



and you too **do** likewise

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

Beggars' hospices

You always have the poor with you (Mt 26:11)

PIA CASA DI RICOVERO E DI INDUSTRIA, ROVIGO (1847-1992)

The municipality of Rovigo in January 1822 rented a building in via Fornaci Alte, to assign as shelter home, managed by a Public Commission of Charity, and in September 1840 buys the property from the State Administration. The number of persons sheltered increase and the capacity of the structure prove to be insufficient. In 1843 a commendable citizen sig. Giacomo Ciro, gives to the Municipal Congregation, a building of his property – with lands attached – for the poor and needy of the *Pio Luogo*, reserving a part of the property for his use, for the rest of his life. The building had been the convent of ex-Monks Olivetani¹. Thus on 9 June 1844 the Shelter for the poor was transferred to the ex-Monastery of St Bartolomeo in St Bortolo square and, in the meantime, collections are made to meet the expenses of the new residence. Thereafter the offerings of many citizens, those coming

¹ By the Decree of 25 April 1810, in effect, the monastery of Olivetani, already convent of the Umiliati, was suppressed and seized by the real state property administration. Cf. Bulletin of the laws of Italian Kingdom: Napoleon, emperor of the French people and king of Italy, orders that all the Ecclesiastical Institutes, corporations and associations of whatever nature be suppressed.

from the bequeathed lands, buildings and the annual subsidies of the Municipality contribute to the maintenance of the guests².

The bishop of Rovigo, Mgr Bernardo Antonio Squarcina (1842-1851), desirous to entrust the «Pia Casa di Ricovero e di Industria» to some religious Institute, presents to the State the request to turn to the sisters of charity of Torino, but the prince viceroy, archduke Ranieri, discouraged him of introducing sisters who are «foreigners», who are non-residents in the Lombardy-Veneto Kingdom³. On 13 April 1845 Fr Pietro Vianelli, in the name of the bishop, writes to Fr Angelo Bosio asking «at least five sisters to direct a shelter home with 160 individuals», for the helpless, chronic and anguished elderly persons, and says that he consoles himself at the thought of having «the generous examples of charity and assistance of the worthy daughters of Bartolomea Capitanio». On 5 June, Bosio arrives at Rovigo to make an agreement with the bishop.

There follows a thick and prolonged network of correspondence between the two. Sr. Vincenza Gerosa, the «mother superior of the daughters of charity of Lovere» was the intercessor, even before their desire to do good could be realised. The frequent letter contacts say how Gerosa had at heart the work that she declares immediately her willingness to be available «for that little possible, for the glory of God» (14 July 1846). Likewise the bishop too had the work at heart and he ensures her that «the work is suited to the spirit of her Institute and her blessed sisters will find in it a very wide field for their zeal and charity» (24 July 1846).

Gerosa (already affected by the sickness that will lead to her death a year after), responds to the bishop who is impatient due to

² We know that Giacomo Ciro in November 1810 purchases the building from the state property administration and by a deed of Dr. Luigi Bonetti, notary, who is adorned with a medal of honour with a band 'for merits of charity' and in his honour a marble plaque is inaugurated and it is fixed on the left wall while entering in the *Pio Luogo*. He dies in 1868. Cf. Ceti Giovanni, former secretary of LL. PP. Riuniti di Rovigo, 1950, *Cenni storici sulla fondazione della Pia Casa di Ricovero di Rovigo*, Reports in AGSdC.

³ cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle Suore di carità*, Venezia, 1933, I, 134; *Ricovero di Rovigo*, Reports in AGSdC; Rosaria Marsilio, Tesi di laurea, p. 117.

the delay of the sisters' arrival, that «the absence of many sisters spread in various establishments and that of Bosio himself, our director – whose opinion and counsel I wish to listen – obliges us to take time and to make some considerations about your proposals» (September 1846). In October, she writes: «...I am consoled that the work totally belongs to God who will help the sisters and you will have pity on them. The bishop hurries to explain: I advice the good sisters whom you have given me to be armed with great patience, while the field I offer is very unrewarding, sterile, and full of thorns and tribulations. However the charity of Jesus Christ triumphs over everything and with time I hope that this field so sterile will give fruits of virtue and eternal life» (26 October 1846)⁴.

However, the agreement was not easy with the government, which wants the municipality of Rovigo to guarantee to the sisters a pension for life, in case the shelter home finds itself in financial difficulties. Fr Bosio reacts to such a proposal and on 22 November writes to the bishop. «Such conditions have never happened neither in Lombardy nor in Tirolo... the sisters do not need your assistance because the Institute provides for them».

