



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)

ARCHIEPISCOPAL SEMINARY «S. CATERINA», PISA (1905-1985)

Pisa is one of the main cities of Toscana; its name immediately calls to mind the *Leaning Tower*, emblem of the city, counted among the iconic symbols of Italy¹. It is also a home of the seat of Normal High school and University known as «La Normale di Pisa» (1810) which at national and international university level stands out as one of the most accredited places for the training of skills in the field of scientific research, where students can be admitted through a highly selective competitive exam.

Since 22 June 1903, the archdiocese of Pisa was under the leadership of card. Pietro Maffi² who, starting from 1904, renovated

¹ The tower of Pisa, famous for its leaning structures due to a subsidence of the ground, is the Romanesque style tower of the cathedral «S. Maria Assunta» in the «piazza dei Miracoli»; it is 56 m high and has 294 spiral steps leading to the belfry. Cf. Storia di Pisa.

² Card. Pietro Maffi (1858-1931) was a professor of physics, mathematics and natural sciences at the seminary of Pavia; in 1904 pope Pious X entrusted him the presidency of the Vatican Observatory which he held until 1931. Here, from 1910 to 1927 they offer a great contribution to the international project for the mapping of celestial space, cataloging more than 400,000 stars, four of our sisters are: Sr. Emilia Ponzoni, Sr. Regina Colombo, Sr. Concetta Finardi, Sr. Luigia Panzeri. Cf. News July 2016, *The sisters astronomers; the history of celestial cartography* pp. 7-8.

the seminary «Santa Caterina»³, renewed the spiritual and cultural life of the seminarians and brought the sisters of Maria Bambina.

From the correspondence⁴ with mother A. Ghezzi it appears that the request was made with some insistence, but on several occasions and with some modifications: on 18 August 1904 the cardinal asked for three sisters and three *mandatarie* for the kitchen and linen room, and informs how to formulate the contracts; on 5 September, he makes the same request: to send three sisters and three *mandatarie* by November 1 for the kitchen, storeroom, refectory and linen room, for 120 students and 20/30 college students, specifying «I need a person with good appearance, that is, a good superior and a good cook». On 10 November he writes that the sisters can go to Pisa for Christmas and start their service from the year 1905, underlining that «they are expected, desired and blessed», and encloses two copies of the *Contract* that mother general can freely modify. On 13 September, mother sends Mgr Maffi a *Note* to put at the bottom of the *Contract*:

Given the distance, it will be necessary to add: the travel expenses of the sisters and 'mandatarie' who will go to the place for the first time, and those that are requested, will be paid by the venerable seminary, as well as the expenses of the spiritual Exercises, or providing a preacher from the place, or travel expenses if they come to Lombardia for this purpose. The compensation of 100 lire per year for clothing is requested both for the sisters and for the mandatarie.

On 6 July 1905 the rector Fr Giuseppe Modena, on behalf of the archbishop absent due to the commitments requested by the Pope, tells mother general that the sisters can go to the seminary on 12 August, so they will begin the mission under the patronage of our Lady of Assumption and with the presence of the archbishop, who wishes to welcome them in person. A month later, on 6 August, the rector again thanks mother for having agreed to send

³ It is named so because in 1784 the seminary was transferred to the former Dominican convent of «S. Caterina», suppressed, like others, because of the decree of the great duke of Toscana Pietro Leopoldo.

⁴ Corrispondenza, in AGSdC 695/C.

the sisters to the seminary, among whom Sr. Carolina⁵; he assures that the house has been prepared with care and that the archbishop will be for them «father, mother, provincial as she wishes, and with the blessing of the Lord».

