



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)*

«INFANZIA ABBANDONATA», BOLOGNA - (1931-1953)

Sinìte parvulos venire ad me (let children come to me). This quotation from the Bible very appropriately introduces the *Regolamento di servizio interno* (*Rules of internal service*) of the Institution in Bologna for the protection of forsaken children. Starting from 1931 it has appeared on letter-pads, on top, right hand corner as a logos of the Institution. Jesus' bidding to the disciples (*Mk* 10:14) is thus given to anyone who has to do with children and, in this specific case, to those who work among forsaken children of Bologna; it connotes their style and aim of education.

In fact, para 11 of *Regolamento*¹, says:

There's no limit to the motherly love and care that children should be shown; our loving ways with them will in that way make up for the lack of a family of their own. Yet at the same time we must firmly expect them to obey, show respect and carry out instructions given

¹ Institution at Bologna for the protection of forsaken infants. *Regolamento di servizio interno*, 1932, in AGSdC, 237/G.

them with the aim of helping them grow into fine young adults, healthy in mind and body, and in due time become worthy citizens.

And para 21 says:

Rather than resorting to punishment, the directress can obtain better results and greater benefits by her unfailingly gentle, persuasive manner and the kindness that is so becoming in the sisters who look after them.

Again:

In placing children, particularly girls, at a home, it is important to be very prudent so that besides being quite sure that the persons who offer to receive our children in their homes are honest and morally sound, there may absolutely be no uncertainty about their livelihood nor an outright exploitation of their work (n 27).

Besides, in *Agreement*², signed on 8 December 1931 by superior general Sr. M. Antonietta Sterni and by the president engr. Carlo Montuschi, the sisters are expected to «be motherly in their care and assistance»; it is stated:

The system of education of the children must aim at forming good citizens according to the principles of the Catholic faith and morals, and in the ways of a healthy, sound method. There should always be kept in mind the actual living conditions of the children, where they come from and the kind of life their future will most likely hold.

The Statute³ then affirms:

The aim of the Institution is to protect the children, ensure the growth of body, mind and morals of forsaken or ill-treated children (art. 2).

It points out, however, that the «Refuge house» is for the boys and girls

not a fixed home but only a temporary refuge to remove them from abandonment and destitution⁴ ...Administrative service inside the House is of a homely type and is entrusted, on the basis of a particular agreement, to sisters.

² Agreement of 1931, in AGSdC, 237/G.

³ Statute of 1931, in AGSdC, 237/G.

⁴ cf. Statute, art. 4 and Agreement, art. 1.2.

This took place on **10 December 1931**⁵, when mother A. Sterni, at the request of card. G. Battista Nasalli Rocca of Corneliano, archbishop of Bologna, in his desire to replace the lay-personnel, established a new community and sent six sisters⁶ to Bologna, which belonged to the religious province of Romagna - Toscana.

The foundation of this establishment dates back to 1890, in via S. Vitale, 30; in 1907 it moved to a building of municipal administration outside Porta Lama, via Pietro Inviti, 9. The service had been entrusted to lay personnel under the guidance of a directress, but when she fell ill and was no longer able to follow those at work in the «Refuge House», reminders for disciplinary reasons induced the president engr. Carlo Montuschi to seek help from the sisters of charity:

*God in his Providence entrusted the daughters of Bartolomea those poor little ones that they might find in the sisters tender hearts capable of loving them, of making them forget what they had endured and soften in their tiny souls the longing for a mother's caressing lips, but above all that they might be nourished by a faith that could stand by them, comfort and sustain them in all the trials of life*⁷.

Children assisted were mostly over 40/50⁸, so too the number of the sisters remained 7/6 from 1931 to 1953⁹. In the *Agreement* of 1931 their work includes: care and assistance of the children, kitchen work, dispensary, wardrobe, laundry work, keeping the house and courtyard attached clean and tidy. Besides it was written

an odd-job man will be available for heavy day-to-day house-work, more especially for the laundry or to attend to the boys in work not fit for the sisters.

⁵ cf. Corrispondenza epistolare I, novembre-dicembre, in AGSdC, 237/E.

⁶ cf. Stato Effettivo delle suore 1931, in AGSdC: Sartori Sr. Elisa (50 years) superior; Dell'Orto Sr. Carolina (46 years) wardrobe; Silvegni Sr. Guglielmina (30 years) asst. girls; Vallini Sr. Concetta (32 years) asst. children; Viganò Sr. Fabiana (28 years) help; Malvestiti Emma (40 years) kitchen.

