



# and you too **do** likewise

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*Sr. Carmela Paloschi*

## Homes for abandoned children

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

### «ISTITUTO SCHIANTESCHI», SANSEPOLCRO (AR) - (1919-1974)

In some cases an orphanage was the natural development of a home for abandoned babies. Above all, however, it was a public or private structure catering for children orphaned by the war or deprived of the father and at times even of the mother on the outbreak of epidemic diseases often accompanying warfare<sup>1</sup>. Another evil that afflicted post-war Italy was real poverty, but this in itself was not the reason for taking away minors from their parents: the basic aim was to protect minors from unfit parents or, in some cases, from real ill-treatment.

Upbringing during the war was very severe, almost military in style. Resort to physical punishment was frequent. Orphans wore a summer or winter uniform; a sense of duty in life and respect for the needs of others were inculcated. Dormitories and refectory in

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<sup>1</sup> The earliest orphanage in Europe was instituted at Naples in 1343 at the request of queen Sancia of Aragon and of bishop Giovanni Orsini; at Milan, the orphanage of the *Martinitt* (close to St Martin church) and of the *Stelline* dates back to 1532 under the patronage of duke Francesco II Sforza and of the Venetian nobleman Gerolamo Emiliani. Orphans counted in Italy as victims of world war I were about 280,000 and 14,000 of world war II; the 149/2001 law enforcing the closing down of orphanages by year 2006, transferred minors to *comunità* or 'family-houses'.

common were spacious. The day was spent in work and study. In the post-war period bigger children were regarded as the *bottega* (these included a variety of workshops for the boys; the girls did knitting and embroidery work on order or on request from outsiders). Of such work produced, one-tenth of the remuneration was given out to the orphans on Saturdays. Others, called *quelli di scuola* were sent to technical or professional schools; these students showed much respect to their friends: considering them as adults who already received a wage! As to pastimes: boys liked football, while girls played at ball, or with the rope, devoted time to reading, staged plays, and so on.

Every orphan left the institution with a skill for her/his living and whatever she/he had earned.

An institution catering for orphan girls belonging to the *comune di Sansepolcro*, Arezzo<sup>2</sup> was started as early as 1800, under the patronage of count Cosimo Schianteschi, conti of Montedoglio. For about eighty years the institution was run by religious, after which it was managed by lay-persons for nearly thirty years. On 20 August 1919, after repeated requests made to the Generalate in Milan (documentary evidence of which is missing), bishop Pompeo Ghezzi succeeded in obtaining the service of the sisters of Maria Bambina, who since 1917, had already been working at the hospital and at the seminary of Sansepolcro.

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<sup>2</sup> Sansepolcro city overlooks the valley (Alta Valle Tiberina Toscana), which opens out into a vast hilly region. Tradition connects the ancient city with two pilgrim saints: Arcadius and Egidius. On their return from the Holy Land they interpreted a mysterious sign as a divine message to stay back: so they settled down in the valley and built a chapel to guard their relics brought from Jerusalem. They founded a community of monks around which there developed the town of Sansepolcro. In the Middle Ages it was feudal land subject to the abbots of the Camoldolites Order. From 1163 onwards it was a free commune; it was then subject to lords. In 1520 Sansepolcro was nominated by pope Leo X as a bishop's see. It is the birthplace of the painter Piero della Francesca (1416-1492). cf. SENSI M., «Arcano e Gilio, santi pellegrini fondatori di Sansepolcro», in *Vite di pellegrinaggio medievale attraverso l'Alta Valle del Tevere*, a cura di Mattesini E., Città di Castello, 1998, 46-47; Documento originale in Sansepolcro, Archivio storico comunale, serie XVIII, filza 1; PREVEDELLO M. A., *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1940, V, 116-118.