On 13 August, Sr. Alessandra Magni, who will be the superior of the community until 1912, writes to Mother that the house is beautiful, there is a chapel where the secretary celebrates Mass for them, the cloister is ensured and the cardinal also expressed the desire that the sisters do not go out of their apartment; nevertheless she is astonished by the great disorder in the linen room and in the kitchen, and dismayed because the sisters also have to rearrange the linen of the boarding school annexed to the seminary, as well as the refectory of the professors, seminarians and boarders. She asks her to leave Sr. Carolina to help her for a few days and to send a superior soon to make up for her inexperience. The archbishop, on his return from Rome, thanks mother general for the gift of the sisters; he too considers it appropriate to leave Sr. Carolina for some time, who moves about with a certain ease. She is a reference point for the young sisters⁶ and is a trusted person by the staff. However, he adheres to Mother's decision, while stressing that «choosing Sr. Carolina as a guide to the sisters was truly the application of an excellent label on the goods!» (23 August 1905).

A few years later Sr. Alessandrina shows her capacity of governance and the heart of a mother for her sisters who do the daily work, tiring and hidden due to the rigorously respected sepa-

⁵ Sr. Carolina Maffi, sister of the cardinal, entered our Institute in 1889; she was a nurse at the «Ospedale Maggiore» in Milan, then secretary of the provincial superior of Bergamo, and then secretary in «casa generalizia» in Milan and, from 23 May 1915, nurse in the military hospital opened in «mother house». Here she devoted herself entirely to the good of the soldiers and, precisely «in the exercise of her compassionate mission, she was struck by the terrible disease» because of which she died on 14 November 1918 at the age of 49. Cf. Necrologio in AGSdC.

⁶ The first three sisters are: Magni Sr. Alessandrina (31), Clerici Sr. Vittoria (23), Longhi Sr. Filomena (25) and three *mandatarie* Lisca Giuseppina (28), Pessina Ernesta (30), Lambrughì Luigia (39). Sr. Carolina was 36 years old with 16 years of experience as a nurse at the «Ospedale Maggiore» in Milan.

ration from the seminary community, but with faith and spirit of sacrifice. Silent, serene and active she stood by the sisters giving them life witness and repeating: *the heart is ours and the face belongs to everyone*.⁷ The *Contract*, signed by both parties in November 1904, article 2 describes the commitments of the sisters in the Seminary and, almost incidentally, mentions the «Collegio». But when, on 11 November 1910 the archbishop tackles the problem of the service of the sisters also at the «Collegio Galileo» and from Milan it is replied that in early December a sister and a *mandataria* will be sent to constitute a community with those of the seminary, the superior, aware of her responsibilities, does not hesitate to write to the Mother, on the same day, about the difficulties that the sisters in charge of the linen room and kitchen of the boarding school should face: to and fro journey about an hour, whole day out of the community for six boarders, the availability of a single room that serves as a kitchen and refectory in a humid place, in locations so low that one has to bend to enter.

To the objection of the rector, Mgr Giuseppe Calandra, that the two small rooms had always been enough for the servants, the superior replies that «the sisters are not maids», and that in this environment, within a month, they would get sick and she is not ready to sacrifice two sisters in this way. The response comes immediately from Milan to card. Maffi, on 15 November, withdrawing the promise made to send the sisters saying that the sisters will be sent when the boarding is more numerous and the premises more fit to live in. In June 1913 the cardinal thanks Mother for the charity used «towards the good Sr. Pierina»⁸ and mentions about the

⁷ cf. Necrologio.

⁸ Emilia Maffi (Sr. Pierina) is one of his nieces, who entered the Institute in 1909 and had a premature death in May 1913, leaving behind a good memory of herself. Cf. Necrologio. Sr. Giuditta (Filomena), another sister of the cardinal, our sister since 1896, after having been in the seminaries of Mantova and Pavia, died at Castegnato (BS) in 1957. The cardinal had, therefore, family relationship with our Institute.

arrangement of the hostel (ready for 40 persons), for which he needs a person, a sister or a *mandataria*, to help in the kitchen.

