



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)*

«CASA MATERNA», LÒNGARA (VI) - (1918-1966)

The palace of the noble counts of Squarzi family¹ was in Vicenza, but they also had an eighteenth century villa in the countryside in the Lòngara neighbourhood, about 5 km from the city. Surrounding it on the northern side were the Pre-Alps and on the southern side were the Berici hills. Villa Rossi Balbi was already falling into decay and reduced to a *bigattiera*², when, during the first world war (1915-1918) it was requisitioned by the military authorities to convert it into a field-camp. Later on it was freed by the Department of Health, so as to make use of personnel and health-care material elsewhere.

The American Red Cross (CRA), abiding by a suggestion made by Miss Maria Fogazzaro³, then president of the Women's com-

¹ The Squarzi family formed part of the noble council of Venice. It was awarded the count title by pope Benedict XIV which was duly recognized by the Veneto Republic and confirmed by sovereign resolution dated 8 July 1820.

² *Bigattiera*: place for the rearing of silkworms.

³ M. Fogazzaro (1881-1952) was the third and last daughter of Margherita di Valmarana and Antonio Fogazzaro, Italian poet and writer (his novels: *Malombra*, *Piccolo mondo antico*, *Il Santo...*), of which he was the intimate and faithful collaborator. Along the Catholic tradition of his family – his father's brother Giuseppe was a priest and one of his father's sisters was a nun: Caterina, then Maria Innocente, of the Visitation order at Alzano Lombardo (BG) (cf. G. DISARÒ,

mittee for public assistance in wartime, rented it to accommodate the children whose parents had fought in the war and who could not be admitted in the city institutes. Repairs and adjustments were made by *Genio Militare*. After that, Miss Fogazzaro and honourable marquis Giuseppe Roi purchased the building and land annexed. Thus the institution was started by decree dated 19 April 1923; it was subsequently erected into an *Moral entity*⁴.

From the thick correspondence between Miss Fogazzaro, Mgr Ferdinando Rodolfi, bishop of Vicenza and mother Angela Ghezzi (from 8 August to 14 November 1918 as many as 21 letters!) we gather, on the one hand, the anxious hurry to have the sisters and, on the other hand, the thoughtfulness and prudence of our superior general⁵. Miss Fogazzaro, acknowledging the validity of the service provided by the sisters in other institutions, asked mother Ghezzi to let her have 5 sisters and 3 *mandatarie* for her institution. In this she had the support of the CRA. The bishop himself begged her to grant the request and to draw up a brief with well-defined terms of relations between the sisters and the promoters of the institution. Mother Ghezzi sent a reply to Miss Fogazzaro and to the bishop, thanking for their trust in our 'small Congregation' (the Institute then had 4,907 sisters in 458 communities!), but she said she was sorry she could not accept the new commitment because she lacked sisters due to an outbreak of the 'disease'⁶ and also because after

A writer of the 19th century: suor Maria Innocente Fogazzaro, Rome, 1978-1979) – she was fervent ascetic but too reserved to perform deeds of charity. Fr Gioacchino Rossetto, member of the *Servi di Maria* inspired many of her aid to the needy among which was «Casa Materna», Lôngara. In 1921 Maria joined the lay-religious Association of «S. Raffaele Arcangelo», founded by Fr G. Rossetto in 1919. Intent as she was on deeds of charity she was not interested in political events (cf. *dizionario biografico Treccani*, vol 48, 1997, Beatrice Pisa).

⁴ cf. *Corriere Vicentino*, 14.7.1919; PREVEDELLO A., *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, III, 1936, 864-865; *Corriere Vicentino*, 15.4.1951.

⁵ cf. *Corrispondenza I*, in AGSdC, 416/G.

⁶ Reference is to the Spanish epidemic between 1918 and 1920, which caused more victims than those of world war I. It was called 'Spanish' because only the Spanish newspapers mentioned it; Spain was not subject to the general prohibition to mention it because Spain was not involved in the world conflict.

the breakdown of an institution run by the CRA at Rimini⁷, she had no intention to have sisters depend on lay-personnel nor on their respective methods.

