



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)*

«OSPIZIO DEGLI ESPOSTI», COMO-CAMERLATA-REBBIO (1869-1991)

The problem of abandoned childhood in the city of Como and province in the nineteenth century find a first refuge in the city hospital «Sant'Anna». In 1485 it started offering hospitality also to unfortunate persons, orphans, mentally ill and pilgrims while, in 1811 the hospital inaugurates the «Luogo Pio degli Esposti» (Nursing home care for abandoned children). The number of children receiving hospitality rose considerably (1,750 in the decade 1811-1820; 4,611 from 1861 to 1870)¹.

The examination of the socio-economic environment helps us to identify the different causes of the phenomenon: silence concerning illegitimate babies; the need of the mothers to earn their living, therefore, they had to find jobs in manufacturing or agricultural activities, and it was not possible for them to look after their babies. Besides, many families lived in extreme poverty, both in town and in the suburbs, hence they could not afford to pay a wet-

¹ cf. TROMBETTA SIMONA, «Abandonment strategies: places, exposed, expositors in the action's case file of Comasco's criminal court (1815-1860)», in *Saggi e studi*, partial re-elaboration of a thesis discussed at the «Università degli Studi di Milano», Faculty of Literature and Philosophy, 1992-1993.

nurse because the cost of a wet-nurse corresponded to three months wage of a skilled worker. Some abandoned the child because they felt compelled to do sending the child to a public orphanage was lawful. To confirm this I have chosen just one testimony, among many others, of a parent abandoning his child: «After a few days that my wife gave birth to this child, she died. Since I live in great poverty and I have no means to send him to a wet-nurse, I decided to abandon the child. I did not think of any way other than that of keeping the thing secret because otherwise they would send my son back to me after a year, instead I would like to withdraw him after four or five years, that is when he will no longer be in need of the help of a woman. In order to be sure to have my son back, I asked the wet-nurse to put together with the bands a sign: I divided a playing card into two halves, one half was put with the child while I kept the other half». Besides, the hospital of Como received also foundlings, exposed secretly, arriving from the close by borders of Switzerland and Valtellina because they did not have a Nursing Home Care², as we can see in the following chart of 1862.

place	total	boys	girls
Como	46	26	20
Switzerland	81	48	33
Valtellina	43	23	20
from wheel	173	93	80
born in Nursing Home	30	12	18
total	373	202	171

The places chosen by the persons abandoning babies were: churches, convents, houses facing main roads, stables; generally, the usual time was at dawn or at night, to avoid being discovered, though they purposely chose a place that would be noticed by someone.

² *Ibid.*

In Como province, all the foundlings were placed in a wicker basket (cf. *Ex* 2:3) and were covered with used clothes, in good condition to protect the baby from the cold weather or from the sun heat. They normally had an identification sign as it was the custom. If people happened to find abandoned babies, they used to wash and/or warm them, inform the parish priest, the midwife and the person in charge of the municipality. After that, the baby was taken to the orphanage and the admission act drawn up, he was given a name from among the most common ones and the surname «Bianchi» (in Milan «Colombo»). Even at the orphanage there were problems concerning wet-nurses, both inside and outside the Institution; the number of the wet-nurses was much less than the number of children. Therefore, during the Sunday Mass, the parish priests invited the breast feeding mothers to offer their milk also to the foundlings at the orphanage or at their homes³.