The year 1914 marks some important events for the community of Pisa: the opening of the «Galileo Galilei» (off-shoot) hostel for male university students with the presence of three sisters who go daily for the service in the kitchen and in the linen room; eight sisters for pastoral activity⁹, on Sundays, in four parishes for the teaching of catechism, with particular attention to the youth of the parish «S. Caterina», for the explicit desire of the archbishop, who appreciated the religious sisters and disputed the fact that *some of the ancient persons in power, who here (in Pisa) held power, committed themselves to obtain a celebrating but silent clergy, presiding but not preaching*, strong words that express the pastoral spirit of his many-sided rich personality¹⁰; the election of the archbishop as cardinal protector of our Institute by pope Benedict XV. On 31 October in her circular letter mother A. Ghezzi wrote to all the sisters:

We recognize the appointment as a help that the Lord has done to us, and we pray for our Protector¹¹ by conforming our prayer for the good that he has already begun to do for us and that he will do to us also in the future.

During the war (1915-1918) the seminary and the Archbishopric were transformed into hospital and the sisters make themselves

⁹ The community in 1914 counted the presence of 14 persons. Cf. Stato effettivo annuale.

¹⁰ cf. M. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle Suore di carità*, Venezia, 1940, V, 822-837.

¹¹ *Ib*, III, p. 45. The cardinal protector was a prelate who protected and solicited the interests of an Institute at the Roman curia. This figure disappears with the Second Vatican council, when the competent authority of the superior general of each Congregation is recognized.

available, as in other seminaries, to accept the soldiers coming from the war front, and assist the patients in the reserved hospital of Pisa. The cardinal writes to Mother: «What will become of us all? I do not know; we all just know that the Lord is our father, that Our Lady is our mother. *In manus tuas!*... and blesses (19.5.1915).

On 16 August 1916 he informed her that Fr Giovanni Hagen informs about Sr. Regina Colombo's departure from the 'Specola', whose replacement can be done after the war, and adds:

For a year, the sisters have been welcoming wounded soldiers in the Archbishopric hospital with 600 beds, with great praise.

And on 23 December he writes:

I reciprocate the wishes of happiness even in the midst of so much pain. Let us not forget that the Angels also sang a few steps away from Herod. 'Regnum Dei intra nos est': may the Lord pour on us his grace and bless and save us.

The richness in personality of the cardinal reveals here the figure of the father and shepherd who sustains in himself and spreads deep faith and abandonment to Jesus the Saviour.

Despite the resistance and the difficulties posed by Mgr Giuseppe Calandra, former secretary of card. Maffi, the rector Mgr Simone Barbieri Benedettini on 24 August 1932, on behalf of the new archbishop Gabriele Vettori communicates to mother A. Sterni that she can withdraw the sisters from the hostel and thanks her for the good they have done during the long period spent at «Galileo». Instead, he asked for, and obtains, the extension of one year – if necessary with his personal mediation at the Sacred Congregation – for the superior Sr. Alessandrina, about whom a sister will write:

She had within herself and communicated to others the gift of peace. She loved everyone, did good to everyone and found the good in everyone. She reached everyone and everything with her material and spiritual help. She had the esteem, appreciation and gratitude of all the superiors of the seminary and of all the sisters¹².

¹² cf. Necrologio.

She will be worthily replaced by Sr Tranquilla Rota from 1933 to 1958.

World War II is more invasive and devastating than the first; the archbishop makes the Cathedral and part of the seminary available to the evacuated people, and the sisters make themselves available at this time of need and take part in the suffering of the moment. From the «Diary of war», typed but anonymous¹³, we draw some interesting historical information:

On 31 August 1943 the myth that Pisa would not have been bombed was dispelled and at 1 p.m. it is estimated that the dead are 7,000. When on 25 September a bombing in broad daylight hits the 'Porta Nuova' area, the community decides to evacuate to Calci, in the country house of the seminary, but three sisters remain in Pisa, lost and alone in the enormity of the premises. Twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays – notes the editor – the rector and the papal treasurer visit us in the seminary, but we have a great desire to meet sometimes the refugees from Calci. In January 1944 the bombs fall a hundred meters away from us... the danger is very great and, waiting for our death, we recite the act of contrition and the prayers of the dying. From that day on, no more water or light; our house is literally overwhelmed by the homeless. Going out to help, the sisters are involved in dreadful scenes: a woman, frustrated by pain, cradles her baby with her skull smashed; the buried alive call for help, others call on those already dead; a man curses but, when the earth tremors for a new bombardment as for the earth-quake, he shouts: «Salva nos perimus!». One day on the steps of their house they find the corpse of a man who became a victim to the Germans when he went out to buy a toy for the dying grand-daughter who desired it...

¹³ cf. Cronache in AGSdC 695/C. The author, undoubtedly, could be Sr. Irma Villa, since she and two *mandatarie* remained in the seminary, while the community emigrated to the Certosa di Pisa - Calci (letter dated 13.2.1944).

The rector was uncertain whether to leave the sisters in Pisa; the superior wanted them in Calci, but the archbishop told them that, if they were ready for the sacrifice, he wanted them to remain in the place. The only comfort was prayer. In June, Calci is also bombarded and until August the three sisters have no communication with the refugees; this period of silence and separation was one of the most distressing... The archbishop made to declare Pisa an 'open city'¹⁴, putting before his requests to the officer of the General Staff Albert Kesselring. On July 26, the war reached the Arno: the bridge of 'Mezzo' and other buildings are destroyed, causing a rain of stones over the whole city. The next day bombs fall in «Piazza S. Caterina», in the Archbishopric, on the old cemetery and the hospital, causing several deaths...

Thanks to Providence, the sisters can prepare soup for 300 poor people, grinding 20 Kg of wheat a day with the coffee grinder, but for two days, when the coffee crusher is broken, everyone eats boiled corn. Later the Germans take over the belfry of «S. Caterina» as an observatory, they enter the seminary for a survey, suspecting that there might be people in hiding... On 18 August the order is given to evacuate the city; the sisters hide in a drain, thinking of reaching Calci during the night, but they will never leave... At Coltano, a small town of Pisa there are around 20,000 prisoners; to these too, as long as the camp existed, the sisters lend their service of charity, receiving later long letters of thanks and esteem.

The diary concludes:

Now normal life has resumed; may the Lord, who has helped us in extraordinary situations, may he help us again in ordinary situations, always for his greater glory.

Soon the community, asked to come back by the bishop and the rector is articulated and assumes various other services, despite some opposition from mother general who is always attentive and worried for her daughters. In 1945 three sisters with a group of seminarians remained in Calci until 1947; in 1948 another three moved

¹⁴ *Open city* is the city ceded to enemy forces without fighting, with the aim of avoiding its destruction, taking into account the number of civilians among the population and the particular historical and cultural interest of the city.

to Calci and opened a nursery school, which functioned for eight years, then continued their activity in the *villa* transformed into a home for retreats and spirituality conferences, the «Oasi S. Cuore», until 1978, when the superior Sr. Santina Sala informs¹⁵ to the provincial superior of Rimini¹⁶, Sr. Giulia Bergamo, the termination of service with simplicity and realism, stating that the sisters, over the course of 30 years have carried out a humble and tiring work, but always with great serenity and edification of all the guests. They received an irrelevant monthly salary, so much so that the archbishop Mgr Benvenuto Matteucci, on their departure, donates 1 million lire to the Congregation. The sisters leave the «Oasi», but above all, as the director Fr Franco Baggiani says, *they leave a void, after a living testimony of being true religious*¹⁷.

In 1958 University hostel «Giuseppe Toniolo» is opened with 120 students, to whom the sisters provide food and bed linen. They also visit the guests of the «Cottolengo» weekly, and one of them is a member of USMI council (Union of Italian Major Superiors).