⁷ cf. PREVEDELLO M. A., *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1940, V, 880-882.

⁸ cf. Registro delle Opere, in AGSdC.

⁹ cf. Stato effettivo annuale delle suore, in AGSdC.

In the *Agreement* it further says:

concerning the girls a work-shift suited to the girls' age will be fixed for general cleaning, making of beds and keeping bedrooms in order, for the cooking, needle-work and mending of clothes, laundry, taking note of daily expenses and, lastly, for the breeding of chickens in their own courtyard and also for cultivating vegetables (15.a). For the boys: shift for the cleaning of the rooms, make their beds for keeping the heating system going, getting ready coal needed for water heaters, kitchen and laundry, for any breeding of rabbits in the place fit for them and for the cultivating of vegetables (15.b);

obviously for going to school in age-groups and for the observing of religious practices, as agreed with the parish priest. More than ever before the *Agreement* is precise and rich in detail with regard to the children's way of spending their time, while it is left to the director to set the timetable «taking into account the children's age» but in a way that all are busy the whole day (cf. art. 18).

Concerning sister superior: in her role as director,

personally and through her assistants, her duty is to get to know the character, attitudes and inclinations, their bright side and weak side. They must make it a point to examine all news about each girl's origins with the aim of forming an all-round idea of individual personalities and so help them develop in the most successful way (art. 12).

In the above-mentioned *Rules of internal service* sisters have clear guidelines of behaviour, to the extent that they can be compared to the instructions for service done by the sisters of charity (1928).

In 1937 a babies' home was also opened for the children of the district's growing population, as well as recreation after school

hours for the girls whose number present per day rose to a hundred¹⁰, to the great satisfaction of the families and of the sisters, considering the good that could come out of it. The president, engr. C. Montuschi, missed no opportunity to thank the superior general for letting him have the sisters' service.

That same year mother A. Sterni died and was succeeded by mother A. Reali; as vicar general, it was her duty to follow the painful happenings of «Refuge House» of Bologna and keep up the courage of sisters and children through the extreme difficulties and perils of warfare and postwar times. In fact the year 1940 marks the end of *chapter one* of the history of the Institution of «Forsaken babies» written out with so much affection by our sisters and, indeed, with self-sacrifice, but also with *positively* brighter effects considering the remarkable progress made by the Project.

On the background of *chapter two* was the *world conflict*, which seemed to annul all projects of an educational or assistance type of the «Refuge House»; every diary page was badly smeared with fear, anguish and blood to the point that there seemed to be no more educators and children to bring up and 'form', but simply sisters who are real mothers and children who are daughters to them: one big family to save from the fury of war and from human hatred.

The *chronicle* «Odyssey of children entrusted to Providence»¹¹ starts with an affirmation as sad as it could have ever been: «On entering the home of *Forsaken infancy* in all its cruelty and arrogance, it drove the children out of it» and – we may add – it made them 'forsaken' one more time, and with them the sisters too, and the story becomes one, the same for all.

At Bologna crowds started fleeing to the hills in July 1943; for our educational community it was neither simple nor easy to find a house that could hold them all. The Institute owned four farms with as many farmhouses but the farmers were not well-

¹⁰ cf. Report of community 1931-1939, in AGSdC, 237/G.

¹¹ cf. Tempo di guerra: cronaca 1943-1945. «Odissea di bimbi affidati alla Provvidenza», in AGSdC, 172/J.

disposed towards them, as at times happens among poor people that they fight over the little there is to share.

On 16 July the first heavy air raid over the city sent everybody looking for a refuge; Lucianino wept because his friend was not there with him; Sr. Gisella returned to the dormitory in the dark; she felt her way from bed to bed and at last found Guidino, the smallest child, who had felt sleepy and so had come back to sleep.

On 24 July, just after a night spent in the corridor between the kitchen and the dispensary – at the railway park a hundred metres away from the Institute, a load of ammunition had been hit... the roof of the house gave way, the gate was unhinged, the courtyard in disorder, with the help of the chaplain and a few soldiers a camion was loaded as fully as possible ...in the evening some sisters with their children reached «Villa Fontana», portion of Medicina municipality.

At this point, the main source of history of *Forsaken infants* were letters exchanged between the superior Sr. Teodolinda Ghezzi and mother A. Reali, the community diary, the wartime diary of Sr. Gisella Conti, the «Breve storia e finalità dell'Opera», then texts published later on¹². There still remains the testimony of persons who have personally experienced genuine love for the little ones with the sole aim of saving their tender lives, already sorely tested. In the background the terrible drama of war, the endless nightmare of the siren, the dreaded ghost of death – remaining ill at ease for an incredible length of time (no water, no light, no toilet...): pages not of teaching method but of life spent bravely, lovingly and with deep faith.

