

# THE HISTORY, SPIRIT AND TEACHINGS OF THE "CASETTA"

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## **A BIT OF THE HISTORY OF THE "CASETTA"**

*On August 27, 1820, the feast of St. Joseph Calasanzio, in a "house" located in the parish of Santa Agnese in Venice, gathered the first community of the future Congregation of the Schools of Charity - Cavanis Institute: "On this day the Feast of our principal Protector St. Joseph Calasanzio, the House that was prepared for the new Congregation began to be inhabited. The eldest of the Directors (Fr. Antonio Cavanis) entered it, having the brother to care for the octogenarian Mother and joined the cleric Pietro Spernich, Matteo Voltolini, and Angelo Cerchieri, and as a servant the young Pietro Zalivani, all with a spirit of belonging to the new Institute. The new House was first blessed by our pastor, and God Lord make it always flourish with his holy blessing." The first brothers of Fr. Antonio and Fr. Marco Cavanis, came to live together to better devote themselves to the common vocation of educators of young people.*

The extreme poverty of the "house" reflected that of the House of Nazareth. The small group who lived there, living in brotherly love, in the perfect community of goods, in prayer and in the service of others, showed that they wanted to imitate the Holy Family and the first Christian community in Jerusalem. The initial group was gradually joined by other religious, lay or priests, including Fr. Marco Cavanis who, after the death of his mother in 1832, came to live with ardour and deep humility with his brother and the first children. The "house" was very miserable and unhealthy. The walls exuded moisture; on the ground floor "high water" invaded the rooms very low compared to the level of the nearby canal; there were cases of young brothers being crushed by tisi and other lung diseases, it was necessary to provide. Due to so many political crises, foreclosing of all the assets of the Congregation by the various successive governments in Venice, the death of some religious, prevented for a long time to carry out a reform project. Then the "house" with the adjoining garden, the schools, the Church and everything, was forfeited by the Italian state that had just conquered Veneto. The Fathers were able to continue to live there as in the house of others. In 1879 the "house" was bought back at auction and when the Fathers moved to a wing of the school building, the "house" remained free and was sold in charitable loan to the Somaschi Fathers. A short time later it was purchased by a benefactor and donated to the Somaschi Fathers.

The goods of this world easily pass from owner to owner. After various events the "house" became the property of the banking institute "Banco San Marco" which offered it to the Patriarch of Venice. After the First World War, the "Banco San Marco" put it up for sale. The Fathers bought it back. So the first house of the Cavanis community returned to the Institute. Unfortunately, during all these years the "house" had lost its original appearance, and nothing remembered the time when it had been inhabited by the Founding Fathers. Thus the property of the first cradle of the Congregation was lost, which could remain for us a memory and a luminous testimony of poverty and religious life. It is already known that the poor, having an urgency of bread, cannot afford the luxury of memories. To remember it, there are only two tombstones left in a wall that corresponds to the area of the room where the two Founding Fathers died:

*This Room, distinguished for many family memories in the year of the Lord 1938 was changed to chapel, occurring the first century by the canonical institution of the Congregation of the Schools of Charity.*

*Here Antonio Angelo and Marco Antonio Conti Cavanis founded the Congregation of secular clerics of the Schools of Charity; from here they flew to heaven, shining for fame of holiness. The sons placed in the year 1884.*

### **THE MEANING AND SPIRITUALITY OF THE "HOUSE"**

The "*house*" so joyfully called it the Founders, had been made from a series of small and old buildings corroded by saltiness. In the "*house*" the life of the small community is simple and poor but far from superficial and bigot. Even the word "*casetta*" and not *house* says something small, remembers that the "*Kingdom of God is revealed to the little ones*", it is similar to a "*grain of mustard that is the smallest among the seeds*". "*Little flock*", are those who inhabit the "house", like the disciples who follow Jesus, but "*it suffices some yeast to ferment numerous measures of flour*".

**Faith, Hope and Charity:** The word and the reality of the "*casetta*" transmit the faith, hope and charity of those who live there but also temporariness, insecurity, freedom in the possession of things because everything passes and does not "*remain stone on stone*"; transmit sobriety "*not accumulate treasures that the moth devours*". Fr. Antonio was more than forty-eight years old and already many symptoms of ill health, but left his "*healthy, sunny and airy*" home, located in one of the most beautiful points of the city of Venice, to go to live in this "*wet and unhealthy house*". The youthful enthusiasm and the "grace of the *early days*" of priesthood and apostolate among the children of the school, of the Mariana Congregation, of the care of the sick in the hospital of the "Incurabili", had not died at all. The Cavanis brothers have matured. In the courageous choice to become poor with the poor and to live with them and like them, they shine for great faith and courage, for a hope that does not disappoint, a joyful charity. The three theological virtues are the foundation of their vocation and mission, of their "*outgoing*" Christian way of life.

**Prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance** also characterize the decision to go and live in those precarious conditions. They had lived in well-being, now they make this firm decision with great freedom, human and spiritual maturity, the ability to discern the "*signs of the times*", in a context of a city that was languishing in poverty and the humiliating loss of an ancient splendor. By imitating Jesus, they become poor to enrich other suffering poor with their poverty. In dealing with the hardships and diseases caused by the lack of the necessary, they never lose hope of fruit and the confident perception that life is received as a gift and always asks to be put to the service of God and of our brothers and sisters. "*As for me, I too run, but not as one who has no direction. I practice the fight but not as someone who beats the air. I treat myself severely and submit my body with its negative tendencies, so as not it happens that I proclaim a message to others and then I myself am destined to be reprobated*" (1Cor 9, 26-27).

**Essentiality:** the "*casetta*" Cavanis spoke of essentiality to the Venice of the nobles fallen from an ancient splendor but also speaks to our world of superfluous, excessive and of appearances. It is a challenge to our invest in *abundance* in our communities, in the means for education and for

pastoral care. Jesus, in order to fulfill his mission, left Nazareth and "*has nowhere to lay his head*", sends the disciples to evangelize the poor of means, rich only in confidence in his presence and in his Word. Even the Cavanis choose to live in that poor context of the "*casetta*", poor with the poor but strong of the Word of God. Even Fr. Marco, while assisting his mother until his death, "*suffers, sweats, agonizes*" in the "*casetta*", where the small religious family lives "*a hidden life with Christ in God, through prayer, concentration, the toil of study and teaching*" of poor children, in the building of the Schools in front of the "*casetta*". Without these essential "means" it is inexplicable their life "*between so much squalor of poverty*". The essentiality of life and means has kept the Founders "*serene in the midst of so many crosses*". Today, however, the abundance in the lifestyle and technological means, do not make *happy*. The "*casetta*", and the essentiality of life of the first community, help to reflect and value much more the relationships, the joy of living in fraternity and prayer, rediscovering the strength of Charity to face difficulties.

### ***THE TEACHINGS OF THE "CASETTA" FOR ALL CAVANIS***

- **Poverty and evangelical freedom:** they begin with the gesture of "*leaving.*" "Abraham leaves his land, the Apostles "*leave their father, the boat and the nets*", let "*the dead bury their dead*". The Cavanis leave their father's house, make themselves poor *with and like* the poor, imitating Jesus who "*being rich became poor*" for the sake of humanity. To follow Jesus in full freedom, according to the word of the Gospel "*sell what you have and give to the poor, then come and follow me*", Fr. Antonio, two days before going to live in the "*casetta*", donated the silver buckles of his shoes to Andrea Salsi to refuse any sign of worldly vanity. Now he feels really free and poor.
- **Unconditional trust in Providence:** after leaving the father's house and all the comforts it could have, to go to live in poverty similar to that of the cave of Bethlehem, they are ready to "*accumulate treasures in heaven*", because those of the earth no longer have value for them. The trust in Providence and the maternal presence of Dear Mother *Mary* helps us to understand how, even today, we must face difficulties, trials, diseases, unforeseen events, oppositions, misunderstandings, crises, which from time to time we meet in our lives.
- **"Freely you have received, freely donate":** the gratuitousness of self-giving to the "poor missing youth" by the community of the "*casetta*", opens the heart of each brother who lives there, to a continuous awareness of the faithful and *gratuitous* presence of Divine Providence on their needs, *desires*, feelings, inclinations and actions. The gift of their life to the Lord becomes free. It is made of spaces of silence where God illuminates and nourishes the path of human maturation and spiritual growth, increases their freedom and forms their consciousness in humility. With the poor, it is easy to act as *benefactors* seeking gratitude for what they do. But the poor teach that either you serve with a free heart or you serve no purpose: "*Don't be like the powerful who dominate nations and call themselves benefactors ... (Lc 22,25)*". *Charity is a matter of the heart and of taking care, not so much of alms or material things.*
- **Responsibilities:** Fr. Antonio and Fr. Marco were educated from an early age to responsibility, in the family, in study, in work, in the parish, for the poorest families in the

city of Venice. In the city, the poor, especially children and young people, social, economic, environmental and political problems increased more and more every day. Still young priests, they take on pastoral commitments and their responsibility grows more and more in the most humble services. They are exemplary in testifying that only with humble responsibility can one *creatively* face life choices, social changes, diseases, adversity and the issues of youth education. ***"Taking care of young people is not an optional task for the Church, but a substantial part of her vocation and mission in history. It is not a part of my life or an ornament that I can remove, it is not an appendix or a moment of the many of existence. It's something I can't eradicate from my being if I don't want to destroy myself. It is necessary to recognize oneself as branded on fire by this mission of enlightening, blessing, lifting, healing, rescuing young people from all over the world"*** (cf. EG 273).

- In the "*casetta*" were born and raised «*the Congregation of the Schools of Charity, the Mariana Congregation, the Garden, the Oratory, the, Spiritual Exercises, the Working House, the Typography, the Women's Institute, the library, the publication of books, monthly retreats, the biblical and Sunday conferences, the desire to extend the Schools in every "sestriere" of the city of Venice and "up to America"*».

(traduzione a cura di P. Remo Morosin)