

# A Visionary with a Mission

Mother Seraphina



Sr. Helen Mankanthanam

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## Mother Seraphina

*The Foundress of the Institute of the Clarist Franciscan  
Missionaries of the Most Blessed Sacrament (CFMSS)*

By:

**Sr. Helen Mankanthanam**

(Sesquicentennial Year of the Birth of the Venerable Foundress)

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## Mother Seraphina



## DEDICATION

Dedicated to each member of the Indian Provinces,

Those who are and those to come

Walking in the footsteps of Francis and Clare

After the example of Seraphina Farolfi

Who strove to be a seraph of love:

Contemplating Jesus in the Sacrament of Love,

Offering acts of abnegation in expiation of sins

Committed by heedless men and women;

Drawing them to the foot of the Cross

To be sprinkled with the blood of Redemption.

May all of us and those who come after us,

Be gripped by her zeal for souls,

Yearning for holiness, yielding to God's will,

Passionate love for the Eucharistic Lord -

The CFMSS' badge, seal and identity -

And live her motto: *I Carry the Mysteries!*



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## Foreword

As I introduce Mother Seraphina, A Visionary with a Mission, first of all, I would like to thank God for the gift of our sister Helen Mankanthanam who passionately and competently hones her intellectual skills to the relentless research work on the history of our Institute and its Venerable Foundress, Mother Seraphina Farolfi. In her quest for knowledge she dives down deeper to the very roots of our origin and gladly offers us the precious pearl she finds. She revises, retouches and embellishes whatever she has already written, enriching it with the new findings in order to update us on our spiritual and apostolic patrimony.

The story of the Institute merges with the biography of the one who has founded it. It unravels the life of Mother Seraphina with all the nuances of her earthly existence: her aspirations, dreams, hopes, joys and sorrows, acknowledging that it is God who has led her according to his plan and clearly manifesting that the power of the Most High shines forth brightly in human weakness.

To write a biography is to recapitulate in the persons and events the memorial of the Last Supper, "Do it in memory of me". The mystery of a God who becomes incarnate for the love of men and women and gifts himself

totally till the very end when he offers himself to the Father and to humanity! A mystery that is renewed in the Eucharistic celebration and in the life of those persons like Mother Seraphina, who offer themselves as a Eucharist of love: a self-gifting to others, a song of praise resonating from the harp of one's life, the melodious notes of which contain all the dimensions of human existence.

Thank you, dear Sr. Helen, for the gift of your new work. Thanks for the love you have lavished on it. We hope that the book will contribute to the rekindling of the Eucharistic flame in all those who will be reading it. On behalf of the whole Institute I say:

"May God Bless You"!

*Sr. P. Maria Rosaria Beninca*

Superior General

21.09.2004

## Preface

In 1982, when I began writing the biography of Mother Seraphina, I had very little knowledge of the rich nuances of the idiomatic expressions, or the impact of the socio-political upheavals, or the *modus operandi* of the diocesan/ Roman curia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy. The manuscript of the Foundress was not easily decipherable; her language was embedded with local idioms, and without cross-references the content of her letters at times seemed obscure. The slipshod educational system for the girl child in the land of Dante and Galileo was a mystifying puzzle for me, brought up as I was in Kerala – the State with the highest literacy rate in India. Apart from the intricacies of the Italian grammar, quite baffling it was too, to grasp the government's throttling hold on the religious Institutions, despite the country's age-old veneration of its Saints and its possessiveness about their relics, or the grandeur of their titular Churches. The usurpation of the papal states could be explained away as a political expediency in building up the Italian nation. But to me the annexation paled into trivia beside the disgusting wrangling of the diocesan curia of Forli and Bertinoro over the juridical status of the Badia community.

Within the past score of years I have had the fortune to gather a wide collection of Mother's writings to people of all walks of life – pupils, lay persons, sisters, priests, bishops, cardinals and even popes, besides letters written to her by various persons; and I could broaden my vision of Seraphina against the backdrop of the socio-cultural Italy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Nevertheless, one could write pages and pages about

Mother Seraphina and still not have said anything. For she was a woman of unfailing faith and trust in God unfathomable inner strength born of her union with the Eucharistic Jesus, and a clear vision of the Congregation's charism and mission bathed in the light of the Sacrament of Love.

Ever since she joined the Franciscan Tertiaries of St. Elizabeth at Forli, on October 27, 1873 Seraphina's vision was to streamline the congregation's educational endeavours and to rejuvenate the Tertiaries with fresh ideals, new goals, updated methods and above all, a paradigm shift in view of the changing scenario. She dreamed about opening numerous "tabernacles for Jesus" and have the various houses centered around a "Mother House" whose duty it was to impart integral formation to the members, administer the pastoral and financial affairs of the filial convents, provide personnel for the various activities et al. Very soon Seraphina realized that her vision of reaching out to far-off lands to build God's Kingdom would remain a pipe dream as long as she continued to be a member of the Franciscan Tertiaries who were strictly under the jurisdiction of the Local Ordinary.

The 1890s set in motion events that challenged Seraphina to prove her mettle: the opening of a branch school at Bagno di Romagna, taking the momentous decision to transfer St. Francis' Boarding School from Forli to Bertinoro, prayerfully discerning God's will amidst the conflicting views of the diocesan curia of Forli and Bertinoro, decisively adhering to God's plan for herself, her sisters and the boarders who had pledged allegiance to her, and the like.

Seraphina's decision to continue running the residential school at Bertinoro brought in its wake a stream of accusation, misunderstanding, outright condemnation, estrangement and even abandonment by both her sympathizers and nit-pickers alike. The ecclesiastical authorities of Forli would neither sanction the Badia community as a branch house of the Tertiaries, nor endorse the construction of a school at Forli. The Bertinoro townsfolk, on the other hand, offered moral and financial support to establish the school at the Badia. In the eye of the ecclesiastical storm Seraphina saw the hand of God that propelled her to take the epoch-making decision to be separated from Forli, admit candidates to the novitiate, write the *Rules and Regulations for the Novices* clearly defining her vision of a new congregation.

The last decade of the 19th century was, indeed, a landmark in the history of the CFMSS. It saw not only the birth of the new Institute but also its flourishing growth towards the close of the century.

The charism that gave life and origin to the religious family of the CFMSS – the original inspiration that shaped its specific way of being, its new way of living, its mission and spirituality – is centered around Jesus in the Sacrament of Love. Living a Eucharist-centered life and being a missionary are thus the twin arms of its foundational charism. Seraphina expects every religious to make the Eucharist – the centre of the life and activity of the Institute, the animating force of her own consecrated life and draw from it the strength to meander through the twists and turns of everyday life. In other words, each sister is to enter the living reality of Christ's sacrifice for the salvation of humankind and thereby

become a sacrificial victim of love for the life of the world by her life of prayer, penance and evangelization.

Seraphina envisioned the Institute of the CFMSS as an evangelizing community nurtured by the contemplation of the Eucharistic Lord and carrying His redeeming love to all those awaiting His healing touch. As daughters of St. Clare, the sisters are to grow in intimacy with Christ, daily contemplating the Sacrament of Love, feeding their soul with the Word of God and the Liturgy of the Hours. As followers of St. Francis, they are to carry on the Evangelical mandate to proclaim the Good news by the sermon of their life, words and actions. Hence the banner: "*Go my daughters, enkindle Christ's love in every heart and set it on fire with love for Jesus in the Eucharist*".

The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the unfolding of the missionary dimension of the Institute, as well as the emergence of orphanages as a salient feature of the apostolate of the CFMSS. On February 3, 1901 a group of four zealous sisters left the shores of Italy to sow the seeds of Gospel among the people of North India. Again on July 3, 1907 a quartet, headed by the saintly Sr. Bernardina Baldassari, reached Itambacury in Brazil to supplement the evangelizing ministry of the Capuchin Friars among the woodsmen. Seraphina often preferred the most challenging locale to the glamour and glare of the glitzy towns. Her choice usually was the back of beyond other congregations shied away from. In fact, most of the mission stations the CFMSS opted for, were inaccessible places tucked away from civilization.

Pope Pius X's approbation of the Institute on May 9, 1907 was a singular event in the nine years of its existence.

Another notable milestone was the approbation of the Constitution by Pope Benedict XV on August 12, 1915 – the feast of St. Clare. Seraphina based her Constitution on the Rule of St. Clare – “the Saint of the Eucharist”. For in Clare’s contemplative life, she found the leitmotif for the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament to combine the role of Mary and Martha in their day-to-day life of “action-contemplation”. The Constitution was forwarded to the Congregation for the Religious in 1913, each article bearing the teeth-mark of the censors’ shears. However, the consultants and canonists had to bow before Seraphina’s determined stand on those very articles she claimed were ‘dictated by her inner voice’: for example, those relating to ‘exemption from dowry’, ‘equal status of sisters’ –whether educated or uneducated, skilled in domestic or professional arts, ‘the recitation of the Divine Office’ according to the custom of the Poor Clares, ‘dependence on the order of Friars Minor’ etc.

Initially, education of the girl child was the main apostolate of the CFMSS. Concern for the underprivileged, especially the destitute and orphan girls from impoverished families had a special slot in the heart of Mother Seraphina. She would admit indigent girls to the residential school and rope in rich patrons to sponsor their educational expenses. Whenever natural or man-made calamities struck down a town, she would hasten to the aid of the roofless and the orphaned. In January 1909, some refugees of Calabria – rendered homeless by the earthquake of December 28, 1908 – found a warm shelter at the Badia. In 1915, it was the turn of the children of Marsica whose houses were razed to the ground by the earthquake on January 13, 1915, to be

welcomed and cared for by the CFMSS. With the First World War adding to the number of the parentless and homeless, care for the disadvantaged girls became another hallmark of the mission of the CFMSS.

The year 1916 highlighted the apostolate of the CFMSS with another bold stroke namely, medical care. In the early years of the Institute, there was no provision for the medical apostolate in the formation programme of its members. At the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a feeler was put out by the secretary of the Cesenatico Hospital to gauge the sisters’ availability for primary health care.\* Practical knowledge of curative and preventive health care was an indispensable requisite for the missionaries in India and Brazil. Yet nothing worth mentioning was done to equip the young members with this essential skill. The First World War, however, yanked the sisters off the class rooms and thrust them into the casualty wards of the hospital barracks at Ravenna, Bologna, Foligno and Rome. Thus originated the medical apostolate of the CFMSS which soon evolved into a distinctive facet of the congregation’s outreach programme, especially in the rural areas.

Reading the signs of the times and rising to meet the challenges thereof, is a legacy that Seraphina has handed down to her daughters. Down through the decades of the twentieth century the CFMSS would rise to the signs and the needs of the times, venturing out to new ministries like Home for Senior Citizens, Crèche for abandoned babes, Working Girls’ Hostel, Rehabilitation Centres for ex-convicts / prostitutes / juvenile delinquents / drug-

\* 26.09.1899: Seraphina’s Let. to the Secretary of the Cesenatico Hospital



addicts, Support Homes for children/ youth from broken families, soup kitchen for refugees, social service centres in tribal belts, catechesis and direct evangelization among adivasis, prison ministry and other insertional initiatives. Care would also be taken that these ministries are firmly rooted in the original inspiration received by our Venerable Foundress Mother Seraphina and the core identity she had envisioned for her Institute.

The need to reprint *Mother Seraphina* came as a godsend as I had never dreamt I would get a chance to revise it. A few historical-geographical gaps and the glaring omission of Seraphina's 'yearning for perfection' in the biography were some of the lacunas that had been gnawing at my literary conscience for the past decade. I am, indeed, glad that thanks to the shortage of copies of *Mother Seraphina*, I have had the opportunity to redeem her profile. I still cannot say that I have done full justice to her characterization in the revised edition. However, the sisters can always supplement their knowledge of our Mother Foundress by referring to *Set on Fire* for an in-depth study of the 'Indian Mission', to *Educate while Teaching* for details of Seraphina's education policy and to *The Blazing Fire* for specifics of the 'Eucharistic-Missionary Charism' of the CFMSS.

The revision work had to be shelved thrice due to urgent tasks of the Institute during the years 2003-2004. I am grateful to Miss Harsha Arora for her expertise and cheerful presence in patiently typing out the manuscript and taking out reams of printout till the text was finally ready for the press. Gratitude is also owed to my co-sisters Sr. Joyce Thadathil who competently proofread the computer printout and to Sr. Emmanuela Falleira who

gave the final printout a meticulous scrutiny, both of whom are ever ready to offer their services despite their pressing obligations.

A word of special thanks to the Provincial Council, sisters of the Indian Provinces, and in particular to the members of St. Anthony's Convent, Faridabad, for their moral and spiritual support as well as concern and interest in all my literary endeavours.

Finally, I owe the deepest gratitude to the Giver of all goods for the gift of His Spirit of wisdom, knowledge and discernment, without Whose constant guiding finger I wouldn't have been able to bring out *The Visionary with a Mission*.

