



and you too **do** likewise

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

Services in seminaries

Follow me and I will make of you fishers of men (Mk 1:16)

PATRIARCHAL SEMINARY OF VENICE (1900-1995)

The patriarchal¹ seminary building of Venice is annexed to the basilica «Santa Maria della Salute» on the Grand Canal; the architect Baldassare Longhena built it in 1669 to accommodate the convent of Somaschi fathers. In 1810, after the suppression of the religious orders by Napoleon decree, the building became the state property and in 1818 the seminary² was transferred here.

In 1893 card. Giuseppe Melchiorre Sarto was nominated patriarch of Venice. In 1900, he wrote to the rector Mgr Giacomo Comin³ that he had entrusted the direction of the kitchen and the linen room to the sisters of Maria Bambina and therefore he ordered him to suspend the assistant cook and another domestic helper and to transfer to the cook the task of the doorkeeper. In Venice, the patriarch had already obtained from mother A. Ghezzi the sisters for the Institute «Buon Pastore» in 1895 and for «S. Maria del Soc-

¹ Patriarchal - patriarch: the honorary title in the Roman Church; the highest grade of dignity and jurisdiction in the Eastern bishopric.

² The seminary was and is a place of culture for the city with a monumental library and the Manfredian picture gallery, gift of fiorentino Federico Manfredini.

³ Letter dated 20 August 1900, Venice, Correspondence, in AGSdC.

corso» in 1898⁴. For this reason, when the experiment with the sisters of charity of the *Zitelle* Institute first and then with the sisters of S. Giuseppe failed, he informed Mother without any hesitation, through the letter dated 28 August 1900 that he was preparing an apartment for her sisters in the seminary, as many as required for 60 inmates and 3 superiors and he waited for them at the beginning of October. However, Mother came to Venice beforehand to visit the place reserved for the sisters and to determine their services. She liked the apartment shown by the same cardinal except for the wide windows of the kitchen opening onto the fascinating basin of the lagoon and she requested him to close it with shutters, but the cardinal affirmed: «Do you wish to take away from the sisters this magnificent light? They would know how to mortify by avoiding looking out of the windows»⁵.

On 24 September from Perugia card. Sarto thanked Mother who had granted the sisters for his seminary and for the hospitality he had received at Crespano del Grappa. On **18 October 1900** the small community, constituted by two sisters and two *sorelle mandatarie* – Sr. Caterina Polletti (41 yr.), superior, Sr. Massimiliana Savini (28 yr.), *sorella* Orsola Battocletti (22 yr.), *sorella* Giovanna Schiavon (21 yr.) – settled in the patriarchal seminary.

The *Contract*, signed by both parties on 20 October, stated explicitly:

*The sisters will take care of the running of the kitchen, storeroom and the linen room and will take care of the furniture and the Church linen (n. 2). The sisters will be granted: an apartment separated from the rest of the seminary, the chapel for the practices of piety and the Holy Mass, or alternatively a gallery or a singing gallery annexed to the church of the seminary, to which the sisters can have access without going through the house, the food is same as that is given to the priests and £ 100 annually for each sister or 'mandataria' (n. 4)*⁶.

⁴ cf. M. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1935, II, 289-294; 368-373.

⁵ *ib.*, 459.

⁶ cf. *Venice*, «*Patriarchal Seminary*», Documents, Contract, in AGSdC.

The cloister was considered as a strict observance, nevertheless initially, not having the internal chapel, for the prayer, the sisters used to go to the «Tempio della Salute»⁷, which was the church of the seminary, afterwards they modified a room in their apartment.

The heart of the community was Sr. Caterina Polletti, who governed with wise virtue, but only for four years because she suddenly falls sick with an incurable illness. She was succeeded by Sr. Santina Murer (1904-1912) who has left behind a good remembrance among the seminarians and the priests; she had made her own the motto of mother A. Ghezzi: «Nothing for myself, all for others». Sr. Battistina Ciboldi also merits to be remembered; she was the superior from 1914 to 1931, who managed the community during the World War I. On 27 September 1915 the rector Mgr Giovanni Jeremich, upon the request of Regional Committee of the Red Cross of Venice, in the name of patriarch Pietro La Fontaine informed mother A. Ghezzi that in the seminary a 100 bedded hospital would be made ready and the sisters ought to take up the responsibility and nursing assistance to the military, in addition to their duty in the kitchen and linen room. He requested her therefore to increase their number. Under the guidance of the provincial superior Sr. Clementina Azzini, on 15 June 1915 five sisters took up the service in the zone hospital at the boarding school «Marco Foscarini» and on 28 October eight of them volunteered as nurses in the «Red Cross» hospital in the Patriarchal Seminary. Regarding their service, carried out with a sacrificing spirit, maternal love and fraternal concern, the principal doctor of the civil hospital of Venice prof. Dr Fabio Vitali, director of «Sperti», the seminary and «Marco Foscarini» during the time of war is a witness:

