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## IL ROGATE OGGI... E DOMANI. ATTUALITÀ E PROFEZIA DI UN CARISMA



27

MARTEDÌ | P. Adamo Calò, RCJ

**La Congregazione dei Rogazionisti di fronte alle sfide del Rogate in una prospettiva mondiale.**

**General House of the Rogationists**
**Rome. Via Tuscolana 167**
**Study Day**
**October 27, 2026**

# THE CONGREGATION OF THE ROGAZIONISTS FACING THE CHALLENGES OF THE ROGATE FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

**The text was translated using AI.*

## LECTURE ADAMO CALO' RCI

### *A discussion aimed at identifying projects that can be implemented*.

Whenever I am asked to speak on a specific topic, I ask myself several questions that I believe are the same as those of the meeting's organizers: What are the motivations behind the meeting? What are the expectations and objectives? What experiences do we wish to share and evaluate? What possible directions might be proposed? What potential initiatives could subsequently be implemented? And based on the answers I can give myself, I structure my reflection, which—in addressing the various issues—does not shy away from raising questions and challenges.

Ours today is strictly speaking a study meeting, but it can also be considered a time for reflection, for sharing experiences, perhaps for review, perhaps for planning, and it should be able to spark a debate among us that goes beyond the experience of this specific day and instead aims at planning projects that can be put into practice.

Concrete solutions—not merely the study and analysis of problems—because a future that is unlikely to materialize cannot be envisioned if concrete commitment is lacking today in certain apostolic sectors.

These meetings, if held periodically, could become special opportunities—provided they succeed in keeping alive our commitment to the specific Rogationist mission within today's Church and in every part of the world, drawing on our experiences and traditions, while paying closer attention to our own local context and to the changing and ever-evolving demands of our times.

This reflection, therefore, in an effort to offer starting points for subsequent and more comprehensive reflections or discussions, will attempt to propose—in a somewhat general way—apostolic themes that explain and complement our understanding of the Rogationist charism, as well as contemporary issues related to the experiences of us Rogationists and other religious congregations and local communities as we carry out and bear witness to this specific apostolic service in the Church and in society, beginning with the personal experience of our Founder himself, and continuing through the institutional experience of the Congregation up to the present day.

### *A charism that adapts to contemporary culture*

The topic entrusted to me—which is complex yet timely, given the current interest in religious and pastoral issues—also demonstrates the vitality and continuity of the apostolic works of our religious Congregation and of the various Congregations within the universal Church that live out and transmit their specific charism through their various forms of apostolate they carry out.

This is no easy task, if we bear in mind the process of cultural transformation underway in the civil sphere and within our religious institutions; the ever-changing regulatory aspects and management approaches; but also when we consider other issues, not least the decline in the number of religious personnel available in many religious communities, which limits our plans for expansion in every apostolic sector; the managerial autonomy of individual religious in carrying out a specific office or apostolic task entrusted to them; and the awareness of having to face every day new challenges with ever-unpredictable outcomes—due in part to the widespread mistrust that has taken root among ordinary people today when they read news reports accusing priests and religious of ambiguous or even criminal behavior in their educational relationships or in the ministry they carry out.

**Our specific educational mission in today's Church and society**

Our religious family, without excluding many other religious congregations, is called at this time to engage in institutional discernment in order to understand whether it is still capable of embracing modern values and apostolic projects—in the field of education, in service to today's poor, in vocational promotion, and in its missionary work— in the conviction that these specific commitments must be carried out by people who perceive them as their personal and communal mission, grounded in and faithful to their Founder.

In a broad sense, starting from the idea of witness and consistency of life among people—especially adults who feel fulfilled—our mission is, or at least we could define it as, above all an educational mission, in that it is directed toward every person for the service of human promotion in its entirety, helping them—on cultural, religious, and professional levels—to reclaim their human dignity, rediscovering the vocational dimension of their lives and living it as a mission among others, according to a divine plan for each of us, in a spirit of complementarity and mutual aid.

Faith, the religious vision of life, and vocation cannot be understood as something superimposed on human experience, but rather as a continuous and substantial reference point for the fulfillment of the person, as an interpretation and vision of human existence.

A primary task within a Rogationist apostolic project will be to develop and promote a culture of vocation, in line with a Christian anthropological vision, in which the person becomes aware of and accepts their own uniqueness, and makes it a gift by giving themselves as a gift to others.

Our commitment in any field remains a work of evangelization. It involves showing others that our life experience—and the religious and human values we have chosen as the foundation of that experience—can become a gift to others through sharing and closeness, and can give new meaning to their own life experiences as well.

**The commitment to planning a future for our presence in the Church**

There are aspects of our specific Rogationist apostolate—such as our educational commitment—that are becoming increasingly burdensome in every respect in our day, and they no longer seem to receive the attention they deserve, even within our own ranks.

The rediscovery of the laity and the employment of lay professionals—now widely regarded as an essential step, beyond the positive motivations shared by all—risks, however, fostering within our own and other religious institutions a purely contractual relationship: a temporary delegation intended to prevent the closure of programs that would otherwise have no other means of being managed and sustained over time.

Our future in certain specific sectors—such as education and the care of minors, which in the past have distinguished us and earned us recognition within the Church and civil society—as well as in other apostolic areas we engage in, such as vocational promotion or the dissemination of our charism through publishing, will depend on our ability to feel personally and institutionally engaged with today's challenges and on our competence in devising new areas and forms of service—with originality and a sense of responsibility—just as St. Annibale Maria and many other founders did at the outset of their missions, while respecting their own distinct and recognized charism.

To this end, we must study and reflect on the witness and tireless work of Saint Annibale Maria Di Francia, and ask ourselves even today what guidance our holy Founder can still offer us, so that we may make decisions that ensure continuity, while always being mindful of transforming the initial charismatic mission—with creativity and courage—into a mission that is relevant and contextualized today, capable of providing adequate responses to the challenges and demands of today's society in various geographic areas.

It is not only the the social environment, the concept of needs, and family situations that have changed when compared to the Founder's time. In those days, poverty and lack of education were the most pressing and defining problems, and the private intervention of religious and secular institutions and associations was recognized and taken into account, and private charity made up for the absence or neglect of the civil state.

**organizing planning sessions and periodic evaluations**

Today, poverty is increasingly identified with social and family hardships; intergenerational relationships and the passing down of traditions have eroded; the civil state's focus has shifted—perhaps becoming less attentive and less involved in addressing and resolving family and youth issues. And the role of private individuals, religious or secular institutions, cooperatives, associations, movements, and sponsorships has changed, requiring a system of networking and sector-wide collaboration.

Our interpretation of today's challenges, while referring to the institution in general, may be limited to Western—and especially Italian—experiences.

I do not underestimate the importance of a historical analysis of the specific educational and assistance work carried out by the Rogationists and the Sisters of the Daughters of Divine Zeal within the social, cultural, and local context in which they currently operate.

To this day, a truly significant contribution is being made in the fields of education and social solidarity, which has a positive impact on the surrounding social fabric, even though difficulties have increased in various sectors that demand ever more complex professional skills and expertise.

It is important to organize, within our institution and within the local communities themselves, opportunities for planning and periodic evaluation, and to promote an in-depth analysis of the progress of our apostolic activities in every area—whether in purely educational or welfare contexts or at the ministerial level—examining the methodologies applied, their impact on and effectiveness for the people involved, how well-known the presence of some of our local communities in the area is and whether it is still needed—always remembering, however, that we are first and foremost religious and priests, and not merely social workers.

We should explore the possibility of launching other diverse apostolic activities in the pastoral and educational spheres, as a religious community's response to the needs and emergencies of the local

area and the local Church, in line with our charism, in terms of planning and programming, in promoting a culture specifically focused on vocations, while seeking the involvement and collaboration of laypeople with expertise in this specific sector, who can assist us, particularly in taking on managerial or professional initiatives and activities.

A historical examination of our institution, our commitment in various fields, and the specific apostolic activities carried out in the past can help us understand and rethink the motivations behind certain operational choices or orientations, but they do not automatically guarantee a promising future, as we are well aware that everything that served to make our past flourishing and glorious will not necessarily be adequate or conducive to planning and revitalizing our future within the the Church and in society.

