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



28 MERCOLEDÌ | Suor Giuseppina Musumarra, FDZ

Il "genio femminile" delle Figlie del Divino Zelo e il Rogate. Il carisma in una creativa lettura di genere.

STUDY DAY

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THE ROGATE TODAY … AND TOMORROW

THE RELEVANCE AND PROPHECY OF A CHARISM

The "Feminine Genius" of the Daughters of Divine Zeal and the Rogate.

The Charism in a Creative Gender-Based Interpretation.

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My initial reaction to the topic entrusted to me was not particularly enthusiastic. Hearing the term "feminine genius" immediately brought to mind the echoes of that neo-feminism of the 1960s which, while undoubtedly leading to great historical and social achievements, risked promoting the standardization of women according to the male model. On the contrary, I have always believed that **the true starting point is the person as such**—whether man or woman—grounded in the absolute value of equal dignity, rights, and equality

Biblical and Anthropological Foundation

So I began to engage with the Word of God.

"God created man in his own image;

in the image of God he created him;

male and female God created them." (Gen 1:27)

Both are human beings—men and women in equal measure—both created in the image of God, free and rational, capable of knowing and loving Him. The fundamental principle is that a human being is a person—men and women alike.

The second account of creation in Gen 2:22–23 [1] complements the first and helps us understand more deeply that woman is placed as another "I" alongside man, as an equal partner in dialogue. Woman is immediately recognized by man as "flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones." This being is part of himself; she was created from his rib. In the original language, the terminology better conveys this concept. She will be called ishsah (woman) because she was taken from ish (man). Now man has a helper who is like him and suited to him, unlike the living creatures of the surrounding world that God had entrusted to him; both, from the very beginning, are persons.

In the creation of man, the Lord God is aware that man cannot live alone (Gen 2:18) but must live in relationship with another person and with God himself.

" Man—whether man or woman—is the only being among the creatures of the visible world whom God the Creator "willed for himself": he is therefore a person. Being a person means striving toward self-realization (…), which cannot be fulfilled except "through a sincere gift of self." The model for this understanding of the person is God himself as the Trinity, as a communion of Persons," [2] writes John Paul II.

Every human being actualizes this self-giving in the specific way proper to being a man or a woman. Humanity means a call to interpersonal communion: just as a woman is to help a man, so too must he, in turn, help her, by virtue of their being human persons,

which contributes to and continually reaffirms the meaning of their own humanity in its entirety, since they have been mutually entrusted to one another.

The mutual gift of self in a relationship finds its highest expression in Mary of Nazareth: **Mother and Virgin,** the two particular dimensions of a woman's vocation, coexist in her in light of God's plan.

In biblical language (especially in the Old Testament), there are comparisons that attribute "masculine" or "feminine" qualities to God, confirming that both man and woman were created in the image and likeness of God. God begets, but in a spiritual way, since " God is spirit," and is therefore free from both male and female physical characteristics. In consecrated persons—and in this case, in a consecrated woman—this act of begetting, by analogy with God's "motherhood" and "fatherhood," is entirely spiritual.

Given these premises, it is clear that in Christian-Catholic culture, women have equal dignity from the very moment of their creation.

This is confirmed by the words, gestures, and encounters of Jesus, who was able to address women with extraordinary courage for his time, breaking sharply with the socio-religious customs of the era. In terms of dialogical interaction, his courageous encounter with the Samaritan woman and his approach to the adulterous woman stand out, toward whom he combined the dimension of mercy with the rigor of truth; also fitting into this context is the encounter with the Canaanite woman, whose faith he publicly recognized and praised, as well as his relationship with Mary and Martha, whom he regarded as friends and disciples on the same level as their brother Lazarus. In a historical and cultural context that excluded women from the public sphere and in which rabbinic tradition denied them access to the study of the Torah, the active inclusion of women in discipleship represents a radical and early anthropological shift.

Women were a constant and courageous presence at all the key moments in the story of Jesus, demonstrating a faithfulness that never wavered, even in the most dramatic moments.

Along the Way of the Cross: They defied the crowd to weep and mourn for him, receiving Jesus' gaze and his words.

At the foot of the cross: Mary, the Mother, stood there, steadfast in her immense grief and firm in her faith, together with other women.

At the tomb: At dawn on the first day of the week, it is once again the women who find the tomb empty and run to announce that Jesus has risen.

In the early community**:** In the room where the early Church was born, in prayer, Mary and the other women are fully present alongside the Apostles. [3]

John Paul II writes further:

"In all of Jesus' teaching, as well as in his conduct, there is nothing to be found that reflects the discrimination against women characteristic of his time. On the contrary, his words and deeds always express the respect and honor due to women. […] Jesus' attitude toward the women he encounters along the path of his messianic ministry reflects God's eternal plan, for in creating each of them, God chooses and loves her in Christ (cf. Eph 1:1–15).

