



# and you too **do** likewise

**Sr. Carmela Paloschi**

---

*The article given below for publication is our contribution towards the book «Per carità e per giustizia» published in 2012 and presented at the «Sala Protomoteca» of the Campidoglio, Rome, on 25 February 2012 to a fairly large gathering of eminent public figures and churchmen. As it is meant to treat of just one of the rich variety of our service of charity, and to keep within the limited number of pages allotted to it, it simply furnishes concrete details of our service towards the «building up of an Italian Welfare State» within the 150 year period since the Unification of Italy.*

*The book aims at «providing information on a part of our past history that is not referred to in official celebrations nor recorded in traditional historical accounts, namely: the history of the welfare state starting from the catering to the poorest sections of society through the explosive growth of Church initiative», and factual evidence on how this great variety of charitable services then took a permanent and definite shape in stable social welfare structures and facilities provided entirely by the State.*

*However, this publication does not merely provide its readers with information on «a past period of our history so rich and blessed by God», as Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone stated in his forward to this Survey on historical and scientific documentary evidence, but it also urges us, men and women religious to draw upon the sources of our founding charism in order to «live the present moment in*

*all its fullness, in accordance with the designs of divine Providence, ever led by the breath of the Holy Spirit, primary Author of every work of charity».*

*Besides, the fact that the presentation of the book has taken place in a politico-institutional setting, confirms the truth that «religious, too, form part of the very texture of public life in Italy» and that they too «have a concrete commitment in their society»: charity, at all times, goes beyond justice.*

## «I was hungry...»

### Meals for the Poor (Part I)

The Institute of the «Sisters of Charity of Saints B. Capitanio and V. Gerosa» – commonly known as «Suore di Maria Bambina» – was started on 21 November 1832 at Lovere, Bergamo, and was approved by the Holy See on 5 June 1840; it dedicated itself to charity, responding to the «great, extreme need» of a grave moment in the history of Italy.

This very «service of charity» towards the brethren in the various forms required by the socio-political-cultural context was to constitute the founding charism, to which the Congregation keeps dynamically faithful everywhere: Africa, America, Asia, Europe.

From the wide range of works of charity to which the Institute has dedicated itself throughout its history, we can mention: schools, hospitals, orphanages, homes for women in moral danger, for the physically and mentally handicapped, for unwed mothers with children, students' hostels and homes for working girls, agricultural tenancies and cheap meal (public) service.

Cheap meal service centres started functioning in 1881 and, except for that of Rome, which was of short duration and record of which is scanty, they were opened in Lombardy and the Veneto to meet actual needs of the times both as a national initiative (due to warfare and ensuing famine and poverty) and by the Institute, the early expansion of which was, in fact, in North-East Italy.

### CHEAP MEAL (PUBLIC) SERVICE

BERGAMO 1881-1950

TRENTO 1907-1955

ROMA 1891-1895

FAGAGNA (UD) 1914-1941

ROVERETO 1905-1949

VENEZIA 1917-1944

### BERGAMO: 1881-1950

Illiteracy, squalid living conditions and extremely-hard work in fields and factories, for low wages fixed by employers along arbitrary rules in the absence of Government laws, were widespread in the Bergamo region in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the 1877 Survey in the region women and children (aged 7-15) were employed in silk factories for 12-13 hours a day and, in some spinning-mills, in the summer season, for 15 hours a day: from 3 a.m. to 8.30 p.m. For very many of them lunch and supper consisted in polenta, often insufficient and badly cooked on poor firewood, and often indigestible because of the poor flour and lack of salt.