**Sr. Helen Mankanthanam**

01.10.2004

## Table of Contents

<i>Preface</i>	VIII
<i>Chronology</i>	XIX
<b>Chapter I:</b>	
<i>Francesca Farolfi and Her Childhood Dream</i>	1
The Master Calls	5
<b>Chapter II:</b>	
<i>The Franciscan Tertiaries of St. Elizabeth</i>	10
The Young Directress of the School	18
<b>Chapter III: Sr. Seraphina, the Educationist</b>	
A School with a Difference	21
Education for character Formation	22
The Teacher: A Role Model for the Students	24
Teachers Skilled in the Art of Education	27
Teacher: A Wise Parent to the Students	29
The Principal: A Caring Person	30
	33
<b>Chapter IV:</b>	
<i>The Expanding Circle of Apostolate</i>	36
Palagano: "The Immaculate Conception"	38
Fresh Sorrow and Joy	45
Bagno di Romagna: "Guardian Angel"	47
<b>Chapter V: The Bolt from the Blue</b>	
Death Takes its Toll	54
Bertinoro in Birth Pangs	57
Who Stirred up the Hornet's Nest	62
	65

<b>Chapter VI: Point of No Return</b>	
The Storm Gathers Speed	72
Dissension and Deadlock	81
	85
<b>Chapter VII:</b>	
<i>The New Shoot on the Franciscan Tree</i>	91
Drafting a Constitution	95
Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament	97
Daughters of St. Clare	102
Franciscan Missionaries	106
Under the Seraphic Banner	109
The Decree of Aggregation	110
The Legal Status of the Institute	111
<i>Practical Guide to Our Sanctification</i>	115
Definitive Approbation of the Constitution	116
The Decree of Approbation	121
<b>Chapter VIII: The World is Our Cloister</b>	
Conditions for Opening a House	124
Developments at Home	125
The Call from Hindustan	127
The Legacy of Begum Samru	130
Regular Franciscan Tertiaries	136
St. Francis Convent, Meerut	138
St. Francis Convent, Agra	139
School for the Italian Immigrants in Newark	143
The Woodsmen of Itambacury	145
The Dove is Flown Home	148
Diamantina: Cradle of the Brazilian Mission	154
The Woodland of Conceicao	156
Reading the Signs of Time	159
A Burning Concern for the Underprivileged	160
In the Casualty Ward	162
Prayer Missile	165
	167

<b>Chapter IX: <i>The Passover</i></b>	<b>170</b>
Long Years of Illness	173
June 15: Feast of Sacred Heart	183
June 20: Solemn Mass for the Dead & Funeral Procession	187
Tribute in Life and Death by the Community of Forli	191
The Mother Comes Back to Rest at the Abbey	192
Catherine Steps into her Sister's Shoes	194
Growth of the Institute	195
Decentralization of the Institute	201
The Bombing of the Badia	202
 <b>Chapter X: <i>The Legacy of the Foundress</i></b>	 <b>209</b>
Pursuit of Perfection	210
Searching for the Will of God	217
The Eucharist: The Centre of Her Life	224
In Union with the Lamb Immolated on the Cross	230
Burning Love for the Crucified	233
In the Footsteps of a God who Died for Humankind	237
Living the Liturgy	241
The Virgin's Role in Seraphina's Life	245
The Advocate of Papacy	249
 <b>Conclusion</b>	 <b>255</b>

## *Chronology*

**Sr. Maria Chiara Serafina di Jesu**  
**(07.10.1853 - 18.06.1917)**

07.10.1853	Birth at Tossignano. Born of Frederico and Ottilia Farolfi
08.10.1853	Is baptized under the name Francesca
18.04.1861	Is administered the Sacrament of Confirmation
12.04.1862	Receives the First Holy Communion.
Feb-Aug 1873	Attends the diploma course in Teacher Training at the Tavelli Institute.
27.10.1873	Leaves home without her father's permission and joins the Franciscan Tertiaries of Forli. Is entrusted with the administration of St. Francis School.
28.10.1874	Begins novitiate. Continues to wear the secular attire so as to escape the notice of the civil authorities who have forbidden admission of new candidates to religious congregation.
22.08.1875	Obtains Higher Diploma in Teacher Training.
28.10.1875	First Profession. Mr. Farolfi, having been reconciled with his daughter's decision, is present at the ceremony, along with his younger daughter Giannina.
28.10.1876	Giannina enters novitiate. Receives the religious name Sr. Caterina of the Sacred Heart.

- \_\_\_\_ 1876 Maria Teresa Farolfi is admitted to St. Francis Boarding School.
- \_\_\_\_ 1880 Writes *Rules and Regulations for St. Francis School*.
- 15.01.1881 Draws up "Steps for Attaining Holiness" at the close of the retreat preached by Fr. Luigi Canali, her long time spiritual director.
- 27.02-26.8.1881 Administers the school at Palagano.
- 1881 - 1884 Revises the Constitution for St. Francis Convent, Forli. Updates her "Method of Life".
- 27.04.1887 Death of Frederick Farolfi.
- 1887 - 1890 Seriously ill. Spends the days mostly in quarantine.
- \_\_\_\_ 1888 Revises "*Steps for Attaining Holiness*".
- May 1891-1992 Is sent to open a school at Bagno di Romagna.
- 01.12.1892 Sr. Beniamina of Carmel (Maria Teresa Farolfi) dies of tuberculosis.
- Mar.-July 1893 Sanitary Inspection of St. Francis School followed by order to close down the school till a new building is built according to the prescribed rules.
- 29.07.1893 Transfer of St. Francis Boarding School to Bertinoro.
- 1893 - 1897 Dispute between the dioceses of Forli and Bertinoro with regard to the "juridical status" of the community at the abbey of Bertinoro. Mgr. Vincenzo Scozzoli and

- Mgr. Frederick Polloni defends respectively the community of Forli and Bertinoro before the tribunal of Cardi. Domenico Swampa - the former Bishop of Forli and currently Archbishop of Bologna.
- 29.10.1895 The Badia community is officially taken under the jurisdiction of the diocese of Bertinoro.
- 06.02.1896 Eight candidates are admitted to the novitiate at the Badia.
- 21.04.1896 *Rule for the Novitiate* is drawn up by Seraphina.
- 24.05.1896 Death of Ottilia Farolfi.
- 1897-1898 Forfeiture of the title-deed to the dowry by the Bertinoro sisters. (held in trust by the Forli community)
- 01.05.1898 Birth of the Institute of the CFMSS. Profession of Mother Seraphina, the eight founding members and five novices according to the Rule of St. Clare and the new Constitution.
- 1898 - 1899 Convents opened at Pianetto, Ravenna & Cesenatico.
- \_\_\_\_ 1900 Writes the *Practical Guide*.
- 03.02.1901 Foundation of the Indian Mission. Four missionaries leave for India.
- October 1901 Installation of the CFMSS at Sardhana
- 09.08.1903 Coronation of Pope Pius X (Card. Joseph Sarto)

28.04.1904 The Institute of the CFMSS is aggregated to the Order of Friars Minor.

26.06.1904 The Convent at Trieste is opened. Trieste being under the Austrian Rule, the sisters are considered "foreigners". Bishop Nagl intervenes on their behalf.

1900 - 1907 Drafts the Constitution under the guidance of Abbot Arcangelo Lolli.

\_\_\_\_\_1905 Corresponds with the Bishop of Newark, New Jersey with regard to opening a mission there among the Italian immigrants.

09.05.1907 Approbation of the Institute of the CFMSS by Pope Pius X.

30.05.1907 Foundation of the Latin American Mission. Four missionaries leave for Itambacury, Brazil.

\_\_\_\_\_1907 Closure of St. Francis Convent, Sardhana.

January 1909 Care of the orphans becomes a pronounced apostolate of the CFMSS as a result of the earth quake of Calabria in 1908.

14.12.1909 Death of Sr. Bernardina of the Most Holy Name, Superior of the Brazilian Mission at Itambacury.

29.01.1912 St. Francis Convent, Agra opened.

15.09.1912 Closure of St. Francis Convent, Meerut.

09.02.1912 Death of Sr. Lorenzina at Agra

06.08.1914 Private audience with Pope Pius X.

20.08.1914 Death of Pope Pius X, who father like,

had been supporting Seraphina and her Institute especially during the critical years of the Indian Mission.

03.09.1914 Election of Pope Benedict XV (Giacomo della Chiesa, Archbishop of Bologna)

1913 - 1915 Final Draft of the Constitution.

12.08.1915 Approbation of the Constitution.

\_\_\_\_\_1916 The CFMSS initiates Medical care among the soldiers wounded in the First World War

18.06.1917 Dies after prolonged illness at the age of 63 years, 8 months and 15 days.

11.11.1936 Translation of the body of Mother Seraphina to the mortuary Chapel of the CFMSS.

June 1944 Sr. Bonaventura Salsi (Missionary in India from December 1920 - 1925) composes a novena to the Eucharistic Jesus for the glorification of Mother Seraphina and obtains approval for it from the Ecclesiastical Authorities of Enna and Palermo.

24.10. 1944 Bombardment of the Badia. Subsequent transfer of the Generalate to Rome.

1947 - 1949 Rev. Mother Carlina Pera, the fourth Superior General, assisted by Sr. Agata, the Secretary General, initiates steps to promote the Cause for Beatification, under the direction of Fr. Gregorio Giovanardi.

- 12.03.1948 The Municipal Corporation of Bertinoro donates the Badia with its adjoining lands to the CFMSS.
- 1950 - 1954 Collection of materials: Mother Seraphina's writings, Testimony of Witnesses, favours received through her intercession etc.
- March 1953-May 1955 Rebuilding of the Badia di Bertinoro.
- \_\_\_\_\_1968 Rev. Mother Pasqualina, the fifth Superior General, petitions for the official act of the Process of Canonization. Rev. Fr. Anastasio Curzola is appointed Vice Postulator.
- 01.05.1968 Inauguration of the Diocesan Process.
- 25.08.1970 Conclusion of the Process.
- 11.05.1971 Inauguration of the Cause for the Beatification by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.
- \_\_\_\_\_1971 Critical Examination of Seraphina's Writings.
- 12.04.1973 Translation of the mortal remains of Mother Seraphina to the newly-built chapel of the Mother House.
- 23.06.1995 Decree of *Super Validate* on the writings of Mother Seraphina by the Historical Commission.

## CHAPTER I

### *Francesca Farolfi : Her Childhood Dream*

*"Since the age of reason I felt the call to active religious life, precisely to a missionary one"*<sup>1</sup>

The infant prodigy with a missionary vocation is little Francesca, the third born of Frederic Farolfi and Ottilia Santandrea. Mr. Farolfi was the administrator of the hospital run by the Daughters of Charity at Tossignano in the diocese of Imola - a little town nestling in the shadow of the Appenine range and watered by the river Santerno. Frederic was also the purveyor of the Carmelite priory at Tossignano.<sup>2</sup> Like its sister towns in the district of Bologna, Tossignano is a pleasant cluster of villas, vineyards, orchards and corn-fields, with no striking monument to distinguish it from others. Situated 229 m. above sea level, its limestone range was a natural fortress against invasions by the armed forces that frequently marched across the Emilia-Tuscany highway.

The 1850s were a decisive period in Italian history. The Crimean War (1853 -56) was being fought between the Russian forces and the allied armies of Great Britain, France, Turkey and Sardinia. Il *Risorgimento* - the great Italian national revival - was riding the crest of a wave of annexation of the principalities of the Italian peninsula in its attempt to have a united republic. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Italy consisted of Piedmont in the northwest with its base in the island of Sardinia in the southwest, the Papal States in the centre, the kingdom of the Two Sicilies in the south

1. Petition sent to Procurator General of the Friars Minor, Rome 20.11.1894, Fasc. 28-D.  
2. It was the practice of the Mendicant Orders professing absolute poverty to have a procurator to administer their goods received in alms, or as dowry, or patrimony of the members, to transact land-deed or sale of donated property etc. In course of time the custom of having a procurator extended even to the other Orders and Congregations of both the sexes. Thus we find Fredric Farolfi administering the Institute of the Daughters of Charity or the goods of the Carmelite monks.

with its capital in Naples, and the Austrian-controlled Venetia in the northeast. In February 1849, the radicals had proclaimed the Roman Republic, but the insurrections led by the Romantic Nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi were quelled by the French Troops that recaptured Rome on July 3 of the same year. Garibaldi carried on his guerrilla warfare through the next decade and conquered Sicily and the kingdom of Naples during 1859 - 60.

Meanwhile, Count Camillo Cavour, the liberal Prime Minister of Victor Emmanuel II of Piedmont, connived at the unification of Italy through force of arms, secret diplomacy and his monarchist-unionist party *the Italian National Society*. In 1860 he took possessions of the Papal States in central Italy and brought up the Southern Kingdom conquered by Garibaldi under Piedmont's dominion.

In March 1861, Victor Emmanuel II was proclaimed King of Italy. Venetia was gained in 1866, and the Italian State easily annexed Rome in 1870 as a result of the withdrawal of the French troops during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. Then the capital was transferred to Rome from Florence.

Born on October 7, 1853 the Farolfi baby was baptized the next day with a name presaging her future activities. Did the parents choose the name Francesca so as to perpetuate the memory of their infant son, who had passed away on the eighth day of his birth just a year ago? Or was it because the whole of Italy was still ringing with the festive air of its beloved Patron Saint, Francis of Assisi? Were they inspired to name their babe after the saint in whose footsteps she would one day tread? Whether emotionally motivated or romantically influenced or even divinely inspired, the child showed a marked lineage to St. Francis, not only in her petite constitution and delicate health but also in

the apostolic zeal and universal love that inflamed her heart, right from infancy.

As a babe Francesca was consecrated to the Virgin by her wet nurse. On April 18, 1861, at the age of seven she received the Confirmation and two years later on April 12, 1863 she received the Holy Communion. Both these events must have been days of unlimited joy for the girl who felt herself drawn to the Divine Spouse since infancy. Her early biographies narrate her childhood desire to flee home and seek martyrdom in pagan lands. To such an ardent soul the practice of attending daily Mass was a renewed encounter with the Love that was preceding all other love.

"Right from infancy Francesca was inclined to prayer and pious exercise. Whatever the weather might be, she would rise early in the morning and attend Mass in the distant chapel of the Daughters of Charity, taking with her, her little brother Joseph for company". My poor papa used to say that he had two mothers in his childhood: the sweeter one was Francesca."<sup>3</sup>

Little Francesca began her elementary education under the Daughters of Charity. Since no Middle School for girls existed in Tossignano, she was educated by her paternal uncle who coached her for not only the high school examination but also for a Teacher's Diploma, which she obtained in six months at the Tavelli Institute at Ravenna. While at Ravenna, she opened her soul to her spiritual director Canon Carlo Uberti, who had noted in her an extraordinary combination of gifts and virtues: keen intelligence, strong will power, sense of duty and honour, the ability to express herself, coupled with a strong faith in God and a complete surrender to the will of God. She would not open her correspondence unless it was gone through by Mons. Uberti: such was her confidence in him; and she placed herself wholly

3. Testimony of Fredric Farolfi - son of Joseph Farolfi & Lucia Oriani - sworn before Fr. Gregory Giovanardi OFM and Fr. James of Tossignano OFM on 5th Sept. 1949.

under his guidance. She was eternally grateful to him for his continued spiritual care of her ever since the Tavelli days, so much so that on hearing of his death on January 12, 1914 she wrote to the secretary of Pope Pius X, requesting His Holiness a suffrage for Mons Uberti.

