his cincture and lowered it into the well, telling the child to hold onto it. Don Biagio pulled the child up, smiling and unharmed.

A poor craftsman presented himself to Don Biagio. He was lamenting the fact that his daughter wanted to become a nun and he did not have the money for the dowry. Don Biagio told him: "Make a novena to our Lady of the Chalice; go to confession

and communion.” The man did everything that he had been commanded. Don Biagio also gave him a little money. The man thought that it would be good to put part of the money on the lottery. He had three winning numbers, and he won exactly the amount necessary for his daughter’s dowry. She went on to be the foundress of the Pallotine Sisters.

One time a coachman stopped at a well to water the horses. The well was dry. Don Biagio was consulted, and he told them: “lower the bucket once more.” They lowered it and were able to draw very good water. The coachman was incredulous and said: “How could this happen? There wasn’t anything there before!” Someone who knew what had happened replied: “You have brought a saint here.”

In January 1834 Don Pietro Buffoni, a Missionary, was ill in the house of Sermoneta. The doctors had given up on him, and he did not want to die without having spoken with Don Biagio. He let Brother Andrea Cacciamano know this, and the latter went to Sezze, where Don Biagio was preaching the spiritual exercises to some nuns, to the seminary, and to the people. When he heard of Buffoni’s wish, he replied to the servant:

– Tell Don Pietro that he will not die at this time.

The Missionary who was near death at that moment began to get better and was cured. He lived another 19 years. Brother Andrea never missed an opportunity to relate the event to his confrères.

In the years from 1832 1837, Don Biagio preached many missions. Either by himself or as the head of a mission team, he gave missions in fourteen communities. With Gaspar, he preached missions in six additional communities. But this was not the predominant feature of his life.

Chapter 13

A TANGLE OF EVENTS

In the years when the controversy just described was taking place, Don Biagio had an important role in nearly all of the houses of lower Lazio. The demands of narrative clarity suggest that we cover the events topically rather than chronologically. As a consequence, the three chapters that follow will cover the same period of time, but each will follow a different thread of events.

The mission in Vallecorsa, begun on February 20, 1831, was very fruitful. Don Biagio's companions were Don Nicola Majorano and Don Pasquale Aloysi, the famous paralytic of Alatri. The people of the town came to have a deep love for the Missionary from Porto Recanati. The fame of this man of miracles was already secure and was based on the unanimous opinion of people from Frosinone, Sermoneta, Priverno, and Veroli. It is not an exaggeration to say that he became quite a topic of conversation in Campagna and Marittima. Some of the material was so overblown that one could say, with a little exaggeration, that a leaf would not move without Don Biagio willing it.

A young woman of Patrica by the name of Brigida Contenta had served her priest uncle, Don Rocco Galitelli, until his final illness. As a sign of his gratitude, the uncle had left her a large inheritance. Encouraged by the local priest and her spiritual director, she opened a school for girls on July 24, 1831. Her sister Teresa joined her along with a *maestra pia*⁴² from Ferentino who was working in Patrica. A rule was drawn up, there was a community schedule, and a spiritual bond. The initiative was going along as well as it could until 1834, when the Missionary Don Giuseppe Bellini of the mission house in Frosinone arrived in town. He suggested that she

⁴² Literally, a "pious teacher." This was the term for a woman who was formally recognized by a local bishop as a teacher of girls. Sometimes the term was used by religious congregations of women.

go to see Don Biagio, “a man totally of God. If he were to give his approval to the idea, it could only be worthwhile and for the honor of His Divine Majesty.”

She liked the idea and acted on it immediately. Don Biagio, invited to come to Patrica to examine the foundation, let it be known that they should continue along the path they had chosen. He would examine everything during his next visit to the town, because he was to preach there after finishing the Lenten preaching in Vallecorsa.

Immediately the rumor spread that the Institute of Patrica would be directed by Valentini. Giuseppina and Nicolina Alderisio, daughters of the deceased notary Vincenzo and sisters of the Missionary Don Giuseppe Alderisio, decided “to turn their backs on the world to pursue a more perfect life.” Their mother Rachele refused to give her consent, but when she learned that their vocation had been approved by Valentini, she had second thoughts. Because some construction was taking place in the school for girls in Patrica, the two young women were moved to the monastery of Vallecorsa in December 1833. Valentini went there in February for Lenten preaching.

Don Biagio returned to the delight of the people of Vallecorsa. Both the clergy and the local authorities had wanted him and him alone. Vallecorsa was a quarrelsome town, and the people appeared to be calmed by his fluent oratory and charming personality. There were many problems, as we shall see.

At the end of Lent, Don Gaspar ordered Don Biagio to bless the undertaking of a young woman of Vallecorsa, Maria De Mattias, who was preparing herself to leave the town to open a school in Acuto. The young woman, directed by Don Giovanni Merlini, was in correspondence with the Bishop of Ferentino, the administrator of Anagni. She explained to him that she did not intend to open a just a school, but a “pious Institute under the title of the Most Precious Blood.”

Maria and her proposed project were well known to Valentini. In fact, in a letter of October 1833 to the Bishop of Ferentino, Maria said that if references were needed, he could turn to “Don Biagio Valentini, resident in Frosinone, and to Don Giovanni Merlini...in Sonnino,” her spiritual director. Why did she not mention Gaspar, who would have had more authority than those two? It was because he did not know her well and did not want to be concerned with the matter, having entrusted it to his two “champions.”

Maria De Mattias had spoken once with the founder of the Missionaries, a little more than a year earlier, the day after the failure of a previous attempt. She had spoken to him in the confessional and had heard him say that she had to become a saint in the world, waiting for a new opportunity, which would not be for him to decide.

Maria’s venture had been carefully prepared by Merlini. He had directed the young woman for ten years. Don Giovanni himself wanted Gaspar’s blessing, and Maria had looked for it as a kind of guarantee. In a certain sense the particulars of this case revealed the radical difference of temperament between the two champions on whom del Bufalo relied. With his strength of experience that had matured in the events of Frosinone and Terracina, Don Giovanni, with patient and conscientious thoroughness, had nurtured a young woman who surely had a vocation and was quite gifted.

By now it was certain that Gaspar wanted to start several institutes of diocesan right,⁴³ reserving for himself the possibility of uniting them later on in the name of their common spirituality. We have already seen that during the 1820s he had made attempts to do this in Terracina and Frosinone. Even now, while he was giving his unreserved blessing to De Mattias, Don Biagio was pursuing the initiative in Patrica and had the Alderisio sisters in mind for this.

43 A religious community of diocesan right is established by a local bishop and is subject to him, in contrast to a community that has the approval of the Apostolic See.

Merlini did not rule out this approach, but he understood that in order to function well, all of the foundations, as branches to be grafted onto the trunk, would need to start out with a connection to the ideals of the trunk and be compatible with it. This was the purpose of the blessing of Don Gaspar, which Maria wanted and anticipated. Here we see the limit of Valentini's way of proceeding, coming as it did from a sort of professional bias: an abandonment to the dynamics of grace and to an event which in a certain sense just happened. There was a curious inversion of names between these two champions of Don Gaspar. Valentini was a sort of transcendent Don Giovanni, while Merlini seemed to favor the popular expression, "Adagio, Biagio."⁴⁴

The initiative in Patrica unfortunately began to look like those of Terracina and Frosinone. Don Biagio went to the girls' school founded by Brigida Contenta in April, directly from Vallecorsa. "After having examined everything with his wise discernment, he fully approved the work that had been begun, and advised that it assume the devotion to the Most Precious Blood." With his personal charm it did not take long to win over Don Giacomo Pilotti, Brigida Contenta, and the entire population. Would that be enough?

Without taking into account the truly marvelous charisma of Don Biagio, one cannot understand his actions. In Patrica the elder daughters of the doctor, Gioacchino De Sanctis, Teresa and Carolina, were captivated by him. When he would come to town they would run to talk to him. When he was away they wrote to him. And he responded. His response was only a bare bones message, penned in haste, but he always responded with encouragement.

What happened in Patrica was documented. In all of the towns there were young women who were won over by Valentini's preaching and who were choosing religious life. He was ready to

⁴⁴ Don Giovanni or Don Juan is a fictional character in opera and literature, generally seen as a symbol of libertinism, or more broadly, of romanticism. "Adagio, Biagio," means "Go slow, Biagio."

fill monasteries with young women who wanted to consecrate themselves to God. For as long as he had known Brigida Contenta, she “always sought to find new plants...in order to transplant them” to the new school in Patrica.

With the effective patronage of Don Biagio the foundation grew. A third Alderisio sister, Michelina, along with Rosalba Piacquedio and Maria Giuseppa Cipolla, a friend of Maria De Mattias, entered. The latter seemed destined for Acuto but instead was directed to Patrica. All of them, or at least most of them, had come through the monastery of Vallecorsa, which was now the subject of gossip.

The mayor had installed Celeste Nardone as caretaker of the school. She was a young woman with whom he had an illicit relationship and, so it seems, he was not her only paramour. This woman had dominated the first superior and then, even more completely, the second. Popular rumor had it that in this school for girls, secret assignations between the girls and boys of their age were taking place. This could not be confirmed, but it did not stop the gossip.

Apart from the incongruity of having a prostitute as the caretaker of a girls' school, much of the gossip could have been due to the prejudice of some in the town toward such schools. The formal education of girls was something of a novelty at the time, and not everyone was in agreement with this innovation. Many believed that women should remain in the house: their occupation was to raise and educate children. Reading and writing were not useful. On this point, Count Monaldo Leopardi of Recanati and the peasants of Vallecorsa were in agreement. The destructive gossip could have been a way of discrediting an unpopular undertaking.

Don Biagio was called on to resolve the problem. The local clergy had their hands tied, because the mayor was so powerful and tenacious. The bishop and the archpriest waited anxiously for Valentini's success. He made a thorough investigation. He

reported to the archpriest that the character and the intentions of the superior were not bad. What was needed was to free her from the evil influence of the caretaker. He had sought to convince the caretaker and the superior to break the bond between them. He had also invited Nardone to leave Vallecorsa, offering her a better position elsewhere.

Both of these offers were declined. In the judgment of Don Biagio, the legitimate superiors needed to intervene. He wrote that if Nardone could be induced to come to him, he would undoubtedly be able to find a suitable position for her in Rome. And he added: "I will return for a time to Frosinone, but I am in residence in Vallecorsa, and in two weeks I will be here again. If some urgent need arises, either the bishop or you should send for me."

As he had done in the past, the mayor soured the relationship with the mission house, and the superior no longer called the Missionaries to hear the confessions of the young women. She had a Trinitarian from Terracina come for confessions. The school went from bad to worse and ended in tragedy a few years later. Nardone was imprisoned for killing a baby girl that she had given birth to secretly, with the complicity of the superior. The Trinitarian priest was ignominiously removed from the town. It was a very great scandal which troubled the life of the local people.

In the same letter in which Don Biagio had counseled the removal of Nardone, he stated that he was very happy with the school in Patrica. He wrote, certainly alluding to that foundation: "the other matter, thanks be to God, goes very well now. I see a model of genuine withdrawal and Christ is the Superior (*Cristo è il Guardiano*)."

The institute had adopted the name of the Daughters of the Divine Blood and was using the Precious Blood prayers. There were so many members that there was talk of founding daughter houses.

In Patrica there were miracles and diabolical encounters. The miracle of the multiplication of money was repeated there. But it seemed that the devil had taken up residence in the community. He was displeased with the good that was taking place there. The evil one manifested himself with blatant spiteful acts: blows to the shoulders of the sisters, sudden howling laughter in the middle of the night, and worse. Exorcisms were necessary and they resolved the problem for one or two weeks, and then the demon appeared again. It was inevitable that Valentini would be called in. Of course, the exorcism he performed resolved the problem.

Brigida Contenta and her companions, having such a powerful miracle worker around, would go to him every time they found themselves in difficulty. They would reach him either by mail or in one of the mission houses of lower Lazio. Frosinone was nearby, and once they went to meet him in Sonnino. They were anxious because the archpriest became tired of their problems and soon became pessimistic about the future of their work. Upon seeing them, Don Biagio sighed compassionately:

— He is tired already? Now he is about to enjoy some fresh air, our archpriest!

Everyone would go to Don Biagio. It was like a daily pilgrimage. Each one was seeking his or her miracle: the apostolic delegate, the bishops, local officials, the sick, and the poor.

Vallecorsa was a typical case. The town was divided into two parts: the upper, Ammonte, was organized around the church of San Martino. The lower part, Abballe, was near the church of San Michele or Sant'Angelo, and the division was about to lead the town into economic failure. The litigation concerned a variety of questions and took place before tribunals at various levels. The people of Vallecorsa were of the opinion that it would be opportune to reach an agreement that would lay the basis for long-term accord. And who did they think could accomplish this? Don Biagio

Valentini, of course. It was said that Gregory XVI himself sent Don Biagio there. The appointment met with the favor of everyone, not only in Vallecorsa, but in Gaeta and Frosinone.

Don Biagio was well acquainted with the problem. A set of rules outlining the rights and obligations, accepted by both parties, would certainly be of help. All had confidence in Valentini, and this was a reason for hope. On May 10, 1836, the apostolic delegate of Frosinone wrote to him in Sermoneta:

Signor Don Biagio, Padrone and Friend. My spirit rejoices on hearing of the fruitful harvest that you are reaping in the mystical vineyard of Jesus Christ. May it please our merciful God always to bless your labors, and to sustain that energetic vigor, which these unfortunate towns need. The people *petunt panem et non est qui frangat eis* 'they ask for bread and there is no one who breaks it for them' except rarely. Regarding the interesting case of Vallecorsa, I think that if you go there toward the middle of this month it would be enough time, and there is no doubt about the influence that the cooperation of the most worthy and excellent Canon del Bufalo would have in moving this matter along to a happy conclusion. Please give him my warmest regards. I entrust this matter completely to your enthusiastic response. With the help of the Lord you will be able to restore peace to that unfortunate Land which has lacked peace for so long.

At this point it might be opportune to insert a brief reflection on miracles. It is easier to multiply coins in a purse, or to cure a person with advanced degenerative disease in an instant, than to change the heart of a person. From a scientific point of view, things seem to be just the opposite, because the heart is by nature changeable while the laws of nature are not.