Each woman, therefore, is that "only creature on earth whom God willed for her own sake." From the "beginning," each woman inherits the dignity of a person precisely as a woman. Jesus of Nazareth confirms this dignity, recalls it, and renews it …"[4]

Paul himself, in his Letter to the Romans[5], mentions several women whose faith and service he praises:

- *Phoebe, our sister, a deaconess of the church in Cenchrea: welcome her in the Lord, as is fitting for believers, and assist her in whatever she may need; for she, too, has been a helper to many—and to me as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus … Greet Mary, who has done much for you … Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, who have worked for the Lord. Greet the most beloved Persis, who has worked for the Lord. Greet Rufus […] and his mother, who is also my mother. Greet Julia, Nereus, and his sister. –*

This is written by Paul, who is not a pioneer or a trailblazer in terms of openness toward women. It is true that in Paul's writings we find the famous phrase, "Let the women keep silent in the churches," but I like to think that the Apostle, rather than imposing absolute silence, was referring to the need to maintain a certain decorum, in keeping with the customs of the time.

Paul also writes:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

Women in the History of Humanity and in the Church

If women had been treated according to God's plan, there would have been no abuses of power.

The failure to recognize female genius was obviously not solely the "monopoly" of the Church, which adopted this attitude from society. If we briefly trace the history of women in humanity, we find extraordinary figures: Hypatia of Alexandria, a 5th-century astronomer, philosopher, and mathematician who led the Neoplatonic school and was killed for her freedom of thought; Artemisia Gentileschi, an extraordinary and exceptional 17th-century painter in the Caravaggist tradition, who asserted herself through her talent against the prejudices of her time; Marie Curie, a physicist and chemist—a Polish woman naturalized as a French citizen—who won two Nobel Prizes in two different scientific disciplines. The 20th century then gave us Hanna Arendt, a German philosopher and political scientist who analyzed the horrors of Nazism; Edith Stein, a German philosopher of Jewish origin who later became a Carmelite nun under the name Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross and died in the concentration camps; Raissa Maritain, a French essayist and poet, described as a

"contemplative walking the streets."

In the same century, we find Frida Kahlo, a Mexican painter and revolutionary who defied social conventions and fought for the rights of people with disabilities; Rita Levi Montalcini, an Italian neurologist awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine; and finally Alda Merini, one of the greatest female poets of the 20th century, capable of uniting earthly suffering with a profound and tormented spiritual quest in her verses.

Women in the Church

Over the past two centuries, women's religious life has undergone profound changes, breaking free from a context that for generations had been almost exclusively monastic.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, religious congregations emerged,[6] led by a superior general, who—in addition to "following Christ" and a distinct spirituality drawn from the Gospel and the local historical context—sought to address the educational, welfare, and social problems of their time, overcoming numerous prejudices.[7]

They often adapted to find a conceptual foothold within the system, striving not to compromise the specific character of how they carried out their apostolate (at that time, the term "charism" was not yet in use) while leaving room for future evolution, drawing on Genesis to justify women's place in society: woman created "as a helper for man," and also to the Gospel: "Whatever you did for me…" to care for the sick; "Let the little children come to me…" for the education of both boys and girls. [8]

In the first decade of the 20th century, a vision took shape that allowed women to live a religious life in the world in accordance with their vocation, with economic independence, the option to live alone, with their families, or in an apartment, and the freedom to engage in any work, including union or political activities. These are what we now recognize as secular institutes.

In the final phase, which began after 1960, the possibility opened up for women religious to live in mixed communities. In these settings, the traditional separation of roles between men and women was overcome. Furthermore, in some of these communities, the prospect of women assuming leadership roles is emerging: an innovative opportunity that, however, is still in a phase of study and experimentation.

The evolution of women's religious life has not been a mere passive reflection of social changes, but has often been a primary driving force for emancipation and innovation; in some circles, it was women religious who anticipated and promoted women's emancipation.[9]

For about thirty years now, women have been more highly valued in society and in the Church; even though the "feminine genius," yet in practice little room is actually left for this genius.

I would like to share with you some excerpts from a document by Bishop Albert Battandier, a consultant to the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Regulars. The year is 1890.