On 2 December, the bishop assures Fr Bosio that «the matter of the municipal council is resolved, more over there is a new delegate and all hope that the most desired arrival of the sisters could be confirmed». On the 11th of the same month he invites mother superior to fix the date, while he will see to the journey so that the sisters, due to the winter season, do not have to suffer. Having got the Government authorisation to call the sisters «for the disciplinary and economic direction of the *Casa di Ricovero e di Industria*», the bishop communicates that he is in Adria until 8 January 1847, and so the sisters can wait until February⁵.

Finally the evening of **6 February 1847** the sisters reach Rovigo: *De Fogolari Sr. Celeste* of Trento (28yrs), superior, *Nazari Sr. Colomba* of Bergamo (26yrs), teacher, *Bonacina Sr. Beatrice* of

⁴ Correspondence, April 1845, 1846, February 1847 (totally 29 letters), in AGSdC.

⁵ Letters of 2 & 11 December 1846, of 9 January 1847.

Bergamo (27yrs), linen-room in charge, *Burghmann Sr. Alfonsa* of Trento (33yrs), nurse, *Del Vai Sr. Ester* of Trento (38yrs), cook⁶.

On 9 February the bishop hurries to write to Sr. Vincenza:

Your blessed sisters arrived last Friday, after being long awaited by me and everyone. To see them so calm gave me much hope for the reform of the Establishment. They dedicated themselves immediately to the work with prudence and enthusiasm. I do not know how to express my gratitude for having sent me good and courageous religious who in short time have to attract respect and admiration of the whole city; they will be very dear and precious object of my pastoral attentions. I have accepted with pleasure the desire of the Rev. Archpriest (Fr Bosio) to form here a Central House so that in the future the Institute will be able to extend itself in this city...

and declares himself 'your very zealous co-operator'. As the religious congregations depend on the ordinary of the place, on 22 February Fr Bosio communicates to the vicar general of Brescia the presence of the sisters of Lovere in the shelter home of Rovigo.

On 13 May, the bishop informs Fr Bosio that on the *Gazzette of Venezia* an extraordinary compliment of the activity and the ability of the sisters has been published, that they are keeping very well, work day and night with much alacrity of spirit... Moreover, he invites Fr Bosio to «tell it to their superior so that together with all the sisters they may thank the Lord for the graces he showers on them... Within three months they have transformed the work into a Shrine». The *Pia Casa* recorded 190 elderly guests and 40 girls.

Like the negotiation for the sending of the sisters, also the drafting of the *Agreement* had its long procedure. The text «**Agreement** between the Institute of the Daughters of Charity of Lovere and the Direction of the *Pia Casa di Ricovero e di Industria*», of September 1846, consists of 22 articles gathered under 4 chapters: *Duties of mother superior, duties of the sister supervising the infir-*

⁶ cf. Contract Project between the superior of the sisters of charity of Lovere and the Commission of Public Charity in Rovigo n. 833 (December 1846); Statistical data of the Institute, year 1847; A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle Suore di carità*, Venezia, 1933, I, 132-136.

mary and dormitories, duties of the sister supervising the linen-room and laundry, duties of the teacher and supervisor of the works. It was not signed by the contracting parties.

In the introduction, it is affirmed that

... it was deliberated in the meeting of 25 July 1846 by the Commission of public Welfare, with unanimity of votes to call from Lovere some Daughters of charity of S. Vincenzo de' Paoli to entrust to them the direction of educational and disciplinary procedures... that the respectable superior Sr. Vincenza Gerosa, with her letter of 14 July 1846, adhering to the requests of Mgr bishop, had accepted the pious duty.

In December 1847⁷ the **Contract Project** is drawn up – that too not signed – in which it is read:

The commission convinced of the best service so far given by these true daughters of Charity, it... authorises Mr. Carlo Novi, meritorious director of the «Pio Istituto», to draft a formal contract with the superior general of the sisters of Charity of Lovere that it is worthy to guarantee an appropriate maintenance for the work begun at the «Pia Casa» and to the sisters.

It is declared that the contract will last until the sisters will render their work, that the superior general, or who in her place, is obliged to maintain the number of five sisters, even with the freedom to change them. On its part the commission, represented by the director, commits itself to give for each sister a payment of one Austrian lire per day, in advance, for the maintenance, and deferred annual sum of £ 100, for the clothing, wine, wood, oil, what is needed for the lamps and laundry.

The first legal document with a value of **Contract** – handwritten as its former ones – is dated 1 May 1858 and signed by president F. Venerry, director G. Gori, secretary G. Grigologo and superior general Sr. Teresa Bosio. The introduction summarises what is written in the Conference of September 1846 and in the

⁷ Sr. Vincenza Gerosa dies on 29 June 1847, after having suffered much from oedema diffuse throughout her body.