In this same year the long and meritorious mandate of governance of the superior Sr. Tranquilla R. concludes; the rector, Mgr Mario Estivi, put forward the proposal to appoint Sr. Irma Villa, who «deals with the administration of the seminary»; mother C. Baldinucci specifies that in such a complex work it is not possible for the superior to have also the duty of a treasurer, and that Sr. Irma will be superior in another community.

¹⁵ cf. Documents-Oasi Calci, in AGSdC, 695/C.

¹⁶ The community of the seminary of Pisa from 1905 to 1918 belonged to the religious province of Toscana; from 1919 to 1980 to the province of Rimini; from 1981 to 1985 to the province of Rome. Cf. Form 343, general secretariat.

¹⁷ The sisters are Sr. Santina Sala, superior of the seminary, Sr. Clelia Baldissera and Sr. Martina Monterastelli.

On 7 October 1964 Mgr Antonio Giuseppe Angioni, auxiliary bishop and rector of the Private School recognised by the state «S. Caterina»¹⁸, at the news of the change of the superior Sr. Teresa Rivaletto, thanks Mother for the work done by the outgoing superior and trusts in the care and attention of the new one. He declares that «all the priests of the diocese know and appreciate your Institute; the diocese hopes that you will always be able to assist the seminary community with the sisters, also with some less elderly persons». He also affirms that although a community of sisters in the seminary seems «wasted and sacrificed, in reality their work is the holiest and most meritorious before God and the Church, because they work for the benefit of God's future ministers». Therefore, he asks her not to abandon the seminaries and it will have holy and abundant vocations.

On 30 August 1966 again Mgr. Angioni positively shares with Mother the replacement of the superior Sr. Virginia Carminati with the previous Sr. Teresa Rivaletto and his concern about the life of the community, the timetable and the commitments of the sisters. Therefore, he will see to reduce the work. In the periodic meetings with priests, he recommend them to direct female vocations to her Institute and gladly accept her initiative to send a letter to the parish priests to make known the large quantity of requests received and the difficulty of fulfilling them due to the lack of sisters¹⁹, he stresses that their presence in seminaries is important because the lay staff will never be able to give such good service.

But a year later (9 October 1967) Mother replies to the rector, with reference to her writings of 8 and 18 September, to point out that, if the provincial of Rimini, Sr. Teresa Canali, takes away some sisters from the seminary, she cannot prevent her from doing

¹⁸ The seminary also managed the *parificato* archiepiscopal Institute «S. Caterina», founded in 1784, with the presence of boarders, semi-boarders from the elementary, middle school, and high schools. Cf. AGSdC, 695/C.

¹⁹ In 1965 the Institute, after reaching the maximum number of 8,941 sisters, began to register a decline in vocations and this decline was slowly but progressively increasing.

so because she knows the voids of her province, therefore it is necessary that he too ought to seek the help of lay staff, already numerous even in the houses of our Institute. At the same time the number of seminarians is decreasing²⁰.

Statistics 1971-1985

| year | semin | priests | year | semin | priests | year | semin | priests |
|-------------|-------|---------|-------------|-------|---------|-------------|-------|---------|
| 1971 | 50 | 10 | 1976 | 9 | 4 | 1981 | 23 | 3 |
| 1972 | 9 | 6 | 1977 | 13 | 4 | 1982 | 22 | 3 |
| 1973 | 8 | 6 | 1978 | 12 | 4 | 1983 | 13 | 3 |
| 1974 | 11 | 6 | 1979 | 13 | 4 | 1984 | 8 | 3 |
| 1975 | 11 | 4 | 1980 | 18 | 3 | 1985 | 6 | 2 |

At this point it is interesting to know a brief profile of the community of the sisters and its path of formation and integration with the seminary community, especially after the special chapter of 1970. In the report on the canonical visit of March 1972, the provincial superior Sr. Giulia Bergamo writes:

I found a true poverty regarding culture, alongside a wealth of souls capable of giving themselves in simplicity, with a spiritual and human charge that truly makes them a sign and witness. Superiors, seminarians, hostellers and lay people all tell me that they see them from morning to evening always with the same smile, with the same availability and with so much human warmth in the most humble, hidden service. They do not feel they are «busy women», but religious who serve Christ and the Church in his priests, collaborators with them in the various tasks, but with the same spirit, alongside the seminarians. There is a real family atmosphere; the sister is a mother and sister for everyone in the seminary. The same

²⁰ cf. Statistiche in AGSdC, 695/C.

thing I must say for the sisters of Calci, House for spiritual exercises. The director of the «Oasi» calls them «concrete and wise women of the Bible».

And the provincial superior Sr. Costantina Bonaiti in December 1979 states:

The superior Sr. Santina Sala is involved in changing the way sisters live, mainly based on work so that they do not carry out just domestic works, but people who are fully aware of their consecration, live their service as a testimony of faith and communion, and the superior has educated them to a kind of intelligent and more adult responsibility. They participate in the initiatives promoted by the diocese, by the FIR (Federazione Italiana Religiose) and by the religious province; they love the Institute with a deep sense of belongingness. Frequent meetings between the seminary community and the religious community serve as a mutual incentive and common edification. Several times from the 13 seminarians present (all adult vocations) I have been told that they see in them their dear sisters, significant not for the culture, but for the faith that they know to reveal through perseverance in fidelity to God, in humble, serene and discreet service. The rector educates the seminarians to consider the sisters of the seminary as their main benefactors; every day, during Mass, the first prayer of the faithful is for them.

In 1985 the provincial superior of Rome Sr. Clementina Fia writes to the archbishop Mgr Benvenuto Matteucci and the rector Mgr Giuseppe Guerri saying that Sr. Santina Sala concludes her third term of governance and can no longer be renewed, that the sisters are elderly and need rest, that there is no possibility of replacement; therefore, she communicates the decision to take them away in mid-August. The archbishop asks to postpone this decision, but the provincial confirms what has been discussed and decided with the general council, also because the sisters have given everything they could and now the Institute must think about giving them rest».

On 17 October 1985 the decree for the suppression of the community was signed. On 22 October the provincial superior writes to the archbishop:

It was a painful moment for us and for the superiors of the seminary; the sisters²¹ left carrying 'their seminary' in their hearts; some have spent a life there, giving their life for priests with a sense of awareness and joy, convinced that they are pastorally investing it as much as possible. I thanked the sisters so much for the testimony of serenity in pain and I thank you, your Excellency, for having shown them affection, understanding, fatherliness.

Our presence in the seminaries would require a volume to write; so far we have spoken about six realities, but there would be another 15: Mantova (1887-1942) Monza (1898-1930), Ferrara (1901-1947) Como, major seminary (1901-1935) and minor seminary (1928-1935), Rimini (1902-1945) Fermo (1907-1976), Trento, major seminary (1909-1952) and minor seminary (1910-1985) Fano (1910-1971), Ascoli Piceno (1911-1976) Cesena (1912-1951), Rome, at Lateran (1913-1947) and in Vatican (1914-1945) Milan (1930-2013); everywhere our sisters have revealed a spirit of sacrifice, fidelity to the Institute, love for the Church.

Now we are no longer working in seminaries which have also undergone a reduction and transformation on the formative and structural level, but we collaborate with priests and seminarians in the various areas of ecclesial pastoral care, through dialogue, the proclamation of the Gospel and active charity.

²¹ Sala Sr. Santina, superior; Baldissera Sr. Clelia, various duties; Boerchi Sr. Lidia, in charge of the wardrobe; Maffei Sr. Matilde, in charge of the kitchen; Rossetti Sr. Costanza, in charge of the wardrobe.