



and you too **do** likewise

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

Beggars' hospices

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

HOSPITAL-SHELTER HOME, AVIO (TN) (1882-1974)

The Shelter home of Avio¹ was opened in 1837, near the ex-convent of the Ursulines, by the Congregation of charity present in the town, thanks also to the bequest of the aristocrat Ubaldo Campagnola. In 1882, the parish priest Fr Alessandro Zanotelli was nominated president of the Congregation of charity. Having seen that the work, directed by the lay personnel, was neglected, almost abandoned and was disturbed by disorders, he asked for sisters to mother Teresa Bosio «to lift up what had lapsed and to start what would be beneficial for the common good», as it is written in the *Storia dell'Istituto* of Sr. A. Prevedello².

On 11 January 1882 the superior of the novitiate of Trent, Sr. Giuseppina Pedruzzi, sent to the bishop of Trent «Very reverend highness»³ (Giovanni Giacomo della Bona) the *Conventions* stipu-

¹ Avio, with about 5000 inhabitants, is in Vallagarina (Trento), on the left of river Adige. It is home to a castle of Sabbionara, which is among the very famous and ancient fortified monuments, stronghold of the noble family Castelbarco.

² A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle Suore di carità*, Venezia, 1933, I, 482-484.

³ The bishops of Trent and Bressanone were the authentic princes of Sacred Roman Empire, subjected to the authority of the emperor from 1027 up to the Restoration in 1815 (ecclesiastic principality). The formal titles of *Prince* and *His highness* have remained for the bishop of Trent, and were definitively abolished in 1953 by the wish of pope Pius XII.

lated between the delegation of the hospital of Avio and the superior general of the sisters of charity, mother Teresa Bosio, so that he might acknowledge them and sign them.

On 2 February 1882, the community was erected on the arrival of four sisters: Sr. Teresa Robatscher (33 yrs), Sr. Giuseppina Agostini (21 yrs), Sr. Dorotea Marini (38 yrs), Sr. Liduina Spanuello (39 yrs). Although a secularist opposition did not want them⁴, the parish priest and the mayor went to meet them at Ala and when they arrived at Avio «...the church square was crowded. The congregation of Charity, the girls of the doctrine, the children, the entire simple and good people, strengthened by deep faith, were there to welcome the sisters like angels of God. It was by a solemn ceremony that the newly arrived were presented to the people. Afterwards, almost led triumphantly they reached the Hospital»⁵.

However, from the beginning, the sisters faced privations and distress and met with various difficulties. Few months after their arrival there was the Polesine flood: on 15 September the river Adige broke the banks and struck the provinces of Rovigo and Verona; on 17 September the over flow of the right side of the river, destroyed almost 35 municipalities; on 27th king Umberto I arrived from Rome to get an idea of the catastrophe⁶. Even the village of Avio was in danger and the sisters availed themselves with generosity and sacrificial spirit to rescue the elderly.

Another difficulty was the complexity of the work: the shelter home was part of the hospital and in the same institution, there were also nursery school, orphanage, industrial school and the

⁴ cf. letter dated 25.8.1881 sent to the parish priest by Mr. Romano Chilovi, who writes that some days back one belonging to the Municipality had said to him that «those of Avio» certainly did not want the sisters; he, however, adds that «the works of the Lord are contradicted», Correspondence, in AGSdC, 644/A.

⁵ A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle Suore di carità*, Venezia, 1933, I, 484.

⁶ The following year the collections were very scarce and hunger struck heavily the rural classes; due to the drought 63,000 persons of the province emigrate into South America. Cf. The great alluvion of Polesine, 1882; RUBIS ZEMELLA, *Polesine 'Mesopotamia' tra Po e Adige. La grande alluvione del 1882*.

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parish activity. The superior Sr. Teresa Robatscher knew how to manage the situation with wisdom and equilibrium until 1896 when the various services were divided and two independent communities were formed⁷. The Hospital-Shelter home remained in the old building, that needed interventions, but the administration was not able to meet the expenses, while the nursery school, with orphanage, the industrial school and the parish activity annexed to it, was moved to a new building and was entrusted to the superior Sr. Giuseppina Agostini.