Our sisters have been rendering service at «**S. Anna**» hospital, **Como**, since 1855; in 1869 the «**Ospizio degli Esposti**» was annexed to the hospital. Our sisters were engaged in the following services: Sr. Savina Zanchi to mind the children, Sr. Pierina Zerman, in charge of the wet-nursing section. On 1 December 1872 P. Tassoni, president of the provincial Nursing Home Care for Foundlings, wrote to Sr. Giustina Morandi, superior of the hospital: «With full confidence in the well-known charity and humanitarian work of the sisters of charity», the administration board begs you that two sisters, not just one, be assigned to the Home to help Sr. Pierina Zerman, following upon her appointment as head supervisor, who «with far sightedness, diligence beyond all praise and competence in the various spheres of activity in service to the orphanage, excels through her most loving care in mitigating the situation of so many unfortunate children»⁴. On 23 December 1872 the president expressed his pleasure to the superior that the superior general had accepted his request; he then confirmed that Sr. Pierina Zerman

³ cf. FASANA ROLANDO, «Exposed and Foundlings in the 19th Century between Como and Canton Ticino», in *Percorsi di ricerca* 3/2011.

⁴ cf. Corrispondenza, in AGSdC.

would still act as head supervisor, while Sr. Savina Zanchi and Sr. Lutgarda Folgheraiter would act as assistants to the supervisor of the orphanage and at the adjoining obstetrician sector. He concluded: «Fully glad to see so well guaranteed, through your care of the children and of all the patients of this Institution, such a magnanimous, compassionate, intelligent and loving care and surveillance, the board of administration expresses sincere thanks»⁵.

In the rich collection of letters (173 letters preserved in general archives) – a valuable source and at times a unique historical documentary evidence – from 1872 to **1893** there is a gap and we have no idea about the reasons. In 1893 the Nursing Care Home for foundlings was detached from the hospital and transferred to an old establishment in **Camerlata**⁶, a fraction of the town of Como, two kilometres away. The inmates are 75 and they are assisted by some nurses and three sisters who form the new community⁷: Sr. Filomena Binelli (32 years), superior, Sr. Gaetana Cereda (37 years) and Sr. Edvige Locatelli (39 years)⁸, assistants.

In the following correspondence between the president and the superior general, the topics dealt with were, on the one hand, the request for sisters: one for coaching classes, a dress-maker for the linen room and a craft teacher. The chairman thanks the superior general because he knows that whenever possible he receives a positive response. On the other hand, the superior general communicates the replacement of the superior on the expiry of her mandate. She also requests the revision of economic conditions of the sisters, the updating of the Agreements underlining the mutual rights and duties. The fixed tasks of the sisters are: supervision within the Institute, that is, the care and assistance of the foundlings, their upbringing and education. They were also in charge of the kitchen activity, pantry, linen room, laundry and of monitoring

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Perhaps, the name of the locality is to be connected, with the expression *Ca' merlata*, that is: *house endowed with merlons* which recalls to mind Baradello Castle, a tower separating the area of Camerlata from the big valley of Como.

⁷ cf. PREVEDELLO A., *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1935, II, 259.

⁸ cf. Stato effettivo annuale delle suore, in AGSdC.

the moral conduct of the personnel, the hospitalized and the persons involved in the maternity ward. They were also engaged in keeping order, discipline and peace among the staff⁹.

At the beginning the **sisters** are 3, gradually the number increases until it reaches the maximum of 12, as we can see in the chart below which is intentionally incomplete but significant. It is drawn out from the Community Statistical Data¹⁰.

1893	1898	1903	1909	1914	1920	1925	1929
3	4	5	7	8	10	11	12

We have no numerical data of the inmates, because the registers from 1893 to 1938 were burnt. The following data are briefly mentioned in a report of the apostolic work by the superior Sr. Carla Reboldi: she says that the pupils attending the kindergarten and elementary school remain in the nursing home care until the age of 12 and even up to 14. On acquiring a skill in some activity they were helped to integrate themselves within the ambit of their kinship or families if they were willing to welcome them¹¹.

From **1930** to **1975** Orphanage and Maternity Institutions of the province find a more appropriate establishment at **Rebbio**, in 28, Pasquale Paoli road, about four kilometres south of the city¹².

