

Gaetano Passarelli



**Father
Pantaleone Palma**

The most intimate son of blessing

ROME 2012

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PRESENTATION

I feel deeply honored and privileged to present this short biography which intends to be a first step to make Fr. Pantaleone better known by the great Family of the Rogate, and by all those who appreciate the face of the friends of the Bridegroom (Jn 3, 29), who have been working in the “construction” of the Holy Church along the centuries.

I am also glad that this is happening when our religious families celebrate the 125th anniversary of the first coming of the Eucharistic Jesus in our Institution, when Saint Hannibal implanted in the poorest and most degraded area of the city of Messina, the Avignone Houses, the first sacramental chapel as the true fundamental point of reference for all his charitable works and for all the men and women collaborating with him.

“We believe that God loves us more when everything goes well. Instead the Lord prepares improvements and progress when he makes our life resemble that of his Divine Son, Jesus who always lived crucified from the time he was in the womb of his mother, Mary.” This is one of the expressions that Father Pantaleone Palma wrote in the darkest moment of his human and spiritual existence when he was isolated at the “Scala Santa,” suspended from his priestly functions, and sentenced...

These were not words of resignation, but of full awareness of what happens in the real ascetic and spiritual growth. It is written, in fact, that “the just ones (...), even if in the eyes of men are punished, their hope is full of immortality (...) because God tested them and found them worthy of Him; He tested them like gold in the melting pot and welcomed them as burnt offerings” (Wb 3:4-6).

Fr. Palma continues: *“For so many persons I made myself as father and mother at the same time; today, the Lord wants to show to*

everyone that the Father and the Mother of all is only and always Him. Not that He disdains the services that we offer to him, but He wants also the leaders to be continually subjected in faith to the true Head, so that at every moment, we may cultivate our conviction that everything comes from God in everyone and in any endeavor,” and “At my age, although a Priest, I have never acquired such a lively and firm faith in the Divine Providence as I feel in this moment.”

The Passionist Fathers, who hosted Fr. Palma at the “Scala Santa”, had the opportunity to know him deeply and appreciated him to the point of holding him as a man of great holiness. The testimonies are countless. Whenever he encountered a Rogationist or Daughter of Divine Zeal, Fr. Leonardo Canestri, then Rector of the “Scala Santa”, used to say, *“You had a holy man among you and you were not able to appreciate him.”* Fr. Ignatius Beschin of the Friars Minor, then Rector of the Antonianum, confessor of Fr. Palma and now Servant of God, was intimately convinced of the innocence and sanctity of Fr. Pantaleone.

Bishop Nicholas Altobello, who often visited Fr. Palma at the time of his tribulation, wrote: *“I was deeply impressed by his great spirit of mortification and unlimited conformity to God’s Will. ‘I offer everything for the good of the Congregation of the Rogationists and of the Sisters of Divine Zeal of Canon Di Francia! ... “Only a priest of his stature could find the Christian strength and courage to shout his ‘fiat’ in atoning for faults, for which, with a clear conscience, I can vouch his total innocence.”*

In few brush-strokes this is Fr. Pantaleone Palma, whom St. Hannibal Mary Di Francia called *“my most intimate son of blessing,”* because he was his right-hand in the foundation of the Anthonian Institutes.

Appointed by Fr. Hannibal as his “universal heir” he was made a sign of misunderstanding by some confreres and sisters, who were instruments of the Divine Providence in testing his fabric as an exceptional man, priest and religious.

The Congregations of the Rogationists and of the Daughters of Divine Zeal, however, never ceased, through the continuous testimony of several of their members, to confirm their affection, esteem and veneration to this father; but we had to wait for the “maturing of times” in order to express these sentiments, and to make known in a better way Fr. Palma’s spirit and work.

His example of faith, humility and submission to God’s will can still be a valid model today not only for priests and religious, but also for those who profess to be simply Christians.

Rome, June 1, 2012,
Feast of St. Hannibal

Father Angelo Ademir Mezzari
Superior General of the Rogationists

HIS YOUTH

Pantaleone was born in Ceglie Messapica, in the province of Brindisi, on April 15, 1875 to Lorenzo Palma and Mary Crocifissa Salonna. His was a wealthy family which boasted of priests, men of talent and musicians among its ancestors. When he was baptized two days later, he was given the name of the holy martyr Pantaleone, a doctor, fairly renowned in the Salento area. The etymological meaning of this name is “strong as a lion,” but Christians changed it into *Panteleimon*, “very merciful,” better suiting the character. St. Panteleimon, in fact, born in Bithynia from a wealthy family, practiced the art of medicine, but was envied for his great skills and for the practice of his trade without asking payment from the poor. Thus he was denounced for being a Christian, and killed by decapitation in 304.

It is said that the connotations of the name can often be passed on to the person carrying it. In our case there could not have been a more appropriate name.

The young Pantaleone, in fact, was intelligent, impulsive and strong-willed, but he was also generous and altruistic. The example of his mother, a woman with a “*courageous and unconditional faith*,” was decisive for his growth and enabled him to mature his vocation to priesthood while still in his family. He entered the seminary of Oria in 1887, excelling for his special gifts of kindness, versatility and discipline, thus endearing him to his teachers and his companions, who appreciated the friendship of this handsome, modest, gentle and mild-mannered, though a little impulsive, man of their own age.

The great commitment to study and the reliability of the young Pantaleone persuaded his Bishop, Theodosius Mary Gargiulo, to allow him to take the government exam as an external candidate in order to achieve the ‘classic maturity’ [Editor’s Note: *the comprehensive exam at the end of*

Lyceum]. It was a difficult test by itself, but it was even more difficult for external candidates and clerics, because the examining boards were composed mainly of Masons and liberal ‘priest-haters’. Pantaleone, however, was declared ‘mature’ as early as the first session. He was always proud of this, boasting of having achieved the goal in “sixty days and sixty nights” of studying. A bravado for which he paid dearly: he had a nervous breakdown which left unpleasing consequences for his whole lifetime.

For his priestly ordination on July 30, 1899, Fr. Pantaleone distributed souvenir prayer cards with the words: *My happiness is to cling to my God and to put all my hopes in Him alone*. A phrase that will prove to be prophetic, because he truly conformed his whole existence to it.

Since Msgr. Gargiulo was planning to have him work as a professor at the Seminary of Oria, the young priest considered his teaching for the formation of future priests as a real mission. Many students, in fact, remembered him as a precise and diligent teacher, especially aware of the importance of that position. For this reason, he deemed it necessary to achieve an academic qualification in literary and philosophical studies. He was also allowed by the Bishop to enroll at the State University for a degree in Literature and Philosophy. Alternating his exams with his commitment to teaching in the seminary, he reached the fourth year of the course. The renowned priest Vincenzo Lilla, from Francavilla Fontana (Brindisi), then professor of Philosophy of Law at the University of Messina, convinced him to conclude his university course in that prestigious University in southern Italy.

THE ENCOUNTER

In Messina Professor Lilla had become a great admirer of Fr. Hannibal Di Francia both as a person and for his apostolate in the “Avignone Houses” (the poorest and most degraded area of the city), so that he had even written a pamphlet entitled: *Canon Hannibal Di Francia and His Pious Work of Charity*. So, when Fr. Pantaleone asked him for advice about where to stay, Fr. Vincenzo directed him to Fr. Hannibal. It was October 28, 1902.

