



and you too **do** likewise

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

Assistance to psychiatric patients

*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching... proclaiming...
and curing every disease and every sickness among the people (Mt 4:23)*

In the Gospel, we read that Jesus healed *every sickness*; we wonder even those mental sicknesses? Undoubtedly, in the time of Jesus there were mentally sick patients not defined with modern scientific terms (alienated, schizophrenic, paranoid, psychopathic, and mad), but with more general names: 'epileptic', 'demoniac', and with reference to the action of the demon (still as in Middle Ages) and due to wrongs done by them or by their parents. There are numerous gospel passages where Jesus draws near and heals the mentally sick, kept at margins of society because they are dangerous.

The episode of the *Gerasene demoniac* (Mk 5:1-20) is an example:

He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones.

He is an estranged and violent person, without any human relationship, not sociable and victim of a deep schizophrenia. After the meeting with Jesus, the people of Gerasene see him *sitting there, clothed and in his right mind*, that is he has reacquired his inner balance and his human dignity.

A similar pathology is revealed by the *epileptic* (Mk 9:17-27) who is presented by his father to Jesus *as one who has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid;... when the spirit saw Jesus, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth...from childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him.* Jesus orders the deaf and dumb spirit to come out of the boy and not to enter him anymore, therefore, *took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.* Jesus touches our fragile creatureliness, our physical, mental and even spiritual illness, with his salvific power and re-instates us in the society.

Even to these, who are the poorest among the poor, because deprived of human dignity, incapable of interpersonal relationships and a filial dialogue with God, our sisters, from 1851 to 1996, have offered their care and motherly attention through concrete gestures of gratuitous charity, in the so called *mental institutions*, later named *psychiatric hospitals*, old structures where often the patients were ill-treated or forced to undergo inhuman therapies, left in a condition of poverty and absolute loneliness. After all, even of Jesus people said: *He has gone out of his mind*, is mad, fanatic...

NEUROPSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL, BERGAMO 1853-1986 (1992)

It is true that Bartolomea among «the poor sick» (CF 8) does not explicitly refer to the mentally sick, however an Institute, *totally founded on charity* and attentive to the poor and needy, could not but dedicate itself «to the care of those who have lost the best of goods in the natural order, the reason [...]. Their misery has reached the extreme. Not only were they far away from the family, but were also excluded from the human group... May they find at least in the person and the ways of the sister and those who help her in assisting them, the charity that comforts», so we read in the *Direttorio*, 1898¹.

¹ *Direttorio per i ministeri esterni delle suore di carità della ven. Capitania*, Trento, 1898, 59-63, in AGSdC.

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

On **9 May 1853** the *vicaria* Sr. Serafina Rosa, on the proposal of the Administration of the Ospedale Maggiore, Bergamo, with the mediation of the parish priest Fr Guglielmo Filippini² and with the approval of the bishop's curia, opens the community for the assistance of the mental patients with the residence at **Astino** (BG), ex-monastery of the Congregation of the Benedictine Monks of Vallombrosa³. The house of Lovere, on which the community depended, was a bit fearful because of the three young sisters⁴, sent to this new apostolic activity. However, in Berra's *manoscritti* we read that on 20 November the main medical inspector, Dr. L. Brunon, writes to the superior of Bergamo praising the work of the sisters for their wisdom, goodness and patience. And on 13 September the inspector makes known to the superior of Bergamo - «S. Bernardino» that he is very happy about the sisters assigned to the work and requests her not to change them except for extraordinary circumstances.

However, in the same *manoscritti* we also read, «The service of the sisters was very much appreciated in the beginning, but later every praise changed into criticism, disapproval and in open contradiction. A great patience was necessary not only for the sisters responsible for the establishment, but also for the superiors of the Institute, who were forced to leave them in spite of the offensive complaints made regarding them»⁵. Once the trial was overcome,

² cf. *Manoscritti* ing. Berra, III, 336ff. *Scritti* of 24 February, 23 July, 18 August 1853.