The official Statute of the orphanage<sup>3</sup> said:

*The girls' orphanage, with its permanent residence in Sansepolcro, was opened in the early days of May 1800, at the request, in rescript, dated 2 March 1797, of his honour granduca Ferdinando III. It is governed along the lines laid down by law 1862 and by 'regolamento' of 27 November of the same year (art. 1). The name of the said orphanage: «Orfanotrofio Schianteschi» keeps up the memory of late nobleman Cosimo Francesco Schianteschi, count of Montedoglio of Sansepolcro city. The said nobleman, by will-and-testament dated 3 August 1796 (with Giuseppe Mattia Zanchi, as notary), bequeathed his property to the needy girls of Sansepolcro left as orphans, and willed for them the erection of a house for their upbringing (art 2). His aim is to admit and bring up needy orphan girls of the city of Sansepolcro: to teach them the holy maxims of the Catholic religion, of Christian morals and of good citizenship; to impart to them elementary instruction as in elementary schools of the kingdom; to train them in skills in view of securing jobs suited to their social status. They are expected to acquire habits and carry out duties related to work and life as able housewives (art 3). A board of directors formed by the institute manages the affairs of the orphanage along the following terms: for the purpose of executing the will, and at the same time to carry out all the details of the inheritance and annual revenue of the same, the testator appoints his excellency Mgr pro tempore bishop of the city of Sansepolcro and archpriest of the Cathedral itself, with his two most elderly vicars, namely: the pro tempore Pievano of S. Agostino, situated in Sansepolcro and the pro tempore parish priest of S. Nicolò church also in Sansepolcro... The bishop is the president of this committee and, in time of an empty See, the presidency will be taken over by the bishop ordinary of Sansepolcro» (art 5).*

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<sup>3</sup> cf. *Ricerca sulla validità dell'Opera Orfanotrofio Femminile «Schianteschi» - Sansepolcro*, 1974; cf. articoli, in AGSdC, 681/D.

Orphanage life started at the home of its founder in via S. Nicolò; in 1808, following upon the suppression of the Benedictine community, the orphanage was transferred to the former convent. The first bishop who directed its affairs, Mgr Roberto Costaguti (1778-1818), also dictated its rules. In 1889 it was recognized as a Moral Entity and its formal Statute was drawn up and duly signed by the presiding bishop, Mgr Giustino Puletti (1875-1892).

After a period of hard times related to problems of governance and assistance in relations with laypersons, bishop Pompeo Ghezzi (1911-1953), born at Gorgonzola, a man of great integrity and kindness, had the sisters of Maria Bambina accept management at the girls' orphanage. He had come to know the sisters at Treviglio, where he was canon and vice parish priest. On 20 August 1919 the community, erected by mother Vittoria Starmusch, was made up of the superior Sr. Fedele Giacometti (1919-1926), who had formerly been at the bishop's seminary of Sansepolcro (1917-1919), with five sisters and two *sorelle mandatarie*<sup>4</sup>; there were then about 15 orphan-girls. On 28 August 1920 the Agreement was drawn up and signed by both parties. The sisters' duties were thus indicated:

*...maintaining order in the girls' orphanage itself; educational assistance, religious and moral instruction; supervision and care of the orphans; training the girls in housework and in handwork that might be useful in any household; household management and exact abiding by the Agreement; care of furniture, wardrobe well attended to; making use of the orphans' help in this; supervision of kitchen duties done by personnel directed, informed or warned by them (art II). The 'mandatarie', who carried out kitchen duties and other types of manual work, will be helped by orphan-girls in regular turns fixed by sister superior (art III).*

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<sup>4</sup> Giacometti Sr. Fedele superior (33 years), Casciotti Sr. Pierina (37 years), Lazzari Sr. Fortunata (33 years), Scanferlato Sr. Innocente (36 years), Zanoni Sr. Rosa (30 years), Gregori Clotilde (39 years), Sottocorno Maria (41 years). cf. Stato Effettivo 1919, in AGSdC.

The sisters left Milan at 6.20, arrived at Arezzo at 16.45; from there they set out at 18.00 and arrived at Sansepolcro at 21.00: a voyage we cannot think of nowadays!

*...On his part the administrator assumes the responsibility: a) to assign to the sisters an apartment with furniture, linen and household goods needed for the use of the kitchen, b) to supply them with their share of food c) an annual pay of £ 250 for each sister and of £ 200 for each 'sorella mandataria' to cover expenses for their clothes, d) to grant use of light, fuel and washing, e) medical care and medicine in cases of slight ailments...<sup>5</sup>.*

The formative pattern and life at the orphanage was very simple: the sisters grew fit for their duties thanks to their talent and practical experience rather than by any professional studies. They knew and practised the hints given by their *Direttorio*<sup>6</sup>:

*In orphanages sisters will limit their educational program to what is established for compulsory education... The main attention is to be given to the teaching of knitting, sewing and embroidery since the girls will later on have to earn their living by their work. Above all care must be taken to give them the training in keeping the house in order and perfectly clean, including such work as cooking, laundry, ironing, so that by the end of their stay at the orphanage each girl is able to count on a good number of skills necessary for an honest maid, housewife or waitress in a good family setting...*

The sisters loved 'their' girls and, at the right moment, they were wisely understanding and firm, patient, noble-minded and self-sacrificing towards them to ensure an all-round formation. The girls were friendly and obeyed the sisters with deep trust; they were lively and happy; life at the orphanage was serene.