From the community dairy, we read that the sisters had to face privations and struggles for a long time; only in the late '900 the roof was repaired, the waiting room of the clinic was reconstructed, the pavements that were still in wood were renovated, the wood stove was replaced with that of kerosene. In 1938, the superior Sr. Carolina Oprandi, through the letter dated 2 January, asks the provincial superior, Pogliaghi Sr. M. Luigia, for woollen garments for the *sorella mandataria* Catina Cincelli who was complaining of ailments due to cold; finally, in 1972, the entire house was heated up – not only some rooms where the sisters gathered the old people during the winter season – and was provided with bathrooms and toilets in the wards, with great usefulness and benefit for all. The management of the work, however, remained always modest, 'fine', and depended on the Congregation of charity; the sisters reached a maximum number of five, offering their service in assisting the patients, in the linen-room, as a nurse and cook, while the presence of the elderly, particularly women was above 40.

During the World War I the situation was critical for our communities situated at the border of Trentino. Among these were the two of Avio. The superior Sr. Gaetana Pizzini on 24 May 1915 wrote

⁷ A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle Suore di carità*, Venezia, 1933, I, 484.

to the superior general:

A state of siege has been declared and all communication is closed with the cities of Trent and Verona, but I assure you that here for the moment there is no danger. Therefore do not worry about us; we are in the hands of God and with heart filled with trust in Him. The Austrian police have gone away; the Italian police have not yet come, therefore no help nor protection in case of need. Nevertheless, I repeat, we are serene, totally abandoned into the hands of the Lord and confident of his fatherly help and protection. Pray for us⁸.

In May 1916 the Hospital-Shelter home of Avio is transformed into concentration camp for the refugees of Brentonico, of Comè and Prada, hence, sick, powerless and children occupy the corridors and every angle of the house, and the sisters redouble their energy to comfort and help all.

It is worth reporting some moving events, narrated in the *Storia dell'Istituto*⁹.

One morning, while the sisters were gathered in the chapel and were in meditation, a woman arrives with a baby girl just born, snatched from her mother who, out of mind, wanted to strangle her. For 40 days the sisters took care of the new born, who was not abandoned alone.

On 22 July a large-caliber cannonball breaks through roofs, destroys rooms, and breaks into pieces the windowpanes leaving only the tabernacle and the Maria Bambina.

A refugee, who was cutting the wood, is made into pieces; an eighty-year old man is thrown out of bed; a little girl is found buried in her cradle and lacerated by windowpanes.

A sister (Sr. Luigia Zoller), who was attending to her duties in kitchen, is thrown to ground while she is distributing breakfast and the strong pressure of air breaks her crucifix, later found in the washbasin among the debris of plates and windowpanes. She remains unharmed.

⁸ A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle Suore di carità*, Venezia, 1936, III, 132.

⁹ *ib.* III, 260-261.

In September 1916, not being able to bear the distress and face the dangers of raids, the Royal Command orders the departure of refugees and sick people, who are accompanied to the hospitals of Cuggiono and Rho by the military doctor and the sisters.

The Municipality of Avio is officially annexed to the Kingdom of Italy (*Regno d'Italia*) in 1919.

Another painful experience, that involve also the mayor of the place and the major superiors of the Institute, is the event of the 'key of the Hospital – Shelter home'. In 1921 the mayor writes to the provincial of Trent (Sr. Angiolina Reali) asking that Dr. Giuseppe Erspamer might keep and use the key of the hospital – which was being taken away from him, for unknown reasons, but certainly serious – to enter into his clinic in case of need. The request is passed onto the discernment of the superior general (Sr. Vittoria Starmusch), who admits that the superior did a mistake in giving it to him and now taking it back from him can amount to an insult, however she disapproves the fact and decides that the key must be given back. This case even places the mayor in dilemma: dismiss the doctor or remove the sisters from the Shelter home. Mother resolves the controversy accepting to leave the key of the *Pio Luogo* (the pious institution) to the doctor, but asking that a new one may be provided for the apartment of the sisters. The Municipality accepts this solution that seems positive for both parties¹⁰.

A question arises also regarding the 'fee' of the doctor, who has taken care of Sr. Pierina Agostini, affected by Grave's disease (autoimmune thyroiditis). The disagreement prolongs from May 1938 to December 1942¹¹. The superior Sr. Carolina Oprandi asks the provincial superior what remuneration to be given to the doctor – whose name is not indicated – for his services to the sister. With passing of time a certain discontent arises on the part of the doctor and therefore the provincial superior very correctly but with firmness, makes known to him and points out some parti-

¹⁰ cf. Letters of November and December 1921, Correspondence, in AGSdC, 644/A.