³ cf. Note of Giulia Todeschini in «Ospedale neuropsichiatrico di Bergamo»: Ospizio della Maddalena (1814-1832), Manicomio di Astino (1833-1891).

⁴ Mangili Sr. Girolama (age 34) superior and nurse, Rossi Sr. Luigia (age 28) linen-room in-charge, Dentella Sr. Teodora (age 24) cook, cf. *Stato Effettivo* 1853, in AGSdC.

⁵ Berra, *Cronaca*, I, 67-68.

on **19 May 1864** other members were added to the community for assistance to the patients (around 200) in the branch opened at **Longuelo**, another area of the Bergamo Municipality in the periphery of the city, where the sisters were assigned the supervision and direction of the linen room, laundry and the wards, while the kitchen was entrusted to a cook.

Up to **1892**, year of the unification of the two houses (Astino and Longuelo) in the new mental hospital of **Daste** (September/October) in Bergamo in via Borgo Palazzo, there are no documents. The procedures for transfers were not simple because the president of the Provincial Deputation of Bergamo, Dr. Giuseppe Puccinelli, asked for a period of six months of probation, before defining in the Regulation the number and the tasks to be entrusted to the sisters⁶. In a meeting of 'Magnati'⁷ it is defined that the sisters be six and they live where the director decides, that the superior must be Sr. Orsola Callierotti, already superior at Longuelo from 1877 to 1892, and not Sr. Cornelia Algisi, the former superior of Astino from 1886 to 1892, and for such nomination the bishop of Bergamo, Mgr Gaetano Camillo Guindani is involved. On 21 October mother Clementina Lachmann writes to the bishop the reasons for which she does not consider Sr. Orsola suitable for the new task and underlines the importance that an Institute reserves the right to assign the service to its sisters, without having external influence. Accordingly, on 8 November, she communicates to the president of the Provincial Deputation the appointment of Sr. Celeste Co-deleoncini as the superior, who will replace both the superior of Astino and Longuelo. She also specified:

I believe that I have to retain the right, always recognised by the Hospital Council of Bergamo and by the Administration who benefit from our small work of nominating a sister of our complete confidence and capable of bearing the weight of a

⁶ cf. Letter 1 September 1892, Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 697/C.

⁷ cf. Minutes without date or signature.

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

significant responsibility as a representative of the Institute... I am apprehensive of not being able to adhere to the desire of the Honourable Commission and respected Director, deserving every respect, but regarding this important point I must be firm without compromising.

She then asks that the relationships of the sisters with the higher authority, their duties and the rules of behaviour, be defined and that the means and the freedom necessary to the community of the Congregation be preserved⁸.

A handwritten *Formulation of contract*, without date, articulated into 35 points containing the *regulating norms* to which the sisters have to adhere, and a *Memorandum*, also without date but less detailed, was sent to the bishop on 17 February 1893. After that, Mother confirms to the lawyer Luigi Salvi the validity of the Norms that regulate the relationships and the services of the sisters.

In these, we can read that the Provincial delegation entrusts to the Institute of the sisters of charity the laundry and linen room of the Mental hospital; the services are assumed for an year, with the possibility of renewal (no. 1); the number of the sisters will be determined by the superior (2); the sisters in the respective wards are the head of the service (5); the superior is responsible for the supervision and the formation of the nurses and the subordinates (6); the sisters depend on the board of medical Direction for assistance, care and hygiene of the mental patients (8); the superior, when the duties permit, and in the more opportune hours, can provide for the sisters some hours of rest out of the Mental hospital, after making necessary communications to those in-charge (12); the

⁸ cf. Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 697/C.

sisters are given the faculty to make the serene patients recite brief prayers in the morning and in the evening (15); the superior and the sisters can receive visits of relatives and friends, but in their apartment, without bringing them in contact with the patients (16).