Of a sanguine temperament - so attests her health certificate - Francesca was optimistic and confident, resolute and dynamic, firm and imperious. Through the exercise of virtues directly opposed to her natural propensities she strove for self-control, especially over her emotivity and impulsiveness, which would assert every now and then. Joseph Bombardini who attended her catechism class attests to her victory over self:

As a girl Francesca Farolfi distinguished herself for her respect and obedience to her parents, for piety and fervour in the church, for her reserved and sober demeanour, for her modest bearing.... She used to take Catechism classes for us which I gladly attended.<sup>4</sup>

Intelligent and imaginative, quick and vivacious, daring and enterprising, diligent and resolute, Francesca was the pride of her father who chalked out a rosy future for his gifted daughter. Farolfi soon found a secretarial post for his talented Francesca: to help him in the administration of the hospital and of the Congregation of the Daughters of Charity at Tossignano. No less happy with her daughter was Ottilia, who freed her of so many worries in running the house. Francesca helped not only with the household chores but also with the studies of the younger ones. Jannina, the fifth born, soon became attached to her and under her tutelage began preparing herself for the Teacher's Diploma. Loving and solicitous, self-effacing and out-going, Francesca won the heart of all.

4. Testimony of Joseph Bombardini

Lively and energetic in her movement, yet reserved and sober in her conversation, Francesca to all appearance, was a model girl whom many a mother might have longed to claim as her would-be-daughter-in-law. Nor was there a dearth of suitors. Among them was Alfred Tozzoli, the secretary of the Congregation of Charity. Declining Tozzoli's proposal, Francesca told him that the ephemeral happiness the world could offer, had no hold on her, she being already espoused to the Divine Bridegroom.<sup>5</sup> No one could guess that the love she poured on all was but the reflex of a greater love that was engulfing her whole being, driving her to aspire to sublime heights. The mysterious voice that was luring her, even in her cradle, was taking a distinctive form and colour, making imperative demands as days passed by.

### The Master Calls

*"With the faculty of reasoning, along with the vocation to the religious state, I felt the call to die a martyr among idolatrous people...but my ardent desire was never realized".<sup>6</sup>*

Coupled with her ardent desire for martyrdom, was Francesca's eagerness to dedicate herself to the education of the youth, preferably in mission lands.

*"With this aim in mind, I took the Teacher's Diploma at Ravenna in August 1873. I dreamt nothing but of offering myself as a victim to Jesus to obtain my salvation along with that of my neighbours."<sup>7</sup>*

For a long time she toyed with the idea of joining the Daughters of Charity, under whom she had begun her schooling. However, she felt more drawn towards the daughters of Francis. For one thing her confessor and spiritual director, Fr. Lawrence of Buzzano,

5. As in footnote 3.

6. 12.6.1902: Letter of M. Seraphina to Bishop Guido Comforti, Fasc. 34

7. As in footnote 1



was a son of Francis. Then there was the church dedicated to St. Francis where, as a boarder at Ravenna, she had spent many a loving colloquy with the Lord. Perhaps her confessor had instilled in her a love for the Franciscan Order. Perhaps her missionary zeal led her to the footsteps of a Founder who, for the first time in religious history, had a whole chapter on missions incorporated into his Rule.

Seeking the will of God, when faced with problems of life, was Francesca's practice since childhood. "The real divine thermometer is to do the will of God", as she would write later to her sister Catherine, explaining the fruit of her own experience.<sup>8</sup> As a child she had sought the counsel of her confessor in fleeing home to seek martyrdom abroad and obeyed him when dissuaded from such a quixotic attempt. Now in her late teens, faced with the problem of choosing a congregation that would meet her eager longing to devote herself to the education of the youth, under the banner of the Seraphic Father Francis, she took the matter to her spiritual director. Fr. Lawrence of Buzzano had heard from the Definitor General of the Friars Minor, that at Forli, the Tertiaries were looking for a trained candidate who could be entrusted with the care of a boarding school. Here was a young girl, gifted and full of zest, ready to offer herself to the care of the youth. Both the confessor and the penitent thanked providence for giving them exactly what they were looking for.

So far so good. It was time to break the news to the family. Francesca had happily deluded herself that her pious parents would greet her decision with outbursts of joy and gratitude. Was not her beloved dad a member of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament and her mother a Franciscan Tertiary? ... But no! Mr. Farolfi raised the roof! No pleas, no supplications, no arguments could pacify him! All the castles he had built of her bright future

8. Memorial, 30.3.1895

Fasc. 28

came crashing down, the echoes slashing him through and through. His favourite daughter had betrayed him so ruthlessly! He shut the door against her, now turned a thorn in his flesh.

It was agony for the daughter to be estranged from a much-loved father. She shed bitter tears before the Blessed Sacrament to move her father to bless her resolution. As for obtaining her mother's permission she fared little better than with her father's. Initially Ottilla had raised objections to her daughter joining the convent. Who would help Marianna and Jannina, Joseph and Teresa with their studies? But she was slowly won over by Francesca's insistent pleas. Now torn between maternal solicitude and conjugal love, Ottilla tried a peace treaty between father and daughter. However, the father, adamant in his oath of silence, would listen neither to reason nor to tears.

Meanwhile the daughter was assailed by frequent spells of doubt. Am I really doing the will of God in embracing a religious vocation? Is my father's continued opposition a clear proof to the contrary? Am I not selfish in leaving behind my sisters and little brother who need my help?... She intensified her acts of penance and took her doubts to the secrecy of confession. Fr. Lawrence assured her that God was trying her love for Him and that He wanted her at Forli, if she was willing to answer His call. In her ears rang the words: "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me". (Mt. 10:37)

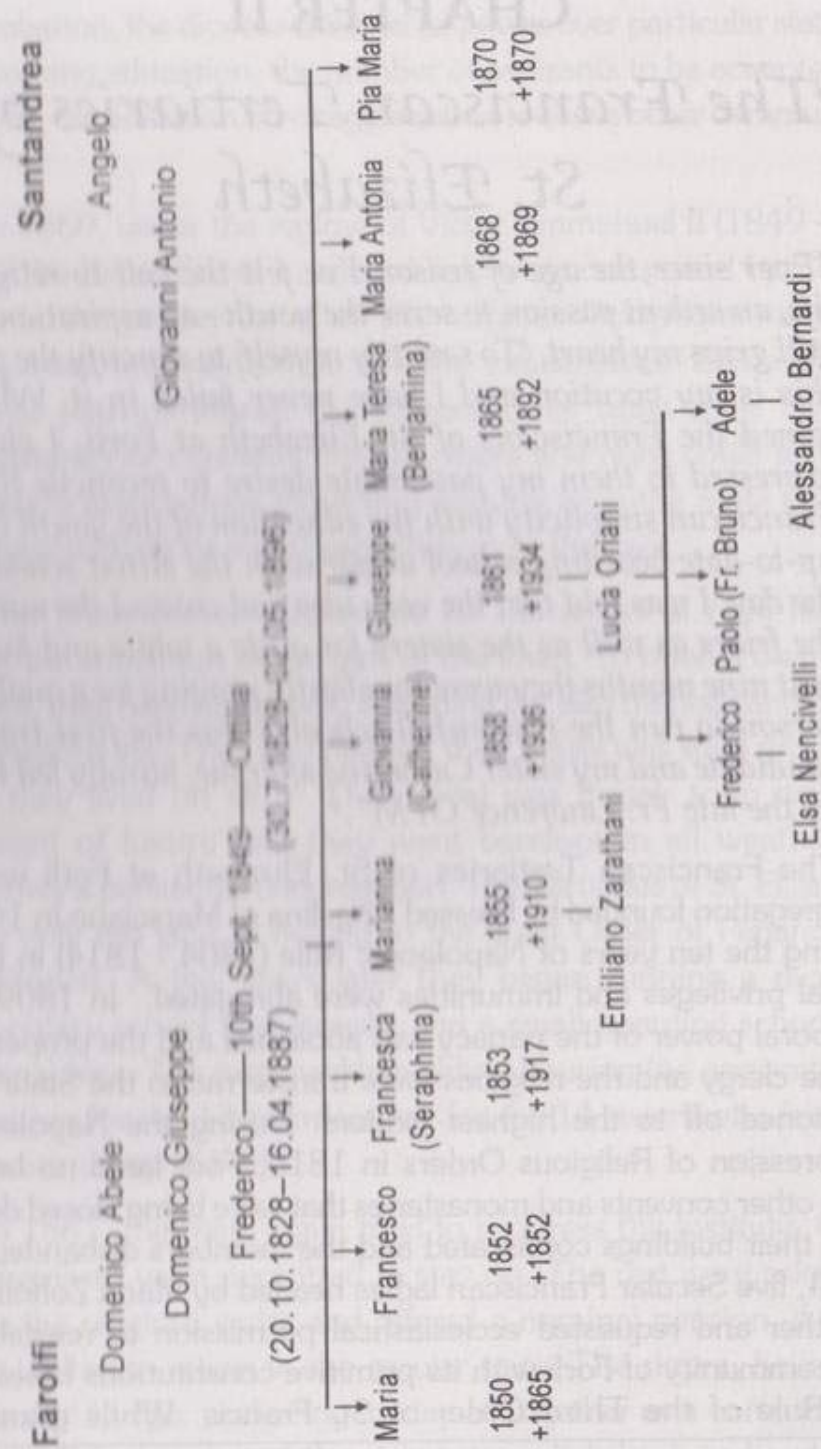
Francesca prayed and hoped, sighed and wept before the Sacrament of the Altar, till at last she was given the strength to leave home without her father's blessing. Before her mind, rose the comforting scene of Francis' renouncing his father who stood between him and his vocation; of Clare making a midnight tryst with Francis to have her call initiated in the silence of Portiuncula...

With a heavy heart she bade farewell to her dear brother and sisters and left her paternal home with her mother's blessing on October 27, 1873. We have no knowledge about the psychological sufferings of Francis and Clare in leaving their dear ones so dramatically; but we have ample evidence of the acute sufferings of Francesca for the loss of her father's love and blessing. It was not only during the two estranged years that she longed for his love, but also much later. When sufferings and misunderstandings bore down on her and when frequent doubts of her vocation assailed her, she would attribute the cause to her leaving home without her papa's benediction.

*"Why do my vocation bring on such evil? Why does my obedience produce such vicious effects? Have I not then been seeking Jesus and his Love? Oh, perhaps is it all because I have been going about without the blessing of my Father? Even in this I obeyed Fr. Lawrence. Thoughts about the past horrifies me; I tremble thinking of the future: and am continuously torn by anguish and pain at the very idea of the present. Oh that my indescribable suffering be meritorious! My whole being is worn out by so great an agony. If it lasts longer, death would be the decisive lot for all!"*

- So she wrote on May 27, 1894 to Fr. Luigi Canali, the Minister General, amidst the swirl of misunderstanding, calumny and condemnation of those turbulent years of her life.

THE FAROLFI FAMILY TREE



## CHAPTER II

# The Franciscan Tertiaries of St. Elizabeth

*"Ever since the age of reason I've felt the call to religious life, an ardent passion to serve the youth - an aspiration that still grips my heart. To sanctify myself, to sanctify the girls: this is my vocation and I have never failed in it. When I joined the Franciscans of St. Elizabeth at Forli, I clearly expressed to them my passionate desire to reconcile life in Franciscan simplicity with the education of the youth in an up-to-date boarding school at par with the elitist schools of the day. I was told that the very idea had crossed the mind of the friars as well as the sisters for quite a while and for the past nine months they were constantly praying for a qualified person to run the residential school. I was the first trained candidate and my sister Catherine after me, blindly led there by the late Fr. Lawrence OFM".<sup>1</sup>*

The Franciscan Tertiaries of St. Elizabeth at Forli was a congregation founded by Blessed Angelina of Marsciano in 1451. During the ten years of Napoleonic Rule (1804 - 1814) in Italy, feudal privileges and immunities were abrogated. In 1809 the temporal power of the papacy was abolished and the properties of the clergy and the religious were transferred to the State and auctioned off to the highest bidders. During the Napoleonic suppression of Religious Orders in 1810, Forli fared no better than other convents and monasteries that were being closed down with their buildings confiscated and the members disbanded. In 1834, five Secular Franciscan ladies headed by Maria Zoffoli got together and requested ecclesiastical permission to reestablish the community of Forli with its primitive constitutions based on the Rule of the Third Order of St. Francis. While granting

1. Petition sent to Cardinal Svampa on 29.7.1894. Scr. 50 p. 51-53

approbation, the diocese retained its power over particular statutes concerning education, the number of aspirants to be accepted or clothed, the affiliation of, or aggregation to some other community, etc.

In 1860, under the regime of Victor Emmanuel II (1849 - 78) when the Papal States in central Italy were conquered by Count Cavour, the properties of all the religious Congregations were confiscated and sold off to wealthy industrialists. Some of the devout patrons leased out to monks or nuns their former monasteries or convents. Monks, friars and nuns could exist as voluntary associations expecting nothing from the State by way of financial help or social securities as in the past.

The Friars Minor responsible for the sisters at Forli had at heart the education of the girls of the town. To open a boarding school, they needed not only a building but also trained candidates for religious life. They had neither: their house was state property and they lived on alms. Their meal was frugal: soup was an unheard of luxury and they went barefoot in all weather as becomes a penitential congregation. The Tertiaries of St. Elizabeth were only too glad to belong to the great Order of Penance of St. Francis. A few years later they began running a modest elementary school gratuitously, and a small boarding school on nominal fees. The ramshackle building housing the convent was fit neither for the 13 boarders nor for the 14 sisters who formed the community of Forli.