The first time we were warmly received was by the arch-priest of «Villa Fontana», don Angelo by name; he placed at our

¹² cf. Corrispondenza I, 1931-1948, in AGSdC 237/E, 172/I; Corrispondenza II, 1949-1953, in AGSdC 237/F; Cronaca e Diario, in AGSdC 172/J; Breve storia e finalità dell'Opera, in AGSdC 237/G; cf. also CARRARO M. - MASCOTTI A., *L'Istituto delle sante Bartolomea C. e Vincenza G.*, Milano, 1966, II, 280-283; GALLIANI A., *Alle mie Sante con gratitudine*, NSdU, 2000/5.

disposal the parish infants' school premises, run by the Franciscan sisters, and the municipal school. When, divine Providence permitting, we were removed from those places, we settled down somehow in the farmhouse of «podere S. Pietro»: the attic served as dormitory, the horse's stable as a kitchen, the dormitory as a refectory, the beds as tables: as a recreation hall, the dormitory if it rained, and the farmer's stable if it snowed – so as to keep warm.

Twice a week, as long as the small train of San Vitale was running, two sisters used to go to town to get foodstuffs and pay a visit to our house which, again and again was found literally sacked (even the tiles of the bathrooms and of the kitchen, and the hand-bars of the stairs were taken off...). In the meantime the president, engr. Carlo Montuschi, who kept an eye and cared for sisters and children, died of a serious illness and the secretary accountant Bel-lagamba was interned to Germany; fortunately the military chaplain, don Nino del Signore di Caresana (Novara), agreed to be both chaplain and accountant of the *Opera*.

The days from June 1944 to April 1945 were simply terrible; the Anglo-American aircraft flew over the zone surveying the place supposing it to be a German resistance spot. With everyone lending a hand, a sort of shelter was built, in the middle of the field, a ditch two metres deep and four metres wide; sisters and children took shelter in it twenty-one times a day. With the coming of Autumn it kept raining, the shelter filled with water; with their buckets the children got rid of it every time, but in winter it gave way. Another shelter was built, leaning against the building; it was made of bundles of straw pressed down with a layer of tiles and bricks. There, other people who lived in houses nearby several times sought shelter. In one of various emergencies the chaplain was wounded in the leg (he was in due time healed by a German doctor); the superior was hit in the head (fortunately not very badly); the children wept: they were hungry and cold... they gathered around the sisters. Everybody prayed for hours; the chaplain blessed them and gave them absolution. For great lengths of time Sr. Gisella interceded eternal salvation aloud, with arms uplifted just like Moses who prayed to obtain the victory of Israel over the Amale-

kites. In her diary she notes down: «Never before as then had I realized what a priceless gift life is and how cruel the hatred of men». Deeply moving and yet so worrying is what superior Sr. Teodolinda wrote to the superior general:

We spend anxious moments, God help us and save us! And you, Mother, bless us (12.9.1944); remember us with the Lord, our only refuge. The sisters are badly in need of rest... It's not work that makes it hard to get it: it's fear... days ago, eight incendiary bombs were dropped in our field at dead of night. Christmas is drawing near; we shall spend it in our straw shelter (15.12.1944); the sisters' health is badly shaken, food is getting scarce partly because it is expensive. Our trust in God is keeping us up... all of us are truly scared (28.3.1945).

On 22.6.1945 in the secretariat of the archbishop of Milan, Vatican radio transmits:

Waiting for news. Warm greetings. Sr. Teodolinda Ghezzi, sisters and children well. Kindly give news of them to their families – Sent to Reali Sr. Angela, superior general sisters of charity – Maggianico (Como).

Between the lines there shines out the superior's care not to convey a sense of alarm to the superior general, who has also come away from Milan and is kept informed of sad situations of so many other communities during this period.

