



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)*

ORPHANAGE «CARENZONI», FELTRE (BL) - (1920-1975)

The fourteen orphan-girls present at the end of 1917 rose to as many as 50. The consequence of the war, as well as the directress' death occurring during the air raid, caused the Pious Institute to find itself lacking the needed personnel for management and educational purposes. This made the council members suggest that the sisters of charity, who for many years had been working at the government hospital and at the rest-home, could be asked to run Carenzoni orphanage of Feltre as well. On the basis of the permitting rules of their Institute and the competence and enlightened service, the said sisters had won the esteem and favour of all concerned...

On 12 January 1920, an official request was accordingly made by the managing council to the Institute of the sisters of charity, Milan, for the service of at least two sisters and a *mandataria*. Mother Vittoria Starmusch's favourable reply was dated 24 January 1920, while a personal recommendation and support to the request given by Sr. Carolina Colombo (superior at the hospital), bore the date of 13 January 1920.

Transactions were completed very soon: consent of bishop Giousuè Cattarossi, drawing up an approval of the Agreements, an on-the-spot visit by Sr. Clementina Azzini, provincial superior of

Venice and of Sr. Gabriella Gerosa, provincial superior of Udine; the latter accompanied the sisters¹ on **7 May 1920**.

The orphanage (orfanotrofio femminile «Carenzoni») of Feltre² owes its start to Mgr Bernardo Maria Carenzoni³, bishop of Feltre from 1786 to 1811. In the will-and-testament drawn up a year before his death (1810), he left a bequest to establish a house for poor girls orphaned of both parents; he wrote:

I leave as my heir the Congregation of charity of Feltre as administrator of public places of charity... income should be spent on the setting-up and maintenance of a house for spinsters, that is; poor orphan-girls eleven or twelve years of age, who would otherwise probably wander as beggars on the street, thus exposing themselves to the serious danger of forfeiting their innocence and of becoming a corrupting influence on social morals... They should be taught needlework and housework suited to women, and be given a Christian upbringing... If such a foundation, which I believe to be very useful, cannot be realized, I would leave the Congrega-

¹ In the annual report of 31 December 1920 there appeared in AGSdC the names of four sisters working at the orphanage, namely: Pedralli Sr. Margherita, Bodini Sr. Cesira, Gelain Sr. Angela, Locati Sr. Giuseppina and two *mandatarie*: Baratto Maria and Gazzola Maria.

² Feltre is an Italian municipal city belonging to Belluno, in the Veneto, on the western banks of the Piave. In the course of time the city had considerable urban and economic development. Artisan associations arose (smiths, carpenters, woodcutters); of *centonarians* (recyclers of used garments and wool processing waste, *centones*, translated 'felt', which seems to be the origin of the name *feltro*). The city is known for the famous «Encounter of Feltre» between Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler on 19 July 1943, even though the meeting actually took place at Villa Pagani Gaggia, close to San Fermo, Belluno. Many residents were put to death on charges of anti-fascist activity, as 'partisans'.
cf. Dante on Feltre in *Paradiso* IX, 52-54 (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia).

³ Bernardo Maria Carenzoni was born in Brescia on 2 March 1748 of a noble family of Brescia. He excelled as a man of a sound spirituality, his training by the Benedictines, complete education as professor of theology and engaged in pastoral activity as head-delegate, on behalf of the population of the newly-constituted province of Piave, to the extent of being proclaimed *defensor civitatis*. He died suddenly at Paris on 20 August 1811, where he had gone by order of Napoleon to join the «Concilio Nazionale». cf. *L'amico del popolo*, 5 February 1985; *Sorrisi e vagiti di Maria SS. Bambina*, 2 June 1921, Publications in AGSdC 653/G.

tion of charity free to replace it with some other public institution of charity.