¹¹ cf. Correspondence, in AGSdC, 644/A.

culars: he himself had agreed to use the intravenous injection for Sr. Pierina with the medicine of 'health insurance' of the hospital, where the sister served for many years; again he himself had offered spontaneously to accompany her in the car up to Ala for the diathermy, having had to go there for personal commitments; besides he himself had refused remuneration that the superior had offered him as a sign of gratitude. However, if now he retained it as his right to receive an adequate recompense, he might turn to the municipal administration, on whom the sisters depended.

We do not know the solution of the controversy that, certainly, has strained once again the relationships of the community with the doctor and the administration.

The sisters, however, never changed their respectful attitude towards the authorities of the Work and above all, have always remained available and attentive towards the patients, animated by the charism of charity and guided by the *Directory*¹² that they knew from 1898 because it was an instrument of formation read and commented during the community meetings:

Considering that there are poor incapable to work and who have passed a life marked by fatigues, but there are also others reduced to a state of being needy by the public charity as a result of vices and bad habits that they bring with them into the Shelter homes, the sister has to keep guard so that always and in every place of the institution, due separation of the two sexes be maintained and so that offense to God especially in the talks might be avoided. Finding oneself without work or with a limited work, without preoccupations for their food and boarding, they spend time chatting. Let the sister see that with her dignified and serious behaviour, blended with goodness to have impact on them to keep them focused on their duty and to gain their respect and in this way to help their souls (1). Work being one of the means of morality and discipline, the sisters, in what con-

¹² cf *Direttorio per i ministeri esterni delle suore della carità della ven. Capitanio*, Trent 1898, cap. IX «Ricoveri di mendicITÀ», pp. 63-65; cf. also *Direttorio delle suore di carità della beata B. Capitanio*, Milan, 1928, 292-294.

cerns their competence, provide for the patients works according to their capacity and suitable to their strength (2). Living together with the patients calls for exercising charity, patience and an uncommon prudence. It demands charity for the comfort of poor patients who, reduced without family and freedom, obliged to a methodical and monotonous life, feel the need to find in the services and, the attention of the sisters towards them, a compensation for their privations. It demands patience in helping them and serving them in their physical needs, in tolerating the defects of their character and roughness, and where possible, complying with their desires and preferences. Finally, it demands, great prudence, because through the exercise of her charity they might not draw motive to judge her partial, and not to give occasion for gossips that are much easier in such environments, to use all firmness needed to maintain order, without exceeding in strictness and with ways that align the hearts of those whom the sister should strive to lead to Jesus Christ. Where it is possible, and at least to the women, may they give a religious instruction, and may enable all, men and women, to carry out daily religious duties in common (3).

The text flows with attention for the poor, reading and answering to their concrete needs, prudence but always with all charity, patience, respect, impartiality in the relationships, *to instill in them esteem and thus be of benefit to their souls*, as how Bartolomea had already proposed to herself regarding youth: «I will especially care for those girls who are most dissipated and most far from you. Such girls I will tirelessly pursue and try by all means *to gain their confidence and then win them over to you*»¹³.

The goal to be pursued in the mission is sublime: directing the person towards truth, salvation, and peace with oneself and with others. These are attitudes and objectives requested in every apostolic service even today, even if the social context is much changed.

The sisters of the Shelter home of Avio had truly at heart their poor, whom they loved, respected and comforted, as shown

¹³ Bartolomea, *Scritti spirituali*, III, 697.

by some awards, conferred on them in various circumstances, and that they are a true life witness and an example for us.

On 10 March 1920 the Congregation of charity writes to the superior *Sr. Gaetana Pizzini*, who concludes her long term of governance (1907-1920).

The Congregation's Council, while it learns with much displeasure of your departure from this Hospital-Shelter home as per higher order, it feels obliged to express to you its very lively gratitude for what you had known to do for the good of the Hospital-Shelter home in around three five-year periods. Your charity, prudence, activity, and promptness that you used for the moral and material good of such charitable institution has made you dear and revered by all, so much so all feel the pain of your departure. The name of Sr. Gaetana Pizzini will remain indelible among the walls of this Hospital-Shelter home. It loses a mother to whom all in the time of pain or doubt turned, to find in her a word of comfort and consolation.