It is worth mentioning and reflecting on the concluding words of this diary: «The tragic remembrances of war» urge us to have access to the inmost depths of our sisters' hearts: they were deeply human and brave but they were, above all, animated by sentiments of piety and love for all:

For brevity's sake many details were left unsaid: worth mentioning were human aspects that are closer to divine mercy than to the cruelty of men. This is because forgiving love and silence are our best vengeance against both the 'enemy' in war and towards the Italian citizen in peace-time. Let us thank God who in his loving kindness and mercy has overwhelmed the raging hatred of men. Let us acknowledge in our prayer those who have brought us relief

in these dreadful years of wartime... Even among enemies we have had benefactors who with gentle words and timely help encouraged us and saved us from their companions including Poles, French citizens, Austrians and Germans. War has brought with it a cruel storm of evils, especially because it has not spared the most innocent, the children; in their spirit and in their body it has left terrible consequences. Of all our pains and sorrows, which have dug a deep furrow in our soul, let us make one bundle and offer them to our divine Redeemer, that he may graciously make them one with his boundless pain and obtain in exchange for this unsettled world the peace that, far from him, is sought in vain¹³.

When the war was over, there still remained problems... For the «Forsaken babies» there starts *chapter three* of events for a third time marked with abandonment. In everyone, children and sisters, there is one big desire: finding themselves back home in Bologna, build up the family harmoniously, re-shape their familiar lifestyle; but their Institute was by now occupied by trespassers who held desperately to it. There thus starts a true and real odyssey in places and houses never before seen nor lived in. On 3 August 1945, again from «Villa Fontana», the superior informed the superior general:

We are not yet in peace and tranquillity. The president is not yet in power; four times already the commissario has offered to lay down his authority, each time in vain; the chaplain is waiting for Dr Bellagamba's return from Germany, before he returns home. Callisto, the house keeper, has left the service... Since December 1943 nobody from the Administration staff has come to «Villa Fontana»; all 40 children are in need of everything; the farmers do not pay us as much as is established in the Agreement. I feel tired out and at times humbled. It makes me happy to think that when trials are hard, Jesus is much nearer, and so day by day I entrust him with everything, that he may see to it¹⁴.

¹³ «Odissea di bimbi affidati alla Provvidenza» - Tempo di guerra: cronaca 1943-1945, in AGSdC, 172/J.

¹⁴ Sr. Teodolinda (born at Cusano Milanino in 1894) was superior and responsible of the work since 1935 and had shared, as mother and sister, in the years of her mature age, all the experiences lived by the *Opera* and in the *Opera*.

Mother Reali wrote to prof. Giuseppe Romagnoli, extraordinary commissario, begging him to

find out what was happening concerning the activity and the sisters: these had gone through severe hardships and were in need of medical care and of personal things... The children have no shoes and cannot attend school. The Institute cannot bear the expense as the Generalate has been destroyed, and other works as well (20 January 1946).

The *commissario* replied on 6 February saying that he would not fail to help an activity that had been «so badly abandoned».

On 10 July 1947, seeing that nothing had yet been done, the superior general wrote to card. Nasalli Rocca di Coneliano demanding human understanding and help for sisters and children¹⁵ still dispersed at «Villa Fontana», «put up in an attic, where the ice of winter and the heat of summer are extreme: no comfort at all, not even from the hygienic point of view». She begged him to plead the case before the mayor for a return to the city. On 5 February 1948, since no-one had intervened, the superior general informed the cardinal that «the situation was untenable after it had been tolerated for five years already, the general council has decided to withdraw the sisters»; at the same time, seeing that her intervention and that of the provincial superior of Rimini had been of no use, she informed the president comm. Cesare Sarti.

However, the deplorable situation remained unsolved, and so, to the new president avv. Antonio Cantele, promptly, again and again¹⁶ confirmed the decision to withdraw the sisters by the end of June because «she could no longer let her sisters put up with such unhealthy conditions». The superior expressed her agreement with the decision taken, the president applies for an extension of the closing date lest he should be forced to entrust the project to «mercenary lay personnel» or else to suppress «Refuge House».

¹⁵ The children are 40 (cf. Registro delle opere), while the sisters 6 (cf. Stato effettivo annuale delle suore), in AGSdC.

¹⁶ 17 March 1.8.21 April 1949, cf. Corrispondenza II, in AGSdC, 237/F.

There started at this point a series of alternative proposals. The letters of the correspondence following on one another read like a novel serial. First a villa at Casaglia, acceptable as far as position and climate goes, but unpleasantly far, 4 km uphill all the way from the city is indicated. Next was a project for the restructuring of the house at Bologna. Worth considering then came Istituto «Trentini», abandoned by other sisters; then ospizio «Meini», at Miramare, and again «Villa Lamberdini», big, with adjoining land and a link with the city.

