



and you too **do** likewise

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

«I was in prison...»

Penal Institutes for «pericolanti, penitenti, carcerate»

(Part III)

«ISTITUTO SAN SILVESTRO», VERONA

«The hour spent in the peace and serenity of the cloisters of ‘San Silvestro’ Convent has been unforgettably impressive. I have seldom had the opportunity to visit convents, and only lately has monastic life drawn and held my attention. But this day is one I will never forget. Could it be that there is no quiet for people outside convent walls? I am almost tempted to believe so, as I call to mind the deep serenity I have seen in the eyes and on the faces of some of the sisters». That is what was written to a friend, before joining the Carmelites of Paray-le Monial (1912), by the marquess Alessandra di Rudinì (1876-1932), the ‘nìche’ of G. D’Annunzio, who, like other noble ladies of Verona, had frequently visited «Istituto San Silvestro».

Actually, the «Institute for girls in moral danger», run at the time by our sisters under the guidance of Sr. Vitalina Tauber (superior from 1878 to 1910), was formerly the ancient monastery built by the Benedictines of S. Silvestro Nonantolo round about 1162 and remained their residence till 1523. After that, the Benedictine nuns of «S. Maria Mater Domini» in Valdonega occupied the building till the time of Napoleon Bonaparte, when in 1807 it was tem-

porarily ceded by Emperor Francis I, free of charge, for charitable purposes, to countess Marianna Gavardi Sagramoso. In 1816 the convent was purchased by canon don Marco Marchi, spiritual director of the *penitenti* and on his death the latter bequeathed it to our Institute¹. Its purpose was «admit, look after and rehabilitate young girls gone astray»; it was supported and managed by a committee of five members with the bishop ordinary as *pro tempore* president. In 1840 it was formally erected into a juridical body by imperial decree, after it had undertaken to follow the previously approved Rule of the Charitable Institute, «Casa Famiglia» of Venice².

In spite of the good will and commitment of the lay personnel engaged in it, the bishop felt the need, due to divergence of views on the plane of disciplinary norms, to entrust the Institution to women religious.

Year 1863 was most decisive. During the months from March to December there was a thick exchange of letters between bishop Luigi dei Marchesi di Canossa (1861-1900), don Angelo Bosio and the superior general. From her residence at «Ospedale Fatebenefratelli», Milan, mother Bosio accepted the request with trepidation and humility and wrote to the bishop: «The project is excellent and deserves to be entrusted to better hands than ours; but far from filling me with dismay, my intimate awareness of our nothingness encourages me all the more, knowing that God usually makes use of poor instruments to carry out his plans. Divine protection and your kind understanding are the only support on which I count for the success of this enterprise»³. On 9 December 1863 of the same year she sent to the bishop and to Fr Gaetano Turri, spiritual director of the house, the agreement to be signed by them. In this she pointed out: «Five sisters of charity will enter the Institution with the intention of taking charge of the detainees and of educating them, and also of managing all its economic affairs» (Art. 1); Art. 6:

¹ A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1933, I, 349-351; cf. Verona, «Istituto San Silvestro», in AGSdC, Storia.

² Verona, «Istituto San Silvestro», in AGSdC, Regolamenti.

³ Ibidem, Corrispondenza - Letter dated 18 October 1863.

«The sisters will be fully in agreement with the managing committee in all that pertains to the admitting and dismissing of the young detainees»⁴.

On their arrival at the «Istituto delle Penitenti», Verona, on **12 January 1864**, the sisters were given a warm welcome amid the rejoicing of the administration and of the girls. By 5 September 1864 Fr Gaetano Giacobbe, parish priest, could already write to mother Teresa in praise of the sisters' patience and charity: «...from the time the detainees were entrusted to these five angels of charity, we no longer consider it as a disciplinary institute but rather as a religious community... and the grace of God in them and through them is yielding ever richer fruits. Oh! May there ever grow in them this spirit of self-abnegation and holy charity!».