**Saint Annibale Maria Di Francia: Model of Our Life Experience**

In this reflection on the challenges facing Rogate from a global perspective, we cannot fail to take into account the person of our Founding Father, Annibale Di Francia, and his life experience, spent largely among the poor and young people. We are speaking of a man and a priest whom we have chosen as a model for our religious and ministerial life. Not merely of ideological or cultural positions—which are always open to debate—but of a life experience by which we can shape ourselves and measure ourselves.

In fact, rather than followers of an idea, we are the spiritual heirs and imitators of a man who lived out, fulfilled, and bore witness to—with consistency and amid countless difficulties—his own personal Christian and priestly vocation, offering original and appropriate responses to the educational and pastoral challenges of his time.

The figure of Di Francia deserves special attention today in the life of the Church and can guide our reflection on certain aspects and challenges of our time, particularly regarding the issue of vocations—which has become almost a crisis of priestly and religious vocations in some nations—and perhaps above all on the theme of prayer for vocations; for, beyond his witness to Christian and priestly life, which he lived in a heroic manner, Saint Hannibal Maria can still have his own significance in the field of vocations today, in the cultural and apostolic formulation of potential pastoral projects.

By reflecting on his experience, which began in the Avignone neighborhood—thus returning to the roots of his and our own experience—we learn to be both faithful and creative at the same time. It is he who shows us the way forward and how to act with creative fidelity. We need boldness, evangelical freedom, serenity, asceticism, perseverance, dynamism, consistency, prayer, and docility, as well as great attention and love for our neighbor.

**The difficulties at the beginning of his experience and the hopes that sustained his works**

Annibale Maria Di Francia himself describes the story of his early trials and tribulations among boys and girls in need. Some of his reflections on the subject are found in a speech he gave in Messina in August 1906, on the occasion of a committee's visit to the Antonian girls' orphanage. These are reflections that can serve as guidance and suggestions for us today as we seek to plan and launch new apostolic initiatives in various fields and regions.

He expressed himself as follows: "I feel the duty to submit the progress of my institute to the wise judgment of such a noble assembly. The goals it pursues, the people who make it up, the means by

which it is supported, the income and outcomes that constitute its internal operations: I will touch upon its beginnings, the events it has undergone, and the hopes that sustain us for its future.

"The orphanage you see here, home to these girls of various ages, is a branch of that pious charitable work I undertook more than twenty-five years ago, there in that poor and wretched place called Case Avignone. There I took in the first girls from those social slums, and there, for more than ten years, the education and success of many orphaned girls took shape.

"From that day on, all my efforts have been directed toward achieving that goal, which is inherent to every educational institution that seeks to provide for the future of its charges: the success of these young women. I have fully understood my obligations and my responsibility. Simply gathering girls to feed them and letting them vegetate is not establishing a school: it does not change the fate of abandoned orphans or prepare the future for the destitute daughters of the people.

"Education must regenerate and moralize the girl rescued from a life of wandering; instruction must enable her to one day earn her daily bread honestly. This extremely grave task of educating and instructing so many orphaned girls placed me before another serious necessity: the need either to find good educators or to train them myself. At first I sought to find them; and I turned to two communities of nuns in Italy, for in this matter of educating young girls gathered in an institute—let us not delude ourselves otherwise—no private teacher can equal a nun, who is born to be a mother, a teacher, a friend, and a sister to young girls of any background. […] they (the Sisters) understand the mission they fulfill: this is the school in which I myself educated them—the school of charity and sacrifice. […]

"Boys and girls must become accustomed to work […] there can be no education—neither religious nor civic— separated from work. […] Through tireless work and the most arduous labor, we have been able to secure the means to sustain, for so long, two large charitable institutions with the many expenses I mentioned above—rents, buildings, maintenance, and the establishment of arts and crafts. […] No, it is not alms that I am asking of you. […] I am asking for other forms of support: your moral backing, your goodwill, your compassionate regard for these institutions, and your willingness to help them."

**Common experiences and challenges faced by other charitable institutions**

It was not unusual in those years for a priest or nun to have to defend their educational and charitable work against the state and various local lay associations. After the unification of the Italian state, a policy of rather strict oversight had in fact been introduced regarding those institutions deemed to be private initiatives or managed by convents, religious congregations, and individuals affiliated with the Church, especially in the areas of education and social welfare. The situations were similar in every region of Italy.

Here is a very brief description of a school run by the Canossian Daughters of Charity in Milan, presented in an official report by a government inspector, Paolina Lomazzi, to the relevant state authorities.

"These schools take in either girls rejected by municipal schools due to frailty or for other reasons, or destitute children whose parents lack the means to provide them with books and necessary school supplies, or girls who, due to some domestic misfortune, need to earn their daily bread early on through sewing work, or mentally disabled girls or those stunted by rickets, who would not be accepted in any other school.

“The supreme purpose of these institutions is, in addition to work, the spread of the Catholic faith; all actions, daily habits—even the girls’ greetings—all bear the mark of religious practice; wherever one looks on the walls, in every corner, one encounters images of saints and small altars; it is certainly for this purpose that the nuns never turn away any girl, whatever her condition and whatever her particular circumstances may be.”

**Challenges to Face and Problems to Solve in the Avignone Neighborhood of Messina**

Annibale Di Francia describes the site of his mission as follows: “There is a remote corner of our city, a neighborhood made up of numerous shacks, known as Case Avignone, where people live in unspeakable poverty and wretchedness.

“The most varied forms of poverty, mixed with its many sad consequences—nausea, disease, begging, dejection, squalor, and all manner of deprivation are gathered there, almost forming a spectacle of horror and compassion.

“Such extreme poverty, in the midst of a cultured city like Messina, has at times stirred people’s hearts, and various local newspapers, at different times, have drawn the public’s attention—and even that of this City Council—to the matter. However, the exceptional nature of the case and the difficulties of remedying a poverty that is too long-standing and deeply entrenched left every generous appeal unanswered.

“A scene of compassion and horror. For forty years, a crowd of more than two hundred poor people—beggars, all living together in a jumble—men and women, young and old—had been languishing in the most extreme poverty and depravity, in utter squalor and abandonment.

“Deacon Di Francia set foot in this abominable place. At the entrance, he found a crowd of those ragged men and women lying on the ground, on the thresholds of the hovels […] the mission had begun […] the outcome of the first attempt must have instilled hope in the deacon’s heart, for he returned there a few days later [this was in 1878].”

In 1882, the first girls’ orphanage was established, followed the next year by the boys’ orphanage. An educational endeavor that, over the years—with the necessary structural and cultural adjustments—has been carried forward by the two religious congregations founded by Saint Hannibal Maria: the Sisters of the Daughters of Divine Zeal and the Rogationists of the Heart of Jesus.

**The motivations behind an apostolic choice in the field of education**

I do not so much wish to describe the development of the Rogationist educational communities, the Antonian orphanages and institutions, in Italy and around the world. For many years, they represented the most substantial and demanding apostolic sector within our institution, and we must admit that they have shaped and projected an institutional identity to the outside world.

Today, we are interested in addressing other questions, before delving into a possible discussion of the institute’s operational guidelines. It is by no means secondary, in fact, to ask ourselves why St. Hannibal Maria initiated these charitable and welfare works, to understand what his underlying motivations were by examining the historical and personal context, in order to identify the elements that can lead the religious institution to continue in the same apostolic sector.

During a specific historical period and within a particular social context, a young man aspiring to the priesthood—who had opportunities to engage in various apostolic fields and pursue an ecclesiastical

career—encountered a social and human crisis and recognized within it the scope of his own apostolate, offering a personal Christian and priestly response to meet the needs of children and young people in need who had no other means of coping with life.

For them, he conceived an educational environment, structuring it according to the cultural criteria of the time but envisioning that it would continue—and perhaps even be replicated in other contexts.

What was Father Di Francia's vision for an environment to educate children? Certainly, it had to be a place of welcome, charity, and assistance—but not only that. The child arrived at the institution in a state of need. He needed everything, both physically and spiritually. It was therefore necessary to assist him in a holistic manner, because a child is not a vessel to be filled with food, knowledge, or prayers. He must become a free, responsible being, capable of making decisions for himself and his own destiny. For this reason, he must be helped to grow (this is education) so that he may respond to that plan, to that vocation he has received from God, until he reaches the fullness of Christ's age in every dimension of his person.

His purpose in taking in orphans was not merely to rescue them from a state of misery and abandonment and to treat them well while they were with him, but primarily to integrate them into society and enable them to live well thereafter through the fruits of their labor.

