

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE "CASETTA"¹

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Exactly a century ago and precisely on the day 27 August 1820, the feast of St. Joseph Calasanzio, in a small house located in St. Agnes, on the "Fondazione Arsenalotti", now, together with the "Fondazione St. Agnese" and the "Rio St. Agnese", transformed since 1864 in "Rio terrà Foscarini", the first community of the Cavanis Institute was reunited.

At that time the Congregation was not yet approved canonically at the level of pontifical law², but its members, united "by the bond of charity and uniform vocation"³, came to live together to better look after for the common vocation of educators of young people. On 12 October 1818, the Austrian government accepted and approved the project to create a Cavanis community. However, this is not yet the necessary royal decree⁴. After several attempts, the two Cavanis had obtained diocesan approval of the male and female branches of the institute on 19 June 1819 and 16 September 1819, respectively...

Here is the short chronicle that we find in the "Memorie" of the Fathers:

"On this day, the Feast of our principal Protector St. Joseph Calasanzio we began to inhabit the House that was prepared for the new Congregation. The oldest of the Directors entered it, while the other had to take care of the octogenarian Mother and joined the cleric Pietro Spernich, Matteo Voltolini, and Angelo Cerchieri, and, as servant, the young Pietro Zalivani, all with a spirit of belonging to the new Institute⁵. Pietro Spernich, a seminarian, had indeed been the first companion of the founders, and indeed had been the first disciple of the Cavanis to live in a hut near the garden, three years before the birth of the community of the "House, starting on March 14, 1817"⁶. The new House was first blessed by our pastor, and God Lord make it always flourish with his holy blessing"⁷.

It was not just a practical arrangement in front of the schools: the text shows that the first true community of our Congregation was born on this date. For Fr. Antonio, accustomed to living in a gentle, gothic palace, overlooking the Giudecca canal, it must have been a great personal sacrifice this change of house number and social situation: it was really getting off the pedestal of the nobility and adapt to live like the people. He, with his brother, had bought a palace of nobles, "Ca' da Mosto", for schools and for their beloved and poor children; but for himself, and later for his brother, he chose the path of exodus. He was then forty-eight years and seven months old. One may ask: why has this diminutive name "casetta" been transmitted to this day? The name depends on the fact that in front of it, on the other side of the canal at that time, there was "the palace" of schools, for children and young people; in front of it, at the "Fondamenta Arsenalotti", was the "casetta", modest home of the Cavanis.

¹ Articolo di G. Leonardi, "Centocinquant'anni fa", dalla rivista *Charitas*, XXXVI (1970), 3: 22-25. Venezia; con aggiornamento al 20200307.

² Lo era però a livello del Patriarcato di Venezia.

³ Cap. I, regola 1 delle costituzioni del 1837; norma 1/a delle costituzioni del 2008.

⁴ A. SERVINI, *Epistolario e memorie*, I...cit., pp. 432-433.

⁵ P. Antonio Cavanis, N.d.A.

⁶ *Epistolario e Memorie*, I, p. 425.

⁷ *Memorie per servire alla storia della Congregazione*, 27 agosto 1820, in: *Epistolario e Memorie*, vol. I, p. 447.

It was not just a practical arrangement in front of the schools: the text shows that the first true community of our Congregation was born on this very date. For Fr. Antonio, accustomed to living in a gentle, Gothic palace, overlooking the Giudecca Canal, it must have been a great personal sacrifice this change of civic direction and social situation: it was really getting off the pedestal of the nobility and adapt to live like the people. He, with his brother, had bought a palace of nobles, Ca' da Mosto, for schools and for their beloved and poor children; but for himself, and later for his brother, he chose the path of exodus. He was then forty-eight years and seven months old. One may ask: why has this diminutive name "house" been transmitted to this day? The name depends on the fact that in front of, on the other side of the canal at that time, there was "the palace" of schools, for children and young people; here, at the foundation of the Arsenalotti, was the "house", modest home of the Cavanis. The extreme poverty of the cottage reflected that of Nazareth; and the small group of clergymen and lay people 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 up close the Holy Family and the first Christian community in Jerusalem. They lived there in an atmosphere of serenity, joy, cheerfulness, perfect fraternity. The initial group was gradually joined by other religious, lay people or priests, and among them we must remember above all Fr. Mark, who after the death of his mother came to live with enthusiasm and deep humility with his brother and the first children. The Congregation was approved by the Holy See, with the canonical erection celebrated on July 16, 1836, the feast of Our Lady of Carmine; the number of brethren increased, though among all kinds of difficulties; but the community house remained the same for many decades. There the two esteemed brothers lived there and died, there were formed to the holiness of life and zeal for souls the first generations of religious of the Cavanis Institute.