The matter should be viewed from a theological perspective. In the former cases mentioned, it is a question of changing the laws of

nature. This is impossible for human beings, but not for God. In the second case, on the other hand, it is a matter of doing something that could require the violation of the freedom of the individual. God would not do this, because it would, in effect, destroy the humanity of the person.

In the famous case of Paul of Tarsus, the will to surrender to the truth was at least implicit and predominant in the Paul the persecutor. God intervened in a powerful way in his mental processes, in order to make of him a vessel of the election, but did not throw him from his horse in order to prevent him from doing what he appeared to desire, but to help him to do what he truly and deeply desired in a very direct way. One could say that God does not do violence to a human being, but at the same time God can hasten an event that a human being wishes to take place, even if the person is not even aware of their deepest desire.

We return to the situation in Vallecorsa. The bishop added a kindly message to the good wishes of the apostolic delegate. Don Biagio arrived as arbiter between Ammonte and Abballe, but powerless to do anything. The destiny of the people of Vallecorsa was in their own hands. If they wanted (as was probable) to hold fast to their respective positions and each side would have accepted the arbitration of the missionary with enthusiasm only because they secretly hoped to have him on their side, they could not have expected him to do what God could not do!

The delegate wrote him again on June 27:

...the trust which the inhabitants of that land have in you and your skill in managing the affairs lead me to believe that you will bring to a happy conclusion the matter I entrusted to you. The work is completely aimed at tranquility and peace, and thus one must hope that God will deign to hear my prayers and to bless the labors which you will have to undertake

in order to accomplish this. I am confident in your wisdom and in the expectation of a very happy outcome for the matter.

Don Biagio did not have a skill as we might understand the word today. His skill was his absolute sincerity. One could say that his irresistible skill was the lack of skill. His disinterest gave weight to his interest; his lack of defensiveness was the basis of his strength; sincerity often exposes deception.

From Gaeta, Bishop Parisio wrote on a portentous day: September 29, the feast of St. Michael, whose title as principal protector of Vallecorsa was being contested by the supporters of St. Martin and was one the principal sources of contention. The Bishop said:

Esteemed Don Biagio. I am happy to hear that you are in Vallecorsa for the good of the Souls there. You have observed the impossibility of agreement on the perpetual questions of those Churches. Let God's will be done always. Moreover I hope that with your cooperation, if the matter is not decided in a good-natured way, at least that the Holy See will make a decision once and for all, for if not, Vallecorsa will always be troubled.

We are not interested in the details of the controversy or in the outcome of the attempt. We know that "the Sacred Congregation issued the decree in accordance with the prudent report received from Don Biagio." The result was not miraculous. What is interesting is the extraordinary moral authority accorded to Valentini. That authority would be confirmed by the following events.

In 1837, central Italy was in the grip of cholera, which was striking down victims in the rest of the peninsula and had decimated the population of Europe. The kingdom of Naples, at the height of the epidemic, was divided from Vallecorsa by a porous border. Rigid protective measures, the so-called sanitary cordon, sought to raise

an insurmountable wall that would have choked both legitimate and contraband traffic. That network of exchange made up the principal resource of the local economy. Certain public officials, driven by necessity, had violated the laws and had challenged the sanctions, which were supposed to serve as a warning. The agitation among the people was very high, and it appeared that there could be a renewal of brigandage, which had been suppressed only ten years earlier. What was to be done?

There was only one hope: Don Biagio. They called, and he came. Only he could deal with what was happening. He got those involved in contraband activities to be reasonable, and the police to be moderate.

While an honorable compromise with regard to the sanitary law was being worked out, Don Gaspar called Valentini back. There was a moment of panic in the town. They feared a catastrophe. On July 25, 1837, the chief town councilor (*il priore comunale*), Martin Iacovacci, and the elders Michele Sacchetti Ascolani and Gioacchino Giuliani, wrote an official letter to Don Gaspar del Bufalo:

This Municipality, with a great number of peasants, finds itself in a very troubled state, and worthy of all sympathy, in view of the Sanitary Cordon which impedes traffic with the nearby kingdom of Naples. These same needy peasants, notwithstanding the reasonable sanitary laws, need to provide food for themselves. They have risked violating the Cordon, and so individuals have fallen into the hands of the justice system and are still subject to judicial procedure. The danger of introducing the cholera (*morbo asiatico*) adds to the prejudice against these same individuals. Therefore to quell the violation of the Sanitary Law and consequently the present grave prejudice which can result from it, Divine Providence brought us that famous and illustrious Missionary, Reverend Don Biagio Valentini. With public preaching and private exhortations, together with his

intelligence and natural goodness and charity, he has been able to stem that problem. This was also due to the deserved esteem which that population in general has toward that most worthy [Missionary]. We members of the local Judiciary, therefore, recognizing the great usefulness to those to whom we dispense justice in these trying circumstances, in matters both temporal and spiritual, of the presence in the Pious House (of Mission) of that above-mentioned and worthy Gospel Worker, and motivated by public wish, respectfully beg the goodness of your Most Reverend Lordship, to permit him to remain at least until the suspension of the Sanitary Cordon, so that he can keep the population in check, and avoid the evils that loom over us.

There was at that time in Vallecorsa Albina Bottelli, the young and attractive daughter of the local governor. She was leading an immoral life. The preaching of Don Biagio changed her heart. She went to confession to him and decided to change her life.

Sometime later, the body of a fetus was found in a field. Albina was accused, because she had left Vallecorsa suddenly with her whole family. In time it was learned that it was Maria Celeste Nardone who had rid herself of the undesired baby, having given birth secretly in the school with the complicity of the superior. It was a great scandal for the town. It led to the closing of the school. Albina, whatever the reasons for her sudden departure from Vallecorsa, ended up in Rome and continued to confess to Don Biagio and conducted an exemplary life until her untimely death.

Chapter 14

AT THE SUMMIT

Valentini participated in Gaspar's last mission in Bassiano. The journey from Porto d'Anzio was among the most dangerous they had made. It took place on April 19, 1837, during an unusually violent rainstorm. In Agro Pontino, heavy rain reduced the land to a swamp. The countryside, devoid of sun and blue sky, seemed tragic and solemn, with expanses of stagnant water up to the edge of the road. The coaches appeared to roll through a dreamlike landscape, on roads and wooded islands suspended in a void.

The torrential rain created puddles across the roads and caused erosion. It was dangerous for the passengers, who had to test the water to determine how deep it was before going on either by coach or on foot.

On that day the coach turned over, and the passengers ended up in the water, trapped inside the vehicle. Adding to the difficulty of getting out of the mud was the behavior of the faithful servant of the founder, Bartolomeo Panzini. In a fit of apparent madness, he fumbled about on the half submerged carriage, shouting insults and imperious orders.

As a consequence of this incident, Don Biagio tells us, the founder "became gravely ill and I thought we would lose him." Valentini and Merlini now had to preach the mission. It was the beginning of the end for Gaspar, who had dragged himself along for eight months, reduced to a shadow of himself, continuing to preach, although less forcefully and less frequently, up until the time of his death.

Meanwhile the foundations in Patrica and Acuto were moving along well, but autonomously. The two houses, although they were under the same bishop when they were established, were in different dioceses, and now that separation became an issue. It would be

wrong to say that there was competition between them, but at the same time it would be naïve to think that those involved would not put the interests of their own houses first.

In spite of the apparent superiority of the foundation in Patrica (it was a beautiful residence with a large number of members, the official blessing on the part of the Bishop, and a daughter house in Arnara), the foundation in Acuto was certainly outstanding. It did not yet have a residence, it did not have daughter houses, and it did not have any sort of approval, but it had Maria De Mattias. None of the women at the girls' school in Patrica could compare to her. Merlini had worked with Maria for ten years, from Lent of 1824 until the moment of founding, in 1834.

The relative closeness of the two foundations created a problem when it came to uniting them. If it had depended on Merlini, the project would not have even been considered. It was Valentini who stirred the waters, and it could not be otherwise, because all questions came to him. From Patrica, they contacted Maria in Don Biagio's name. Before discussing the matter with Don Biagio, Maria sought and received authorization from her own director, but nothing happened, whether because of the difficulties that arose between the two dioceses, or because of a certain reticence on the part of Maria to merge with the foundation in Patrica. After all, it was Patrica asking for help from Acuto, and not vice versa.

When Gaspar died in Rome, on December 28, 1837, Biagio was in Vallecorsa. Giovanni Merlini was at the bedside of the dying Gaspar. When it appeared that death was inevitable, Merlini had asked the founder how he wished the eventual election of his successor to be handled. Merlini suggested asking the Pope, with Cardinal Frasoni acting as intermediary, to name Don Biagio Valentini. Don Gaspar did not exclude such a solution, but neither was he enthusiastic. His response: – Let it be done (*si regoli*).

That Don Biagio was to succeed Don Gaspar was a matter known by all, and it had been mentioned many times, both seriously and humorously, by the founder himself. The problem was how to arrive at this foregone conclusion. Among other things, Don Gaspar had named Don Biagio executor of his estate and of the affairs of the Valentini family, and that was a matter of public knowledge. He was also the oldest member of the Institute in years of membership. After him came Don Raffaele Brandimarte, Don Innocenzo Betti, and Don Giovanni Merlini.

When Don Biagio arrived, on December 30, the funeral services had already taken place, and the body of the deceased was still on view in the church of Sant'Angelo in Pescheria.⁴⁵ Accompanied by Merlini, he went to see his great friend, confidant, father and, in a manner of speaking, his son. The casket was closed as he watched, and was then to be taken to Albano for burial, as Merlini had arranged, after obtaining the necessary permissions. In the afternoon of the 31st, the coffin was taken from the church and carried to the mission house in Albano. Solemn funeral rites were celebrated there, with public exposition of the body and homage from a great crowd, and then the founder was buried.

During the viewing, Don Biagio, as if seized by an interior impulse, stood before the body. It was as if he saw the founder alive, and he asked Gaspar “pardon for all his faults and any hurts he had caused him (*i mancamenti e disgusti datigli*) while he was in the Congregation, begging him in his heart to obtain for him the grace to persevere in all of his obligations.”

The body was buried in the afternoon of January 3, in a private service with Don Biagio, Don Giovanni, the stonemason, the chancellor of the diocese, and a few others assisting. It was a very sad task. The founder still appeared to be incorrupt. Never again

⁴⁵ This church was only a few steps from Gaspar's residence in the Teatro di Marcello.

would Don Biagio see that familiar face, so important in his life. Without Gaspar's presence would he still be a man of miracles?

It was decided to proceed with the election of a successor by secret vote, held by means of a sealed letter sent by each Missionary. On January 20 they counted the votes, in the presence of Cardinal Giacomo Filippo Frasoni, the protector of the Institute. 29 of the 30 votes bore the name of Don Biagio. He did not vote for himself. Innocenzo Betti and the community in Benevento did not vote. Although they stood by the election of Valentini, they had wanted the election to take place in a general assembly of all the members.

The election of Valentini was ratified in the following days by Gregory XVI. A new era began with Don Biagio. No longer was he the confidential counselor of the founder, a moral authority. He suddenly became the director general, with juridical authority. He was at the head of an institute which, however small, counted some ten houses and about fifty members, clerical and lay. Don Biagio would have to express their will and put into action what they wanted. He would have to see to it that the rule was followed in the communities, preside over the individual members, reprimand them at times, assign them to the various communities, and preside over legal controversies. Was he truly suited for that kind of service?

The response to that question is simple, of course. The vote to elect him was unanimous, and there was no doubt that his colleagues judged him suitable for the job. How can we today make a better judgment than they did? Moreover, it was a new kind of religious congregation and was bound to encounter frequent challenges. After all, it was made up of diocesan priests living in community, each incardinated in his own diocese of origin and, as noted, technically on loan by their bishops. The head of such a congregation had to be a person of unquestioned character, highly regarded by all, who could silence the gossip and would be ready to demand obedience in virtue of his noble character. Don Biagio

would certainly meet those standards. He was highly regarded by the people, thronged by supporters from all levels of society, and marked by the gift of miracles.

This is not to say, however, that he had all of the gifts needed for the task that he was now called to fulfill. He lacked practical acumen, a mind for economic matters, and the capacity to control a structure that was both vast and heterogeneous. We shall have to consider such aspects of his personality, and these will emerge from the facts narrated in the following pages.

After a brief stay in Albano, Don Biagio established his residence in Rome, in the apartment of Don Gaspar del Bufalo, where Paolina Castellini and Gigia del Bufalo lived with some servants. A great part of the apostolate of the community of Albano took place in Rome, with a coming and going that was a burden, given the lack of an autonomous house in the capital city. Gaspar's apartment, in the Palazzo Savelli (also known as the Teatro Marcello) on the Piazza Montanara, was big enough. Nearly all the Missionaries stayed there when passing through Rome. It had a main door, common to all the inhabitants, in the courtyard of the palazzo, and its own door, up the grand staircase.

Don Biagio was well acquainted with Gigia, since he had lived with her, with or without Gaspar, for more or less extensive periods over many years. She was a very able woman, observant and well informed about the affairs of the Institute. Missionaries from different houses went to her when they needed things in Rome. She always stepped up to help. In carrying out the responsibilities entrusted to her, she had made important friendships and had established those special networks of influence needed for dealing with the bureaucracy. With her around, the new director general had at his disposal an efficient secretary, to use a modern term.

She certainly had her good qualities, but mention must be made of some of her shortcomings. She was a woman of thirty-two who

needed to be dealt with cautiously, because she did not limit herself to helping with various matters; she inserted herself forcefully into them. Her uncle had often reprimanded her for this. Would Don Biagio know how to do the same? And would Gigia accept the moderating influence of an ascetic like Don Biagio, or would she deal with him as she pleased?

Only after ten months was there was a *congressus*,⁴⁶ or meeting, that assigned the other responsibilities of the general administration. Ten months was a long time. Had something not gone right after the death of the founder, and were they were trying to deal with this? We think that was the case, but at the same time this circumstance should not be overstated.

They were faced with finding a new model of government. During the life of the founder there are no minutes of a *congressus* of the general administration. Thus Don Biagio could have thought that this should continue. The founder, however, had enjoyed an intrinsic authority in his role that no director general would be able to have. Too many affairs of the Institute remained uncertain.

