



and you too **do** likewise

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

«I was in prison...»

Penal Institutes for «pericolanti, penitenti, carcerate»

(Part II)

«OPERA PIO RITIRO SANT'ANGELO», IN CREMONA

This was one of the institutions in the city («Conservatorio S. Orsola», 1528; «Casa del Soccorso», 1587; «Conservatorio S. Giuseppe», 1704); it was started in 1812 to cater for young girls in danger of leading a dissolute life and of ending up along a wrong path. It was originally willed by marquess Isabella Vaini Magnoni and later extended and supported by marquis Luigi Dati and his wife marquess Antonia Ugolani, and by other benefactors who paid the fees for one or more inmates.

The «one and only purpose» laid down in the *Prospectus* was «to provide a home, maintenance and education free of charge for young girls who would otherwise be at the mercy of loose morals or clearly in danger of going astray. No girl, however, could be admitted without the express request of her parents or of a legal representative. Age limit for admission was from fourteen to twenty. They could not stay on beyond the age of thirty. The fixed number of inmates could not exceed thirty-two, unless extra funds were made available with due consent of the guardian concerned. Edu-

cation imparted to the young women aimed mainly at improving their standards of moral behaviour, and making of them honest hard-working mothers of a family or able to be suitably placed as domestic maids»¹.

Marquess Ugolani ran the Institution till her death, after which, in accordance with her express will, responsibility was transferred to the current bishop (Mgr Omobono Offredi, 1791-1829) or, during a long absence, by his vicar. A lay-person put in charge was assisted by a 'major teacher' who, in her turn, was helped by an 'assistant teacher'. All three received a regular salary.

In between 1828 and 1850 considerable changes were made in the number of inmates, their age and the place they came from. Their number increased from 35-45 to 70-80; The average age went as much below as 20, and girls coming from outside Cremona city had become much fewer².

In August 1851, owing to the advanced age of the directress, Eufemia Sampietro, Mgr Antonio Novasconi, bishop of Cremona (1850-1867), wrote to Mgr Girolamo Verzeri, bishop of Brescia (1850-1883), expressing his wish to have the sisters of charity of Lovere to run the Institution and look after its inmates. These, he said, were «most fitting for such duties». About the same time, on 6.8.1851, his vicar, Mgr Giuseppe Vezzoli, wrote to the vicar of our Institute, Sr. Serafina Rosa: «This home is in extreme, urgent need of your charity», and writing to the bishop of Brescia, don Angelo Bosio declared: «The activity is in full conformity with the spirit of the Institute», and besides, the opening of the new community would create a common «centre for the other four groups of sisters spread about the same diocese: in Casalmaggiore, Soresina, Soncino and Calcio»³.

¹ *Statuto organico (Prospectus) dell'«Opera Pio Istituto Sant'Angelo» in Cremona.* Manuscript, undated, in AGSdC, Corrispondenza, 1.

² cf. A. FOGLIA, «Il Ritiro Sant'Angelo dalle origini alla metà del XX secolo: tracce di storia», in *200 anni di testimonianza della carità - «Opera Pio Ritiro Sant'Angelo»*, Cremona, pp. 2-6.

³ «Istituto Sant'Angelo» in Cremona, in AGSdC, Corrispondenza.

With the consent of the bishop of Brescia on 28.8.1851, the vicar of the bishop of Cremona backed the sending of sisters and on **14 September 1851** six sisters: Sr. Candida Febbrari, superior (aged 44, formerly at Chiari), Sr. Ancilla Martinelli, doorkeeper (aged 39), Sr. Giulia Berleghini, teacher (aged 29), Sr. Natalina Oberti, Assistant to superior (aged 24), Sr. Vittoria Montini, teacher (aged 19), Sr. Ambrogina Benetti, teacher (aged 22)⁴ entered the Home in Piazza Sant' Angelo, Cremona.