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<sup>5</sup> Convenzione, Milan 28 August 1920 (manuscript), cf. Convenzioni, in AGSdC.

<sup>6</sup> cf. *Direttorio per i ministeri esterni delle suore della carità della ven. Capitanio sotto la direzione di S. Vincenzo de' Paoli*, Trento, 1898, 135-139; *Direttorio delle suore della carità della beata Bartolomea Capitanio*, Milano, 1928, 335-337.

The orphans were divided into two groups: the ‘little’ ones belonged to elementary classes; the ‘big’ ones were all the rest. They were all together for meals and recreation; classrooms were not cut off from work-rooms. The children wore the uniform only on particular occasions; for the rest they wore their usual garments.

The timetable was as follows:

time	6.45	<i>getting up</i>
time	7.20	<i>holy Mass / visit with short meditation - breakfast - housework</i>
time	8.30	<i>school lessons / work</i>
time	12.00	<i>first lunch</i>
time	13.00	<i>second lunch - clearing up - recreation</i>
time	14.15	<i>work / study</i>
time	16.30	<i>tea-break</i>
time	19.15	<i>supper</i>
time	21.00	<i>rest</i>

On feastdays the girls were taken out on long walks or outings; throughout the year such days brought the joy of receiving gifts (sweets, fruit, toys and pocket-money) from generous persons. Around Christmas and Epiphany, according to a local custom, the little ones were invited to lunch at various people’s homes: inhabitants tried to outdo one another in goodness of heart, something that occurred throughout the year but was more intense and generous at Christmas time, as is mentioned in the community diary. For summer holidays the Institution made use of a colony named «Civetta», bequeathed in 1930 by a benefactor, Stefano Nicolai, and of a seaside summer resort: «Belsite a Pinarella», where the girls enjoyed themselves and improved in health. A priest took class in Christian doctrine once a week; every day, the sisters led a ten-minute reflection and provided religious and moral support individually and in groups. Medical check-ups and health visits were given free of charge and with much care by the Municipality.

Work at the kitchen, sewing and general cleaning was done by the orphan-girls: as they did not go to school, they had time for drama, comic scenes and songs, which they then exhibited in a show for the public. Such entertainment was provided by them alone for the population of Sansepolcro, with practically everybody participating<sup>7</sup>. In February 1937 the bishop of the Camaldolese hermitage wrote to the superior, Sr. Margherita Pedralli:

*let me add a word of heartfelt thanks to all the good sisters of charity of B. Capitanio who in Sansepolcro especially are carrying out a marvellously-good apostolate in excellent works entrusted to their care*<sup>8</sup>.

In September 1938 a threefold event was solemnly celebrated: the 50 years of religious life of Sr. Gonzaga Amigoni<sup>9</sup>, the admittance into our Institute of an orphan-girl as postulant, and the first communion of a little orphan-girl prepared for it by Sr. Gonzaga<sup>10</sup>.

In 1944, during the nazist occupation, the community was divided into 4 groups: one group remained at Sansepolcro as a home for persons and families seeking refuge and protection; yet another group of orphan-girls with three sisters evacuated to Sigliano-Pieve S. Stefano and were received by the parish priest; another group sought refuge at Anghiari (AR) at *santuario del Carmine*; and finally one group was given hospitality by an institute of sisters at Città di Castello<sup>11</sup>.

In years 1943-1944<sup>12</sup>, community sisters previously 6 in number rose to 14 at the most, while sister-educators of the orphans were 3 in number, throughout: two to mind the girls and one for the 'after class hours'. Orphans on the roll ranged from 40 to 50<sup>13</sup>; from 1930

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<sup>7</sup> cf. *Sorrisi e vagiti di Maria SS. Bambina*, Brescia, August 1921.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Letter dated 4 February 1937, Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 681/D.