**Historical Welfare and Educational Institutions: from orphanages to educational communities and foster homes**

When discussing education and educational institutions, we cannot overlook the cultural and governmental transformations—in the West and specifically in Italy—that led to a new perspective on educational challenges and to various practical solutions that have influenced and shaped our experiences and our very language.

Institutional care was practically the only organizational model for helping "children in need." Statistics on the institutionalization of minors show steadily rising numbers up until the early 1960s. Beginning in the 1960s, discourses and practices began to emerge that called into question the welfare system for minors.

Traditionally, for centuries in Italy, it has been institutions—founded and run by religious organizations or secular corporations—that have fulfilled this substitute role of raising and educating children without families. It was considered normal for these children to grow up in an institution; indeed, the concern and compassion of Christian communities and many individuals who could afford it sustained the institutions through donations, enabling them to survive and expand.

In this way, large welfare institutions sprang up throughout Italy over the years, designed to provide shelter for orphaned children, exposed, abandoned, or for various reasons left by the poorest and most unfortunate families who could not provide their children with the necessary material and emotional care.

Although scaled back in scope and size, these institutions continued for a long time to serve as places of refuge for orphans and the children of poor, emigrated, or incapacitated parents. And the juvenile courts themselves (established in 1934) and guardianship judges (established in 1942) often ordered the placement of children in institutions and reform schools for welfare or educational purposes.

**A cultural challenge: but is the education of children still a form of assistance?**

My first consideration is a question regarding a factual reality and a possible solution at the terminological and, above all, pastoral levels. In our institutional documentation, we combine what I believe to be two distinct themes and areas of the Rogationist apostolate, presenting them in a single programmatic discourse: the educational commitment and the specific service of assistance to children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds—the latter of which could have been framed within the context of charity and new forms of poverty. The educational sphere, though still influenced today by emergencies and situations of youth distress, cannot be defined or equated with the related issues.

I have sought on more than one occasion to find a plausible answer for myself. Perhaps our history and terminology have been shaped by the personal experience of St. Hannibal Maria, who chose the children of a poor and notorious neighborhood as the subjects of his educational project. Or perhaps we are influenced by the definition we give to the term "assistance," if by it we mean providing young people with what they need to be able to serenely accept and follow an educational program: shelter, health care, food, clothing, and education.

Probably the two spheres—education and assistance—point to a single pastoral perspective if, within the context of a Rogationist interpretation of educational challenges, we propose as a pastoral solution to the difficulties and problems of life, for both young people and adults, the rediscovery and reclaiming of one's own human dignity as the first and necessary step toward understanding and responding to an individual vocation.

The theme of vocation, which presupposes and calls for a journey of human promotion, can become the key to understanding a single broad sector of the Rogationist apostolate—one that encompasses both education and assistance, as well as specifically vocational promotion.

I believe these responses are not exhaustive and require further exploration. I remain suspicious, in fact, that our way of interpreting the educational theme as a single discourse encompassing education, assistance, and human and cultural promotion has been the factor that, over the years, has conditioned and limited our educational experience and pastoral ministry, identifying it with spheres and structures that evoke welfare-based models, and less open to alternative educational experiences and pastoral projects.

**Education today is about planning no longer charity and benevolence**

A first practical choice at the cultural and pastoral level within our religious institution will be to understand education as a distinct field, separate and autonomous from that of charity and benevolence; to recognize that the educational sphere requires planning and cannot be identified exclusively in terms of prevention, assistance, or rehabilitation for children and young people.

In fact, promoting the dignity of the person, guaranteeing education and vocational training, and ensuring employment are today recognized rights—no longer the result of, nor conditioned by, charity and philanthropy.

If, when speaking of education and the Rogationist educational project, the first thing that comes to mind are institutions or group homes, we are outside the educational context because, in fact, we are influenced by—or share—an alarmist interpretation of a youth problem that has always been present in society, one that constantly demands attention and calls for new commitments and duties from everyone, prompting religious and civil institutions to assume their responsibilities.

When discussing education and educational issues, influenced by this scenario of emergency or challenge, we risk reducing the topic to a matter of social problems, security, and civic efficiency, and we fail to view the educational commitment as an ongoing responsibility to be assessed within an anthropological framework and a comprehensive understanding of the human experience.

A reinterpretation and reappropriation of the educational commitment today cannot be motivated solely by the need to address questionable phenomena among adolescents and young people, thereby developing provisional educational projects that respond to emergencies or problematic and ever-changing demands.

Education is an adult responsibility inherent to the human spirit, when it is understood as preparing and ensuring for children, adolescents, and young people a future and a society on a human scale, so that they may be happy and feel fulfilled on a human and social level.

**The opportunity to consistently provide original and dignified educational projects**

Beyond the many motivations rooted in charism and tradition, based on the witness of life offered by its Founder, today a religious institution, with diverse purposes, can affirm the validity of its presence in society and in the Church if it is able to present an original and dignified project, open to alternative pastoral approaches in the local community.

It is taken for granted that the educational work we carry out has always been guided by a clear vision and a pedagogical approach, with a well-defined and up-to-date methodology, just as it has been taken for granted that the staff involved in this field have also been committed, over the years, to retrain and reinvent themselves, and that the decades of experience gained in assisting the poor and needy children of the past could serve as a guarantee of educational success among today's children—who are often challenging and problematic—and who no longer live in or attend the traditional facilities we had designed for them.

At times in the past—though this remains a current risk—little attention was paid to developing a comprehensive educational plan that specified the ideals and objectives, the religious meaning of life, and the plan to be carried out. Instead, great importance was placed on the facilities, the technical aspects, the professionalism of the staff, the functionality of the premises, the definition of the procedures required for the admission or discharge of the children, and relationships with social service workers.

And at times, this complex external structure has taken precedence over ideals and educational relationships. What in the past was called an educational plan, method, or system—if developed and refined in light of the demands of a new and more modern pedagogy and new social sensibilities—can become the hallmark of us Rogationists and Sisters of the Divine Zeal, ensuring a positive presence and welcoming spirit among today's diverse educational settings —in schools, parishes, social and sports centers, shelters, and day schools.

It would also be desirable to promote coordination among the various educational communities of the Sisters, Daughters of Divine Zeal, and the Rogationist Fathers to formulate a shared project, not least because we are sometimes faced with provisional and often conflicting projects and pedagogical criteria, linked more to the ingenuity of individual staff members than to shared principles.

**New legislation does not speak of assistance but of the rights of minors as they grow up**

One of the challenges facing the many religious communities that have been engaged in educational work for decades will be to re-examine, in light of new social and ecclesial demands, their educational mission, come to terms with current cultural and practical difficulties and uncertainties, and study, identify, select, and promote new educational pathways—to be formulated into projects and tested in daily life—while drawing on their rich experiences and traditions, with a closer eye on the local context and the demands of the times, and re-committing to placing the well-being of young people and the lives they are building at the center of their agenda.

Perhaps the time has come for the two religious congregations—the Daughters of Divine Zeal and the Rogationist Fathers—which share the same Founder, were born of the same charismatic motivations within the Church and are dedicated to fulfilling the same mission, and are both engaged in the field of education, to sit down together to draw up common programmatic guidelines and launch jointly managed projects in the local community.

In recent years, within our social contexts, public opinion has devoted greater attention to issues affecting minors, especially those from social groups facing particular hardship. This collective awareness has fostered improved civil legislation grounded in children's rights, aimed at ensuring they have a family where they feel cared for and educated, thereby promoting their balanced growth and gradual integration into society.

Undoubtedly, in the contemporary era, greater interest is being paid to young people and their problems, and this reflects a shift in sensitivity toward the unique needs of this delicate stage of life. The positive trend and the improvement in children's conditions—resulting from the general progress of society—are not, however, free from ambivalence and uncertainty in the behavior of institutions, in the content of social policies, and in the culture itself.

Although the essential needs of the most vulnerable members of our society have been carefully identified and described, there has been a lack of genuine commitment to identifying the paths through which it would be possible to change a social reality that is essentially indifferent to the problems of minors. Efforts were made to establish a charter of children's rights, but no attempt was made, with equal tenacity and insight, to verify whether the rights solemnly proclaimed by the legal system were actually guaranteed in social reality.