Project of December 1847. It is followed by more precise tasks entrusted to the sisters under the dependence of the superior. In particular, the superior,

will choose among the patients those whom she will find capable of doing house service. She will supervise so that all the tasks specified in the Regulation are carried out, not only what regards economy, order, instruction, works, but also first of all, what conforms to morality. When she finds some failures, she will admonish those at fault and, if her charitable admonitions turn to be useless, she will share them with the director. When she finds needs, in the part of economy as in disciplinary section, she will apply measures that in her wisdom she will judge to be more opportune, after having agreed with the Director... Only the superior can give permission to any patient to go out of the house, after having known the reason. She will indicate the time in which he/she will be obliged to return, which will never be later than evening Angelus. She will take care that the doors are always locked and guarded by a door-keeper. Having in receipt an exact written note of all means, furniture, bed-linen and clothes etc., belonging to the Institute, she will safeguard them with great care.

The superior is responsible for the whole house. To her are entrusted the persons therefore, she must guarantee that the work is carried out and their behaviour is correct; in cases of failures she will intervene with her charitable admonitions. Therefore, she should be a person capable of governing, prudent and at the same time understanding; the Direction expresses respect and trust regarding her and calls for her collaboration as well.

From the sister supervising the infirmaries and the dormitories

all those serving in these places depend on her and therefore she has to supervise them in the fulfilment of all the tasks that will be assigned to them, reproofing them with much charity and patience in their defects, and animating them to be fair in charity, especially with the sick. She will have a singular care wherever there is cleaning and, avoiding every confusion, noise, she will see that there reigned silence, order, tranquillity and modesty. She will constantly follow the doctors in their ordinary and extraordinary visits and

she will see that whatever they have ordered is followed exactly; she will be present at the distribution of food and medicines; she will show concern in preparing the sick for the holy Sacraments and she will see that the chaplain is prepared for his duties.

The service of the sister and her collaborators have to be animated by great charity; their services respond to both physical needs as well as to moral and spiritual necessities.

The sister-supervisor of the linen-room and laundry

will see that each thing is prepared in time; in winter she will mend the summer clothes and in summer, those of winter. She will keep far from linen-room and laundry those persons who have nothing to do with them. She will see that in the servants there is order and quiet, avoiding any sort of noise. From the Pious Administration she will receive whatever is necessary for the laundry, that is soap, wood, ashes etc., and she will supervise that possible frugality be used in the consumption of such things. The servants, according to the measure of their service, receive a wage.

In this sector order and quiet are important – the term noise returns – and a certain frugality is requested in the use of the material.

The teacher supervising the works

has to establish the order and the hours of work and the quantity and quality of works, based on the age of the little girls sheltered, so that they are taught in all the ordinary works of women suited to their condition. The girls have to work for the benefit of the «Pia Casa».

The insistence on *order* in all the ambits is surely an essential condition to be able to manage a wide and a very populated structure.

The sister who directs the kitchen

will receive all the utensils necessary besides the food items; she is helped by those sheltered in the time of meals. The helpers offer themselves to keep ready the wood for the stoves, to keep clean the boilers and remove them from fire, to wash the soup plates and other related vessels, to distribute water and to bring food to the refectories and to the infirmaries.

Here the sister *directs* the works with her competence and foresight.

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All the sisters are called *supervisors* in various work ambits. They are helped by the servants chosen from among inmates from whom they have to ask the proper services, *admonishing them with charity and patience* if necessary. The relationships, therefore, have to be cordial and respectful with all.

The *contract* is updated only later (18.9.1901), signed by the president Felice Dall'Ara and the superior general Sr. M. Angela Ghezzi. She confirms essentially the former one specifying that the sisters, including the superior, are eight. Moreover the ***Internal Rule*** that defines the further general dispositions and the duties of the superior and the sisters are published⁸: one responsible for the pantry, one for the kitchen, two for the infirmaries of men and women of the aged home, three for the linen-rooms of different sections: aged home, orphan boys and orphaned spinsters.

It is interesting to know the *titles and the requirements for the admission* of poor of both sexes in the shelter home: authentication of having the residence in Rovigo Municipality, lack of means, of subsistence and of relatives obliged legally to administer them, invalidity at work or chronic illness (cf. chap. I, art. 1). The maintenance of the poor is highlighted. At the same time, persons, the so-called tenants, with payment of certain fee or daily pension are also admitted and they have the same duties and rights of those sheltered freely. However their admission cannot impede or delay that of the poor admitted freely (cf. 6-10).