Later on, mutual relations grew more friendly; once it had become clear that the sisters were to be entrusted with complete responsibility for the running of the institution⁸, on 5 September the superior general promised Miss Fogazzaro that she would provide the sisters for the new institution with the request never to praise her sisters in person: she wanted them to remain humble and always to seek in all they did the glory of God and the salvation of souls «without knowing or seeing the good that the Lord graciously does through their lowly service»⁹. She then seconded the bishop's proposal to have a single superior for «Casa Provvidenza» at Vicenza and the new institution at Lòngara. Transactions were speeded up: on 28 October 1918 the Agreement was drawn up and countersigned; mother A. Ghezzi requested M. Fogazzaro to send the permit to Onè di Fonte, Feltre and Milan for sisters and *mandatarie*¹⁰ who had to go to Vicenza and to Lòngara; 3 sisters and 2 *mandatarie*¹¹ went to Lòngara on 20 November and on 1 December they were entrusted with the first batch of abandoned children, irrespective of sex, and in seven months' time they already amounted to 74.

⁷ From 1917 to 1919 along the Adriatic Riviera waves of refugees from the Friuli and Veneto meet, amounting to more than 10,000. They wanted to avoid the occupation by German and Austrian-Hungarian troops. In 1917 our Institute was already in Rimini, working in the infants' school, in the seminary and the home for the aged and sent sisters to help in four other activities to ease the emergency of that year: Profughi Hotel Regina - *Asilo*; Profughi Villa Pugliesi - *Suore*; Grand Hotel - *Cucine*; Profughi Ospedale CRA with Rizzonelli Sr. Stefania (age 43) and Dal Pozzolo Sr. Elisa (35). cf. Stato effettivo 1917, in AGSdC.

⁸ cf. letters 8 August - 2 September 1918, Corrispondenza I, in AGSdC, 416/G.

⁹ cf. letter 14 September 1918, Corrispondenza I, in AGSdC, 416/G.

¹⁰ *Mandatarie*: were good young girls admitted into communities as helpers in housework, running on errands, shopping etc. Later on, in answer to their desire, they were allowed to join the Institute and they emitted the religious vows. In 1954 no more of them were accepted; in 1970 they were equated to the sisters.

¹¹ Boldi Sr. Severina (age 41), Vicenza, as *primaria*, Maiocchi Sr. Giuseppina (37), Penso Sr. Agostina (27); *mandatarie*: Bettinelli Sara (35), Gelosa Eva (22).

The Institution was called «Casa Materna» and so it was in fact: a ‘home’ and, above all, a motherly one for those who had always been deprived of it or had been deprived of it too soon. In fact, it carried out activities of a foundling home and received babies who had never had parents, soldiers’ children of unworthy mothers, or of refugees who returned home from Austria, Germany or from France. Every child had already passed through a long, sad story which up to then was unknown and perhaps never to be understood by the child itself. However, all those who were attended to were never tired of warmly thanking the sisters who with open arms had received them, hugged them and cared for them with motherly tenderness, and helped them grow happily, in hope¹².

The smallest ones were looked after and fondled by the sisters, those who were not so young (age 6 to 12) went to the government primary school, and they did well.

At the head of the Home was Miss Fogazzaro, while the duties taken up by the sisters were noted down in the Agreement of 1918, art. II: «bringing up the children, religious instruction and good behaviour, minding the orphans and so on. Housework, needlework that may be useful in any family. In duties relating to cooking, dispensary and wardrobe, orphan girls could also help. Sisters were to be in charge for duties carried out by lay-personnel: they could direct them or warn them in ordinary duties but turned to the competent authority to deal with cases of insubordination».

The Managing committee undertook to «provide the sisters and *mandatarie* with their food and to pay each one the annual sum of £ 200 to be paid at the end of every three-months term as a compensation for expenses of clothes» (art. IX). Evidently, the compensation for the sisters’ service was not an economic asset for

¹² cf. *Corriere Vicentino*, 14.7.1919; Pubblicazioni, in AGSdC, 416/J.

the community, whose desire was solely to soothe the sorrow of so many innocent babies.