The *Regolamento*, dated 1827, established also the timetable of the inmates; it is very much like that of a monastic community:

5.30	<i>getting up</i>	13.00	<i>recreation</i>
6.00	<i>prayers and H. Mass</i>	14.00	<i>work</i>
7.00	<i>tidying up</i>	17.00	<i>snack-recreation</i>
8.00	<i>work</i>	18.00	<i>prayer</i>
9.00	<i>breakfast</i>	19.00	<i>work</i>
10.00	<i>work</i>	21.00	<i>supper</i>
12.00	<i>lunch</i>	22.00	<i>rest</i>

The girls did their work in silence or else recited devotional prayers, or listened to some edifying reading; during recreation they sang, walked about the long corridors and chatted, but all indecent talk or pointless questions was not allowed.

At every meal there was: for breakfast bread (fruit or milk on Sundays and feast-days); for lunch: plenty of soup, bread and wine; for supper: side-dish, wine and *polenta* as much as they liked.

Their work aimed at training them for a means of livelihood. They were employed, each according to her bent, in weaving, sewing, knitting socks, lacework and embroidery... The material needed for their work was provided by the person who placed the order. Instruments put to use (loom, sewing machine, knitting frame, embroidery frame...) were furnished by the Home itself. Earnings went to the girls themselves.

⁴ cf. Statistical data concerning the community of the sisters of charity in Milan and other places depending upon it at the end of year 1851.

Elementary school instruction was also imparted.

The girls could see their relatives once a month, in the presence of the directress or a teacher, partly because in the case of many of them the mother was a prostitute. On leaving the Institution they generally returned home or were assumed in some service.

Several times the bishop expressed his «full satisfaction» with the sisters' work and, considering the real need for it, he asked for two more sisters. His vicar also attested: «The sisters' beneficial presence is a real blessing... they are lovable and truly loved by all». Testimonials of deep esteem and affection are frequent: «The pupils show them warm affection as for a mother; they are devoted to them and obey them gladly: one can expect immense good to come out of this... The sisters have truly brought God's blessing to this establishment which, since it has been entrusted to their wise care, has flourished and is doing very well in all respects»⁵.

The superior Sr. Candida Febbrari, «a pious and wise woman» ran the Home even on the administrative plane, with an intelligent sense of balance, up to 1868, when Sr. Felice Bonotti (1869-1870) took over. After that, the superior was Sr. Giuseppina Pedruzzi, formerly a teacher at the *Pio Luogo* since 1867.

The Home was given a renewed impetus thanks to bishop Geremia Bonomelli (1871-1914), formerly parish priest of Lovere, where he had come to know, help and guide our sisters⁶, and had supported them in their activity among the youth. In the superior Sr. Anselma Galli (1880-1906) he found a person who shared his views of a sound education, as well as a humble spirit and a loving devotedness to those in need. Both together they provided for the material and moral good of the young women and also opened a «charity school» for girls coming from poor families.

In the fat correspondence preserved in the files of the Generalate at Milan, we unfortunately do not find the replies of the superior general or any other writing on her behalf; this leaves a gap for the years 1856 al 1875. After that, the correspondence is regular,

⁵ «Istituto Sant'Angelo in Cremona, in AGSdC, Corrispondenza.

⁶ cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1933, I, 198-199.

but by that time the Home had taken a new shape. In fact, as «Buon Pastore» had been opened in the city, catering exclusively for young women who had gone astray, the Home lost its character as a refuge for cases of extreme need (nor do we have adequate documentary evidence for precise dates for this transformation. However, it began to figure as a «collegio» (boarding school) catering not only to orphan-girls or girls coming from needy families but also to paying boarders coming from the lower middle-class families who could not afford a higher fee⁷.

The many developments undergone after this included: a charity school, workshop and knitwear centre for professional training, embroidery classes, military hospital in the post world war II period, nursery school and elementary school level classes, coaching classes, home for refugees of South-East Asia for a three-year period, home for girls in extreme need, parish pastoral care centre. All this shows how the history of «Istituto Sant'Angelo», underwent various expressions in answer to new needs while remaining open to changing situations and giving proof of a capacity to meet needs in adequate ways. Our sisters came away from «Sant'Angelo» in Cremona on 31 July 2012.