Chapter II describes the *treatment of the patients*: men and women are in different wards without any possibility of communication among them; the shelter home generally is for lifetime,

⁸ cf. Title III, *Servizio direttivo ed economico interno* pp. 34-41 of the *Regolamento Interno dei Pii Luoghi Riuniti - Casa di Ricovero, Sindacato poveri Lazzeretto, orfani e zitelle*, approved by the joint provincial administration with the resolution 2 May 1901, N 320.2280, Rovigo, in AGSdC.

but if the economic situation of the poor or his family improves, or if the health regained permits him a profitable work, he has to be dismissed. After the prescribed hygiene care, all wear uniform; those who are able have to offer themselves for some service in the infirmaries, laundry or in the kitchen and they receive a small weekly recompense in cash according to their service (11-23).

Then there are warnings regarding *the outings and the visits*: a prior request is made on Saturday to the superior and the *outing* is granted on Sunday, in the morning and afternoon; extraordinary permissions are given by the Administration for a maximum duration of six hours. Taking away from or bringing into the Establishment bread, wine, drinks, liquors and any other thing is forbidden; the patient who outside of the shelter home gives into begging or comes back drunk, will be denied the permission to go out. *Visits* are permitted on Sunday from 1.00 p.m. to 4 p.m. and cannot be more than an hour, in the fixed halls, escorted and supervised. Card games or any other is not banned, as long as they are not cause of fights, while smoking in the dormitories and especially in the infirmary is prohibited.

The patients are required to comply with the internal *discipline* regarding the time of rising, meals, work, retirement to the rooms, personal cleaning etc. (cf. chap. III, 24-42). In case of transgression, recourse to *punishments* is done: reprimand, deprivation of permission to outing, dismissal from the Institute. To the patient who, not tolerating the internal discipline, asks to get out of the Shelter home definitively, the administration grants dismissal, after making him known that, begging being prohibited by penal laws and if one begs he will expose himself to arrest and criminal procedure. Moreover, he will hardly be accepted again in the shelter home, if, in case, regretting, he should ask to be admitted again (cf. chap. IV, 43-48).

All the laws are clear and defined, however an attitude of helping, comprehension and respect to the person underlies the whole Regulation.

The *number* of the elderly people generally exceeds 100, while the sisters are five or seven; their presence increases up to 17 when orphan boys and 'spinsters' are admitted in the shelter home.

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The health service is entrusted to a doctor and two sisters with the help of nurses (from among those sheltered); the chaplain is responsible for the religious service. He resides in the shelter home both during the day and during the night⁹.

The Table containing the 'meal plan' of the patients attached to the internal Regulation merits our attention.

	from Monday to Sunday			
<i>breakfast</i>	black coffee	2/5 litres		
	white sugar	8 grams		
	bread	92 grams		
<i>lunch</i>	soup	8/10 litres		
	plain rice	140 grams	3 broths per day	
	noodles	80 grams	to satisfy	
	rise with vegetables and beans	100 grams	the taste of all	
	or pasta with vegetables	85 grams		
	beaf soup	100 grams		
	beans, potatoes... with	250 grams		
	Lard (pig fat)	5 grams		
	salt	9 grams		
	pepper	what's necessary		
	vegetable garden products	what's necessary	onions, parsley, celery	
		boiled or stewed with side dish		
		boneless beef, cooked	55 grams	
		side dish: seasoned vegetable	150 grams	beans, peas, salad etc.
	watered down wine	1/2 litre		
<i>dinner</i>	bread	185 grams		
	soup	4/10 litres		
	beaf soup	400 grams		
	bread	92 grams		

⁹ The successive agreements, more concise, are of 1944, 1945, 1946, signed by mother A. Reali; that of 1975 is signed by the provincial superior Sr. Giulia Bergamo.

Friday: for lunch a plate of *fried fish* (90 grams) *with a side dish* substituting meat and in alternative to bread there is *polenta* (330 grams); in the evening *vegetable soup*¹⁰.

The sisters were always ready and available in carrying out their duty; very soon the bishop had declared (13 May 1847) that «Sr. Celeste is born to be a superior, Sr. Alfonsa is loved and blessed among all, Sr. Colomba has transformed the girls into little angels», in a Work that «represents all the human misery: helpless, elderly people, chronically ill, the anguished, orphans and destitute of every kind»¹¹.