In 1867, the State again tried to suppress the Institute. Only six members were permitted to stay on. The rest were asked to leave the religious order and offered a nominal pension, if they were willing to return to the secular state. The sisters, however, refused to budge, preferring to stay all together as a community. Bishop Trucchi advised the sisters to switch back to lay dress,

and enroll themselves as office attendant or Class IV employees so as to escape notice. In 1874, came the order to dismiss all those who joined the convent since 1864, under threat of expulsion, even those vested earlier in case of disobedience or revolt.<sup>2</sup> To confound the matter further, an inspection of the school carried out in 1872, declared that the boarding school could no more be run without qualified personnel.

It was at this stage that Francesca Farolfi made her entry into the convent at Forli, on October 27, 1873. The young aspirant was entrusted with the care of the small boarding school, to which she dedicated all her youthful enthusiasm and apostolic zeal. Her sanctification as well as that of the boarders was her goal, to obtain which she spared neither herself nor her pupils. Francesca had a charm of her own in addition to her intuitive knowledge of persons and situations. She soon won over the affection of the old sisters, the esteem of her young students, and the approval of the friars.

"1873: According to the Inspection Report of 1872, we were to close down the residential school, unless and until we have had trained members to run it. On October 27, the community received Francesca Farolfi of Tossignano, a young candidate with the Junior Teacher's Training Certificate who would undertake ventures worth mentioning as we subsequently witnessed. The new candidate poured herself into her mission with the utmost zeal, wholly devoting herself to the progress of the boarding school and the school for the poor. She ineffably won the love of the pupils whose number grew with the growth of her fame."

2. "With the restriction to accept candidates, novices and neo-professed were not dressed in the religious habit in order to escape public attention. During the spring of 1876, state officials stormed the convent. Sr. Seraphina was presented as the Head-Mistress, another as teacher, a third as clerk and so on. Jannina being too young was shown as a boarder while the older postulants were quickly sent out for a long walk. The inspection went off smoothly and there was no more threat or menace." (The Diary of the Tertiary Sisters of Forli, pp. 50-55)

So goes the entry in the House Diary of the Tertiaries compiled by Christina Barusi,<sup>3</sup> that gives us a vivid portrait of the initial stages of Francesca Farolfi's religious life.

The year of postulancy being over, Francesca entered the novitiate on October 27, 1874 changing her name to Seraphina of Jesus. Was it a coincidence or a deliberate choosing of names? Francis, the Seraph of Assisi, was the model she wanted to imitate in her journey towards perfection. Had she taken the name Seraphina to be consumed by the seraphic love of the Poverello? Incidentally the restorer of the Travelli Institute at Ravenna after the Suppression, was Sr. Seraphina Cardoni (+1827), whose holy memory was still fresh among the people when Francesca entered the boarding there. Had she purposely taken the same name, conscious of her being the renovator of Forli...? Whatever one might conjecture about the selection of name, the fact remains that she was a renovator in more than one sense, like her Seraphic Father.

What preparations she might have made for the memorable day of her vestiture! How painstakingly she must have spent or wanted to spend the day of her postulancy! The letter she wrote to her sister two years later gives us a glimpse of her own striving after perfection:

*"By the very fact that you'll be laying aside your dress and putting on the sacred habit, resolve to divest yourself of your self-will and offer it to your future bridegroom. Girding your loins with the cord, heartily embrace obedience; and covering your head with the white veil, cherish purity and modesty and make them your faithful companions till death.... Oh the Sacred Mysteries that draw us to the Most High! Oh the*

3. The Diary was compiled in the early twentieth century on the basis of the testimony of the surviving members, and preserved in the archives of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception at Palagano to which the Congregation of the Tertiaries of St. Elizabeth were amalgamated in 1925.

*joys that the worldly ones can never experience or understand! Fortunate are we to be made partakers of such a happy lot!"*<sup>4</sup>

Very soon the young novice was disillusioned, not of her love for her Divine Spouse, but of the Congregation she had opted for. As a novice she was expected to take part in all the community acts and observe faithfully all the prescribed penitential acts, fasts and abstinence. But the school was claiming all her attention. The austere life of the Tertiaries was at odds, not only with her delicate constitution but also with her ideals of education. Right from the start, she was, like Don Bosco, convinced of the value of preventive education: to be always with the children in order to guide them and minimize the occasions of their lapses. Even though helped by the neo-professed Francesca Lolli, she found that she could do justice neither to the school nor to her own sanctification. She wanted to spend hours in loving colloquy before the Lord in the tabernacle; but her maxim was: "For the love of God never leave the children alone, neither the boarders nor the day-scholars."<sup>5</sup> Seraphina had not only to teach classes, but supervise the studies and recreation of the boarders without neglecting the community acts. She also had to set the growing boarding school on a sure footing with prescribed rules for day-scholars and boarders, with a curriculum on a par with the best of public schools and with a full-fledged staff to teach the various subjects and crafts, so as to give an adequate education to the girls of noble rank. Meanwhile, she had to sit for the public exam conducted by the State for teachers of higher grade, as well as help the aspirants and other young religious obtain a teacher's diploma. On September 15, 1875 she was awarded the Higher Grade Teacher's Certificate.

4. Letter to Jannina 17.10.1876 Fasc. XIX

5. Letter to Catherine, 22.10.1903 Fasc. XII

Seraphina was exempted from certain community acts; special dishes were given to her because her delicate constitution was giving in to the austerities of convent discipline and she was slowly losing weight. The growing number of students in the day school as well as in the boarding school brought with it features that were completely alien to the age-old convent routine. Some of the old sisters looked askance at the changes taking place in their life style; but they had nothing to disapprove of in the daring young novice.

In the midst of her ceaseless activities Seraphina suffered physically and morally. Apart from the constant grief for her father's stubborn attitude towards her, her own conscience reproved her of the dichotomy between what she was practicing and what she was soon going to profess publicly. She knew she was bringing in new characteristics to a traditionally penitential congregation, raising eyebrows among the orthodox members. Yet adhering to its austere features, she could not carry on her apostolate among the youth. Consequently doubts and anguish tore her: "Have I chosen the right place? Forli is diametrically opposed to what the Lord asks of me! Or is it because I have joined the convent without my daddy's blessing?" The obstinacy of her father gnawed at her heart. He would not read her letters, throwing them into the flames as soon as they arrived. He had forbidden the family to speak about her and he mourned her as if already dead... As far as he was concerned she was among his departed children: Maria the eldest dying at fifteen, Francesco when eight days old, Antonia when one year old and Pia Maria dying a few hours after her birth - the eldest two and the youngest two. There was no hope of breaking the ice even after all these months. Seraphina's heart bled for her father.

As the days of her profession drew nearer and nearer Seraphina became restless. The year of novitiate for her was a series of

inner turmoils, one more violent than the other. Why profess a rule that she was not going to keep? Why promise to observe a life of penance when at every turn the teaching sisters would have to ask for exemption? Why at all continue to stay in a convent that hindered her apostolic activities?

*"Your Eminence, you already know the changes that have taken place in the life of the community: the impact of the educational apostolate on the old austere life-style, the incompatibility of the new features with the "enclosed" penitential life. I felt it pointless to destroy one dimension to forge another one. I desisted from the rift and did not want to make my profession for fear that I wouldn't be able to realize my true vocation. Mgr. Trucchi was also of the same opinion. But the Franciscans through their spokesperson, Fr. Bonaventure of Castelazzo, assured me that it was the will of the Order that the community be transformed into an entity beneficial to the society, and that I was the instrument chosen by Providence to bring about the desired change. I blindly believed them. Though I felt extreme repugnance for the conflict I was in for, I convinced myself with the reassuring words of my confessor."*<sup>6</sup>

The customary voting to pool the opinion of the community about admitting novices to the profession of religious vows was about to take place. Bishop Trucchi who had a soft corner for Seraphina and who had warned her that Forli was not the place for her, asked her to expound to the sisters in Chapter the changes that would come about in the community by the establishment of a full-fledged boarding school. They had to deliberate well upon casting their vote for her, for by the very fact that they were consenting to her being professed, they would naturally be assenting to the proposed changes she would soon be affecting.

6. As in footnote 1. p.10

It was the last straw for Seraphina to cling to: some black votes from the dissenting sisters. But no... the vote was unanimous in her favour and she greeted the manifest will of God with a copious stream of tears!

In exchange for her surrender to His will, God had a present for her on September 13, 1875. There was her father with open arms to heal the wound inflicted two years ago. Then there was her darling Jannina ready to join her elder sister in serving the youth in the Franciscan way. Oh what a joyful encounter! The father and daughter embraced and the two years of agony and grief vanished into thin air, sealing their bond tighter. It was the miracle she had been praying for. "Abandon yourself in the hands of Jesus and He will do what is best for your soul", she would write months later to Jannina, convinced of the truth she stated.<sup>7</sup>

In Francesca's absence, Jannina had won over the affection and trust of her father with an obedience and filial submission sweet enough to heal the wound inflicted by her eldest sister. She would snatch charred pieces of her sister's letter from the flames into which her father had consigned them. At the opportune moment she would read to him snippets from Francesca's letter: words of apology, professions of eternal love, requests for forgiveness and blessing... Very soon she realized that she too would have to cause him sharp grief... For the Lord was calling her to follow her sister. Fearing the consequences of his wrath, ready to face come what may, she told him of her 'yes' to the call of God. There was no explosion of angry words, no scenes, no tantrums. Instead Farolfi raised his arm not to strike his daughter but to bless her, promising to take her to Forli at the earliest! Instead of the usual sorrow felt at the parting of a daughter for the convent, there was rejoicing in the Farolfi family. For the first time in two years they could take the name of Francesca without

7. Letter to Jannina, 17.7.1876, Letter 1165

the fear of being silenced by their formidable, unforgiving father. And in their happiness at meeting her, they almost forgot that they were losing Jannina.

On 28<sup>th</sup> October 1875, in the presence of her dear family, Seraphina offered herself as a victim to the God of Love - her father's countenance beaming with joy for having two of his daughters chosen by the Holy Spirit as His brides.

### The Young Directress of the School

*"At the age of eighteen I left home to dedicate myself exclusively to the cherished objective of my life, namely, education of the youth. In realizing this treasured goal of mine, I have spared myself neither hardships nor sacrifices, not even my health, the consequence of which I now face..."*<sup>8</sup>

The strain - physical and mental - had taken its toll and the superiors found the newly professed Seraphina emaciated and weak, much in need of a rest. They sent her to Rimini to restore her health by bathing in its curative springs. She was given special food; she had pleasant surprise visits from acquaintances and friends. Seraphina was grateful to the superiors who had her well-being at heart, and to the priests who visited her at the health resort. From Rimini she directed Jannina to run the school during her absence.

Promising candidates, drawn by her magnetic personality, were joining the convent. The extraordinary qualities of the young Head Mistress were attracting the attention of the civil authorities too, so much so, that she was requested to run the Training School at Forli. She turned down the offer, as her hands were already full. Moreover, her delicate health was a constant source of anxiety to the superiors and students alike.

8. Letter to Queen Margarita. Fasc. 35

Meanwhile, the friars on the lookout for a suitable building to house the boarding school heard of the Canestry palace being auctioned. Fr. Bonaventure, with his Franciscan knack, managed to get the building for the school. Seraphina was invited to view her future scene of activity. She toured the narrow corridors, selecting classrooms, study halls, recreation rooms, craft rooms, dormitory, etc. Once the boarding was established in the new site, Seraphina invited experts to give model lessons to the staff and to inspect the syllabus as well as the methods of teaching. Her aim was to have her school reach the academic level of the best school in Rome.<sup>9</sup>

In 1881, M. Concetta Zannoni was elected superior and she applied herself to the task of making the convent self-supporting. She bought orchards and grounds and repaired or altered the ancient building to give it the semblance of a public school. Since all their original property was confiscated by the State, they had neither capital nor the means to pay for any land transaction. So they made ample use of the dowries of the new candidates with or without their knowledge.

As the years passed, Seraphina's health was becoming a constant source of concern to everyone except herself. She fell a victim to typhoid and the doctors gave up hope. In their desperation the sisters stormed the heavens. Someone came up with the bright idea of placing on her head the cap of the late Pope Pius IX that they had obtained during the papal visit of Forli in July 1857, and which was jealously guarded as a relic. The community prayed to the owner of the cap to intercede for

9. 30.07.1881 Letter to an official	Fasc. 35
30.10.1881 Letter "	Fasc. 35
29.06.1886 Letter to the Director of Education	Fasc. 35
18.02.1886 Letter to a Principal	Fasc. 35
Letter 1, to Queen Margaret.	Fasc. 35

their Seraphina and soon the patient was back on her feet, though still not strong enough to work. The running of the school naturally fell on Jannina's shoulder, she being the second candidate to hold a Higher Grade Teacher's Certificate. The year of novitiate for Catherine (Jannina) was no different from that of her sister's having had to direct the school during her sister's prolonged absence from Forli. Nor did she have the consolation of having her beloved family, not even Seraphina, present at her profession - the ceremony being a clandestine one.<sup>10</sup>

10. See footnote 2, p. 12

## CHAPTER III

### Sr. Seraphina, the Educationist

*"Should we, the consecrated spouses of the Celestial Bridegroom, allow ourselves to be surpassed by men who do not have God either in their minds or in their hearts, yet strive after and achieve so much good? Must we be inferior to them in zeal, sacrifice and discipline? Never! If they consider their hardships light in view of the earthly praises in store for them, why shouldn't our toil become pleasant for us, since we have the comforts of our religion whose worthy daughters we have to be, and who must be gripped by the zeal of the Divine Founder who gave himself for our salvation? If we have opted to follow Christ, if we are nailed to the Cross with Him, we ought to yearn ardently and strive hard so that the folly of the cross be embraced by all, for which no sacrifices should be spared and every necessary means, chiefly education and teaching, should be made use of. For they serve as nets to draw people towards us and to guide them at our ease..."<sup>1</sup>*

Education for Seraphina was not confined to the four walls of classroom, or to the efficient delivery of the curriculum. It was a full time occupation, with the teacher motivating, encouraging, stimulating, prodding and leading the pupils through practice and precept within and outside the school hours. According to her, a teacher's primary duty is to recognize and foster the unique resources of her pupils: their interests, sensitivities, abilities, attitudes and purposes so that each student can be guided not only to the realization of her inner potentialities, but also to use them wisely in the pursuit of goals that are constructive to the society.