«CASA FEMMINILE DI PENA E DI CORREZIONE» IN VENEZIA-GIUDECCA

In 1854 superior general Sr. Teresa Bosio acknowledged with «lively sentiments of exultation, gratitude and profound respect» a proposal made by his eminence Aurelio Mutti, patriarch of Venice, on behalf of his excellency Back, minister for Internal Affairs, Vienna, to undertake the running and care of «Giudecca Penal Institute» for Veneto district⁸ (women's prison), because it is in accordance with the spirit of our Institute.

⁷ cf. «Statuto interno disciplinare» del 1865 in A. FOGLIA, «Il Ritiro Sant'Angelo dalle origini alla metà del XX secolo: tracce di storia», in *200 anni di testimonianza della carità - «Opera Pio Ritiro Sant'Angelo»*, Cremona, pp. 6-8.

⁸ Letter of the patriarch of Venice to the superior general, Venice, 9 October 1854; cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1933, I, 274.

Cardinal Antonio Turri, archbishop of Milan, bishop Girolamo Verzeri of Brescia, and don Bosio gave their consent on both accounts: that of setting aside for this undertaking the full number of twelve sisters, and of sending three of them, namely: Sr. Stefana Dell'Oglio, Sr. Tomasina Ferrari and Sr. Daniele Castelletti to the prisons of Moravia, run by the sisters of St Vincent, so as to learn the structure and, above all, the method of running them⁹.

This new penal institution was inaugurated on **15 April 1856** in the Island of Giudecca, Venice (Giudecca derives from 'zo de ca' which for the Venetians means «to go outside the city», out in the countryside of a neighbouring island called «Zodecca», later on: Giudecca)», with the housing of 250 detainees from Lombardo Veneto, the Trentino, Dalmatia and Capo d'Istria.

While abiding by current disciplinary norms, the sisters, «through words inspired by faith and gentle ways» won the affection and esteem of those 'unhappy' women and transformed the prison into a serene, orderly family, so much so that they obtained from the Imperial Government remarkable amendments to their contract, in their desire for a more humane treatment of the detainees (abolition of chains and iron balls formerly worn on their feet, of whipping and of wooden cages for beds); the sisters also gradually obtained some freedom in their duties as guards, doing it without the help of armed guards¹⁰. They were given full responsibility in watching over prisoners and other detainees, day and night, with regular shifts for duty throughout the night. The sisters' aim was to bring about a moral and human rehabilitation of their charges, enabling them to acquire good habits, a desire to love God and neighbour and to behave as self-respecting citizens.

The detainees were kept occupied in house-cleaning, work in the linen-room, laundry, kitchen and kitchen-garden. Above all, they spent much time in all kinds of handwork such as knitting,

⁹ Letter dated 20 July 1855, in AGSdC, Corrispondenza; cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1933, I, 277-278.

¹⁰ Rough sketch of notes on the first fifty years of the Institute (undated, nor signed), in AGSdC.

weaving also of cloth used for our Congregation, and even fine embroidery work of the luxury type, from 8.00 to 13.00 and from 14.30 to 18.00, for which they were paid a daily wage.

They were also given elementary instruction, including religious knowledge, suited to their capacity as women from the lower ranks of society and grown up illiterate. A manuscript says: «Ignorance is one of the causes of the crime committed (most of the women prisoners have a life-sentence to serve for homicide, or for ten to twenty years). Those who are unable to read and write when they enter, leave the establishment with a fair level of instruction. Others, who come with no particular skill leave it qualified for a job. Here they learn to give up idle ways and acquire habits of an active, industrious life. Above all, moreover, under a religious and moral influence, many of them become more gentle if not totally transformed...»¹¹.