Fr. Di Francia had made available not only a room, but also the services of Brother Joseph Anthony Meli. At this point, Fr. Pantaleone expected a relevant monthly due. “Fifteen Lire,” was the answer instead. To which, full of wonder he exclaimed: “So little?”

It was an important encounter for both of them.

Soon the young priest chose as his confessor and spiritual guide the person whom everybody called “Canon Di Francia”. He began also to feel some discomfort to live like a rich gentleman in that environment.

Seeing day after day the spirit of poverty, prayer and charity of a man of God like Fr. Hannibal, realizing how many people had asked to follow him so as to serve the poor abandoned children and the needy of every kind, without sparing themselves, and also hearing sisters, orphans, poor and religious at prayer several times a day, so that the Lord of the Harvest would send many holy laborers into his harvest, induced him to revise his choices.

With his usual impetuosity, he soon overcame all hesitation and asked to be part of the Rogationists. Fr. Di Francia was glad. Indeed, as he explained on the occasion of the Silver Priestly Jubilee of Fr. Palma: “*The Divine Providence wanted our work to flourish. And, behold, in the year 1902 He sent me a young priest from the town of Ceglie Messapica, in an unexpected way,*

and we would even say by chance (but it is God who works in all things). This is his name: Fr. Pantaleone Palma, who was then enrolled in the fourth year of university course. His coming had an exceptional importance.”

The caution of Fr. Hannibal as a man of God, however, was not conditioned by the enthusiasm of Fr. Pantaleone. He welcomed Fr. Palma, but admitted him in his religious family only two years later. Meanwhile, however, the rumor had spread and difficulties did not delay their coming: the news that Fr. Palma had abandoned his studies so as to be part of the Work of Fr. Di Francia provoked a violent reaction on the part of the Bishop of Oria, relatives and friends. Msgr. Gargiulo said in no uncertain terms that he would never grant the excardination from the Diocese. And he kept his word! Fr. Pantaleone was able to get it only in 1903, just because the bishop died.

His brother Peter and the Archpriest of Ceglie, Don Giuseppe Carlucci, went down to Messina determined to make him reflect in a better way so that he would not take such a “false” step His sisters, Isabella and Teresa, did not fail to exert on him a pressure perhaps less violent but certainly more subtle.

Ironically, however, or rather, as Fr. Hannibal used to say, for “*the wonderful interweaving of ways that the Lord had set*” at the end, everything flipped around: it was not Fr. Pantaleone who changed his mind, but all the others.

Unfortunately, Isabella died prematurely, but along with her sister she had already decided to enter and become one of the “Daughters of Divine Zeal,” the Institute of women of Fr. Di Francia, where Teresa became Sr. Gesuina. Peter, his brother, who was so determined to bring him back home, became a faithful collaborator of Fr. Pantaleone when, in Oria, he organized the shoemaking shop to introduce the orphans to a trade. Finally, Don Carlucci, the Archpriest, forwarded a request to become a Rogationist; and since the Bishop did not allow it, as much as he could, he made

himself always available for the needs of Fr. Hannibal's Work.

The Institutes of Fr. Di Francia supported themselves by begging, which Fr. Hannibal used to do alone or together with Brother Joseph Anthony Meli, and through the devotion of the "Bread of St. Anthony," which he had introduced in Messina. Fr. Pantaleone, eager to relieve Fr. Di Francia from this burdensome and essential task for survival, offered himself together with Brother Meli to carry out what we would call today *'the finding of the sources of subsistence'* so that Fr. Hannibal could devote himself more to the formation of his spiritual sons and daughters. Thus Fr. Palma made himself available to go about begging and placing donation boxes first in Messina and in the villages and towns of the Archdiocese, and then throughout the whole Sicily and Calabria regions. At the same time he also accepted the invitation of the parish priests for preaching and hearing confession. At that time, except for the main thoroughfares connected by railways, means of transportation were often occasional or even non-existent, so that people traveled on foot or, at best, with improvised vehicles.

Fr. Pantaleone, fully aware that he was of benefit for the Institution and that he could raise it out of precariousness, did not spare himself. And the difference was felt soon.

In a note of that time, Fr. Hannibal wrote: "Father Palma with Brother Giuseppe Antonio travelled throughout Sicily [...]. They extended much the propaganda of the 'Bread of St. Anthony' and we had a lot of providence! [...] Fr. Pantaleone works very much".

It was a flurry of activity which led not only to the spreading of the devotion to the "Bread of St. Anthony" but also of the Prayer for good workers in the Lord's harvest, to which "either by zeal or by determination" Fr. Di Francia had dedicated himself since his youth.

At this point, on August 15, 1907, the need was felt to start the publication of the periodical “God and Neighbor,” which was to be the means of connection between the Institutes and their benefactors scattered everywhere. Likewise on this occasion Fr. Palma begun to give his contribution by preparing occasional short articles, until he finally had the brilliant idea to write and to publish in installment the biography of Brother Francis Mary of the Infant Jesus, a young Rogationist religious who had died in the odor of sanctity in 1908.

THE EARTHQUAKE

On 28 December 1908, at about 5.30 a.m. a violent earthquake followed by a tsunami provoked massive damages and 80,000 deaths just in Messina. Fr. Hannibal was in Rome for an audience scheduled on December 29 with Pope Pius X. Upon hearing the news, he left for Naples as soon as possible hoping to reach Sicily by sea since the rail connections were disrupted.

In Naples he learned from the first refugees from Messina that his institutions were reduced to a pile of rubble, but no one had news about his people. We can only imagine the anguish of Fr. Hannibal, tormented by the regret of not having been there, among his orphans, his spiritual sons and daughters. As it usually happens in these cases, the imagination flies, so he was worried that they may all be dead or seriously injured ...

He was able to board, but due to the sanitary cordon set up in the area, he was forced to see Messina only from the ship. He was able to disembark at Catania [Editor's Note: *approximately 60 km south of Messina*] on January 1. Here he got more reassuring news about his orphans, and religious brothers and sisters. With difficulty, on January 4, he was finally granted the permission to enter Messina, to embrace once again, as a father, all the survivors and to mourn for the thirteen victims of the Daughters of Divine Zeal. Fr. Hannibal wanted their memory to remain imperishable, and when he rebuilt the Mother House of the Sisters, he placed thirteen lamps that were always burning over the altar of the chapel.

We have a wide knowledge of what happened in the terrible event of the earthquake, because Fr. Di Francia felt the duty to give an account of the event to his benefactors in a detailed manner through the periodical "God and Neighbor."

Thus we know that, “Orphans rose at five in the morning, according to their usual schedule, and at five and one quarter they were ready and clothed. They started reciting their prayers in a sector of the dormitory where there was a venerated image of Our Lady in front of which they were having their morning prayers when there was the strong shock. Everything around them collapsed except the portion where they were standing, leaving the orphans and their educators unharmed. Likewise the students, *‘aspiring to become priests in the same institute [...] together with the lay brothers, our faithful companions and assistants, who form with us one family,’* were praying in the church. Both the dormitory and the church collapsed, and only the roof under which the boys and religious were, remained hanging, “leaving them unharmed.”

“As soon as the earthquake was over, our priest, Fr. Pantaleone Palma, rushed immediately to the female orphanage which was a five-or-six-minute walk from the boys’ orphanage. Two lay brothers followed him [...]. Their presence revived the sisters and they began the work of rescuing the sisters swept by the event. Their cries could be heard from the rubble. Fr. Palma called them by name, and some of them answered; he gave absolution to those in danger of death. Then he worked with full strength to free them.”

