



# and you too **do** likewise

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*Sr. Carmela Paloschi*

**«I was sick...»**

**Institutes for minors with psycho-physical ailments**

*(Part I)*

*Besides young women in moral danger (cf. CF 1) and poor young girls without parents (cf. CF 4), the Institute «totally founded on charity» should devote itself to the relief of the poor sick as well, and especially to the care and the direction of Hospitals (CF 7): these are the sectors specifically included by Bartolomea among the particular types of active charity, that was so dear to her heart.*

*However, along the course of time, Superiors General with their Council, interpreting quite correctly the term «the poorest and the most needy» did not hesitate to meet other emerging needs which they found conforming to the founding charism.*

*Thus there were founded communities to cater to minors with psycho-physical ailments: sisters were engaged in looking after the deaf-and-dumb at Milan (1894-1971), the blind at Padua (1917-1994), the mentally-ill at Marocco di Mogliano Veneto (1927-1981), the dyskinetics at Rovereto (1958-1970), the badly disabled at «Ospizio Sacra Famiglia», Milan, and at various branches (1903...).*

*The Institute has always been open to the emerging needs of the poor, well aware that theirs are the features of the charity of God.*

## «CHARITABLE INSTITUTE FOR THE DEAF-AND-DUMB FROM THE COUNTRYSIDE », MILANO-TURRO

Deserving mention among eminent persons who contributed towards the founding, at Milan, of the «Institute for poor deaf-and-dumb from the countryside», are: Fr Eliseo Ghislandi (1821-1898), catechist of the Institute for the deaf-and-dumb of Milan, founded in 1805 with limited admissions; Count Paolo Taverna (1804-1878), in his concern to help deaf-and-dumb neglected and abandoned children (as many as 150!) coming from country-suburbs of Milan. Together they formed the Committee set up to put the institution underway. This was started on 6 November 1853 in via S. Vincenzo, 21, with six children. The deaf-and-dumb girls were entrusted to the care of the Canossian Sisters of via Chiusa, 9.

The third person deserving mention was the young Fr Giulio Tarra (1832-1889). He was ordained priest on 3 June 1855 and appointed Rector of the Institute five days later (8 June). His dream was to be a Missionary Priest in Oceania, but after discernment done on the advice of his spiritual director Fr Luigi Biraghi, he wrote to Count Taverna: «...To be frank with you, my first and greatest sacrifice God wanted from me is perhaps what I'm doing now, that of giving up the loveliest idea of my youth: to be sent to the Foreign Missions... But praised be the will of the Lord whose designs are of wisdom and love... I shall be a missionary of the poor illiterate children of my own Country, since God is entrusting them to my care»<sup>1</sup>. While Fr E. Ghislandi and Count Taverna were moved by noble sentiments of compassion and the desire to help and restore human dignity by bringing up and educating the poor deaf-and-dumb children of the countryside, Fr G. Tarra courageously, unhesitatingly and skilfully blended faith with Gospel charity<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle Suore di carità*, Venezia, 1935, II, 265-267.

<sup>2</sup> P. LUGARO in *Avvenire*, 11.6.1989 in occasion of 100<sup>th</sup> death anniversary: «Scientist, teacher, publisher and loving father of the deaf-and-dumb. He stood for moral and civil regeneration of that unhappy family. The change-over from *hybridism* to the *oral method* was neither simple nor rapid. Such creatures were doubly poor: in addition to being extremely poor, with rare exceptions, they lacked the fundamental means

In 1886 the «Pia Casa d'Industria» moved from Via S. Vincenzo, 21, to Via L. Galvani, 2 and, in 1927, to Via Prinetti, 47. Here, in 1977 a Girls' Section was integrated into the charitable Institution. Its name was also changed several times in the course of the years: in 1853, «Pio Istituto per sordomuti poveri di campagna»; in 1947 «Pio Istituto sordomuti poveri di Milano»; in 1967 «Pio Istituto sordomuti di Milano», mirroring an ever greater sense of respect for the human person.

On 15 January 1894 our Sisters undertook work at the infirmary, kitchen and wardrobe. In answer to Giovanni Grandi, President of the Managing Committee, Mother A. Ghezzi wrote: «I greatly appreciate the trust shown by the honourable Committee in our small Institute in calling it to collaborate in this eminent work of charity...». She also expresses thanks for their prompt care of making the place habitable for the Sisters and suited for the service entrusted to them. She had already signed the *Prospectus* dated 22 November 1893 and the *Agreement* of 2 December 1893, when she personally accompanied the first Sisters: Superior: Valassi Sr. Claudina, Bianchi Sr. Serafina, Favalli Sr. Romualda, Scarlatini Sr. Maria and the *Sorelle mandatarie*: Carnieli Domenica, Pessina Ernesta, Verdolini Stella<sup>3</sup>. She spoke to them of the importance of their duty and that she was counting on «the understanding and support» of Count Rinaldo Taverna<sup>4</sup>.