1. *A Word to the Teachers* Fasc. 21



Seraphina looked upon 'education' in its original connotation of 'nurturing'. Derived from the Latin verb 'educare', the term 'educate' etymologically means to rear, to nurture, to refine and perfect intellect, mind and spirit. Training the mind and character is an activity that requires love and care. For Seraphina the school was a God-given vineyard, the classroom a greenhouse where each child with her unique character had to be tended and nurtured with love, concern and solicitude. According to her education was the art of drawing out the best in each pupil-vine and making her to yield copious fruits. She writes to her ex-pupil Rosina:

*"The Lord has given you a vineyard; you will be fortunate if you make it fruitful...Rear those little plants for heaven"*<sup>2</sup>

### A School with a Difference

Up to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, girl's education in Italy consisted of a curriculum of religion, ethics, diction, basic mathematics, music, domestic science, social studies and fine arts and craft. Girls of middle and upper class families were prepared for their future lives as wives and mothers, or as members of genteel professions like music, painting and teaching.

However, certain unique features distinguished the St. Francis Boarding School run by Seraphina. The residential school was mainly for the scions of the noble families, even impoverished ones; while the day school admitted offspring of the working class. She took the courageous step of admitting to the pre-primary classes children of all social strata, irrespective of their parent's rank - whether aristocratic or artisan. There were some Patrician ladies who could not see eye to eye with Seraphina's revolutionary step. However, she stood her ground and kept the pre-primary section open to both the blue-blooded and the proletariat.

2. 28.2.1879: Seraphina's Let. to Rosina Fasc. 36

Again, Seraphina introduced in the kindergarten classes the principle of education through games. Constructive play and self-activity advocated by Friedrich Froebel formed the core of her child-centered education. Later when Maria Montessori's novel methods for teaching the mentally challenged as well as normal children became popular, she got her teachers trained in the self-educative activities.

Another distinguishing characteristics of the school was the stress laid on the dignity of labour. Work was an essential ingredient of the curricular activities: *"Useful, progressive work suited to the age and need of each child."*<sup>3</sup> She wanted her students to excel not only in the intellectual field, but also in the cultural and social spheres. Each girl - whether high-born or low-born, had to be acquainted with household work along with fine arts and crafts, not only to keep themselves occupied in their free time, but also to become diligent housewives, exemplary mothers and useful citizens - pride of their families and the wealth of the society.

*"The Students are given training in all sorts of household work - both manual and mechanized, from the humblest to the noblest and the most ingenious."*<sup>4</sup> *"If knowledge is invaluable for a woman, work too is indispensable for her. Therefore, students should learn household chores without, however, neglecting their studies, fully convinced that such skills will come in handy for their own family."*<sup>5</sup> Seraphina was ahead of her time in envisioning girl's education as knowledge-equipped and skill-equipped alike. If girls were to be the corner stones of economic and social development, they should be imparted job-oriented education.

3. *Rules and Regulations for St. Francis School: 2*

4. *Prospects of St. Francis's School: Rule for Day-Scholars, Fasc. XXI*

5. 31.7.1881 *Rule for Day-School, Palagano, n. 12*

Games, gymnastics and indoor or outdoor recreation, all had a place in the daily life of the residential school. "A taut bow breaks easily", Seraphina would often remark. Hence the slot for recreation thrice a day for the boarders.

*"Since children cannot concentrate on doing the same work for long, they should be kept alert with some exercise at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the class".<sup>6</sup>*

## Education for Character Formation

*"One of the main tasks of an educator is to study the character and abilities of each pupil, guide them with firmness and maternal tenderness on the path of truth and goodness, and guard them against the allurements of vices"<sup>7</sup>*

Seraphina considered the authentic inter-personal relationship between the teacher and the taught an essential factor in helping the pupils to gain insight into self-awareness, acquire mastery over their weak points, and find the impetus to develop their potentialities to the maximum. According to her the primary role of an educational institute is to instill in the students perennial values and principles for life-long living. She was convinced that intellectual pursuit without the development of character defeated the very aim of education. She upheld the view that intellectual competence without formation of character would produce a hybrid of intellectual giants and moral dwarves. She followed Pestalozzi, Froebel, Herbart and other 19<sup>th</sup> century pedagogues who laid stress on character building as the ultimate objective of education. They opined that education could not be conceived of in terms dissociated from religion, for no one could live a life of moral values and intrinsic goodness without being rooted in the sound principles of religion and ethics. Hence primacy was given to the development of character.

6. *My Duty as a Principal Memoirs.* Fasc. XXIX  
7. *Profile of a Principal, n.8* Fasc. XXII

*"Education without religion is not true education. Whosoever desires to acquire knowledge should first commit himself/herself to the study of virtue".<sup>8</sup>*

Seraphina's prime concern was the inner formation of the pupil: to guide them to acquire the capacity to make sound moral judgements and ethical reflection, to discern right and wrong, and to choose the right values in the order of their priority. She was convinced that without instilling a sound value system she could not form a critical conscience in them, without which she could not produce wise and good women who would leave an imprint in their workplace and neighbourhood.

An individual knowledge of the children entrusted to their responsibility, was required of both the Principal and staff, so as to help develop their particular talents, snip their vices, cultivate virtues. To her pupil-teacher relationship was but a reflection of that between a mother and daughter. Only a mother can intuitively understand the 'mystery' that her daughter is: the unique temperament of her growing child, her aspirations and aversions, anxieties and joys, expectations and frustrations, et al. Like a mother, the teacher is to encourage, support and strengthen the teenagers in their varying phases of growth and mood-swings, offering sympathy and guidance. Hence Seraphina's prayer to Jesus in order "to know, understand, probe the students so that she can guide, correct and perfect them" into the ideal their Creator had destined for each one.<sup>9</sup>

*"My thoughts are always centered on my daughters, acknowledging the good in some, noticing the defect of the others, and wondering what means should be chosen to bring everyone to the fountain of Divine Love."<sup>10</sup>*

8. *Regulations for Day-Scholars.* Fasc. 21  
9. *My Duty as a Principal, Memoirs.* Fasc. XXIX  
10. 1.2.1876: Let. to Rosina Maggiori, Fasc. XXXVI

Through talks, conferences and even personal interviews Seraphina developed moral insight and critical thinking in her learners. She would invite the pupils to evaluate the pros and cons of their actions, conscientize them about the pitfalls in life, urge the weak ones to amend their failings and stimulate the strong ones to persevere on the right path. In short, her prime objective of girls' education was:

*"To form not only good Christians, but also obedient daughters, exemplary mothers, excellent citizens, fond of work and order, useful to themselves and to the society".*<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, the teachers were to be more concerned about instilling values and principles for life-long living than merely imparting theoretical knowledge. The teacher has the sacred obligation to try to develop each student to be a constructive citizen enabling her to work out improvement that will make their home and neighbourhood a safer and more wholesome place to live. In her instruction to the Headmistress of the Day-School, Seraphina says:

*"She should assiduously watch over the pupils in order to instill in their innocent hearts those values that will enable a woman to succeed in any milieu. She must observe the day-scholars during the games and meals in all possible ways in order to discover their tendencies and orient them towards good. Woe to us if a child is lost through our negligence!"*<sup>\*</sup>

Needless to say teaching, according to Seraphina, is a process of bringing desirable changes in the behavioural pattern of the students. Every classroom activity has to be oriented towards fostering a climate of values that give a context and meaning for the pupils' actions and decisions. Hence, Seraphina's exhortation

11. *Prospectus of St. Francis Residential School*, Section 1 Fasc. 21  
\* *Rules and Regulations for St. Francis School*, n.8

to "draw out of every lesson moral norms applicable to life".<sup>12</sup> Intellectual competence without refinement of character, information without the formation of the heart, or learning without moral leadership, cannot be called education in the Seraphinian sense.

"During the personal talks, our Principal would speak to us about the counter-values prevalent in the society. She would advise us on how to behave when we left school, and traced for us an outline of proper demeanour at home: wise, prudent, modest, dignified, devout, outgoing, yet without affectation, no swear words, frivolity, elaborate hair-do or coquetry."<sup>13</sup>

Says Carolina Gennaioli, her alumna.

### The Teacher : A Role Model for the Students

Realizing that the teacher's influence as a person far exceeds methods and materials in teaching, Seraphina constantly exhorted her teachers to be role models to their pupils. They were to edify their charges with exemplary behaviour and teach by their example of neatness and discipline, being always the first to follow what they preached:

*"Remember that your words will ring empty, if you do not precede your students on the path of virtue."*<sup>14</sup>

In the "Exhortation to the Teaching Sisters", Seraphina insists upon the teacher's exemplary behaviour in punctuality, courtesy, respect for the individual pupils as well as her colleagues and superiors, so that she is able to maintain moral authority over her class. To sum up:

*"A teacher is the soul, the treasure, the jewel of her students,*

12. *Rules and Regulations for St. Francis School*, n.6  
13. Carolina Gennaioli, April 1992 Fasc. LXIV  
14. 28.12.1879: Seraphina's Let. to Rosina Fasc.36

of her family, of her town. On the contrary, it is a misfortune to have a depraved teacher.”<sup>15</sup>

A corrupt teacher can not only mislead her pupils, but also cause great harm to the society by turning them into agents of destruction and violence. On the other hand, a teacher who enables the teenagers to become enlightened citizens with moral values, will transform society and lead her nation to progress and peace.

Time management was another important skill that Seraphina, insisted upon everyone to acquire. “Time is a coin with which one buys paradise”, she wrote to Zenobia Baratti, one of her alumnae, on December 15, 1894. She challenged her staff and pupils alike to be responsible and accountable. The teachers had to draft the syllabus - whether curricular or extra-curricular - on a long range and a daily basis; and plan their lessons with remote/proximate preparation, so that the students might always be fully occupied.

*“Unoccupied students are an index of negligent teachers... Remember that the earnestness of the students is directly proportionate to the solicitude of the teachers and her seriousness to be in class on time... Even teaching of crafts should be linked to character formation.”*<sup>16</sup> *“Beware that each moment spent in idleness by the students weighs upon our conscience just as the deliberate delay in development and perfection”.*<sup>17</sup>

One should be accountable for every minute at her disposal; the teacher in keeping the students “occupied with useful, progressive work”, and the pupils in promoting her own growth in learning and virtue.

15. Ibid

16. Rules and Regulations for St. Francis School n.7

17. A Word to Teachers, n.k. Fasc 1

*“Promise Jesus every morning - because He wants it so - to study along with all your other activities, as if you have to take an examination at the end of the day.”*<sup>18</sup>

## Teachers Skilled in the Art of Education

To Seraphina education was much more than the imparting of core academic skills. She wanted her students to reach the height of excellence in every field. She believed that the most effective teachers are artists at discovering, recognizing, encouraging and fostering the unique interests and abilities of each individual pupil. She was convinced too that the teacher should continuously strive to update her knowledge and methodologies by constant study. Hence she wanted the teachers to be abreast of the progress in science and technology, so that their students might not be behind the times.

*“The subject teacher has the sacred duty of acquiring a wide and perfect knowledge of what she has to teach, and while teaching to educate the hearts of her students towards a virtuous life... It is essential for her to have an absolutely unimpeachable character, and for the students to see in her an embodiment of the lessons she teaches them. She should update herself with true and useful knowledge, keeping abreast of the scientific progress, new findings, and whatever can contribute to sharpen her intellect... She should work out a good method without which all her teaching would be of no use. With wisdom and skill she will learn to draw out of every lesson moral norms applicable to life... The one who does not know how to educate while teaching and to teach while educating, usurps the name of the teacher.”*<sup>19</sup>

Seraphina had a wide range of managerial skills: drafting and

18. To Emma Baldassari, First Friday of March 1887, Letter-42, Fasc. II.

19. Rules and Regulations for St. Francis School, n.6

updating the school Prospectus as well as the Rules and Regulations for the staff; supervision, motivation and encouragement of the staff, organizing in-service training programme for improving the teacher's pedagogical skills et al. When she heard about the self-educative devices for young children, designed by Dr. Maria Montessori, she wrote to her:

*"I would like to have two of our sisters trained in the new system of teaching pre-schoolers, which has brought you a glorious name in the educational circles."*<sup>20</sup>

Every weekend she held staff meeting for the teachers of the residential school to evaluate the work done in the previous week and to plan out the activities for the ensuing week. One of her school improvement programmes was to invite a panel of experts to review the administrative procedures, the curricula and the teaching techniques to determine how they facilitated or interfered with the effective development of the learning process. To quote Carolina Gennaioli, one of her alumnae:

*"If Mother invited professors from other institutions, it was not because the syllabus was not completed, but primarily to ensure that the pupils were thoroughly prepared for the public examination. The professors had high praises for the students who were invariably well-prepared for the exams."*<sup>21</sup>

### Teacher: A Wise Parent to the Students

*"The spontaneous, intuitive, motherly approach is the true method."*<sup>22</sup>

Seraphina followed the 'pedagogy of the heart' than the 'art of pedagogy'. Her directives to the teachers show the depth of her intuitive child psychology, her maternal individual love for

20. 4.4.1914: Let. to Prof. Montessori Fasc. XXXIX

21. Testimony of Carolina Gennaioli, April 1920, Fasc. LXIV

22. Rules and Regulations for St. Francis School n.6

the gifted and the average, for the rebellious and the submissive, for the active and the insolent, for the pious and the indifferent, for the diligent and the mediocre. She was a disciplinarian with a different touch. In dealing with the teenagers, she wielded the weapons of firmness tempered with gentleness, patient understanding of the follies and the tantrums of the young, dialogue, prayer and reflection. Knowing that no one can demand excellence from others, much less from the growing teenagers, she showed patience, benevolence, understanding and discretion in dealing with the disorderly behaviour of the young.