“All were working with improvised tools, using essentially their bare hands, with feverish anxiety. Fr. Pantaleone, with the help of two other religious and some strong sisters took care of extracting the surviving sisters from under the rubble, and also of unearthing those who had lost their lives. By the evening, having made sure that there were no more cries rising from the rubble and all could be accounted for, he thought of the needs of the survivors. With blankets he organized improvised tents and went looking for aid for those seriously injured. He was, in short, the point of reference not only for the members of the Institute, but also for the people of the neighborhood.

His feverish activity was relieved when, a few days later, rescue operations were organized according to a general coordination, and his request for six sisters and other people seriously injured was accepted: they were taken on board the ship “Queen of Italy” and were transferred to the hospitals in La Spezia.

It was painful to look at the destroyed buildings: so much hard work seemed to have vanished into thin air. Needless to say, that when Fr. Palma finally saw Fr. Di Francia, he felt relieved at least partially of the huge responsibility, which, like a boulder, had fallen on him.

“In the early days the confusion was so great that no aid reached us, - continues the story of Fr. Hannibal - however a baker, who worked independently in some premises of our compound, left some thousand pounds of pasta under the ruins. Before leaving he donated to us all the pasta if we would recover it. We had also sacks of flour and semolina, and thus we baked bread.” So, we were able to feed not only the members of the Anthonian Institutes but also many other people who, even years later were always grateful.

Luckily, sometime before, Fr. Palma had made an application to the former War Ministry for some clothing, which turned out to be very useful. “*We had several hundreds of military clothing, the purchase of which had been authorized by the Ministry, and were used to clothe the male and female orphans in these rigid nights, while they were encamped outside,*” continued Fr. Hannibal.

The words that one day Fr. Di Francia said to Fr. Francesco Vitale, who was to be his successor, can give us an idea of what Fr. Pantaleone did in that calamity: “*I clearly knew the intelligence and the extraordinary dynamism of Fr. Palma, but I was far from supposing all that he was able to do during the days of the earthquake. It was truly incredible! He deserves several gold medals for civil valor for his courage, and a Paradise would be too little for the heroic charity that he performed.*”

An old proverb says that “*what we do not hope for, comes sooner.*” So in the extreme ruin Providence was revealed. Fr. Hannibal wrote to the Bishop of Oria, Archbishop Antonio Di Tommaso, who in turn offered shelter to the male and female orphans in the cities of Oria and Francavilla Fontana. Thus Fr. Palma organized the convoys of female orphans with the Sisters and of the male orphans with the religious brothers, and on January 29, 1909 they left for those destinations. Mother Nazarena Majone, the Superior General of the Daughters of Divine Zeal, remained together with some sisters in Messina to guard what was left of the Mother House and to start the reconstruction. Being homeless along with his sister Concettina, Canon Francesco Vitale, who had always shown sympathy for the works of Fr. Di Francia, was welcomed by Fr. Hannibal himself in the Avignone Houses. The Canon with some Rogationist religious stayed among the ruins of the male Institute, also to avoid its looting. Since then, all the times that he and Father Palma were absent from Messina, Fr. Di Francia entrusted to Fr. Vitale the task of director.

THE DEVELOPMENT

Being back to his diocese where he knew people and things, Fr. Palma took care of ensuring a decent accommodation for the orphans and, with God's help, a sort of economic self-sufficiency. From his co-citizens in Ceglie he solicited generosity for the orphans by passing by to collect alms and the people of Ceglie were very generous.

The initial months, however, fared much distress. Fr. Palma walked the length and breadth of the villages in the province of Lecce (at that time there was no province of Brindisi) to provide the necessary support for the orphans. He bought a horse-drawn carriage with a mare and drove it himself for the collection of bread and wheat.

The need to overcome that critical moment entailed also a place for a permanent residence to restart the work in all its forms of laboriousness and discipline. Providence willed that as early as September 1909 Fr. Hannibal was able to buy 'St. Pascal,' in Oria, the former convent of the Alcantarinis Fathers, for the religious community and the male orphans, and also the 'St. Benedict' monastery for the Daughters of Divine Zeal and their orphans. Fr. Pantaleone was appointed superior of the men's House assisted by Bro. Joseph Anthony Meli for the economy and Bro. Carmelo Drago for the discipline.

Now, after so many years, we can say that the opening of the men's and women's Houses in Apulia, Oria and, in particular, in Francavilla Fontana, was the launching pad for the development of the whole Anthonian Work. Always with the guidance of Fr. Di Francia for his operations, Fr. Palma put all his talents at work.

Having overcome the period of extreme poverty, Fr. Pantaleone began to put into practice Fr. Di Francia's principle that the works of charity, both for the male and female orphanages, should not rely solely on the donations

from the benefactors, but on their work. The convent of St. Pascal had annexed some land “quite uncultivated and uncultivable in the state where it was.” Fr. Palma organized a vegetable garden and a stable for cows, a fold for sheep, a chicken coop, a rabbit hutch and a tower for pigeons. All these were to provide the food needed by the about seventy people of the two institutions, not to mention the poor who began to knock at their doors. If they were farmers, he invited them to lend a hand, so as to give dignity to the charity they were receiving. To look after the animals he also involved the Sisters and the orphans of the female Institute of St. Benedict, assigning the responsibility to the energetic Superior, Sr. Carmela D'Amore.

Though Fr. Pantaleone did not know music, he was also very passionate in it and he had a fine ear. With the help of Vincent Chirico, a music teacher from Ceglie, he set up a band composed by orphans to accompany him when he was going around begging. He thought, however, that by increasing and transforming it into a professional band, it could become both an educational and economic resource. In fact, in a short time, the band was so much appreciated that it was being requested to enliven the patrons' festivities and to perform in concerts.

The band was an effective, but occasional and periodical resource. What was needed was a stable system of arts and crafts to train the orphans to become later “workers.” Availing of the expertise of his brother Peter, who was a shoemaker, Fr. Pantaleone set up a shoe factory, a tailor shop, a print shop, a carpentry shop and a bicycles repair shop.

As soon as the financial situation allowed, he proposed to Fr. Hannibal the establishment of a “mechanized shoe factory.” This would allow him to raise the technical and professional preparation of the little orphan workers, to insert them into the society, as soon as they would come of age, not as simple shoemakers, but as skilled professionals, and thus be a valuable financial support also to the Institute

since they could take contracts commissioned even by the army or by subcontracting firms.

On the other hand, the sisters' Houses opened schools for "womanly works," as they were called at that time, to indicate tailoring, embroidery, knitting and crocheting. In the Anthonian Institutes, however, sisters were also working in the printing press.

Of course, the Institute of Oria became the first and the leader of others which were founded or restarted in southern Italy and in Sicily. In "God and Neighbor", Fr. Di Francia wrote: "Fr. Palma had also a creative genius for establishing industries. From him came the mechanized shoe factory which we have in our Institute for boys in Oria [...] and the seven printing presses which we have in our houses for boys and girls". And also: "The relevant growth in revenues from the Anthonian propaganda has allowed us to expand our structures in order to shelter the orphans; and even in this field, our good Fr. Palma had an architectural genius not inferior to other engineers."

