

THE CASETTA AND THE CAVANIS FORMATION

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A humble beginning

On August 27th, 1820, the feast of St. Giuseppe Calasanzio, Father Antonio and Father Marco Cavanis had decided to officially start the new Congregation of the Schools of Charity.

Fr. Antonio left his beautiful and dignified home on the Zattere, to enter an old building, poor and humid, called by him and his brother Fr. Marco “la casetta” the house. There were four young men with Fr. Antonio: the cleric Pietro Spernich, Matteo Voltolini and Angelo Cerchieri, and the young Pietro Zalivani as a servant. It is a humble and muted start: few people, hosted in a very poor structure. Before entering the rooms that will be the cradle of a new religious Congregation, the two brothers asked the parish priest to bless the rooms.

Fr. Marco was unable to follow his brother. He stayed at home, on filial duty to the elderly mother; but he was only apparently out of the house, because spiritually he suffered from not being able to follow his brother, and materially he continued to give all his energies to the work as is shown by what he did in the following years.

Don Andrea Salsi writes: “What love and respect, what awe and obedience Fr. Marco always had towards his parents and mother, even after the beautiful soul of his father flew to heaven. Not only in his early age, but also among the splendor of the jobs he never left home in the morning, nor did he go to bed in the evening without kissing his mother’s hand and asking for the maternal blessing; he never left the house in unusual hours without notifying his mother and asking for permission; nor did he enter into any business without consulting her. I myself several times witnessed, to my great edification, that he continued, also as a priest, this custom of honoring his mother in this way, showing his filial reverence”. From correspondence it is clear that at 50 he still asked for the blessing and continued as a priest to show respect.

Fr. Marco left the family palace, facing the Giudecca Canal, only after his mother death, in 1832. He went to the refectory, in the “casetta”, and asked, kneeling, to be welcomed to live with his brother and other novices and confreres. It was a moving moment, left in the memory of the Institute.

Later the founders’ birthplace was sold, to carry on the ideal of their life: free education of the youth in a school and house of charity.

The “casetta” had been obtained from a series of small and old buildings corroded by the salt, bought from the state property together with the vegetable garden. Despite some partial adaptation works, it always kept the mark of the most austere poverty, and with humor Fr. Antonio and Fr. Marco called it precisely the “casetta”, and so it has continued to indicate it until today in the Congregation. It was a damp and unhealthy building, somewhat austere. Speaking of actual poverty, which Fr. Antonio prepared to embrace, entering the “casetta”, Don Andrea Salsi testifies that two days before leaving his home, he took off his silver buckles from his shoes and gave them to him.

Despite the extreme poverty, the atmosphere in the “casetta” was good: there was a lot of charity, zeal, religious spirit and, above all, family spirit. It was a blessed place. Fr. Marco Cavanis, forced to travel to help the Congregation, lacked much of the familiar atmosphere of the “casetta”. In a letter dated 11th June 1835, he wrote to his brother: “When this letter arrives, all of you will be in glory for the New Mass... How much pain for me not to be able to be present at such a happy function! But this I say secundum hominem. Now God wants me here in Rome, and I’m happy to do his will. Today

four months of my painful pilgrimage, far from the little house, are fulfilled, which seem to me four years". In numerous letters, Fr. Marco insistently asks his brother and the congregates of the "casetta" not to tire of accompanying him with their prayers. There is hardly a letter in which he does not insist on being supported by prayers; and he does it with greater conviction, the greater are the difficulties to overcome. Everyone is praying for him in the "casetta".

Fr. Antonio, from his "cell" (this is how his and the other rooms of the "casetta" are called in the Memoirs of the Institute) in a letter addressed to his brother, dated November 26th, 1822, writes: "The good news of your health have brought to our mother, to me, to the casetta, to all, a great joy".

Fr. Antonio was, in practice, always present among the young religious in formation. He shared with them prayer, the study of theology and philosophy, school meals, recreations, every moment of the day. This allowed him to have a clear idea of the qualities and defects of the candidates. He exercised the first and most important of the "five wounds of the Cavanis educator" : the loving oversight, which consists in the sacrifice of time, in dedicating himself totally to the office of trainer, with generosity, focusing entirely on this very important mission, from which - he was aware of it - the future of the Institute depended.

He knew the heart of the clerics, and they in turn gave him the heart.

Very important in the "casetta", in view of the loving surveillance, were not only the moments of prayer, study and work, but also those of leisure. Fr. Paoli, firsthand witness of the holiness of the Founders, writes: "Fr. Antonio was the soul of everyone in the recreations, to which he always intervened, unless he was absolutely prevented by illness".