There is no exact record of the number of girls catered for, but it could not be low. In fact, in 1878, next to «Istituto delle Penitenti» – named «Istituto Buon Pastore» in 1923 by decree of Vittorio Emanuele III – there was opened «Asilo delle pericolanti» conceived by Fr Giulio Giori, a priest from Verona, as a home for girls in dire poverty, orphaned or forsaken. In 1881 it was erected into a juridical body by decree of Umberto I, king of Italy, and its organic statute was approved by him the following year. The Rules of both Institutes mention no holidays for the inmates, which means that the sisters served them full time. The average number cared for was a hundred.

The sisters formed a single community which, in 1895, when the Institute was organized into provinces, was incorporated into the religious province of Venezia.

While the penitenti were girls who willingly decided to change, the *pericolanti* were «rieducande» (in rehabilitation) sent by the ministry of Justice through the *Centro di Osservazione* of Venice. Art 6 in the official agreement of 28 February 1880 said: «The sisters will see to it that there be no contacts between the *penitenti* and the *provanti* and that the *pericolanti* do not enter into the space reserved for the *penitenti*». These girls, of age ranging from 6 to

⁴ Verona, «Istituto San Silvestro», in AGSdC, Convenzioni.

18, illegitimate, orphaned or coming from poor or broken families are further grouped into: the little ones (aged 6-11); medium (aged 11-14) and bigger ones (aged 14-18); each group follows its own timetable, with separate refectory, recreation hall and dormitory.

The girls admitted into *Asilo delle penitenti* mostly came from families of low moral standards, girls who had already passed from family to an institute or from an institute to another, and they themselves had immoral acts imputed to them⁵. The method of education was the same for all, based on essential principles: treating every girl firmly but gently always, even when they had to correct them; punishing only in exceptional cases; showing trust in them and encouraging them; patiently and tirelessly repeating the same advice, even when there seemed to be no improvement; praising progress however small and every sign of good will. Any sort of correction was to be done privately, if unheeded, the case was to be referred to the Governing Body, and ultimately ending with dismissal from the community.

The day-to-day timetable was established as follows:

6.00	getting up (the little ones at 7.30)
7.00	holy Mass - thought for the day by superior
7.45	breakfast - tidying up
8.30	work and study with mid-morning break
12.00	lunch - clearing up - recreation
13.30	work and study - classes conducted by a sister
16.00	light refreshment
19.00	supper - clearing up - recreation
20.30	rest

⁵ «Istituto Buon Pastore» and «Asilo delle pericolanti» make up the «Pie Opere dell'Istituto San Silvestro», cf. Regolamento.

It was the duty of the Governing Body to know as far as possible the family background and individual characteristics of every girl in order to have an idea of the harmful effects of bad influences in their physical and moral growth and, above all, to apply positive help where needed to strengthen the character and redress negative tendencies of individuals concerned. Girls were induced, or rather trained, to gradually get used to community life and to observe the rules.

In accordance with the obligation to have a school education, the girls residing at «Buon Pastore» went to the state elementary school in the region; at the «Asilo delle pericolanti» a teacher trained any adults still without a school-leaving certificate for the final exam of class V of elementary school. Besides, all the girls could attend courses in housecraft, drawing or receive professional training classes. Those who were not fit for higher education had coaching in cutting-out, embroidery or knitting... When they were proficient enough to produce work made to order, a fixed part of the earnings went to them, for small expenses, or was put aside for them and handed to them when they left the Institution: at the age of eighteen or above for the *pericolanti*, after at least a three-year stay for the *penitenti*⁶.

In 1940 some sisters and all those under their care had to leave the building because of the war, and settled in a country-house in Bussolengo, Verona district. In 1948 they returned and resumed their activity though the house was badly damaged.

In the course of time superiors were changed and the religious community increased in number (from 5 to 15). In 1951 the house also gave refuge to flood-victims.