<sup>9</sup> Born in 1864 at Calolziocorte (BG), died in 1947 at Palombara Sabina (RM) in 1894, at the age of 83 and 59 years of religious vocation.

<sup>10</sup> cf. *Sorrisi e vagiti di Maria SS. Bambina*, Brescia, December 1938.

<sup>11</sup> cf. Dati storici, in AGSdC, 681/D.

<sup>12</sup> cf. Stato effettivo annuale, in AGSdC.

<sup>13</sup> cf. Registro Opere e Statistiche, in AGSdC, 681/D.

onwards students were also admitted<sup>14</sup>. In the beginning they lived apart from the other girls; they were treated in a different manner and went out to attend state schools, while the orphans were trained for diplomas in cutting-out, sewing and knitting. In 1952 the superior Sr. Agnese Allievi encouraged five sisters to attend a course in cutting-out and one sister for a course of training in the use of small looms for textile fabrics<sup>15</sup>; in July 1956 at a social function rendered more charming by songs and scenes staged by the orphans, significant events were celebrated: the completion of a course of professional training in knitting work promoted by the UPAI (*provincial administration office for Italian and International aid*), and the handing out of diplomas and accompanying booklet to young girls who had passed their exams. Among the teachers there were Sr. Giuseppina Mele and the directress of the course, superior Sr. Ambrogina Mauri<sup>16</sup>. After that, the orphanage and the students' quarters were amalgamated, and the orphans too attended courses of studies at the *medie* and *classi superiori* of state school.

Good mothers of families<sup>17</sup>, as well as fervent religious<sup>18</sup>, owed a great deal to «Schianteschi» institution.

As life emerging from the earthquake of 1948, returned to normal, the big, old building undergoing gradual repairs and was rendered more welcoming by a series of reconstruction and adaptation so as to have study-rooms, recreation hall, dining-room

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<sup>14</sup> In 1924, in the large hospital building of the orphanage, was opened the shelter for the poor «F. Lazzerini», in 1927 the nursery school «Nomi-Collacchioni» and in 1929 the boarding school for students.

<sup>15</sup> Letter dated 12.12.1952, sent by the superior to mother A. Reali. cf. Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 861/D.

<sup>16</sup> «La voce» del 15.07.1956, articoli, in AGSdC, 861/D.

<sup>17</sup> The community diary, 1968, p. 2, mentions the little girl, Graziella: from the babies' hospital she was received by a family of farmers, from there to «Schianteschi» which became 'her home'; she obtained a job at «Buitoni» Company; she met a good young man and on 20 January their marriage was celebrated in the chapel of the orphanage.

<sup>18</sup> I personally know and hold in deep esteem and affection Sr. Angelina Guerrini (Matilde), ex orphan of both parents; she taught Latin and Greek, then she was headmistress of the *Liceo classico* at *scuola «Santa Capitanio»*, Bergamo.



small bedrooms with appropriate furnishing, toilets and above all, after a long wait, the central heating system thanks to superiors Sr. Ambrogina Mauri (1955-1961) and Sr. Clorinda Di Nobile (1961-1968), the president-bishop Mgr Domenico Bornigia (1953-1963) and Mgr Abele Conigli (1963-1967), and also to the donations from several benefactors, the generous heart of Sansepolcro<sup>19</sup>. Very praise-worthy was the sisters' concern to render more functional and comfortable the orphans' dwelling while they themselves were most self-sacrificing, so much so that in 1962 mother Costantina Baldinucci wrote to the president:

*As a follow-up of my visit to the orphanage, I take the liberty to present to your grace a few improvements that truly need to be made for the small community. I propose that a flat be prepared for the sisters, in conformity with the Canon Law, including a few rooms with toilets apart, and a small study-room for the superior and a common room so as to facilitate and ensure the private life of the community... I would ask that the modest pay-check be given out every month as is done everywhere by now; that would make it easier for the superior to provide for the other needs of the sisters<sup>20</sup>.*

Meanwhile the sisters had met requests made by the local Church for other forms of service: infants' school; students' boarding-place; students' meal; teaching how to make lace on a lace-pillow, catechism class in two parishes and in a state elementary school and minding of altar-boys at the Cathedral...

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<sup>19</sup> cf. *Opere di rinnovamento all'Orfanotrofio femminile*, 1965; *Cronaca di Sansepolcro - Istituzioni benefiche*, 1965, «La vita», articoli, in AGSdC, 681/D.