"The Christian woman, whether a religious or a layperson, is not made to lead, but rather to be led, and in fact, one cannot expect a nun—however educated, learned, or prudent she may be—to possess the qualities and knowledge necessary to exercise spiritual direction." Furthermore: "This Institute would end up taking the place of the clergy, to whom alone God has entrusted the guidance of the faithful. This tendency for women to encroach upon a field that is not, nor can ever be, theirs must be taken very seriously."[10]

To better understand Bishop Battandier's remarks, the pastoral work of the Institute of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart—founded in 1865 by Saint Catherine Volpicelli—is historically divided into three branches or "families": the **Handmaids** (religious sisters living in community), the **Little Handmaids** (consecrated women who remain living with their families of origin), and the **Aggregates** (laywomen who share in and support the Institute's spirituality). The Little Handmaids and the Aggregates were guided by the religious sisters in their own spirituality and in their apostolate.

And this was unthinkable according to the mindset of the time, among those who lacked a vision open to the future.

This is not an isolated case; even within our own religious family, there have been ambitions and attempts to dictate the direction of the women's institute. [11]

The Church lives within history, always on a pilgrimage, and theology journeys with her; during the same period, there are those who continue to look to the past and to traditions, unwilling to question or understand society's "achievements," while others, like prophets, bring the future to life.

Looking briefly back over the history of the Church, the extraordinary value of the **"feminine genius"** immediately stands out, embodied by women capable of leaving an indelible mark.

It is impossible not to begin with **Saint Hildegard of Bingen**, a German nun born around the year 1000. Endowed with an eclectic and extraordinary personality, she was simultaneously a scientist, herbalist, physician, theologian, poet, and musician. Hildegard often found herself at odds with the clergy of her time, but she had the extraordinary merit of challenging the monastic model of the era—even though it would remain unshakeable for a long time to come—preferring a life of preaching open to the outside world to the more traditionally cloistered one, and was ultimately recognized by Pope Eugene III, who authorized her to speak in public.

In the 14th century, we encounter **Saint Catherine of Siena**, a Dominican tertiary. Although she held no ecclesiastical office and had no political backing, Catherine accomplished a historic feat: convincing Pope Gregory XI to return the papal see to Rome in 1376. To achieve this, she did not hesitate to write him numerous letters and to travel as far as Avignon, where the popes had resided since 1309. There she spoke to the Pontiff—as Benedict XVI recalled—"with vigor and effectiveness," driven by the certainty that the Pope's return would renew the Church and bring peace to Italy.

Moving into the second half of the sixteenth century, the figure of **Saint Teresa of Ávila** stands out. This Spanish Carmelite, a profound mystic and theologian by divine inspiration, left such an indelible mark on the history of spirituality that she became the first woman ever to be proclaimed a Doctor of the Church.

In modern times, the torch was passed to **Mother Teresa of Calcutta**.

By dedicating every moment of her life to caring for the poorest of the poor, she became, in the eyes of the entire world, the universal symbol of selfless love and boundless charity.

Finally, we cannot forget the Italian **Chiara Lubich**, mystic and founder of the Focolare Movement. Guided by a profound charism rooted in unity, Chiara devoted her life to promoting universal brotherhood, building bridges and fostering dialogue among different cultures, religions, and nations.

Even in the face of severe social discrimination, these holy women acted freely, strengthened by their union with Christ.

These are just a few of the best-known names, but history is rich with women—saints, nuns, mothers, volunteers, and missionaries—who have deeply loved the Church.

Even today, the "feminine genius" enriches the Church through the courageous, humble, and persevering witness of women, guided by the challenges that arise from the heart.

The Church's Magisterium from Paul VI to Francis

· **Paul VI** dedicated several addresses to women: his Message at the closing of the Second Vatican Council on December 8, 1965, in which he defined women as guardians of life and peace, urging them to preserve peace in the world and praising the feminine ability to make the truth "sweet, tender, and accessible"; his writings reflected the traditional contemporary view while remaining attentive to women's dignity. In 1973, he established a specific Commission to study women in society and in the Church to explore the role and participation of women. Upon the Commission's conclusion in 1976, he reaffirmed that men and women are created within a "single plan of love."

In the apostolic letter "Octogesima adveniens," Pope Montini dedicated a passage to women. The Pontiff called for an end to discrimination and for legislation to move "toward the protection of women's own vocation and, at the same time, the recognition of their independence as persons and the equality of their rights with regard to participation in cultural, economic, social, and political life."

The previous year (1970), he had proclaimed, within a few days of one another, two women as Doctors of the Church—Saint Teresa of Ávila and Saint Catherine of Siena

· **Pope John Paul I** did not write an official document or a specific encyclical on women, given his very brief pontificate; however, we can recall a passage from his famous speech, in which he says: "God is a father; even more so, God is a mother,"[12] associating with God the capacity for compassion, care, and tenderness typical of mothers.