Utter misery was therefore the main cause of diseases that particularly caused havoc in the region: pellagra in the countryside and rickets in industrialized areas (AMADEI R., *Storia religiosa della Lombardia. Diocesi di Bergamo*, Brescia, La Scuola, 1988). In October 1877, in his anguish at the forced abandonment of teaching at the College of Vicenza, Nicolò Rezzana (1848-1915) went to Bergamo to participate in the Fourth Catholic Congress organized by Catholic Municipalities. Though he was still unknown in the circles of the Catholic Movement of Italy and in particular of Bergamo District, he was appointed Member of the Diocesan Committee of the «Opera dei Congressi», chaired by Count Stanislao Medolago Albani, and he was offered the opportunity to teach Literature and History at the «collegio Bartolomeo Colleoni» of Bergamo. That was the start of his extraordinary activity fruitful of works at the national level and more especially at Bergamo, which he grew to love so much and where he wanted to be buried.

In 1880 this man-of-action founded the local Catholic daily «L'Eco di Bergamo» and in 1881 he promoted the Work of Cheap Meal Service in order to wipe out pellagra, a disease that caused the death of thousands of undernourished people (INVERNIZZI M., *N. Rezzana* in I.D.I.S., Istituto per la Dottrina e l'Informazione Sociale, 1997).

The first two centres for this activity, opened in both zones of Bergamo ('Città Alta' and 'Città Bassa'), were a concrete, effective token of the concern of the Catholic world for the needy; it provided labourers and poor people with a hot soup at the right moment, and within reach.

For the running of 'Città Alta' Centre, Fr Luigi Palazzolo was appointed (CASTELLETTI C., *Vita del Palazzolo*, Tavecchi, Bergamo, 1920), while for the other centre the charge was entrusted to the Sisters of Charity of Lovere, residing in via S. Bernardino (where they still live at No. 32): «This valuable agreement settles one of the major difficulties for the regular and smooth running of the institution; and so, the Chairman has the honour to carry out most gladly the charge given him by the Committee to thank your Reverence with sentiments of profound gratitude. The Committee will then be extremely glad to welcome and gladly follow all kinds of suggestions and good advice which you may find useful and wish to offer for the greater success of the institution»<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence - Letter of N. Rezzana, Chairman of the executive Committee of the Cheap Meal Service in Bergamo to Sr. Clementina Lachmann, Superior of the Sisters of Charity, Bergamo, dated 6 September 1881, Prot. No. 24, at the Archives of the Generalate of the Sisters of Charity (AGSdC), 235/K. Same File for the following quotations.

More than 114,000 litres of soup, distributed every year, were a first attempt to help the most needy; each ration of soup was set at 8 decilitres per head, and so 142,000 soup rations were cooked, for an average of 400 persons a day. To ensure the assistance and help to as many persons as possible, there was also fixed the amount in grams of the various ingredients for every soup portion, as is shown in the Table below.

<b>INGREDIENTS OF EVERY SOUP PORTION GIVEN IN GRAMS</b>			
<i>Ingredients</i>	<i>Quantity</i>		
Pasta	grams		90
Vegetables	«		100
Chitterlings	«		30
Salt	«		9
Lard	«		72
Butter	«		4
Oil	«		3
Water	decilitres		8

Besides, the day-to-day distribution was done according to precise rules:

- the meal is served from noon to 1 p.m.;
- receivers of the soup are expected to show the coloured ticket bought the previous day for 10 cents or else the white permanent ration card;
- the head of a family may buy a certain number of white ration cards at the beginning of the week and then have them changed for coloured tickets according to the day-to-day needs of the family;
- any person or institute may purchase permanent ration cards and give them out in alms to the poor who will get for themselves coloured tickets numbered (daily) at the meal service centre: via S. Bernardino, run by the Sisters of Charity<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> *Regolamento* in AGSdC, 235/K.

As the persons served were poor and needy, the service was done free of charge by two kind, self-sacrificing sisters, but on 15 September 1882 Procurator Andrea Salvi wrote to the presiding Officer: «...Well aware of the financial difficulties the Rev. Sisters of Charity find themselves in, ...the Sister-Cook in charge will be given a remuneration of 1 lira a day, while the other Sister who helps her will continue to render service without pay».