The first typed *contract*, duly signed by the lawyer Volpi Luigi, the superior general Sr. Maria Vittoria Starmusch and authenticated by the province of Bergamo, is dated 17 August 1920⁹. It is in part similar to those agreed upon between the two parts in other apostolic works; specifically it explains that the sisters, in the respective wards and offices, are the Head Supervisors of the service, the nurses and the subordinates help them under their ‘guidance’ (II); they will supervise with love and diligent care so that the patients do not harm themselves or others; for their good treatment, for the exact implementation of the medical prescriptions. They will maintain order and will work to keep calm the patients (IV). They will supervise the wards also during night to ascertain that order reigns everywhere and due assistance is not lacking (V). The honourable Provincial Deputation obliges to grant to the sisters an apartment separated from that of the patients (X) and will pay each sister an allowance of 5,00 lire per day as a compensation for the boarding expenses and the monthly payable clothing items (XI).

Note IV: *The sisters will supervise with love and diligent care so that the patients do not harm themselves or others; for a good treatment of themselves, for the exact implementation of the medical prescriptions*, is of particular importance, if we think that in the mid 19th century in the psychiatric hospital, even Italian, the life conditions were worse than those of a prison.

The patients often were subjects who could give trouble or scandal (paralytics, pellagra, drunkards, homosexuals, political adversaries) and who, closed in the psychiatric wards, stopped being a problem to society and for the family; the first measure to be taken, therefore, was isolation, as a result the hospital is forced to be in a place far away from the city, even on the islands, as San Servolo and San Clemente in Venice. Their number from 62,000

⁹ cf. Convenzioni, in AGSdC, 697/D.

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

in 1926 rises to 95,000 in 1941. The mental hospital did not help the persons, it was only an instrument of social remedy.

The patients lost their identity; they were considered numbers, forced to live in miserable conditions, with evident malnutrition, lack of hygiene and the consequent worsening of their social, interpersonal and behavioural abilities, due to the environment and not only due to their mental disturbance.

The wards were named after the behaviour of the patients: after a period of 'observation' for 15 days or a month, they were divided into 'calm, semi-agitated, agitated'; the nurse kept the patient but who, not being treated, soon became bedridden and became sick all the more. Among the pages of the community diary of 1966 an article of Francesco Barbieri is inserted and it said:

All the neuropsychiatric hospitals were forgotten. Recently qualified authorities have compared them to medieval prisons. They had to be places of care but they ended up becoming concentration camps in exile beyond every human understanding. Yet many of the patients have ways of feeling human and suffer even for their condition. They understand and know that they are not understood. They ask for understanding and, at the maximum, receive pity¹⁰.

In 1970, the service undergoes a development and the patients are given a good treatment at the level of boarding and dressing and a day out from the ward; this naturally calls for further help to the sisters, because the freedom given might not be a cause of moral disorder. Those responsible for the Work appreciate their service, and the charity lived in silence and self-forgetfulness had a positive influence on these patients.

¹⁰ *La Domenica del Giornale di Bergamo*, 9 January 1966.

In 1978 the law 180 or «legge Basaglia» (Italian Mental Health Act)¹¹ was emanated that introduces the revision and successively the closing of the psychiatric hospitals in Italy, instituting public services of mental hygiene with the obligation of health treatment, a true cultural and medical revolution. It said:

Foolishness is a human condition. In us, the folly exists and is present as does the reason. The problem is that a society, to call itself civil, has to accept both reason and folly, instead, it assigns a science, psychiatry, to translate the folly in sickness, with the aim of eliminating it. The mental hospital has here its reason for existence.

The closing of the last mental hospital in Italy takes place only in 1999, because first it was necessary to build and consolidate the network of ambulatory services in the territory.