Two of the weightiest problems were Don Innocenzo Betti's contentious stance and assigning responsibilities in the general administration. As to Betti's position, there was not much to be done but resign one's self to the situation. With regard to the responsibilities, given Valentini's personality, the office of procurator general would be crucial. In fact this role (along with some others) ended up with Don Giovanni Merlini. He appeared to be a kind of "guard dog" for the Institute, and his admonitions regarding "the will of our Father [Gaspar]" seemed obsessive to some.

46 The Italian *congresso* can be translated simply as *meeting*, but in the history of the CPPS it has had the special meaning of a meeting of all the members of a house. In the original Rule of the Congregation, such meetings were to be monthly and the minutes were to be recorded so that the director general could examine them when he visited. The translator recalls that the term was still in use to some extent in the decade of the 1960s.

The *congressus* was special, because the presidents of the various houses were invited to participate. Present at this meeting were Don Vincenzo Maria Fontana of Cesena, Don Camillo Rossi of San Felice, Don Nicola Santarelli of Pievetorina, Don Gennaro Gamboa of Frosinone, and Don Beniamino Romani of Rimini. Naturally, also in attendance were Merlini, of Albano, and Don Biagio, director general. Don Innocenzo Betti of Benevento was also invited, but he refused, because he was demanding a general *congressus* of all the members of the Congregation

The *congressus* dealt with important themes and assigned members to their new duties. Don Giovanni Merlini was confirmed as the president of the house in Albano and as a definitor general (in today's terms, a general councilor); Don Vincenzo Maria Fontana was named superior and a definitor general; Don Beniamino Romani, vice superior and a definitor general; Don Gennaro Gamboa, director of the missions; Don Nicola Santarelli, economo and consultor; Don Cristoforo Frioli, director of the spiritual exercises and consultor. The minutes also note that Merlini would continue "in the responsibility as secretary general, entrusted to him by the founder."

Problems were emerging and they were not noted in the minutes of the meeting. There was the introduction of the process for the beatification and canonization of the founder, the approval of the will, the opening of a house in Rome, and settling Gaspar's estate. Taking care of Gaspar's estate was the special duty of Don Biagio. There was nothing said about the duties of the procurator, Don Beniamino Romani.

Don Biagio went to Rome with several agenda items. After the *congressus*, he added several tasks to be accomplished: to open a mission house in Rome according to the wishes of the founder; to open a house in Porto Recanati, which he had wanted; obtaining the approval of the rule; and taking care of the sister-in-law and niece

of Gaspar. Another item was added as something of a surprise: the expansion of the congregation outside of Italy. The question of the house in Porto Recanati will be treated in the following chapter. In this chapter we will look at the question of the expansion of the Institute.

A restless Swiss priest became acquainted with the Missionaries and the mission house in Cesena in 1833, and he was very impressed by them. His name was Francis De Sales Brunner. He had been a member of both the Trappists and Benedictines, and he was now a secular priest. He believed that his vocation was to be a member of the new Congregation. He met Don Biagio in Rome, during the first weeks of his term as general, was accepted as a member, and then sent to Albano, under the care of Don Giovanni Merlini. Now he was going to return to Switzerland and was to open a mission house in Alsace. Don Biagio sent him with his accustomed encouragement and enthusiasm. Sending Brunner appeared to be risky, but he was capable of handling the risk.

At the end of 1838, Don Biagio could note another great success: the approval of the rule on the part of Gregory XVI, on December 17, 1838. This longed-for event brought Valentini's first year as general to a triumphal conclusion. A year later he would register a new success: a new mission house in Rome.

The mission house in Rome was made possible by Cardinal Luigi Lambruschini, the Secretary of State. He was the commendatory of the little church of San Salvatore in Campo, which had a small house attached to it, and he was willing to give both to the Congregation. Don Biagio accepted. On May 23, 1841, a papal rescript was issued for the formal concession of the property, and on July 27, the Congregation formally took possession of it. The director general entrusted the church to Don Michele Gentili, who was functioning as his personal secretary.

Don Gentili did not have much to write about as far as the director general was concerned, and that is a shame. Valentini's handwriting

is strange and illegible, and that of Don Michele Gentili is beautiful to the point of affectation. But Don Biagio did not want to be written about, all the more so as he saw the encouraging prospects for the Institute and his administration as director general. Without question, Valentini was almost solely responsible for the above-mentioned successes, in the sense that they were due principally to him and to the esteem in which he was held by the pope and some important cardinals.

It was clear that his personal reputation was aided and enriched by some extrinsic factors. He had been the spiritual director of Canon del Bufalo. The mission house in Albano had functioned in an exemplary fashion, directed by Merlini. The pope had visited the house during his vacation in Castelgandolfo and came away with a very favorable impression. There were good reports coming from the dioceses where other mission houses were located. Devotion to the Blood of Christ was very popular. There was interest in the Adorers of the Most Precious Blood. These and other factors could not but help favor the representative of the Institute that was at the center of a vast movement.

All of this can be read between the lines of the petition that Cardinal Giuseppe della Porta Rodiani sent to the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Religious supporting approval of the rule. Hewaxed eloquently over “the zeal, the spirit, and the knowledge of the tireless Founder, the Priest Gaspar del Bufalo...example and credit to the Roman Clergy” as well as “his sons, who, following in his footsteps, do not cease to be zealous for the good of souls and for the glory of the Lord.” He said that there were “uncontestable proofs” in the city of Rome of his assertions. Every time that the direction of souls or preaching had been entrusted to them, the result was that people were very happy with them, admiring “their prudence and exemplary patience... [and] understandable methods (*i modi facili*) [for] calling the wayward to the right path,” and in

“strengthening good people in the various principles of a more just moral life.”

The opening of the house of San Salvatore in Campo did not please Gigia del Bufalo. It diminished her role in the affairs of the Congregation. Indeed, it practically excluded her, since the Missionaries were now acquiring independence. She began to show her disappointment in increasingly more resentful ways, eventually in open hostility. Merlini did not like the house either, since he dreamed of a large building in Rome (for example, Santa Maria della Pace), for a permanent spiritual oasis like that of Albano, but better organized to welcome the secular clergy and fulfill one of the aims of the Institute.

Chapter 15

A PROPHECY TO BE FULFILLED

How should an ascetic who has always lived in a land of miracles respond to a prophecy by a man of God who had been so dear to him? Don Biagio sensed that he had the ability to show whether the prophecy of his mentor Don Gaspar was genuine or false. He had discovered his own vocation through the ministry of Gaspar. When Gaspar responded to the citizens of Porto Recanati who reproached him for taking Valentini from their city, he told them: "In time Don Biagio will do more good for Porto Recanati than if he had remained there." Those words still rang in his ears. He had always interpreted that prophecy as referring to the opening of a mission house. In his heart he dreamed of investing all of his remaining inheritance in such a project.

To that end he had given his father considerable sums of money, with the idea of taking advantage of his patrimony and expanding his real estate holdings in Porto Recanati. One of his first acts when he became director general was to make contact with the religious and civil authorities of his native city. The Bishop and ranking civil authority were very interested, because the moral condition of Porto Recanati was in an alarming state, and the people were seeking measures to address that.

The municipality was able to offer the church inside the Castello and the house that was attached to it. That house had been offered to the Observant Franciscans. The pastor released the property. The two buildings were in very bad shape. Don Biagio got his niece Antonia to obtain beds and other furniture. In time, however, the pastor had second thoughts. Besides, the Pope was not in favor of making changes or innovations, and there would be no funds for restoring the parts of the Castello that were in ruins.

Don Biagio preferred a new foundation. He needed to have funds at his disposal for this. He suggested requesting an annuity “from the house of the Duke of Leuthemberg, namely the vice Queen of Italy, Princess, etc. begging her in the name of the people.” In order to have members for the proposed house in Porto Recanati he thought about closing the house of Sermoneta, to which the Franciscans could return.

Obviously the news of the probable closing of the house in Sermoneta caused some agitation in the town. Don Biagio asserted that he had consulted his companions, but probably it was a matter of only talking to a few members in his inner circle who, rather than overruling him, let the ascetic director general stew in his own juices. Don Biagio believed it was necessary to take members from Sermoneta in order to staff Porto Recanati. The Franciscans, however, let it be known that they were not interested in returning to Sermoneta. An offer was made to the Trinitarians, who took some time to think about it, and in the end also turned the offer down.

The Bishop of Terracina, Priverno, and Sezze, who considered himself to be a Missionary and would become for all intents and purposes a Missionary a few years later, wrote a letter to Don Biagio expressing his distress, in which among other things he said: “would it not be possible to open the house of Porto Recanati and keep the houses of Sonnino and Sermoneta? Wait for a while. May our Father give you a clear inspiration from on high.”

Striking while the iron was hot, Don Biagio had sent the Missionary Don Francesco Palmieri to Porto Recanati along with a lay brother to await a turning point in the events. Meanwhile, Don Biagio, as determined as ever, pressed his case before the Bishop, and the Bishop again brought the case to the Gonfalonier Andrea Cadolini.⁴⁷ He in turn brought the case to a meeting of the Council on January 16, 1841. The decision was favorable and

47 The term *gonfalonier* (“standard bearer”) refers to a chief magistrate or other important public official.

the project was approved. The Missionaries were given “at first a temporary residence, and in no greater than a year, the building in the Castello that is currently inhabitable and available.” In addition, they decided to provide a subsidy in the amount of 300 scudi, to be payable during the years 1841, 1842, and 1843.

The town council declared that they were unhappy at not being unable to give more, due to economic conditions. They also stated that they were very pleased to have an establishment that they considered “the first and most efficacious means capable of achieving the rebirth (*risorgimento*) of Porto Recanati. The merit of the project was attributed “to the piety, religious zeal, and patriotism” of Don Biagio. As representative of the city, the gonfalonier felt it necessary to offer him “special thanks for such an exceptional benefit and to testify to the recognition of the public.”

The assistance of the municipality was not enough to ensure the success of the project. The construction of a church and of a mission house, which needed to be of a size and structure similar to a convent, required huge sums of money. In this context an idea previously floated was taken up again: to give the Missionaries the parish of San Giovanni Battista for a period of at least three years. This solution, however, was rejected by Don Biagio, because it did not conform to the rule of the Missionaries.⁴⁸

Along with these events surrounding the establishment of a mission house was added the conflict between Recanati and Porto Recanati. Valentini’s family always headed the independent faction. Crispino and Simone had fought a great deal for the separation. Now Crispino was old and failing, and Simone had passed on to the other world. The residents of Porto Recanati, by their own admission, felt deprived of “all their protectors, who had been their well-being and their consolation.” They suspected that, behind a

⁴⁸ Gaspar did not want the Missionaries to accept parishes since it would limit their availability and mobility for giving missions and other spiritual exercises.

façade of kindness, the authorities of Recanati would oppose the mission house.

By now it was clear that the best solution would have been new construction. The Valentini house in which the Missionaries were residing ended up being too small, even taking into account the annexed warehouse. Adjacent lay some uncultivated land belonging to the municipality. There was nothing to be done except make a request to the municipality. Don Francesco sent the petition to the gonfalonier who, perhaps under pressure from the people and the bishop, advocated for it. Pietro Gigli, the town engineer, was sent to carry out the needed surveys. He measured the portion requested by Don Francesco. It was larger than had been thought. The response of the council, at their meeting of August 23, was positive. The entire area was staked out and the work began quickly.

Plans for such a large project were drafted by an architect. The foundations were set in and the wall surrounding the property was erected, but then construction halted. No one knew where the large amount of money needed for this project would come from. Meanwhile, another construction project began at San Salvatore in Campo in order to make the house more livable. It was an initiative of Don Beniamino Romani.

Don Biagio's move from Albano to Rome, and later the opening of the mission house of San Salvatore in Campo, had caused a break in the communications between the director general and his secretary general Merlini. Just as they had carried their weight when the founder was alive, it was even more important for them to carry it together now.

In a way, Don Giovanni found himself in the same situation as Gigia, and she did not lose an opportunity to try to open a special channel of communication with him, in the hope of reinforcing her own position. Needless to say, Don Giovanni did not fall into

the trap, and he responded in an austere and evasive manner to her complaints which, to a certain extent, he shared with her.

The breakdown became more serious as a consequence of the close collaboration of Don Beniamino Romani and Don Nicola Santarelli with Don Biagio. They were excellent Missionaries, capable, but also somewhat brusque and meddlesome. Not only were they inclined to fill in those blank spaces which the personality of the director general left open, but they also competed with one another. This was especially true of Romani. He would often go to Rome. He carried out the decisions of the director general or made decisions in his name.

Don Giovanni Merlini had not shown much enthusiasm about the house of San Salvatore in Campo. He wanted to consider it a “hospice” (*ospizio*) or a temporary house. Consequently he did not think it was the right time to spend a large amount of money on the building. This was also the view of Gigia and, if someone were inclined to be suspicious, it might appear that there was a secret agreement between her and Merlini, although one did not, in fact, exist. Merlini’s opinion was disregarded. Don Beniamino (with the consent of Don Biagio?) had planned the construction in the house in Rome while the Institute found itself facing the expenses for the process for the canonization of the founder, in addition to the expenses in Porto Recanati.

On Christmas Day in 1841, Don Giovanni wrote a letter to Don Biagio that resulted in a polite attempt at collaboration in administering the Institute, and which called for collegiality.

At the Hospice (*Ospizio*) I will only spend what is necessary and inevitable. The proposed expenses amount to more than 600 scudi. At least this is what I imagine. This is completely useless. So I think. The structure of the church was not completely damaged. It is a scare tactic to say that in an earthquake it would be the first to fall! There are other damaged buildings

which would fall before it...I say this as a result of what I have learned from our members. The façade of the house was damaged, but was still in good shape. Gigia writes me that she is without money and has debts to pay. She will have told you this. She needs to live. For this reason also I tell you to be cautious with the building...I say this for my peace of mind. What is the purpose of the large circular windows on the stairway? Excuse me. Pray for me.