The Institution IPAI (Provincial Institute for Childhood Assistance) offers shelter to ‘children of unknown persons’, babies recognized only by mothers, babies coming from other Entities (OMNI, Opera Nazionale Maternità Infanzia - National Institution for the defence of motherhood and infancy), children who have lost one or both parents (ENAOI: National Board Supporting Italian Orphan

⁹ cf. Extraordinary commission of Como province, Prot. No 5086, to the superior general, object: provincial Orphanage, Como, 7.8.1928, Convenzione, in AGSdC.

¹⁰ cf. Stato effettivo annuale delle suore, 1893-1929, in AGSdC.

¹¹ cf. Report «Rebbio Como» by Sr. Carla Reboldi, 1973-1974, in AGSdC, Reports and Publications.

¹² The ancient *Alebbio*, later on *Arebbio* and then *Rebbio*, remained independent up to 1937, therefore, it was annexed to the municipality of Como.

Workers) or babies belonging to broken families or going through difficult periods. The organization and the functioning of the works are entrusted to a director appointed by the provincial administration. Religious assistance is regulated by the bishop, who entrusts the duty to the parish priest *pro tempore* of Rebbio¹³ and later on he was helped by a priest of the Foreign Missions of Verona¹⁴.

Urged by the educational superintendent for Como, the director, Dr. Giannino Porta, pointed out (to the superior general) the need to have a qualified sisters-teacher since «the dimensions and the various fittings of the new establishment have increased». Therefore, new experiments are put into action, namely: wet-nursing service, custody, children attending kindergarten and elementary school outside the establishment, recruitment of qualified staff regarding childcare nurses, community assistants and a specialised team. Very soon, the director of the board of education of Como urged to have a sister with a teacher's diploma, even if the teaching of Sr. Orsolina Salomoni, although not graduated, is validly confirmed by the results obtained in previous school years¹⁵. Mother A. Sterni regretfully tells him that she is very sorry because she is not able to answer to his request and in September 1930 she writes: «...we find ourselves in the biggest shortage of personnel and we hardly have enough sisters to fulfil the works of charity, therefore, we have difficulties in providing personnel» and in December 1932 she states «...the number of qualified sisters is very limited, and they are not even enough for our schools, in fact, we had to employ some young ladies to fill the vacant posts»¹⁶. The educational methodology opens new horizons to meet the needs of assistance, no longer

¹³ cf. Orientation outlines of the religious service in the Infancy and Maternity ward at the Provincial Institution of Rebbio, 1933, Documenti, in AGSdC.

¹⁴ cf. Dispositions regarding the religious service in the Maternity ward in the Institution at Rebbio in Como, 1952, Documenti, in AGSdC.

¹⁵ cf. Letter of 12.8.1930 and of 2.12.1932 - Corrispondenza, in AGSdC.

¹⁶ Letter of 20 September 1930 and of 5 December 1932 - *ibid.*

N.B. In 1930 the Institute counts 6,693 sisters distributed in 541 communities-apostolic work, of which 18 in India and 9 in Argentina. In 1932 the sisters carry out their apostolic work in 198 kindergarten and in 50 schools.

interpreted as an act of charity, but as the right of each individual, to life and to integral formation. The sisters are challenged to courageously face up to experimentation and to a watchful, loving attention to the real needs of the children.

When, in October 1934, mother Sterni communicates the change of the superior, the president of the province expresses his regret because Sr. Celestina Tenni «for many years (1907-1934, first in Camerlata and then in Rebbio) has offered her intelligent, dedicated activity, full of spirit of sacrifice for our vital Institution». Besides, he asks her the permission to allow him to offer her a medal as a souvenir, a coinage by the province. The superior general thanks him for the expressions of full satisfactions regarding Sr. Celestina, but for the souvenir of the medal, interpreting the desire of the sister, she invites the president to deliver the sum of money for the benefit of the poor, «if it amounts to a high cost»¹⁷.

Since 1937 the children, at the end of the elementary school, were distributed in various Institutions of the province to receive professional training. The flow of the assisted persons – the documentation of the inmates of the first decade is missing – at the residence of Rebbio is variable but considerable¹⁸.