· Ten years later, **John Paul II**, on the occasion of the Marian Year, dedicated an apostolic letter on the dignity and vocation of women—which I have cited several times in this address—entitled "Mulieris Dignitatem ." This encyclical is the *Magna Charta* of the theology of women; it is an in-depth exploration of the anthropological and theological foundations necessary to resolve issues concerning the meaning and dignity of being a woman. This document represents a milestone for the Church from a doctrinal standpoint, but in practice there is still a long way to go[13] . The expression ***"feminine genius"*** was coined by John Paul II himself to describe the unique qualities of women:

intuition, generosity, a special sensitivity, and the capacity to welcome others. He sincerely acknowledged that, throughout history, even men of the Church have hindered women's progress and diminished their value. He consistently expressed gratitude for the various dimensions of womanhood: the woman as mother, the woman as wife, the consecrated woman, the woman as daughter and sister, and the working woman.

· **Benedict XVI**: following in the footsteps of John Paul II, he recognized the "feminine genius," emphasizing women's sensitivity, strength, and natural inclination toward the defense of life; in 2010, he dedicated 13 catechesis sessions to the great female figures of the Middle Ages and their theological, mystical, and cultural contributions; he also proclaimed St. Hildegard of Bingen a Doctor of the Church.

· **Pope Francis**, with his communicative, direct, and informal style, has repeatedly condemned violence against and the exploitation of women. He has not written a specific encyclical, but we find references in *Evangelii Gaudium*, [14] in *Amoris Laetitia*, and in numerous specific speeches [15]; however, he has been more rich in gestures than in words: from the washing of the feet, extended for the first time to include women, to visits to women's prisons, to the establishment of a Commission on the Female Diaconate, and to the ever-increasing number of women appointed to prominent roles in the Vatican Dicasteries—and the current Pontiff, **Leo XIV**, is continuing along these lines.

Father Annibale and His Vision of Women and the Daughters of Divine Zeal

Father Annibale held women in high esteem and appreciated them; they played a prominent role in his spiritual life and in their collaboration on apostolic activities.

From a young age, he spent time with the last three nuns remaining at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Messina, where he later chose to be ordained a priest.

His desire for holiness and to seek the face of God on earth led him to seek out women known for their lives of holiness—mystics—whom he would later consider the spiritual co-founders of the Daughters of Divine Zeal. I mention only ***Sister Maria Luisa of Jesus***, of the Monastery of Maria Stella Mattutina in Naples, whom he met when he was just nineteen years old. He went to visit her in Naples on July 26, 1870. This is what he wrote:

"I was filled with sacred emotion as I stood before the grille of the Stella Mattutina monastery, in the presence of the humble Servant of the Lord, who, endowed as she was with the Spirit of the Lord, foresaw my future through whatever her Heavenly Spouse inspired in her. Fifty-two years have passed since the fulfillment of my ideal—that is, to see a living saint; indeed, more than just seeing her and speaking with her, to experience her sacred affection for the span of five years, as long as she lived; to enjoy frequent correspondence by letter from Messina, and then, after she had ascended to God's eternal embrace, to receive from her pious spiritual daughters such distinguished relics as her white veil and her snow-white habit, which I have preserved ever since as precious mementos." [16]

Sister Maria Luisa was a precise, reliable, and motherly spiritual guide. She took an interest in his health, gave him practical advice, urged him to exercise his poetic and spiritual gifts, and accompanied him in the early stages of his priesthood. [17]

In his discourse on St. Clare of Assisi, Annibale writes: "But there is a realm in the spiritual sphere where man cannot act: and there is a need for women; there are works of sanctification that are proper to women; there are particular graces that Divine Providence has reserved for the ministry of women. Just as in civil and domestic life the influence of women preserves, carries out, and completes the work of men, so it is usually the case in the moral order." [18]

At the beginning of the Work in Avignon, Father Annibale, after establishing the first orphanage, had several female collaborators, but the most valuable among them was undoubtedly Mrs. ***Laura Jensen Bucca***; in the years following the founding of the the Institute of the Sisters, in the early 20th century, Andreina Battizzocco of Padua also played a significant role; a wealth of correspondence with her has been preserved.[19] I will say only a few words about Jensen. She was a noblewoman from Messina, married to Guglielmo Jensen, a man of English origin and Protestant faith, a man of great kindness, devoted to his work. At the age of 25, his wife had heard Father Annibale preach a homily in Messina, and from that moment on, he became her spiritual guide. She already had three daughters; she was an elementary school teacher, an intelligent and enterprising woman.