The "house" was, however, too 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; the cases of young brothers who were crushed by tisi and other lung diseases were multiplying: it was necessary to provide.⁸

Fr. Casara, who succeeded the Founders and Fr. Frigiolini in the government of the Institute, had long thought of building a new home for the community; but the serious expense, and more urgent concerns of all kinds, including from 1867 the loss of all the assets of the Congregation and of the religious prevented him for a long time from carrying out the project.

In 1867⁹ the "house" with the adjoining garden, the schools, the Church and everything, were forfeited by the Italian state which had just entered the Veneto the previous year; however, the Fathers were able to continue to live there, as in the house of others.

In 1870, precisely on 15 December, the cottage and the garden were bought back at auction, at a rather expensive price of 17,314.94 lire. It was very curious that they had to buy back their home with their own money, which had already cost many sacrifices; but Fr. Casara was not the type to

⁸ Con ogni probabilità, questa caratteristica di eccessiva povertà e di insalubrità della prima residenza della comunità è uno dei motivi della mancanza di sviluppo della congregazione fin dal suo nascere.

⁹ Più esattamente il 24 settembre 1867 si ebbe l'applicazione all'Istituto Cavanis di Venezia del decreto generale, da applicare a tutti gli istituti religiosi del Veneto, del 1866 (dopo la III guerra di indipendenza) di soppressione e di incameramento dei beni.

cry over the poured milk, and after the first moment of painful amazement, he had immediately rolled up his sleeves, and had set about the repurchase of the properties most necessary for the life and activity of the Congregation.

After about ten years spent in this heavy but fruitful task, Fr. Casara, trusting more in Providence than in the chronically anemic bank account, on 20 January 1877 blessed the first stone of a new wing of the building, which could be completed between many economic difficulties only after four years and finally on 20 January 1881 the community was able to move into the new dwelling, always modest and poor, but broader and healthier: the house is the same where the Fathers live today¹⁰.

This is how Fr. Domenico Saporì told the Patriarch the series of events¹¹: "We could conserve, make use of these¹², continue our coexistence, the Rules, and the exercise of the Schools, until Providence helped a recovery of Home and Schools on the public auction, and to have possession of them again. Of the Members of the congregation, although for the suppression they had a pension (...) no one left. And it was also for this reason that, continuing income to flow into the common fund, we too could contribute not in part with the alms of the pious and generous faithful, and the repurchase of some of the other funds lost by the suppression, and to a huge expenditure encountered not only in indispensable restorations and very appropriate improvements, but also in the erection from the foundations of two new buildings, long believed necessary but to which one had never been able to think effectively". The "house" remained free, and soon the Cavanis community sold it in charitable loan to the Somaschi Fathers who had to give up the direction of the orphanage of the nearby convent of the Gesuati¹³; Shortly after, Countess Morosini Gatterburg, at the invitation of Fr. Casara, bought the house from the Institute for 22,000 lire, to donate it to the Somaschi Fathers¹⁴, favoring these of a dwelling and the Cavanis Fathers of a considerable sum; Unfortunately, however, the property of the first cradle of the Congregation was lost, which could have remained for us a memory and a luminous testimony of poverty and religious life: but we know that the poor, having urgency of bread, cannot afford the luxury of the memories.