The «Pio Istituto» received deaf-and-dumb children aged 8 to 16, physically fit and coming from families in dire need. Chapter 2 of the 1911 *Prospectus* on «Instruction and Education» says: «The regular Course of Teaching is spread over 8 years divided into four periods, that is: Prep Class (training of the senses, labial reading and writing), Classes I to III. Each Class is divided into 3 Sections

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of self-expression; yet little by little they came out from their marginalization state. After meeting with (Fr) G. Tarra and his enterprise, A. Manzoni had said: “This is a real miracle of Christian art and skill... We can now say that the redemption of the deaf-and-dumb is done: the deaf hear words and the dumb speak”», in Cronache, AGSdC, 643/B.

<sup>3</sup> The report for the current year did not give details on the duty of each one.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Corrispondenza, Letters for years 1893-1894, in AGSdC, 643/B.

and is spread over two years. As a general rule, no Section has more than 10 pupils (para 25). Regular instruction aims at developing brain work in the best possible way, to enable pupils to communicate with their society, using the local language in speech and in writing. Subjects taught were: the Catholic Religion, History, Geography, Arithmetic and what is particularly useful for integrating into social life (26). Pupils were also taught Craft and manual skills mostly in common use in an agricultural society, with opportunity for farming practice, as far as possible. In their Boarding House boys were also taught skills in carpentry, making and repairing of shoes and tailoring (29) and were given a small daily allowance for it... (30). They were helped in all ways to develop these skills well enough to earn their own living by it when they left the Institution (87). After the school year, which ended with an Annual Examination, they went home for the holidays in mid-July. School reopening was generally within the early fortnight of the following October (31)». During the holiday break the Sisters were to watch over the building and keep it in order<sup>5</sup>.

Management was in the hands of a Rector and Vice-Rector. Class-Teachers had to be qualified to teach the deaf-and-dumb. The Sisters' duties at the Boarding House were laid down in chapter 7, paras 107-115 of the *Prospectus*. They depended directly on the Managing Committee<sup>6</sup>; entrusted to their care was all necessary equipment and foodstuffs, linen-room and infirmary. They were to fill in the day-to-day forms with details of loading and unloading of the various goods. The Sister-Cook had to prepare the meals according to the list of provisions established by the Committee for the day. Regarding the general running of the Boarding School, the Sisters had to consult the Rector and abide by his orders. However, even though they were not in direct contact with the pupils, Committee members as well as teachers and other personnel appre-

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<sup>5</sup> cf. President's Letter to Superior dated 10.7.1894.

<sup>6</sup> cf. *Commissione per l'educazione dei sordomuti poveri di campagna*. Prospectus: rules for service at the kitchen, linen-room and Infirmary at the Boys' Boarding School in agreement with the Committee, 22.11.1893 - Regolamenti e convenzioni, in AGSdC, 643/B.

ciated the Sisters' self-availability and friendliness when required to help in ways within their competence.

In his letter forwarding the official *Agreement*, dated 10 July 1890, the President of the Committee wrote to the Superior: «I avail myself of this opportunity to assure you that this Committee is indeed satisfied with the enthusiasm and concern with which you and your Sisters carry out your duties for the full benefit of this Boarding School».

In his letter to the Superior General on behalf also of the Committee, the President affirmed, «I greatly appreciate and am most grateful for the valuable, kind work done by these Reverend Sisters»<sup>7</sup>. Especially moving was the Committee's testimonial in a letter of condolence to the bereaved community: «The Committee is grieved to hear of Rev. Sr. Gaetana Cereda's death caused by a fatal infection contracted while with a loving, scrupulous care she looked after the sick pupils... these loved her and looked on her as a mother, and they now pray for her, as a victim and generous martyr in her apostolic activity. All of us will for ever remember her with reverent affection» (19 February 1901). On 26 February Mother Ghezzi wrote to thank and assure the Committee that she would send her replacement, chosen «from among those best suited to meet the needs of the Institution».