In December 1909 Fr. Hannibal published an article entitled: "*Current Status of the Anthonian Orphanages of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary*," in which he assesses the situation one year after the disaster: "Just two days after the disaster of Messina [...] I thought in my heart that [...] all would have perished! The Divine Providence disposed instead that the huge catastrophe was to be for my orphanages the beginning of a greater expansion. Our houses, which before the earthquake were four, now are ten," and he enumerated for the men's Institute: Oria "St. Pascal," Francavilla Fontana and Messina and for the sisters: Oria "St. Benedict," Francavilla Fontana, Messina, Taormina, Giardini (Naxos), San Pier Niceto and Trani.

Meanwhile, the propaganda of the "Bread of St. Anthony", thanks to the periodical "God and Neighbor," had given rise to a vast network of benefactors spreading all throughout Italy and in many places abroad where the Italian migration was significant. To deal properly with the

correspondence and to promptly satisfy the requests of the faithful, Fr. Pantaleone organized the Anthonian Secretariats, specialized for this purpose. He also invented a system of boxes [for the sorting of the correspondence] which was later used even by the Italian Postal Office. This delicate work was carried out mostly by the Daughters of Divine Zeal in the various Institutes of the sisters, which he meticulously prepared.

Each female House had its Anthonian Secretariat which used to send by mail the periodical magazine and other printed matters. Initially, the printing presses were small and the machines were operated manually. Since the number of subscribers and benefactors was growing, Fr. Palma started at first to provide printing machines powered by generators, then by more powerful internal combustion engines, until he purchased and installed in Messina the rotary press. This had a printing capacity of 25,000 copies per hour when working part-time; 50,000 when running at full capacity. It printed the magazine, cut it and folded it all in one at the same time with the assistance of only one person. "God and Neighbor" thus reached a circulation of approximately 700,000 copies.

THE PORTRAIT

Fr. Di Francia, therefore, found in Fr. Palma his practical and operational right hand to whom he entrusted the most delicate tasks and delegated the foundation of new institutes and the negotiations with the authorities, firms and industries. Fr. Pantaleone was worthy of that trust, by unraveling himself with such professional competence that aroused the wonder of all. He could be found in Rome, Messina, Corato, Altamura, Montepulciano, Taormina, Trani, Padua and in many other cities and places for the establishment of large institutes of men and women, which would carry the imprint of his expertise.

Though he was not at all generous in praising his collaborators, Fr. Hannibal, in 1912, spoke in this way about Fr. Pantaleone: *"Let him come to Messina, and I will be very much pleased, because I want to see him and talk to him about so many little things, since Fr. Palma is my intimate son of blessing"*. In another letter to Father Vitale, Fr. Di Francia called him: *"Our dearest and always most beloved Father Palma,"* adding another enthusiastic praise: *"Our resource in many of our major contingencies."* We know that Fr. Di Francia wrote these words when he came to the decision of entrusting to Fr. Palma the difficult mission of rescuing the Agricultural Settlement [Editor's Note: *a farm for training young people in agricultural works*] of Gravina di Puglia (1915).

The dynamism and the realization of large and arduous works for the glory of God necessarily demanded a toll in terms of health and energy, because of the endless hardships and sacrifices. And Fr. Pantaleone, burning with the fire of charity, like the one whose footsteps he was following, no matter how frail in body, knew no respite or rest. He accepted the most severe privations. His motto was that of the Founder: *For the greatest consolation of the Heart of Jesus.*

The great esteem that Fr. Di Francia had for Fr. Palma was based on the latter's virtues. Fr. Pantaleone was impetuous but he had a profound humility. Out of love for God, and fully embracing the ideals of Fr. Hannibal, he held himself as the servant of all; he wanted to serve others, little ones and grown up, and not to be served. Basically Fr. Pantaleone was a simple soul like Fr. Di Francia.

He abhorred duplicity and falsehood; he always opposed indignantly any deception and shunned artificiality and pretenses. He was scrupulously reserved both with himself and with others, even if the needs of the apostolate or of the tasks assigned to him by Fr. Di Francia forced him to communicate with people of all walks of life. And he demanded that such confidentiality be seen also in the words and deeds of his pupils and confreres.

It was his particular concern to keep himself in the presence of God, through short invocations, Rosary and practices of piety. He was untiring in this; everywhere, even while traveling by train, by car, or when he was at work or walking. To go with him meant to be continuously at prayer. And indeed in prayer he was able to find his most intimate joy, satisfaction, and the real remedy for his many disappointments.

He received from the Lord the gift of tears and of the discernment of spirits, so, while he was moved by the consideration of the mysteries of our redemption, he could immediately perceive the persons filled with God, approach them, discuss with them about the highest and most profound Christian asceticism and direct them on the way of perfection.

Perhaps to some, Fr. Palma could appear gruff, with rough manners, short-tempered in correcting and in his educative system, but we must not forget that this kind of behavior should be correlated to the geniality of his personality, to his physical situation worn out by commitments, continuous transfers and by the deprivations to which he submitted himself without reservation.

All the times Fr. Di Francia purchased an edifice, so as to start a charitable activity, it was often found in a miserable state. This did not discourage him because he knew whom to count on. It was enough for him to say to Fr. Palma: "Take courage, put your skills and try to adjust these rooms as best as you can to make them functional as soon as possible". Fr. Palma, even when he was not at all excited about that building, put all his tenacity and in a short time the results were seen, and with a great satisfaction for the Founder. Refurbishing the buildings was not enough; the trickiest task was still to come. The new foundations needed always the daily bread to feed primarily the poor male and female orphans, clothes, shoes and all that was needed for the educational system to work; then the equipment to train the youth in various trades and crafts and to overcome the times of poverty by procuring orders. All this was entrusted to Fr. Palma.

SOME CLOUDS

The development of the institutions decentralized in many places required Fr. Founder and Fr. Palma a continuous traveling. Fr. Pantaleone was the director of the institute of Oria, but he could not grant his constant presence, which was thus often delegated to the Brothers Carmelo Anthony Drago and Joseph Meli. Of course, this, along with the inevitable envy and jealousy, caused some complaints and, as it usually happens in all environments both secular and religious, he could not escape some “sharp” comments about his absences and the fact that he used to go to the Sisters’ Houses.

Brother Carmelo, as a faithful collaborator, once reported the matter to the Founder. Fr. Hannibal became serious, and in a tone of wonder and disapproval had answered him: “Be grateful instead to Fr. Palma for everything he does. Keep in mind that if he is often absent from Oria, he is not traveling for fun. He is taking care of the setting of the houses and of the economy. I have given him this task, because I cannot reach out to everything, and because Fr. Palma does everything with diligence and zeal according to my directives. That is why he often goes also to the Sisters’ Houses, especially for the establishment, development and management of the Anthonian Secretariats. The Secretariats are the channels of the Divine Providence, which is using Fr. Palma for such a rational system that all wonder about. And since, for the meantime, this work is to be done by the Sisters who still have little knowledge and are not prepared enough for this purpose, it is necessary for Fr. Palma to assist them with greater assiduousness. So, rather than complaining and making uncharitable comments, be grateful and admire the sacrifices made by Fr. Palma and by the Sisters in order to support you and the male and female Communities.”

On his part, sure of his righteous conscience and obedience to the Founder, Fr. Pantaleone did not worry at all about the backbiting. But, due to the continuous and exhausting apostolic work for the development and settlement of the Houses of Puglia, Fr. Palma's health collapsed.

The Founder, as he used to do in case of illness, imposed to Fr. Palma a period of rest in the "native air" in Ceglie Messapica and sent Fr. Francesco Vitale to Oria to substitute him.