A pamphlet preserved in the «Biblioteca Marciana», Venice, gives *the number of those who entered or left* during the 1856 to 1867:

<i>year</i>	<i>sentenced</i>			<i>offenders</i>		
	entered	died	left	entered	died	left
1856	132	8	32	22	3	—
1857	84	9	52	35	1	1
1858	90	6	71	28	2	20
1859	35	2	67	8	1	64
1860	39	7	69	16	—	2
1861	25	1	40	20	—	2
1862	46	4	45	14	—	11
1863	31	3	42	10	—	7
1864	52	5	53	1	—	—
1865	58	4	43	9	—	11
1866	41	6	65	9	—	35
1867	25	—	2	98	—	—

¹¹ Manuscript, undated, nor signed, but mention is made of the superior, Sr. Modesta Pegoretti who was directress of the prison from 1874 to 1909, in AGSdC, Relazioni I.

We can get significant information from this Table if we compare figures concerning the two types of detainees by reading relevant figures horizontally, vertically and crosswise.

The same pamphlet goes on: «Indoors, the building is among those kept as well as can be possibly desired. There is a soothing peaceful atmosphere in every part of it: a most exquisitely good taste fittingly harmonizes with the sober simplicity and cleanliness of the place. No corner of the house lacks evidence of the day-to-day work of sisters and detainees... the watchful care of the sisters and the beauty of the dwelling-place render life less harsh, because the deprivation of freedom is softened by the sweetness of domestic life». And the detainees themselves say of themselves: «It is true that the petals of our lily have been torn off by the gusts of moral misfortune, but on the white corolla, so spoiled and battered, there has come down the precious Blood of Jesus, who washed off the mud, and on the stem of the fallen flower a special ray of light shone, as on the dim eyes of the blind man of Jericho that Jesus made bright with light and grace»¹².

The excellent management of the women's prison induced minister Wais to ask for sisters to assume charge at the men's prison as well. The superior general declined. Instead, in wise, thoughtful terms, she herself proposed that a charitable institution be opened for ex-detainees of Giudecca, to save them from the danger of falling back into evil ways unless they found a good job with some respectable family. Another institution she commended was one for girls left to themselves, of age eight to sixteen, an age receptive to improvement and therefore to rehabilitation.

In September 1864, on the completion of an inspection of the prison, and having seen for himself the regular running of it, Francesco Giuseppe, Emperor of Austria, conferred on the superior, Sr. Stefana Dell'Oglio, the gold cross «in recognition of her eminently beneficial work»¹³. During the official function the lieutenant

¹² Letter to the provincial superior from the pupils of the five elementary classes, «Casa di pena Giudecca», Venice, 19 February 1941, in AGSdC, Relazioni I.

¹³ Letter of the S.M.I.R.A. dated 17 September 1864, in AGSdC, Corrispondenza.

for the delegation of Venice uttered these words: «The religious habit that you wear speaks solely of humility and detachment; nevertheless, your heart has every reason to be simply glad. Rejoice, therefore, and exult so as to please our great sovereign, and side by side with the cross you already have, made of suffering and self-denial, accept this cross of honour and glory, and let it be a seal for you and your fellow-sisters. And to the detainees: «You girls (lit. daughters) are truly fortunate that in the place of expiation where you find yourselves, you have by your side these religious who with tireless care seek nothing except your good»¹⁴.

Other awards from high authorities were not lacking. On 23 December 1866 Francesco Borgatti, minister for Justice, wrote to the same superior: «I am glad to confer this token of praise on you. It is an acknowledgement not only of the charity that your Congregation distinguishes itself for, but also of the fervent love for suffering humanity to which you and your fellow-sisters have consecrated your whole life».

And in January 1867 the deputeo Federico Bellazzi wrote to the superior general, Sr. Teresa Bosio: «I am glad to reaffirm that in the *Casa di correzione e di pena femminile* at Giudecca I truly found reason for exceptionally-high praise. In so much wretchedness found in most penal institutions in Italy, in such serious lack of human spirits that are moved by the sublime priest-hood of religious and civil charity towards those hit by penal laws, it does credit to the Country to have in the penal institution of Giudecca a model of excellence for the whole of civilized Europe». Mother Bosio replied: «You cannot imagine how encouraging this piece of news was to us... We have seen in it a genuine favour from Heaven and a token of benevolence of the civil authorities shown us through the kindness of Your Excellency. We trust that you will continue to give your valuable support to that community and also to the whole of our humble Congregation, which is animated by the same spirit that you have found in our House of Venice»¹⁵.