And on 12 December 1884 the Chairman himself wrote to Superior Sr. Ambrogina Benetti: «In appreciation of the extra work the Sisters engaged in the Cheap Meal Service at S. Bernardino have had to do this year during the cholera plague, and as a modest acknowledgement of its heartfelt thanks, the Committee has in today's sitting decided to offer you the meagre sum of 100 Lire, which its budget for this year can spare. While offering you the said amount, I request you to continue your valid support to the charitable institution. With a profound sense of gratitude and sincere regards».

The service was cheerfully and gladly kept up by the Sisters; evidence of this is the exchange of letters between the Chairman of the Committee and the Superior of the Community of S. Bernardino, as special occasions arose.

His letter dated 10<sup>th</sup> January 1892 says: «Today, exactly ten years since our Cheap Meal Service was put underway, our Committee and its Associates feel bound by a profound sense of duty to attest that without the valuable service your Community has rendered, the Activity started by them could have hardly developed so well and given the results that everyone can now be happy to see. The poor, who are directly benefited and helped by the Cheap Meal Service, will tomorrow be given, for free, abundant soup and bread, in occasion of this anniversary celebration. As they do so, they will call God's blessing also on the Reverend Sisters

of Charity; we are truly indebted to them for the exceptional help so gladly given out». The current Superior of the Community was Sr. Rosina D'Anna.

Years after that, on 10 January 1907, the letter sent to Superior Sr. Maurina Regazzoni said: «It was exactly twenty-five years ago that the Cheap Meal Service was started in the City. Among those deserving of praise and thanks for this Charitable Institution, special regard is due to the Institute which for a quarter of a century has been running with affectionate care the Centre in via S. Bernardino in 'Città Bassa'. While, on behalf also of the Managing Committee I express my most sincere thanks to you, I am happy to present you with this sum of 250 Lire in aid of your Institute as a tiny token of our trust. With profound esteem».

On 13 January, by which time the Sisters' service had proved to be effective as well as efficient, the Chairman of the Committee wrote personally to the current Superior General of the Congregation, Mother Angela Ghezzi, requesting her to authorize the Sisters to assume the charge of an undertaking for the benefit of emigrants of the Bergamo region, not only of the kitchen but also of the dormitory, though night duty was done by lay personnel.

The Institute's mission in this field was kept up till May 1950. No documentary evidence is left, not even of the reasons for the withdrawal of the Sisters. However, among the latest Sisters engaged in the kitchen, we come across the name of Sr. Giuseppina Pellizzoli.

In Brescia territory too, particularly at Pontevico, Verolanuova etc., the Sisters who looked after chronic patients in Homes also helped in the serving of soup to the poor, especially in winter.

### **ROMA: 1891-1895**

In the history of the Institute there is also some scanty evidence of Cheap Meal Service in Rome. On 31 August 1891 Sisters who had been called to Rome by Mgr E. Fontana, Rector of the Seminary of Lombardy, took up residence in a modest rented flat called «Casa Spallanzani», in via Aurora, 12. In October that same

year the ground floor was converted into Nursery School and Elementary School classrooms; there were still rooms available in the basement. On the advice of Commendator Pio Folchi and with due authorization from major Superiors, the Sisters started a Cheap Meal Service for labourers. This activity lasted till 1895, when the Community, in answer to increasing demand for enrolment in the School, moved to the present residence in via Paolo VI, 21, formerly via S. Uffizio, 45 (PREVEDELLO A., *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Libreria Emiliana Editrice, Venezia, II, 1935, pp. 190-191).

### **ROVERETO: 1905-1949**

The Cheap Meal Service of Rovereto, which functioned smoothly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had ups and downs in the course of its history that was heavily marked by World Wars I and II. It was started on 27 January 1890, in the ground floor of the small Rosmini House, close to the Nursery School, where they served only polenta and soup. The activity was discontinued in 1906 and then reopened in 1912, as a «Locanda sanitaria», in via Portici, with an improved accommodation and a more adequate service. It was again discontinued in 1915 and resumed once more in 1919, under the name of «Ristorante Popolare» (PREVEDELLO A., II, 1935, p 708). The management itself was transferred from the «Congregazione di Carità», Rovigo (in 1937) to that of *Eca* of Rovereto.