*"The principal should be patient and tolerating the shortcomings of the adolescent and accept them as they are for God's sake, bearing with them for the Love of God. She should, however, be careful not to annoy them or arouse their anger by denying them their just demands, treating them harshly, punishing the undeserving, or withholding forgiveness because it is utterly unfair to always expect excellence."*<sup>23</sup>

She advises the teachers to be understanding and compassionate with the tantrums of their students, to be prudent in handing out rewards, sparing in meting out punishments, vigilant in giving the students no occasion to be defiant by denying them their rights or treating them with partiality. As for handing out punishments a teacher should examine her own motive and verify that the urge to chastise a student does not arise from her own need to assert her authority! Seraphina knew only too well the subtle play of pride that can distort a trivial offence into an outrage against the teacher's authority. Hence, she exhorts the teachers to probe into their own hearts to ensure that they are not out to humiliate a child, and that the pupil is really guilty and deserves punishment.

23. Profile of a Principal n.13

*"When a child does some mistake we punish her as if it were a personal affront to us, thereby vindicating our self-esteem... and thus losing our moral authority causing great harm to ourselves and to others. Oh, the unfortunate tender shoots entrusted to our care!"*<sup>24</sup>

Correction, detention, imposition, curtailment of privileges and other disciplinary measures could be resorted to, only if exhortation and repeated warnings fail to bring the wayward pupils to book. Moreover, the punishment should be in right proportion to the offence committed, and meted out in such a way that the pupil is convinced of the love that provokes the unpleasant action. Where the foundation of warm teacher-pupil rapport is built up, correction becomes easy and efficacious. Punishment by itself is not educative but an effective means to reform misdemeanors if meted out in a climate of love for the individual student.

*"Be firm but not angry; rebuke gently but never excuse indiscipline; pray a lot and punish the guilty only if nothing works to bring forth the acceptable behaviour: constructive, corrective measures taken after due reflection and prayer"*.<sup>25</sup>

A profound note of apostolic charity runs through her recommendation to have recourse to prayer before admonishing a guilty. In a long colloquy with the Lord in the silence of the soul, one has to reflect upon the motive that prompts her to chastise a child in order to ascertain that there is no touch of personal vendetta in the act. She must implore the Lord to touch the heart of her pupil, to illumine her own mind so that she may make the right move, and only then can she take recourse to punishments, after which the event should be forgiven and forgotten.<sup>26</sup>

24. 23.6.1890: *Exhortation to the Teaching Sisters*, n.3

25. 19.3.1881, Let. to Catherine, Fasc. I

26. 23.6.1890, *Exhortation to the Teaching Sisters*, n.11 Fasc. 20

## The Principal: A Caring Person

*"The principal's heart should be wide open to welcome everyone. The good should find in her a stimulant to do better, the wicked an antidote to control their passions and a means to correct them."*<sup>27</sup>

Seraphina considered school as an extension of the home and the teachers as surrogate mothers. She not only fostered a warm ambience of caring love, understanding and support in the school, but also encouraged the teachers to have great concern for their pupils' physical, intellectual, psychological and spiritual well-being. Seraphina followed her pupils' spiritual, moral and cultural growth even long after they left school. She continued to encourage, counsel, and even admonish them with a mother's possessive love. The hundred-odd letters of her alumnae are an eloquent witness to the close bond between themselves and their former principal.

If she heard of an ex-student whose demeanour did not correspond to the instructions received at school, Seraphina would discharge a volley of letters, exhorting, pleading, warning, or reproving. "You have spent ten years in this school, but what have you gained?", she asks Rosina, a difficult character to be moulded after her ideal of a perfect student. Yet Seraphina pours the balm of consolation when this particular student is struck by domestic tragedy caused by the loss of her father and younger sister within a year. She counselled Rosina till she completed her Teacher's Training Course, guided her in setting up her own coaching centre, and directed her to the minutest detail, sending her copies of her Regulations for Boarders and Day-Scholars.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Profile of a Principal*, n.12

<sup>28</sup> Letter-7, 2.2.1876, Letter to Rosina. Fasc. 36

Letter-11, 23.2.1877, Letter to Rosina Fasc. 36

Letter-15, 29.3.1878, Letter to Rosina Fasc. 36

Letter-17, 28.12.1879, Letter to Rosina Fasc. 36

Seraphina was a principal who had truly touched her pupils' hearts, who understood and cared about them as persons, and shaped and moulded their future. The testimony of Sr. Veronica, nee Carolina Gennaioli, gives us a vivid picture of Sr. Seraphina, the character builder of her students:

"One look at Mother Seraphina and you were struck by the authentic love of a true mother and worthy educator...It was in 1881 that I was enrolled as a boarder at St. Francis School. Every child knows the terrible ordeal that he/ she undergoes when one has to leave home for the boarding school. I began crying at the thought of parting from my dear ones. Mother, who could read people like a book, understood my anguish as I stood there with my heart in my boots. She spoke to me tenderly and comforted me with the distinct vision of a well-bred, well-educated girl returning home after graduation. Slowly my bitter sorrow at parting from my maternal uncle vanished into thin air and I felt contented to be in the Boarding. Thus on the very evening of the very first day I was lucky to find in my principal, a true mother, someone who understood me. I felt drawn to her, to love her, to confide in her and to earn her love.

Mother had a heart of gold and loved us like a mother, with the love so tender and attentive. No flippant words ever escaped her lips; her words were always well thought out and weighed. Not once have we heard a frivolous or improper word uttered by her. All her conversations were edifying, instructive and spiritual. Her presence among us was a lesson in good manners. To the boarders, Mother's well-bred, dignified, decorous demeanour was a shining light of real religious spirit.

Mother saw to it that we lacked nothing for our intellectual and physical growth. She would keep an eagle eye on what we read. She wanted us to read the classics and books that

were generally recommended for the youth. She could read us like an open book. We could never, ever hide anything from her, for she intuitively sensed our feelings, our joys and sorrows, all our goodness and evil propensities. And into her maternal heart we poured out all our problems and heart-aches. Invariably we returned from her presence with a heart brimming with peace and tranquility."<sup>29</sup>

Seraphina had based her educational philosophy on the nineteenth century educationists, especially Denti and Froebel, spiced with the current teachings of the Church. Her limitations are the drawbacks of the century; her vantage points her own. She followed the intuition of a woman, and adopted the 'method of motherly love, care and concern in educating and guiding her pupils. For her the educator's task was to stimulate the genius, encourage the gifted, provoke the average and patiently help out the slow-learners.

Seraphina's systematic praxis as an educator consisted of one-on-one talks with individual student/teacher, talks in common on select themes, general exhortations to the pupils/staff et al. In her *Exhortation to the Sisters*, Seraphina lays stress on the teachers' responsibility to set a good example to the students and to maintain moral authority. In her *Word to the Teachers*, we have her view of education, specific methodology, the need for constant updating, planning of syllabus and preparation of lessons, etc. In *The Profile of the Principal*, she outlines a strict schedule for inspection, supervision, individual and group meetings etc., besides means for fostering accountability in every employee etc.

Among the staff an elder sister, among the pupils a mother: that was Seraphina, a model to be imitated by any principal and educator in any century!

## CHAPTER IV

### *The Extending Circle of Apostolate*

*"Lord how beautiful it is to spend one's life in your holy service! Order me, if you wish, and I'll multiply your tabernacles where many a soul will be proud to serve and adore you".*

The "School of the Farolfi sisters" turned out well-educated youth year after year. Girls in their late teens went back to the family equipped with adequate intellectual, cultural and spiritual formation: the pride of their parents and family. Some came back ready to take the veil, feeding flames to the already wagging tongues that spread the rumour that the convent school at Forli was but a seedbed of nuns. It was certainly not a lie, for the boarding discipline was just a step lower than that of the novitiate, the girls being brought up on strict rules with regard to study, work, cleanliness, deportment in school, at play, at table, in the dormitory, even while dressing and undressing. They could meet close relatives only on prescribed days; they visited their home only for short periods during the long vacation, which was spent at some holiday resort under the strict surveillance of the mistress. They were well-versed in exercises of piety : in meditations and reflections, in frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament, in daily Holy Communion, so much so that the Commissary, Fr. Mario Mustacchi, had to intervene, limiting Communion to thrice a week. There is the Diary of the Tertiaries bearing witness to the charm of Seraphina in drawing girls to the cloister :

*"Among the boarders who dearly loved their headmistress who knew well how to attract the girls, many wanted to enter the novitiate. Some joined after having completed the Teacher's Training Course; some way through advanced studies..."<sup>1</sup>*

1. "Diary of the Tertiaries of Forli". p.72

One would expect the headmistress to be happy and content with the marvellous success of her apostolate among the youth. Instead, terrible was the anguish that gripped her inmost being as years passed by. Deep within her she felt an insurmountable vacuum. No matter how hard she prayed, Seraphina could not lay her fingers at the root of the emptiness that rang hollow within her, and at these dark moments would surge higher waves of doubts and confusion. "Is it really here that God wants me?", she would ask herself a thousand times. In her utter despair she would ascertain God's will by pouring out her soul to her spiritual directors - priests holding high position in the Church or in the Order, known for their virtues and holiness: Bishop Svampa of Forli (later Cardinal of Bologna), Fr. Bernardine of Portogruaro, Minister General of the Friars Minor (1880-89), Fr. Louis Canali, Provincial, Minister of the Friars Minor and later successor to Fr. Bernardine, Arcangelo Frabetti, Arcangelo of Vago and Fr. Louis of Forli. The Franciscans would encourage her that it was indeed at Forli that God wanted her:

*"What can I tell you, dear daughter, except that I sympathize with you whole-heartedly in your sufferings, while urging you to adore, love and thank the most holy will of God in everything. I assure you that you have been and are doing God's will, and that you are walking the path He has willed for you, despite the opposing views of men.*

*It is God who took you there; He has placed you there at Forli and he wants you there... After having examined it with due consideration I have come to the conclusion that God wants you there and nowhere else; and that a slow and prudent change would bring about greater good without causing any rift. For God's sake do not be so anxious! Like an infant throw yourself into the loving hands of the adorable Providence and to the sacred bosom of Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup>*

14.12.1889, Fr. Bernardino's Let.to Seraphina



Some priests, on the contrary, would bluntly tell Seraphina that hers was a mistaken call and they pitied the young girls joining Forli. These included the late Bishop Trucchi of Forli, Fr. Louis of Parma - the ex-Minister General of the Friars Minor, and the Jesuit Fr. Louis of Forli.<sup>3</sup>

**Palagano: "The Immaculate Conception" (27.02.1881)**

"My dear daughter, see that you are the corner stone of that house, and that it depends on you to preserve the Franciscan spirit even in the future."<sup>4</sup>

In the midst of all these uncertainties and assurances, of doubts and light, of sufferings and consolations, came the call to open a convent and school at Palagano in the diocese of Modena, where once existed a Franciscan Tertiary convent founded by Blessed Angelina of Marsciano. Palagano could not survive the Napoleonic Suppression and the ancient convent lay mouldering under the scavenging termites and rats. In 1873, the town, desirous of having a convent school, turned to the Sisters of St. Anne and then to the Daughters of Charity to establish one in the antique building. The former tried it for a while and then abandoned the site; the latter did not give it a thought. Then in 1880, Don John Brugioni applied to the Tertiaries of Forli and to their Commissary, Fr. Bonaventure, pleading with them to take up the cause of Palagano. The sisters had no capital to buy the property since they were hard-pressed with their own problems of repairing and remodelling the Canestri Palace and of buying the much needed grounds and orchards for the school and community. Yet they did not want to refuse the proposal. "Who knows what benefit it would bring to Forli!" they mused.

Brugioni pestered them with continued requests, imploring them not to pass by such a golden chance of giving glory to God

3. 1.9.1894, Petition sent to the Procurator General, Fasc. 56.

4. 15.3.1881, Fr. Bernardino's Let. to Seraphina Doc. XI

by winning so many souls who would otherwise be lost. He begged the Mother Superior to send two nuns to view the place so that they could ascertain themselves of the imminent need to open a school. Fr. Bernardino, the Minister General, who was contacted by the Commissary, advised them to accept the mission. The lot naturally fell on Seraphina, experienced administrator that she was. The call had come at the most inopportune moment, for she was passing through one of her worst crisis of vocation. To whom was she to turn for help? Fr. Canali who had preached a mission at Forli in January 1881 and whose magnetic personality had impressed Seraphina, was away. There was Bishop Trucchi ready to give her his apostolic blessing for the new enterprise. Yet she did not want to leave Forli without the express order of the Minister General.

"I give you obedience for Palagano since you ask me for it. Be careful to maintain that holy indifference that wants neither this nor that, but only the will of God, despite the natural inclinations or spiritual considerations of one's own good or of the others, wherein often lurks our own self love and self-will.... If you are sent to Palagano, go there in obedience; if you are prevented from going there, remain at Forli equally contented... You may remain there more or less, or return early or late as you are ordered, without initiating anything of your own, praying only that God may dispose of you according to his sweet will. Be brave, and believe in the goodness of God... The Lord had begun his work in you. He will bring it to perfection and make you holy... I bless you with all my heart. Pray for your beloved father in Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

15.3.1881, Fr. Bernardino's Let. to Seraphina,

Doc. XI p.8-9

Strengthened by this consoling letter, Seraphina offered again her inner martyrdom at the feet of the agonizing Saviour, intoning with Him, "Not my will, but Thine be done". With the blessing of Bishop Trucchi and the obedience from the Minister General, Seraphina left for Palagano on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1881, along with Sr. Francesca Lolli and two boarders, including her youngest sister Maria Theresa. It took them four days to reach their destination.