On 7 May 1949 the superior general wrote that if no conclusion was reached, «the sisters would leave the service by not later than 30 September. In his letter of 3 June 1949 the cardinal of Bologna sought to persuade her to let them stay on. This time (6 June 1949) she dictated her *ultimatum*: she would give her sisters permission to accept new hardships in a new provisional attempt to make the place at Casaglia habitable on condition that they were provided with water needed, a means of transport (car and driver) for covering the distance to the city, a teacher for the children who were unable to walk the 2 km of road distance to school and that «Villa Lamberdini» be made inhabitable by October 1950.

Again, it all ended in smoke: on 7 December 1949 the superior wrote to mother general: «Our situation goes from bad to worse ...it appears that they are holding us responsible for the closing down of the establishment...» So the superior general communicated to the president the confirmation of the sisters' withdrawal by not later than 31 March 1950 and sent her regular cancelling of the *Agreement* (21 December 1949). By return of post president Cantele assured the superior general that he would provide for the setting up of a *colonia agricola* or *casa di lavoro* for the boys with other personnel to render «Villa Fontana» ready for use particularly from the hygienic point of view. By year 1951 at the latest «Refuge House» would be shifted to Bologna or elsewhere. But it was too late (27 December 1949) for the superior general to change her mind: The sisters' withdrawal was fixed for 31 March 1950.

The president reacted cunningly: he threatened her saying that in accordance with Canon Law she could not close down a

religious house without the *nihil obstat* from her cardinal archbishop, who had received no request of that sort. In the meantime, while acknowledging that so far the sisters' service had been reasonably fair and deserved an «everlasting debt of gratitude» beyond all praise, he described to the cardinal the succession of events since 1943, his own commitment and the difficulties met, and so he begged him to put in «his lofty word». The president was sincere enough in his affirmations, but also flattering with the result that what the cardinal wrote to the superior general utterly amazed her, not to say bewildered her:

I will never let the Daughters of B. Capitano, now proclaimed a saint, be away from my diocese. Your own saint would not bless you, neither I (17 January 1950).

There was some new hope of saving the *Opera*: «Villa Tamba» in Bertalia, fraction of the municipality of Bologna, which Sr. Teresa Canali, provincial superior of Rimini saw and deemed adequate for the needs of the children; but a little later there appeared a better choice in *Stanteria* (first aid department) of the fondling hospital in the city itself, till in the end on 16 November 1950, the superior informed the superior general that the community was already for a week living quite happily at Bertalia, «Villa Tamba», via della Selva Pescarola, 26, and that four days back the children had started going to the school close by.

This came as a relief, breathing space in the open heavens... The Establishment seemed to be reviving, but in September 1952 it was decided to admit, together with 36 guests, 65 children of the «St Vincent' society» of Milan while the house was equipped for 60 persons. The superior was by this time too tired to accept, and in October the superior general relieved her and appointed Sr. Luigina Silvera in her place. The president was very sorry about the transfer of Sr. Teodolinda whose «rare gifts of character, motherly

love towards the orphan-children and her apostolic spirit and self-sacrifice» he greatly appreciated. In December 1952 the superior general wrote again to the president that the sisters «could not overwork and bear moral responsibility that were too high for them». Her council formally informed that she would withdraw them at the end of the school year and that she was informing the new archbishop of Bologna, cardinal Giacomo Lercaro as well.

The epilogue could not be different: the situation remained tense, the sisters overworked, the president was all the time ‘off stage’, The «St Vincent society» withdrew its boys, then about to go on their holiday to Serina (BG). To take up the *Opera* there seem to be the sisters of Imola, even though the passing on of powers and duties was yet unknown – wrote superior Sr. Luigina (8 June 1953); the latter added: «God willing, this uncertainty is for our good».

The sisters left the *Opera* on **10 September 1953**. It was very painful: *Let little children come to me*.

We are not free to judge the behaviour of the president A. Cantele. It is our duty, on the other hand, to point out that the repeated delay and extending of time granted by mother A. Reali were not the result of lack of firmness, inconsistency, or to a lack of courage on her part; it was due to the long period of discernment on the ‘case’. In fact, on 7 February she wrote to her sisters:

It grieves me to drop an ‘Opera’ that cost us so many sacrifices, but what is good should be done well. Let us have patience a little while yet so as to hand over the ‘Opera’ with honour to whoever it will be in future.

This is the most moving and painful story that I have ever read: the example of the sisters total dedication, what the children went through, the superiors’ unfailing patience, and the trusting self-abandonment to God’s mysterious plan call us to deep reflection and conversion.