The boarding «Marco Foscarini» and the «Patriarchal Seminary» have witnessed during our glorious war, long lines of wounded heroes and the sick soldiers returning from the defence line and

⁷ Santa Maria della Salute or church of Health is an ex vow by the Venetians for the liberation from plague (1630-1631) that destroyed the population; for centuries, every year, on 21 November, through a bridge, made of boats, now floating fixed on the poles, the Venetians from St Mark come to the basilica to pray.

asking for refuge in the halls of the seminary; they replaced the groups of young men, enthusiastic in study, gymnastics, sports to strengthen their limbs and to adorn and to intensify their intelligence so that they may prepare themselves for the professional and ecclesiastical life. Among this painful multitude, I have seen always near the nurses, volunteers of the Red Cross, the sisters of blessed Capitanio bringing their untiring help, their continual service, ministers of good, constant comforters, and true sisters to the suffering poor and I have always had for them those sentiments of admiration. The objectives and services of the sisters whose vocation to follow the ideal have removed them from society to be dedicated to charity have inspired me during my long medical profession⁸.

In November 1918 the Red Cross transferred the hospital to Treviso; the sisters returned to their 'humble service' in Venice and at Paderno del Grappa (TV) in «Villa Fietta», holiday house of the seminarians and minor seminary with the presence of four sisters from 1953 to 1955⁹. Certainly, the service of the sisters was simple and humble; a cleric, F. G., would write:

...it is not only the type of work that gives dignity to the person, as much as how the work is carried out: the human element, love, the character of the person... In our seminary, there are superiors, professors who guide and support the life of this Institution but if the sisters of Maria Bambina with their 'humble service' and at times difficult in kitchen, were to be absent, an indispensable element would have been lacking, also because their work is made precious by their prayer and deep spirit of faith¹⁰.

And regarding the superior Sr. Battistina an 'Excellency' told the community: «Sisters, if you should lose your Rule, do what your superior does and the rule will be safe»¹¹.

⁸ Venice, «Patriarchal Seminary», Historical record, Autograph in AGSdC; cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1936, III, 102.

⁹ cf. Annual Statistical Data, in AGSdC.

¹⁰ cf. Historical record, in AGSdC.

¹¹ cf. Necrology, in AGSdC.

In the same year 1918 the patriarch Pietro La Fontaine and his secretary Mgr Giovanni Costantini requested mother A. Ghezzi to send two more sisters for domestic service in the «patriarchal Palace». Mother responded to the secretary that the legislation did not allow such services to the sisters, apart from the exceptions of Ravenna and Ferrara where the seminary is in the archbishopric and the sisters, therefore, live in community; besides they are living situations of change, due to the war period¹².

While expressing her displeasure, Mother affirmed that «it is a question of principles and it is not good to open the way». The opening of this new mission would be effected in 1970, by the work of provincial superior Sr. Maria Dametto, with a decree of the superior general, mother A. Campanile, with the prior permission of patriarch Albino Luciani, elected pope with the name of Giovanni Paolo I in 1978¹³.

In January 1920 the rector Fr. Giovanni Jeremich, replying to the request of Mother to increase the fee of the sisters, confessed the failure of certain income titles of the seminary and said in the dialect «for a broken boat there is no more remedies», and added: «The sisters will have the honour of doubly cooperating in the discrete functioning of the seminary and facilitating the welcoming of the poor students in need of material help as well»¹⁴. Like in other services, even here the Institute not only offers the service of the sisters but also accepts their meagre retribution in favour of the service itself: this is a constant feature of the charity of our religious family that is revealed or made known only through researches made by particular studies or by publications. From 1921 to 1941,

¹² cf. Correspondence, letters dated 25 September, 10 November, 13 November 1918, in AGSdC.

¹³ The small community – from 3 to 5 sisters – had a particular way of management: directly dependent on the provincial superior, then on the superior of the seminary, therefore on the delegate superior; the service lasted up to 2002, with the patriarch Mgr Marco Cè and the superior Sr. Bartolomea Costantini. cf. Profile Venice province in General Secretariat and the Annual Statistical Data, in AGSdC.

¹⁴ Correspondence, letter dated 3 January 1920, in AGSdC.

in archives there is a total lack of documents both in correspondence and in the community diaries.