In the Agreement of 19 May 1952, signed by mother Angiolina Reali and by marquis Dr. Giuseppe Roi¹³, president, the duties of the sisters (art. 2) remain unchanged, while the wording of the article itself is made to form part of art. 3: «The sisters will not have the charge of the orphan boys in the dormitories nor when they are out for a walk. These boys will not be over 12 years old. To mind them, his honour the administrator will engage the service of a man or women of a mature age, who are trustworthy and on whom the sisters can rely». As a matter of fact, «Casa Materna» had by this time taken the shape, almost exclusively, of an orphanage. What did change, instead, was the value of the sisters' allowance, in art. 5. «The hon. administrator of the orphanage undertakes to sanction the allowance of Lire 2,500 per month for each sister to compensate for expenditure on clothes and stockings, to be paid at the end of every three-months' term». Even with this rise in the allowance, there remained the principle, in force in our Institute and which was to be laid down in the Rule of Life: «In the administration of goods we should respond to the evangelic criterion of seeking first of all the kingdom of God and his righteousness» (Cs 161) and «The goods which the Institute possesses are meant for the service of charity in its many forms» (Cs 162).

Lot of precious letters, all written by hand but easy to read, marks an empty five-year space, after February 1919, left unexplained. In 1924 the bishop of Vicenza forwarded another request, on behalf of don Angelo Boscato, parish priest of Lôngara: two sisters were needed to run an infants' school he wished to open, and for a needlework school, avoiding in that way to bring into the town another Congregation of women religious. In her reply to the provincial superior (Sr. Clementina Azzini), mother Vittoria Starmusch advised her not to give an utterly-negative reply for the moment¹⁴. However, there is no record of any new service taken

¹³ Convenzioni, in AGSdC, 416/H.

¹⁴ cf. letter of 7.3 and of 13.3.1924, Corrispondenza I, in AGSdC, 416/G.

up in the following years; on the other hand, in 1928 inside «Casa Materna» itself there is mention of five sisters working at the infants' school¹⁵.

From 1924 to July 1940 there is again no letter in the archives: we know from history that the bombing on Milan on 16 August 1943 hit and destroyed mother house too and with it a section of its history records. In fact, from 1918 to 1939 we have no way to know statistical data of the guests of «Casa Materna», helpless babies and orphans while it is possible to have from the annual records, the names as well as the number of the sisters who lived there and served with motherly love and devoted care. From the number of the sisters which, after the small initial nucleus varied but remained around the average of 9 persons and, considering the capacity of the building, we can suppose that the average number of children cared for must have been between 70 and 80.

Statistical data: sisters

1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928
5	14	13	7	8	7	8	8	8	9	10
1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
9	9	9	10	10	10	9	10	10	10	9

Prominent among the sisters was Sr. Anna Andreon, who guided the activity and the community for ten years: from 1921 to 1930, she was a «tenderly-loving *mamma* to those poor, abandoned babies and lavished on them care and affection»¹⁶. Sr. Ippolita

¹⁵ cf. Stato Effettivo annuale delle Suore di carità delle sante B. Capitanio e V. Gerosa, in AGSdC.

¹⁶ Necrological notes of the departed sisters in the Institute 1934-1937, in AGSdC.

Gerosa was the superior from 1931 to 1941; when the superior general informed the authorities of her transfer, the president, while acknowledging the arrangement and trusting that the new superior would come up to the delicate task, could not help express his grief and anxiety. He wrote: «I am glad to repeat that Sr. Ippolita has always carried out her duty in an excellent manner. Always watchful, prudent, scrupulously delicate, motherly with the children and worthy of all praise»¹⁷.

The war raged furiously on, leaving awful signs in the Veneto as well: on 29 May 1944 Sr. Giulia Giacometti informed mother Reali that there had been five incursions and that the house had been damaged but all of them, thank God, were safe, in the shelter.