1940	1945	1950	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975
125	135	140	130	70	88	120	70

In those same years, at the beginning, the number of the **sisters**, slightly increased but, when the Institution employed qualified lay personnel, the number of sisters decreased¹⁹.

1940	1945	1950	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975
15	18	17	15	16	13	5	5

¹⁷ Letter of the president dated 25 October 1934 and that of mother Sterni of 31 October 1934, Corrispondenza, in AGSdC.

¹⁸ Registro delle opere, in AGSdC.

¹⁹ Stato effettivo delle suore, in AGSdC.

The sisters carry out various services, including working in the pantry, kitchen, linen room and laundry. However, they also look after the babies in the nursery section, in the kindergarten, in the infirmary, in the department for infectious diseases, in the pharmacy, and supervise the staff²⁰.

The president, in different circumstances, does not fail to express his heartfelt thanks on behalf of the province for the «solicitous, active, competent and Christian kindness» work that the sisters, for so many years, carry out in favour of many children and the hospitalized within the Institution²¹.

On 20 November 1941, the director of the province invites the princess of Savoy, Maria José (last queen of Italy between 1941 and 1945) to visit the Institution. She is welcomed by the authorities of the province and of the Home. She receives the household honours with the words pronounced by a little boy of three years and a floral tribute by a younger girl. After visiting each and every ward the princess expressed her congratulations for the management of the Institution. Sr. Orsolina Salomoni writes to Mother to inform her²², but she also tells her that the sisters wish and look forward to meet their superior general personally. Mother A. Reali visits the community on 28 Novembre 1942²³.

In 1963 Sr. Maria Alessia Pezzoli falls seriously ill and she is transferred to the infirmary «Sacro Cuore» in Milan. The director, Dr. G. Porta writes: «for 52 years of uninterrupted service carried out within the wards of the orphanage with zeal, perseverance, energy and a devoted affection to children in an excellent manner. Without any doubt, her life was fully devoted to the illegitimate children with intelligence and with such an amazing energy that makes us wonder how human nature can make such sacrifices up to deny itself so constantly. I propose that the honourable provincial administration award her a gold medal that never as in this

²⁰ Cronistoria della comunità, 1950, Relazioni - Pubblicazioni, in AGSdC.

²¹ Corrispondenza, letters of 13.9.1945; 15.3.1949; 13.4.1950; 23.8.1950; 5.7.1970 *ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* Letter of 23 November 1941.

²³ Cronistoria della comunità, 1937-1950, written by the superior Sr. Giulia Suardi.

occasion has ever been so well placed and so deeply deserved»²⁴. In an article, «Le cronache della bontà» (Chronicles of goodness), signed MF, we read: «[...] She has offered her freedom to live her own way, she renounced to form a family and have children in order to dedicate her whole life for the sake of the life of so many lives that open out to uncertain, at times painful days. [...] Children who belonged to no-one have felt her caressing hand, so silent and none the less so loving, her eyes on them filled with mercy, and her care of them so motherly. The sister was watchful, silent, devoted to her duty, humanly endowed with maternal foresight and in her prayers she used to repeat: ‘Lord, I beg you, may I be worthy of my life’s task!’ . She was always very close, loving, lavish in her love, generous with the children; she guided mothers, comforted betrayed women and gave good advice to women tempted to go from bad to worse. Saintly in her affections, tenacious in her mission, strong in her patience: motherly in every situation»²⁵.

Surely, all these acknowledgements are not blameworthy of impudence or of excessive praises, they simply bear witness to truth: with a sense of motherly kindness and total dedication our sisters devoted themselves – in the various spheres of activity – to the illegitimate or abandoned children to the extent that they arouse wonder and admiration even in us today.