After various events the old house came to the ownership of the "Banco di S. Marco" a well-known banking institution in Venice, which in 1916 offered it to Patriarch La Fontaine as the seat of a "House of the Soldier", a place of serene and Christian retreat for soldiers stationed in the city during "the Great War", that is, the First World War (1915-1918). The Cavanis Fathers gladly took over the home and spiritual care of the soldiers; and so, they had the opportunity to return, albeit as guests and for pastoral ministry reasons, to the "house".

After the war the Fathers used the house, at the patriarch's wish, as rest home and the seat of a

¹⁰ Così scrivevo nel 1970. In realtà, dal 2002 la comunità dei religiosi Cavanis di Venezia ha ceduto la propria abitazione alla scuola, trasformando le camere in aule; e si è ritirata nelle piccole e basse camere dell'antico noviziato, ripetendo così un gesto di povertà e di amore ai giovani.

¹¹ Lettera del 1° marzo 1886.

¹² La casa e la scuola, N.d.A.

¹³ In realtà si tratta dell'ex-convento dei padri domenicani; ma poi i PP. Somaschi avevano in realtà dovuto rinunciare alla direzione dell'orfanotrofio situato alla Salute.

¹⁴ Nel 1884.

university club¹⁵, while the attached courtyard¹⁶ was made available among other things to a department of explorers¹⁷, the first of the city of Venice. On May 12, 1919, the Banco S. Marco offered the house with the courtyard for sale to the Institute, for the price of 130,000 lire. The Fathers seized the opportunity, and then slowly managed to pay the large sum, with the generous help of the same Banking Institute, which granted an installment payment at the rate of 4%, then again lowered to 3%; and finally condoning the remaining sum of 25,000 lire.

On 2 May 1934 Fr. Andreatta, then a “preposito” general¹⁸, could announce to his brethren that the debt was completely extinguished. Thus the first house of the Cavanis community returned to the Institute; and is still in his possession. It will be, in the following decades, the seat of the Calasanzio Circle, of the Marian Congregation and of the Male Youth of Catholic Action¹⁹; university hostel from 1920 onwards, of classrooms²⁰, of the institute’s typography, of the theater and cinema for students and of the theological studentate. In the attached ground, “l’orto”, which for the most part served and still serves as a courtyard for the recreations and sports activities of the boys of the Institute, were built the gym for physical education²¹ and, more recently the university hostel “Domus Cavanis”²².

Unfortunately, during all those years and through different services, the “house” had lost almost entirely its original appearance, and almost nothing remembered the aspect it had in the time when it was inhabited by the Fathers; it was eventually almost completely torn down in 1961 to make room for the “Domus Cavanis”²³.

Of the original “House”, which had the form of “L”, with the eastern branch towards the “Rio Terà Foscarini” and the northern branch parallel to the ancient “Cale Baleca”, which became

¹⁵ Probabilmente è da questo suggerimento da parte del Patriarca La Fontaine, accettato e messo in pratica dall’Istituto che provenne l’idea, più tardi, negli anni ’50 del secolo scorso, di abbattere la casetta e di costruire il grande edificio per la foresteria per universitari e per la pastorale universitaria.

¹⁶ Il cortile grande, al lato dell’ex-convento dei domenicani e della “casetta”; che era poi l’antico “Orto” delle origini dell’Istituto.

¹⁷ Più conosciuti come Scout.

¹⁸ La serie dei suoi mandati coprì gli anni 1931-1949.

¹⁹ GIAC in sigla.

²⁰ Ancora almeno fino al 2015, come aule jolly.

²¹ Attorno al 1953.

²² Sulla fine degli anni ’50 e inizio degli anni ’60 del secolo scorso. Lo stile architettonico della foresteria, pur molto bello, è piuttosto fuori posto nell’ambiente di Venezia; a suo tempo, P. Antonio Turetta, che si occupava direttamente della faccenda, come pure il rettore pro tempore e il preposito P. Tomasi dovettero fare miracoli – e percorrere anche communi non proprio ortodossi – per ottenere i permessi di costruire e far approvare il progetto. All’epoca della costruzione ero studente di propedeutica e poi di teologia in Istituto a Venezia e una delle vittime degli attacchi insistenti del P. Turetta Antonio era mio padre, allora assessore all’edilizia a Venezia, che non voleva assolutamente che si trasformasse lo skyline della zona con l’edificio avveniristico.