As the imposing building was situated close to the main road leading to the Basso Vicentino, the Germans were constantly on patrol and the commander desired to have the building at his disposal, but thanks to the intercession of the patron saints of the orphanage, St Joseph and Maria Bambina, the visitors used to leave without gaining anything.

On 1 March 1945 a column of large camouflaged trucks loaded with munitions stopped and remained in front of «Casa Materna» the whole day. The danger was deadly, yet the powerful prayers of the children to St Joseph obtained the grace that on that day no aeroplane flew over the zone and in the evening the trucks left, to the great relief of everyone. And on 3 May 1945 superior Sr. Pierina Andreotti, wrote to mother Reali, assuring her that in spite of the constant incursions sisters and children were keeping well and had built a safe shelter in the canteen. She informed her that in the building there was also the office of the «Banca Cattolica», with about twenty employees evacuated from Vicenza, and a pensioned teacher, but they did not create difficulties for the community nor for the Institution, and that Sr. Giuseppina Ambrosetti ran the dispensary for the people and also served people in their homes as a nurse. Three days after that, on 6 May, mother Reali received the news that a bomb had damaged the house but fortunately not anyone: on 26

¹⁷ Letter of 17 June 1941, Corrispondenza II, in AGSdC, 416/H.

April, forty children had been transferred to a small village in a mountainous district 10 km away and that the sisters with the bigger children had been protected by the Lord. Over this period many children deprived of parents were admitted, including the wounded.

At the end of the war, the Institution found itself in a financial crisis, but the sisters' trust in divine Providence together with American aid, enabled them to keep up the 'pious deed' so beneficial to the diocese and to the province of Vicenza. Now, «Casa Materna» is a home for little girls and boys, age two to twelve; at the age of three to six they go to an infants' school attached to the home. They are then admitted into government elementary and post-elementary school at Lòngara, Vicenza. In the summer, from July to September, all the orphans go in turn for a month to «Sacro Cuore» colony at Mazzurega Fumane (VR), Valpolicella, where they spent a good holiday. Besides entertainment and bodily fitness they were given opportunities to develop culturally: they were taken on educational tours, visits to places of interest like the zoo, museums and historical places and exhibitions such as the *Risorgimento* in Brescia and of birds in Vicenza, the Canova Temple at Possagno (TV), without excluding the merry-go-round of the *Luna Park* at Verona.

The building could cater for ninety persons. From 1945 to 1960 it admitted 1,478 children, some of whom for a short period, others for years. In 1961, at the exams for class V, 80 out of 90 children were promoted; in 1963 a student was awarded his diploma with silver medal for progress and conduct, and a girl obtained a 9 out of 10 average mark for her Commerce exams with distinction among all the sections of the school¹⁸. It should be kept in mind that two or three sisters, were available during the study time not simply to mind the children but also to help them revise their morning classes.

From the register of the works, kept in the archives, we can find out how many children were looked after at «Casa Materna» from 1939 to 1965; the table below shows the number present, starting from 1950; the number of the sisters was around 10-11.

¹⁸ cf. Relazione della «Casa Materna» 1939-195, in AGSdC, 416/I.

Statistical data: orphans

1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957
80	75	75	83	95	103	114	110
1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965
120	124	115	120	126	95	85	80

When they reached the age marking the end of their stay, with their primary education completed, they were transferred to another Institution where they were expected to acquire the needed instruction and competence for a living, and, if possible, of their return home. They did not easily forget «Casa Materna», the home where they had spent their early years of life: they often returned to it even when they have formed a family. On 21 November 1961, Nerina Panozzo went to the institution for her wedding-ceremony in the artistic chapel of the orphanage that had been her home for five years and where she had remained to help the sisters¹⁹.

With the years that passed by, the building obviously has been improved upon: back in 1935 there was built a large, spacious hall for the nursery school, besides the laundry and infirmary. Rooms and recreation hall were restructured and the floor and stairs remade: the latter had been damaged during world war I, when the big building had become a field-hospital²⁰.