The Superior General was evidently watchful over the Sisters, in her letter of 1<sup>st</sup> February 1918;<sup>8</sup> she pointed out to the President the poor working conditions of the Sisters engaged at the Military Hospital put up in the premises of the Institution for the deaf-and-dumb. And on 9 January 1920 Mother V. Starmusch submitted to the President, Count Luigi Paravicini, an updated *Agreement*, which

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<sup>7</sup> cf. Letters dated 12.2.1897 and 5.11.1898.

<sup>8</sup> From 1902 to 1918, there are no letters in our Archives.

confirmed the Sisters in their duties but declared that henceforth Sisters and *Sorelle mandatarie* had to depend no longer on the Committee but on the local Superior, who had to «observe appropriate norms and pass on the required information to the right persons».

On 21 September 1930 another bereavement in the community served as an opportunity to acknowledge the significance of the Sisters’ presence at the Institution. The President wrote: «The Administrative Body was grieved to hear of the death of Sr. Elisa Savio... we will always remember the loving care with which she carried out her duties as sister-in-charge».

From November 1942 to October 1946 the Home had to move to other buildings outside Milan: Alzate and Versago (CO) where the same routine of class and work was kept up with a smaller number of deaf-and-dumb. The Superior was Sr. Giuseppina Bruschi. On the evacuation of the German troops and then by the Allies, the daily routine at Milan was resumed and children on the roll increased considerably.

The Table below gives an idea of the attendance through the pre-war years, during the War and in the post-war years. Figures were drawn from statistics preserved in the Archives of the Generalate:

<i>Year</i>	<i>On the Roll</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>On the Roll</i>
1939	112 at Milan	1946	114 at Milan
1940	118 at Milan	1947	120 at Milan
1941	119 at Milan	1948	130 at Milan
1942	70 at Alzate	1949	130 at Milan
1943	70 at Alzate	1950	130 at Milan
1944	70 at Versago	1951	123 at Milan
1945	64 at Versago	1952	123 at Milan

Average attendance of the deaf-and-dumb was 125; superiors over this period: 5; teachers: 4; assistant teachers: 10. The Sisters’ activity was remarkable.

In 1954 the first centenary of foundation was celebrated. The leaflet said: «In these last hundred years of healthy life, the Institution catering for needy deaf-and-dumb has restored to our society no less than 1,350 deaf-and-dumb boys and 980 deaf-and-dumb girls, made able to speak and qualified for a fruitful work. School Year 1953-1954 had 128 pupils in the Boys' Section, 80 in the girls' Section and 35 children in the Nursery Class. Milan Centre was always considered as most admirable; the noble achievement of our ancestors has always shed a beneficent light».

Testimonials expressing esteem and gratitude towards the Sisters came mostly from the new Rector, Mgr Giulio Broggi. On 10 July 1961 he wrote to Mother C. Balducci: «Your Sisters' work among us truly deserves the highest praise» and with his wishes for Christmas 1962: «...they are sincere wishes prompted by gratitude for the humble, splendid work done by your Sisters among us to the benefit of our poor deaf-and-dumb... and to our own benefit too». Warm thanks were again expressed as the next Easter was drawing near: «...My wishes are dictated purely by what I owe you in return for all the good your Sisters are doing for the sake of the deaf-and-dumb and of the priests who look after them, and for the edifying example they give us of every religious virtue...».

By 1936, at the request and advice of Cardinal I. Schuster, a residential community of priests engaged at the 'Pious Institute' was set up with the assurance given by Mother A. Sterni that food and care would be provided for them by the Sisters<sup>9</sup>. Again in occasion of Christmas 1967 Mgr Broggi attested: «...Your Sisters are working wonders in our Institution... they work hard in self-forgetfulness just like lively young girls. Thank you. I am very grateful to you. On my behalf our dear children thank you most warmly».

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<sup>9</sup> cf. Community diary, in AGSdC, 643/B.

In 1970 the irreversible process of *ridimensionamento* began in our Congregation. On **29 June 1971**, painfully yet fully trusting in God's will as mediated by major superiors, the Sisters<sup>10</sup> ended their service. However, there remained for a long, long time the memory of their loving care of the deaf-and-dumb, which they had «learnt at the foot of Jesus Redeemer», and of their life-witnessing, as was attested that very year, on 27 April, by Mgr Broggi, no longer Rector since 1969, but still there as 'an old Teacher' among the poor deaf-and-dumb who had won his affection: «The news [that the Sisters are leaving the Institution] has truly taken us by surprise and greatly saddened us. On the basis of my long experience I can affirm that the Sisters here are not 'engaged only in house keeping'; they are carrying out a real apostolate among our poor, unfortunate children, and their work is fully conforming to the aims of the Institute of the Sisters of Charity. Ours is a large family and the Sisters are its 'mothers'... all of us priests have always had a deep esteem and admiration for the work the Sisters are doing in silence, unknown to all. From the intellectual and moral point of view the disability of a deaf-and-dumb person is more severe than that of a blind person; your sisters are helping the unfortunate, and they are doing much good by word, manners, and example. The Lord will bless and increase your glorious Institute in return for your charity towards the unfortunate...».