In 1942 appears the figure of card. Adeodato Giovanni Piazza, of the order of disalced Carmelites¹⁵; we have preserved two of his writings, one regarding the office of the superior of the seminary, after the canonical visit of his delegate, in which he affirms:

*...the sisters attend regularly to the practices of piety and the commitments of their state, as well as to the special tasks inherent to their services [...]; I desire to confirm my heartfelt thanks for the much good that is being carried out in this Diocese by the religious of this Institute in the specific activities for the spiritual and material advantage of the children whom the Providence has entrusted to me*¹⁶,

and an autograph to Mother, whom he thanked for the greetings on the occasion of his saint's feast-day and the prayers, stating

*most grateful for the good that her daughters fulfil in the Patriarchate, and particularly in Venice, with a very high spirit of dedication and sacrifice*¹⁷.

The successive letters¹⁸ are again regarding the sister's remuneration, which was by now definitely inadequate, even insufficient concerning the cost of living, and they had the administrator Mgr Vittorio Piva as the interlocutor.

¹⁵ Patriarch from 1935 to 1948, was a mediator of peace during the second world war and worked for the freedom of the imprisoned politicians and soldiers from the concentration camp prison, moreover was a man of doctrine and attentive to moral and social problems of the time. Cf. Letter to the President A. De Gasperi and to hon. A. Piccioni dated 24 April 1947.

¹⁶ cf. Correspondence, letter dated 11 February 1942, in AGSdC.

¹⁷ *Ib*, writing dated 12 December 1944.

¹⁸ *Ib*. letters dated 24 & 31 July 1946; 4 & 21 August, 18 October 1947, 21 June 1950.

After 15 years without any written memory, in 1964 with her letter mother C. Baldinucci communicated to the rector the change of superior; Fr Aldo Da Villa, while abiding by the canonical laws, manifested esteem for the superior Sr. Giuditta Ferronato and expressed gratitude for the good that the sisters with much selflessness and sacrifice have carried out for many years among the seminarians and their superiors¹⁹. In fact Sr. Giuditta would remain confirmed as superior up to September 1972 and would be nominated again from 1977 to 1986.

The community of the sisters was never numerous (from 6 to 8 maximum); initially only in carrying out the domestic services, later they were helped by lay persons, whose number vary in relation to the presence of the seminarians. The years of highest frequency were represented from 1956-1965, while from 1981 to 1990 a strong decline is recorded, as it can be seen from the tables.

Works' Register 1956-1965

year	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965
semin.	190	190	193	220	220	250	120	230	238	220

Annual statistics 1981-1990

year	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
semin.	74	82	85	76	82	85	80	82	80	85

The reasons? It was the period of widespread protests that did not spare even the formative and pastoral ambits of the Church.

A decreased number of young men who studied for the priesthood was already verified in 1953 with 90 present and in 1954 with 75, however, the reason was due to the transfer of the boys of the minor seminary to the country house at Paderno del Grappa in «Villa Fietta». From 60's the seminary possessed another house

¹⁹ *Ib*, letters dated 7 and 17 December 1964.

on the mountain at San Vito di Cadore (BL), «Villa S. Maria Ausiliatrice», which was utilized for their holidays and the vocation promotion purposes. Even here, two or three of our sisters rendered their service and they collaborated and experienced community life together with two Oblate sisters of the Sacred Heart.

In 1961, for the first time, the Seminary offers to the sisters a picnic-pilgrimage to the shrine of «Madonna della corona» on the hills of Verona and then to Lovere, Sotto il Monte, Assisi, Camaldoli... Their hidden service, difficult and lasting for many hours a day, in a big house with only limited external helpers was recognized; above all their generous dedication according to the charism of charity was appreciated.

The one who contributed to reducing the distance between the sisters and the community of the seminary was the superior Sr. Giuditta Ferronato, of whom a fellow-sister remembered²⁰:

In the beginning of her first mandate as superior (we are in 1957), Sr. Giuditta found in the seminary a severity that was unknown to her and could not understand. One day a cleric requested her saying that he did not feel to eat because he was having a headache and he would have willingly taken some hot milk; she prepared it and brought it to him in the refectory. The sisters hurried to inform her that it was forbidden to enter into the refectory and speak to the clerics. In fact, in that epoch, the food passed through the wheel, as in cloistered convent. Therefore, she sought for the rector confessing her error. Nevertheless, he understood the goodness of her behaviour and therefore invited her to go to the refectory always to see the clerics and to listen to their needs. The sisters were happy about it and the seminarians even more.

Later, with experience, her prudence and maternal sensibility, she brought to the notice of the rector some inconveniences related especially to the distribution of food to the boys and the youth (they were about 180); on being invited to propose solutions, praiseworthy initiatives agreed upon gradually improved the life in the seminary to the benefit of all.

²⁰ In memory of Sr. G. Ferronato, died on 17 July 2014 at Bassano del Grappa and buried at Casoni di Mussolente (VI), p. 2.