She was an enthusiastic and diligent collaborator, guiding the girls of the Avignone neighborhood in their work, seeking funds for their support—given her connections in Messina's high society—as well as evangelizing the young women, instructing them in the catechism, and inspiring them with a spirit of piety. It was she who composed the hymn "Heavens of heavens, open up…" for the first reception of Jesus in the Eucharist. Father Annibale placed his full trust in her and granted her complete freedom in organizing the workshops and managing the orphanage. It was she who urged

him to establish an institute with the most fervent girls, even when Father Annibale did not yet consider them ready to take this step, because he said they had not yet fully come to know the Lord.

Due to the young women's insistence and the pressing need, Father Annibale founded the women's branch of the Work in March 1887. Soon, Mrs. Jensen's independent nature became apparent, and she began to take the place of the Founder in certain decisions. After some serious misunderstandings, Mrs. Jensen withdrew. Father Annibale's approach to the situation, despite his still young age, was wise and discerning, showing great respect and esteem for Mrs. Jensen.

ü Annibale M. Di Francia involved the young women and invited them to pray for Mrs. Jensen's return.

ü He remained open to her possible return, guiding the young novices toward this openness.

ü Mrs. Jensen, in addition to being a generous woman who gave of herself, was intelligent and an excellent organizer; Father Annibale recognized and appreciated these talents and considered them useful for the Work.

ü **Father Annibale, even when he reprimanded her for a mistake, always maintained a fatherly attitude.** He never humiliated her, nor did he withhold his esteem; on the contrary, he was ready to restore her to her role, provided that she understood and accepted his conditions. These conditions were never imposed: the mistake was, in fact, explained clearly and honestly, through dialogue and reasoned discussion. In doing so, Father Annibale was inspired by the supreme model of Jesus. Father Annibale consistently applied this approach in his relationships with others as well—both men and women.

There was a subsequent return, though it was short-lived, until Jensen left for good, founding her own institute.

After Ms. Jensen's departure, they continued to hold each other in high regard and exchange correspondence. Father Annibale continued to harbor a strong sense of gratitude for all the good Ms. Jensen had done and wished to reciprocate with the "Diploma of Affiliation,"[20] as recognition of the good she had done and as a spiritual gesture of gratitude.

For both of them, this mutual esteem lasted a lifetime. Mrs. Laura Jensen Bucca died in 1930, three years after Father's death, and bequeathed to Canon Vitale—for the benefit of the orphanages—the only small house she had left from her estate, located in Gesso, a village near Messina.[21]

Mother Nazarena Majone and Mother Carmela D'Amore.

Father Annibale said of them: "Those two hearts were one in the heart of Jesus." They were the first two Daughters of Divine Zeal, the foundation of the new Congregation, "cornerstones of the mystical edifice," as defined by the Founder.

They entered the Avignone Quarter on October 14, 1889, coming from Graniti (Me). They were immediately captivated by the Founder's holiness. In the *Positio Super Virtutibus*[22] of Mother M. Nazarena, the following is written regarding Father Annibale's influence on Maria Majone, who was later given the name Nazarena:

"His words, his sacrifices, and the spirit of charity that animated him attracted her, captivated her, and gently won her over. She, as she said, realized she was in the presence of a saint, and in her soul—pure and innocent, as she kept it until her death—she sought nothing but holiness and the love of God. […] Di Francia recognized the soul the Lord had sent him to assist and support the women's work, and he resolved to nurture her spiritually and intellectually."

The same can be said of his companion Carmela D'Amore, whose obedience stemmed from a sense of calling rather than duty, yet was always deeply rooted in faith.

Father Annibale placed his trust in both of them; initially, he entrusted the leadership of the women's community to Sister M. Carmela, as he writes in the Eulogy:

"Speaking of Carmela, I am compelled to mention her companion as well, whom the Lord may preserve for us for a long time to come. Might these two chosen ones in the Lord have become discouraged? (The Father is referring to the poverty of the Avignone Quarter.) Did disillusionment cause them to back down? Not at all. They had given themselves to Jesus; they had taken up the plow, just as the Gospel says, and did not want to look back; they had left behind the comforts and conveniences of their families,

and had already fallen in love with the poverty of Jesus Christ and with sacrifice for His sake and for the souls. I soon realized that Carmela D'Amore possessed a special aptitude for governing the nascent House, and I entrusted her with its care. I must say that I was amazed at how, in a short time, she had developed a talent comparable to that of an experienced nun placed at the head of an institution" .[23]

But after a few years, due to jealousy and slander, Father Annibale was asked by the bishop to remove her from her position. Although he did not agree, the Father obeyed and sent her to spend some time resting with her family, while maintaining constant contact, in the hope that the situation would be resolved so she could return. Sister M. Carmela obeyed without hesitation; it has recently been noted that Sister Carmela's defining virtue was obedience—a guiding principle that marked her entire life. In fact, some time later she was reinstated and appointed superior of the house in Taormina, which she led "wisely," and subsequently to Oria and then to Trani, where she died. The Founder's esteem for her was also demonstrated by her appointment as Mistress of Novices; we learn of this in a letter the Founder wrote to Fr. Palma, in which, among other matters, he informs him that:

"Our women's novitiate is a *flores apparuerunt in terra nostra* [Song of Songs 2:12]! We have one, Sister Gioacchina, in Messina; seven in San Pier Niceto; and four in Oria. How wonderful it would be to have them all together! *Sister Maria Carmela is proving to be a pious, kind, shrewd, and prudent Novice Mistress!"* ***[24]***

On the occasion of the celebrations for Mother M. Nazarena's name day, in his letter of congratulations he wrote to her:

"[…] And I give thanks to the Lord for your cooperation, for you have been a docile and obedient daughter—and I would almost say a faithful companion—through the vicissitudes, now sad, now joyful, of this Institute, in the many sacrifices we face for that holy ideal that guides us, comforted by the great Hope of the fulfillment of our good desires." [25]

In recognition of her dedication to the work, Father announced and organized solemn celebrations for the twenty-fifth anniversary of Mother Nazarena's religious profession, at that time Mother General of the Institute (March 19, 1917). At the end of the letter dated February 10, he notes that:

"March 19 also marks the Silver Jubilee of the Reverend Mother Sister Maria Carmela D'Amore, a fellow townswoman of the Mother General, who entered the Institute on the very same day and made her profession on March 19 together with the aforementioned Superior. She, too, for the many services rendered to the Institute, deserves that this auspicious anniversary not go unnoticed." [26]

The relationship between Father Annibale and Mother M. Nazarena was rich and meaningful throughout the thirty years they lived together, sharing ideals, spirituality, plans, hopes, and difficulties of every kind, as he himself writes in the letter already cited, on the occasion of his name day.

In 1906, in a speech to the women of Messina's aristocracy, Father Annibale expressed his ideal of a woman consecrated to religious life:

"Today, the nun is no longer confined within four walls: she is in contact with society; she must respond to the demands of a critical, mocking, and unbelieving century; she must honor the habit she wears; she must shine with virtue, modesty, prudence, charity, and also with intelligence and knowledge! […]

Among the young postulants of this Community—who have gathered here from various countries, numbering about thirty—a course of study was initiated some time ago. They study Italian literature, history, geography, arithmetic, and the French language. I have also held that the fine arts are the splendor of the religious habit, and our young women, in addition to various kinds of women's handicrafts, learn drawing, painting, and music."[27]

But ideals do not always translate into reality; this was the desire of the Founding Father, and there were some brief attempts at cultural preparation, but at times the demands of apostolic work took precedence: the new houses that were being opened, and limited financial resources. During the term of Mother M. Cristina Figura as General Superior, studies for the religious began to take on a more systematic form, but they lasted only a short time because the Mother General who succeeded her—Mother M. Ascensione Carcò—did not continue along these lines; she led the Institute from 1932 to 1945.

The "Feminine Genius" of the Daughters of Divine Zeal and the Rogate

The "feminine genius" in the Rogate was evident from the very beginning of the first Daughters of Divine Zeal in prayer and in Rogationist action, in a vital and generative expression, in service to the harvest within the ordinary rhythm of daily life, lived in simplicity and with the wisdom of the heart.

Mother Nazarena was able to strike a balance between fidelity to the Founding Father and an originality that was wholly feminine and maternal, which she successfully transmitted to the community of women in the Daughters of Divine Zeal.

Father Cristoforo Bove, relator for the cause of Beatification of Mother Nazarena, writes:

"The maternal character of her virtues and her way of being among the little ones and the least, her zeal for souls, and the very feminine nuance of her holiness find their defining form within the spirituality of the Rogationists. Mother Nazarena is a "Daughter of Divine Zeal"; she belongs to a religious family which, unique in the Church—along with its sister order, the Rogationists—has grasped Christ's redemptive concern, aroused by compassion at the sight of crowds abandoned like

a flock without a shepherd. This woman's "zeal" springs from that of the Divine Master, and from His command she still draws the remedy of prayer, imploring for "laborers for the harvest." The Venerable's spiritual edifice is shaped by the Rogate, and through it her message to the Christian people and to contemporary society itself takes on a poignantly timely relevance.

The vocational perspective, with its rich conceptual and concrete nuances, is Mother Nazarena's joyful new message to the Church. The charism of Saint Hannibal *celebrates in her the first to have offered its most fruitful and original expression in the spirit of feminine genius"*. [28]

In Mother Nazarena first and foremost, and in all the Daughters of Divine Zeal of yesterday and today, the "feminine genius" is shaped by the intelligence and zeal of the Rogate. It is a natural quality that illuminates their entire being.