The Management as well as the Congregation Counsel feel obliged to remember Sr. Gaetana among the benefactors of the Congregation, because she is fully worthy of such a title for an outstanding work of charity that she carried out for many years during which she was in charge of the hospital management. This is worthy to the praise and honour of the respected sisters of Venerable Capitanio.

The text is signed by the president, vice president and the manager.

On 30 December 1969 the *Ente Comunale Assistenza* (ECA, the Municipality Assistance Entity) of Avio communicates to the superior of the Shelter home *Sr. Pierina Agostini*:

The Committee ECA has decided to grant as Christmas gift 20,000 lire to the respected sisters who with love and zeal spend themselves day and night for the good functioning of the Shelter home and the patients. The award is not much, but it is given only as a token of a simple gratitude. The President Vito Bongiovanni.

In April 1971 in the community diary we read:

The departure of Sr. Pierina pains us as she leaves the house

where she has lived for many years (1938-1971). She has left in all a deep regret for her talents as a true nurse; the Lord will reward the good done.

The necrology in her memory¹⁴ speaks of her in this way:

She had spent almost her entire religious life at the Hospital-Shelter home, where she worked as a nurse and assistant to the medical officer. Her love for medicine and surgery in general was such that she did not stop with giving the surgeon scissors, scalpel (surgical instrument) and sterile dressing, but she observed and imitated him. In the absence of the doctor, at times she took his place with ease and calmness, and the entire population of Avio gratefully and trustfully welcomed her services... Avio had become her chosen land.

On 7 February 1974 the president, Mr. Caden Mariano, writes:

The Management of Shelter home of Avio intends to give expression to the sentiments of gratitude and profound admiration of the entire population of Avio on the occasion of the burial of Sr. Battistina (Chiocchetti) and Sr. Serafina (Frizzera). These two religious have given themselves wholeheartedly in the assistance of the elderly people of our zone for many years with exemplary generosity and sacrifices. Our heartfelt thanks goes in a special way to Sr. Serafina who spent 17 years of her life (1956-1973) in this service. We remember her simplicity, her virtue of humility and sacrifice of which many give witness.

As a sign of these our sentiments the Management unanimously decides to celebrate a thanksgiving holy Mass for the intention of dear sisters Battistina and Serafina and offers for the work of charity in their honour 40,000 lire to the Church of Avio in need of restoration works. May this be the occasion to express our friendship and also to ask pardon for those times when we had not reached out to give support in everything which was necessary in certain moments¹⁵.

¹⁴ In memoria - Telve, 14.12.1975, in AGSdC, 590/A.

¹⁵ Correspondence, in AGSdC, 644/A.

After few months, unfortunately, on 29 August 1974 the provincial superior Sr. Giovanna Brambilla, after having had a meeting with the president of the Shelter home on 15 June, writes to him confirming the decision to withdraw the sisters because they are not able to carry out the activity (only two are below 60 years, but the average age at that time was very low), and it was not possible for her to send a help.

The community is suppressed on **31 October 1974**. The work continued, ensured by the lay personnel. In 1979 the Hospital-Shelter home is partially renovated with the contribution of the autonomous province of Trent, but over the years becomes inadequate, therefore is demolished and in the same place «Rest Home for the elderly» is inaugurated in December 1997. In 2006 from IPAB (*Istituto Pubblico di Assistenza e Beneficenza* - Institute of Public Assistance and charity) it becomes APSP (*Azienda Pubblica di Servizi alla Persona* - Public entity of services to the Person). It has totally 69 beds divided into three nuclei, with ample individual and common spaces. It offers hospitality and assistance to the elderly both self-sufficient and not, who, due to necessity or by choice, intended to live in a protected community, even temporarily¹⁶.

Almost all the shelter home-hospices where our sisters rendered their work (The *registro opere* the register of works in the archive of the Institute report more than 50 works, in small and big centres) have undergone a similar evolution. Not every sister had a professional certificate, especially in the beginnings, but everyone and always had the degree of love that sees and intervenes to help the needy brethren with the 'wisdom' of the heart.

The poor evangelise us: in contact and in the familiarity with the little ones of the Gospel we learn to discover the presence of Jesus, who reveals himself to us at the same time in which we try to manifest his goodness¹⁷.

¹⁶ cf. www.Apspavio.it

¹⁷ *Acts XXII general chapter, 7.*