*"We have to put up with all sorts of deprivation, hardships and penury which would certainly take a toll on my health, unless the Lord takes care of it. I tell you, I am not weighed down by all the inconveniences. It is as if they do not exist. I am not even aware that I am deprived of those very things I considered essential at Forli. I almost enjoy the privation. In the same pot (not having another) we put in the pan, wash the plates, make the bread-soup, etc., and then some other things that you can't even imagine! However, what grieves me most (but always with resignation) is the deprivation of the Blessed Sacrament."*<sup>6</sup>

The school was formally opened on March 8, 1881. To Seraphina, running a school was child's play because of her vast experience. The rules for the pupils were experimented and perfected with her own personal experience at Tavelli institute and then at her own school at Forli. As Gertrude Mazzotti, the boarder who accompanied the sisters to Palagano attests:

*"In such a short time our principal had managed to enroll a good number of pupils, either because of her charming manners or because of her art of teaching, or even because of her daily prayers so devout and inspiring. Everything was well ordered: the lessons, recreation, prayers et al."*<sup>\*</sup>

6. 03.03.1881 Let. to Catherine Fasc. I  
\* Rome, AGCFM - b.a IX

Nevertheless, it was not the administrative or academic field that held her primary interest but the fertile souls of the young girls that frequented her workshop. She poured herself into the apostolate of drawing souls to Christ. She wrote down the rules for the "Daughters of Mary", an association for pious girls and had it approved by the local Ordinary. With his permission she began enlisting teenagers into her association, celebrating the month of May and the principal feasts of the Church. She went further and got his permission to reserve the Blessed Sacrament in the convent and to set up the Stations of the Cross – much to the delight of the Palagano citizens. An astute missionary, Seraphina soon detected promising candidates for the religious life.

*"My Handmaiden was an extraordinary person, ever on fire with God's love and yearning to do missionary works. She had a maternal heart and keen intelligence, teeming with holy initiatives. O what good, what resplendent example, have I not received from my beloved Mistress!"*

She left Louisa Zauli who took over the reins of the school after Seraphina's departure from Palagano.<sup>7</sup>

Letters were exchanged between Seraphina and the Mother Superior of Forli and between the latter and the Minister General. *"The candidates could afford handsome dowries which could be utilized to acquire the rented building and the grounds around it. Should a novitiate be opened at Palagano for girls unwilling to leave their native town? Or should they accept only those who were willing to come to Forli for their novitiate? What should be the status of the house at Palagano? And above all, to whom should it be dedicated?"* Seraphina had wanted the house dedicated to the Immaculate Conception and to St. Joseph while the Minister General wanted it in honour of the Holy Family.

7. Quoted by Sr. Maria Ranucci of Palagano in her letter dated 6.8.1949.

Finally he decided upon Immaculate Conception and the name remained with the Sisters of Palagano.

Unfortunately Seraphina was dealing with a project which was too ambitious and incompatible with ecclesiastical legislation. For Bishop Guidelli of Modena and the local priests of Palagano were hoping to have the school managed by daughters of the soil, leaving free the sisters of Forli to go back to their convent once the school could stand on its feet. Meanwhile, they had to train the candidates of Palagano and guide them to run the school once they were professed and in possession of the Teacher's Certificate. In short, it was the autonomy of the house they were clamouring for. This too was the desire of the Father General: the current Canon Law did not approve of a filial house in cloistered or semi-cloistered congregations. The Law provided complete autonomy - legislative, executive and legal - only for the clerical Orders. All religious who were not exempted were to accept the control of the local bishop, under whose jurisdiction they resided. He ordered Forli to supply personnel till Palagano was ready to manage on its own. It was a bitter pill to swallow for the Forli sisters. "Why sacrifice persons and time for a community that would never be ours?" "And why should we spare Seraphina out of all the sisters?" .... The Mother Superior wrote to Bishop Guidelli informing His Lordship that her sisters would be withdrawn by the end of the academic year. There shot a volley of letters from the bishop, from Don Brugioni, from the sisters at Palagano, pleading with her not to take such harsh measures cutting at the root of the good they had just begun.

Though Bishop Guidelli insisted that the community should be under his exclusive jurisdiction, he was happy to have the gifted young headmistress to direct his school at Palagano and granted most of her requests. She turned to him for advice in drawing up the Constitutions for Forli - a task she was entrusted

with in 1879. Wishing to draw materials from the constitutions of the Poor Clares and of the Carmelites, she had requested His Lordship for a copy of the same. He sent her not only what she asked for but also a copy of the rule he had written for the Tertiaries in his diocese, some years before.

"You could certainly profit from the Rule of St. Clare, but note well that the Clares are of contemplative life; and the Tertiaries with their day and boarding school, of mixed apostolate. Try, therefore, to insist more on the spirit of profound humility, of blind obedience and of generous sacrifice than on many external penances and on a lot of time devoted to prayer".<sup>8</sup>

Seraphina had always insisted that the Constitutions of Forli with its emphasis on external acts of penance were at odds with active apostolate. Yet while drawing up the new Constitutions adapted to active life, she was looking for the Rule of St. Clare and its contemplative aspect. The eternal dualism between contemplation and action would be the heritage of the children of Francis and it is no wonder that our protagonist found herself lured in both directions.

Within six months of her stay, Seraphina was called back to Forli. Remembering the words of Fr. Bernardin she bowed in obedience with a "holy indifference". And Sr. Louisa Zauli took over the reins from her. Much would Seraphina have loved to have Palagano as a filial convent of Forli, each enriching the other with reciprocal gifts of persons and virtues. She had rejoiced at the first opportunity of expansion-of "multiplying tabernacles" for Christ. Her ardent desire of reaching out to as many souls as possible was nipped in the bud by Canon Law that understood nothing of the spirit of Brotherhood with which Francis had revolutionized monastic Europe centuries before. How could her dream of opening tabernacles in all the places where Christ was not known, ever come true! Disillusioned once again, she came

<sup>8</sup> Modena: 10.4.1881, Bishop Guidelli's letter to Seraphina, Doc. XI, p.12-13

back to Forli, her heart an arena of doubts and questions about her vocation.

There were other factors that confirmed Seraphina's doubt about the inopportuneness of Forli to realize not only her vocation but also that of all those who had joined there through her influence. Many were falling ill, victims of tuberculosis. Is it the unhealthy building that causes the spread of TB among the inmates? Or is it our strict adherence to severe penance and frugal meals? Or isn't it rather a clear proof that God does not want us here?... She wrote to the Minister General expressing her fears, which were soon laughed at by Fr. Bernardino.

"No dear daughter. God has called you there... Don't give it another thought... Take care of your health making use of all the means to strengthen you: substantial food, a little good wine, mineral water, open air, etc. Abandon yourself to the Divine Providence and let Him use you and accomplish in you what He pleases. If it is His will to sanctify you in inactivity, or confined to bed, you should be content, blessing God forever. What counts in the long run is our sanctification, not the number or the grandeur of our work. We cannot exchange the end for the means...."<sup>9</sup>

Repeatedly the Provincial and the Minister General assured Seraphina that she was on the right path and, though others had warned her to the contrary, she abandoned herself to the guidance of the friars.

"Your heart beats with the purest love for Jesus. You want to draw from the divine font and to consume yourself with the first draught... But remember daughter that before you can get there, you will have to pass through the dark night of the soul, described by St. John of the Cross."<sup>10</sup>

9. Aracoeli Rome: 19.3.1881, Fr. Bernardine's letter to Seraphina, Doc. XI,p.17.  
10. Fr. Louis Canali's letter to Seraphina / Cfr. Diary of M. Seraphina, 16.6.1882, Fasc. 29

## Fresh Sorrow and Joy

The darkness of the soul was deepened by the unexpected death of her father on April 28, 1887, at the age of fifty-nine. Since their reunion at Jannina's entry into Forli on September 14, 1875, the father and daughter were again on their old preferential terms of love. Farolfi, in fact had his family divided at three places : three of his daughters at Forli, his second surviving daughter happily married and living with her husband, his only surviving son living with him in the paternal house. Proud of the school of the "Farolfi Sisters", he had left his youngest daughter Maria Theresa in the boarding school since 1876, to be educated by her elder sisters.

Seraphina, worn out by her own physical and moral sufferings, attended her dying father and strengthened her grief-stricken mother and brother.

*"I can never believe such sorrow possible! The first person I saw dying...I would never forget the experience. Eternity...Pain...Resignation...Twice he had received the Holy Communion. He forgave his enemies, warmly welcoming them...He was administered the Last Sacraments...And I kept watch till he was lowered into the tomb...He looked beautiful after death..."*

*What a moment is death! A grief that can never be equalled to or surpassed by another sorrow! ...O God! Oh my Jesus! Receive my papa into your glory; cleanse him in your blood...and let my sorrow be an expiatory holocaust for him!"*<sup>11</sup>

Nine years later, Ottilia would follow her husband to the grave. For Seraphina, 1896 was a year of redoubled sufferings. Whetting her sorrow came the news of her mother's death on May 24,

11. Diary of M. Seraphina, 28.4.1887, Fasc. 29.

1896. Ottilia had longed in vain to meet her daughters. She had received the Holy Communion and had passed away before the particle could be consumed. Seraphina was allowed to assist at her mother's funeral. Ottilia being a Tertiary, Seraphina dressed her in the Franciscan habit with the spare article of clothes she had: her veil and Catherine's wimple.

Seraphina's health was sinking year after year, her body racked by spasms of coughs and consumption; her heart in the throes of psychological sufferings; and her soul groping in pitch darkness. The shore seemed farther and farther, the bottom deeper and deeper, while Seraphina swam the current guided by the beacon light held by her spiritual directors.

Meanwhile, Seraphina was given her youngest sister as the bride of her Love Divine. Maria Theresa had completed her Teacher's Training Course in 1884 and had gone home. She was back in 1886 requesting permission to take the veil. Her vocation is a surprising one for all through her stay at Forli she had not felt the call to the religious state. Her short stay at home was interspersed with crises and spiritual struggle: being courted and proposed to, with reluctant acceptance and delayed rejection of suitors. Her letter to Seraphina who was at Palagano for her retreat and rest, speaks for itself:

"Oh that my heart had known the true good and to tread the path of Christian virtues! I am afraid I'll be returning to the bosom of the family without having cultivated any virtue, and the folks would be shocked to know that seven years of good counsels and loving corrections have not produced any fruit in me! Let the most holy Mary illumine my path and if by chance the Heavenly Spouse calls me, oh I would gladly return within these walls and mould myself after you."<sup>12</sup>

12. 5.9.1883 Maria Teresa's Letter to Seraphina.

Maria Theresa was the brightest of the Farolfi sisters, gracious and charming, winning the love of not only the inmates of the boarding school but also of eminent persons such as Bishop Guidelli, Don Brugioni, Bishop Svampa, Frs. Bernardine and Canali. The superiors hesitated to admit her to the novitiate, as she was frequently ill. Maria Theresa was all tears when she heard of the probable exclusion from the longed-for happiness. However, in September 1887, in a private ceremony she was presented the holy habit by the Minister General. There were three other boarders sharing the same happiness at the solemn ceremony presided over by Fr. Bernardine. The headmistress beamed with joy as her pupils, Emma Baldassari, Carolina Gennaioli, Eleonora Del Pia and Maria Theresa received the habit from the Minister General's august hands, taking respectively the name, Bernardine of the Name of Jesus, Veronica of the Blessed Sacrament, Germana of the Cross and Benjamina of Carmel. Benjamina spent most of her time in bed, a victim to the voracious TB. She made her profession on her deathbed on April 16, 1888, but recovering somewhat she made it again at a public function on April 16, 1890.

Bagno di Romagna: "*Guardian Angel*" (5.12.1891)

*Because it has cost me a lot of tears and pain, this house does and will continue to do great good. I can call it really mine in the strict sense of the term. Often I thank the Lord for having chosen me to open him a new altar and I am glad to be the only person directly utilized for the purpose... Oh that I could open more houses for the God of Love and sing His praises!"<sup>13</sup>*

Bagno nestling in the Appenine range and blessed with hot springs, is a health resort for the neighbouring towns in the district

13. Seraphina's Letter to Catherine, Palm Sunday, 1892, Fasc. 11.

of Romagna. Since no convent school existed in the locality, the Church authorities were praying for some benefactors to leave an adequate legacy to found a school and some sisters to run it. They found the former in the person of Mr. Biozzi who left not only his house but also a handsome capital to meet initial expenses. Bagno had heard of the Farolfi School; some of its citizens had known personally the elder sister who was a frequent visitor to its springs. Don Balassini, the parish priest of Bagno, wrote to the Mother Superior of Forli giving her details of the Biozzi house and legacy, a share of whose annual interest would be theirs in addition to municipal aid. There was a vacancy in the municipal school close-by and some sister could apply for the post in order to have a sufficient number to form a little community at Bagno.

Don Balassini chalked out also the legal status of the new house at Bagno: it would be under the direct supervision of Forli; the school itself under the indirect management of the Headmistress of the Forli Boarding School. The only condition Don Balassini laid, was the presence of Sr. Seraphina for a week or two to negotiate matters with the local authorities and her continued supervision of the school through correspondence. Moreover, the sisters would benefit from the spiritual help given by the Franciscans who would be preaching during Advent and Lent. He concluded his letter by adding that they could at least try it for a year, at the end of which they were free to continue or to leave, giving him prior notice.<sup>14</sup>

With the experience of Palagano fresh in their minds, the sisters did not want to burn their fingers again. Don Balassini assured them that Bagno would always be their filial house; its members professing obedience to the Mother Superior at Forli.

14. Letter of Don Balassini to the Mother Superior of Forli.  
18.11.1891 (Documents of Palagano)

It was not asking for autonomy but for affiliation; it certainly would not be another Palagano! Assured of the continuity of their apostolate, the sisters complied with Don Balassini's request and four sisters left for Bagno on Saturday, December 5, 1891.

