



and you too **do** likewise

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

Homes for abandoned children

*Anyone who welcomes one of these little children
in my name, welcomes me (Mk 9:37)*

«PIO ISTITUTO FRANCESCO CHIOZZI - OSPIZIO ESPOSTI» CASALMAGGIORE (CR) 1890-1965

Casalmaggiore is an Italian municipality of about 15,500 inhabitants, of the province and diocese of Cremona, in Lombardy; it overlooks the left bank of the river Po, to which it owes some of its commercial advantages, but it is also the cause of the last devastating floods of 1951, 1994 and 2000.

Its historical development justifies the presence of a Home for Foundlings. Thanks to its traditional agricultural vocation¹, the population developed a sound industrial and commercial craft fabric; from the socio-political point of view, first it gains independence from Cremona (1427), then it receives the title of city by Maria Theresa of Austria (1754), finally, the role of being the capital city of the province, including large areas of the territory of Casale and Viadana (1787). At a religious level, the community of Casale aspired to gain higher prestige, however, although the attempt of having a bishopric² failed, they received the recompensation of

¹ Casale: the origin of the name refers to a *casale*, a plot of land with a farm-house typical of an agricultural region.

² In 1769 pope Clement XIV promised to establish a bishopric. Cf. *Casalmaggiore: il duomo abbaziale di Santo Stefano Protomartire*, a cura di Enrico Cirani, 2015.

having their parish recognised as an abbey and in 1840, they built the Abbey-Cathedral of Santo Stefano which was governed by a mitred abbot³. All this led to a widespread prosperity which influenced the life-style, hence, festivals and various entertainments were organized both by the noble families and by the people.

On 28 May 1890 Sr. M. Agostina Baruffini, superior of the zone hospital⁴, informs mother Clementina Lachmann that the president of the wet-nursing section, abbot of Santo Stefano, Mgr Francesco Grossi, needs two sisters, one as superior or *sorella servente* and the other as sister-in-charge of the linen room, for «Pio Institute Francesco Chiozzi - Home for Foundlings» which was under restructuring; on 10 June he sends her the Regulations of the Home for Foundlings⁵. After having duly considered the case with her council, on 3 June, mother C. Lachmann writes to the administration of the Home, and plainly states that the apostolic work is in accordance with the aims and purposes of the Institute, but that there is the difficulty of opening a community just with two sisters, while the minimum number consented by Canon Law is three; besides she also wants to know the precise or approximate opening date of the Home for Foundlings because at the present moment she has no persons available.

In the following period, until October, an intensive exchange of letters⁶ (up to 10 letters) took place: mother C. Lachmann deals with the problems of the new community. The president decides

³ An abbot wearing the mitre (head top used by bishops) is the superior of an abbey who governs the territory which is not under the jurisdiction of the bishop; he has authority also upon the parishes in the surroundings; he wears the insignia and enjoys the privileges of a bishop.

⁴ From 1845 at Casalmaggiore our sisters carried out the service at the zone hospital and at the *Pio ricovero dei vecchi*, rest home; the lord-lieutenant, prince Schwarzenberg, the king's personal representative in Lombardy, in 1850 awarded the superior of the rest home with a commendation cross. Cf. PREVEDELLO A., *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, I, Venezia, 1933, 119, 163.

⁵ We do not have any news about the existence of previous apostolic works, probably dating back to 1830, nor do we have the text of the above quoted Regulations.

⁶ cf. Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 415/A.

that 1st November will be the established date to start the apostolic work and that two sisters are enough for the service; if mother Lachmann wishes to add a third sister the Institute must cover the expenses. This element, which today may appear unsuitable, is an index of the economic and financial difficulties which conditioned the foundation and that, from time to time, re-appears. A possible solution was to introduce the two sisters in the community of the hospital, but the superior makes it clear that a half-an-hour trip would be inconvenient, both in winter for the cold weather and in summer for the hot weather.

Open to charity, but also caring for her spiritual daughters, mother C. Lachmann asks the administrators a ‘model’ of the agreement; she corrected the paragraph about the economic treatment of the sisters pointing out that «...among us we do not admit distinctions and that among the members of the Congregation whatever the office they exercise – indifferently in any establishment – they receive the same allowance without any partiality both for the directress as well as for the cook» (15.9.1890).