In 1965 the provincial superior, Sr. Giuditta Divina encourages the administration to employ a lay personnel to replace the departed Sr. Angelina Cavalleri and to give further help to the sisters in their heavy work full of responsibilities²⁶. In the course of the following ten years it was said that the Activity of Rebbio (IPAI - Provincial Institution for the Assistance of Infancy) will undergo a radical change or close down because the services were greatly reduced due to the political action of the administration, engaged in implementing deinstitutionalisation, to promote ‘special adop-

²⁴ Corrispondenza, letter of 5 November 1963 of the director of the provincial administration.

²⁵ cf. Relazioni - Pubblicazioni, in AGSdC.

²⁶ Letter of 18.03.1965, Corrispondenza, in AGSdC.

tion' and 'foster care'. To the basic ideological motivation there were added also economic, social and political reasons.

On 24 April 1975 the IPAI of Rebbio was transferred to **S. Fermo della Battaglia** (CO)²⁷. The «**Ala Materna**» of the Hospital Care Centre «S. Romanello» Milan-Segrate, on the outskirts of San Fermo, houses about 70 children underage (boys and girls) from 0 to 12 years with the following division: wards for babies up to 18 months, pre-school and school aged children. Inside the establishment there is a nursery and a kindergarten, while for the elementary classes children go to the State School. The children are divided into groups entrusted to assistants and outside school hours they do some activities, such as playing, handiwork, practical activities and they also go for a walk, make use of audio-visual aids or perform extracurricular and complementary activities. A psychosocial service, formed by the social worker and the psychologist, guides and helps each child; some assistants attend rehabilitation therapy courses at the Centre «Bosisio-Parini» (CO).

The assisted children are illegitimate, recognized or not, or come from broken or non-existent families: children of prisoners, divorced, separated, bachelor fathers and single mothers, orphans. They all come from extreme situations and this inspires the sisters to say that their apostolic work is in conformity with Bartolomea's aspiration; the sisters had the role of directress and were responsible for the general services²⁸. Unfortunately, the relations with the president, Prof. Fr Luigi Verzé, soon appeared difficult due to misunderstandings, lack of respect for the competences and failure to remunerate them for their work²⁹, who devote themselves to their mission with love and a deep spirit of self-sacrifice.

Meanwhile, the provincial administration of Como intends to transform the IPAI into an Operational Centre for children under-

²⁷ The battle of S. Fermo was on 27.5.1859, during the 2nd war of independence of Italy, when G. Garibaldi, commander-in-chief of the 'Rifles' refused the advanced position of the Austrians in favour of the defence of Como and freed the city.

²⁸ P. A. *Relazione*; Sr. E. Piron, Provincial Administration - Report - Relazioni - Pubblicazioni, in AGSdC.

²⁹ Letters from 1975 to 1979, Corrispondenza, in AGSdC.

age at San Fermo, in Como; Sr. Giuseppina Munaretto, provincial superior, informs (on 27 March 1979) the director, Dr. Antonio Augusto Spreafico, that the Congregation is unable to assume the educational responsibility due to lack of trained personnel.

The commissioner, on receiving the notice of cessation of the Agreement regarding the service of the sisters, explains to the provincial superior (16 November 1979) that there are chances for the sisters to continue their collaboration because the Operational Centre will only accommodate 15/20 children under-age, for a limited period and not more than four mothers with their sons.

The supporting personnel will carry out the household and kitchen work, while the educators have all been chosen from among the religious personnel for legitimate reasons: therefore, the sisters can continue their presence in the 'family' as an opportunity to be reference points, fully available from the affective point of view.

The provincial superior, on 7 January 1980, presents to mother general, Sr. A. Campanile, the difficulties of the community of S. Fermo who renders service for the benefit of two different welfare institutions: «Ala Materna» (Maternity Wing), depending on the hospital Care Centre «S. Romanello», Milan-Segrate and the IPAI, depending on the provincial administration of Como; besides she states that the administration of «S. Romanello» accepted without any comment the withdrawing of the sisters. On the other hand, the provincial administration of Como expressed his desire to have four sisters working at the Operational Centre on the outskirts of Como³⁰.