The Theology in the "casetta"

The Founders, during their life, have done everything to obtain the freedom for the philosophical and theological study of the clerics of the institute. Given the experience of the years in which they had sent them to the patriarchal seminary to study, they were firmly determined to keep them in the "casetta", so that they could receive training truly according to the charism, spending as much time as possible under their watchful gaze, so as to be able to know and observe them better and better, in all their manifestations, and to be able to guide them with pastoral experiences, in contact with the youth.

The conquest, however, was not peaceful, and until the Cavanis were unable to have professors members of the congregation, they continued to have tribulations. But they didn't give in; and they only resigned to send their clerics to take exams in the seminary. They were convinced that, by acting differently, they could not "shape their spirit to the practices and burdens of the industrious institute", and that they had to do their duty to the end.

The tenacity they demonstrated throughout their lives for freedom of formation in the "casetta" is remarkable: they were convinced that the clerics of the institute had to be trained according to their own criteria, regardless of governmental interference, in a family atmosphere, under the gaze of a constant amorous surveillance. They were fully aware that this was their duty as founders, their faithful response to a specific vocation, recognized as coming from God. They felt they had to transmit their spirit to the spiritual children, within the walls of the "casetta" and nowhere else. In the face of the difficulties encountered in obtaining the philosophical and theological study at home of the young aspirants of the institute, Fr. Marco said: "To be truly sure that God does not want to grant us the home study of the sciences, I must have used all the means possible to me to obtain it. Until now I have used the pen. I still have my tongue". This obstinacy and conviction make you think:

Cavanis training was perceived from the outset as something specific and irreplaceable, as the only guarantee for the future of the new Institute. Fr. Antonio and Fr. Marco wisely dedicated the flower of energy to it.

It is by being in contact with the Founders that the spirit of the new work can be absorbed. The first generation of Cavanis Fathers, formed by Fr. Antonio and Fr. Marco, unanimously testifies to the importance of this personal contact in a special and exclusive environment.

Fr. Antonio formator in the “casetta”

Almost exclusively, Fr. Antonio was responsible for setting the religious discipline in the “casetta” community: the formation of clerics, the direction of the work. Clerics were able to observe many interesting things from the life of the two Founders daily.

We note below, among the many, ten still current elements of Cavanis formation in the “casetta”. They are a Decalogue that can help us even today, in our Congregation that has become international, multiethnic and multicultural.

- 1) It was normal for Fr. Antonio to consult with Fr. Marco before any more or less important decision. And sometimes the two argued, even *animatedly*, but in the end, they always found a way to agree. This trait of frankness and freedom in the personal relationship will remain very impressed on the religious in formation.
- 2) Fr. Antonio was a formator above all with life. More than a man of many words, he was a man of silence, study and prayer. His letters to young religious are not many; they are usually short and express their concern for their formation in the spirit of the institute. They are full of sweetness and encouragement.
- 3) The deep spirit of faith, which animated the whole life of Fr. Antonio, vibrated in a particular way in his teaching to the clerics. In this regard, Fr. Casara writes: “You could see him completely taken by the truth he announced, in love; and the sweetness of holy love for the most holy truths of the faith was accompanied by words, attitude, gesture, appearance, and everything contributed to impressing those who heard it, and to infusing in them the sweet anointing of his pity and his loving ardor”. In the “casetta” not only theology was taught, but to love theology.
- 4) The love for the study of Sacred Scripture was also singular in Fr. Antonio, of which he had excellent knowledge, as can also be seen from the notes for the spiritual exercises. It was not only competence and professionalism, but authentic love. This love of his also made him dictate in the Constitutions the rule of daily reading of a chapter of the New Testament, to be made *flexis genibus et nudo capite*.
- 5) We must then highlight the veneration, the respect, the fidelity, which Fr. Antonio professed towards the Church in general and towards the Pope in particular. This attitude was in him the fruit of intimate convictions of faith, which made him sensitive and delicate, and made him live intensely the spirit of the Church expressed in the dispositions and directives, in the liturgy, in its happy and sad events. Fr. Casara uses an interesting expression to describe this sensitivity of both brothers: he defines it as “**a very fine Catholic touch**”, and describes it with words that make you think: “They both had a spiritual feeling so exquisitely and delicately Catholic, that they realized immediately if, in speeches or written works, there were concepts, words or spirit not fully compliant with the faith and spirit of the Church”.