This is the past and also the present.

I, for my part, would rather offer a wish, a hope for today and for the future, by presenting some ideas that might express ever more fully and effectively the "feminine genius" of the Daughters of Divine Zeal, rooted in the Rogate.

What contribution can a Daughter of Divine Zeal make to Rogate?

Or perhaps we should ask ourselves, even better: what contribution does a Daughter of Divine Zeal already make to Rogate?

§ Living the sentiments of the Heart of Jesus, His intimate sorrows: the loss of souls, the lack of good workers, His suffering for those who suffer from wars, hunger, natural disasters, and discrimination—but not in a generic or collective way, rather in every person we encounter on our journey, with those unique nuances of a woman, of a mother. Father Annibale maintained that we console the Heart of Jesus by "coming to the aid of afflicted humanity," because the Lord suffers in those who suffer.

§ Compassion—not only through prayer, but by sharing in the suffering of our brother or sister, putting it into action through listening, empathy, understanding others' anguish, bringing relief, defending and protecting whoever they may be, because everyone is a gift and we are all gifts. Let ourselves be moved by the very compassion of Christ.

§ Tenderness, a distinct emotion that has always been attributed to women. Consider Rembrandt, the Dutch artist, who in 1669 (approximately), in his painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, depicted the father's left hand as a woman's hand. "The 'revolution of tenderness' begins with Mary because Jesus saw himself reflected in her eyes as a newborn and received her caresses"[29]; this is how the Daughter of Divine Zeal must act toward the harvest, also because in this way she helps us understand the mercy, tenderness, and love that God has for us.

§ Delicacy and sensitivity foster an atmosphere of serenity and harmony that supports and enriches personal growth and the education of children and young people, translating into the authentic power of care.

§ Having a perspective that looks beyond, like mothers do. When faced with their children's mistakes, limitations, or vulnerabilities, they have a broader perspective. They see their potential and help it flourish; with their sensitivity and intuition, they know how to listen to each person's deepest needs, always open to hope to help them discover their own talents and uniqueness in building a future suited

to their personality. To have a forbearing gaze, full of benevolence and trust toward the most fragile of the flock.

I think of Father Annibale, who "saw" in the Neapolitan street urchin, Carlo Levi, the goodness of that heart and his intelligence. From that esteem, from his care for him, a priestly vocation emerged: Fr. Redento.

§ Spiritual Motherhood and the Priesthood. In Father Annibale's thinking, the priesthood was the vocation par excellence, in line with the ecclesiology of his time. For this reason, the Daughters of Divine Zeal are explicitly called to spiritual motherhood, aimed at bringing forth holy priests who ensure the continuity of the sacramental ministry and bear witness to the message of salvation in the world. Like every mother who first gives birth and then cares for her child, the Daughter of Divine Zeal—or the woman who has embraced the divine command of the Rogate—has the duty to watch over the priests through prayer. In our daily intercession, we should never fail to remember priests who are experiencing moments of vulnerability. The Lord of the Harvest must be invoked for:

- sick or elderly priests, who are facing the decline of their physical strength,

- those who suffer from loneliness,

- those going through a vocational crisis, or those wounded by pastoral disappointments or injustices they have suffered.

§ To have Mary as our model—the Divine Superior, the Mother—means understanding that the motherhood of every woman, and therefore of the Daughter of Divine Zeal, is not merely physical but must be understood in the light of the Gospel. It is a motherhood similar to that of Mary, who took everything to heart, treasured everything with love in her soul, and entrusted everything to God. Furthermore, in Christ's teaching, motherhood is linked to virginity, and Mary is the first person in whom this new awareness was manifested. The Daughter of Divine Zeal thus lives out the motherhood of the spirit, which is expressed in many forms: first and foremost, that of bringing forth, through prayer and sacrifice, new workers for the Gospel.

§ To be women capable of interpreting history, current political events in the world and in the region where they live, and of understanding the future of the world in order to better understand and serve the harvest.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope that these points for reflection have been an opportunity to cherish and ever more fully express the "feminine genius" in the light of our charism. It is our responsibility and, at the same time, our beauty.

It is the gift we are called to renew every day, so that we may be a true prophecy in the Church and in the world, guided by the caring gaze of Mary, Mother of Rogate.

We entrust ourselves to the infinite creativity of the Holy Spirit, that we may always be open to the hope of a world inhabited by men and women who proclaim the Good News of the Gospel—so that we may see fields of golden wheat, even when it is still winter.

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[1] "Then the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he fell asleep; He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh in its place. The Lord God fashioned a woman from the rib he had taken from the man and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This time she is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones. She shall be called "woman" because she was taken out of man.'"