¹⁴ A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1933, I, 286.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 287-288.

1917 was a year of hardship for everyone: following upon the Italian defeat at Kobarid (Caporetto) the prison building of Giudecca had to be made vacant. On 12 November the superior Sr. Claudia Santagostino, on her return from Venice where she had gone on an urgent handing over the service to the military authorities, wrote to mother Angela Ghezzi: «The unfortunate detainees were taken to convict prisons in South Italy. It was heart-breaking to see them leave; they were torn away from us in tears: we too wept while we begged them to be calm and behave well to obtain the grace for warfare to cease and that they may come back to us in Venice»¹⁶. The sisters were first received by the Ursulines of Ferrara and when their convent was turned into a military hospital, they settled in a small house of the parish priest of Modena. They resumed their activity at the end of the war.

There is then a large gap in documentary evidence. Some information is gleaned from the community diary over the following years, stretching to 1950. On 3 April 1952 elementary school classes I to V, interrupted in world war II, were reopened, and that same year the department of *Grazia e Giustizia* made some improvement in the building: a new refectory, bathrooms and showers along the modern system. On 30 June, in the presence of the authorities of schools and prisons the *Provveditore agli Studi di Venezia* handed the result sheets and rewarded students who had done exceptionally well in the exam they had had.

Starting from 22 December 1953 there was a series of release from prison in an amnesty. The sister who kept the diary wrote: «It is impossible to describe the detainees' gratitude and affection shown towards the sisters who had given them a sense of direction and a preparation for a new way-of-life. The superior collected

¹⁶ A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1936, III, 504.

warm clothes to dress them up respectably. Some who had no family to go to were put up at *Magnificat* Institute in Padua, and others were helped to settle down as maids in good families».

15 April 1956 marked the hundredth anniversary of the sisters' coming to the women's penal Institute of Giudecca. In *Supplemento ad Ascendere* we read: «According to what the current superior, Sr. Angela M. Lanzerotti, wrote to us, that event was kept only in the intimacy of the religious community in a spirit of thanksgiving to God and of oneness in deep fraternal love, in tireless work for the spiritual benefit of persons in such extreme need. To add to the praise and make up for the lack of external celebration may there be the warm congratulations of the whole Institute to our dear Sisters who, in order to serve Jesus in the person of the detainees, are generously offering their self-sacrifice as voluntary prisoners»¹⁷.

In 1969 Sr. Fortunata Zennaro was awarded a silver medal by the ministry of Justice; in 1970 classes were started among the detainees, a laboratory of glass beads, a craft widely popular in Italy and abroad; in 1971 a committee of civil servants of the Government of Argentina who visited the prison to study the method found it efficient. The method the sisters followed among the detainees was based on the imitation of Christ: kindness and cheerfulness; awakening serious reflection and repentance with a desire to start a new life¹⁸. Evidence of this are the thoughts of an unknown detainee manifested in an undated statement: «It is night and the wind is blowing; all is dark, and my thoughts rise in meditation. You see, Lord, you are humbling me utterly. You wipe me out of the sight of men, and let your love shine through me. God is Love. That's what I heard one day; now I know it for certain. He is Love in giving, in giving, in giving endlessly... From men I may receive very little, as you did, Christ my Lord, but shall I be able to give, to give without expecting anything in return? I am still shaky in that uncertainty. I do need your strength, Lord!».

¹⁷ *Supplemento ad Ascendere*, May to August 1956, 30, in AGSdC, Relazioni I.

¹⁸ cf. Cronistoria degli «Istituti penali femminili», Venezia-Giudecca, 1972, in AGSdC, Relazioni II.