In 1957, along with the new Agreement, bishop Giovanni Urbani sent words of appreciation to assistant general Sr. Zaveria Bertulesi: «I avail myself of this opportunity to express to you my delight at the activity your sisters are carrying out. I have no hesitation to affirm that «Istituto S. Silvestro» is a model Institu-

⁶ Verona, «Istituto San Silvestro», in AGSdC, Regolamento.

tion... I can also assure you that there reigns in it a good spirit, mutual kindness and religious observance...»⁷.

In 1959 the penitenti were 100 in number and the *pericolanti* 20. Official agreements were reviewed and updated from time to time, methods of education and of accompaniment were improved with the support of the social services. Religious assistance was throughout in the care of the house chaplain. The building itself underwent considerable repairs and furniture was made more adequately suitable for school activity, work and recreation of the girls⁸.

In 1965 the community was integrated into the religious province of Brescia and in 1966 there were started at «Istituto S. Silvestro» lessons along the state middle school syllabus, for the girls, conducted by lay teachers.

In **December 1969** the official Agreement with the ministry of Justice elapsed; in 1970, in order to meet demands of the times, the two institutions merged into a single project: a students' Hostel for girls coming from various country-towns, with the aim of helping them morally and at times also economically.

«OSPIZIO SANTA MARIA», MILAN

To us sisters, particularly those of Lombardy, the address «Milano, via Orti, 27» brings at once to mind the well-known *Pensionato per signore* (Rest-home for the elderly), but the activity had its origin and was motivated by the original charism of Bartolomea: «...to be of assistance to young women in moral danger... because there are few means of bringing them back to the good other than by keeping them away from danger» (CF 1).

⁷ Ibidem, Corrispondenza, letter dated 19 January 1957.

⁸ Ibidem, Storia.

On 1st December 1879 Sr. Teresa Bosio, in her capacity as superior general, with due approval of her council, opened the *Ospizio di Santa Maria* as a home for girls «with no home nor name, brought up at Santa Caterina Home for foundlings⁹, then dismissed from that charitable Institution still in need of finding a way of earning an honest living»¹⁰. It often happened that they were sent away even from families at whose service they had been, and so it was evidently necessary that till they found a good job they had to be kept away from peril in their life of freedom and dire need.

«The Institute put the enterprise underway and generous benefactors came to its support. A house in *via degli Orti* was purchased and was fittingly adapted; ladies were also accepted as paying guests and in that way they learnt the art of serving to perfection»: that is how the general secretary Sr. Luigia Gallina described it¹¹.

Unfortunately, there is no record left of the initial phase of the activity nor of its developments: no contracts or agreements with public agencies, nor of the number of guests, because the house was Institute property and the enterprise was run directly by the Congregation. The only precious document that has fortunately been preserved, and from which we can make out its characteristic features and the lifestyle kept up in the Home, is the *Regolamento*¹² dated 1879, drawn up by superior general Sr. Teresa Bosio and sent to the bishop of Milan, Mgr Luigi Nazari di Calabiana (1867-1893), in order to have his approval. In her letter she presents the project in these terms: «The precarious condition and dire need in which (these girls) find themselves, and which Christian charity alone can possibly meet, made some sisters think out and

⁹ The Home was named after the suppressed monastery of St Catherine of Alexandria (known as St Catherine of the wheel, referring to the instrument of her martyrdom), situated along the Naviglio, facing Ospedale Maggiore.

¹⁰ A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1933, I, 471.

¹¹ Notes on the first 50 years of the Institute, in AGSdC, 69/G.

¹² Regolamento dell'ospizio di «Santa Maria» in Via degli Orti, 27, in AGSdC, Milano, «Casa Santa Maria».

suggest a way in which they could open for them a temporary refuge, which could protect them from every danger and at the same time help them find an easier and more practical way of settling down. The most obvious way out is to provide those of them who are practically homeless with a Home. But financial means were lacking».