[2][2] JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7, Apostolic Letter—1988

[3] Acts 1:14—All these were devotedly devoted to prayer with one heart, together with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

[4]

JOHN PAUL II Ibid., no. 13

[5] Rom 16:1–2; 6–7; 12–13; 12:15

[6] The new congregations were approved in 1900 by the *Conditae Christo* and definitively by the 1917 Code of Canon Law.

[7] Cf. Geranio C. *Two Hundred Years of the Canossian Religious Family*, Vol. I (1808–2008), Rome 2007

[8] In southern Italy, the advancement of women in religious life occurred later than in the north, central Italy, or other parts of Europe; it was only after 1915 that religious institutes began sending their members to study at universities and opening missions abroad. In our Institute, this began during the generalate of Mother M. Espedita Ambrosini—by then we were already in the 1950s.

[9] Particularly in Veneto, Lombardy, and other northern regions, it was the Canossian Sisters who promoted women's emancipation.

[10] BATTANDIER, A. *Pious Union of the Handmaids and Oblates of the Sacred Heart*, Report of February 1, 1890, p. 11, cited by G. Rocca, *Religious Women*, Rome, 1992

[11] TUSINO, T. Circular *The Rogationists and the Daughters of Divine Zeal*, 1950

[12] Angelus, September 10, 1978

[13] On Holy Thursday following the promulgation of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II sent a pastoral letter to all the priests of the Diocese of Rome.

[14] FRANCIS **Evangelii Gaudium** nos. 103–104 Apostolic Exhortation 2013

[15] Cf. FRANCIS (Jorge Mario Bergoglio) *You Are Unique – Hymn to the Feminine Genius* Libreria Pienogiorno 2024 Anthology of speeches and quotes by Pope Francis on women.

[16] VITALE, F. Canon Annibale Maria Di Francia, p. 48 Rome 1994

[17] ANNIBALE M. DI FRANCIA *Speeches*, pp. 253–254, Messina, 1970

[18] Ibid., p. 245

[19] ANNIBALE M. DI FRANCIA *Writings*, Vol. IX, *Correspondence* (1907–1909), Rome, 2020

[20] "The undersigned, in his capacity as Superior General of the *Pious Work of the Interests of the Heart of Jesus*, blessed, and the undersigned Superior General of the Women's Community of said Pious Work, mindful of how much the pious *Mrs. Laura*, widow of *Jensen*, née Bucca, loved this Pious Work in its early days and worked with great sacrifice for its sake, including financial contributions, hereby offer to the aforementioned,

also on behalf of the two respective religious communities, male and female, *full spiritual affiliation* with the said Pious Work, with broad and complete participation in all spiritual goods, works, labors, practices of piety, exercises of devotion and mortification, prayers, reception of the Sacraments, and all that is pleasing to the Lord Jesus, accomplished within it by His grace. Amen. Given in Messina on March 19, 1922"

[21] TUSINO, T. *Father Annibale Maria Di Francia – Biographical Memoirs* – Part Two – pp. 23–36, Rogate Publishers, Rome, 1996

[22] NM *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Vol. I, p. 319

[23] ANNIBALE M. DI FRANCIA *Discourses*, pp. 178–179

[24] ANNIBALE M. DI FRANCIA *Writings*, Vol. IX, p. 589, Letter of November 12, 1909; the quotation from the Song of Songs might suggest that it refers to Mother Carmela, upon her reinstatement. The verse reads as follows: *The flowers have appeared in the fields; the time of singing has returned […] in our countryside.*

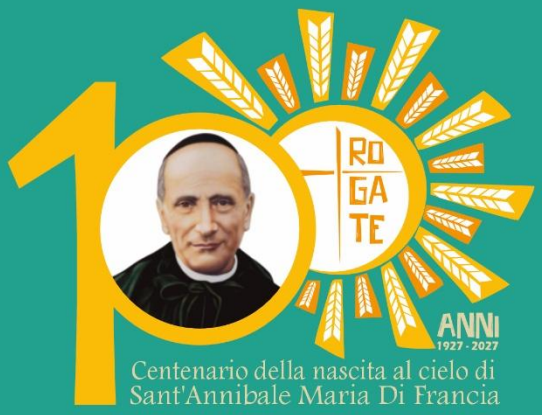
[25] ANNIBALE M. DI FRANCIA *Writings*, Vol. VIII, p. 160, Rome, 2019

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[27] ANNIBALE M. DI FRANCIA *Speeches*, pp. 444–445

[28] BOVE, C. *Mother Nazarena: A Feminine Form of Holiness*, pp. 6–7, Rome, 2022

[29] Pope Francis



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