**Our Specific Educational Commitment from a Vocational Perspective**

The education and care of children and young people have, from the very beginning, characterized the work of our Congregations—the Daughters of Divine Zeal and the Rogationist Fathers—as an integral part of our charism.

In step with new societal sensibilities in the field of education and the social choices reflected in the new regulations governing the sector, there has also been a shift in our Congregations' apostolic perspective, which, in my opinion, has been far more significant and influential. This shift stems from a different interpretation of the Rogationist charism and apostolate, and consequently from a different way of understanding, planning, and shaping our internal culture and pastoral ministry.

Beginning in the 1970s, there has been greater attention to the theme and challenges of vocations as a key to understanding the Rogationist mission through the lens of our charism.

This has, in fact, led to a practical shift—sometimes disavowed at the institutional level—in the apostolic interests of the new generations within the Congregation. At the time when it was decided at the institutional level—with courage and ingenuity, based on new sensibilities within the Church and the Congregation—to reevaluate, support, and promote a culture of vocations, it would have been appropriate, with the same foresight, to promote within our own ranks an updated culture of education—understood also as human and vocational development—to ensure and keep alive the educational and welfare service among minors carried out by the Rogationists in society, so that it might become a compelling formative appeal among young people in formation.

**The educational commitment lived out among children in difficulty remains an ever-present pastoral challenge**

The educational commitment, lived out above all among children and young people in difficulty, as a witness to our charism—regardless of the types of service chosen in various cultural or social contexts—remains one of the most significant pastoral challenges for us religious today.

In an article of mine from 1976, published in the periodical "Notiziario Rogate," I expressed my reflections on what was happening in the Congregation, also putting forward some working hypotheses and assessments: "No one who is even minimally 'attentive' to the life of the Congregation today can fail to notice a slow transformation taking place—in both mindset and circumstances—that is leading us all to prefer a new 'apostolic practice' within the Congregation. Enthusiasm for Rogate has emerged, understood primarily as an orientation and vocational activity for groups and young people; at the same time, an illogical anxiety is gradually taking hold regarding the management—and even more so the evaluation—of our charitable works; perhaps it is merely antipathy, fueled not least by a certain distrust stemming from the backwardness or provisional nature of our structures and the educational methods we employ.

"This state of affairs is reflected, in practice, on the one hand, in a certain unease among many of those currently engaged in our charitable institutions, who feel—perhaps it is merely an impression—that they are being progressively marginalized from the Congregation's primary interests, as if their current apostolate had no long-term prospects within a future, more up-to-date plan for Rogationist apostolic practice.

" On the other hand—a fact verifiable by all—many of the new religious who agree to embody and live out the Rogationist religious vocation with commitment and fidelity today express significant reservations, if not outright protest, regarding their "possible assignment to charitable institutions," while speaking enthusiastically about an apostolate of animation and vocational promotion or, more generally, parish ministry. (Adamo Calò. Article: "One Can Die for Rogate," *Notiziario Rogate*, Year II, No. 4 (July 1976).

Now, even after a cursory reading of the Founder's life, it becomes clear that for him the "issue"—in the terms we commonly use of vocational animation and guidance, on the one hand, and Antonian orphanages, on the other—simply does not exist; and if we wish to consider it real, we would have to reframe it in different terms and contexts, such as an environment of poverty, the need for good workers, and prayer to obtain them.

There is a unified relationship among these that is not coincidental—as some would have us believe—but necessary, in the sense that they are so interrelated that the presence of one in the Father's vision could not be explained without acknowledging the contribution of the others.

Welfare institutions and educational communities for minors have been for us—(are, and should be)—the local and temporal manifestation of our love for the poor and of our life among them.

In my opinion, however, it would be advisable to revisit this discussion in the appropriate forums, adapt it, and expand it to address today's youth issues, so that the educational commitment and the service of assistance to young people in difficulty may be preserved and valued, rediscovered and reimagined in new and alternative forms in parishes, youth clubs, youth associations, schools, and universities—transforming it from mere assistance into a Christian educational process that helps them rediscover their dignity as persons called by God to live out their personal vocation.

**Call for a Permanent Educational Planning Center to promote a contemporary culture of education**

In my opinion, our institution should establish a permanent planning center or educational observatory, which would take on the task of promoting a constantly updated culture of education and youth vocational guidance, as well as a continuous evaluation of the methodologies applied in these areas, and to encourage and foster greater and more active involvement of lay professionals or volunteers who have at least some interest in the religious education of the young people residing in educational facilities affiliated with Rogationist communities.

It is also important to establish a code of ethics for communities undertaking educational commitments, in which the objectives of the projects, methodologies, competencies, responsibilities, and the professional and religious criteria and requirements to be considered when selecting educators and hiring lay collaborators are defined; these collaborators, in their daily professional work, must take into account and follow guidelines that respect our tradition in the fields of education and youth ministry.

It is likely that underlying the diminished willingness of young Rogationist religious to envision their apostolic life as a commitment to educational and assistance works is a sense of unease stemming from the doubt about whether to continue proposing, in today's society, educational methodologies that are not appreciated, do not ensure human and apostolic fulfillment, and require specific human, professional, and spiritual gifts.

In some communities, attempts have been made to address these shortcomings by seeking the collaboration of lay professionals in the field. However, their professionalism does not always align with a vocation: educating and guiding young people, in fact, is more than just a job—it is an apostolic commitment to young people in need, grounded in religious motivations; it is a service to one's neighbor out of love for Christ and remains a witness to the Gospel.

It will be the responsibility of local communities to safeguard, as much as possible, a physical presence of religious among the young people housed in our educational facilities and communities—a presence intended to provide guidance—based on and in accordance with the principles of Rogationist pedagogy, through Christian-inspired educational programs, to form future Christians and honest citizens, giving greater emphasis to complementary initiatives—both cultural and practical—prioritizing networking and collaborating with other organizations in the area, in accordance with current government guidelines and regulations.

**New Educational Spaces and Types of Intervention in Today's Youth Culture**

Today, the educational mission is carried out in ways appropriate to the times—in youth clubs, schools, vocational schools, rehabilitation centers for troubled youth, and homes for single mothers—

but also in student dormitories or through various cultural and athletic activities, such as theater, music, school camps, and sports clubs, as well as through active collaboration in parishes and youth ministry.

We are aware that today's society and culture are becoming increasingly complex and ambivalent. The languages, models, and lifestyles presented are often contradictory and ambiguous. Many young people and adolescents are no longer able to make sense of their lives or plan a peaceful future for themselves, influenced by a weak, occasional, or temporary religiosity, and are increasingly unwilling to make positive, long-term decisions or to trust institutions and adults who lack credibility because they are distant from the young people's world and language. The family, the school, and the Church—institutions that in the past took their credibility and authority for granted—have in fact lost their role as educational guides.

It is therefore difficult—unless based on an emotional bond and mutual trust—to speak to a young man or woman about freedom as the ability to make appropriate choices and take responsibility for oneself, about discipline as self-control, about commitment to studies, respect for one's own body that goes beyond mere sex and physicality, freedom from the desire for wild parties and excessive use of drugs and alcohol, attention to one's language so it does not become vulgar, insolent, or brazen, solidarity with others—especially the weakest and most unfortunate— respect for those of different ethnic backgrounds or skin colors, to avoid a subtle racism made up of epithets and insinuations; growth in faith as a worldview, a way of life, and regular participation in the sacraments and the life of the Christian community to which one belongs.

What will help young people grow are not merely advanced and modern educational techniques or comfortable living environments, but the the humanity of the educators, the sense of responsibility of adults who care for them, making this the purpose of their profession and their lives, until they see the young people become sufficiently mature and autonomous. The educator's authority and the consistency of their witness will help young people grow responsibly. No content, method, or strategy can replace this requirement.

The educational aspect remains one of the defining features of the Rogationist apostolate and is part of the very nature of the charism, especially when it is understood as a service of preparation, discovery, growth, and human and vocational development.

**The True Challenge Facing the Rogationists Today. Their Presence and Cultural Contribution in the Field of Education**

One of the commitments of the Rogationists and the Daughters of Divine Zeal, following the example of Saint Hannibal Maria, remains that of disseminating—beyond their own circles, through the use of the media—the ideals, perspectives, motivations, and progress of the apostolic initiatives they undertake.

While the goal in the Founder's time may have seemed to be expanding the circle of benefactors during times of economic hardship, today it must evolve into an apostolate and become an integral part of our presence and apostolic activity.