Realism, Christian love and faith marked the attitude and activity of the sisters who put the project underway and accompanied the young girls with motherly concern and self-sacrifice. Among the earliest sisters there was the superior Sr. Cleofe Maggioni and also the teacher Sr. Chiara Carraro¹³.

Here below are significant articles taken from the *Regolamento* (Prospectus); though limited to a few essential points it completely covers the basic sectors:

I. *Admission - Administration*

- The purpose of the home is to care for girls in moral danger, especially those whose age is beyond the scope of *Santa Caterina* Home.
- Whenever a girl leaves the home because she has found a job she does not automatically have the right to be re-admitted later on; in case of need, it rests with sister superior to freely decide according to what she deems right.
- The hospitality the home is meant to provide is temporary in nature; its duration more or less depends on the time needed to find for the girls a stable employment.
- Official representative of the home is the superior general of the sisters and no other; it is she who assumes the charge personally or through another sister appointed by her.

¹³ Stato effettivo 1880, in AGSdC.

II. *Life pattern*

- The life pattern is like that of any Christian family guided by its head; it therefore follows an ordinary way-of-life.
- An appropriate timetable is regularly followed day by day.
- The girls are kept occupied with work suited to their capacities; this is done in common.
- The day opens and ends with the prayer of the Christian said in common; included in this is a prayer to St Joseph for the home.

III. *Duties of the girls*

- Every girl has the duty to work according to her capacities; on leaving the home she cannot claim remuneration for work done.
- They cannot go out whenever they like; for this they should have sister superior's permission, for a reasonable purpose, and always with a companion.
- If a girl is systematically regardless of rules, she should be expelled.

The superior general's letter to the bishop ends in these terms: «Trusting that what is said gives sufficient reason to hope that the opening of the home with the Lord's powerful grace, will render good results, the undersigned superior general of the sisters of charity humbly begs your grace to grant the needed authorization, along with your pastoral blessing».

The whole test is simple yet clear; general rules and instructions to be followed are stated with a warm, transparent feeling for order, thoroughness and above all in a familiar atmosphere that the home aspires to breathe in mutual trust, under the protection of St Joseph, as is the habit in our Institute.

This *Regolamento* laid the basis for a praiseworthy work of rehabilitation till 1932, according to what we can reasonably deduce from the statistical data for the current year¹⁴.

A last important note worth making can be gathered from the *Storia dell'Istituto* and quoted in the leaflet for the jubilee year of «Casa S. Maria»: «However, it was not enough to provide a

¹⁴ Stato effettivo 1932, in AGSdC.

safe residence and a watchful, caring assistance. It was our duty to put girls adopted as our own daughters in contact with (reliable) persons, entrust them with a responsible task and train them in activities suited to women of the time... and so, when the *Casa di via Orti* decided to cater to elderly ladies in need of peace and care, the girls of *S. Caterina* were placed at their service in an atmosphere of sweet serenity and mutual affection. In that manner, in the name of Jesus, venerable old age embraced hapless youth, brightening up the horizons of solitude and of joylessness».

«IL CONVENTINO-SOCCORSO», BERGAMO

«Conventino-Soccorso» of Bergamo: that is the official name given by Sr. Antonietta Prevedello¹⁵, historiographer of the Institute, to the well-known providential home in *via Torquato Tasso*, 44 which, along with «Ricovero delle convertite» di *Borgo S. Caterina*¹⁶, largely contributed towards the education and rehabilitation of poor girls of Bergamo city and district from 1882 to 1961.

In correspondence available¹⁷ the said name recurs till 1935; after that, there is mention only of an orphanage for girls. It is not quite clear, therefore, up to which year «Casa del Soccorso», this research work is concerned with, carried on its activities as a project attached to the orphanage.

On 17 January 1882¹⁸ Mgr Gaetano Camillo Guindani, bishop of Bergamo (1879-1904), earnestly requested superior general Sr.

¹⁵ A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venezia, 1933, I, 484-486.

¹⁶ Later named «Istituto Divin Redentore» (cf. *In the Sign of Unity*, 2013, 1, 57-62).

