

Rome, March 1, 2012

Prot N. 28/12

Re.: 125th Foundation Anniversary of the Daughters of Divine Zeal

To the Rogationists
The Daughters of Divine Zeal
The Lay Rogationist Missionaries
The Members of the Family of Rogate

Dearest,

we are living together a Year of the Eucharist in commemoration of the 125th Anniversary of the Feast of July 1, 1886 and in this time of grace, as daughters and sons of Father Hannibal, we are called to remember one of the first fruits of the coming of the Sacramental Jesus in the Pious Work to remain therein: the birth of the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Zeal, which occurred on the eve of the feast of St. Joseph in 1887.

In view of this event, in these coming days of March 17 to 19 we will be in Messina, and together with our sisters Daughters of Divine Zeal, we shall praise and bless the Lord for the great gift of their presence to the Church and to the world.

I would like to commemorate this grace to renew our gratitude to the Lord and to confirm our profound relationship with our sisters who have preceded us in birth, following the footsteps of Father Hannibal in fulfilling the mission of Rogate.

Looking back to the events of those years, in the field of apostolate in Avignone Quarters, we meet our holy Founder, who gives himself totally for the redemption and evangelization of the little ones and the poor.

Since his first appearance in that field of work, which occurred about ten years earlier, in 1887 many things have changed and, in the place where chaos and the most humiliating degradation reigned, there arise an oasis of peace.

Boys and girls are guided to the faith and prayer, introduced to the first rudiments of study and initiated to work; they assisted the sick, helped the families materially and morally, lifting them from rather pitiful situations.

We know that Father Hannibal, while becoming aware of the growth of the Pious Work and of the great difficulties he encountered daily, in his humility he tried to invite some Institutions who are already working in the field of charity to take charge of the little children and the poor of Avignone Quarters.

But in Father Hannibal such urgency of charity goes together with his awareness of a still greater necessity to have "good workers", which he felt since his teens. His vocation was illuminated by the Rogate since the beginning, and when it was further clarified, it was understood as a special charism that the Holy Spirit gave to the Church. He confesses, speaking about himself, as he wrote in 1910:

"That young man «becoming a priest had an idea, something that could be very pleasing to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin, and could produce great benefits, if two religious community would be formed, one of men and another one of women, who could have the *vow of obedience* to that command of Jesus Christ: *Rogate ergo Dominum messis, ut mittat operarios in messem Suam*, and through this vow they would commit themselves to three things:

«1. To pray daily and fervently the adorable Heart of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, the angels and saints to beseech many holy priests and religious men and women to the Holy Church, to all peoples, to all nations of the world, and holy and special vocations to all Religious Orders and all dioceses.

«2. To spread everywhere, as much as possible, this spirit of prayer, in honor and obedience to the divine command.

«3. To be, both of them, within the confines of their limitations and possibilities, laborers in the mystical harvest , working for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the neighbors.

«With this fixed idea in his mind, that poor priest looked at the many religious communities and congregations of every sort that existed and are still forming in the Holy Church, and he was surprised to see that no religious order has ever received that divine word from the adorable mouth of Jesus Christ our Lord, and as if it had been unnoticed.

«Then that priest, with the simple light of reason sustained with faith in the Gospel, seeing that in this word of Jesus Christ lies the divine command of the zeal of his heart, and it is a word and command of a supreme importance, indeed an *infallible remedy* for the salvation of the Church and the society, that priest thought (God forgive his audacity!) of starting the above mentioned Communities or Religious Congregations with that vow of obedience to a threefold commitment»¹.

The Rogate inspires all the choices of Father Hannibal who lived in the dimensions of *prayer* and *action*, as he explains: «The exercise of this prayer should necessarily lead to the aid of holy vocations, because from desiring good evangelical workers and asking them from the Lord, this would more easily lead to putting the necessary means to produce them»².

Thus from the beginning he tried to stir vocations among his sons and daughters. In his first letter to Father Cusmano on August 4, 1884, he already speaks of good hopes among the boys and girls: «A number of them want to give themselves to Jesus; and oh, they seem to be the first flowers that sprout amid the horrors of that place!» And later, on February 10, 1885 he wrote: «I long for the idea of cultivating holy vocations to the Priesthood». He reveals his hope that a good number of girls could become nuns «if they have a good directress».

Father Hannibal has found a good collaborator in the young lady, Laura Jensen Bucca, who assisted him in guiding the orphans and young intern and extern girls, helping them in everything and accompanying them to the life of piety.

It is significant to note the song she wrote on Christmas of 1885, entitled: *La Poverella del Piccolo Rifugio ai piedi del suo Divin Salvatore* (The Little Poor of the Small Refuge at the feet of her Divine Savior). As noted by Fr. Tusino, it represents a common cry of pain, generosity of purpose, commitment to virtue, groaning of prayer, ecstasy of union, all for the souls, for the persecuted and deserted Church due to lack of priests, and thus the “Poverella” will console the Heart of God by becoming his bride. The final lines state: *What can console you or*

¹ DI FRANCIA A., *Scritti*, vol. 2, pag. 144.