By 1978 the situation has clearly changed: the internal running of the place was entrusted to lay personnel who feared the detainees (serving sentences for armed robbery, kidnapping of people, belonging to *Brigate Rosse*, use and despatch of drugs, prostitution and supporting of prostitution among minors). This caused continuous tension and agitation that at times broke into violence. Sister nurse was the only one who could approach them and receive their confidence. The situation gave rise to serious difficulties to the community, whose aim was to promote a sense of human dignity among the detainees, while what the prison authorities sought was external security, discipline and order. What was clearly indispensable on the part of the sisters was a collaboration that was intelligent and wise¹⁹.

In occasion of his visit to the prison on 17 June 1985 pope John Paul II uttered words of solace and encouragement: «Christ is here, in this prison, in your midst, close to each one of you because you believe in God the Father's love... Don't give in to the passive 'resignation' of persons who feel beaten... I know it is not easy to bear your sentence with dignity and patience... have trust in one another, remain in dialogue, open out to the confidence of genuine friendship». Two posters prepared to welcome the Pope bore the words: «Peter, your Church is built on these rocks, too». And: «Even ears of corn grown by the side of the field are gathered up by the good sower»²⁰.

Enlivened by trust in God's saving work and in the detainees' good will, the sisters are carrying on their service of love. In **September 1993** the community left the dwelling that had become deeply dear to them. Up to this day two sisters: a nurse and an educator, go every day to the prison. Every year, during the summer holidays, a group of Italian students called «The song of love» spend ten days there. Though relating to the detainees is difficult yet they believe the experience is worthwhile because it enables them to live their faith in active Christian charity.

¹⁹ cf. Relazione sulle carceri di Venezia, 1978, in AGSdC, Relazioni II.

²⁰ John Paul II at the Penal Institute of Venice, in AGSdC, Relazioni II.

«CASA DI PROVVIDENZA», IN BRESCIA

«Casa di Provvidenza», a girls' rehabilitation centre in Brescia was opened privately in 1856 by the noble lady Carlotta Rota, the widow Dossi, who wanted to remove helpless girls from moral danger and to rehabilitate others gone astray. On the advice of Fr Davide Clementi, Filipino, and with the collaboration of three priests: Fr Eugenio Bianchini, Fr Carlo Lucca and Fr Artemio Gorgonio, she purchased and adjusted two houses, in the neighbourhood of San Gaetano or the Capuchin friars, 860-861, now via Martinengo da Barco, 10. In the beginning the directress of the establishment, first named «Asilo di soccorso» or «Asilo di pace» (Home of peace) was Caterina Rossi, but in 1862 ill-health caused her to retire in a house of her own with the few girls then under her care²¹. In his letter dated 4 June 1863 to the superior general Sr. Teresa Bosio, Fr Clementi expressed his earnest desire to entrust to the sisters' responsibility and care the management and the protection of «girls in moral danger, who being under age or in the absence of evidence of guilt, or for other reasons could not be sent to prison nor allowed to go free». He added that the Government's grant offered amounted to 80 Italian centesimi per head», and concluded: «...I hope these details are in full conformity with the aims of your charity and zeal»²².

Mother Bosio consulted don Angelo Bosio. During the months of June-July they exchanged letters, seeking to discern wisely the new activity and the commitment it entailed. They deemed it wise that «administration and financial responsibility should rest with the priests at least till the sisters were better known and had time to know where to turn to for subsidy, and also not to let them imagine that the sisters could afford the expense on their own». With an acute sense of responsibility don Bosio visited the house at Brescia, as is described in his letter to his niece, signed «Your affectionate uncle don Angelo». He fixed an appointment with

²¹ cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1936, I, 328-330.

²² Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 645/G.

bishop Girolamo Verzeri of Brescia, to have his approval. On his part, Fr Clementi pressed the sisters to come soon (letters dated 3, 4 and 6 August 1863). On 15 August the superior general received the bishop's approval. On 27 August the prefecture of Brescia gladly authorized the opening of the Home for abandoned girls in Brescia²³.