With the proceeds deriving from the income, the Congregation of charity acquired the building of the suppressed convent of the Ursulines and admitted eight orphan-girls into it. In 1813 the orphanage was officially opened under the name of «Carenzoni». It was raised into a recognized body on 1st January 1818. Following upon world war I, repairs were made on it out of bequests of money left by private citizens, together with a contribution from the State, and sixty orphan-girls were admitted. It was set up by a council of seven members who carried out their functions free of charge... In 1914 there was opened in the same building «Bertagno» professional school for girls with classes in cutting, sewing and embroidery⁴. And so, the sisters' duties as given in the Agreements dated 10 April 1920, are: the running of the orphanage and of the girls' professional school attached to it, a basic and religious instruction, moral education, minding of the orphan-girls, training in housework, needlework that can be useful in any family, cooking and dispensary, linen-room: suitable use is also made of the orphan-girls⁵.

In his letter of 20 August 1920 to the Mother, councillor Carlo Obberoffer expressed satisfaction regarding the new system introduced in the Pious Institute thanks to the sisters «even though much was yet to be done»; and on 1st January 1922 the president, Arturo Paoletti, told the superior general that he was very sorry about the transfer of the superior, Sr. Margherita Pedralli:

an intelligent sister, a good-natured peacemaker, who in the carrying out of her duties with firm will and deeply zealous, has unfailingly put to good use her various aptitudes and her long familiarity with orphanages; she thus succeeded, in a short time and with meagre means, in establishing at this Pious Institute a true and proper education⁶.

⁴ Ivi.

⁵ cf. Convenzioni, 1920, signed by Giuseppe Bovio president of the council and by mother M. Vittoria Starmusch, superior general, in AGSdC 653/G.

⁶ cf. Corrispondenza I, in AGSdC 653/F.

However, starting a new venture is always a hard struggle: there arose disagreement between citizens who sympathised with the sisters and the managing committee that put limits to their work; bishop Giosuè Catarrossi favoured the Canossian sisters and wanted to dismiss our sisters, so much so that mother Starmusch was compelled to consult cardinal Pietro Maffi, archbishop of Pisa. Divergence re-emerged in 1922, when the number of orphan girls was increasing to a remarkable degree and the managing committee did not provide adequately for their need, to the extent that to change the orphans' clothes they had to be kept in bed. In 1924, Emma Mazzocco, a teacher at the professional school, intolerant of discipline and with no respect towards the sisters, created ill-will even among the orphan-girls. In 1926 some students formerly attending the Canossians' school, were admitted to Carenzoni's: this gave rise to the bishop's open disapproval⁷. On 17 January 1926, Sr. Ernestina Giulini, superior, wrote to mother Starmusch:

With the opposition made to our modest work, there will surely arise from sacrifice, salvation of souls and the most robust virtues.

Meanwhile, superior and sisters went on lavishing care and efforts on both the orphanage and the school, so much so that the managing committee felt duty bound to thank mother V. Starmusch, for the high regard in which she held the Pious Institute,

by seeing to it that it always had a superior and sisters adorned with gifts of mind and heart most proper for an educator.

That same day, 9 August 1924, Luigi Barbante in his capacity as president, thanked sister superior and all the sisters

for the excellent results obtained by the professional school and for the considerable income earned by the ironing and needle-work products sold or commissioned (two sisters were in charge of the linen and ironing section). He appreciated the steady smooth running of the orphanage.

⁷ cf. Corrispondenza II, in AGSdC 653/F; PREVEDELLO M. A., *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1940, V, 152-157; Report on the Initiative, in AGSdC 653/G.

In reply, Sr. superior thanked for the esteem, trust and kindness shown towards the sisters. She added, however,

it is the bounden duty of every sister who bears the title 'of charity', to work with fraternal concern for the good of her neighbour.

In September 1925 mother Starmusch contributed towards the work done on the chapel of the building, where an altar with a niche of Maria Bambina was also placed.

In 1929, following upon a legacy bequeathed by ing. Giovanni Monego, the orphanage opened a boys' section called «Infanzia abbandonata Margherita di Savoia» in Feltre⁸, with the decision to bring back together the girls to the girls' orphanage of Feltre newly named «Carenzoni Monego» and to admit into «Infanzia abbandonata» an equal number of little boys. Mother Starmusch agreed to the decision and was willing to send a greater number of sisters if needed. She was thankful that the 'little undertaking' of the sisters as she herself called it had met with the pleasure of the authorities and expressed her trust that the sisters «would always work gladly for the welfare of the Pious Institution». Nevertheless she sought to speak up for the sisters' rights: from time to time she asked that their monthly pay be updated, and when, in 1931, following upon R. D. 20.11.1930, the president was about to reduce the pay of all the personnel, sisters included, she pointed out that if their modest pay was further reduced it would not cover their normal expenditure. In the end the president had the sisters dispensed from the cut⁹.