² *Preziose Adesioni* (ediz. 1901), *Prefazione*, pag. 7.

*what do you want - The beloved Poverella, - But who will ever be the one - What could she do? - Tenderize this heart – Before a yearning so fair, - And let the Poverella – be your Bride!*³.

All that passes through the life of Father Hannibal: problems, blessings, achievements, plans, hopes, was invariably lived in prayer. So, even here, for this aspiration, we can find a prayer he wrote in 1886. In it he asks the Lord spiritual graces for his "daughters" that seem to be proper of consecrated life. Then, in listing the spirit of which Father Hannibal wanted them to be filled with he already traces the charismatic figure of the Daughter of Divine Zeal.

He prays for their *sanctification*, so that they can *live and die* in the Divine Heart and be led by him to *the most perfect union of love*; that *day and night they would think of Him and Him alone they would always sigh*; that they would grow *from virtue to virtue*, and would become *humble, simple, obedient, meek, pure as angels, docile, modest and patient*; he wants them to be *detached from all created things, and much more from themselves*, to be founded in the holy fear of the Lord and be filled with his holy love. Father Hannibal further asks that they be *souls of prayer*, and thus grow in the knowledge and love of the Lord, seeking the interests of his Sacred Heart, that they have a continuous and loving attention to the Supreme Good, and *a great desire and hunger and thirst to receive him in the Blessed Sacrament*, and that the sublime sacrament of his love would constitute their daily nourishment. He asks Jesus to instill in his daughters *a tender and holy compassion for the intimate pains of His Divine Heart* and that they would be charitable to the neighbors, especially the innocent in danger. Finally, he prays that they could *become true lovers of the Blessed Mother Mary and the glorious Patriarch St. Joseph, and true little poor daughters of her most loving heart*. In the final part of this beautiful prayer he begs to obtain for the young girls *final perseverance in serving the Lord, their sanctification and salvation*. However, he cannot help but ask, for some of them the vocation to consecrated life: «Hear me, O my Jesus, so that these souls maybe adorned with the precious flowers of holy virtues and *so that most of them would consecrate their entire self to you*, O immaculate Lamb, who are the King of Virgins and tends among the lilies»⁴.

After reporting several unsuccessful attempts by Father Hannibal to invite a few Institutions to take charge of the charitable work he started in the Avignone Quarters, Fr. Tusino, adds that he began to reflect that maybe the Lord wanted to entrust his girls to a community of a new foundation, which had its origin in the midst of the shanties of the poor. He also notes that the intense and demanding spiritual life with which Father Hannibal guided the formation of both the intern and extern young girls who come to Avignone Quarters was also intended to inspire or encourage in them the religious vocation. And he notes: "In fact some of those girls showed good dispositions, and certainly the Father has sent them to this or that community, to which he considered them suitable"⁵.

Finally when Father Hannibal thought that the time was ripe, he decided to fully concretize his "very bold, if not courageous idea": to form by himself the Community of Sisters for his orphans. He introduced himself to the Archbishop and told him of his thought. Monsignor Guarino agreed: "*Do, do likewise, but secretly, without much publicity.*" This permission – Fr. Tusino noted - is the birth of the future *Daughters of Divine Zeal*; we say, future, and then we

³ TUSINO T., *Memorie Biografiche*, II, p. 7 ss.

⁴ DI FRANCIA A., *Scritti*, I, p. 86 ss.

⁵ TUSINO T., *Memorie Biografiche*, II, p. 19.

will say when and why such name appeared⁶. At the beginning, the Father did not bother about the name. Were they not born in the shelter of the little poor? In fact, they had been called for a long time, the *Sisters of the Little Refuge*, or the *Little Poor of the Heart of Jesus*, but when they became known in the city, the people called them: *The Sisters of Fr. Di Francia* or *The Sisters of the Orphans of Fr. Di Francia*.

In the Regulation which Father Hannibal made for the Novices on April 29, 1887 he calls them *Little Poor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of the Small Retreat of St. Joseph*.

Father Hannibal wanted to put the nascent Institute under the special protection of St. Joseph, so the taking of the habit was made in the first vespers of the feast of the Saint on March 18, 1887. Their habit, inspired by the *Little Sisters of the Poor*, has the color of the Carmelites, in honor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and bore on the chest the emblem of the *Rogate*.

The four neo-novices were Affronte Maria, Santamaria Giuseppa, D'Amico Rosa and Giuffrida Maria. They took the habit, then prostrated before the orphans who were present in the celebration, a gesture that indicated their willingness to serve.

It was a gesture of an extraordinary symbolic richness which expresses, at the moment when the young novices offered themselves to the Lord, their clear intention to do so for His glory and for the salvation of souls, especially in the service of the little ones and the poor.