On 9 September 1863 three sisters (whose names are unknown because particulars for years 1863 to 1864 are lacking) assumed their delicate activity at the Brescia rehabilitation centre, furnished with what was strictly necessary and catering for five or six girls. The former «Asilo di pace» was given the new name of «Casa di provvidenza». In 1865 the superior of the community was Sr. Diodata Marenghi; the teachers were: Sr. Erminia Corbellini, Sr. Eufrosina Gandolfi and Sr. Virginia Pernici. On 30 September of the same year a new agreement fixed: the sisters' gratuitous use of the Home for girls gone astray; the commitment of the superior general to send other sisters to keep up with the number of new admissions; financial matters managed by the priests for two years were then to be transferred to the sisters' responsibility; should expenses exceed income the superior general had to defray annual food expenses of the sisters; should the establishment be closed down, the building would revert to the priests²⁴. All aspects were thought out with care and sense of balance. C. Dossi, directress, committed herself to help financially till death, and the priests in 1878 ceded the building with four other small houses, to the sisters, as recorded in registers of the Notary, Beduzzi of Brescia.

On 20 February 1870, in answer to Note 80 from the prefecture of Brescia district, dated 12 February, recommending regular

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Convenzioni, in AGSdC, 645/H.

schooling to the young inmates, the superior Sr. Diodata wrote: «First of all may I point out that the notification from the ministry dated 21 June 1869 concerns public Institutes of charity... but ours is a private home... Besides, since they are all poor and have no support from relatives, the young girls residing here will need to enter into service with respectable families and so our main aim has always been that of training our girls for domestic service, to teach them some needlework and to educate their hearts so as to lessen or help them overcome any evil tendencies that have a hold on them (given that they are all charged with theft or taking to the road), without neglecting, however, to develop their mental capacities and encourage reading and writing practice... elementary classes I and II are entrusted to Sr. Gaudenzia Venturini, a qualified teacher with experience as a teacher in the public school of Iseo and in Lovere»²⁵.

The inmates are divided into four classrooms or large rooms with separate refectories, dormitories, classrooms and recreation halls. This grouping is done age-wise or according to needs and purpose of their presence here. The number of juvenile offenders (5 or 6 in 1863, 35 in 1869) increased to 170 by 1885. In 1883, in fact, a house was purchased at Castegnato, formerly a boarding school run by the Dorothean sisters (now a rest-home for elderly sisters of the religious province of Bergamo). Fifty girls, «still minors and well-behaved» were transferred to it. But in 1887, difficulties in means of communication and in co-ordination of educational activity made it imperative to seek another dwelling-place: «Santa Maria», an old property of the lawyer Ventura, a holiday resort of the bishop of Brescia. It was an estate with land under grass and kitchen garden, situated in Via Mantova, 15²⁶, 1½ km from the city. Later on, with a diminished grant-in-aid from the Government and as a result a smaller number of offenders to cater to, the ‘branch office’ was converted into a boarding house for students²⁷.

²⁵ Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 645/G.

²⁶ Notizie storiche sulla «Casa di Provvidenza», ossia Riformatorio femminile in Brescia, in AGSdC, 645/G.

²⁷ cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1935, II, 131-132.

On 3 October 1890 Giuseppe Zanardelli, minister of Justice, wrote from Rome, to the superior Sr. Faustina Baraggi: «When I visited this Institute guided by you, I was so struck by the way it is run that I felt it was my pleasant duty to offer you a token of my sincere admiration. I am therefore taking the liberty of sending you a money order for £ 400 for you to spend as you think most useful for the Institute».