St. Hannibal Maria Di Francia, through his statements in the press and later through the publication of the periodical " God and Neighbor," had become a voice of protest in his native Messina, a point of reference and a barometer for local political decisions in the areas of assistance and solidarity with the poor.

To speak implies having something to say. To speak of poverty—understood as economic hardship, social marginalization, and human humiliation—of social injustices, of the ambiguities in certain pastoral and economic plans at the local or national level, of education and educational emergencies or challenges, and of vocational outreach, means raising awareness, shaping culture, forming opinions, sparking discussions, and fostering reflection.

It means taking on the responsibility of leading civil and ecclesial society to the realization that we must continually find new solutions to ongoing crises, serving as a critical conscience for society, and offering guidance, proposals, and concrete collaboration.

At times, we are witnesses to—and perhaps even responsible for—a weak culture that fails to attract, lacks effectiveness, and has little impact on the local community.

Yet visibility today can serve as a religious witness when it translates into cultural initiatives and ever-new, alternative projects. This will require a communal willingness, a strong awareness of our mission, its relevance, and importance, and a strong sense of belonging in order to engage in dialogue with people—without hiding our identity as a religious family, without fear of being recognized or judged for what we do, or of appearing different or alternative to the cultural proposals of Italian society and certain sectors of the Church.

**Cultural Spheres and New Social Spaces for a Contemporary Educational Service**

Life, within our cultural spheres, is above all a religious and moral commitment to one's own development and to others. Study, cultural education, and professional training are a service to which God calls us—not only to meet life's demands and assume social responsibility, but also to fulfill, precisely, the mission entrusted to each of us.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to encourage our confreres to be more sensitive to the challenges and needs of the local community and more open to welcoming and evaluating diverse projects and experiences—even temporary ones—that are both needed and urgent.

Whatever the institutional orientation may be, at this moment we must encourage research and experimentation, plan competently, foster dialogue and discussion regarding a community's projects, and—whenever possible—promote a variety of initiatives within the same field and in the same local area, countering waning interest, a sense of powerlessness, and the tendency to delegate responsibility. We must revisit the topics of youth education, culture, social solidarity, and vocational guidance, returning to the task of planning activities and investing in the apostolic opportunities offered by the local area.

The worsening of certain phenomena of great social significance, such as drug addiction and juvenile delinquency, contributes to making the need for new forms of intervention by religious institutions—and by us Rogationists and Sisters of the Daughters of Divine Zeal, who were founded with the intent to help and ensure that children and young people lead meaningful and dignified lives—more widespread and urgent.

The term "youth distress," which we often use, is one of those commonly used phrases to describe a widespread state of unease among young people today. Above all, the increase in adolescent distress calls for an innovative and preventive form of intervention aimed at a particularly critical age group.

Young people ask not to be left alone. It is therefore essential to train educators and spiritual guides—priests, religious, and laypeople—who are capable of accompanying them. We must reawaken a sense

of responsibility and a passion for education in various types of adults. This formation should be carried out through programs—tailored to age and life situations—that are challenging and demanding yet respectful of a gradual process.

**Education as Youth Ministry and the Rogationist Educator as a Mentor**

Youth ministry must extend to the settings of school, university, work, and leisure, as well as to social relationships and civic engagement. We should strive to pursue a youth ministry that cares for those who are distant—the many young people we never encounter during the day.

The religious community should become a welcoming place for every young person, a home where everyone is welcome, where they can find people attentive to the questions raised by loneliness.

In Rogationist practice, the educator is the one who is present and takes responsibility for the young people, sharing with them moments of play, study, and the discovery of life, as well as their emotional reactions, personal suffering, and difficulties. In the past, we referred to the educator as an "assistant" . The term has lost its original meaning. "To assist" does not mean merely to help and come to the aid of a person in difficulty; it means, first and foremost, to participate, to feel involved in everything that happens.

Assistance is not simply a disciplinary tool for maintaining order, regularity in study, morality, and good manners. It is a demanding and exhausting presence, yet one that is deeply rewarding when children and young people—loved and recognized for who they are and their individual worth—respond by gratefully receiving what they are given by their educators.

**The current problem of vocations in the Church, or what we call the crisis of vocations**

Now let me dwell on a topic I have been thinking about for some time. It is a highly topical issue—and not only that, but one of such a nature that it touches us, as the saying goes, to the core: it is a problem that affects the very life of religious congregations and, at the same time, that of each one of us; it is the problem of vocations, or rather, what we call the crisis of vocations.

This is a phenomenon that has long affected the entire Church, but one that has become much more acute and troubling in recent years. It is a situation we must face with great humility and sincerity, with serene courage, without losing ourselves in fruitless lamentations or emotional accusations.

Faced with a crisis in numbers—and perhaps also in the witness of our lives—we are called to gather in prayer and ask the Lord to help us, as far as we are concerned, to view the situation with the utmost objectivity, identifying its causes and possible remedies.

The problem, I repeat, concerns us all, because we all have a vocation not only to safeguard and defend, but even more so to nurture and make fruitful for our times.

The numerical crisis of religious and priestly vocations is unfolding throughout the Church, with some areas we might call "hotspots" and others we might describe as "privileged."

Our Founder, Saint Hannibal Maria, reminds us that: "All the faithful must understand that the greatest mercy God bestows upon a people is to send them chosen priests… Conversely, the greatest punishment with which the Most High strikes peoples is when He deprives them of His ministers—or rather, of ministers after His own heart…"

Never before have the Founder's words proved so prophetic regarding the current crisis of vocations. Indeed, the issue of vocations today is inextricably linked to that of crisis—perhaps not merely a numerical one.

In recent decades, therefore, we have witnessed a numerical decline in vocations to both the ordained ministry and the consecrated life. The number of priests, in particular, has seen a further decline over the past two decades.

**The current numerical crisis among priests and consecrated persons is due to various factors that should not be underestimated**

Perhaps the causes can be attributed to the low visibility of consecrated life, the growing presence of the laity, and the cultural climate in today's social life that almost never accommodates the affirmation of God.

In short, in recent decades, the factors exacerbating the crisis have multiplied. We must admit, as many Church theologians maintain, that Christians today are confused, lost, disappointed, and disoriented.

Perhaps the current numerical crisis has also been fueled by other factors. Consider the numerous scandals that have rocked the Church in recent years. News reports bring to light disconcerting events involving numerous figures from the Catholic world—both priests and members of religious congregations.

Finally, a series of internal changes within the Church also shapes the current landscape of the question of vocation. While in the past "vocation" effectively referred to the ecclesial role of the priest, the religious brother, or the religious sister, within a perspective of "perfection" as full, total adherence to the Gospel teaching—beginning as early as the 1950s, and then more clearly from the Second Vatican Council onward, the concept has progressively expanded, first to secular institutes and then to the baptized as such: " All the Christian faithful, whatever their state or condition, are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity" (*Lumen gentium* 40).

While it is theologically correct to emphasize the fundamental equality of all the baptized with regard to evangelical "perfection," it is also true that a plurality of "vocations" —all of which are authentic forms of following the Lord—multiplies the range of possible options.

Praying for vocations today means invoking the Holy Spirit so that every person may discover and embrace their own life plan according to God's design, not limiting themselves solely to the priesthood or consecrated life, but embracing every form of response to love and to the Gospel.