The construction went ahead and worse happened. Don Beniamino got tired of the interference of Gigia, just like the others. However, he believed that he had found a way of taking care of the Gaspar's sister-in-law Paolina and niece Luigia (Gigia). He planned to merge the foundations of Patrica and Acuto and to unload (*scaricare*) Paolina and Gigia on them, giving them some sort of responsibilities. In order to carry this out it would be necessary for Gigia to start an institute and open some houses; later they would be united and the two branches would be a single trunk.

Thus Gigia was given a mandate, signed by Don Biagio, to be the foundress along the lines of what had been expected of the Countess Caterina Bentivoglio Orsi. In the meantime, the director general found himself with a staggering burden of debt.

The fame of Gaspar del Bufalo spread throughout the Catholic world because of the accounts of the miracles that occurred through his intercession. Don Biagio had now become a charismatic figure in Rome. He found himself surrounded by a strange assortment of personalities. Those who sought his advice, in addition to the pope, were Cardinals Frasoni, Giovanni Maria Mastai Ferretti (the future Pope Pius IX), and Lambruschini. Also coming for counsel were Princess Zenaida Wolkonsky; Duchess Maria Adele Chelers of Fleury; the Neapolitan mystic Maria Carmela Giuseppa Ascione; Father Adolfo Alessandro Semenenko, founder of the Resurrectionists; Don Vincenzo Pallotti, founder of the Pallotines

and close friend of Gaspar; and dozens of bishops from diocese where Don Biagio had preached or in which there were mission houses.

Don Biagio allowed himself to be carried away by the winds of enthusiasm. He dreamed of a huge expansion of the Institute. The important people who came to him were rich. Certainly they would put some of those financial resources at his disposal. This was quite probably his reasoning. He was, however, pitifully discreet, and would not ask for even a small sum. No one knew how indebted he was. Who would have suspected this, given that he was seen giving alms with a prodigality that they admired?

Among the characters that gravitated to Don Biagio, the most unusual was undoubtedly the Princess Zenaida Bielezierskij Wolkonsky. For some time the famous Russian princess had been driven by a pathological thirst for miracles and had come to the feet of the “prince of miracles,” Don Biagio, dressed as a penitent. Inevitably, she was charmed by the man of God.

She had converted to Catholicism some years earlier and was connected to the famous seer Maria Luisa di Gesù. The latter had founded a congregation dedicated to the Sorrowful Mother and to Saint Philomena. In its aims it was not unlike the institutes that had grown up in Acuto and Patrica. Zenaida, already protector of the monastery in Naples, offered herself to be sponsor and head of the two houses. Her exuberant mind was bent on mixing good with bad (*di fare d'ogni erba un fascio*) indiscriminately under her direction, assuming the rule of Maria Luisa, the most “miraculous” of the three founders.

Don Biagio would have to control this whirlwind. Zenaida hung on the words of Don Biagio, and he took everything she said at face value. Romani was not interested only in finding a place for Paolina and Gigia. The latter, a sort of unrefined Zenaida, entangled in the affairs of foundation, would have wanted more monetary

assistance from Don Biagio. Moreover, she would not accept advice from anyone, convinced that she had no need for it. Because the financial support was not available to her, partly because of the work in progress at San Salvatore and Porto Recanati, she began to speak out against those projects, and against the one who had promoted them.

Apart from the complete lack of aptitude for temporal matters, there was something strange that was absorbing his attention and distracting him more than was usual for him. We will treat that matter in the next chapter. Meanwhile, however, let us stick to the present, in order to explain the decline of the general administration during this crucial period. In the end, it seems that one must admit that Gigia was substantially correct.

In Rome, Maria De Mattias did not enjoy a favorable reputation. Her economic imprudence (she used money from the dowries for the needs of construction) had given some weight to this skepticism. Don Biagio appeared to be somewhat detached, even when Maria would speak enthusiastically about the progress of the institute. She was about to found the fifth school, in Cascia. Clearly the director general limited himself to getting information from the reports of others and he was not about to make decisions about the issue.

Zenaida Wolkonsky was now more than ever determined to put together her "Russian salad." She was pessimistic about the affairs in Acuto. Relying on her interior illuminations, she saw that the solution could only be the union of Acuto with the institute of Maria Luisa of Naples. The princess dreamed of many monasteries entrusted to the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. Perhaps because of Gigia's malicious gossip, Zenaida also spread her own dose of poison.

In the houses of the Missionaries there was some resentment on account of the scarce attention to the problems which were surfacing and because of the grumbling heard outside the Congregation. The

complaints reached Merlini, who addressed them as he could, more often than not with silence. Don Innocenzo Betti who, after having made some harsh judgments, said to Merlini: "They do not care for my style. Since I am all heart, tongue, pen and hand, I easily forget the niceties when I speak of things that seem to me to be the truth."

Administering the mission houses and the different foundations of women would have been a burden too heavy for a man with Don Biagio's mentality, even without the family problems that arose, or the resentment and gossip of Gigia, as well as the angry outbursts of the princess, and the debts.

Gigia del Bufalo, feeling unappreciated, accused Don Biagio of ruining her uncle's Institute and of not giving her sufficient support to founding or merging foundations of women dedicated to the Precious Blood, with the result that they lacked the necessary means to continue in existence.

These criticisms came to the attention of Cardinals Luigi Lambruschini and Gian Filippo Frasoni, and others, and they were perplexed. Fortunately Don Biagio enjoyed a good reputation with them, and he put the accusations in a more moderate perspective. With his affable manner, he was able to excuse the woman, tracing the resentments back to some strained economic circumstances. In this way he succeeded, with the help of the aforementioned cardinals, in obtaining a small annuity for her. He was hoping that in this way to have at least won her over. The reader will see how he deceived himself.

Don Biagio found himself in an increasingly difficult position. The great miracle worker, the charming young old man, universally considered to be a giant, who had held spellbound entire populations with the authority of his preaching and his behavior, now appeared to be a bumbler.⁴⁹ Family trouble now came crashing down like an avalanche onto this already difficult situation.

⁴⁹ The phrase used is *pulcino nella stoppa*, literally "a chick in the flax," an Italian idiom that means someone who does not know which way to turn.

Chapter 16

THE SAGA OF THE VALENTINIS

Crispino Valentini guided the members of his family as though steering his fishing boats. They might get off course, but his oars and rudder guided them where he wanted. He controlled his property the same way. He had mortgaged his property heavily for cash and had spent generously for the education of his children and the expansion of his fishing fleet. At the end of the 1830s, the situation of the family was serious. The old man continued to control everything. His strong constitution and the family name were showing signs of decline. The members of the family were resistant. They wanted Crispino to loosen his grip before things began to become a problem for all of the family members.⁵⁰

Crispino decided to give up running the family on January 10, 1840. He went before a notary to dictate his wishes. He stated that: “[he had lived] to the ripe old age of eighty and [was now] in poor health... [and] he did not want to risk spending his last days occupied with running the finances of his Family.” Having said this, “to avoid all harm to the good of the same Family” he resolved “to entrust the administration to one of his sons, the very reverend priest Don Biagio Valentini, Director General of the Apostolic Missionaries.”

Crispino’s decision at least apparently granted his son a full and all-encompassing mandate. The notary entered into the transcript:

The aforementioned Signor Crispino Valentini of his free will...establishes, elects, and appoints as his true, certain, legitimate, and special agent of all his property located in Porto Recanati and in whatever other place it may be, the previously named and absent son Don Biagio ...to act for him and in his stead and name to direct, supervise, and administer all property and

⁵⁰ The Italian is quite colorful here. Literally, “They wanted him to let go of the bone before it ended up sticking in everyone’s throat.”

effects, debts, legal actions, and business activities, in whatever place they are situated and exist.

There follows an endless series of specifics which are completely unneeded, given the clarity and breadth of the mandate. They were probably requested by those who knew the old man and intended to bind him hand and foot to prevent his future interference in decisions that would have to be made in the administration of such a complex estate.

Many people were interested in the question of the Valentini patrimony. Fishermen, sailors, the women who salted the fish, and the warehouse guards all depended on the boss of the port. A rough inventory put the liabilities at four thousand scudi. The estate was optimistically valued at nearly eight thousand scudi. If the indebtedness were to grow because of payments in arrears, as was foreseen, everything would have gone up in smoke. The blow had been delayed, as we have seen, by Don Biagio, with repeated loans “for the benefit of the Institute.”

The old man had three potential heirs: Don Biagio, Antonio, and the deceased Simone. The portion of the inheritance due Simone was, in theory, to be divided among his six children: a male and five females. Two of the girls had entered the monastery of San Girolamo in San Ginesio and had renounced their right to an inheritance. There were thus four of Simone’s children to be cared for.

The ascetic Don Biagio would have to be occupied with the administration of the estate of Crispino. This was complete nonsense (*La cosa non stava né in cielo né in terra.*) As we already know, he did not know the value of money. Now he would have to be involved in complicated transactions and handling large sums of money. Is it possible that Crispino would not have known his son well? We have seen that Don Biagio was puzzled and overwhelmed trying to care for twelve mission houses, not to mention the sisters. Was his father in the dark about all this?

Certainly, Crispino could have thought: "If they made him director general he must have become a wise man!" We are of another opinion. Don Biagio, in the name of the prophecy of Don Gaspar, had in effect become the owner of a good part of the estate by lending it money in order to save his father's property. Crispino's decision was necessary. How could anyone else be entrusted with administering property that, in effect, now belonged to Don Biagio?

This is not to dismiss other possible factors, for example, the incompetence of the other son, Antonio, about whom we know little. He is thought to have had psychological problems (*problemi di natura caratteriale*). Crispino could not involve his grandchildren in the problem while passing over his own sons. Perhaps this is what Valentino Valentini hoped would happen, given that he was most interested in the inheritance. In the light of indirect evidence from some documents, it seems reasonable to suspect that there was some kind of division among Crispino's children and grandchildren and their children. Valentino could have expressed his resentment or laid claim to greater rights with respect to the uncles, who, he said, had lesser needs.

Crispino felt that he had been wounded. On December 20, 1841, he summoned Giovanni Ridolfi and Angelo Rozzi, and in their presence declared his intention to change his will in favor of the grandchildren. He apparently had second thoughts about his previous declaration, and noted that much of the debt had been incurred for the benefit of his children and grandchildren, for example, for their education. In the declaration (quoted at length in the Italian original), he states that he had now come to favor the grandchildren over his own children.

Three months later, on March 26, 1842, the grand old man died with all the comforts of religion. He was one of the longest-lived citizens of Porto Recanati at the time, and was also one of the most interesting. He was able to keep his head until he died. He was

buried in the parish church. We do not know why he was not buried in the cemetery in which many of his family were interred.

Removing Don Biagio could not be said to be a careless decision, even from an economic perspective. In theory, as long as the indebtedness was less than the value of the capital of the Valentinis, Don Biagio, and through him the Congregation, would be safe. The debt was still much less than the capital. It was as if the Missionaries were about to acquire the patrimony of the Valentinis.

With the advice of Dionisio Cesarini, Antonio made a bold proposal to his brother. Don Biagio would assume his part of the debt (about 1100 scudi) and would give Antonio an annuity of six scudi a month, payable later. He would also give him full control of the house called “the Palazzina,” and would restore it to an inhabitable condition. He would give Antonio a third of the furniture of the family home. If he would agree to this he, Antonio Valentini, would declare that he had been paid, and would sign a document renouncing any other claim.

Antonio’s anxiety and his aversion to debts must have been great, because to regain his peace of mind he was laying down conditions that were so greedy as to be a provocation. The diligent lawyer Cesarini, knowing the good heart and simplicity of Don Biagio, added as a kind of peroration: “You would be offering a great benefit to your brother, eliminating his painful anxiety, and you would need to do all this with the greatest care, and, if agreeable to you, to draft the document immediately, given the debts that are coming due. I hope for your quick and complete response.”

The conditions proposed by Antonio were not accepted. Don Biagio, probably on the advice of Don Beniamino Romani, and also because he was more determined than ever to open a mission house in his native town, used the money of the Congregation to deal with the family debts, intending to regain possession of the real estate and liquid assets, as we will see. After this the Valentini estate had a

debt of 4,338 scudi. Don Biagio was responsible for 3,338 scudi, and the family of the late Rosa Mancini was responsible for the other thousand. The honor of the Valentinis was safe. Now the estate needed to be saved.

The foundation in Porto Recanati took place amid a great deal of gossip and problems. Don Francesco Palmieri must have been a miniature Don Biagio. He was held in high esteem as a priest, but he was completely incapable of supervising construction and dealing with technical and legal disputes. Not all the priests were in agreement about the new foundation. Don Francesco became discouraged and asked to be transferred.

Don Francesco was well liked in Porto Recanati. As soon as the rumor that this Missionary wanted to leave and was awaiting permission from the director general, the people mobilized. The pastor, Don Ermenegildo Panocchi, was among the most vocal, perhaps fearing the people's reaction. He wrote a letter to Don Biagio in which he implored the director general not to consent to Palmieri's request "by the merits of the blood of Christ, by the sorrows of his mother Mary, and in the name of St. Francis Xavier." He assured Don Biagio that Palmieri had been a force for harmony and peace among the clergy. The devil would lose many victims if the mission house were to be established in Porto Recanati.

One can be certain that the devil did not want the mission house. However, manure is needed for a plant to grow, and Don Biagio did not have it. He turned to the superior of the mission house in Ancona, Don Gennaro Gamboa, a very capable but somewhat arrogant man. He would be the one to supervise the construction in Porto Recanati. The relationship of Don Gennaro with the director general quickly became somewhat testy and in the end, tempestuous. The correspondence between the two paints a magnificent picture of characters in a chiaroscuro painting worthy of a Caravaggio.

Gamboa was something like Don Innocenzo Betti: he wanted a frank discussion of the problems. By contrast, Valentini was now engulfed in some very personal matters involving many parties, and he was reluctant to speak openly about everything. He did not view the situation to be as dramatic as some wanted to believe it was. He was surrounded by powerful people, who promised him unconditional support. If certain of his ideas would be carried out, everything would be resolved in the blink of an eye. Was there anything that Providence could not accomplish?

