

## Two hundred years from the “casetta”

*Fr. Pietro Antonio Fietta*

“August 27, 1820. - On this day, the feast of our principal Protector St. Joseph Calasanzio, was inhabited the house that had been prepared for the new Congregation”. Thus Fr. Francis Xavier Zanon in the *Documented history* of our Founding Fathers, note the beginning of the first religious community of our Congregation. “The oldest of the Directors entered there, having the other to remain at home to care for the octogenarian mother; joined the cleric Pietro Spernich, Matteo Voltolini and Angelo Cerchieri, and as servant the young Pietro Zalivani, all with a mind of belonging to the new Institute”.

After two hundred years, it is good to return to our origins to catch the precious heritage that comes to us from that “*little house*” that was the nest of our Congregation. I’ve always heard her mention it that way, and I always thought it was a small house with a few locals. It wasn’t really like that. They were small old and uneated buildings, which could have become a single dwelling. But the Founders had to wait a long time to buy the houses that were interposed among those they had already purchased. The Emperor of Austria came to the rescue, who on his second visit to the schools offered our Fathers 1000 guilders to pay the school’s debts and with the remnants they managed to buy and readjust the other houses that, together with those they had previously purchased, formed the *casetta*.

The *casetta* passed through various changes and owners according to P. Basilio in “Pensieri e affetti” in 1958. “The cottage where the Congregation was born and where so many of our brethren died, God wanted to give it back to us. The Somaschi owned it, then the Bank of St. Mark, the “Gesuati” and then the Cavanis”.

The Cavanis had bought the Palace “Da Mosto” for their pupils, but for them they chose the poor *casetta*. Fr. Antonio left the noble Palazzo Cavanis, his large, beautiful, airy, sunny house located in one of the most beautiful places in Venice, to go and live in the narrow, poor and unhealthy *casetta*. I think it was for him as to live in his flesh the mystery of the Incarnation: being a rich man he became poor, he lowered himself to share the fate of the poor and to lift up the poor misplaced youth, giving his life so that the boys had new life.

As Fr. Zanon describes it, the house had to be really poor: “The *casetta* was a building that bordered the garden from two sides; one along the “fondamenta” of the Arsenalotti, the other along the Balecca Court. The first was formed by the ground floor and a single floor, the other had two floors. The refectory and kitchen were on the ground floor in the first branch; domestic oratory in the second. Old walls patched up and corroded by salt and therefore always worn in the ground floor: from the garden you had to descend two steps to come into the refectory and four steps to go into the oratory. And when, as it often happens in Venice, in winter the waters of the Lagoon inflated by the tide and the wind that pushes them from the sea, invade the lowest points and sometimes the whole city, that poor refectory, the kitchen and even more, the oratory, were flooded and the brothers who lived in the house told us that the low benches of the oratory floated on the water of the flood and lay brothers had to make rafts in the kitchen to approach the hearth and prepare food for the community

Several times I heard from older brethren that the winter in Venice was very cold and humid, there was no heating in the cottage, the toilets were rather rudimentary. In the room there was a basin and a bowl with water and often in winter they had to break the ice in order to wash.

Life in the *casetta* was simple and poor, it was a hidden life with Christ in God, through prayer, recollection, the toil of study and teaching. The *casetta* was also Cavanis first seminar. Among those poor walls, under the wise and loving guidance of Fr. Antonio, the young clerics savored and soaked in the Charisma Cavanis thus preparing the rise of a new Congregation for the Church that would take the name of Schools of Charity. And it was charity that animated that small community for which every little sorrow was delight for the good it expected. There were also difficulties, problems and even great suffering when death visited the *casetta* reaping young lives that were great promises for the new Congregation. The humid and unhealthy environment, often scarce food, have provided fertile ground for diseases that have proved deadly for some. From the funeral eulogy that Fr. Marco wrote for the young deceased Angelo Battesti, who was Deacon, Giuseppe Scarella and Bartolomeo Giacomello you can understand how great was the piety and religious fervour that animated the first community and how they lived united in the bond of charity. By valuing the exemplary life of these young religious, Fr. Marco wrote: “Love to one’s Institute always brings alive the spirit of the particular vocation, awakens the esteem of so much grace, inflames the commitment to correspond to it, makes animosity to support the travails of the ministry, helps to fight the temptations of inconsistency, and dispels the illusions of a capricious piety that satisfies and feeds of imaginary ardor, while neglecting the practices of the works that are convenient to our state and that the lord seeks from each one.”

“The house is where the heart is”, Plinio il Vecchio wrote, and therefore in the *casetta* the heart of the nascent Congregation was throbbing, which, from the ardent charity of the two brothers transmitted to the first congregations, began. The flame of charity has illuminated the holy life of so many of our brothers who have preceded us, warmed the hearts and illuminated the minds of generations of young people who approached our schools and were helped to rediscover the true values of life. We can say that nothing that has passed through the heart dies, because love is life and those who love don’t die. In charity lies the source and perpetuity of our Charism, and we will not betray our mission if we are driven solely by Christ’s charity and not by other special interests.

During two hundred years we have built great structures, institutes and schools for the good of youth and, forgetting the spirit of poverty that animated our origins, we have adapted our homes with all the comforts, yielding to what “Papa Francesco” calls “worldliness.” Today we feel the difficulty of carrying out the great structures also for the reduction of the number of religious in some territorial parts. We are willing to leave some structures, but I do not know if we are willing to abandon certain comforts, or bourgeois lifestyles, to return to the spirit of poverty that makes us feel the need of God to trust his Providence and be closer to the poor.

Fr. Basilio Martinelli also left us a good recommendation: “Poverty, paternal charity, the spirit of the Founders should never fail. If there is this, the good we will do will be great and the imprint in our dear pupils will not be erased. Let’s love poverty! Poverty is the virtue that God and the Founders like the most. It is the basis of religious life.”

The *casetta* reminds us the home hearth and the family life that took place around it. Are our communities’ real families? We live fraternity not because we repeat a common slogan, *we are all brothers*, but because in community we feel *at home*, united in the bond of charity, enduring and valuing each other, and where everyone has a task and a role to play.

We have always said that our institutions have to be families where pupils are welcomed as children and where we exercise the office more of fathers than of teachers. The paternal familiarity, the assiduous presence among the boys, the surveillance formed the basis of the Cavanis educational method that also inspired “San Giovanni Bosco” himself. But we cannot live only of the heritage of the past, repeating what has always been done, but we are called to a creative *fidelity*, that is, to be

creative and bold, but always faithful to the spirit of the origins, that is, driven by the great love for young people. Times have changed, but young people today need, more than in the past, to meet true fathers who direct them in life.

In some countries of Northern Europe there was a very significant tradition. When a wedding was held, her husband would bring some embers from the hearth of his father's house to light the fire in the new hearth where he went to live. This gesture meant that the newlyweds treasured all the teachings received by their parents and pledged to live love like their parents. It will be our commitment to bring in all the missionary openings and new foundations a ember of the hearth of the "*casetta*".

Celebrating the bicentenary of the "*casetta*" means reviving the fire of the domestic hearth rekindling the fire that lies beneath the ashes of time, because the Spirit blows again in our hearts and in our works and we can boast of the name of Cavanis.

*(traduzione a cura di Fr. Remo Morosin)*