- 6) Fr. Giovanni Paoli, “first-hand” witness of the holiness of the Founders, writes: “The art of conciliating veneration and respect for the authority of superior that he had, and at the same time of attracting the affection of religious. It can be said with truth that there can only be a saint who knows how to reconcile reverence and love. A glance from him, a handshake, a word was enough either for severe reproach or for gentle comfort of anyone”. And he adds, with a thread of irony: “Whoever wanted something from him, was enough to present himself to him after he had confessed, or after Mass, or communion, or after office”. This affection was due to familiarity, to living together, to spending a lot of time in community. Fr. Paoli concludes: “Fr. Antonio was truly united to the hearts of the clerics: no one would have ever hidden anything from him, knowing that he was dealing with a father”.
- 7) When the first novice left the Institute, on May 18th, 1825, Fr. Antonio gathered the whole small community, then composed of only five clerics, and told them, like Jesus to the apostles, when many of the disciples had gone away: “ Do you want to leave too? The Congregation does not need you: but you do, if you are called to it”. Here we can see the freedom of spirit of the mature formator, who does not bind people to himself and does not seek complicity but feeds personal freedom and the primacy of God’s plan.
- 8) Fr. Paoli highlights another dowry of Fr. Antonio as formator of the clerics: “Wonderful was the secret of reassuring consciences in him. To one who hesitated to be ordained priest, the night before, which was Good Friday, around midnight, listening to him in confession, he said with heartfelt emotion: “Go on, my son, go with courage to the altar. Until now you have been a sign of God’s mercy, from now on you will be his instrument and minister. Go, because the Lord is your inheritance”.
- 9) Again Fr. Paoli testifies another aspect of Fr. Antonio’s pedagogy, as formator to solid virtues and especially to the love of poverty, “the greatest patrimony of the Institute” according to the Founders: “He wanted everyone to observe the rules *corde magno et animo volenti*, and he repeated it often. He was eager to exercise humility and obedience well. He insisted that we read the rules carefully, and that everyone fully understood their spirit. Having established the congregation, he himself explained and shredded them in the Wednesday conferences. He was very strict about the perfect community. So, in the early years he often visited the cells, to see if there was anything superfluous”.
- 10) As a young priest, we know that Fr. Antonio immediately began to give an example of zealous industriousness, in the midst of a rather neglectful and bourgeois clergy. *The spirit of industriousness* was one of the main elements that Fr. Antonio tried to inculcate in the formandi. He did it with the words yes, but above all with the example of life. The clerics could see that the door of his cell was always open and at night, even at late hours, the Father studied, by candlelight: he prepared what, in the tradition of the Institute, are called the “conferences”, that is moments training. But besides that, he reviewed books, composed texts for school, studied the Bible, prayed, wrote letters. Certainly this working in the semi-darkness for long nights did not facilitate his eye problems and it does not surprise us, but if anything we are moved, to see his signatures on the documents in the last years of his life, when, “cecuziente”, he was writing on the paper an “X” with quavering hand.

It was with these things that Fr. Antonio formed hearts and prepared a future for the Congregation, whose purpose, in his thought and that of his brother, was to “exercise the office not so much of teachers, but of fathers”.

Fr. Marco formator in the “casetta”

In true joy of spirit, the two Servants of God educated their clerics. Fr. Marco gives us various examples as in the letters to Pietro Spernich (17th October 1824 and 18th June 1834), and in the “letter to the baroncelli della casetta” (21th October 1824).

When he was not traveling, Fr. Marco set a good example to everyone in the “casetta”: in him, in his bearing, in his attitudes, he saw an evident trace of that “formidable love of God” (so a witness will express himself at the beatification process) that animated him. In the corridors of the “casetta”, for example, it happened that sometimes he stopped in silence and, thinking he was not being seen by anyone, he brought his right hand to his heart, adding some brief prayers to this gesture. He celebrated Mass in a space neither long nor short, but with a very uplifting recollection and with an expression of authentic piety, which then continued to manifest in a long thanksgiving. As in the Mass, so in the recitation of the divine office he saw himself so concentrated, as if he had no other worries.

The poverty of the “casetta” must not be idealized or seen in a poetic key. We can say that it did not help the health of the first congregates. With the benefit of hindsight and with the scientific knowledge that we have today, we understand that the humidity, the sanitary conditions, the living conditions in the “cottage” were not healthy. We say it with respect, but also with realism.

The saltiness of the nearby river penetrated the ground and impregnated the plaster of the walls, the sultry summer heat, the incrustations, the humidity, the winter cold, the diet and the general conditions were not a cure-all for those suffering from lung diseases.