⁸ In its concern for the innocent victims (from 6 to 12 years of age) of the war and its aftermath the Congregation of charity of Feltre, in 1925 instituted «Infanzia abbandonata», after «Margherita di Savoia». The centre is in the building next to the courtyard of the rest-home; management and work carried out in various offices are still entrusted to our sisters who worked in them till 1952. cf. Corrispondenza I, 24 e 26 July 1929; PREVEDELLO M. A., *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1940, V, 377-378.

⁹ cf. Letters 9.11.12 January 1931 - Corrispondenza I, in AGSdC, 653/F.

The detailed proposals dictated by Carenzoni in his will-and-testament, relating to the management of the Institution at the administrative and educational level were codified into the Organic Statute of 1940, signed by king Vittorio Emanuele III and his minister Guido Buffarini¹⁰.

In chapter one it indicated the origin of the Institution, its aim and means it disposed of.

«Carenzoni-Monego» orphanage, formerly «Carenzoni» girls' orphanage, is divided into two sections: boys' section and girls' section ... The girls' section was founded in 1810. It was erected into a recognized body on 1st January 1818. The boys' section started functioning in 1929.

Orphanage patrimony: public property in the countryside, buildings, furniture and State income... (art. 1).

The aim of the orphanage is that of providing without charge, as far as it can afford, for a home, maintenance, moral and physical welfare and schooling of little boys and girls both parents of whom are poor or those deprived of one parent. If extra room is available, other orphans who are not poor or poor orphans belonging to other municipalities may be admitted on the payment of a fee.

To be denied admission are orphans below six years and those over twelve years of age, those not yet vaccinated or have not yet caught smallpox, sickly or disabled children (art. 2).

Priority is to be given to children orphaned by the war, children of parents mutilated in warfare, invalids for the Nation's sake or in Italian projects and operations in Eastern Africa, orphans coming from a numerous family (art. 3).

Orphans will be given elementary education at public schools in the capital city of Feltre. On completing their compulsory education the boys will be guided along a skill or occupation: if the Institute does not provide for it, they will be placed at agencies, workshops or offices found in Feltre, provided these are conducted properly and judiciously. The girls will instead be admitted into the «scuola professionale femminile F. Bertagno» (art. 4).

¹⁰ cf. Convenzioni, in AGSdC 653/G.

In training the boys on a career or a job, their bents and aptitudes should be taken into account (art. 5).

Concerning the girls, besides theoretical and practical hints on jobs and professions that are best suited to women, other irreplaceable skills are imparted to ensure the smooth running of a house... Pupils will be trained in habits of sincerity, mutual respect, orderliness, love for work and sense of personal responsibility and cleanliness, in a word: what is needed to form the character of a self-respecting citizen (art. 6). In the orphanage the treatment of pupils cared for free of charge will in no way differ from that of others admitted on payment (art. 7).

Pupils who have officially availed themselves of professional training may work inside the Institute or outside it in accordance with the decision of the council; they have their share of the gains made by the work in which they have taken part. The profit made by pupils concerned will be deposited every month in the postal saving bank and noted in each one's booklet; this will be handed to the owner when the time comes for leaving the Institute (art. 9).

The boys are dismissed at the age of sixteen and the girls when they are eighteen years old... If a favourable opportunity arises to settle down and improve their lot, orphans can leave earlier (art. 10).

The Statute is clearly bureaucratic in the flow of its articles, which are honest and balanced enough. However, with a watchful eye and intelligent heart the sisters sought the real needs of each orphan and wisely responded in an efficient and constructive manner, encouraged all along by superiors who were broadminded and truly understanding. They followed the formative, educative method then prevalent in orphanages yet gradually opening out to social needs, and encouraging their assisted youth to respond with a sense of personal responsibility: greater and more frequent contacts were allowed with the world outside and with their family through a weekly stay and during the holidays, while those who had no family to turn to, were entrusted to some generous person or found some remunerative work with holiday centres, hotels or private homes.