The Sisters, already active in the city at the State Hospital (1844), Nursery School (1872) and Orphanage (1872), started service to the poor, labourers and persons predisposed to pellagra disease, in 1905<sup>3</sup>; the Sister and Sorella belonged to the Nursery School

---

<sup>3</sup> Correspondence - Letter Prot. No. 2418 dated 12 October 1905 and prot. No. 2529 dated 2 November 1905 of Chairman Pio Lenzi to the Superior General Sr. Angela Ghezzi, in AGSdC, 235/D.



Community where they returned in the evening, after work. In 1912, three Sisters and three Sorelle attended to the work that had meanwhile increased, and were constituted into a Community<sup>4</sup>. In 1915, during the War, the Sisters were refugees in the camps of Malè and Salisburgo, and on their return from there in February 1919 they resumed their apostolic mission till 1949. Meanwhile, in 1929, the «Refettorio materno» planned to enrol 40 was put up as an extension of the «Ristorante Popolare», and managed by «Opera nazionale maternità infanzia» (PREVEDELLO A., 1935, II, p 708).

The Sisters were entrusted with the internal running of the Cheap Meal Service: purchase of foodstuffs, cooking and serving of the food from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 5 to 6 p.m., and house-keeping, as laid down in the Agreements<sup>5</sup>. Relations with the public (suppliers, customers, checking of proceeds etc.) was the duty of a lay directress; an employee of the Charitable Congregation distributed the ration tickets.

In his letter Prot. No. 1037 dated 9 March 1920, in answer to questions put by the Superior General, who was anxious not to overwork the Sisters nor change the aims of their service, the Chairman of the Committee wrote: «The title ‘Ristorante popolare’ was adopted to adjust to the wish of the working class, who did not like the name ‘Cucina Economica’ nor ‘Locanda Sanitaria’. However, it is simply a matter of names; what it is for, remains the same. The Sisters are not expected to depend on the Lay Directress nor to be supervised by her. In her internal capacities Sister Superior is completely independent; her relations with the Directress have to do with mutual collaboration in the filling-in of order-Forms».

And in his letter of 6 September 1920 the same Chairman explained: «For supper there are put by and then served out as many

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem. Letter Prot. No. 4986 dated 12 December 1912 of Chairman Masotti to the Superior of «Locanda sanitaria» Sr. Giuseppina Pedruzzi.

<sup>5</sup> Agreement manuscript dated 9 January 1913, signed by Superior General Sr. A. Ghezzi and Chairman Sir Masotti; Agreement typed dated 9 December 1919, revised without substantial change, signed by the Superior General Sr. Vittoria Starmusch and Chairman Pio Lenzi, in AGSdC, 235/D.

entire portions (of those prepared for lunch) as have been reserved at midday, and they are picked up at the counter, where the tableware, glasses and cutlery will be put back when the meal is over. The serving of the evening meal will take place from 6 to 6.30 p.m., after which the 'Restaurant' will close down, with no exception of any sort».

Persons the Service caters to are:

- the poor of the city of Rovereto holding ration ticket free of charge for their own use, not transferable to others; they may eat the food in the premises or carry it elsewhere in recipients of their own;
- inhabitants of Rovereto suffering from pellagra, holding medical certificate, to be served for free;
- persons from outside Rovereto, suffering from pellagra, holding medical certificate and Statement issued by their own Municipality, which pays the daily fee for the lunch;
- the public in general: labourers, craftsmen, excluding employers, civil servants etc., who should have their lunch in the premises.

Fees for rations of the poor are:

- entire ration (soup, meat and vegetables; for bread and polenta there are separate tickets): 36 cents each.
- Half portion, corresponding to two-thirds of the entire ration: 24 cents each.

Persons with pellagra receive a 4 cent worth of bread instead of polenta. The menu for the following day is put up in the premises day by day.