The first generation of Cavanis paid a high price because of these conditions. It was a constant pain for Fr Marco to witness the death of the aspirants of the Institute at a young age. The young hopes went out, leaving the founders’ hearts torn, but always full of hope. If the work is of God - they said - it will have a future.

We can observe an aspect of the psychology of Fr. Marco, as formator in the “casetta”. Whenever some young congregation died, he wrote a detailed obituary, with a moved soul and a father’s heart. What is surprising in these obituaries is the level of profound knowledge that he demonstrated of the person. With the heart of a father, he traces the human and spiritual profile of the deceased, highlights his characteristics, indicates the virtues that will remain as an example for the congregates, and is not even ashamed to mention, with gentleness and sweetness, with tact, prudence and respect, also the limits, the frailties, the struggles sustained. This realism, this frankness, the intellectual honesty that shuns easy hagiographic idealizations, tells us what kind of man Fr. Marco was. But it also gives us a glimpse of another thing: only those who had direct, personal, prolonged and frequent knowledge could offer such a precise and affectionate description of the person.

The obituaries written by Fr. Marco seem to be detailed reports on candidates for religious life: realistic, honest, practical, objective. Here the formator’s eye can be glimpsed, the perspective of a man of God, who knows how to see with the gaze of faith, without letting himself be deceived by appearances, but scrutinizing the heart, feelings, emotions.

It is true that Fr. Marco had to be absent for bureaucratic issues, to find funds for the nascent institute, to plead the cause of education. But he was not an absent father. He was not a trainer with the heart elsewhere. His spirit was always in the “casetta”, as he writes several times in the letters. Even when he was traveling, the thought, the prayer, the affection, the concern, everything was addressed to the “casetta” and to those whom he humorously called the “baroncelli”, that is, the young people in formation. These were at the top of his worries and thoughts.

“Our workers”, as he calls the young hopes of the Congregation, were his constant concern: he knew that the future of the Institute depended on formation.

A “casetta” of Saints

Supernatural prudence guided the Founders in the “casetta”. In them lived a supernatural intuition for holiness.

For example, Fr. Marco was admired by clerics because he continually asked for advice before any important decision. The first counselor was, of course, his brother, whom he also consulted while traveling. Everyone in the “casetta” could see it.

But the people he used for advice were many. Among the most prominent names we must mention: S. Maddalena di Canossa (founder of the Daughters and Sons of Charity, canonized in 1988), S. Gaspare Bertoni (Founder of the Stimmatini, canonized in 1989), S. Ludovico Pavoni (founder of the Sons of Maria Immacolata, canonized in 2016) and St. Vincenzo Pallotti (founder of the Congregation and Society of the Catholic apostolate, canonized in 1963).

It should also be said, however, that if he humbly appealed to the prudence and experience of others, the others turned in turn to his prudence and experience, as did S. Maddalena di Canossa and S. Ludovico Pavoni. Rosmini himself (Founder of the Institute of Charity, beatified in 2007) esteemed him deeply, visited him in the “casetta” and recommended himself to his prayer.

The nineteenth century was a difficult century, but also a century of saints. The young Cavanis in formation were aware of living in the company of two saints, who in turn had other saints as friends. This beneficial imprint has marked the roots of the Congregation.

Charity: heart of the “casetta” and inheritance for the Cavanis of the future

In his last address to the community of July 16th, 1853, just three months before his death, Fr. Antonio still urged everyone to “never tire or lose heart for anybody difficulties” and added: “Well you see how much it is necessary for you to implore from the Lord a hardworking spirit, a feeling of full and constant disinterest, and a heart animated by an invincible suffering; but, following the examples of our glorious Fr. Giuseppe Calasanzio, I cannot leave you to recommend a spirit of constant firmness in a special way”.

The fraternal charity that Fr. Antonio had witnessed in the “casetta” throughout his life, recommends it even a few moments before dying, according to what Fr. Sebastiano Casara attests. Who writes how, after having received the Viaticum, “Fr. Antonio told me to recommend charity to our brothers, by which we were always closely united. This was the only advice he made to me in death”.

After the funeral of Fr. Antonio it was Casara himself who, in his room, with amazement found in his diary, that twenty years earlier, in the retreat made before the canonical institution of the Congregation, Fr. Antonio had spoken of fraternal charity with such strength and fervor “that it seemed to us a St. John. And he concluded by saying that at the time of his death he would not have been able to give us any other memory than this: love one another reciprocally”.

And so in fact Fr. Antonio died in the “casetta”.

In the way he had prophesied twenty years before.

(traduzione a cura di Fr. Remo Morosin)