**Praying for vocations an explicit command from Jesus**

Cardinal Martini, Bishop of Milan, *said: Asking "Why pray for vocations?" may at first glance seem superfluous, or even self-evident, given how explicit Jesus' "command" is—"Pray to the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his harvest"—and how urgent the need is, almost everywhere in the Church, for new vocations.*

*"This is the meaning of 'Pray to the Lord of the harvest.' Pray, that is, ask, desire; and as you ask and desire, trust and make yourselves available. This is what is asked of everyone. Not everyone is called to respond to special missions, but all of us, if we have responsibilities toward the Church, are called to pray with this spirit of availability…*

*" In the Christian community, prayer—and specifically prayer for vocations—is increasingly taking the form of* a prayer of thanksgiving*, because God does not lose faith in humanity and continues to call; as* a prayer of invocation *to the Holy Spirit, who enables us to recognize God's gifts and our personal responsibility within the Church and toward humanity; and as* a prayer of petition*, to explicitly ask the Lord for new callings and generous responses."*

*" This is the meaning of "Pray to the Lord of the harvest." Pray, that is, ask, desire; and as you ask and desire, trust and make yourselves available. This is what is asked of everyone. Not everyone is called to respond to special missions, but all of us, if we have responsibilities toward the Church, are called to pray with this sense of openness… And we must come to say: 'Lord, if you will, call me.' It is a difficult step, but nevertheless it is a step toward which this prayer prepares us. I believe it is a preparation for this step…"*

*Prayer is therefore, for the individual, an "ongoing call from God" and the "beginning of a response" on the part of the person: a true vocational journey."*

**Promoting a culture of vocation to rediscover the connection between faith and questions about the meaning of life**

We are living in a time of intense secularization, yet we certainly often ask ourselves what our personal vocation is. Perhaps many of us have lost a sense of the sacred, yet we are always seeking to know what God has called us to. Many young people are attending religious services less and less, yet they are searching for a sense of spirituality. In a context of profound crisis such as the one we face today, the Church—and parishes in particular—can become fertile ground, and often the only one, for a rediscovery of faith and a vocational choice, especially for young people.

The vocational dimension of life accompanies our entire existence and permeates all pastoral ministry. Rooted in the gift of life and in Baptism, God's call is expressed in various vocations, including marriage, consecrated life, and ordained ministry. Fostering vocations is therefore the responsibility of the entire Christian community.

Perhaps today's vocational crisis seems linked to a deeper cultural crisis, in which the word "vocation" risks no longer speaking to people's lives and losing its meaning in daily life. We must emphasize the need to promote a culture of vocation capable of rediscovering the connection between faith and questions about the meaning of life, freedom, and the future.

The dream remains of a Church that is not afraid to speak openly about vocation and of an ecclesial community united in prayer for vocations.

St. John Paul II urged us to "*courageously reaffirm the initiative, inventiveness, and holiness of the founders and foundresses as a response to the signs of the times emerging in today's world."*

But to do this, we need a consecrated life that is open and ingenious. Often, the allure of the past prevents us from thinking in new and creative ways. We must avoid resorting to mere survival tactics. Certain communities and institutes believe they are doing something new and being original by recycling old habits.

**In today's catechesis, it will be necessary to redefine the meaning of "workers in the harvest."**

Prayer for vocations from a global perspective represents a fundamental pillar for the Catholic Church, as it broadens the horizon from local needs (one's own parish or diocese) to the universal mission.

Praying from this perspective means recognizing that every vocation is a gift for the whole world and responds to Jesus' command: *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest"* (Lk 10:2).

The mission of *Rogate,* based on Jesus' Gospel command, is not intended as a mere devotion, but as a global and practical perspective focused on specific challenges.

In the contemporary context, in today's catechesis, it will also be necessary to redefine the meaning of "laborers in the harvest." Prayer and action for vocations are no longer limited to the search for priests or religious alone. They require broadening our horizons. From a global perspective, the involvement of the laity is key to allowing the Rogate charism to permeate the secular structures of society, politics, and the workplace.

In today's Church, the harvest needs "good laborers" in every sector of society. In light of these new pastoral horizons, our Congregation increasingly proposes a "Rogate Family," which includes lay associations, families, and professionals called to live out the Rogate charism in the workplace, in politics, and in education.

Vocational promotion today means speaking to all believers about their life choices understood as service, solidarity, and social responsibility.

Perhaps in the time of St. Hannibal Maria, prayer for vocations was closely linked to helping the poorest and orphans in the Avignone neighborhood of Messina. But today, the two religious congregations he founded and the entire Church are called to foster a culture of care and compassion to address various social and global challenges, redefining Rogationist pastoral ministry in terms of evangelization and human and cultural promotion across increasingly diverse contexts—areas defined by poverty and marginalization—ranging from parishes and cultural and pastoral centers, to shelters for minors in need, to a wide variety of reception and rehabilitation programs, and, last but not least, through magazines and publications designed to promote the ideals and relevance of the Rogationist charism in today's society and Church.

**The Catholic Church Today and the Many Challenges It Faces**

Today, many people are questioning the transformations taking place within the Church and are trying to understand *how* and *whether* the Catholic faith and ecclesiastical tradition still fit into and influence the lives of individuals. Although the Second Vatican Council did much to renew and revitalize the Church, it now faces many challenges.

One challenge is the shortage of priests, as many of those currently active reach retirement age and new vocations to the ordained ministry are declining in nearly every region of the world.

The relationship between the Catholic Church and contemporary society is undergoing profound change, influenced by secularization, scientific progress, and ever-changing and diverse social expectations.

In recent decades, secularization has led a portion of the population, especially in Western countries, toward growing religious indifference, prompting many people to pursue their own spirituality—one that is more personal and less institutionalized.

Despite growing indifference toward religious practice, the Catholic Church remains a significant moral voice in various areas of public life, from bioethics to social justice. Recent studies highlight how the Catholic **Church**'s commitment to human rights and international solidarity continues to garner widespread support, even among those who do not consider themselves practicing Catholics.

Perhaps, one of the greatest challenges for the Catholic Church is its relationship with young people, many of whom are increasingly turning away from institutional religious practices. They seem increasingly wary of religious institutions, which are often perceived as rigid or out of touch with everyday reality. However, there are also many young people who show great openness toward ethical and spiritual issues, even if not necessarily within a Catholic framework.

In fact, young people today want a Catholic Church that is more inclusive and open to dialogue, especially on issues such as gender identity, sexuality, and civil rights.

The future of the Catholic Church in modern societies will depend on its ability to adapt and respond to the spiritual, ethical-moral, and intellectual needs of a world in which faith, for many, is merely a personal choice, no longer an imposed tradition. It remains to be seen how the Catholic Church will address these new challenges and continue to uphold a clear vision of the Gospel, striving to be a meaningful presence in the lives of both believers and non-believers.

**Today's Church needs priests who serve as spiritual guides for the community**

The number of Catholics worldwide is increasing, but the number of priests is decreasing. The crisis of the priesthood—perhaps not merely a numerical one—is today a crisis of function, of role, and of pastoral commitment. Perhaps today's priests are forced to be merely administrators of parish services and no longer find the time to serve as spiritual guides for the community entrusted to them.

Yet, now more than ever, we need intelligent and innovative priests—true spiritual guides. The Church faces the difficult task of finding solutions for the formation of priests, starting with seminaries that no longer seem to fulfill this purpose.

This is why rethinking the role of priests—and their role as shepherds and missionaries—has become one of the most important challenges for the Church of the future.

There are several challenges that will need to be addressed in the near future. Certainly, a renewed and creative theology is needed—one that explains and expands the role of women in the Church, which is called to be an ever more welcoming home, capable of engaging in dialogue with an increasingly secularized and fragmented culture.

Faced with the challenges of modernity, if we truly wish to address the issues at stake regarding family policies, sexual morality, and the relationship with the sciences, the Catholic world must recognize that certain solutions no longer work today, and the Magisterium is called upon to act as a moral guide for humanity.

We are therefore invited to ask ourselves whether, in the Italian Church, the transformation necessary to put the Gospel back at the center, rediscover the joy of faith, and face the present and future challenges of Christianity has truly begun.

It is a matter of moving from a *pastoral approach focused on preservation to a missionary pastoral approach* that must concentrate " on what is essential, on what is most beautiful, greatest, most attractive, and, at the same time, most necessary" (*Evangelii gaudium* 35). And this requires abandoning pastoral criteria aimed solely at preserving the status quo, in order to "rethink the goals, structures, style, and methods of evangelization in our communities" (*Evangelii gaudium* 33).

From this perspective, we should all rethink a new way of transmitting the faith—one that proposes a new model of community no longer centered on the priest's ministry, but capable of effectively and responsibly involving the laity, so that pastoral renewal may generate new spaces for proclaiming the Gospel and innovative approaches for those who are distant from or indifferent to the faith.

Pope Francis wrote, among other things, "I dream of a missionary choice capable of transforming everything, so that customs, styles, schedules, language, and every ecclesial structure may become an adequate channel for the evangelization of today's world, rather than for self-preservation " (EG 27).

This dream, however, calls for a new form of ecclesial presence in the local community and, above all, a renewed centrality of the Word of God and an evangelization capable of fostering a living encounter with Jesus.