¹⁷ AGSdC, 410/E.F.G.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 410/E.

Teresa Bosio to send a few sisters to work at the orphanage for girls in Bergamo (170 orphan girls), currently conducted by a lay-teacher in a manner not inspired by faith nor motivated by Christian charity. Mother Teresa accepted the project of running *Conventino-Soccorso*, and made it a point, later on, to transact terms of agreement with the administrative council. By letter dated 25 February 1882, Prot. No. 174=89, the president of the council, lawyer Valdimiro Beretta, agreed with mother Bosio on these terms:

- I. «The said superior general commits herself, from 15 March 1882 to send three sisters from her Institute to run the girls' orphanage *Conventino-Soccorso* in Bergamo...
- II. The three sisters will hold these duties: one as directress, a second one as head-supervisor of activities, and the third in charge of the dispensary and linen-room in accordance with the *Regolamento* previously drawn up for the above-mentioned orphanages and officially recognized by the local deputy office of the district.

...In anticipation of the promised intimation of the names of the sisters to be assigned the three above duties and of their arrival at the establishment and hence of their official reception and introduction to all the personnel and to the girls, the undersigned expresses to you, reverend sister, the warmest thanks and sincere regards, begging that it be pleasing and highly acceptable to you»¹⁹.

In charge as *direttrice* was Sr. Clementina Lachmann who, on 13 June of the same year, was elected assistant general. Replacing her till 1885 was Sr. Teresa Crippa. In charge at the *Ritiro delle Convertite* (Rehabilitation Centre) was Sr. Monica Sianesi, who passed away in 1890²⁰.

Noting that the sisters were overworking, mother Teodolinda Nazari, would have liked to send more sisters to help, but the presi-

¹⁹ AGSdC, 410/H, Convenzioni.

²⁰ Ibidem, 410/E, lettere - mother Lachmann thanks the managing council for their condolence letter.

dent of the governing body wanted to have a lay-person in charge of the linen-room and that she be paid by the Congregation²¹.

Relations with the governing council were evidently a bit strained, and so too with the lay personnel. However, the sisters worked humbly and patiently; in particular, they were very understanding and motherly towards the girls under their care. As she presented the *Regolamento*²² to them the directress Sr. Pierina Gerardi addressed them gently: «*Mie carissime*» (My beloved); she urged them to observe the Rules, taking them as meant for their good. Then she added: «...the words of a friendly person are always pleasing because they cannot deceive... Life must have some rules to go by; rules guide the wise; whatever leads to happiness should be dear to your spirit and considered as one of the greatest benefits; the norms of good living truly lead to happiness». Then she concluded: «You are now in the boat where God in his providence has made you enter. Your superiors are the pilots who will take you to the harbour. And so, obey them faithfully and be loyal in the practice of your rules».

The council strictly abided by the *Regolamento*; admissions and cases of expulsion rested with the council, so too appointments and orders given to the personnel. The president of the council closely supervised the whole functioning of the establishment, including the education and instruction given to the girls. All members of the council could visit the Institution, inspect its activity and take necessary measures.

However, in 1886 in a letter (Prot No. 473=219) addressed to the *direttrice* of *Conventino-Soccorso*, Bergamo, the president of the council expressed his full satisfaction with the work of Sr.

²¹ Ibidem, letters of 4 June and 6 July 1885.

²² AGSdC, 410/H, Regolamenti, n. 49, 1888.

Crocifissa Barbieri, supervisor of activity done, and conveyed «his highest admiration and praise»²³.

The years of the war and its aftermath were critical economically: several times the superior general had to apply for an increase in the sisters' pay. In the letter of 31st March 1917 of the superior Sr. Pierina Gerardi to the council of the orphanages «Conventino-Soccorso» we find documentary evidence of the presence of a greater number of sisters (10 sisters and 7 *sorelle mandatarie* for various duties); it pointed out that the annual remuneration had remained unchanged since 1882²⁴.