<sup>20</sup> Letter dated 8 June 1962 to Mgr Domenico Bornigia, Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 861/D.

In 1970 there were 15 orphan-girls, as in early years; in 1974 only two were left; the orphanage was so only by name.

Though all agreed that for so many years the institution had carried out an effective work of education, renewed structures, the sisters' good will and affection were no longer sufficient for obtaining positive results along actual educational demands, especially with regard to competent personnel: there had to be qualified teachers with adequate educational methods.

There remained the praiseworthy self-sacrificing spirit of the sisters their self-forgetfulness in their efforts to create a family atmosphere. In 1980, however, three councillors of «Schianteschi», parish priests of the three ancient parishes of the city, wrote to mother A. Campanile: they stated the need for coming up to Statute demands for higher qualifications in some aspects of the service rendered by the Foundation, which had for so many years expressed the heart of all the city-dwellers; they affirmed that various activities run by the sisters were marginal, while the main aim of «Schianteschi», next to that of educating the orphan-girls, was that of caring for the aged, and hence the absolute need to revise the membership of the community and the sisters' competence<sup>21</sup>. By return of post, the superior general wrote back to the managing committee:

*it is up to the provincial superior to follow each community and see to any need for re-structuring; the considerable shortage of religious in our Institute does not allow for the possibility of taking up any new service; in all the provinces situated in North-Central Italy, there is already in force a re-dimensioning plan that foresees the thinning of activities in various sectors, all of which makes it difficult to meet the demands put forward for any sort of requalification of «Istituto Schianteschi»<sup>22</sup>.*

Meanwhile, provincial superior Sr. Clementina Fia was succeeded by Sr. Vincenza Calabresi: on 15 March 1982, after a careful inspection of the complex situation of the religious province of Rome, and a thorough reflection with her council, she wrote to the

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<sup>21</sup> Letter dated 3 December 1980, Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 861/D.

<sup>22</sup> Letter dated 19 December 1980, Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 861/D.

superior general, mother A. Campanile that all she could do by then was to ask for authorization to withdraw the sisters<sup>23</sup> for the following reasons: no sisters trained for care of the aged were available in the province; at Sansepolcro there was already «Villa Serena», a home for the aged; three other sisters were engaged in looking after the aged in their homes, which meant that in the city this form of requested assistance was not lacking. While waiting for authorization to withdraw the sisters, she received a request from Mgr Telesforo Giovanni Cioli, bishop of Arezzo, to retain a few sisters for voluntary assistance, at least for a year, and thus prevent the closing down of a building with the danger of a requisition by public authorities<sup>24</sup>; the superior general and the managing committee were also informed of this. On 21 May the superior general gave her consent to the delay.

13 July 1983 marks the departure of the seven sisters with superior Sr. Giuseppina Mele, and the end of the activity. In his letter dated 11 July 1983, from bishop's house, Fr Ercole Agnoletti, vicar general, had written to the provincial superior:

*Even the last sisters of Maria Bambina are leaving Sansepolcro. In this city we have seen in a short period of time the sisters leaving the seminary, the sisters leaving the state hospital, then «Schianteschi» orphanage. Three Institutions of great significance, run by the generous attention of these kind-hearted religious. Let us hope that vocations in all fields of human activity may flourish anew, that the example of a few may witness to the love of God the Father. We shall pray for the sisters who are gone and for those who are*

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<sup>23</sup> In letter of the same day she informed the *consiglio di amministrazione* that by not later than the month of June she was compelled to withdraw the sisters due to the «shortage of persons sufficient capable for the project».

<sup>24</sup> Letter dated 15 May 1982, Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 861/D.

*about to go elsewhere. May they continue, as much as they possibly can, to witness to that faith for which they had offered themselves to God and to their neighbour. And, above all, we give thanks. Thank you, mother, for what you have offered to our city. May God gladden with his peace and serenity the years that he will be pleased to grant to these sisters.*

The provincial superior wrote back (15 July):

*Your understanding heart has deeply moved me. I express to you my profound gratitude which I unite with the grief at having to come away from «Schianteschi» Institute. It is inexpressibly painful to abandon fields of work for the kingdom of God after years of self-sacrifice and total dedication.*

These are two testimonies in praise to life and to work done by sisters amidst orphan-girls, with such a great love that allowed them to become mothers and sisters.