The Pious Institute remained active till 1994, in spite of the decrease of pupils owing to the integrating of the deaf into the State School.

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<sup>10</sup> Pincioli Sr. Rosa, superior, nurse; Mandelli Sr. Bambina engaged in house duties; Pirola Sr. Teresia, in charge of linen-room; Rusconi Sr. Aurelia, nurse; Scolari Sr. Giuseppa, cook, see *Catalogo generale*, 1970, in AGSdC.

## «INSTITUTE FOR THE BLIND», PADUA

### 1. «Convitto Maria» - «S. Massimo» - «Ricovero privato Beata Capitano»

Fr Giacinto Turazza, the Director of «Istituto Luigi Configliachi» catering for the blind at Padua<sup>11</sup>, in 1893 opened at his own expense, in Via S. Massimo, Padua, a Home for poor blind girls of that Province. He personally attended to the basic elements of general instruction and to their spiritual growth, while his sisters Angelina and Augusta organized the activities of the small group and provided for their maintenance. By 1904 the number of their pupils had increased and so they moved to Via R. Marin, next to the Armenians' Block, in a more suitable building, and the charitable project was named «Convitto Maria per le cieche».

In 1916 Angelina Turazza died and her sister Augusta, feeling she could not manage adequately by herself, asked for the presence of the Sisters of Lovere. Unfortunately, perhaps due to War damage, there is no documentary evidence left in our Archives of the formal transaction between Miss Augusta Turazza and the Superior General, nor even of the Bishop's authorization for the undertaking of this new apostolic service.

The project was found conforming to our charism and so, on **18 June 1917** Mother Angela Ghezzi sent Sr. Maria Teresa Borelli as Superior with a Sister and a *Sorella mandataria* to «Convitto Maria» to look after, teach and above all love 29 blind persons<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> It was the first Institution in Italy (1838) meant to cater exclusively to the blind: to provide school education and train them in a skill to earn their own living as independent citizens. The Founder of «Asilo caritatevole per la sociale istruzione dei ciechi» was Abbot Luigi Configliachi (1787-1864), Lecturer in *Storia Naturale* and *Economia Rurale* at Padua University. This *Opera Pia*, subsidized by the Austrian Government (from 1840 to 1851) and by Territorial Fund, Veneto (from 1854 to 1868), was recognized as *Ente Morale* in 1870.

<sup>12</sup> cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle Suore di carità*, Venezia, 1936, III, 419-421. In the current statistical data for 31.12.1917 the religious community comprised: Sr. M. Teresa Borelli, Sr. Colomba Fumagalli; *sorelle mandatarie*: Turazza Augusta (later Sr. Giuseppina in 1922), Guidolini Maria and Mastorgi Angioletta.

The disastrous events of World War I, particularly the Battle of Caporetto (24.10-12.11.1917), caused serious hardship to their blind charges, who were forced to get up several times during the night. Several measures were taken in an attempt to help the girls: at first, Mgr Luigi Pelizzo, Bishop of Padua (1906-1923), offered them shelter in a room on the Ground Floor of the Seminary; then Comm. Turazza put them up at his house in Bassanello, on the out-skirts of the city; in the end, on 4 January 1918, on the advice of the Superior General, Sisters and girls left Padua and moved as refugees to Serina (BG) in Brembana Valley. There they were warmly received and cared for by the population, and the place was quiet and healthy, but the girls were not keeping well at all, so much so that five of them (a nine-year old and 4 fourteen-year olds) fell ill and died in Bergamo Hospital, to the deep grief of the inhabitants who had enjoyed hearing the girls' sweet voices. This sad situation induced Mother Ghezzi to have them transferred to «Maria Bambina» Boarding School, Lodi. However, in spite of the advantage of a milder climate, three other girls fell ill and died, leaving in bereavement Sisters, relatives and companions<sup>13</sup>. On 14 March 1919 the *Convitto* returned to the Padua address and resumed the usual routine: study, work (loom, crochet, knitting), piano and organ playing, prayer, recreation... supervised in a loving manner by the Sisters.