For a clearer picture of *Soccorso* the only document found in our archives of the Generalate is the *Regolamento* dated 1869/1870 (and reprinting in 1923)²⁵ of the main sections of it:

I. Requisites for admission to the home are given below:

to the Conventino home

- Age at the moment of admission: 7+ to 12.
- Extreme need.
- Orphaned of father or of both parents, or forsaken by them.

To the Soccorso home

- Age at the moment of admission: 12+ to 16.
- Extreme need.
- In moral danger due to unsafe guardian or if forsaken by parents.

II. The community is divided into 4 sections, age-wise (years: 7-9; 9-12; 12-15; 15-18). Those of *Soccorso* form a separate group.

- They are taught needle-work.
- They are trained in all kinds of housework.
- They are educated along the syllabus of elementary classes I-IV.
- For those deemed unfit a particular type of education is given, suited to their limited mental capacity.

²³ Ibidem, 410/F.

²⁴ AGSdC, Note dated 28 February 1882.

²⁵ Ibidem, 410/H, Regolamenti.

V. All the girls are treated equally regarding food and clothing according to the prescribed style. Girls belonging to *Casa del Soccorso* wear a special badge.

VI. The orphan-girls of *Conventino* leave the home at the age of 18 and are helped in finding a suitable job.

The girls of *Soccorso* leave after a six-year stay; years are counted from the day of entry, provided they are not above 20 years of age.

XII. The *direttrice* informs the *delegato* month by month of the general situation of each section, with regular details about the girls' behaviour.

All other arrangements are alike and generally refer to «orphan-girls».

In his letter dated 12 October 1921, Prot. No. 810=279, president V. Beretta explains to the superior general a new educational system for the *Conventino* proposed by the administrative council: «Without finding fault with the past, which has certainly had its merits, changing conditions of the time now make it necessary to give up classes in embroidery and instead, introduce classes in cooking, cutting-out, ironing, and other kinds of housecraft suitable for women, as well as practical agriculture especially for orphan-girls coming from families of farmers; the aim is to provide each young girl with a professional training suited to her, and to make it easier for her to get a good job and earn an honest and decent living when she has to leave the orphanage. The council deems it right to inform you so that may wisely see to it that the sisters engaged at the *Conventino* may adjust to this plan»²⁶.

²⁶ AGSdC, 410/F.

In June 1935, after insistent requests made by Mr Arnaldo Mazzoleni, mother Antonietta Sterni, at the cost of a real sacrifice, sent a sister qualified as an elementary school-teacher²⁷.

In spite of the strained relationship with the administrative council, particularly with regard to the replacing of sisters and of the *direttrice*, the sisters steadily served with a spirit of self-sacrifice, with total self-dedication and love for the young girls of the *orfanotrofio femminile* «Il Conventino-Soccorso».

From 1939 onwards, in the ‘registro opere’ of the Institute there appeared only the *orfanotrofio* or *Conventino* with an annual average of 120 and about 20 sisters engaged in looking after the girls and in various other duties²⁸.

On 30 June 1960 mother Costantina Baldinucci sadly announced that in the current need of the Congregation she had to withdraw the sisters: 70 girls were entrusted back to their parents’ care, 22 followed sister superior and two other sisters to «Casa S. Giuseppe» of Alzano Lombardo.

At the start of the new year three Ursuline sisters took over the charge: the orphan girls were then about thirty in number.

On 29 July 1961 Dr Enzo Zambetti, president of the council, wrote to the superior, Sr. Luigina Morganti: «...I am writing in my desire to express, personally and in the name of the administrative council, our most sincere thanks for the passionate and tireless work done for the benefit of the Institution...We deeply grieve to see you depart as you set out on your mission elsewhere... We beg you to appreciate our sentiments of gratitude and profound esteem»²⁹.

²⁷ AGSdC, 410/F.

²⁸ cf. AGSdC.

²⁹ Ibidem, 410/G.