It is impossible to reconstruct all the events that accompanied the foundation of the mission house of Porto Recanati. Don Gamboa was above all annoyed by the story of a note given as security and which had not been paid. A sample of some of the correspondence will give an idea of the dispute that followed this. Don Biagio wrote:

Please take that sum of money from my account, and go to Porto Recanati to take care of the error cause by that late deposit...I am anxious for myself and even more for poor Palmieri, who finds himself pressed by debts and creditors. I don't know if he is still there. In any case, go as soon as possible and assume responsibility for everything, since the resources are not lacking, as they are not lacking for Ancona. Remove [Palmieri] from the harassment of the creditors and send him to Rimini with the title of minister, thereby calming those who could interpret his departure in a bad light. Pay the most urgent bills and pay the rest as promptly as you can...Please do not fail in this. Pray for me.

In the postscript he added: "Listen a bit to those in [my] house, namely to my brother, and obtain information about everything that Palmieri has done, with the letters for the mortgage, etc. But get the information without my brother knowing about this [matter]." Thus the Valentinis were divided into two factions: on the one hand, Biagio and his nephews, and on the other, his

brother Antonio. The latter had to be kept in the dark about that which strictly speaking did not concern him. He was certainly not enthusiastic that a part of the estate would end up in the mission house. Could he be made to understand that it was a question in large part of a “restitution?”

Don Biagio had just sent the first letter when he wrote a second to Gamboa, *for his eyes only*. He probably realized that he was asking his trusted representative for the famous miracle of the multiplication of money. In fact, he had told him to pay many debts without indicating how they would be covered. Thus he added a note for 300 scudi with which the necessities of Porto were to be paid. Don Gennaro thanked him on September 29, and promised to contact Don Palmieri as soon as possible to do what he had been requested and to inform him of everything.

On October 1, 1842, he wrote to the director general:

I arrived in the house in Porto last night to relieve the anxieties of Don Francesco. What do you wish for me to say to him?... Undertaking such immense construction with persons who are not very practical and who do not have a secure cash flow would by necessity have taken the course it has taken until now. The design is beautiful and the expenditures are impressive; this is why Palmieri is loaded with debts. The Bishop advanced 100 scudi that I have already distributed...We must pay for the bricks and the stones, not to mention the current labor costs, and I hope that 300 scudi will cover a good part of the expenses. There is also a debt with the fishing vessels and I will see to taking care of this tomorrow. How am I to act when this debt comes due? I do not know. My opinion is to suspend the construction until spring... In every respect Palmieri is not the man for this job.

Don Biagio responded that the construction must continue. He was sorry for Palmieri. He then exhorts Gamboa and thanks him for their collaboration. He promises to send Don Giovanni Chiodi,

a very capable man, to Porto Recanati. Meanwhile, he counsels patience and confidence in God.

But the difficulties grew, and with the obstacles failure became more likely. A letter was sent to Don Biagio, in the name of the entire population. They said that they were writing with tears. "In this poor town abandoned by all, we have not had two Masses except for the feasts, and when we wanted to confess we had to go to Loreto, and we also have not had the benefit of hearing a sermon, and as a consequence we must live like Turks."

What did Don Biagio have to do with all this? The correspondence explained:

For this reason and since we have no other person to turn to, we throw ourselves before your feet with tears in our eyes, so that you might agree to have at least one missionary priest live here... Ah, our dear Don Biagio, if, for the love that you bear for our God, you should grant us this, we will pray to God and the most holy Mary that he give you the good fortune of being carried up to heaven.

In the meantime, however, the debts and mistakes multiplied, and the question of the note blew up. The tone of Gamboa's responses became more severe and alarmist. His letter to Valentini is quoted here to give some sense of the tragic nature of that moment.

Most illustrious Sir. We find ourselves faced with new problems, and we have come to enjoy a poor reputation with the general public. Who would ever have dreamed that we would reach this state! The second promissory note for the 627 scudi that you agreed to has come due and is not paid yet...How are we to remedy such a situation? I do not know, but I fear that we could be ruined... If you find yourself burdened by heavy obligations, which press upon you, a matter which is well-known even to the servants, why not consult your confreres, explain your situation

to them, and get the agreement of the congregation? The members are beginning to become annoyed at seeing themselves treated as they have been, and they sense the [imminent] collapse and cannot see how to prevent it. I hope that you will not take offense at my writing to you so freely. Take this with the definite love that I bear for you and for the Congregation. You are acting without acquainting your fellow members with the matter, and you are exposing yourself alone to give an account before God and the world. The opinion of the congregation is declining more and more with the public. Why not go to your old companions who are capable of handling this whole matter, instead of listening to the opinion of persons who need to go to grammar school for another ten years? I have been advised by honest persons, and I feel it is my strict duty in conscience to speak both to the Congregation and to the Superiorità,⁵¹ to whom is entrusted the supervision of religious corporations. Do not believe that this is a craving or thirst for being in command. No, Don Biagio, God who must be my judge knows [otherwise], and I consider myself to be incapable of that. I am only doing this for the common good of that Congregation which I love and which I see falling into great danger.

Upon receiving the letter, Don Biagio was astonished at such alarmism. “Are we not all in God’s hands? Is it not his work?” So he seemed to say in his responses. “Come on! A little bit more optimism! Things are going well. Our congregation is expanding in the world and with it the glories of the Blood of Jesus.” With similar expressions he hoped to calm their hearts. He was astonished when he caused them to become even more troubled.

⁵¹ The Italian word literally means *Superiority*, and appears to be a reference to some sort of agency entrusted with overseeing religious congregations. At that time, and as they are today, religious institutes were under the authority of a Vatican congregation, but it is possible that there may have been some sort of civil authority that dealt with religious institutes as well.

Chapter 17

GIGIA DEL BUFALO

Like her uncle, Gigia del Bufalo was resourceful, eloquent, able to deal with many problems at the same time, and liked to maintain a network of relationships. She did not, however, possess those qualities that might have directed her along his saintly path. Without that holiness of life she showed her worst, and even her good qualities were tainted. She was ambitious and intriguing, and she considered herself authorized to meddle in the internal matters of the Institute founded by her uncle. Her sense of entitlement led to unwarranted interference in the affairs of the Congregation.

Don Biagio, out of charity and respect for her uncle, had humored her, but then had to rein her in. Regaining the independence of the Institute from Gigia's interference was another accomplishment of his term as director general, but there was a price to be paid.

Gigia's imprudent indulgence in criticism ended up being particularly dangerous, but at the same time it was encouraged, since the process for the beatification of her uncle was underway, and many of the witnesses as well as the curious became acquainted with her.

The woman lacked tact and spoke disparagingly of this or that person, not sparing anyone except, of course, her uncle. This behavior, however, had the effect of tarnishing the reputation of the great apostle of the Blood of Christ. There were those who did not like Gaspar, and they enjoyed hearing his name being mentioned amid all of her gossip. They deliberately provoked her to feed the fire.

For this reason, Don Biagio grew less friendly toward Gigia, and this led to her vendetta. She began corresponding with the Missionaries in various houses, discrediting Valentini and making the darkest predictions. Among the correspondents most willing to listen to Gigia was, of course, Don Gennaro Gamboa, who was

already prejudiced against Valentini, and who had documented evidence about the inability of the director general to take care of economic affairs.

Don Biagio was very unhappy with the connection between his deputy in Porto Recanati and Gaspar's niece. Valentini wanted Gamboa to ignore Gigia, not only because of the confusion she was creating, but also out of respect for the founder. If Gigia were given some kind of standing, this would put the Institute in a bad light and would hurt the process of beatification. Don Biagio had written purposely to Gamboa and to others so as to put them on guard. Out of charity and prudence he had written about this more or less in passing and in a general way that was open to misunderstanding. This was, at least, the excuse that Gamboa offered.

Dealing with Gigia was a difficult task. She began to lash out at everyone, beginning with Valentini. She claimed that they were allowing her to die of hunger, those very Missionaries who themselves had a morsel of bread and a house that they owed to her uncle. They were, according to her, squandering enormous sums of money through imprudence and incompetence. It was irresponsible behavior.

Now Don Biagio, who saw the events the events in a different light, could not do anything more about what was going on. We can imagine what it was like for him: the lamb that suddenly wants to become a lion. He must have thought: "Are they listening to Gigia del Bufalo now, and not taking into account the reassurances of the director general?" He wrote to the superior in Ancona: "I pray that you not be duped by someone who is sowing disorder among the confreres by what she says and writes. I have been informed of this by some friends and I have become aware of this myself. I do not believe that it will go so far as to bring discredit and dissension to the Congregation."

Having said this, the kindly Don Biagio allowed himself to go on about Gigia:

It seems incredible that a person who has benefited so much would be so ungrateful. I know well what Frasoni and Lambruschini are thinking and feeling about her continual gossip and stupid statements, even though I acted in such a way that they would have another view of her so that they would provide assistance to her for the rest of her life. This was my duty and I hope to have fulfilled it completely. But when that person, who should be giving thanks to God and to me for her support and dignity..."

He continues in that tone and concludes:

She, however, is not a friend, when she regularly confides in you and slanders me and at the same time confides in me with the same kind of slander about you. She puts on your lips the gossip she spreads about me, and on mine, the slander she spreads about you. *Scit Deus quod non mentior* 'God knows I do not lie.' I have yet to hear from that blessed mouth any good words about us or our confreres. I have admonished her many times, but she does not want to accept it. Meanwhile you be my judge.

In the judgment of Don Biagio, everything started, ...when she began to deal with matters that she did not like, even if they were useful and necessary for the Congregation. Paolina sensibly spoke forcefully to her, saying: 'Don't meddle! Don't meddle!' And Fausti was singing: 'Soon we will have a woman pope! Soon we will have a woman pope.' And the servant Tommaso joked: 'Oh, the trumpet of Piazza Montanara! Oh, what a hell of a racket in the house!' But this was a bit of comedy. We don't want this to turn into a tragedy. I myself have written Merlini and others. For this reason I have advised that the correspondence of Signora Gigia be removed from the correspondence of the institute. Now I have called Merlini to Rome, and he knows all about

this. We will see about prudently getting rid of the ridiculous Papacy of this woman (*del Papato ridicolo di una femmina*), from whom may God deliver us forever.

Don Biagio went on and on about the matter, once he had dropped his usual reserve, since he usually referred to Gigia as NN.⁵²

He concluded:

I have compassion for her and am sorry for her, but I cannot allow the good and the progress [made by] the Institute to be criticized, as though she were facing ruin and her Uncle were being dishonored, when the case is completely the opposite. Let us help one another, dear [Gennaro], as we have been doing up till now. I wish no harm to anyone, but I want and I must defend the honor and credit of the Congregation in the face of gossip, to the extent that I am able.

Don Gennaro was forced to admit that he had encouraged her and that he would comply with Valentini's wishes:

I confess in all candor that Signora Gigia, in the three years that I have been in this house, has written me eight or ten times. I do not deny that in the letters she told me that the congregation was ruined and that Your Excellency was overwhelmed with debts. She wrote that I should dismiss all hope of recovering the money that should accrue to this house, and that she suffered when she saw the work of her uncle thrown into confusion, and other similar expressions which I do not remember. Nor do I deny that in my responses I told her that even here we saw some irregular steps being taken...I promise you that from today forward whatever correspondence between her and me will be destroyed, even if it concerns ordinary matters.

His good intentions were too late. Three days before, Gamboa had sent a hot letter to Don Giovanni Merlini, in which he fully

52 NN is the usual Latin term for *someone* (*nonnullus*).

espoused the accusations of Gigia del Bufalo, even if from another perspective and with other motivations. He wrote:

After a long silence I am, with clear conscience, finally obliged to speak, and thus I turn to you as the first definator and Vice Director General... Let us not deceive ourselves any more: the Institute is in grave, very grave danger. I assert that is not passion that moves me, nor some malevolent judgment that might be attributed to me, but the pure truth and love I bear for the congregation and which God, who must be my judge, knows ... Signor Don Biagio Valentini, a great ascetic, but very poor administrator on account of his excessive goodness, which could well be called excessive simplicity, is so involved in administration that that the Institute is presenting a bad image and is exposed to very shameful criticisms.

Pointing out the rather touchy question of Crispino's estate, Gamboa painted a panorama of the other problems:

The capricious undertaking of the hospice of Rome and the construction in Porto Recanati have caused him to throw away not inconsequential sums of money, amounting to more than a thousand [scudi], by our poor Congregation.

After rehashing the story of the problem with the payment of the notes, he concludes:

In such a circumstance, what is to be done? Are we to allow the institute to run along as it has begun to do? It is going to come to an end and perhaps with little dignity...Oh, what an unhappy state! Now we know how wrong [Valentini] was, and that Canon Betti was right in this matter. Everything would be taken care of if Don Biagio would be persuaded that God does not call him to administration.

We have already seen that Don Biagio, although he was convinced that the affairs of the Institute were going along quite

well (and we will see that he was not completely wrong in this regard), had arrived at the same decision. He called in Don Giovanni Merlini, since he recognized the need for conducting financial matters more competently and wisely. But the mandate to Merlini did not last, and, after Don Biagio visited various houses in the North, it seems to have ended. After that, Don Giovanni returned to his responsibilities in Albano, and the habitual counselors of Don Biagio regained the upper hand. Don Biagio went back to dreaming of the great triumph of the Blood of Christ and the glorification of the founder.

Meanwhile, Don Biagio was not at all angry over the confrontation with Don Gennaro, and had named him his own representative for the ultimate disposition of Crispino's estate, which now had reached the phase of disbursement. "The amiable division" was accomplished on August 25, 1843, at Porto Recanati. Present were Don Gamboa, Antonio Valentini, and Valentino Valentini. The complex negotiation succeeded to the satisfaction of all and provided for the following legal conditions.

The debt of 1000 scudi with the Mancini family was retired by giving them a house valued at 912 scudi and a small house valued at 84 scudi. Don Biagio, the *deus ex machina* of the entire operation, agreed to retire the debt owed him by reason of the loan he made to his father and the estate, as follows.

He received a warehouse; a larger house with two small houses nearby; a building used as a warehouse, called the Palazzina; and a building used as a warehouse with a walled enclosure, where they were building the mission house. All together the value reached a total of 3,336 scudi and 19 baiocchi, the exact amount owed him. It was not part of the estate, but the payment of debts owed by the estate, which were now retired by Don Biagio. According to the terms, the property went to the Congregation, because it was with the money of the Congregation that Don Biagio had been able to pay off the debts.