**The Catholic World and the Many Current Challenges to Be Faced**

Today's world presents many challenges for Christians: secularism, which reduces the space for the sacred and the transcendent; the ecological crisis, which threatens the future of the planet and of the poor; social injustices that generate violence and inequality; forced migration, which jeopardizes people's dignity and rights; and religious pluralism, which calls for respect and dialogue.

How should the Church respond to these challenges? How should she bear witness to the Gospel in today's society? How should she be present in the world without being of the world?

The answer cannot be one of isolation or fear, but one of openness and trust. The Church cannot shut itself off, but must go out to meet people, their questions, their needs, and their aspirations. The Church cannot ignore or condemn the world, but must illuminate it with the light of Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

To do this, the Church needs two fundamental attitudes: listening and discernment. Listening is the ability to pay attention to reality with an empathetic and compassionate gaze. Discernment is the ability to recognize the signs of the times with a prophetic and wise gaze.

Listening involves dialogue with other religions, other cultures, other sciences, and other human experiences. Listening involves welcoming the least among us and the marginalized as brothers and sisters to be loved and served. Discernment involves the courage to proclaim the Gospel with fidelity and creativity.

**Another challenge no less important: the promotion of vocations to consecrated life**

The number of vocations has declined in many parts of the world. Fewer and fewer young people are choosing the priesthood and religious life. Beyond the numbers, the challenge also extends to maintaining the quality of the vocations seeking to join a Congregation and to understanding what attracts and sustains a vocation in today's world.

The role of vocation promoters must also be highlighted. To foster vocations, a personal encounter must be offered through witness, relationships, and prayer. Every priest and religious is a vocation promoter by the way they live their lives and by their willingness to spend time with young people and help them discern whether God is calling them to the priestly or religious life.

In this context, an ever-important and necessary theme is the promotion of a culture of vocation promotion that goes far beyond the simple work of vocation promoters.

A culture of vocation promotion invites every religious brother and sister to assume the necessary personal responsibility through daily prayer for vocations, a willingness to welcome young people into our communities, and the witness of a life that inspires and attracts them.

We know full well that all vocations depend on God, who calls young people to make personal choices, including the choice of a congregation they prefer. Recognizing our dependence on this grace , one of our most important aspirations must be to commit ourselves to daily prayer for vocations.

The Italian Church is aware that the promotion of vocations is an essential part of its pastoral ministry and that the persistent crisis in vocations to special consecration represents one of the principal problems of our time.

The continuous decline in vocations to religious life, especially among women, is plain for all to see. This phenomenon remains serious because it points to an even more troubling problem: the crisis of faith and the profound crisis of vocational awareness that has come to a head in our times, evident both in the culture and customs of our society, as well as within our Christian communities.

It seems that our daily lives are drifting ever further from the awareness that we are called to build the Kingdom of God, and that people are living increasingly outside that universal call to holiness to which God calls everyone.

**A challenge that must not be overlooked: the need for prayer for vocations**

The Gospel recounts that one day Jesus saw the crowds, who were weary and disoriented, *"… like sheep without a shepherd"* (*Mt* 9:36). Is this not, in many respects, also the situation today? Well then, what does Jesus propose in response to the urgent need for exemplary and sure guidance that points to the true path of life—and of eternal life?

Here are his words: *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few! Pray, therefore, to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest!"* (*Mt* 9:37–38).

These words of Jesus can be understood through the lens of faith, which enables us to perceive the most serious and urgent needs—those of the Kingdom of God.

Praying to the Lord of the harvest for vocations springs from a vision of faith; it springs from the desire for the Kingdom of God to come. Prayer for vocations measures the level of faith in a community, whether religious or parish-based.

Jesus himself set the example for us on several occasions; so it was with the choice of the apostles: "Jesus went up the mountain to pray and spent the whole night in prayer to God. When day came, he gathered his disciples; he chose twelve of them and gave them the name 'apostles.'

Prayer for vocations is an exceedingly significant act that underscores the divine origin of a vocation and its importance for the Church's mission.

Our prayer for vocations should not be viewed as a concern for the growth or expansion of our own religious Congregation, but rather as a response to the Lord's explicit invitation, and the convinced, joyful, and self-sacrificing acceptance of the mission entrusted by the Holy Spirit to our Founder as an apostolic gift for the entire Church.

**By its very nature, the Rogation Prayer is directed toward the universal Church**

Prayer for vocations is, by its very nature, far broader than the growth of a single charism: it looks to all the workers of the Church.

We know that our Founder intended as a distinctive purpose of our Congregation a constant commitment to all vocations.

Let us remember that we give a great treasure to the Church when we foster a good vocation; whether this vocation leads to a diocese, to the missions, or to a religious house, it does not matter; it is always a great treasure given to the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Christian life, as we know, is a call to follow Christ, to live in accordance with his Gospel, and to be witnesses of his love for the world. Everyone has their own specific vocation—a unique and irreplaceable call that invites them to follow the Lord in a particular way.

Prayer for vocations is a plea to God to enlighten our hearts and enable us to discover the vocation to which we have been called. This means that each of us has a specific role to play the Church and in society at large, and this prayer helps us recognize and value it.

We are all called to serve God and others in a unique and personal way, placing ourselves at God's disposal so that He may use us as instruments of His love.

Our task is also to accompany all those who are on a journey of discovering their own vocation, to help them interpret their own lives as a response to Someone who is calling.

What we seek to do, then, in a broader sense, is to promote what we call a "vocational culture"—that is, the way of interpreting one's life as a response to life itself. That way of interpreting one's life as a response first and foremost to our very existence, but also as a mission, as a responsibility entrusted to us by God.

In his latest Exhortation, "Christus vivit," Pope Francis also referred to vocation as a call to friendship with Jesus, which takes concrete form in missionary service to others. Young people are sometimes deaf to this call. Why is that?

I believe the call is always there, as the Pope also says; the Lord has never stopped calling.

"Perhaps, as a Church, we need—and I believe this is also our task—to give young people, on the one hand, the tools to be able to discern this call and, on the other hand, to experiment with ways of communicating that they can understand. In this sense, it also seems necessary to reexamine the ways in which we speak about vocation—how we present it—and to recognize that perhaps some of the language we use, some of the images that are familiar to us, may not be familiar to the current

generation. It is up to us to facilitate this encounter between Jesus and young people—and, more broadly, with all people—to whom God wishes to speak." .

Every local Church must become increasingly sensitive and attentive to vocational ministry, educating—at various levels—family, parish, and association—especially children, girls, and young adults, to develop a genuine and loving friendship with the Lord, nurtured through personal and liturgical prayer; to learn to listen attentively and fruitfully to the Word of God through a growing familiarity with Sacred Scripture; to understand that entering into God's will does not annihilate or destroy the person, but allows one to discover and follow the deepest truth about oneself; to live in generosity and fraternity in relationships with others, because it is only by opening oneself to God's love that one finds true joy and the full fulfillment of one's aspirations.

**St. 'Annibale Maria Di Francia and the Current Challenges in the Church**

Tormented by the thought that there were millions upon millions of people in the world in need of material and spiritual bread, and distressed by the scarcity of generous souls dedicated to their spiritual and material salvation, he found the answer in Jesus' command: "Pray therefore to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest," convinced that the vocations of the new apostles are a gift from God and the fruit of prayer. Even then, he considered workers in the harvest to be not only priests and consecrated persons, but also all those called to engage in activities for the benefit of others in the Church and in society: parents, teachers, and leaders.

The Rogate (the prayer for vocations) became the program of his life, a "guiding principle and constant focus" for all his works. Drawn by his charism, men and women joined him. Father Annibale founded the two Congregations of the Daughters of Divine Zeal (1887) and the Rogationists (1897), which express through a fourth vow their commitment to pray and engage in specific activities for vocations—including centers for spirituality, discernment, and vocational promotion, as well as publishing initiatives and seminars.

Di Francia, in committing himself and others to prayer for vocations, seeks to convey that those who ask the Lord to provide his Church with laborers for the harvest are asking not only that they be numerous, but above all that they be holy. Furthermore, he suggests that those who pray for vocations must personally listen to God's call, ready to say: "Here I am, Lord; if you will, send me."

Father Annibale's spiritual experience and his special mission are shared today by numerous laypeople—men and women—who are committed to living the spirit of the "Rogate" in the Church, either individually or as part of an association. Among the various lay associations is that of the Rogationist Missionaries, composed of women who live a consecrated life in the world through the profession of the evangelical counsels and the fourth vow of the "Rogate."