Mother Campanile deems the service at the Operational Centre responding to social and pedagogical aims which the Institute embraces willingly, but it is also necessary to make sure that the sisters chosen are fit in age and training. Besides, mother informs that the small community will depend on the superior of the hospital «S. Anna» in Como-Camerlata, where the Nursing Home for Foundlings had been established.

³⁰ Corrispondenza, March 1979 - July 1980, in AGSdC.

On the occasion of the change of the establishment, 24 June 1980, in the presence of Mgr Teresio Ferraroni, bishop of Como, Giovanni Fiamminghi, president of the provincial administration, and other personalities, three of our sisters namely, Sr. Antonietta Galli (from 1918), Sr. Filippina Berbenni (from 1941), Sr. Antonia Brambilla (from 1957) were presented with a golden medal provided by the provincial coinage, «reserved for those who in various areas of social, political, cultural and economic life distinguished themselves for their devotion to duty and for their timely and selfless activity in favour of the community of the Lake district of Como³¹. For several years these sisters of ours had devoted their motherly care to children forsaken both morally and materially.

On 2 July 1980 the general secretariat of the Congregation registers the transformation and the transfer of the facilities of S. Fermo della Battaglia to Como, in 85, Bellinzona road, third and fourth floor of «Villa Aurora». The provincial superior communicates to the administration the names of the sisters available (3 and not 4): Sr. Ester Piron, coordinator, Sr. Seconda Airaghi, responsible for the infants department, Sr. Liliana Gilardi, responsible for children up to 6 years. The Operative Centre aims at putting the person at the centre, to meet the basic needs of the human person in accordance with the promotional principle, to respect the rights of every person, to promote the person at all levels in view of reintroducing each individual within his family of origin, to converge every attention and the services of the employed personnel working at the Centre towards the normative goals³². The educational welfare service continues for a decade; the presence of the sisters and children varied a lot, however, always in continual decrease.

year	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
childrens	20	36	37	25	29	24	27	24	21	4
sisters	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	2

³¹ cf. The newspaper «L'Ordine», June 1980, Pubblicazioni, in AGSdC.

³² cf Relazione/Statuto, in AGSdC.

Meanwhile, many other events affect the life of the religious community: the precariousness of the establishment where the apostolic work was carried out («Villa Aurora» is put on sale, although within two years); the immediate change of a sister and of the superior, therefore, the sisters had to depend legally upon the provincial superior. The suppression of the community on 31 December 1990: the provincial superior Sr. M. Franca Manfredi, informs directly mother general, Sr. C. Kersbamer about the reasons. Other reasons were: the shared reflections and the guidelines of the interprovincial assembly of Italy (1987), the diminishing of persons available, the composition of the community formed by two sisters, the need to help other entities, the presence in the area of similar facilities run by religious³³.

However, the unforgettable memory of two charismatic personalities remains alive: *Sr. Seconda Airaghi*, for over thirty years was deeply committed in giving herself totally to the children, receives the reward «A mother, a child» without the need of having special commissions or any recommendation: for almost six years a little girl, daughter of unknown parents, suffering from brain-damage due to delivery problems, deaf-mute and cross-eyed was given a name «Anna» and a mother, «Sr. Seconda», who endowed her with attentions, smiles and looked after her with maternal care³⁴.

Sr. Bianca Rivolta remained alone with two children at «Villa Aurora» for nearly a year, until the lay personnel took over effectively; she was exclusively sustained by a passionate charity towards the little ones in need, whom she followed with a mother's affection.

Love for the poorest and the most needy is a huge and strong challenge proposed by Bartolomea to her daughters; our sisters won this challenge!

³³ Corrispondenza, in AGSdC.

³⁴ cf. The newspaper «L'Ordine», December 1982, in AGSdC.