The rest of the estate, now completely unencumbered, was divided into three parts, Don Biagio received “two houses used *di salara e caldara* ‘for salting and cooking.’” Antonio received two houses and a small house. Valentino received three small houses linked by an attached garden, and in addition six scudi as a one-time contribution on the part of his uncle Antonio.

The division left everyone satisfied and was a good solution, but it did not compensate Don Biagio for his significant role in all of this. Meanwhile, the kind Don Biagio was, somewhat predictably, driven into a new disaster, taking on the burden of taking care of his nieces, the daughters of his brother Simone. The poor girls had chosen the monastic life, as had their two older sisters, and had declared themselves ready to enter a monastery of Don Biagio’s choice. He selected the monastery of Santa Teresa al Quirinale, which obliged them to pay a dowry of 2000 scudi, which they did not have. Antonia, Maria and Clorinda, twenty, twenty-two, and twenty-four years old respectively, were given a guarantee with a regular contract, on September 30. Don Biagio provided for the amount to be paid in ten years, in the meantime paying the interest of 62 scudi. As collateral he put up his property in Porto Recanati.

Don Biagio was the same as ever. He did not care about the trials in which he found himself, and was always optimistic and enthusiastic over the undeniable successes of the Congregation. He now threw himself into another undertaking. The fame of the Congregation had spread to France, following a miracle obtained by the niece of the celebrated authors Joseph and Francois-Xavier De Maistre. In 1843 Don Edmondo Cazalés entered the Congregation. He was a professor at Louvain, a member of the Academy of Religion, and intended to spread the spirituality of the Blood of Christ in France.

Don Biagio accorded Cazalés full faculties and meanwhile dreamed of a great house of formation in Rome, reserved for students who spoke French. Since a benefactor had offered to donate

6000 scudi, he immediately began negotiations for purchasing two apartment buildings in the Via del Boschetto, in the Monti quarter of Rome. In July 1844, he signed a contract for the purchase, in the amount of 4000 scudi. While awaiting the anonymous benefactor to give the 6000 scudi, the Duchess Adele Fleury offered to loan him the needed 4000 scudi, without interest.

Don Biagio, who now possessed the money furnished by the Duchess, was beside himself as he thought how much good could be accomplished with so much cash. He gave half to the seller and loaned the rest to persons in need and without interest. Meanwhile, however, he took out a note promising to pay the rest of the cost of the buildings in ten years. An incredible move, to be sure, but it reveals much about Valentini.

Chapter 18

THE ADORERS OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

The Perpetual Adorers of the Most Blessed Sacrament at Quattro Fontane were founded in Rome by Caterina Sordini in 1807. In religion she was Sister Maria Maddalena dell'Incarnazione⁵³. The foundation, near the church of Saints Joachim and Ann, experienced rapid growth. On February 2, 1808, the cardinal vicar approved its constitutions, which were subsequently confirmed on July 22, 1818, by Pius VII.

At the death of the foundress in 1824, deep divisions arose. Some of the issues caused considerable anxiety. The issue that affected the community most was the division between the choir nuns and domestic sisters (*tra le coriste e converse*). The latter were called Servants of Mary. They had formed a party and were struggling for equality with the choir nuns in all aspects of community life, except for the recitation of the office.

Such an ideological struggle can be a genuine search for the truth, if carried out with sincerity and calm. The struggle of the Servants of Mary within the institute was, on the level of ideas, legitimate. Their aspirations resembled those raised among the Missionaries with regard to the status of the lay brothers, even if in that case it was not the brothers but the founder who fought for them.

The problem was that the Servants of Mary too often resorted to denigrating their opponents, the very persons they wished to live with as equals. This was hardly the path to arriving at the truth. Offending people is reprehensible behavior and a tactical mistake, even if those giving the offense are, in the abstract, correct.

The monasteries of the Perpetual Adorers of the Most Blessed Sacrament were under the direction of a spiritual director and an

⁵³ She was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007

ordinary confessor, in addition to the directives of their legitimate superiors. The spiritual director and the confessor were not always of the same mind. This made the administration of a cloistered community all the more difficult, since it lacked a unified sense of direction. If one adds to this the disagreements over the constitutions, one can easily understand the disturbances that arose. It could happen that the sisters would speak ill of the spiritual director with their confessor, and thus put him in a bad light, but without sharing these complaints with the community. Accusations and alliances underwent quick and ongoing modification, depending on the needs of the moment, so that the congregation found itself in a real muddle (*ginepraio*).

The community had only a single house until 1839, when Gregory XVI gave the community the church and the large monastery of Santa Maria Maddalena al Quirinale adjacent to the original house. The sisters were opening daughter houses in Turin and Naples. It was certain that the old divisions, if not resolved, would be duplicated in the new foundations, and even in a certain sense might be worse.

The ordinary confessor, Don Giuseppe Grappelli, instead of working for peace, had made the division deeper. He had become heavily involved in the internal diatribes, and this was destructive, apart from the eventual justice of his position. The Servants of Mary managed to put their own foundress in a bad light in order to strengthen their cause, and went on to say that she was in hell. Moreover they said that all of the sisters who had died up to that point were in hell, because they had observed the old rules. The rules which would lead one to paradise were the new ones, which were favorable to the domestic sisters. To give weight to such nonsense they spoke of the divisions and declarations that were conveniently invented at the moment.

The matter delighted the rumor mongers. They believed that they were authorized to propose facts that would justify the eternal

damnation of the sisters who had died. Gruesome and improbable stories, abundantly embellished with details, began to flourish. Needless to say, all of this hardly promoted the serenity necessary for a religious community or for the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Fortunately for the Institute there were some great souls, who grow holier from this tribulation, independent of the opinion they held regarding the prickly problem of the rule, which was not the Gospel.

The cardinal protector of the monastery, Giacomo Filippo Frasoni, who was also protector of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, thought that there was no person more suitable than Don Biagio to mediate in this situation.

Valentini should have responded to the cardinal that he could not accept this responsibility, because it was contrary to the rules of his own Congregation, which forbade assuming any office that required a stable residence. He probably did respond in this way, but the cardinal insisted, pointing out to him that it was the expressed wish of the Pope. At this point any rule ceased to have force. Don Biagio accepted the office in March 1843. It was a felicitous decision.

This responsibility removed Don Biagio even further from the general administration, but it gave him an office that was more congenial to his personality. He had no other thought but that of forming souls, beginning with his own. The chick in the flax became a noble and high flying eagle.

Don Biagio began his work with the Adorers discreetly, but immediately encountered the ordinary confessor. Don Giuseppe Grappelli did not welcome the arrival of the prestigious spiritual director. He tried to discredit him, poking fun at his asceticism and some physical defects. He called him contemptuously Padre Raschio 'Father Harrumph,' because of the frequency with which Don Biagio cleared his throat.

His plans failed. On April 19, 1843, during a course of spiritual exercises, Don Biagio denounced the conduct of the priest, calling him imprudent and devious, a fomenter of discord rather than one who worked for peace.

As a result, Franson dismissed the confessor. Don Biagio, however, was not pleased with this. He did not want punishments, but repentance. He believed that the confessor would repent, and asked that he be called back, and his request was granted. Don Giuseppe returned, and, perhaps ignorant that his reinstatement was due to Don Biagio, he was determined to get his revenge. In front of Franson, Don Giuseppe made a big scene, treating Don Biagio as though he were a fool. Don Biagio bowed his head and kept quiet, actually giving the impression of being a fool. The cardinal, notwithstanding the high esteem that he had for him, thought that he was inadequate to the task, and removed him.

Don Biagio did not put up any opposition. He returned unperturbed to San Salvatore in Campo. The confessor boasted about having destroyed his “rival.” He took sadistic pleasure in telling the sisters who were of his faction:

– Did you see how he left hanging his head?

His vindictiveness did not stop at that. He circulated some defamatory material about Don Biagio outside the monastery.

The news reached the cardinal, to whom the nuns faithful to the foundress had taken recourse. The cardinal sought arbitration from an extraordinary confessor, the Jesuit Giuseppe Bellotti, who unmasked the deception. The cardinal then dismissed the malevolent confessor for good, and rehabilitated Don Biagio, who returned to his work in the monastery as if nothing happened. It was September 18, 1843.

Events took a turn for the absurd frequently enough in the life of Don Biagio. The Missionary again wanted to recall poor Don Giuseppe, and because the cardinal was absolutely

unwilling to do so, Valentini did his best to obtain other work for him, since he had lost his post. It seems that this gesture at last brought about the conversion of the priest, who acknowledged the virtue of the disgusting Padre Raschio, kneeling at his feet to make his confession.

He was not reinstated, however. The cardinal was completely against this. Don Biagio used the opportunity to name a priest that he trusted, the Missionary Don Giovanni Pedini. Now the directives were being followed uniformly, because Don Pedini, besides being juridically subject to Don Biagio, admired him greatly.

Don Biagio went almost daily to the monastery from San Salvatore in Campo. His daily pilgrimage was good for him, but it took a very long time, because he walked very slowly. His companion (generally Raffaele Marini) walked at his own pace, and had to stop often to wait for Don Biagio. He had many ailments and had become completely bald. When he was twenty-seven, one would have judged him to be in his sixties, so one can only imagine how old he looked now at the age of fifty-two. With his simple manner he used to say: "I've been an old man since I was young. It became a habit with me!"

The Pope insisted that Don Biagio move to quarters near the monastery reserved for the clergy. After offering some resistance, Don Biagio consented. Thus a second residence of the Missionaries was established in Rome, a second *ospizio*. The two Missionaries assigned to the monastery and a lay brother lived there.

The lay brother Raffaele Marini lived permanently with Don Biagio. He ended up being of great use to the sisters, because he was a capable carpenter and skilled in all sorts of other trades. In the monastery there were many things that needed to be fixed, and he appeared to be a miracle worker. He was not bored. He used to say that while Don Biagio was putting the sisters in order, he was putting the monastery in order.

A certain misunderstanding in the administration of the community in Rome arose because the mother superior had left for Turin to found a new monastery there, while continuing to direct the monastery in Rome through a representative. The foundation of Turin started out with the lofty patronage and resources of King Carlo Alberto. There was also support from the Marquise di Bartolo.

Don Biagio had a tendency to downplay a situation. He immediately let Frasoni know, and through him, the Pope, that in the monastery there was nothing truly sinful, but only “some things that were in confusion,” “a variety of opinions,” to be treated “with tolerance.” The gossip that had circulated consisted of calumnies promoted by the devil.

Among his first decisions was that of putting an end to the calumnies leveled against the mother foundress. He fostered respect for her and gave a good example by praising her virtue on every occasion.

He usually spoke with Sister Concetta di Santa Teresa, Teresa Campanelli in the world, born in Marino on December 18, 1800. Among the most active nuns in the monastery, which she had entered in 1819, she became a fervent admirer of Don Biagio’s virtues, and we owe the information from that important period to her. It could be said that all of the sisters felt great veneration for the new director. He did not impose himself with authority, but with the witness of his life and with respect. All this did not escape notice of the good sisters. They saw how much the good director had taken their situation to heart and how much time he dedicated to their spiritual and organizational problems. They showed their gratitude by taking care of him in whatever way they could, but he was disconcertingly simple. For example, they made a skullcap for him to protect him from the cold, but he rarely used it. He said that he preferred to do a little penance and that without the skullcap he would get fresh ideas.

On June 6, 1844, the feast of Corpus Christi, when he went into the parlor, the entire community was there behind the grate. He was greeted with the lovely sound of a strange little orchestra. Sister Concetta di Santa Teresa recalled:

The community standing in his presence and was full of great consolation because of the celebration of the solemnity... All of the sisters had some sort of instrument in their hand or some other object capable of making noise, and they could do nothing but make music and dance (*suonare e saltare*).

Don Biagio did a little dance, but from surprise. Then with one of his accustomed wise and low-key comments, he said:

– You can burn! (*Che vi possano ardere!*) And because the nuns would not stop, “every so often he would raise his voice, repeating those words.

He did not have a really humorous streak, but he was calm and instinctive in his quips. He habitually called the Blood of Jesus “balm of eternal life.” When some nun asked would ask him to go to confession, he would say: “You want a bit of balm, eh?” If one of them was concerned about imposing upon him by asking him to enter the confessional, he would reply that confession benefits the confessor as well. “Like alms, the sacraments do good for those who receive them and for those who administer them.”

As a disciple of Saint Alphonsus Liguori and Saint Francis De Sales, Don Biagio conquered hearts in the confessional. There was no rigorism, but great understanding: human and spiritual wisdom. Sister Concetta di Santa Teresa did not feel she should go to communion while the priest celebrant was giving communion to the community. Later in the sacristy he said to her:

– Evil creature! To leave Jesus for me! Go to him and receive communion!

His celebration of the Mass touched many in the monastery. Especially after communion he would be completely engrossed in prayer and ecstasy. Among the Missionaries (and this was told to the sisters) it was said that those were the only moments in his life in which Don Biagio thought of nothing else but eating and drinking. He taught the sisters that at the moment of celebrating Mass all the saints were around the altar. "The Madonna," he would say, "is very devoted to the Mass." And when the sisters asked him if the saints remained there after the celebration, he would look at the altar and say: "Don't you see them? Are you blind?" He felt surrounded by the saints of paradise and he saw them. Yes, through him it seemed that one could actually see them.

He was always available but did not want to be disturbed during the thanksgiving after Mass. He would say: "This is my time. Afterwards the time is all yours!" When he ate, he often hummed softly hymns to the Madonna and "especially those he had composed for the solemn Chaplet of the Precious Blood."

As he spent so many hours in the parlor, some would ask him:

– Don't you get tired, spending all these hours here?

He would respond with a maxim of Saint Francis De Sales:

– Since I have to deal with women, who speak a lot, my job is only to listen.

Don Biagio entered the monastery proper only on the occasion of some grave illness of one of the sisters. One time he went in to visit the superior, Maria Giuseppa. When he finished visiting her, he wanted to visit Sister Concetta di Santa Teresa as well, since she was sick, but she did not expect the visit.

He said to her:

– How are you?

– Rather sick, replied the sister.