On the same day they sent a letter to the Bishop to implore his blessing saying that they want to live like Mary and Martha, in contemplation and in apostolate, "especially praying to the Sacred Heart of Jesus that He may deign to send good Workers to the Holy Church"⁷.

In the following month of October Father Hannibal submits to the Bishop the request for the approval of the Institute, and underlines that it is a step in the path he has undertaken for the service of the Rogate, the charism which is sown in the soil of the little ones and the poor of Avignone Quarters. "And now I beseech H.E. - he writes - that gazing kindly to this humble Institution, you would deign, if there are no obstacles, and for love of the divine word, which form its emblem and its goal, to confirm its existence, through your ecclesiastical approval, and would then review and recognize, as you believe, the regulation, the habit with the sacred emblem, the prayers, the name of the novices and their poor dwelling"⁸.

We know that it was still necessary to wait for several years to obtain the long-awaited approval.

Father Hannibal, who had accompanied spiritually with particular care the four young girls, now novices, deemed it necessary to organize the journey of preparation to the novitiate for other young girls who wished to devote themselves to the Lord.

Meanwhile besides the novices there were some aspirants who also joined, at Pentecost in 1887; to them he had given a small Regulation to train them to be fervent in spirit and to introduce them to the novitiate⁹.

In conducting the Pius Work our holy Founder allowed himself to be guided by the Lord and by the cry of the children and the poor. Filled with the love of God and neighbor, he gave himself unreservedly to evangelize and alleviate the poverty of every kind that he encountered

⁶ L'Arcivescovo di Messina, Monsignor Letterio D'Arrigo, il 14 settembre 1901, approva i nomi definitivi delle due Congregazioni religiose, i *Rogazionisti del Cuore di Gesù* e le *Figlie del Divino Zelo del Cuore di Gesù*.

⁷ DI FRANCIA A., *Scritti*, VII, p. 125.

⁸ DI FRANCIA A., *Scritti*, VII, p. 136.

⁹ TUSINO T., *Memorie Biografiche*, I°, pag. 59.

on his way. In every moment that he felt the need to start a new initiative, he listened to his heart of an apostle, consulted with those who are with him in the Pious Work and then submitted the idea to his superior.

Thus, after starting the Female Institute, amidst sufferings, but nonetheless with the signs of the Lord's blessing, on November 25, 1887 he asks the Archbishop, to be able to start also a male religious Institute, in order to give completeness to the Pious Work.

He wrote, among other things: "We will join ourselves, four or five priests; we would have a small refectory, an Oratory, and we would begin the novitiate for the profession. Your Excellency would be the Founder and Superior of the small community: P. Muscolino, or my brother would be the immediate vice-superior. Your Excellency would give us the Rule and your full blessing! What more else would it take for its growth? This small family would gather around the Sacramental Jesus, having the adjacent church: it would be implanted *in a place that seems pretty fertile for good workers: in a place where people pray unceasingly to the Lord of the harvest to send good laborers into his harvest: in a humble place - poor - hidden from the world -: where humility, detachment from things of the earth, patience, charity, and trust in Divine Providence*"¹⁰.

It would take ten years to materialize the beginning of the plan for a male Institute (1897), but Father Hannibal looks with confidence and hope, strong in prayer to the Lord of the harvest, because in that place where that prayer was sown will soon arise a core group of good workers, who would live that prayer, spread, and give it to others in poverty and in charity.

Dearest, this step in the journey of our sisters Daughters of Divine Zeal is intended for all of us, members of the Family of Rogate; an invitation to confront ourselves with the life and spirituality of that "little family" in Avignone which has grown "around Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament". This little family is called to live in constant prayer for Good Workers, in humility, simplicity and detachment, in charity and trust in Divine Providence. The liturgical season of Lent is a further reminder for us all.

The Lord has blessed our journey over more than one hundred years and enabled us to expand our presence in the five continents, to bring the *Rogate* in the richness of different cultures and through our apostolic commitments.

In the entire concert of consecrated life we are a "little family" but with the heart of our Founder, we are called to live the great treasure of the *Rogate* that has been entrusted to us to be shared to the Church.

These events that led us to revisit our origins allow us to enjoy the beauty of our vocation and mission. At the same time they invite us to rekindle our sense of belonging, while sharing the different dimensions of the charism in one Family of the Rogate.

Let us, therefore, learn together to know and love more and more our vocation and mission. Moreover, when the occasions allow or suggest us to do so, let us join our forces in religious fraternity and mutual cooperation in the best way possible.

With this wish, that I entrust to the blessing of our Divine superiors, and the intercession of our Patron Saints and our Founder, St Hannibal Mary, I greet you all with affection in the Lord.

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(Fr. Angelo A. Mezzari, R.C.J.)

¹⁰ DI FRANCIA A., *Scritti*, VII, p. 138.

Superior General