Some sisters and some religious, relying on the simplicity and scrupulosity of Fr. Vitale, insinuated a series of accusations against Fr. Pantaleone. Fr. Vitale immediately reported to Fr. Hannibal, who, though sure of the innocence of Fr. Palma, wanted to conduct personally an investigation with his characteristic wisdom and prudence. Every accusation proved false, as can be seen from the correspondence between the Founder and Fr. Vitale. But some malicious persons, ignoring what was proved by Fr. Di Francia, even saw Fr. Palma's moment of rest as an expulsion.

When Fr. Vitale left Oria and returned to Messina because of the recurring malaria bouts, Fr. Palma resumed his governance in the House of Oria and all the activities.

Meanwhile, World War I broke out. Almost all young religious were drafted for military service and in the Institute of Oria Fr. Pantaleone was left alone with some elderly religious brothers. Fr. Palma worked unceasingly to get the exemption of some religious from military service, using as justification the mechanized shoe factory which could provide shoes for the army. In this way, some clerics were exempted. Likewise Fr. Palma himself was exempted, having been appointed by Fr. Di Francia as Director of the Girls' Orphanage (opened in Altamura on August 15, 1915) for the orphaned daughters of soldiers killed in war.

As a thanksgiving to St. Anthony for the protection of the Institutes, Fr. Hannibal bought a large piece of land in

the district of Arcella in Padova to build an Institute, but its construction was delayed because of the war. Meanwhile, the Bishop of Padua Msgr. Luigi Pellizzo, who greatly esteemed Fr. Di Francia, asked for a group of Sisters to serve as nurses who were to care for the soldiers taken into the military Hospital “G.B. Belzoni” of Padua. Eight Daughters of Divine Zeal were sent. The Founder did it because he knew he could count on the collaboration of Fr. Palma, who actually went often to Padua to direct and encourage the sisters in their new apostolate. The military authorities praised the sisters’ service. The sisters stayed until the retreat of Caporetto, when the hospital was closed.

The post-war period, of course, was difficult but the works of Fr. Di Francia recovered, having two poles: that of the formation headed by Fr. Vitale, and that of the economy and external relations led by Fr. Pantaleone.

ILLNESS AND DEATH OF FR. DI FRANCIA

While Fr. Founder was seriously ill in Messina, some Rogationist religious with Father Palma went to the Vatican for an audience with Pope Pius XI. According to the protocol it was strictly forbidden to speak to the Pope, but when Pius XI came close to them for the kissing of the hand, Fr. Pantaleone said: "Your Holiness, I ask a special blessing for Canon Di Francia, who is seriously ill." The Pope said, "All the blessings." The Pope was about to leave when he returned and asked: "It is about Canon Di Francia from Messina, right?", "Yes, Your Holiness," Fr. Palma said. And the Pope: "Yes, yes, all my heartfelt blessings, with the hope that he may regain his health and keep up his precious apostolate."

On 1 June 1927, Fr. Hannibal surrendered his beautiful soul to God. Fr. Palma was in Rome for some commitments for the Institution. Although grief-stricken, he immediately started moving so as to be granted the permission to bury the remains of Fr. Hannibal in the Shrine of St. Anthony in Messina. Once he obtained it, he went back to Messina where he was able to take part in the apotheosis of the funeral of Fr. Di Francia.

After the period of prayer and mourning for the Founder, the priests and sisters of the two Congregations were summoned on June 6, 1927 by Notary Antonino Arrigo for the reading of the will: Fr. Hannibal had appointed Fr. Pantaleone as universal heir and as testamentary executor of all his properties. It was an explicit and unequivocal will.

The revelation surprised everyone. Fr. Palma, legally speaking, could take the reins and manage all activities according to his personal criteria, but as a religious and a docile interpreter of the thought of his revered Founder, he left everything unchanged. After the regular transcription of

the deed, he conferred ample powers of attorney on Fr. Vitale, and never retracted it later.

Since the male Community was made up of just four priests and thus unable to apply fully the provisions of the Constitutions, Fr. Palma proposed to the Priest Confreres the system adopted by St. John Bosco, when at the beginning of the Pious Salesian Society the congregation did not have yet sufficient priest-members for a General Chapter: he called to the first meetings also the Clerics and the Coadjutor Brothers, a practice that has now become common to all the congregations.

Fr. Vitale, however, following his prudential rule, submitted the matter to the judgment of Archbishop Angelo Paino, the Archbishop of Messina at that time, without taking into account that according to the Canon law, also the judgment of the other Ordinaries where the Congregation had Houses had to be requested. Msgr. Paino thought that he could decide on his own, without consulting the other Ordinaries, and called the General Chapter, based on the Constitutional Norms and the Code of Canon Law.

This way of acting displeased Fr. Pantaleone who, after consulting eminent jurists, put the matter to the judgment of the Congregation for Religious, which, in turn, took upon itself the problem of the two religious Congregations, and appointed Fr. Leo Kirckels, who at that time was the Superior General of the Passionists, as Apostolic Visitor. On the basis of the report presented by Fr. Leo, the Congregation for Religious recognized the will of Fr. Di Francia and with a Decree on February 7, 1928 appointed Fr. Palma as General Administrator of both the male and female Institutes of Canon Di Francia under the control of a temporary Superior in the person of the Apostolic Visitor, Fr. Leo. And Fr. Leo then delegated to Fr. Vitale the task of disciplinary supervision over the Houses of the Rogationists, always subject to his superintendence.

Once he defined the issues with the male Community, the visitor convened the General Chapter of the Daughters

of Divine Zeal, which was held on March 19 in Rome, presided over by Fr. Leo in the presence of a representative of the Vicariate. Mother M. Figura Cristina was elected at the first ballot as Superior General. She was an intelligent woman of strong character and determination, skilled in governance, very experienced in the affairs of the Congregation. This choice of the chapter, however, created discontent among some sisters who spoke of an alleged interference of Fr. Palma in favor of Mother Cristina, in order to grant him a greater capacity to manage the Sisters' Congregation, because the new Superior General had been his right arm in the management of the Anthonian Secretariats.

On July 25, 1928, the Apostolic Visitor, Fr. Leo, because of commitments related to his office, had to go to South America to visit the Houses of his Congregation. He had to be absent for a couple of months. During his absence, in agreement with the Prefect of the Congregation for the Religious, he delegated Fr. Vitale to replace him with all the ordinary powers as Superior of the Rogationists.

During this temporary government and without giving any plausible reason, Fr. Vitale, decided to transfer Fr. Pantaleone from Oria to Messina, thus preventing him from any activity and delegated to Fr. Domenico Santoro, the master of the novices, even the power as local Superior of the House of Oria.

Fr. Palma presented the case to the Prefect of the Congregation for Religious, who, after just 17 days, ordered him to be reinstated to his normal functions as Administrator and Superior of Oria. This episode increased the distrust between the Rogationists of the two Houses of Oria and Messina.

On January 2, 1929, a group of Rogationists appealed to the Congregation for Religious, exposing a list of "sins" attributed to Fr. Pantaleone, concluding: "We believe the tenure of Sr. Cristina and the current freedom of action of Fr. Palma prevent the peace and good order of the Institutes,

and therefore we ask the Sacred Congregation to set up a rigorous INVESTIGATION of all these facts, through the most Rev. Fr. Visitor who is already very knowledgeable about our affairs, so as to take radical measures.”