At the end of the general rules there is a recommendation. «We do trust that those who come to this Kitchen are willing to behave well in every respect, conforming to instructions given by those in charge, including the Reverend Sisters assigned to this service» (Agreement No. 1267. «Norms for the New Cheap Meal Service and

*locanda sanitaria*»). There are then given specific details regarding the price of items of food anyone could ask from those available on the day's menu»:

<b>PRICE OF ITEMS OF FOOD THAT MAY BE ORDERED</b>		
<i>Menu</i>		<i>Costo</i>
<i>Soup: full portion</i>	0.75 litres	12 cents
<i>Beef</i>	2 grams	16 cents.
<i>Cooked vegetables</i>	about 200 grams	10 cents.
<i>Bread</i>	about 100 grams	4 cents.
<i>Polenta</i>	0.75 kg	10 cents.
<i>Fresh cheese</i>	80 grams	16 cents.
<i>Cod fish</i>	170 grams	20 cents.
<i>Spaghetti with butter</i>	200 grams	24 cents.
<i>Intingolo carne di manzo compreso cuore e coratella</i>	42 grams	24 cents.

From the Agreements we come to know that in 1913 each Sister received a salary of 300 'crowns' a year...; in 1920, in addition to food and lodging they were given, as an indemnity for expenses on clothing, 1 lira per day. In 1943 each one was paid 100 lire a month; in 1945 the monthly pay was 506 lire.

On 7 January 1945 the local Superior Sr. Leta Tomazzoni wrote to the Superior General: «Up to this moment, thank God, we have always come out safely from the Shelter», where the Sisters were edified by the fraternal love and mutual help among so many people.

In his letter of 15 October 1946 (Ref. No. 2837/87) Chairman of the Municipality Council, Sartori by name, acknowledged the Sisters' cheerful, diligent and dedicated work at the cost of real self-sacrifice; he said they exerted themselves to the utmost to the satisfaction of everyone. He added that he wished to award them an official merit but the Superior General, Sr. A. Reali pointed out: «We work for Our Lord's sake and for the good of our neighbour;

we are more than satisfied in carrying out the mission He called us to, through the religious vocation and therefore we do not seek men's praise and appreciation. But I do admit that what you wrote to me about my sisters has cheered and comforted me, because an acknowledgement expressed by the civil Authorities of their spirit of self-sacrifice and generosity, particularly in these times when every moral value is undermined, will also be for them an encouragement to strive towards ever greater heights of perfection...» (Letter dated 22 October 1946).

But on 2 June 1949 Mother Reali herself, on behalf of her Council informed that the Sisters were compelled to withdraw because the Institute was labouring under a shortage of Sisters, due especially to the sickness of very many: «This is a very painful step that I am taking, and I beg you kindly to understand the grave situation my Institute is in, and so graciously desist from making any opposition to this decision».

Though deeply sorry to receive this final decision, Chairman N.D. Toffenetti expressed esteem and thankfulness, along with a hint of hope in two letters: on 8 July 1949 he wrote: «Your Reverend Sisters who have been at the charitable Institution of the 'Ristorante Popolare' from its birth, and have nourished it with assiduous care for 60 years, are leaving among all of us a vivid memory of their self-sacrifice and of their work of charity. I am therefore expressing sentiments of gratitude of the Administration along with my own. Well aware that there is unfortunately no going back on the decision taken, I dare not ask that it be changed, but I trust that, as soon as the difficulties you mention in your letter are overcome, a new request will be taken in a most favourable consideration». And shortly before they left, on 5 September of the same year, he wrote: «In the name of the Managing Committee I express to you once again my deepest sense of gratitude for the work carried out by the Reverend Sisters of your Congregation for the benefit of 'Ristorante Popolare' which, thanks to their dedicated love and their daily, silent self-sacrifice, has always succeeded in fully meeting increasing demands in face of difficulties it has passed through, especially during the last War and its immediate aftermath».