The Regulations the sisters followed were those given in the *Direttorio* for external duties, chapter XII, concerning the *Ritiri delle penitenti* (Centres of rehabilitation). They were educational guidelines that the sister kept faithfully. «Sisters entrusted with the care of the detainees should strive to conform to the spirit of charity of Jesus the Good Shepherd, who spared himself no pains to save even a single sheep... The unfortunate girls who live in these homes are in need of an immense charity that will make up for their lack of freedom and lighten the hardships they have to endure in the ‘house of penitence’... Let the sisters train them in needlework and crafts to avoid idleness among them and help them acquire a means of livelihood by the end of their stay... They should give them nourishing food in plenty and provide proper treatment when they are sick, leaving them sufficient time for rest and proper refreshment to promote full physical growth. Everything should be suited to their condition with no excess or affectation... Every corner of the house should be clean and tidy... Knowing that change of heart and of will is the work of God’s grace, let them seek to draw them to the Lord through prayer, good example and especially by being always patient and kind to them, by treating them gently, serving them and caring for them»²⁸.

²⁸ *Direttorio per i ministeri esterni delle suore di carità della ven. Capitanio sotto la protezione di san Vincenzo De’ Paoli, Trento, 1898, XII, n. 1-6, pp. 72-76.*

Everything seemed to go on fairly smoothly, including relations with civil authorities. But year 1909 proved to be tough. Marquess Gina Cinta Tantarini, in her capacity as inspectress, visited «Casa di Provvidenza» and «Santa Maria», and her report was most unfavourable, not corresponding to the truth, perhaps expressive of a person hostile to religious Institutes.

For the next two years there was a thick correspondence between Sr. Michelina Cugini, who was directress and superior supported by Mother Ghezzi herself and the prefect of Brescia to undo the undeserved charges of the inspectress and restore esteem and trust in the sisters. In November 1910 M. Doria, minister for Internal Affairs and director general of prisons and reformatories, wrote to Prof. advocate Alessandro Stoppato, M.P. attesting that the sisters of «S. Gaetano» and of «S. Maria» in Brescia had nothing to fear or worry about and assuring that the marquess Tantarini's inspection has mentioned «the improvement made in the various types of service in both Institutes, according to the directives given as a follow-up of the previous inspection»²⁹.

Other inspections and negotiations with the Government, regarding the daily fee of the guests, took place but with no mishaps or disagreement. In fact, in 1948 the Government put forward the request to open a section of 50 admissions of minors under observation. Several agreements drawn up pointed out explicitly: «The minors admitted will receive close individual attention and their behaviour will be observed. The management must therefore point out and illustrate the characteristic features of every minor as a contribution towards a psycho-diagnostic investigation carried out by a team for an overall study of each young girl in view of further decisions to be taken without delay by judiciary authorities on their account»³⁰.

In 1960, when the number of institutions catering to minors had to be reduced as they had become much fewer, Dr Gaetano

²⁹ Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 645/F.

³⁰ Ibidem.

Intarchi, civil procurator opted for the suppression of «Casa di Mantova» rather than that of Brescia, where the building had been readjusted and better equipped and the sisters had profitably followed a refresher course for formators³¹.

The number of minors the sisters cared for were still able to reach a peak of 150 or so, divided into three groups: preventive care, rehabilitation, supervision. For purposes of supervision they availed themselves of expert help of laypersons: social workers, medical officers, psychologists and psychiatrists. But the rapid changes in society, widespread evils such as drugs, prostitution and robberies etc. were rendering rehabilitation work more and more difficult. As a result, though the sisters' apostolic service had proved to be a valid help for individual progress and social improvement, the finding of new sisters fit for the work had become practically impossible. On **7 June 1972** mother Angelamaria Campanile wrote to the provincial superior, Sr. Giovanna Romolo and, for information, to the local superior, Sr. Paola Toia: «As it had become evident that your province is unable to replace the sisters currently working at «Casa Provvidenza» with persons more adequately qualified and psychologically more 'fresh', I appealed to the other provincial superiors, hoping that with a generous helping the service could be kept up. Unfortunately the general situation of the Institute shows diminishing forces everywhere. After carefully considering the case in all its aspects the general council has with deep sorrow decided to authorize the suppression of this activity»³².

On 31 December of the same year the rehabilitation Centre, after 110 years of activity carried out with motherly, individual attention to the girls, who have remained affectionate and grateful to the sisters, has been converted into a «House of spirituality».

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Ibidem.