Cholera of 1848-1849 undermined their energy reducing the enthusiasm of service, but not the spirit of charity. On 28 September 1849 the bishop writes to Fr Bosio: «They are times of mourning, anxiety, adversities, but we need to trust in the Lord... In the shelter home, it is fine thanks to the governance of Sr. Celeste»; on 6 May 1852 the vice-vicar general, can. L. Ramello, confirms to mother that the sisters work «with solicitude and untiring work in the individual mansions with useful and efficacious charity, of which they bear the name». The second wave of the epidemic of 1854-1855 did not spare even the sisters who were admitted in the hospital; the director B. D. Pignolo, on 26 July 1855, communicating to the vicar Sr. Serafina Rosa the death of Sr. Rachele, writes: «We were hoping to be able to save her; but she is the last of the precious victims» and greeting her he expresses his esteem and gratitude. On 18 August¹² the superior Sr. Celeste, who was also sick, communicates to him that Sr. Maddalena is better; the other sisters are regaining health and are desiring to return to the community, even if in the hospital, the director is taking care of them with love¹³. The unjustified silence of correspondence covers the years 1858-1892.

¹⁰ Regolamento Interno, Attachment A.

¹¹ A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle Suore di carità*, Venezia, 1933, I, 134.

¹² cf. C. BERRA, *Manoscritti, copia di documenti, carteggi e memorie delle Suore di Carità*, IV, 760, in AGSdC.

¹³ From 1858 to 1868, and therefore the third wave of cholera (1865-1867), there is no documentation.

On 3 June 1893 the mayor Amos Bernini asks mother C. Lachmann to substitute the superior of the shelter home, which is about to be united to the Orphans' and Spinster's Institute, with a sister 'ideal and capable of innovation and improvement'. On 6 June, Mother replies that she will do everything possible to improve the functioning of the *Pii Luoghi*, but regarding the superior, he must be patient because «there is need to move more persons». On 9 November 1894 the new mother A. Ghezzi writes to the superior Sr. Maddalena that «she is concerned about the spiritual and moral good of the shelter home and she presents its case to the Lord». On 12 March 1895 the bishop Mgr Antonio da Caerano confirms to the Mother the intention of the mayor to bring also the Institute for Spinsters and Orphans into the spaces of the shelter home and to place them all under the direction of the sisters of charity.

On 17 May 1897 the president Achille Bombardi Lavezzo writes to Mother that, while recognising the merits of the superior Sr. Maddalena Medici, given her age he considers appropriate that she be substituted, also due to the increase in the responsibilities of direction and supervision of the Institute. On 30 May 1897 the President underlines again to the superior general that with the bringing together of the orphans and the spinsters into the shelter home it becomes necessary to have a new superior, and that «the work needs a superior who is intelligent, energetic, active and practical in order to obtain useful improvements for a regular and praiseworthy administration».

The change of superior, requested many times, happens only after 4 years. We are not told however the reason. It is sure that Sr. Clementina Azzini showed all the qualities needed by persons in-charge of the Work.

She governed the *Pii Luoghi Riuniti* from 1897 to 1910¹⁴ and «gave her heart and her time to the abandoned elderly, the poor, and the sick. And with an enlightened prudence, with Christian fortitude, with a fervent prayer, in sad days she saved the *Pii Istituti*

¹⁴ From 1910 to 1919 she was the provincial superior of Venice.

of Rovigo from the attacks of those who wanted to secularise it»¹⁵. She was firm and exact in front of the attempts of the Administrative Council that continued saying ‘the sisters are good only for the elderly, but not with the girls because they become narrow minded and clerical’¹⁶. This affirmation, in a moment of high tension that was resolved with the change of Administration, could sound offensive, while it became a public recognition to the sisters for their total dedication to the poor and the marginalised, welcomed and cared for in the shelter home.

Having lost its original physiognomy, the ‘pio luogo del lazaretto’, becomes the old age home with an attached hostel for men and women. In 1958 the name «Luoghi Pii Riuniti» is substituted with «Istituti Riuniti di Assistenza Sociale» (IRAS).

In 1965 the community passes from the religious province of Venezia to the religious province of Rimini until 1981.

The Work, complex in its articulation and renewed in its structure, in September 1975 is officially «Casa Albergo di Rovigo», but it could have the efficacious presence of the sisters until **11 August 1992**. In spite of the comforts it offers, the home however needs persons rich in humanity, especially when loneliness of old age is marked also with abandonment of the family members, and the sister is always available to offer help and support to the elderly person who needs human solidarity, affection and comprehension.

¹⁵ cf. Necrology, VI, 171-175, in AGSdC.

¹⁶ There was media campaign against or in support of the sisters, particularly of the superior that she wanted to go away, but was encouraged to withstand by the same superior general. Cf. *La Settimana*, weekly of Rovigo, 1907-1910.