Superior Sr. M. Teresa made repeated attempts to purchase a place with more spacious rooms<sup>14</sup>; in 1921 there emerged the hope that Sisters and girls could be received at the «Istituto Configliachi». Mother V. Starmusch encouraged all concerned to have trust in divine Providence and in March 1923 she herself took the problem in hand: she asked the Superior to supply all the details: number of blind girls, annual fee, which was not the same for all, and the payer for each one. Of the 35 girls, only 9 were 'subsidized' partly by their family; the Municipality or the Province supplied the rest.

With the list there are attached *details on the weekly diet*<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle Suore di carità*, Venezia, 1936, III, 583-584.

<sup>14</sup> cf. Corrispondenza from 1919 to 1923, in AGSdC, 650/A.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

Breakfast	coffee with milk; bread at one's pleasure
Lunch	soup and side dish:    Sunday    - meat and greens Monday    - meat-balls or <i>salame</i> and greens Tuesday   - meat-balls and greens Wednesday - cheese and greens Thursday - meat-balls and greens Friday    - cod or other fish and greens Saturday - <i>salame</i> and greens a glass of milk per meal; wine for a few
Merenda	bread
Supper	<i>pancotto</i> or <i>pasta</i> ; dried fruit or greens

It is a menu that gives us an idea of current conditions, quite different from those of our consumeristic society...

In April 1923 there is recorded an exchange of letters between the Superior General and Comm. E. Turazza. The latter is against the idea of moving the blind girls' group into the spacious property of the Institute at Orsago (TV) because in his opinion the Sisters would run the risk of being unable to run their private Institution on a par with State Institution about to be opened at «Configliachi».

It was accordingly decided to move to the «**Istituto Configliachi**», integrating the Girls' group into the comprehensive State School by **12 October 1924, Sector: Education and Instruction**.

But on **2 February 1924** Mother Starmusch wrote to Sr. Clementina Azzini, Provincial Superior of Venice, that her Council had approved the proposal of placing at «**S. Massimo**»<sup>16</sup> the blind girls who, being over-age applicants, would be refused admission into the new institution. Thus, from **13 September 1924** onwards 14 adults aged thirty to sixty found themselves living happily in adequate premises, which later (date not given) was named «**Ricovero privato Beata Capitanio**», S. Massimo, 27, run by Superior Sr. Maria Zenato of the Ladies' Home, then independently by Sr. Assunta Parini.

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<sup>16</sup> The «Pensionato S. Massimo» was opened by Mother Clementina Lachmann in 1890 with the aim of providing accomodation and care to elderly ladies who were sick and had none to look after them.  
cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle Suore di carità*, Venezia, 1935, II, 176-177.

On 23 October 1925 Mother Starmusch undersigned a document with the Timetable and a brief Prospectus<sup>17</sup> for the new structure: «Adult blind persons may be admitted provided their character is irreproachable. They must produce: Baptism Certificate, Good Health Certificate, blindness without any infectious discharge, statement of person who assumes the obligation to pay the fee, which could be paid on a three-month or six-month basis. Personal outfit. Pursue of study, for those who ask for it, knitting work and crochet. The Home is built on a healthy site and has open space good for walking about. The diet is good».

*Day-to-day Timetable*

5.30	Getting-up, prayer, Holy Mass, meditation	14.00	Study
8.00	Breakfast, tidying up of one's room, of dormitories	15.00	Religious instruction, spiritual reading
9.00	Work	15.30	Work
10.30	Break	16.30	Break
11.00	Study	17.00	Holy Rosary, Evening prayer
12.00	Chapel visit	18.00	Supper, Recreation
12.30	Lunch	20.00	Rest

Of remarkable importance is the study of music, which blind persons have particular aptitude for and are good at, so much so that they often perform wonderfully well.

Sisters look after the blind adults with loving concern; their hearts suggest ways and means of meeting the real needs of the poor and those in distress. Worth quoting is an article called «Cieche veggenti» (blind who see) written by Mgr Pietro Prevedello in 1926, about the service rendered by the Sisters of Padua in occasion of the Beatification of Bartolomea Capitanio: «You are praiseworthy, Sisters of Blessed B. Capitanio ...in looking after the little blind girls entrusted to your care, you discover treasures of intelligence, loving kindness, determination and talent as a result of which our society no longer looks on them with pity but with wonder and

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<sup>17</sup> Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 650/A.

admiration, because they find in those you have restored creatures worthy of the most lively sympathy and wide interest»<sup>18</sup>.