The same attention and importance was given to orphan girls of professional school «Bertagno», officially recognized in 1929 as «a Girls' secondary school specializing in handwork». Hence diplo-

mas issued to the students had the same juridical value as those awarded to students of secondary schools in the Kingdom. Orphanage and school both developed in their context and were highly appreciated by the authorities, families and the people. This is confirmed by statistical figures¹¹

<i>year</i>	<i>sisters</i>	<i>wards</i>	<i>students</i>
1920	6	40	60
1923	9	50	90
1932	11	80	110
1938	14	110	120
1948	15	100	140
1960	17	110	160
1966	15	80	150
1972	14	70	50

and by the esteem expressed and the merit awarded by the managing committee and by its ‘president’: in letters received and sent in 1924 and following years, mutual esteem-and-gratitude was expressed (see p. 86). On 14 September 1929 Memi Barbante, administrator, thanked sister superior for her religion lessons, «true and proper bread for the soul» to the children of «G. V. Mezzamo’s fascist heliotherapy colony»; on 2nd July 1932 in his letter to Sr. Ernesta Giulini, superior, G. Bovio, president, said it was his duty to acknowledge the active, zealous, and motherly manner in which, in perfect harmony and collaboration with her sisters, she had uninterruptedly served the Pious Institute, the expenses she had made for its sake and for the good of the orphan girls; on 6 July 1936, gen. Zermem G., president of professional school, fervently thanked the superior, the sisters and the lay teachers for the closing event of the school year, to the satisfaction of everyone; particularly impressive was an exhibition of the girls’ handwork.

¹¹ cf. Report of the apostolic work drawn up on 22 August 1974, in AGSdC 653/G.

In December 1937 mother A. Reali thanked the mayor of Feltre for giving free of charge burial place in the cemetery for the body of Sr. Giuseppina Beroldo, and in 1948 for the honorary funeral and the burying among the benefactors of the orphanage the body of the superior Sr. Ernesta Giulini, who for 26 years had directed the Institute with noble-mindedness and delicate intuition; for every person she had a word of wise counsel, a deed of kindness; she had been a tender mother to the orphan girls, to the poor, to those in any need; to so many young girls she was a highly esteemed educator. With incomparable skill she had guided the Institution even during world war II when Feltre, already intended to be pattern-bombed, was miraculously spared¹².

As time evolved, with the direct intervention of administrators and with pressure put to bear on the various ministries, many costly repairs and expansion works were carried out on both the orphanage and the professional school. In 1952 the latter made an impressive gain when a spacious, modern building was offered by sen. Achille Gaggia and dedicated to his mother, Maria Paoletti Gaggia who in her youth had been an esteemed teacher at the school.

Every year an exhibition was open to the public, including very many visitors from beyond the province and whole classes of students. The display of exhibition was complete: clothes and cutlery, paper models and handwork, adults' garments and children's frocks. The method followed was that of prof. Virginia De Benedetti; it was later on brought to perfection and adapted to modern demands by prof. Ida Galimberti from Rome¹³.

¹² cf. Corrispondenza I, in AGSdC 653/F. The little ones had been evacuated to Foen, fraction of Feltre, 3 km away with 4 sisters, and the superior went to see them every Sunday.

¹³ cf. *Il Gazzettino*, 28.6.1958, Pubblicazioni, in AGSdC 653/G.