**Those who pray for vocations must feel and be workers in the Lord's harvest**

Saint Annibale Maria, rightly called the "true father of orphans and the poor," wanted the members of the Institutes he founded to concretely express their commitment to vocations by becoming workers in the harvest themselves—preferably in service to the little ones and the poor—through all possible works of spiritual and material charity: orphanages, schools, vocational institutes, and centers for people with disabilities.

Although he was a man of action, he lived a life of ever-increasing and heroic practice of all the Christian virtues, which he channeled into zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Deeply in love with Christ himself, his motto and exhortation were: "Fall in love with Jesus Christ."

Pray! For him, vocational ministry begins with prayer and through prayer, because it is prayer that brings the essential to the fore and allows for an intuition of the unum necessarium.

Prayer is the natural path of vocational discernment, the privileged place for discerning one's vocation. Every vocation—whatever it may be—arises from the space of an invoking, patient, and trusting prayer; sustained not by the expectation of an immediate answer, but by the certainty or hope that the invocation cannot fail to be heard, and will, in due time, reveal the invoker's vocation to him (cf. New Vocations, no. 35d).

As I draw to a close, I would like to add some significant expressions preserved in the writings of Saint Hannibal*: "For prayer to be effective, it must be accompanied by our cooperation in obtaining what we pray for. Prayer without cooperation is imperfect and ineffective. Thus, prayer, when combined with action, becomes effective. And meditation impels us to pray and cooperate. You must pray to obtain good workers for the Church, but at the same time you must work toward this end."*

On another occasion he wrote: *"The abandoned poor have a great need to be evangelized. Evangelizing the poor without helping them is an incomplete task. One must combine the two. May we never fail to uphold this spirit of 'double charity.'" I believe I am not far from the truth when I say that this grounding in "double charity" is a defining element of the charism of Saint Annibale Maria Di Francia.* (Monsignor Marcello Semeraro)

Annibale Maria Di Francia made the Gospel imperative of "Rogate" his own, and today we can all see how, in this fundamental aspiration of his life, he was a prophetic voice for the Church of our time. John Paul II recognized this when, on the day following his beatification on October 7, 1990, he described him as a true pioneer and zealous teacher of modern vocational ministry.

**World Day of Prayer for Vocations in the Church**

This Day offers a precious opportunity to rediscover and support all vocations in the Church: to the priesthood, to consecrated life, to mission, to marriage and family life, as well as to the daily commitment of the laity in society. Every vocation is a sign of God's living presence and contributes to the building up of the Christian community.

The Catholic Church depends significantly, in its day-to-day life, on its consecrated ministers and also on its men and women religious, who in recent centuries have contributed so greatly to the development of the mission and Catholic works throughout the world. How are we to understand the decline in vocations, at least in lands of ancient Catholic tradition?

We, too, are rightly concerned, given that so many of our priests are aging and new ordinations continue to be far too few.

We cannot deny that there is a crisis. Why? Today's young people fear making long-term commitments. This fear stems from the risks they face in the face of a seemingly uncertain future. Young people trapped in a culture of instant gratification and fleeting interests are in no hurry to get married, much less to enter a seminary or convent.

Although conventional wisdom claims the opposite, the shortage of priests is not the result of celibacy but of a crisis of faith and the closing of the human mind's window onto the infinite or the transcendent. The desire to become a priest is nourished essentially by intimacy with the Lord, in a truly personal relationship, which is expressed above all in the desire to be with Him.

Priests should not only invite young people to consider a vocation to the priesthood but also attract them through their integrity and priestly joy. Parents should also be willing to encourage their children if and when they wish to discern a vocation to the priesthood or to consecrated life. At the same time, teachers—and indeed, ordinary Catholics—should also encourage a particularly promising young person to consider dedicating his life to the service of God.

**Living God's Plan**

**Sowing Hope and Building Peace**

"*Vocations Day invites us to reflect on the precious gift of the call that the Lord addresses to each of us so that we may take part in his plan of love and embody the beauty of the Gospel in the various states of life: married life, consecrated life, priestly life—a life given with and for the love of Jesus and our brothers and sisters*" (cf. Pope Francis' Message for the 61st World Day of Prayer for Vocations).

In our time, many young people feel lost when faced with the future. They often experience uncertainty about their job prospects and, more deeply, an identity crisis—a crisis of meaning and values—which the digital confusion makes even harder to navigate. Injustices against the weak and the poor, the indifference born of selfish affluence, and the violence of war threaten the plans for a good life they cherish in their hearts. Yet the Lord, who knows the human heart, does not abandon us to insecurity; on the contrary, he wishes to awaken in each of us the awareness that we are loved, called, and sent forth as pilgrims of hope.

The Church needs pastors, religious, missionaries, and married couples who know how to say "yes" to the Lord with trust and hope. A vocation is never a treasure that remains locked away in the heart, but grows and is strengthened within a community that believes, loves, and hopes. And since no one can respond alone to God's call, we all need the prayer and support of our brothers and sisters, (From the Message for World Youth Day 2025).

**The decline in membership is forcing the remaining religious to shoulder heavy workloads**

Religious congregations today are addressing the vocational crisis through a profound restructuring of their presence, rethinking the management of their assets, generational renewal, and their pastoral role in contemporary society.

Many institutes have a very high average age, with few or no members under the age of 60 and more deaths and departures than new admissions. Buildings and large convents are often too large, dilapidated, and unsustainable both economically and in terms of the communities' actual housing and pastoral needs. The decline in membership forces the remaining religious to shoulder heavy workloads, with the risk of causing burnout, especially among the younger members. Changing social values, combined with the reputational and moral consequences linked to the abuse crisis, have eroded trust in and the traditional visibility of the consecrated charism.

Religious congregations are experiencing a complex period that is profoundly shaking up practices and customs rooted for centuries. By cross-referencing various studies and analyses, it becomes clear

that within twenty years, there is a risk that the vast majority of religious buildings will stand empty. Indeed, many already are, with thousands of religious houses and monasteries having closed in Italy over the past forty years.

**CONCLUSION**

We have attempted an analysis of the youth vocation crisis primarily in socio-cultural terms. It must be acknowledged, however, that this attempt is incomplete—not only in relation to the available data or the validity of the interpretation offered, but above all in relation to the mysterious nature of vocation. In analyzing it, there will always be a variable that eludes us—one not subject to human expertise, namely that which responds to the unpredictable promptings of the Spirit.

Nevertheless, as far as our purpose is concerned, we can draw from these data an impetus to rethink our vocational promotion efforts more realistically, so that they may respond more adequately to the situation of today's young people, who are embedded in a profoundly changing social and ecclesial context.

The Rogationists and the Sisters of Divine Zeal will feel that the missionary zeal of the Heart of Christ—who said to his disciples, "Pray and Go"—is a particular requirement of their specific mission in the Church. They will feel sent by the Heavenly Father to spread the divine "Rogate" in order to extend the Kingdom of God on earth.

Therefore, with a great spirit of zeal, they commit themselves, as part of their apostolate, to evangelization, including in mission lands, in accordance with the character of their Institute. *(Constitutions of the Rogationists).*

From a socio-religious perspective, our country appears to be undergoing a profound and rapid process of secularization—understood as a crisis of the traditional sacred and a search for a new religiosity. Secularization is not synonymous with irreligion, but rather a process involving changes in values, in one's outlook on life, and in behavioral patterns that have arisen alongside shifts in social structures and institutions.

As far as vocational values are concerned, we see fairly similar reactions whether the vocation is priestly or religious. In general, there is a tendency to shy away from the "closed" structures of the seminary. The priesthood is far less "attractive" than it once was, perhaps because it no longer offers security and prestige. As for religious life, it can be observed that—generally speaking—there are more reasons for disaffection than for interest.

Perhaps we should rediscover within ourselves what seems to attract today's young people to religious life: the desire to live a life entirely inspired by the Gospel, following Christ—especially in certain aspects that resonate deeply today—such as love, poverty, service, and work for the Kingdom; and the hope that the renewed structures of religious life will offer opportunities for self-realization, flexibility in commitment, and personal creativity.

*Father Adamo Calò, RCJ*




*Manda, o Signore,*
*apostoli santi*
*nella tua Chiesa!*

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