The Sisters kept up this activity until the President Ing. Comm. G. Indri, in his letter dated 13 October 1936, suggested to Mother A. Sterni that the «Ricovero Beata Capitanio» for the adult blind of Via Massimo could be transferred to the administrative Body of «Istituto L. Configliachi», a recognized public Body catering for children blind from birth to death<sup>19</sup>.

2. *Istituto «Luigi Configliachi» per minorati della vista. Reparto: educazione e istruzione; rieducazione professionale e lavoro; casa di riposo*

From what is said above on the basis of documentary evidence available: conditions of our Archives and Agreements drawn up with «Configliachi», we can trace the gradual passing into dependence on «Istituto L. Configliachi» Padua, and the erection of our three religious communities. On 12 October 1924, Superior Sr. Teresa Borelli, with four Sisters and six *Sorelle mandatari*, took up service at the **Department of Education and Instruction, Girls' Section**.

The *Agreement* in our possession, dated 21 July 1933 enumerates the duties and demands of the sisters' work: «The said community will carry out its duties inside the Girls' Section of the Institute, such as general instruction (excluding Elementary School Education and Music), supervision, keeping the girls and their rooms clean and tidy, and duties common to the Boys' Section and Girls' Department, and also looking after the patients in the infirmaries

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<sup>18</sup> cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle Suore di carità*, Venezia, 1936, III, 421.

<sup>19</sup> From 1925 to 1936 there is no written evidence of correspondence between «Ricovero Beata Capitanio» and the Generalate, nor of correspondence between the Congregation and «Configliachi».

within the limits allowed by the Sisters' Regulations (2). The religious Congregation commits itself to provide the service of three Sister-Teachers: one for minding the Girls' Elementary School Section after school hours, one for the Nursery and one for Needlework classes. The first two must be qualified to teach and have attended the Rome Course in Method of teaching the Blind (3). The Sister-Supervisor will ensure the strict observance of the rules and terms established by the *regolamento interno*; she must keep the President regularly informed of what goes on in the Institute, draw up a brief account of the day-to-day events in the Girls' Section, the daily attendance of girls and personnel under her charge... a brief annual report of the work carried out over the school year, with observations and suggestions of her own (9).

Sister Superior, who is directly responsible for the Girls' Section, must see to it that Elementary School teachers, teachers of Music and of Craft carry out their work in conformity with what is laid down by the Agreement... She is authorized to watch over the moral conduct of the personnel and to admonish them (10). A Sister Teacher of Needlework was at the head of Craft Classes, including knitting. Sisters and *Sorelle mandatarie* had to accompany the pupils when they went out or when, for their studies, they had to go to the boys' Section (12)»<sup>20</sup>.

The *Agreement* of 1<sup>st</sup> October 1935 is the only document that mentions the opening of the religious community at **Pontevigodarzere** (PD) for the **Reparto Lavoro** (Craft Department, later called *Rieducazione professionale e lavoro*). «The said community will carry out its service in the kitchen and wardrobe and cleaning of the rooms, helped by lay personnel (2). The Sisters will be given a room to be converted into a Chapel where the blind will also be given religious assistance (4)»<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> *Agreement* dated 21.7.1933, signed by the President ing. Annibale Mazzaroli, the Superior General Sr. A. Sterni and Bishop Carlo Agostini. *Convenzioni*, in AGSdC, 650/A.

<sup>21</sup> *Agreement* dated 1.10.1935 between the Home for the Blind «L. Configliachi», Padua, represented by his *Commissario ministeriale* avv. cav. G. Cavalcaselle,

The Superior, Sr. Giovannina Praderio was helped by Sr. Francesca Bonati and by *Sorella mandataria* Maria Bolcato<sup>22</sup>.

The blind girls were trained in various kinds of manual work: in the use of knitting needles, spindles, crochet, looms for weaving thread into cloth. The blind boys are taught craft work in wicker, cane, broomcorn and marsh feathers.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1937, after considerable care and trouble taken by the President of the Management G. Indri, by Mother A. Sterni, Sr. Assunta Parini, Superior of «San Massimo», Sr. Ernesta Gallotti<sup>23</sup>, Provincial Superior of Venice, and with the consent of Bishop Carlo Agostini (1932-1949), the Sisters assumed service at the **Rest Home** for invalids, blind girls and boys, a branch of «Configliachi» in Via Belzoni, 49. The Home consisted of two country-houses offered by Prof. Luigi Bottazzo, an eminent musician, a blind man, former pupil of the Institution. The community comprised: Superior Sr. Agostina Cisco, Sr. Carmela Cibin, Sr. Fedele Scarton and *Sorella mandataria* Luigina Agnoletti<sup>24</sup>.