Meanwhile Fr. Kirckels had been appointed Archbishop and thus Fr. Agnello Jaccarino, of the Society of Jesus, was chosen as Apostolic Visitor. Because of his good-natured character, he did not prove up to the situation for an office so important and delicate in an already exacerbated environment, so that the Bishop Ermenegildo Luca Pasetto had to take over. He was well known throughout Rome for his impulsiveness and intransigence.

Msgr. Pasetto, even before starting his Visitation, forwarded to the Holy Office a folder containing letters with accusations against Fr. Palma, considering the matter as competence of that Congregation. Then, without verifying the allegations, he obtained the authorization to use, in the investigation that he was undertaking, the strict obligation to secrecy under oath normally connected only to the Holy Office. In reality, however, he interviewed only a few people, neglecting a large part of not only of religious men and women, but also of Prelates and Bishops who had known Fr. Palma well for many years.

THE ORDEAL

Meanwhile, in the awareness of his upright conduct, Fr. Pantaleone continued to work in the two Congregations as he did when the Founder was still alive. Conscious of his responsibility as universal heir, he endeavored to settle all pending economic issues especially in Messina where, for example, Fr. Vitale, out of naiveté and inexperience in business, had been deceived by a contractor. Also this way of acting, however, was read negatively by some, who instead of helping him, put obstacles to him.

On February 19, 1932, Sister Gesuina Palma died in Rome, just in time to avoid knowing that his brother, Fr. Pantaleone, had been summoned by the Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office (August 8) and was going to begin five days later his segregation at the Scala Santa in Rome.

On Oct. 7 the General Council of the Daughters of Divine Zeal was deposed also: Mother Cristina Figura and her Council, elected in 1928, were assigned without any office to the various houses of the Congregation.

In that same month, on October 23, Fr. Palma was summoned by the Holy Office for the hearings. The trial lasted almost a year. There was a flood of slanderous and defamatory accusations. The hearings dragged on and multiplied. In his own words, when he was called to court he felt his head exploding, racked with pain ... He had to explain to the judges where the millions that streamed into the Anthonian Secretariats had gone, and then to give evident proof of his innocence against the vile accusations about his moral behavior... things which were formally grave, but that had nothing to do with the facts. The sources of the allegations about both the economic matters and the immorality issues were the same, and although there were

regrets and recantations, all the apparatus set up by the defense attorney was not enough to convince the judges.

The sentence was passed on July 19, 1933. The Cardinal Vicar of Rome, Francesco Marchetti Selvaggiani, was assigned to read it to the accused: Fr. Palma was discharged from the Congregation of the Rogationists, secularized and suspended from the sacraments, with the obligation to stay, therefore segregated, at the Scala Santa.

Msgr. Pasetto wrote to Fr. Vitale: "The 'excommunication' happened yesterday in this Vicariate, and was accepted by the defendant with humility and a contrite spirit. As you can see, the sentence stated that the Institute of the Rogationists shall provide monthly 1,000 (one thousand) Liras for Fr. Palma's sustenance in the House of penance (Scala Santa - Passionists - Rome). The abovementioned monthly allowance - as ordered by H. E. Cardinal Vicar - will not be sent to Fr. Palma, *but to me*, and I will hand it over, according to the instructions, to the Superior of the Scala Santa."

The moments of extreme trial highlights the greatness of a person and the consistency of his faith. Here is what Fr. Pantaleone wrote from the Scala Santa to his sister Jacinta on September 11, 1933: "Dearest Jacinta, I regret much that Linda, though so good, has afflicted you; I had forbidden her, but God's will be done. However, you do not have to worry for me. God does not abandon any of those who trust in Him. Now I can assure you that our Lord if on one hand has put me to the test, on the other gives me truly extraordinary graces every day. [...] And indeed day-by-day the Lord provides me with everything. At this age, although a Priest, I had never reached a faith so alive and certain in the Divine Providence, as I now feel. I have never stopped doing, almost continuously, acts of confidence in God and His Divine Son, Jesus. I cannot do without often invoking the Blessed Virgin Mary as our Mother in every need, and I do the same thing with our dear St. Joseph. Never did I feel so attached, as I do now, to the Works for which I worked thirty years. I hope

that the Lord by His mercy, and also considering somehow the fidelity of a person who accepts the trial with submissive heart, will raise that person better than before. We believe that God loves us when everything goes well. Instead the Lord prepares improvements and progress when He makes our life resemble that of his Divine Son, Jesus, who always lived crucified from the time he was in the womb of his mother Mary.

For so many persons I made myself as father and mother at the same time; today, the Lord wants to show to everyone that the Father and the Mother of all is only and always Him. Not that He disdains the services that we offer to him, but He wants also the leaders to be continually subjected in faith to the true Head, so that at every moment, we may cultivate our conviction that everything comes from God in everyone and in any endeavor. Be confident that everything will be settled. [...] Take courage. Affectionately. Pantaleone.”

Fortunately, he was allowed to receive visits. Don Luigi Orione, who knew him since the earthquake of Messina, often visited him along with Don Risi, and he not only proclaimed his innocence with the members of the Congregation for Religious, but did much to obtain a retrial. The Archbishop of Trani, Msgr. Altobello Nicola wrote: “I am deeply impressed by his great spirit of mortification and by his boundless uniformity to the Will of God. [He told me,] ‘I offer everything for the sake of the Rogationists and of the Sisters of Divine Zeal of Canon Di Francia!!! ...’ Only a Priest of his character can find the Christian strength and courage to shout his ‘fiat’ in the atonement of sins, about which I can state with a clear conscience his total innocence.” The list of persons ready to give this kind of testimony would be long. It is enough to say that the Bishops of the various Houses where Fr. Palma had resided and worked (the Archbishops of Bari, Brindisi and Taranto, the Bishops of Oria, Montepulciano, Monopoli, and the Prelate of Altamura) upset by the outcome of the trial,

turned to Pius XI on March 3, 1934, addressing to him a joint letter where they asked for the review of the trial.

In any case, the Archbishop of Trani, Msgr. Giuseppe Leo, on October 1933 wrote a personal letter to "Card. Sbarretti, Secretary of the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office," which we are going to quote, because it allows us to grasp more fully the tragedy, presented by an upright man and shepherd, which has overwhelmed Fr. Palma:

"Your Eminence, in your singular goodness allow me, though not required, to relieve my conscience and expose what I had come to know.

The sentence of conviction issued by this Supreme Sacred Congregation against Fr. Pantaleone Palma, the first, most influential and active partner of the Founder of the Congregations of the Rogationists and Daughters of the Divine Zeal, Can. Di Francia, of blessed memory, could not but cause grave surprise to those who knew him well and believed, and still believe, that it is morally impossible that he may be guilty of grave offenses; thus they cannot explain how malicious people were able to hide the truth in front of the justice of this Supreme Sacred Congregation.

I too knew since a long time the secret and persistent struggle that was being carried out against Fr. Palma by some of his confreres and some sisters; perhaps out of jealousy, noting the special affection that the Founder showed to him, much appreciating his fruitful activity and constant fidelity; perhaps because the strictness that Fr. Palma used in the screening of persons who were non-eligible and lacking when it comes to vocation. This struggle was exacerbated when the Founder died and, upon opening his holographic will, it was known that Fr. Palma was appointed heir. Even more so when Fr. Palma, performing his role as heir, discovered a most deplorable intrigue in the administration of the House in Messina, when, with the authorization of the Sacred Congregation for Religious, he made an inquiry and testing of the construction work of that

House: investigation and testing that led to the recovery in favor of the Institute of *seven million* lire, which had been bartered unwisely to a totally dishonest constructor.