Don Biagio, in quite a good mood, told her a story about Don Innocenzo Betti. Then he left. Sister Concetta was surprised to feel

herself suddenly healed.

On a similar occasion, when Don Biagio was in the monastery, Sister Concetta wanted to have him bless her thumb, which she had caught in a door, and which was swollen for many days. It had been drained twice. Don Biagio blessed the thumb “with great devotion and charity.” The swelling subsided and there was not even a scar.

One evening Sister Concetta was very upset. She had wanted to go to confession, but it was not possible, since Don Biagio had suffered some sort of stroke (*un attacco apoplettico*). So, looking for a quiet spot, she went into the penitent’s side of the confessional and began praying the rosary. Soon she heard the slide making a noise. Someone had entered the priest’s side. She recognized that it was Don Biagio. She asked him:

– Father, how is that you have come at this hour?

He replied:

– I thought that someone might have a need for confession so I came down.

One time Sister Concetta had the impression that she had not been understood in the confessional. She had tried to insist on this, but Don Biagio greeted her and said:

– Send in someone else!

One night while she was ruminating over some problem, the sister heard someone suggest an explanation. She sensed that Don Biagio was present. The next day she said to him:

– Last night you were with me.

Don Biagio was not taken aback by this statement that could be taken the wrong way. He replied:

– Yes, I was, truly...but not physically!

He added this jokingly, to clarify the matter. He did not want this to become food for the gossips.

The spirituality of the Perpetual Adorers of the Blessed Sacrament was very much like that of the Precious Blood. Their

religious habit was evidence of this. It consisted of a tunic of white wool with a scapular of red wool, and on the left side of the breast was an embroidered monstrance. A cincture of red wool hung down from the left side, and on this, one after the other, were symbols of the passion in white.

Don Biagio did not neglect introducing the prayers of the spirituality of the Precious Blood, but without being insistent. Sister Maria Concetta di Santa Teresa offered this beautiful eulogy for him:

He was accustomed to call Jesus by the name of *Agnellino* 'little Lamb,' and one time he gave a beautiful and moving sermon on this topic. Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament had to be the object of his affection, and I point out how much he did for our Institute, in the nearly four years that he was directing us after he came to us...both by himself and by means of his Missionaries. We can truthfully say that with Him all sorts of good, especially in the realm of our spiritual life, which for some years had been thrown into confusion by people from the outside who did not know day from night. He, the loving father, never ceased contributing to our well-being, in every way that one can imagine.

I always have considered the prudence of the servant of God to be his chief virtue, and that an Angel come down from heaven could not have conducted himself in our affairs as well as he did, given that he was so acutely intelligent, with vast experience, full of the spirit of God, and very gifted.

In truth, one could ask how that celebrated prudence seemed to end when it came to treating earthly problems.

The model of the monastery realized by Don Biagio became authoritative. Even Zenaide Wolkonsky was fascinated by it and wanted to duplicate it for the Adorers of the Precious Blood of Maria De Mattias and for the sisters of Maria Luisa in Naples.

Chapter 19

NO LONGER OF THIS WORLD

In April of 1844, Don Beniamino Romani took up residence in Rome, in the house at San Salvatore in Campo, citing reasons of health. The transfer was connected to the death of Don Michele Gentili at age thirty-three, which occurred on the sixth of that month. What made Romani's departure difficult to accept was that it was of an impromptu nature. Don Giovanni Merlini, the president and factotum of the house of Albano, was apprised of an accomplished fact.

A solution to the problem of Gigia had become urgent, because her mother, Paolina, died on June 25, 1843. Probably as a result of this turn of events, the thirty-seven year old woman began to gather some companions around her, something she had talked about for some time. Romani was quite convinced that he could take care of Gigia in this way. If she could occupy herself with some project, she would feel valued, and she would stop sowing discontent among the Missionaries.

Perhaps it was Gigia herself, in this context, who demanded a document authorizing this, so that one day she would not find herself abandoned and end up like some other foundresses. In fact, Don Biagio Valentini signed a letter giving her the mandate to found an institute of teachers dedicated to the Precious Blood.

A number of people worked on this project: Don Vincenzo Pallotti, Father Gioacchino Ventura, Dom Paolo Theodoli, abbot of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, the Duchess Adele Fleury, Maria Luisa di Gesù, and, of course, Princess Zenaide Wolkonsky. Maria De Mattias and Don Giovanni Merlini, keeping a low profile, got involved, albeit skeptical about what was boiling in that pot.

One of the duties that often fell to Don Biagio was that of comforting those condemned to death. He never refused to

help them. For this reason they reserved the most obstinate cases for him.

One time he learned that a man condemned to death was resisting conversion. Don Biagio was called, but even he found himself before an insurmountable wall. Even on the scaffold he continued to resist. Suddenly Don Biagio said to him:

– Promise me that you will at least say a Hail Mary with me, and then I will leave.

The condemned man consented. Don Biagio began the prayer with such fervor that it softened the man who was about to die. When they reached words “pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death,” he began to weep. Don Biagio took him to a room reserved for the condemned (the *conforteria*) and the poor man fell to his knees and made his confession. “When he returned to the gallows, he asked pardon of everyone, and accepted his death with resignation.”

Don Biagio suffered a severe psychological shock as a result of this event. Raffaele Marini attests: “But Don Biagio [suffered from] what was understood as a flow of blood in the kidneys, the beginning of an illness that lasted a few months, and Don Biagio was surprised by the attack.” What did he mean to say? That he had been offered as a victim for the salvation of that soul? Don Nicola Pagliuca, who recorded the recollections of Marini, does not delve further into the matter.

Had he lived a long life, like his father Crispino, Don Biagio would have accompanied the Congregation long enough to witness end of the temporal power of the Papal States, with Rome as the capital of a unified Italy. The office of director general was for life⁵⁴. But Don Biagio, like his brother Simone, seemed to take after his mother. The illness that nearly led him to the grave at the

⁵⁴ Moderators general continued to be elected for life until the middle of the twentieth century, when term limits were imposed.

beginning of his priesthood was a distant memory now, but new and no less dangerous infirmities presented themselves: buzzing in the ears, tremors, palpitations, and difficulty walking because of circulation problems.

In September 1845, he began to bleed from the nose. The sister begged him “to take a rest, but he, accustomed to minimizing his health problems, responded that it was a good thing.” In effect, he must have considered this a spontaneous bloodletting, and drawing blood was a panacea of the medical practice of the day. In his case, the statement had a certain scientific validity, because in dealing with hypertension, the flow of blood gave some relief to an attack of high blood pressure. He had just finished giving the spiritual exercise to the sisters. He told them: “Speak little, suffer much, work hard.”

His days continued to be busy. He was giving his testimony for the process of beatification of the founder. From July 15, 1845, he went almost daily to Sant’Apollinare. In the evening, after the session, he returned to the monastery and took a walk for about fifteen minutes, because he said he had heaviness in his head. So as not to waste time, he took along a confrere who had joined the Missionaries and who was being instructed by Valentini. Then he went back to the monastery to attend to the sisters. In those days Don Luigi functioned as secretary, in place of poor Don Michele Mancini, who had gone to his eternal rest.

During the same month of September, Don Biagio experienced a mystical rapture during the celebration of Mass. The sisters noticed this and spread the word and, were captivated by the event. After the Mass they were very curious to know what had happened in the heart of the celebrant. Sister Maria Tommasina went to Don Biagio and put the question to him in all innocence. He was accustomed to give in to such curiosity, even if grudgingly, so as not to fuel exaggerated stories. He called the mystical experiences “*confetti*

from God.” In those days a *confetto* was a vision similar to that of Saint Peter narrated in the Acts of the Apostles.⁵⁵

- A sheet like that of Saint Peter – said Don Biagio.

- And what does that signify?

- The sheet is a symbol of this community. The variety of opinions will be purified and the house in Rome will be the most perfect of all the houses.

Nevertheless, on the following day, he was in his usual place in the parlor, to deal with the case of a postulant. He returned in the afternoon. He was just murmuring, and in order to understand him one had to watch the movement of his lips.

On November 3, the attack was over. He sent word to the sisters that if necessary, he would come down to the parlor. Suor Concetta sent him a gift of a small picture of the Sacred Heart and of the Blessed Virgin. Upon seeing them he had the Missionary assisting him write: “I thank you for the little gift, which is completely to my liking. The Heart of Mary and the same of Jesus. I bless you. I am better.”

Instead, he had gotten worse. New attacks shook him. The convulsions were so violent that it was difficult for four people to hold him in the bed. Leeches were applied. On the 12th he received the Viaticum. After communion he improved somewhat and in the following days the phenomenon repeated itself. After communion he would rally. There were sudden bursts of life. On the 20th he received the anointing of the sick. In the afternoon they brought the Infant Jesus of Aracoeli to him.⁵⁶ From then on he got better and better. On Christmas Day, Don Giovanni Merlini, writing from Albano, communicated to Sister Maria Saveria di Gesù: “By now you will have gotten the news of Reverend Don Biagio, which is satisfactory, and we give thanks to God for that.”

⁵⁵ Cf. Acts 10:9-15. In modern Italian, *confetti* are sugar-coated almonds traditionally served at a wedding or other celebration, like an ordination.

⁵⁶ The statue of the *Bambino* or Baby Jesus of the Church of Aracoeli on the Capitoline Hill was thought to have miraculous powers. In recent years the statue was stolen and was replaced by a replica.

The Countess of Comar presented herself for a visit. It was a very embarrassing moment for Don Biagio, torn as he was between his naturally compliant nature and refusing to see her. Consenting to the visit would have put him in a situation unique in his life: a woman in his room. He let the countess know that it was not a question of her disturbing him. She insisted on the visit, and Don Biagio added that it would be a violation of the cloister. She went to Pope Gregory and the pontiff replied that Don Biagio's bedroom was not part of the cloister, and thus he could see her if he wished.

The countess communicated the response to Don Biagio, who declared immediately that since the pope had left the decision to him, his earlier decision would stand.

At the end of the year they carried Don Biagio to the parlor. The sick man personally delivered the rule that had been written by order of Cardinal Fransoni to the sisters, along with some words of exhortation. He said, with both humor and seriousness, that this work had brought on his paralysis. They should, therefore, follow the prescriptions of the rule.

His health improved slowly, but continuously. On February 11, 1846, he was able once again to give depositions for the process of the founder, but in his own quarters in the *ospizio* next to the monastery. It was difficult for him to speak and one had to strain in order to understand him. He was occupied with the testimony until May 29. On Easter he was able to celebrate Mass with the sisters, supported by some confreres.

On June 1, Pope Gregory XVI died. Don Biagio was a great admirer, an admiration that was reciprocated by the pontiff, who sought the counsel of the Missionary many times. Valentini said that those who criticized the pontiff did not understand him. He told the sisters that the late pope was a holy and gifted man.

He had to give up his quarters next to the monastery during the conclave that elected Giovanni Maria Mastai Ferretti, Pope Pius IX. He returned soon after the election.

He was happy with the choice of Mastai Ferretti. He knew him well and was in turn well known to the new pope. As a cardinal he had visited the monastery often. Joking about Valentini's height, one day he said:

– Look at General Piccolomino! *Piccolo omino* ‘small little man.’

He enunciated the phrase, because it was clearly a play on words.⁵⁷

The popularity of Pius IX left Don Biagio somewhat puzzled. From his room he heard the cries in the piazza of the Quirinale Palace. “Pray for the pope,” he told the sisters. “All of these acclamations do not bode well for the future.” He understood that they were more political than religious in nature. It was an insight doubly surprising coming from a man who was considered by many to be otherworldly.

He would say: “The Catholic world will be shaken, divided. Blood will run in houses of religious. Pray, pray hard.” Those who had heard those prophetic words would see them realized during the days of the Roman Republic.⁵⁸ Don Biagio did not live to see it, but his warning echoed even more authoritatively in the awareness of his penitents.

The doctors, pressured by Zenaide Wolkonsky, prescribed the curative thermal baths of Naples. On June 17 he greeted the sisters and on the 18th he left from San Salvatore in Campo. The lay brother Raffaele Marini accompanied him, dressed in a cassock.

The baths, located in Castellammare di Stabia, were quite renowned. Many of the clergy would go there. Don Biagio did not go there voluntarily. His great cross was having to stay in an inn (*locanda*). Sister Concetta di Santa Teresa was not at all pleased with the departure of their spiritual director, and Raffaele

57 The play on words may involve a reference to the surname Piccolomini, a prominent family of Siena. One of the important Renaissance popes, Pius II, was a scion the family.

58 The reference is to a republican government established in 1849 in the Papal States. Pius IX fled to Gaeta, but French troops defeated the republicans and re-established the temporal power of the Pope.

Marini was no less displeased. He left behind some unfinished construction projects.

The trip to Naples involved a stop at Frosinone. Traveling on to Naples was difficult enough. We know little about his stay in the capital city. In the inn where he took lodging “he aroused such esteem for himself, that all recommended themselves to his prayers. Princess Wolkonsky and the Contessa Comar went to visit him many times. The bishop of Gaeta, Monsignor Parisio, visited him at least twice, and on the second visit brought his nephews and had them kiss his hand.” In Naples Don Edmondo Cazalés also went to see him, coming from France, where he had been tasked by Valentini with expanding the Institute.

In the middle of August Don Biagio’s condition became critical. He found himself practically at the end of his life. He received the anointing of the sick. Improved a little, he asked to be moved to a religious house. He did not want to be a burden on the owners of the inn, since they would not like hosting a moribund guest. Perhaps at that juncture the Monastery of the Sorrowful Mother and Saint Philomena, of Maria Luisa di Gesù, or the monastery that was being established by the Perpetual Adorers of the Blessed Sacrament, offered assistance. The sources are silent about this.

He was transferred to Rome in September, by way of Frosinone. The arrival of Don Biagio in the capital of Campagna and Marittima brought many people to the mission house. They were friends, admirers, but also people who needed healing for themselves or for their family members. The director general was in such a sorry state that he had to be carried to his room in a chair.

While lying in bed, all day “he would recite the acts of faith, hope and charity and some prayers to the Madonna. Every day he would read from devotional books, especially the life of the saint of the day.” On December 8, on hearing some beautiful reflections on the Madonna, he asked:

- Who wrote this?
- Padre Gioacchino Ventura.