The *Agreement* of 22 January 1937 indicates the «Duties of the Sisters: day-to-day management, promoting devotion, health, recreation and good behaviour, thrifty habits in cooking and distributing food, the wardrobe, keeping the place clean and tidy with the help of lay-personnel engaged at the Rest-Home (3). In the assuming or dismissing lay-personnel the advice of the local Superior is sought, who is free to admonish them and, in cases of insubordination, to have recourse to the President or acting-president of

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assisted by the Secretary of the Home rag. Virginio Bonetto, by Bishop Carlo Agostini and Superior General Sr. A. Sterni, *Convenzioni*, in AGSdC, 650/A.

<sup>22</sup> cf. *Stato Effettivo* 1935, in AGSdC.

<sup>23</sup> cf. *Corrispondenza* September-December 1936, in AGSdC, 650/A.

<sup>24</sup> cf. *Stato effettivo* 1937, in AGSdC.

the Institution, on whom she depends (3)»<sup>25</sup>. The Chaplain celebrated Holy Mass every morning and gave an hour a week of religious instruction in all the classes.

Due to World War II all three departments (School, Manual skills, Rest) moved first to Piazzola sul Brenta and then to Monselice till 1945. Meanwhile, in 1944 the last two departments returned together to Padua in a new building in Via Guido Reni, 38. The Sisters formed a single community with Sr. G. Praderio as Superior till 1949 and after that with Superior Sr. Virginia Bruschi till 1967.

The *Agreements* regarding the Department of Education and Instruction were updated in 1962 (5 December) with adjustment in economic affairs, the Sisters' enrolment into I.N.P.S. and their retirement from service at 60 years of age, with some exceptions<sup>26</sup>.

The Sector of Education and Instruction admitted only the blind aged 3 to 15 mostly in view of a school education. Their schooling covered from 10 to 12 years, divided into the following Sections: Kindergarten; Elementary School conforming to the programme set by the State from 1960; music classes with teachers, some of whom were blind, appointed by the *Local Education Authority* of Padua, on a par with the State Conservatory from 1953; assistance to those who went to the Public Classes (Medie).

The Sector *Rieducazione professionale e lavoro* (Training in Arts and Crafts) admitted blind persons of age 16 to 45; its aim was to give them a professional training to enable them to integrate into the world of work. The early simple workshops developed gradually and produced samples of an ever more refined quality. The School followed the general school syllabus in Braille writing, polyphonic music, choral and creative compositions; there were also two-year courses for telephone operators starting from 1957, and three-year courses for masseurs from 1963 onwards.

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<sup>25</sup> *Agreement* dated 22.1.1935 signed by President ing. Giuseppe Indri, by the Superior General Sr. Angiolina Reali and the Bishop. *Convenzioni*, in AGSdC, 650/A.

<sup>26</sup> *Agreement* dated 5.12.1962, signed by President cav. Federico Marconini, by the Secretary rag. Virginio Bonetto and by the Superior General Sr. Costantina Baldinucci, in AGSdC, 650/A.

Music has always powerfully fascinated with its melody and song the highly emotive spirit and sensitive ear of persons deprived of sight, and made of them brilliant artists. We have a sample of an invitation to their first musical entertainment program, held on 17 May 1952, with music of classical and modern authors, played on the piano and on the organ, and four-part songs.

Evidence of the passionate interest and concern of the Sisters for this aspect, not solely for their material needs, is a letter dated 19 February 1963 with reflections on a Meeting, treating of the psychology of the Blind, held at Trieste. Sr. Stefania Artuso writes to Mother C. Balducci: «Our task as educators is truly delicate. It consists in helping our charges in discovering their capacities and developing the energies that blindness may at times render more difficult to emerge. It involves, especially, seeking to instil in our young people a great confidence in the life in store for them so that, sustained by their formation and education received they may in due time integrate in their society as active, autonomous members of it».

In the sector *Casa di riposo (Rest home)*, where the Sisters' presence was meant to give assistance, protection and a sense of security, the blind men and women, with no age limit, were unable to work. The women, looked after by the Sisters, depended directly on Sister Superior, while the men depended on the Director. The Sisters supervised the women's Section and were engaged in various types of service in the men's Section<sup>27</sup>.