The note ‘implicitly’⁷ refers to No. 12 of the Foundation Document, where Bartolomea states: «...it seems to me that our Lord desires in it the greatest charity among the individuals, a perfect community with total equality among all, without any partiality whatsoever, neither for the rich, nor for the frail, or for any other human consideration. From the time of joining the Institute, everyone should be a perfect sister to the poor daughters of this Institute». Further on, mother C. Lachmann points out: «Since, however, the two sisters... are full-time engaged in their duties, they need someone (a servant girl/woman) to provide and cook meals; the said person will be maintained by the sisters out of their own pay, therefore, I ask that the sum proposed should not be changed».

After receiving the advice and the approval of his eminence Mgr Geremia Bonomelli, bishop of Cremona – who thanks the

⁷ ‘Implicitly’, because the so called *Promemoria*, drawn up by Bartolomea on 26 April 1831 was discovered and given the official name of «Foundation Documents» in 1969, in the course of the XIX special general chapter.

sisters for the new apostolic work they will be undertaking in his diocese – mother C. Lachmann sends back the agreement duly corrected and signed to the administration and confirms that Sr. Cecilia Lira will undertake the service as directress of the Institution and Sr. Pierina Cabrini will be in charge of the linen room. Mother C. Lachmann writes that on 15 October the sisters will leave for Casalmaggiore to prepare themselves and to get things ready, in order to start their new mission and she adds, humble and aware of human limits: «They are coming there with all the good will to devote themselves zealously to the duties assigned to them and I trust that this respectable administration will support them generously and with sympathy»⁸.

The following duties of the sisters were drawn up in the Agreement of 6 September 1890⁹; to monitor the observance of the disciplinary Regulations both by the in-patients and by the personnel; to promote with maternal care the physical development of the foundlings (No. 3); to ensure orderliness and cleanliness in all departments, to carry out the service of the treasurer, the kitchen, the pantry and of the linen room (No. 4); to take care of the sick at the Rest Home, to be present during the doctor's and the surgeon's visit, to give them an account of the good and bad effects produced by the remedies (No. 5). They will depend on the local superior for the fulfilment of the duties entrusted to them (No. 11). The directress must keep the records of the foundlings, the daily movement of the personnel and of the financial system, to watch over the competence of the personnel appointed for the services of the Institution, such as: wet nurses, farmers... (No. 6).

The average number of children under care is 20 and they are mostly illegitimate children who, at the beginning, were abandoned immediately after their birth. A high mortality rate is recorded due to, in some cases, the difficulties in finding healthy and reliable

⁸ Letter of 3.10.1890, Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 415/A.

⁹ Signed by the superior general Sr. C. Lachmann, by the administrators Pollani Pietro and F. Grossi and by the bishop of Cremona his eminence Mgr G. Bonomelli, in AGSdC, 415/C.

wet-nurses for the nursery¹⁰. There are also some orphans who due to their tiny age are not accepted at the orphanage. Their number increases especially when the mothers have to go working in the rice fields and they mostly come from poor families.

In 1895 the superior Sr. Vittoria Montini, asks mother Ghezzi for the help of a *mandataria* sister at the expense of the Establishment, because the work is immense, but in 1899 she herself asks the permission to give up the salary of one sister to the Institution, going through hard economic difficulties and is forced to reduce the salary of the staff, including that of the secretary and of the medical doctor in charge, and affirms that the sisters «are in a painful agony for the poor unfortunate children»¹¹.

On 12 May 1901, on behalf of the administration, abbot Ferdinando Balteri writes: «The miserable financial conditions of this pious Institution do not make it possible to reach a balanced budget without carrying out substantial reductions to the budgeting of the expenses and the salaries, and although convinced that it is not a good thing to do «for the personnel, and less still for these pious sisters whose allowance is not enough to remunerate their charitable, assiduous and intelligent work which they carry out for this Institution». Mother Ghezzi agrees to reduce the sum given to each sister and writes: «since the good of the Establishments is very dear to us too»¹². After the critical situation, the salary is re-established and updated in 1910.

In September 1909, the abbot draws mother Ghezzi's attention to the situation concerting the superior Sr. Vittoria; while acknowledging her high merit and valuable service, he says that her advanced

¹⁰ cf. The community diary of 1953, in AGSdC.

¹¹ cf. letter of 7.12.1899, Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 415/A.