A typical day of the patient foresaw:

7.30 a.m. rising	12.00 p.m. lunch	6.00 p.m. end of activity
8.30 a.m. breakfast	2.00 p.m. rest	7.30 p.m. supper
9.00 a.m. workshop	3.00 p.m. rehabilitation activity	9.30 p.m. rest

The dietary table¹² presented:

breakfast	lunch	supper
<i>coffee</i> 10 grams	<i>rice or pasta</i> 100 grams	<i>pasta or rice</i> 100 grams
<i>sugar</i> 20 grams	<i>butter or oil</i> 25 grams	<i>butter or oil</i> 25 grams
<i>milk</i> 250 grams	<i>sauce or salt</i> 5/10 grams	<i>sauce or salt</i> 5/10 grams
<i>bread</i> 100 grams	<i>potatoes or vegetable</i> 250 grams	<i>potatoes or vegetable</i> 250 grams
	<i>oil and vinegar</i> 20 grams	<i>cheese or meat</i> 100 grams
	<i>beef or calf</i> 150 grams	<i>coffee and sugar</i> 10/5 grams
	<i>bread</i> 150 grams	<i>wine</i> 250 grams
	<i>coffee</i> 10 grams	<i>fruit</i> 100 grams
	<i>sugar</i> 5 grams	<i>bread</i> 100 grams
	<i>fruit</i> 100 grams	
	<i>wine</i> 250 grams	

¹¹ Franco Basaglia (1924-1980), psychiatrist, neurologist and professor, innovator in the mental health field and reformer of the psychiatric branch.

¹² Signed by the medical director professor Dr. Alberto Rostan on 5.3.1952. See *Corrispondenza*, in AGSdC, 697/C.

From the Community Diary¹³ results that already in 1936 *occupational therapy* was being practised at Bergamo. Men worked in different workshops: binding of registers and books, chair mending, manufacturing of shoes, mats, and birch brooms; in the blacksmith shop for repairs, in the agricultural colony to cultivate vegetable, fruit and rear hens and rabbits; women were employed in the cleaning of wards, making canvas, ribbons, tapes; they did knitting and sewing in the linen and tailoring room. The profit of the activity of the sick persons were used for their needs: a sweater, a pair of underwear, small comforts for those abandoned by parents, an outing to a Marian shrine, purchase of an organ for the mentally ill, already in 1946 they have composed four amateur bands: male nurses, female nurses, sick men and women. The representations of the nurses had a delightful and educative purpose; those of the sick, guided by a sister were a reason for comfort and amusement for those who were in the hospital since many years and even for a whole lifetime, at times forgotten by the relatives.

The sick are obligated also at a spiritual level: they frequent the local church, participate in the Eucharistic celebration and 'pray in a moving way', especially in the feast of St Valentine, patron of the epileptics, and that of St John of God, patron of the hospital; on moral level they carry out missionary activity: they send help to India, in favour of the seminary with the «Fondazione Borsa di studio» (Study scholarship foundation) in perpetuity for a seminarian, in favour of poor children; for their cultural formation they have a library with 200 books.

The sisters do not have heavy duties, but often they receive beatings, pushes, biting, scratching from the sick to which the sisters respond with charity and gentleness, as some of the authoritative witnesses testify.

In March 1923, the director writes to the Mother:

The superior Sr. Maddalena Martinelli has fulfilled her noble office with great love and diligence, giving an admirable example

¹³ cf. AGSdC.

of zeal and charity; she has left in all of us a vague regret and the memory of a pious and noble figure, dedicated wholly to her duty.

Regarding **Sr. Celeste Calciaferri**, who for 15 years has been a superintendent of delicate and important services in kitchen, the treasurer in 1924 writes:

Her special capacity, watchful, ever ready, enthusiastic conduct that knew to accomplish the major and very notable benefit not only at the economic level, but also moral, maintaining firm, also through the dietary treatment, the discipline of the nursing personnel is indisputable.

The director affirms that **Sr. Veronica Rizzi**, died in 1932,

was an example to all of goodness, piety, sacrifice, having dedicated her entire life to the assistance of the very painful among the sicknesses. Those who have followed her in her especially semi-secular good work appreciated and admired her valuable gifts of her heart and her untiring activity.