For many years I have known Fr. Palma very closely because of the so to say ‘continuous’ contacts which he had with me on the occasion of the many works that he has carried out in my Archdiocese, where there are four Houses of Fr. Di Francia, which until now are very flourishing precisely because of Fr. Palma’s work. I had very frequent occasion not only to follow up the man in his admirable work, but also to see and evaluate his conduct as a true religious, being much edified by him.

If the allegations, which until now have been made public, regard alleged misappropriations, thefts and financial dissipations, as well as serious facts connected with morality, your Eminence shall allow me to confess my greatest surprise for the slanderers to be able to support such accusations, so as to cause the very severe condemnation by this supreme Assembly against the defendant.

When it comes to the financial aspect, I know well the standard of living observed by Fr. Palma; which and how many sacrifices did he make for the sake of the Works which he was managing, his admirable industries in order to increase their revenues. His organization of the propaganda was brilliant, assisted by the unceasing and intelligent work of the former General, Sr. Mary Cristina. Through that organization – which was opposed by some of his Confreres - millions of liras have been poured into the coffers of the Anthonian Orphanages.

On the other hand it seems an obvious reflection to me, that if Fr. Palma was attached to riches, as they wanted to present him, and would have been of the moral caliber as they wanted him to be considered, taking advantage of his position as heir of Fr. Di Francia, it would have been an easy matter for him to secure, even legally, huge capitals, which nobody could anymore take away from him.

When it comes to the morality of Fr. Palma, I had the opportunity to see in all the encounters his finesse of conscience, to the point of scrupulosity, and his jealous observance in complying with any stricter norm of action. For this I always had him in high esteem and high judgment and this is shared also by other Bishops, very upright men of Church, civil authorities and honest people from all walks of life, whom I could indicate as appropriate witnesses. It is therefore incredible that he be guilty of such dishonorable faults, and we are almost forced to believe that the plan of endless fight against him has yielded its evil effects leading to hold as true the darkest and most slanderous false accusations.

And I might say, I am confirmed in this belief by events made known to me which I hint at here:

- shortly after the call of Fr. Palma to Rome to present himself to this Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, a rumor was spread throughout Trani (I do not know by whom) that Fr. *Palma had run away with a nun and two million!* This voice took such consistency that the Royal Prosecutor and the Investigating Judge of this Court called on the Attorney of this Archiepiscopal Curia. And since the Theologian Canon of this Metropolitan Chapter, a devout and prudent priest, took the opportunity, speaking from the altar, to dispel from the faithfuls' mind this dishonorable rumor, the Confreres of Fr. Palma resented that, and one of them came to me to complain against that priest, as if he had done harmful or imprudent deed. I made the imprudent Rogationist understand that he should have been the first to rejoice for the gesture of Can. Teolo, and be grateful for him having defended his Confrere and the Congregation, on which reverberated the ominous reflection of that libelous rumor.

For the opening of the House of the Sisters of Divine Zeal in Corato (of this Archdiocese of Trani), an endeavor which met the favor of the people and of the local authorities and was supported by donations of suitable land for the

buildings and by offerings of the faithful, what a fierce resistance was done to Fr. Palma! And it was I who had to make the application to the Sacred Congregation of Religious to get the permission for the building of the house!

And how much fight was done, as it could be attested by H. E. Msgr. Leo Kirckels, then General of the Passionist Fathers, who was at that time the Apostolic Visitor of the works of Fr. Di Francia, by the Bishop of Oria and perhaps even by the Sacred Congregation for Religious, in order to prevent the ordination of four young professed Rogationists, only because they had been educated and trained by Fr. Palma? They were persons whom the detractors wanted to present as incapable and unworthy, but who in turn have shown a shining proof of their preparation and maturity, and have been called to occupy directive positions, so delicate and trust-based with the vote of the very people who were their detractors! [Editor's Note: *these were the future Superior Generals, Fr. Luigi Luca Appi, Fr. Carmelo Drago and the excellent religious Fr. Camillo Ruggeri and Fr. Redento Levi*].

I know well about visits to the various Houses of the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Zeal by those who had the mandate and authority [Editor's Note: *he refers to the Apostolic Visitors Fr. Jaccarino and Msgr. Pasetto*]. But it is also known that in such occasions the Visitors interviewed almost exclusively the discontented sisters, those claiming to be victims of the Government of their Superiors of that time who were considered to be inspired and directed by Fr. Palma. When it comes to the other sisters, who were perhaps the best and certainly the most observant, it was enough for them to show, in answer to the first questions, that they were contented - or worse, to praise the way of life of the House, their Superiors or Fr. Palma - that the interview was immediately ended. Furthermore, would it not have been convenient to consult and interrogate the Bishops in whose Dioceses these Houses are, and about things and persons depending on them?

Your Eminence, as Ordinary of this Archdiocese, in which there are four houses of the Institutes of Fr. Di Francia, of venerable memory, I felt the duty of conscience to report to Your Eminence what I mentioned above.

In your wise prudence and unblemished conscience you will judge whether it is the case to review the trial which led to the severest condemnation of Fr. Palma. The case has to be based on a broader investigation, especially for the allegations about private facts which have no eyewitnesses; on a more severe scrutiny of the reliability of the accusers and their previous relationship with the accused throughout the course of his religious life and in all the evidences, to infer whether the statements and accusations against him are reliable or baseless and slanderous; and whether there was a preset plan to ruin a man who enjoyed, beyond any other member in the Congregation, all the trust of the Venerable Founder and whose exclusion and removal from the works of Fr. Di Francia cannot but damage those very works. It seems to me that I am in the position to understand the gravity of these damages because of the four Houses existing in my Archdiocese.”

Fr. Palma himself, on October 23, 1933, under the pressure of Fr. Ignatius Beschin, OFM, Rector of the Antonianum and his confessor, appealed to the Pope declaring his total innocence: “I confess before God, who has to judge me, as I speak to His Vicar on earth: I am innocent of the charges hurled on me. I am maligned, because I loved and served with the only aim of God, and regardless of any creature, the Works of Fr. Di Francia to which I have been committed for 30 years. Let me add that, in the long investigation, it seemed that no value nor attention was given to any document presented, nor any testimony has been questioned in my defense, not even the Bishop of my native place, Msgr. Di Tommaso in Oria, who did know me for 30 years, or the Archbishop Leo of Trani, where I worked for 23 years, or any other local Bishop, nor one of the many

persons with whom I have worked with, and who, I would say, could daily guard and spy on me, especially Attorney Intonti Vincenzo, from Trani; the Cathedral Chapter of Trani, Commendatore [Editor's Note: *An Italian Civil Title of honor*] Francesco Calderone (Brindisi), Dr. Luke Spaziante (Altamura), Fr. Domenico Franzè, O.F.M., of the International College of St. Anthony (Rome), Fr. Antonio Di Coste, General Councilor of the Redemptorists, Msgr. Gustavo Bianchi of Montepulciano and so on. All these could give testimony as eyewitnesses [de visu] because of their priestly ministry or other reasons they have continuously known the Houses and the things of the Institution."

Meanwhile, the sisters who had accused him, recanted - all of them - indicating also the persons and reasons that induced them to do so. But it was not taken into account.