¹² *Ibid*, cf. letter of 12 and of 18 May 1901.

age (78 years) and poor health make it advisable to let her retire from her service. He himself is well-disposed to accept consequent change of sisters because he says that: «both in Soresina and now in Casalmaggiore, I have always been fully satisfied with the sisters of charity, and have always got on well with all of them because they are all good and full of true religious spirit»¹³.

Sr. Cristina Secleifer succeeds her and, during her term of office, she does not report particular problems.

In 1923¹⁴, the superior is Sr. Costanza Zanda and the president is the mitred abbot, apostolic prothonotary, the Palatine count canon Temistocle Marini, successor to abbot Eugenio Chiodelli. The relations with the administration are good; the economic situation of the Institution is healed and the remuneration to the employees is adjusted and increased.

However, some difficulties regarding the children arise: the permanence, at the Institution, of some male foundlings over the established age who create harming circumstances for the little ones (reported also in the report of 1909), and the ordinance addressed to the president by the National Institution for the protection of Motherhood and Childhood, in accordance with the Home Officer, to accommodate detained juveniles for public safety measures, in order to avoid closing them up in security sections under the police force or in prison¹⁵. The abbot, Temistocle Marini, not without obstacles, provides for the transfer of the boys over seven years to the orphanage and firmly tells to the provincial Federation that the Home for Foundlings cannot accommodate detained children for security measures, because the Institution is run by a few sisters who already have to look after the newborn babies and it is not possible for them to follow the troublesome boys; besides the spaces within the Institution do not meet these new needs. Above all, the great issue is that the children will have to live with these dangerous

¹³ *Ibid*, cf. letter of 16.10.1909.

¹⁴ The epistolary body preserved in the archives is lacking from 1917 to 1923.

¹⁵ cf. letter of 12 May 1927 in which is enclosed the letter of 29 April 1927, Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 415/B.

boys which will create serious disorders in the Institution¹⁶. In short the emergency is subdued.

In October 1929, the abbot himself expressed his desire to open a *charitable kitchen* in the Home during the winter months, from 15 December to the end of March, so he asks mother for a sister and, later on, due to the increased work, for a sister *mandataria*; with reference to the latter demand, mother Ghezzi suggests to assume a lay person, due to lack of sisters.

In 1945 the sisters are asked to do another service: «...*the preparation and cooking of a meal* (a hot soup and a glass of wine, in a fully spiritual atmosphere) for the ex-internees and refugees coming back from Germany, since the sisters of Maria Bambina already work among the evacuated and refugees, e.g. in Vicobellignano». At that moment, mother Angiolina Reali is at Maggiano (LC) together with her council and most of the sisters of the generalate, because Milan is under the bombardments; she writes to Mr. Ennio Fiezzi, Catholic university student, promoter of the project together with the abbot, confirming what has already been communicated by telephone: «...I gladly grant the permission to the sister cook of the Foundling Home to lend a helping hand in the supervision of personnel in charge to prepare the meal for the Italian internees who have returned safely from Germany; the superior, in approaching those poor people, so in need of every kind of assistance, will be able, whenever possible, to say a good word of comfort and faith, to offer her advice, encourage them etc., but she should not give lectures»¹⁷.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, letters of 12 May 1927 and of 19 September 1928.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, letter of Fiezzi Ennio (not dated) to mother A. Ghezzi and that of mother to E. Fiezzi of 28 June 1945.

As we can see, the Home for Foundlings is rather modest and it is not organically structured as the complex ONMI (National Service for Maternity and Infancy), but it is open to the needs of time and of the place, and this demanded the sisters to be very open and to have a great spirit of sacrifice. In the community diaries of the latest years¹⁸, we perceive that the children are 20, the boys from one to eight years and the girls up to twelve years; then they either return living with relatives or are sent to the orphanage; some attend the primary school, others the kindergarten and the little ones, from 15 to 18 months, remain at home. At Christmas and Easter, if requested, they may go home for some days, while in the months of July and August they are accompanied for a holiday in the mountains, at Castello dei Conti (BG).

Outsiders appreciate the service rendered by the sisters, they often repeat that the children are well cared for, well-dressed and neat, they are easy to deal with, cheerful and polite; the teachers are happy. But the service staff, three girls in all, easily leave this job because they prefer to go working in a factory; the inevitable result is the increase of work for the sisters who have to look after the children and also give them religious instruction and prepare them for the Sacraments.