About her the patriarch card. Marco Cé wrote:

Sr. Giuditta was known by all the priests of Venice for her long service in seminary: with the passing of time she had become a 'maternal' figure, to whom all, superiors and seminarians referred²¹.

Thus the relationships with the clerics became more spontaneous and cordial: the seminarians, on their return from holidays, used to go in the kitchen to greet the sisters and to enquire about them, they helped them in washing dishes because they were not able to lift the pots and pans; the theologians visited the elderly sisters at «casa Gerosa» of Bassano; the professors, by turn, assured them of the explanation of the Word of God and some special liturgies; the sisters began to be present at the ceremony reserved for the handing over of the cassock to the seminarians, they participated in their recreations presenting the comedies of Goldoni... The seminary was now a great family, where the maternal presence of the sisters expressed itself above all in a great availability that was serene, reserved and simple.

On 6 November 1982, during the official celebration of 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute, in the St Mark's basilica with a solemn pontifical mass concelebrated by 40 priests, the «Centre for Culture Cosulio», representing the city of Venice, through the hands of his Excellency card. Patriarch Marco Cé handed over the «golden Angel» to the provincial superior for the all the sisters of Maria Bambina.

This gesture does not want to be an award, but a symbol, underlined the president. As the angel of the St Mark's bell stands for the protection of Venice, a spiritual guide for the people of Venice and watchfulness to whoever suffers in body and soul, so also it is the sign of the assiduous mission carried out by the sisters of Maria Bambina during the 135 years of their presence amid the people of Venice, during which they have given a generous witness of selfless service for the benefit of many charitable works.

²¹ cf. letter dated 17 October 1985.

During the homily, the Patriarch affirmed that these years could not be forgotten, because they gave sense not only of an Institute but of a people, of a city, because they honoured humanity and granted to femininity a very true, great and exultant image²².

Fr Giacinto Danieli in his testimony on «Le suore del seminario» (The sisters in the seminary) in the same year 1982 wrote:

I am among those who call the sisters 'mother'. A good habit learnt in the nursery school, but it has been strengthened here in the seminary when in the sixth grade I had to stay even three months without seeing my parents. Mother: a word that recalls many things, things that remain, that keep one up, make one feel secure. Moreover, this, as men and as Christians.

I remember the sisters of the seminary like this and I encounter them like this: a maternal presence, the first fruit of an undivided heart that is dedicated to the Lord alone to love evermore the brethren. In the seminary, the sisters of charity, but it is nice to call them sisters of Maria Bambina have been here for 82 years: for many priests of our diocese who are prepared here, their presence was decisive to create a family spirit. And, we know, a lifetime is not enough to say «Thanks!» to a mother²³.

Nevertheless, the configuration of the community was slowly undergoing changes: the sisters in 1989 were five, aged between 60 to 78 years, one of whom went periodically to help in the Patriarchate. They lived with great sobriety, in their apartment they had few things and devoid of comfort. They worked with great dedication and sacrificing spirit and accompanied the boys and young priests with commitment and love²⁴.

²² cf. Community Diary, Patriarchal Palace, 1982.

²³ cf. Yearly Community Diary of the community.

²⁴ Ibid.

In June 1992 the provincial superior Sr. Annamaria Facchini asked mother C. Kersbamer the authorization to confer the third mandate of governance for the community of the «Seminary of Venice and Patriarchal Palace» to Sr. Bartolomea Costantini for the following reasons: difficulty in finding substitutes, a good relationship between the sisters and the priests, a necessity to prepare the ground for the next likely shortage of sisters²⁵.

On 24 April 1995 mother C. Kersbamer communicated to the rector, Mgr Giuliano Bertoli, through a letter, the decision to withdraw the sisters, noting with suffering that, besides the advanced age of the sisters, we were not able to carry out such service with dignity and respect for all.

On 9 June the provincial superior, after a serious discernment, the consultation of the Patriarch, the information to the community, the rector and the vice-rector, asked Mother to proceed with the suppression of the community of the seminary. The Decree of suppression was dated 30 June and the community was closed on **31 July 1995**²⁶. The last sisters were Sr. Bartolomea Costantini (71 yr.), superior and coordinator of the personnel, Sr. Ildefonsa Fasolato (67 yr.), involved in various services and linen room, Sr. Anna Maria Moro (77 yr.), a nurse.

Even if the task entrusted to the hands, to the intelligence and the heart of the sisters in the seminary is humble, it is always a seed that goes underneath and fructifies, and great is the promise of good, as we read in the Gospel: *Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward (Mt 10:41).*

²⁵ cf. letter dated 8 June 1992.

²⁶ Venice, Correspondence, in AGSdC.