In one of the halls of the exhibition there was put up an anonymous thought, which is worthwhile reading in these times of ours, which are so different: *A girl's dowry does not consist in the heap of money, but in virtue and in preparation for life at home. Beauty fades with the time, wealth may be lost any day; virtue, instead, is a beauty, a wealth that neither sickness nor time nor events can spoil*; and in one corner, there was written: *Children are flowers of humankind, the smile of God, the joy of living, hope for the future.*

From 1948 to 1960 Sr. Angela Gelain, formerly an educator and teacher, a «perfectly balanced personality in behaviour and in activity», was the superior guiding both the orphanage and school «Bertagno». To her goes the final record of merit as such. When in September 1959 sir Sisto Zancanaro, president, was informed of her intended withdrawal, he wrote to mother general, Sr. C. Baldinucci:

We were grieved by the news concerning this humble, great sister of exemplary virtue, who for 39 years has, with such zeal, carried out her mission at the Pious Institution. She was loved by all. She represents the figure, worthy of merit and truly noble, of the sisters at work there. Noble in her love for the welfare of the young, noble in her understanding and enlightened guidance of our orphans and of all the young girls who turned to her, noble in the serene mind, steadfastness and diligence with which she has carried out her mandate as mother superior... Our first thought was to go to rev. mother general and beg her to withdraw the decision, but Sr. Angela begged us to abandon that idea and accept the decision of the general council. Sr. Angela's homage to obedience prevented us from carrying out our first thought. And so, the managing committee unable to express the deep gratitude to our kind, good superior, has decided to confer on her the golden medal so as to honour the great achievements of her thirty-nine years at this orphanage and at school «Bertagno» attached to it.

Meanwhile the number of orphan girls was on the decrease, and compulsory education was extended to *terza media*. Very many girls were employed in factories. In 1969 the house was given a new name: «Istituto educativo-assistenziale Carenzoni»; young girls coming from the surrounding districts and from the Region had to pay a monthly fee which varied according to what their family could afford or the municipal bodies had fixed¹⁴.

Our Congregation undertook to help sisters qualify for their work through attendance of monthly courses for assistant educators, organized by FIRAS. Though considerably past their youth,

¹⁴ cf. Report of the apostolic work for year, 1974, in AGSdC 653/G.

these adult-students responded to the new teaching method. They were close to orphan girls who had experienced psychological crises, helping them «to mould their character, to train their mind and to channel their tendencies» in preparation for social life¹⁵. They stimulated the religious sense of human life with all its spiritual values. Young girls later thanked the sisters for this when they came back as ‘old students’.

However, on 22 December 1973, provincial superior Sr. Maria Dametto informed mother A. Campanile that the council had included into the plan of *ridimensionamento* for 1974 the «Istituto educativo-assistenziale Carenzoni»; the main reason given for this step was the lack of religious to replace the current sisters by then already elderly and no longer fit. The president, Enrico De Bortolo, inevitably reacted, but his recourse to the administration, to bishop Gioacchino Muccin, and to mayor Felice Dal Sasso was of no avail...

On **30 June 1975** the sisters left the Institution so dear to them; their departure, however, did not bring about its suppression: The Congregation of the Canossian sisters kept it up. In the daily newspaper *L'amico del popolo* of 12 July 1975 we read:

It can be said that «Carenzoni» Institution, thanks to the dedicated love of the sisters of Maria Bambina that has represented a meeting point and upbringing of whole generations of girls. It is there that besides a motherly assistance, many girls have also received a human, religious instruction worthy to be kept by them all through their life as a never-failing possession.

From 1985, onwards, with no religious available any more, the person at the head of the Institution was a priest, aided by lay per-

¹⁵ cf. Talk by Sr. Zaveria Marini, social assistant, in *Supplemento ad Ascendere*, March-April 1955.

sonnel: Dr Giovanni Gobbo, as head of the administration, revived it by developing the educational aspect, in fidelity to Carenzoni's will-and-testament, in a context totally renewed: accordingly, admissions included university students of the faculty of modern languages, and also those of the school of professional nurses. Other cases accepted aimed at offering assistance to girls in difficult family circumstances, and also granting admission to a group of anonymous alcoholics, for meetings of group therapy.

On 2 March of the same year, in occasion of the 175th anniversary of foundation of the Pious Institution, the sisters of Maria Bambina, who from 1920 to 1975 were one with the disadvantaged in life – not just close to them – were awarded a 'memorial plaque' in acknowledgement of the good done¹⁶.

¹⁶ cf. *L'amico del popolo*, weekly of Belluno & Feltre, 2, 9 February and 16 March 1985, Publications in AGSdC 653/G.