The director Doctor, Raul Dolcini, on 9 December 1946 writes a **Declaration on the service of the sisters:**

These constitute, as a whole, an element of order and security and constant performance in the general functioning of the Institute, having been able to verify in repeated occasions their indifference to passing preoccupations that often hinder and limit the functioning of the lay personnel. Particularly, as regards their work of assistance, the well-known charitable role carried out for the benefit of the patients and especially those, unfortunately not rare, abandoned or forgotten by their respective families. Such work was done specifically during the long period of the recent war also in the midst of privations and sacrifices pertinent to it.

The president, Dr. Fiorenzo Clauser, in the name of the Provincial Council, on 22 January 1960 expresses to the assistant general Sr. Zaveria Bertulessi *the feelings of a very cordial appreciation for*

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

the generous work that the sisters carry out with zeal and profound charity in the field of services which are particularly assigned. In 1962 the president Dr. Enzo Zambetti decides to increase the monthly payment of the sisters taking into consideration their fruitful and human work that the said religious personnel carry out in favour of the patients, and in 1965, with the same recognition, the president of the Administration, lawyer Giovanni Giavazzi, communicates to the Mother:

With that the civil Province has further wished to recognise tangibly the zealous and untiring activity done for a long time by the religious personnel.

Even expressions of *merit* do not lack: in 1946 to the *sorella mandataria* Anna Combi an amount of 10,000 lire is given as an award for the long period of service done; in 1957 the *Provincial Council* has wished to express its sentiments of heartfelt thanks by deciding to offer a gold medal of merit to Sr. Giuditta Montoli who for 47 years dedicated her valuable service in the *Neuropsychiatric Hospital of the Bergamo province*.

In a letter to Mother (January 1958), the superior Sr. Flavia Cappelletti writes:

I touch with my hands every instant the help of God. From the part of Administration I find maximum understanding and a greater support... and of our patients what to say? If only you know how happy I am to be among them! I try to see them when they are brought here; as soon as they realise to be in the mental hospital, they suffer much, feel the need of a good word that might assure them the possibility of returning to normality and therefore to their family. Even those more sick have more or less long periods of lucidity... they pray and sing well in the church.

Many other testimonies are in the Community Diary and in the letters.

In June 1985, during the meeting in the Psychiatric Assistance Centre (CAP), the episcopal vicar, Fr Achille Belotti, recalls the progress made in Italy to humanize the psychiatric assistance and he wishes that Bergamo might be advanced in this field. Dr Umberto Vitale, official of USSL and the animator of the organizing committee, affirms:

This day has for its principal aim of favouring the meeting among citizens, health operators, patients of the centre and their parents because all together might begin to look with new mentality and different spirit at the mentally sick and their problems. It is the desire of all that this atmosphere might not cause any more fear to anyone and that all might seek to overcome certain presumptions.

The **number of the sick** in the mental hospital of Bergamo (1853) [later named Psychiatric Hospital (1966) - successively Provincial Neuropsychiatric Hospital (1980) - finally USSL agency 29 (1984)] swings between 1200 and 1350; from 1976 it falls below 1000 because the chronic patients are transferred to geriatric hospitals. In 1977 they are reunified based on geographical zones¹⁴, articulating and simplifying the structure and, successively, in the last 20 years **1966-1985** they continue to decrease in a perceptible way, at the statistical level, both sick and lay nurses.

Statistics of the sick persons

1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975
1,350	1,300	1,350	1,300	1,347	1,320	1,320	1,292	1,261	1,262
1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
983	328	275	275	233	233	189	109	109	79

¹⁴ Division in Zone: Bergamo sector 1 and 2; Valcavallina and Isola; Val Brembana and Val Seriana; Bassa est and Bassa ovest.

Statistics of lay nurses

1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975
122	127	161	162	161	305	378	330	348	354
1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
335	123	123	115	78	68	51	27	23	24

The community of the sisters is formed by a number of religious that ranges from a minimum of 7 in the beginning of the Service to a maximum of 21 in the years 1941-1945, when the hospital had even 1270 patients; in the preceding and successive periods their presence swings between 10 and 15 members, considering the services also in the male wards (already in 1894), where however night turns were not accepted for clear reasons of prudence, in the provincial station of sanitation (1935) and in the internal pharmacy for the patients (1941)¹⁵.