The petition of the Bishops and the personal intervention of Msgr. Leo Kirckels worried Pius XI especially for the fact that they had not been heard by the Holy Office and it seems that he had in mind to reopen the process. In any case, just five days after the Papal audience of Msgr. Kirckels, Fr. Palma was granted permission to resume the celebration of the Holy Mass starting on August 6, 1935 - an unmistakable sign of rehabilitation.

The letter, which Fr. Pantaleone wrote to Fr. Camillo Ruggeri on August 4, is meaningful: "With the help of the Lord, the day after tomorrow, that is this coming August 6, I will say the Holy Mass. Thus, may the Lord indeed be praised. See, this is a great grace ... For our Lord everything is easy. In a moment He changes everything. Do not be afraid: we have to leave it to Him and to Him alone. He takes anything small and makes it as big as it pleases him."

THE LAST TEST

During his three years of staying at the Scala Santa Fr. Palma never enjoyed perfect health, especially because of the grave moral sufferings; however, he never showed anything alarming until the month of July 1935, but in the early days of August he began to experience progressive symptoms of abulia, amnesic aphasia and drowsiness. His brother Peter was allowed to assist him.

Since his situation was progressively worsening, at the request of his relatives, on August 28 he was visited by Prof. Ferretti, Director of the "Littorio" Hospital, who diagnosed a psycho - neuro - asthenia of a melancholic character, suggesting a treatment based on hyposulfite and a short stay in a family environment.

Having been informed, Msgr. Pasetto, denied the permission for any treatment, and came the same evening at the Scala Santa with his own trusted doctor, Prof. Borromeo, who immediately ordered Fr. Palma to be hospitalized for observation at the Hospitaller Brothers' Hospital, where he was the head physician.

Mr. Peter Palma reported: "Indeed on [August] 29 we went to the Hospitaller Brothers' Hospital, I, the sick [Fr. Pantaleone] and a Passionist Father who had been assigned to guard him. In the morning of the 29 they examined him from head to foot and said there was nothing; orally they said that it was mental illness, though Fr. Palma's fever every day was 38.7. Thus on August 31 they ordered him to be discharged from the hospital, and to return to his cell at the Scala Santa."

In a report probably written as a third person by Fr. Ignatius Beschin, Fr. Palma's confessor, we read: "On August 31, just after 36 hours of hospitalization, and after summary observations and clinical investigations, Fr. Palma was dismissed with fever and the diagnosis that he was a

simulator (!) was verbally and unofficially communicated to his relatives. Fr. Palma was sent back to the Scala Santa and confined to his usual cell without any special assistance and cure.

On Monday, September 2, at around 8:00 a.m. the relatives of Fr. Palma were urgently called, and told that Fr. Palma at around 5:00 o'clock in the morning had been found dying in his own room lying face downward on the floor because he had fallen.

The House doctor of the “Scala Santa”, who had already been called, had not provided any cure; the Rev. Fr. Ignatius, OFM, having come provided the religious assistance for the dying; at approximately 8:30 a.m., five minutes after the arrival of his relatives, Fr. Palma died without having regained consciousness.”

His brother Peter tells: “I immediately rushed and found him dying, there was Fr. Ignatius to assist him. At 8 o'clock in the morning he expired. Several relatives have come after because they thought that it was not so imminent.”

What happened later is truly sad, as Peter narrates: “Now we come to the death certificate which had to be issued by the Director of the Hospitaller Brothers’ Hospital, a certificate that was needed for the burial of the body. The director made an incomplete certificate, because the cause of the patient’s death was not stated. Since the Civil Authority’s clearance was requested for the transportation of the remains, the Magistrate did not grant the permission for the transport of the corpse, and requested the autopsy. Then the Passionists tried to find a solution through their House Doctor. So there was an inspection of the Magistrate, they pretended the Passionists’ doctor to be the coroner who had to release the death certificate; otherwise the corpse could not be buried. This doctor of the Passionists declared that my dear brother had died because of marasmus, and since, indeed, it was all false, our cousin Doctor [Editor's Note: *Dr. Erminio Palma*] rebelled against that certificate and

then the Magistrate ordered the autopsy. I strongly opposed it because I did not want my brother's corpse to be ill-treated again, so the autopsy was not done."

Fr. Palma's relatives present in Rome with some Passionist Fathers, among them Fr. Sergio Contini and Fr. Leonardo Canestri, who had a high esteem and reverence towards Fr. Palma, held a wake over his body until the following day, September 3, when there was the funeral.

Where could he be buried? Peter Palma asked Msgr. Pasetto, as Apostolic Visitor of the Anthonian Institutes, "the money needed to bury the remains in a reserved place," but Pasetto "told me that the Institutes could not do this expense," and made "another proposal, telling me to put the body in the ground, to present an application to get the money, and then put the remains in a reserved place."

At this point Peter Palma requested Mr. & Mrs. Rossi, in-laws of his cousin Dr. Erminio Palma, the charity of the burial, and the remains were placed in their family tomb in the Verano cemetery in Rome.

Msgr. Pasetto told the news about Fr. Palma's death via telephone to Fr. Francesco Vitale and to the Superior General of the Daughters of Divine Zeal, Mother Ascension Carco'. Fr. Vitale, from Messina, wrote to Fr. Teodoro Tusino, Superior of the House of Oria: "I ordered the prayers as if he were our own priest (except the funeral), including Gregorian Masses." Fr. Tusino wrote in the diary of the House: "Although legally Fr. Palma was not anymore one of us, we immediately began the prayers as if he belonged still to us, except the funeral for reasons of prudence." And again: "For the poor Fr. Palma, death has been the end of a long purgatory; also for the Works it has been undoubtedly an advantage. When he was still alive - though not for his fault - a very dangerous dualism had formed in the Work itself (male and female branches), jeopardizing the existence of the Institutes; a dualism that - unfortunately - did not subside even with the removal of Fr. Palma." In the House of

Trani, according to witnesses, they prayed “for an outstanding benefactor who died”!

Six years after the death of Fr. Palma it was once again his relatives who, in 1941, submitted a petition to Pope Pius XII, in which among other things we read: “Most Holy Father, the relatives cannot accept passively the fact that the memory of their Brother and Cousin so loved and venerated remains sullied by a sentence, and, in the archives of the Holy Office, kept as indicted of crimes so contrary to the purity of his disinterested and righteous conscience. Patiently they have waited even too long for reasons easy to understand in similar cases. But now they implore humbly and earnestly the review of the entire process through an objective examination without the biases, which formed the basis of the conviction; taking into account the documents submitted and listening to the Most Excellent Bishops and other witnesses who were neglected, we do not know for what legal reason.

Your Holiness will be the first to be pleased that a priest has lived an upright life completely devoted to his duty, and that he left, though prematurely, this world with a clear conscience immune of the faults of which the slander had dared to smear it. The time elapsed seems to be sufficient for the triumph of justice and truth, having, as one would hope, jealousy and passions now subsided.”

Unfortunately, the petition did not succeed.

Fr. Palma has always enjoyed the esteem and affection among a part of the Rogationists; in recent years the concern of the whole Congregation has aimed at rehabilitating the memory of this great son of St. Hannibal Mary Di Francia; however, little could be done, to the point that we may conclude with the words written on September 3, 1935 by Fr. Beschin: “He who lived his entire life in the service of others did not find support for himself; he who procured comfort and care for thousands of orphans found no comfort and care for himself, and he who preferred charity, virtue

and justice, did not find love, virtue and justice for himself either in life, or in death.”

*Eternal be your memory,
Beloved brother Pantaleone!*



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