Further improvement in the building, in hygiene and assistance/invigilation was done later on, above all thanks to the president of the administration council, marquis Dr Giuseppe Roi, in the 1950²¹. Another providential step was taken by the Americans: overcoming the current prejudice against them, the soldiers of battalion 'A' of 150, artillery *di campagna* devoted their free time to repair rooms just like masons and painters: not only that; each one of them made friends with one or the other child of the orphanage: the

¹⁹ cf. Note di cronaca, in AGSdC, 416/I.

²⁰ cf. Relazione 1932-1939, in AGSdC, 416/I.

²¹ cf. *Ascendere*, n. 3, May-June 1954, in *Redazione*.

soldiers paid visits practically every week, bringing with them presents (a set of hundred plates, glasses and cups, an electric washing-machine, a piano, various toys and stationery...), as well as foodstuffs and sweet, and they stayed in the children's company. The children thanked them with poems, songs and short scenes²².

In November 1960 mother C. Baldinucci sent to the president word of the withdrawal of the sisters due to scarcity of religious. The president did not abide by the decision as that would have meant turning out the 120 children looked after. Meanwhile the sisters stayed on. Two years later, in November 1962, mother Baldinucci wrote to the bishop, Mgr Carlo Zinato, and to the president that due to the lack of vocations she was unable to keep up the sisters' service at «Casa Materna» of Lôngara and that, besides, the sisters were no longer fit for the work required.

In the reply of G. Roi, president, on 11 December, there was evident disappointment and dismay thus he wrote: «the numerous praiseworthy things so many good mothers, who in these long years have lavished love on our children in an exemplary manner...». By return of post, on 14 December, mother Baldinucci wrote. She stressed the point that the reason for the withdrawal of the sisters was the lack of vocations; it was not a question of dissatisfaction of a moral or financial nature. In fact she was forced to call back sisters from other places as well.

The superior Sr. Luigina Vicentini assured mother Baldinucci that she and the sisters were most willing to do God's will²³. Their service, however, terminated only on 20 September 1966²⁴.

²² cf. *Il Giornale di Vicenza*, 29.7 and 24.8.1956, Pubblicazioni, in AGSdC, 416/J.

²³ Letter of 18 December 1962, Corrispondenza II, in AGSdC, 416/H.

²⁴ No document, among those preserved, contains the cause or the reasons for the additional period of time from 1960 to 1966.

Shortly after that, on 5 October, a certain mother called Maria, sent to the institute «Santa Maria», Brescia a letter for publication in the periodical «Maria SS. Bambina»; among other things it said: «The very day you were in feasting, your ex-companions, we, here at Lôngara were greeting our sisters who were leaving «Casa Materna». With them there is also gone the smile of the *Madonnina*, who will no longer radiate light in the little chapel, where we used to bring our sons and daughters, our nephews and nieces to give her a kiss and utter a word of affection. Our little children were happy to see the little heavenly Child always smiling!... Sisters of another Order have come, but the void left by ‘our’ sisters never be filled again... I have not even greeted them; I give you the charge to send through the pages of the periodical our regards to the superior, to the sisters, especially to Sr. Giuseppina, the nurse, who used to fill us with strength and courage. Tell them to pray for us and that we will not forget them»²⁵.

Thus there comes to a close, in faith and in obedience, another chapter of the mission of charity towards the feeble and in need of the sisters of Maria Bambina; these, however, never fail, before they leave an activity, to entrust it to other persons, laity or religious, so as to ensure its continuance. Well aware that we are simply instruments in God’s hands and that, as St Vincenza liked to say, the work is his, the sisters abandon themselves to God’s Providence fully confident that he nourishes and protects the birds of the air and the flowers of the field and... all of us, his children.

At present, «Casa Materna», still governed by the administration council, renders a public service: children below ten are taught and helped through the management of a *Nursery* authorized in 2001 by the Regione Veneta, of an infants’ school, officially recognized on an equal basis, and of a guided revision class for children of primary and high schools. Its *mission* is always the same as before: to provide formation to Christian values.

²⁵ From «Maria SS Bambina», Brescia, November 1966, Pubblicazioni, in AGSdC, 416/J.