On 11 April 1974 the president, prof. Severino Citaristi, informs the provincial superior of Bergamo, Sr. Maria Teresa Bombelli, on the restructuration of the Neuropsychiatric Hospital and indicates the possible destination of the sisters:

- a) *maintenance of positions of responsibility and direction in the hospital general services, in addition, naturally, with the task of religious and spiritual assistance to the patients;*
- b) *covering of top positions of nursing services of the ward foreseen organically (head nurse/ward sister, shift supervisor) after the legitimate exam of the sisters who have the requested requirements.*

The provincial superior confirms the availability of the sisters for the general services, while she reserves the possibility of someone to participate in the competitive exam. In fact the sisters main-

¹⁵ Sources for the Statistics: Community diary 1932-1939; Registro opere 1940-1969; Statistics 1970-1985, in AGSdC, 697/D.

tain the service, also of ward sister, corresponding to their professional qualification, that they carry out with passion and love.

On 1 February 1986 the provincial superior, Sr. Michelina Festini, communicates to the president, surveyor Andrea Carrara, the decision of suppressing the community for two reasons: aging of almost all the sisters; the impossibility of replacing them due to crisis of vocations. However, she writes:

We are very sorry about having to leave uncovered an area of service and a category of persons who are among the 'neediest', therefore we wish to make an attempt of taking up a service with a modality of a different kind of presence. If this esteemed Administration retains it appropriate, we can maintain in service two who are presently ward sisters – Sr. Celsa Pelucchi and Sr. Anna Togni – and a third one, Sr. Matilde Bianchi, with a pastoral service¹⁶. The three sisters will be present only during the day.

On **10 September 1986** marks the **suppression** of the community of Psychiatric Assistance Centre USSLL 29 of Bergamo; the activity continue with three sisters who belong to the community of «Centro Residenziale Anziani» of Bergamo, via Gleno. In the month of August **1992** concludes the service of the last ward sister¹⁷.

Almost for 100 years our sisters have carried out their activity in this service, rather complex and difficult, having as goal the recovery, as much as possible, of the individual person in his/her uniqueness; the respect and valuing of every sick person, even if affected mentally; the awareness of the human problem of the medical, paramedical, nursing personnel and those of various services.

Helped and enlightened by the experience, the sister finds the suitable way to draw close to the patients and establish with

¹⁶ cf. Tasks of the sister for religious assistance, Convenzione 1997, in AGSdC, 697/D.

¹⁷ Letter of mother Piercarla Mauri dated 10 July 1992 to the president and the health sector director, cf. Corrispondenza, in AGSdC, 697/C.

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

them a dialogue with a psychotherapeutic purpose; with patience and courage helps them to have care for their own person, encourages interest towards those who surround them and towards their relatives of whom, at times, they do not remember not even the name, also because they see them very rarely or never. In this commitment the sister has sought to be, for all and for every sick person, mother and sister, loving them with predilection because they are very poor and marginalised¹⁸.

Presently the hospital «Bolognini» of Seriate is the reference agency, office of DEA (*Dipartimento Emergenza Accettazione* - Emergency Admission Department), whose *mission* is to ascertain the more suitable care and assistance to every patient in the acute phase of the sickness, guaranteeing later the continuity of territorial and socio-assistance services; it wishes to be friendly, placing at the centre the person and his/her needs, place of hope, care, welcome and serenity, in which it is possible to entrust oneself with trust to the personnel who volunteers to be a neighbour with great gifts of humanity.

¹⁸ cf. Notizie sull'Opera, Profilo dell'opera apostolica svolta dalle suore in O.N.P. di Bergamo, written by the superior Sr. Valentina Maccarini, in AGSdC, 697/D.