– He will come back, – said Don Biagio, inspired. – The Madonna will not permit someone who speaks so well of her to be lost!

Padre Gioacchino Ventura, a genuine admirer of Don Biagio, had of late advanced some ideas that were considered reckless. He went to Paris, and some said he had left the Church. It was not true, naturally. Don Biagio was well aware of this. With the expression “he will come back” he meant to say “come back and make a full submission.”

The director general remained in Frosinone the entire winter. He came back to Rome toward the end of April 1847. He wanted to go and greet his sisters. Then he was taken to San Salvatore in Campo.

On May 10, he continued giving depositions for the cause of the founder. They were taken in his room. The hearings continued until June 26. He then wanted to return to the sisters at the Quirinale.

On the evening of July 18, Sister Concetta went to speak with Don Biagio at length, explaining some of the problems with the monastery in Naples. Some of the sisters from that foundation had arrived and made reference to some issues that had led to arguments. It was a question of “external” problems, that is, organizational problems. Don Biagio had already heard of those problems, since he heard the voices in the room next to his. He said to the sister:

- I am no longer of this world.

With declarations like these, Don Biagio was confirming a judgment others had already made about him, except that he was saying this in a real and not an allegorical sense. He intended to say that they should take the matter up with another priest. Was he announcing his imminent death? Sister Concetta did not want to accept this interpretation, especially because the sick man was such a solid spiritual rock.

On July 22, the feast of Saint Mary Magdalen, Don Biagio was in a pitiful and irreversible condition, but did not want to miss an appointment with his sisters and went down to the parlor. It was the name day of the foundress and of the title of the monastery. Sister Concetta described him sitting in the parlor, helped by Brother Raffaele, with the usual line of sisters who needed to talk with him. It was that last time she saw him. "He was practically lying down, unable to move his head," which hung loosely at times and his body seem to want to follow along. The sister began to cry, but he was calm and jovial. Alluding to the foundress, he said:

– Today in paradise they are eating macaroni...

The Sister wrote: "He had the appearance more of one of the blessed than of a wayfarer on this earth, not only because of his tranquility, but also because of the light of his face."

Suddenly Don Biagio's head slipped to the side and his whole body slumped over to one side of the chair. With his arms pinned, there was no hope that he could raise himself up. The grill⁵⁹ kept Sister Concetta from intervening. She began to call out for help. Don Biagio, on the other hand, without losing his calm, continued to talk about spiritual matters, as if nothing happened. Raffaele came and put him against the back of the chair.

In the monastery, on the other side of the grill, other sisters arrived and were observing the scene, which was both pitiful and edifying. Sister Maria Maddalena recognized the contrast in the figure of Don Biagio in those moments. He remained a giant, a "saint of paradise," but his body was reduced to almost nothing. Raffaele handled him as if he were made of malleable clay. Don Biagio in bodily form was waning. His soul was emerging to catch the wind. The eternal was becoming so much more evident as the transitory was fading. What was striking was how Don Biagio was

59 In a cloistered monastery, a grill usually separates the nuns from people who are not members of the community.

observing the transitory part of himself totally from the perspective of the eternal part, with a calm and inimitable naturalness.

He was taken back to San Salvatore in Campo. On August 26, 1847, Don Biagio called a congressus of the general administration, only the second in ten years. He stated that “not being able to assist the congregation as it should be...during his illness the missionary Giovanni Merlini” would “take his place, with that care, diligence, and activity that seeks the good of the congregation *in omnibus* ‘in all things.’” In reality, the burden of administration had effectively fallen to Merlini. In Valentini’s words of homage for his confrere, so different from him even physically, one can read the handing on of the mantle (*si poteva leggere una investitura*). Only Don Giovanni Merlini would be able to handle the problems that had become so muddled because the director general was in such a physical decline.

Don Biagio passed the days in bed. He was most obedient to the nurses. In the last two years no one had heard him utter a word of lament on account of his sufferings. He asked that they recited some of his preferred short prayers to him, prayers he had composed:

Sangue divino del mio Signore
Stempera in lacrime questo mio cuore.
Mio Dio, mio Dio, nulla poss’io
Ti rendo il Sangue dell’Uomo-Dio.

Divine Blood of my Lord
Melt this heart of mine in tears.
My God, My God, I can do nothing
I offer you the Blood of the Man-God.

The transfer of authority to Merlini was provisional, but no one was under any illusions. The Missionaries who arrived to meet with Don Biagio said to the sisters: “Rather than losing him, things are going well for us. He is a saint and he consoles us with his presence.”

The illness was in every way the most glorious period in the life of Don Biagio. Monsignor Sillani,⁶⁰ who knew him well, confirms this.

It is on the bed of pain that one must study the saints, when weak nature is no longer an encumbrance and a burden, and only the virtues are of support, and these can no longer be hidden under the mantle of humility. On his death bed, therefore, we come to know our Valentini.

These comments were followed by a long praise of his peace of heart, tranquility, meekness, patience, and communion with Christ crucified.

The bishop continued:

That [Don Biagio] enjoyed the read aid of the heavenly virtues in the final period of his life presupposes a great familiarity with them...One who has mastered himself so well must have had a long series of struggles and victories over the inborn passions of our fallen nature. And that is exactly the judgment that must be made of our Valentini.

On November 21, Sister Marianna was elected the new superior of the monastery. During the preceding year Don Biagio had predicted her election to Don Giovanni Pedini. The next day the newly elected superior sent a note of greeting to Don Biagio, who wanted to respond immediately, saying a few words. He assured her that he felt well. The he wanted added two letters: D.S. No one knew what he wanted them to mean, not even the superior when she first read the reply. During prayer, she heard an explanation from a voice that seemed to be that of Don Biagio: *Dio solo* 'God alone.'"

60 Guglielmo Aretini-Sillani became bishop of Terracina in 1836. He became a member of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood after resigning from his diocese.

Don Biagio was already face to face with God. That same night “he had another stroke, which, in his weakened state, caused a rupture of the blood vessels.” He was near death all day on the 23rd. He received the last sacraments with serenity. He died in the afternoon at 3 o’clock, assisted by Don Giovanni Merlini, Don Beniamino Romani, and by the other confreres of the community of San Salvatore in Campo, who were quietly praying those short prayers he wanted.

The funeral rites took place in the church of the mission house. Bishop Sillani, who was living in that community, delivered the funeral eulogy. The Perpetual Adorers of the Blessed Sacrament were present in spirit, but not only spiritually. On the sides of the coffin were four scrolls they had composed that presented a eulogy of deceased and which expressed the sorrow of a community of women who felt themselves to be orphans:

DOM
ALLA MEMORIA
DEL CHIARISSIMO D. BIAGIO VALENTINI
DIRETTORE GENERALE DELLA CONGREGAZIONE
DEL PREZIOSISSIMO SANGUE
DI VIRTÙ D’ OGNI MANIERA LUMINOSO ESEMPLARE
DI TUTTE QUELLE DOTI FORNITO
CHE AD UN VERO MINISTRO DEL VANGELO
SI ADDICONO
CON DIO RICONGIUNTO
LE ADORATRICI PERPETUE DEL SS. SACRAMENTO
DOLENTI PER LA PERDITA
DEL LORO TENERISSIMO PADRE SPIRITUALE
MEMORI GRATE DIVOTE
QUESTI PIETOSI UFF. CELEBRANO
E
DI LAGRIME E FIORI
SPARGONO L’URNA BENEDETTA

To God the best and greatest (*Deo optimo maximo*)
 To the memory
 Of the most illustrious D. Biagio Valentini
 Director General of the Congregation
 Of the Most Precious Blood
 A luminous exemplar of virtue of all kinds
 And endowed with all those qualities
 That are fitting
 For a true minister of the Gospel
 Joined again with God
 The Perpetual Adorers of the Blessed Sacrament
 Sorrowing over the loss
 Of their most tender spiritual father
 Remembering with devoted gratitude
 Celebrate these pious offices
 And
 Scatter tears and flowers
 On the blessed urn

The other three scrolls were also in Latin. Here is a selection from the texts:

Good-bye, Father Biagio, good-bye. Your life was an incomparable example to all. We Adorers of the Blessed Sacrament, your daughters, cannot give you a worthy eulogy, so we offer you our tears...The just man does not die at all. His best part lives on. Biagio Valentini is dead, but his memory, by the virtues of religion and by his piety, resists iron, fire, and time. He lives and will live always because he was familiar with God and with men.

He was buried in the church of San Salvatore in Campo, “in front of the main altar, in two chests with special seals, where, if it ever pleases the Lord to make him glorious also on earth, his mortal remains may be recognized.”

Three days later, Don Giovanni Merlini sent the Missionaries and the sisters a sad circular letter, in which, among other things, he said:

I must carry out the sad office of announcing to you the loss, which our Congregation has now experienced, of our most worthy Reverend Don Biagio Valentini...To his learning was also joined the simplicity of a dove. He had the manners of an angel, benign toward all, affable, gentle, charitable, ready to satisfy others rather than to be satisfied. He endured humiliations and opposition with such peace and serenity on his face, that he was himself of a Salesian spirit. In sum, his life was nothing other than a continuous exertion in the service of God, and for the salvation of souls.

On January 1848, Don Innocenzo Betti wrote to Merlini: "Our Don Biagio has been in heaven since Christmas Day!" How could Betti have come to know the news? Sister Maria Luisa of Naples had communicated this to him. Don Innocenzo, transcribing all of this for Merlini's benefit, added: "O blessed are you other Directors General who get to heaven like a shooting star (*in vapore*). May you think of me standing before the inferno, and beg for me the efficacy of the Blood of the beloved Son of God."

Chapter 20

ORNAMENT AND SUPPORT

Valentini's will was published on February 9, 1848. Don Beniamino Romani had been named his sole heir. The economic condition of the deceased director general and the balance sheet of his administration were studied closely. It would take years to recover.

According to the cited opinion of Bishop Sillani, Don Biagio was to be considered the "ornament and support" of humanity. Ornament, yes. His charming personality and innocence that bordered on the mythical were amazing and attractive. "The diligent cultivation of the most delicate and exquisite virtues" had "sown a sweet fragrance in him," which could not help but intoxicate those in his presence. Wrote Sillani:

His angelic modesty, the kindness of his dealings, the affability of his conversations, and courteous manners, and especially his characteristic simplicity together with vast knowledge and exquisite prudence, refined the hearts of those who were around him.

But how could someone who was known to be limited in his ability to manage affairs and of whom it was said that he "was not of this world" be described as "support?"

One could respond with the facts. Hundreds came to him for support, among them popes, cardinals, bishops, princesses. In a world of wolves, the capacity of a lamb to preserve that gentle nature in itself offers strength to others.

He was a credible witness to that saying of Jesus that "only one thing is necessary," the salvation of the soul.

Against this radiant image of Don Biagio one could bring to bear other, less complimentary facts.

He left the Congregation, which he had directed for ten years and which he loved with all his strength, mired in debt. Christ on

the cross was aware that he was about to redeem the entire world and at the same time knew just as clearly that he would die alone and misunderstood. As he serenely committed his soul to God, was Don Biagio aware of the burden he was bequeathing to his confreres on earth? He had embarked on difficult projects with such assuredness. Was he not, perhaps, a sort of holy Don Quixote who was drowning in debt, convinced that sooner or later the money would fall from heaven?

Someone who did not know him could also make such a judgment. But it was not the verdict of those who lived with him and who, in the face of the debts, we could call “the plaintiffs” (*i danneggiati*). They continued to love Don Biagio even after his death when his memory needed protection.

His confreres (beginning with Merlini) feared that some aspects of Valentini’s difficulties might hurt his legacy, and they were not entirely wrong. It would have been a shame if the poetic and charismatic image of Don Biagio had been destroyed in the heat of such judgments ruled by passion, as we have seen, for example, in the case of Don Gamboa, or of Gigia del Bufalo, or of Betti, all of whom had now begun to soften their views. This explains a certain official silence on the personality of Valentini immediately after his death. But meanwhile, there were moving testimonies in his favor. A priest from another institute went to the tomb to weep and say: “I owe my priesthood to him. He provided everything for me in my course of studies.” Another, a foreigner, came to greet him, and instead learned that he was dead. At the tomb he told his story:

I was indigent when I arrived in Rome and was sent to him. I shared my situation with him. Opening a drawer of his desk he said to me: Here, my son; take what you need. I took twelve scudi, which allowed me to get by until I found a stable situation.

The poor people of the streets, as they stood before the altar with their eyes on the tomb, said: "He never denied alms to us." There were the religious sisters of Sezze who openly acknowledged that he had loaned them two thousand scudi. Then there was Albina Bottelli, the daughter of the governor of Vallecorsa, who fell on hard times and was helped by Don Biagio until her death in 1844.

When Don Biagio distributed freely the money that came fortuitously into his possession, he found himself overwhelmed with debts. He who warned others to flee debts like the devil appeared to be incapable of recognizing the traps and destructive power of debt. Not everyone would be ready to understand such behavior in a fair light. Don Biagio seemed to like burdening himself with debts as if they were hair shirts, or stones for a pillow, or a pebble in the shoe.

Those who understood were moved to defend the memory of a man who left a precious legacy to the Congregation and who, even considering those undertakings that were inappropriate and even unacceptable, brought greatness and honor to the Congregation. Don Giovanni Merlini, as was his style, kept quiet about the economic misadventures of his confrere and would attempt, wisely and discreetly, a tactful attempt at recovery.

Like Don Giovanni, many others who held Don Biagio in esteem were ready to safeguard the memory of the great man of God. From them he had hoped for help, without ever asking for money. He walked lightly, like a feather blown along in the wind of the Spirit, because he was not attached to anything on this earth. Now they understood him.

The Duchess Fleury bought the houses on the Via del Boschetto. Cardinal Frasoni retired all the debts of Porto Recanati. Don Beniamino Romani increased the value of Crispino's estate, and with it paid the dowries to the monastery of the Teresiane. The monastery in Sezze committed to paying off its debt gradually. After his death, Don Biagio worked the miracle he had waited for in life.

The miracle that he had worked in life, day by day – his own life – did not need to be propped up. His life was a masterpiece and he deserves the greatest admiration. He came to our world from heaven to show us a miracle.