²³ La Domus Cavanis poi non si resse a lungo come Foresteria o Pensionato Universitario e come casa della Pastorale Universitaria, anche per mancanza di chiara volontà di praticare questa non facile pastorale, per la mancanza di personale specializzato in questo campo, e anche perché i giovani che chiedevano di abitarvi raramente lo facevano per desiderio di abitare in un ambito di chiesa. Essa venne allora affittata a un albergo, dentro del contesto del boom di turismo di massa a Venezia e della moltiplicazione degli alberghi ancora in atto, che sta trasformando Venezia in una Disneyland. Il palazzo si chiama attualmente “Albergo Belle Arti”, al civico # 812/A di Dorsoduro, Rio Terà Foscarini. La foresteria universitaria è passata in un primo tempo nell’antico edificio dello studentato teologico Cavanis, a nord del più piccolo dei tre cortili dell’Istituto, al numero civico # 895 e 896 di Dorsoduro, Rio Terà Foscarini, cui era passato il nome di “Domus Cavanis”. In seguito tuttavia anche questa ultima spiaggia della pastorale universitaria Cavanis è stata affittata all’Albergo Belle Arti, pur mantenendo il nome di “Domus Cavanis”.

private and owned or at least concession of the Institute, remains only part of the eastern arm, currently painted orange, while the most important northern arm, where the founders' rooms and the community chapel were located, has completely disappeared.

As a reminder, if you can say so, only the two tombstones remain on the walls of the ground floor room that corresponds to the area²⁴ of the room where the two Founding Fathers later died.

Here's the text:

HIC
ANTONIUS.ANGELUS.ET.MARCUS .ANTONIUS
COMITES.DE .CAVANIS
CONGREGATIONEM.CLERIC.SAECUL.
SCHOLARUM.CHARITATIS
FUNDARUNT
HINC
SANCTITATIS.LAUDE.CLARISSIMI
IN.COELUM.EVOLARUNT
FILII.PP.AN.MDCCCLXXXIV²⁵

CUBICULUM HOC
TOT DOMESTICIS MEMORIIS
INSIGNE
A.D. MCMXXXVIII
A CONGR. SCH. CHARITATIS
CANONICE CONSTITUTA
PRIMO RECURRENTE SAECULO
IN SACELLUM MUTATUM FUIT²⁶

²⁴ Ricordo che P. Aurelio Andreatta con un gioco di parole e con una certa tristezza ci diceva che quella stanza corrispondeva (e corrisponde) ormai non all' "area" ma all' "aria" della stanza dove sono morti i fondatori, perché anche il livello del pavimento è stato sollevato di almeno mezzo metro, e i muri sono stati completamente rifatti.

²⁵ = Qui Antonio Angelo e Marco Antonio Conti Cavanis fondarono la Congregazione dei Chierici secolari delle Scuole di Carità; di qui volarono in cielo, splendenti per fama di santità. I figli posero nell'anno 1884.

²⁶ = Questa camera, insigne per tante memorie di famiglia nell'anno del Signore 1938 fu mutata in cappella, ricorrendo il primo secolo dalla Istituzione canonica della Congregazione delle Scuole di Carità.

Peccato davvero che questo "sacellum" o piccolo santuario, con le sue lapidi ancora in posto, o meglio ricollocate sui nuovi muri, sia oggi ridotto, in modo del tutto indecente e riprovevole, a stanza di deposito dei bagagli dei clienti dell'Albergo Belle Arti, e che anche i membri della comunità Cavanis di Venezia vi abbiano difficile (e triste) accesso.

(traduzione dall'Originale in Italiano a cura di P. Remo Morosin)