From the «*Registro Opere*» of the Congregation, we can have a rough idea of the average number of persons cared for, every year, in each of the three Sections, over different periods.

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<sup>27</sup> cf. SR. FEDELE SCARTON, *Cronaca dell'«Istituto Configliachi» per i ciechi di Padova*, 1965; *Cronistoria dell'«Istituto per ciechi»*, Padova, 1972 (not signed by Sister-in-charge), in AGSdC, 650/A.

	<i>Education</i>	<i>Work</i>	<i>Rest</i>
1939	130	50	32
1940	117	70	34
1941	115	60	40
1942	100	45	36
1943	200	70	40

Figures are indicative of spacious residential areas as well as considerable responsibility of persons committed to respective types of service. At irregular intervals there are recorded also the total number of persons in groups attended to in turns at the summer camp «C. Lorato» in Asiago (VI).

	<i>Education</i>	<i>Work</i>	<i>Rest</i>	<i>Summer Camp</i>
1954	110	140	75	/
1955	99	140	80	/
1956	108	140	70	/
1957	112	150	70	270
1958	120	170	70	224

Later on, *Education* and *Work* form a single Unit, while the *Rest Home* is recorded separately; Statistics simply give details in a five-column Table, as above.

	<i>Education and Work</i>	<i>Rest</i>	<i>Summer Camp</i>
1963	171	205	75
1964	196	200	/
1965	235	200	/
1966	221	195	75
1967	216	180	75

Statistical figures show a decrease in the number of young people and a steady increase of the aged invalids, admitted and cared for at «Configliachi». Hence, starting from 1968 the Sisters,

with Sr. Bartolomea Stocco as Superior, stay on in service, with humble concern, only at the Rest Home<sup>28</sup>.

In the document «Bagliori di luce e di grazia divina» of 30 December 1970 we find presented, as in a picture, a segment of the life of three blind persons: one of them was an elderly man and the two others were young. The friendliness of the priest and of the Sisters help them overcome moments of peevish behaviour and of lack of religious devotion: as a result their 'spiritual sight' is restored and their life, and that of their friends and relatives, emerges from the shadow to the kindly light.

Demands on the Sisters are increasing ever more and they are no longer able to meet the needs of life around them adequately well. On 1<sup>st</sup> April 1973, Sr. Carla Tagliapietra, provincial superior, wrote to Mother A. Campanile proposing that the activity be closed down because the Sisters were old and their health too poor: «Before we are told to leave, it is wiser to withdraw. *Ridimensionamento* is painful, but inevitable». The Superior General agreed, and so Sr. Carla informed the President of the *Opera Pia*, comm. Eugenio Travetti; the latter passed on the communication to Mgr Pasquale Macchi, secretary of Pope Paul VI, asking him to intervene: «...the withdrawal of the Sisters would endanger the Christian outlook of the persons involved, who are already so sorely tried and whose sole comfort derives from their faith; they are in particular need of delicate, affectionate care. Apart from the work load expected of them, the Sisters' activity is particularly important, inasmuch as their presence, so exemplary from every point of view, is a sure guarantee towards the good running of the House»<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> cf. Stato effettivo and Registro delle opere, in AGSdC.

<sup>29</sup> Letter dated 27.11.1973. Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 650/A.

In her reply on 6 December the provincial superior begs to be excused for the pain the decision may cause, expresses thanks for what has been done for the benefit of the Sisters, who have worked with simplicity of heart, honesty and goodwill; she stresses that all this is no longer sufficient, because the commitment to promote the welfare of other persons calls for an all-round vitality and an adequate professional training.

The blind men and women cared for also wrote to the Superior General: «We appeal to the charity of Christ, which is your life's programme...»<sup>30</sup>.

On 30 December 1973, since replacement by young Sisters was not available, the Sisters were to be found in the new community assigned to each by religious obedience. The last Superior was Sr. Serena Toni.

«Istituto L. Configliachi» for the blind, of Padua-Arcella, run completely by qualified lay personnel, today carries out its service in two Sectors: Rest home and Centre of professional Training, with the following types of service: orientation and mobility, sight rehabilitation for the visually impaired, Braille library, speech therapy, hostel (ways and means to help the blind integrate in their society as autonomous individuals).

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<sup>30</sup> Letter dated 30.12.1973. Corrispondenza, ibidem.