The economic and financial precariousness of Pius Institution re-emerges ones more; in fact the correspondence between the superior general and the administration, from 1945 onwards, often deals with the problem of the contracted allowance check to be given to the sisters of the Orphanage and of the kindergarten (1915-1962) which is not enough to meet the needs. In the first interventions of mother A. Reali and then of mother C. Baldinucci we can perceive their concern and motherly care towards the sisters, as well as their clear sense of justice in work relations and a sense of fairness which does not contradict the style of simplicity and poverty that should characterize religious life.

In August 1962, the Institution changes its name: it is no longer called neither «Orphanage» nor «Home for Foundlings», but «Pio

¹⁸ Diary of the community, years 1953-1964, in AGSdC.

Istituto Francesco Chiozzi», as displayed in the plaque on the façade of the building. In 1964 there are clear signs that the sisters can no longer continue such a mission due to the advanced age of the sisters-in-service¹⁹, the lack of sisters and thus the impossibility to replace them. The provincial superior of Brescia, Sr. Giovanna Romolo, writes to the vicar for religious life of Cremona and she receives from him the *Nihil Obstat*²⁰ that is, the permission for the closing of the community on 30 June 1965.

Rumour spreads quickly and on 17 June, the local newspaper «La Provincia» makes known: «The Home for Foundlings of Casalmaggiore will close by the end of June». Mediations – the prefect of Cremona and the bishop of Mantua – the alternative solutions suggested are: either to ask for two lay sisters from Castiglione delle Stiviere, or to unite the two neighbouring houses of the kindergarten and of the home for foundlings – but these two attempts failed in the course of the closing year, dissolving every hope. The writer carries on: «In this house normally enlivened by the enchanting voices of the children there will be, instead, a dark and oppressive silence, producing loneliness, emptiness...» and ends with a severe remark of exhortation: «The problems of our home are many, yet we must do something for these innocent souls; their only fault is that of being children like the others, however, they lack the caress of the true mother, of the true father. They are without a home of their own. And we, members of today's society, must also think about them»²¹.

¹⁹ The superior Sr. Sistina Santoni is 82 years old, Sr. Mansueta Azzi in charge of the linen room is 75 years old, Sr. Giovanna Mariani, nurse, is 56 years old. cf. Stato Effettivo, in AGSdC.

²⁰ cf. letters of 25 September and 8 October 1964, Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 415/B.

²¹ cf. Publications, in AGSdC, 415/C.

In the last page of the handwritten community diary of 1965, the sister in charge gives precise and moving information: «12 June: end of the school; out of 12 children 8 pass regularly; 2 must repeat the exams in September and 2 must repeat the class. 24 June: 16 children go to other Institutions, some will go to Cremona and others to Piacenza and, other 4 children will go to the orphanage in Milan.

For us, these are days of agony in seeing these poor innocents leaving; we have looked after them for 5, 8 and even 10 years. One of them already writes that during the night he cannot sleep, and that he cries when he remembers us. They love each other as brothers, although sometimes they quarrel; they understood that in this home they experience a loving family atmosphere and not the environment of a boarding school; moreover they feel dearly loved – by us – without any partiality, because in them we see innocent children who have suffered in life; and we love them intensely to make up for the lack of affection of their family.

And now I have to say: ‘the end’. On 30 June we will leave. We will go to Brescia to do the will of God. ‘*Fiat*, always!’, 27 June 1965», is the handwritten signature of the small and admirable community».

On 9 July «La Provincia» diffuses the last official word concerning the orphanage of Casalmaggiore: «The Home for Foundlings has closed its gates. The ‘Pio Istituto’, pride and glory of the city, besides witnessing the most beautiful and the most valid generosity which heals that sense of regret offending society, had to close down, not for lack of inmates, but for the destitution of management and assistant staff. The good sisters of Maria Bambina after the discreet greetings of the president, the abbot, and the committee, leave the city forever...».

In this small and modest house our sisters met the big and good eyes in search of love, tiny sparrows in search of a protective roof: the sisters have offered them their motherly hearts and, in loving them, they have also communicated to them our Christian faith: this, in short, is the life spent for 75 years *of* and *within* «The Home for Foundlings F. Chiozzi» in Casalmaggiore.