*"After having attended Holy Mass and received Holy Communion, under the watchful eye of Mary and entrusting to her my journey, its aim and objective, I left Forli in the company of Srs. Maria, Angela and Veronica. All through the way I strove to purify more and more my intentions and to render myself worthy of the Lord's work... I wanted nothing but Jesus and the fulfillment of His will. I wanted to be rid of everything that smacked of self. I felt like someone who had to do something in an alien land, determined to remain a stranger throughout the task and to leave the place as soon as it was performed with the maximum solicitude".<sup>15</sup>*

The little company reached Bagno at 5 p.m. braving snow and ice all along the way. Soon Seraphina set to work visiting the proposed houses, the municipal school and the educational committee (that wanted her to have a co-educational school when she was all for a girl's school) and enrolling youngsters for catechism and craft. Seraphina, sagacious and astute lady that she was, knew what good could be derived from Bagno, for itself and for Forli. Within the allotted fortnight she could do nothing. If it had to be a mixed school, a fresh regulation was needed. So far, she had only girls to cope with; but here was a co-educational school, which meant drafting new rules adapted to its specific nature. Her assistant Sr. Veronica had to return to Forli, as she was coaching the staff in Froebel's kindergarten methods.

Seraphina could not, therefore, leave until a substitute arrived. Moreover, young girls - among those were candidates for religious

15. Bagno: 5.12.1891, Diary of M. Seraphina. Scr. 30, p.15 & foll.

life - could not be contacted unless a workshop was open for them. There was no hope of starting one until the Biozzi place was allotted to the sisters and community life was set in full swing. The sisters were staying at two different places; their meals being sent from the priest's quarters, as the promised house was being used by its old tenants. Seraphina did not feel it right to leave Bagno without having started anything at all. She stayed on. The fortnight became a month and the month a quarter of a year. Meanwhile letters flowed in from Forli asking her to come back, misinterpreting her motive for staying so long at Bagno. To make matters worse she had a relapse of illness, prolonging her stay at Bagno. The misunderstandings of her fellow-sisters were like darts that pierced her sensitive soul already suffering from aridity and darkness.

The moment she reached Bagno, Seraphina had sensed an extreme coldness. There was not the expected warm welcome from the populace. She felt a complete emptiness within, an inexplicable tedium, an extreme melancholy. In her aridity of soul she felt as if it would be a thousand years before she could get back to Forli.<sup>16</sup> In young Don Clement she found a good counsellor and under his guidance she found enough dew to moisture her dryness. In her letter to her sisters, she confessed how she had dreaded the arrival of Sr. Geltrude Angelini, her former novice mistress. For some inexplicable reason she felt her presence nauseating. She confessed to Don Clement her repugnance about living with Sr. Geltrude and was given the grace to find pleasure in her company.

In her admiration for the young holy priest - not yet 33 years old, Seraphina feared that there be any tint of earthly love:

16. 5-6 Jan. 1892, Seraphina's letter to Catherine and Benjamin.  
Cfr. Diary of M. Seraphina, 9.12.1891, Scr. 29 p. 35

*"I would rather die this moment than have a rapport or direction in which lurked even the slightest shadow of sin.... Jesus! I want you alone.... Your love and nothing more".<sup>17</sup>*

She wrote to her sisters giving them the minutest details of the state of her soul and the help she received from the saintly priest. She asked them to pray for her, as well as to make her pupils also pray for her, so that there might be no shadow of sin in her love for Don Clement.

It was not the first time that Seraphina was at Bagno. She was an annual visitor to this health resort, for her lungs needed its fresh air and curative springs, her body a long rest and her mind the quietness and solitude, to raise her oft-drooping spirit. Back in 1883, she had formulated a "rule of life" for herself. She had lived it for five years and through yearly revision and amendment gave it a proper form during the retreat of 1888 with Fr. Louis Canali. She presented it to Don Clement to compare it with his own spiritual keys and under his guidance she gave the finishing touch - a form of life she would one day prescribe for her own postulants and novices. Her first thought at rising was to offer herself as a sacrificial victim to the Lamb of God immolated on the altar at that precise moment. It was her way of being a martyr: offering herself, her sufferings, her incessant coughs that prevented her from reciting the vocal prayers, her desire to rise early for community acts, her inability to do so and her eventual submission to the superior's order to rest longer in the morning. She would go to bed thinking that it would be her last night on earth; she would rise thanking the Lord for another day to serve Him. Her leitmotif was: *"Today is the first day that I serve the Lord; it could as well be the last. What would I not do to please him!"<sup>18</sup>*

17. Ibid

18. Diary of Mother Seraphina, Scr. 29, p.15 & foll.

Seraphina gave ample space to contemplation - a practice she had begun at Palagano where for the first time she found time to spend long hours in silent meditation and where she had come across the Rule of St. Clare. At Bagno again, she came under the spell of the contemplative mood and she made the best of her time, turning her sick bed into an oratory. For her health had deteriorated again. She was already misunderstood; various were the interpretations given for her overdue stay at Bagno. Finally she returned to Forli in the first week of May 1892, weaker and sicker in body but stronger and refreshed in spirit, as attested by the entry in her personal Diary:

*"O Virgin of Sorrows, conceived in divine purity, you've always been my most tender mother! To you I owe that intuitive light which reveals to me the beauty of a life hidden with Christ in God, and urges me to long for it the whole of my life. To live in the world as if I were not part of it. To do good unseen by others; to love, suffer and work seen only by God. A life of intimate union with God may be shrouded by a life of action; yet it is so sublime and acceptable in the eye of God.*

*To you I owe that burning irresistible need to cleanse myself of every spot of sin - a need more insistent during this Holy Week, especially today, the Holy Saturday in which I long for purification without any consolation. The ardent, intense yearning to love Jesus in the perfection of love, freed from all gratification and spiritual vanity, in ever-growing freedom of spirit and simplicity... The sole yearning of my heart and the exclusive offering I bring to you, O Mary, is my sacrifice: abnegation completely hidden with Christ, which under your guidance leads me to the pureness of ineffable Love, of real perfect union. To die, or to live for Love: love that makes my soul cry out: 'Lord, to suffer and to be despised for You; to die, or live a life of Love'."*<sup>19</sup>

19. Bagno: 16.4.1892. Scr. 29

## Fr. Bernardino of Portogruaro

Born in Venice, of Bartolomeo Dal Vago and Nicoletta Antonia of Barbariga, orphaned at the age of seven, Bernardino (Little Bernard) completed his studies at St. Catherine's Boarding School and at seventeen, entered the Franciscan monastery of St. Michael. Fr. Bernardino made his Solemn Profession on November 27, 1842 and was ordained priest on September 21, 1844. As a friar, Bernardino held successively the post of Guardian, Provincial, Procurator General and Minister General. During the ministry from 23rd April 1869 to 3rd October 1889, besides the founding of the Pontifical Institute of St. Anthony in Rome and of St. Bernardino at Quaracchi and of the periodical *Acta Ordinis*, Fr. Bernardino had guided many a nascent Religious Congregation and Houses, including those of the Clares of the Bl. Sacrament and the Sisters of Infant Jesus. As Minister General he had directed not only the friars of his order but also many a foundress and sister, especially Mother Seraphina to whom he had addressed 123 letters. The holiness of his life and his knack for administration earned for him the archbishopric of Sardica on August 4, 1892. He passed away in the odour of sanctity on May 7, 1895.



## CHAPTER V

### The Bolt from the Blue

*"Certainly Forli was the wrong place for me. My entry there altered the policy of the residential school. In fact it created two streams, each clogging the other. It was wrong on my part to blindly obey the two friars, Fr. Lorenzo of Bussano and Fr. Bonaventure of Castelazzo, who continued to assure me that it was God's will that I remain in Forli. I really committed a mistake to turn a deaf ear to the fatherly advice of Card. Moretti, Mgr. Trucchi and others who told me that I had joined the wrong congregation, that the educational venture was a misguided one. As a matter of fact the new system caused a duality in the community with all its painful consequences.*

*Although the sisters had all conceivable care and concern for me, and though there never had been the slightest friction among us, the terrible state of affairs made me undergo a continuous martyrdom for twenty long years, tossing me into every sort of inner anguish. Often my external sufferings drove me to the point of death. My whole body was afflicted with diseases caused undoubtedly by the constant spiritual torments due to the conflicting situation in the convent and the consequent loss of inner peace.*

*The Minister Generals, the Provincial Superiors, the extraordinary confessors and other worthy persons considering me as the victim, showered upon me every display of affections, which invariably increased my martyrdom. For every one would conclude with the words: "Poor Seraphina, this place is not for her. She can never be happy here. The friars had only the interests of the convent in view and gave*

*no thought to others." One day Mgr. Trucchi said, "Don't you know that you're the talk of the town? People ask if you're so crazy that you can't even explain the reason why you joined the Tertiaries!"... You can imagine the anguish, doubts, fears and struggles produced by such remarks! Woe betides me, had not Jesus strengthened me with his ineffable love!"<sup>1</sup>*

The horseshoe-shaped mansion of Count Pellegrino Canestry, the King's Solicitor, bought in 1878, turned out to be a white elephant. It was purchased by the Friars through their benefactress, Countess Albicini at the request of the then Mother Superior, Sr. Placida Albonetti. Sr. Seraphina being ill and away, had known of the transaction only when she was invited by Fr. Bonaventure to select the wing for the school. She protested against the purchase, not only because the superior did not consult her or the other discreet before buying the expensive mansion but also because of its unsuitability for a school building. At a mere glance, she could assess the heavy repairing and remodelling work involved, in converting the old building to a school and boarding house. But her protestations were in vain; for the contractor was already engaged to carry out necessary repairs and installations of plumbing and heating system for the convent wing.<sup>2</sup> The frustration that Seraphina felt, could be matched only by the discernment of Bishop Trucchi who repeated to her more than once:

*"I bless you and your work, but not the purchase nor the construction, not even the Institute as a whole. For it is not the will of God."*

Every year, the students were charged towards the extra furniture fund. Often the sisters were sent to beg donations for

1. Letter to Bishop Raimondi Jaffei of Forli, 1898 Scritti 50  
2. 30.1.1890, Petition sent to Bp. Svampa. Fasc. 23

equipping the school. Occasionally, the Minister General as well as Bishop Trucchi met the expenditure of the school and the medical charges of the headmistress. It was in this financial strait that the superior launched the heavy construction work. Fortunately, there was no dearth of vocations and she made liberal use of the dowries brought in by the candidates, with or without their knowledge. There was Maria Albe with a Senior Teacher's Certificate and a handsome dowry, wanting to open a school and festive oratory for the poor. The Minister General gave her his blessing and she ran the school in a makeshift room till the basement was ready. There was Sr. Veronica too, wishing to dedicate herself to the infants. A wing had to be placed at her disposal for her kindergarten.

The rush for admissions was ever on the increase. Parents flocked in to press Seraphina not only for admission to the boarding house but also for her personal guidance in preparing their daughters for the Senior Teacher's Certificate Examination. She had to employ extra teachers to instruct them in Languages, Mathematics, Drawing and Music.<sup>3</sup> Pressed by the gifted novices with their varying charisma and the eager parents requesting their daughter's admissions to the boarding school, there was an increasing demand for continued construction work: altering the existing rooms, corridors, stables, sculleries, pantries and store-rooms into class-rooms and halls or dormitory and work rooms.

Seraphina watched with anxiety the growing debt incurred by the community and the number of young sisters taking to bed after their profession. There was something wrong somewhere in spite of the increase in religious vocations among her pupils. Yet, there was the continued assistance, assurances and support of the friars. Besides the trickle of monetary aid, there was spiritual help in abundance. In addition to the Commissary and the

3. Diary of the Tertiaries of Forli, p. 52-72.

confessors - ordinary and extraordinary, there were the Provincial and the Minister General visiting them annually, giving them conferences, preaching retreats to both teachers and pupils, officiating at Chapters, professions, vestures, First Communions, Prize Distributions and the like.<sup>4</sup>

## Death Takes Its Toll

In 1882 Seraphina had expressed her fears about the rampant TB in the campus and was advised by the Minister General, to take precautionary steps such as substantial meals, fresh air and mineral water. But the contagion was deep-rooted, taking in its stride a fresh victim every year. Malicious tongues, failing in their attempt to discredit the school as a hothouse of nuns, now had an effective weapon to wield against its supporters. "The school building is unhealthy; the boarders are always ill; they wither away for want of fresh air; they choke to death with the stuffy air throughout the year, even during the holidays. 'Watch out! Or you'll be sending your darling daughters to an early grave!'" -So went the slogans hurled against the school.

Seraphina realized that something had to be done to counteract the gossip even though there was some truth in it. She herself was under strict order of isolation: a year of agony during which she had to keep herself apart from her dear pupils. There was her youngest sister Benjamina breathing her last. The boarders were never taken out to a summer resort during the long holidays.

Thanks to the gossipmongers, the boarders could henceforth enjoy their holidays away from the stale air of Forli. They spent the vacation of 1888 and 1889 at Cesena; and from 1890 onwards, the chosen spot was the ancient Camaldolese abbey at Bertinoro. Seraphina was taken up by the blueness of the sky, the freshness of the air and the eye-filling panorama viewed from the abbey.

4. 30.1.1890, Petition sent to Bp. Svampa. Fasc. 23

*"At the Badia (abbey) at last! It seems the germs that gnaw away my existence will be destroyed here. I feel like being born to new life. An unexpected joy fills my whole being".<sup>5</sup>*

Her heart went out to the girls whom she met in the common refectory and in the chapel. She would have loved to talk to them, to receive their confidences, to solve their problems, to direct their aspirations; but she refrained, bowing to the doctor's order of isolation.

In 1892, when she came back from Bagno, Seraphina found her youngest sister again in the throes of death. In 1889 all hope had been given up and special permission was obtained from ecclesiastical authorities to make her profession on her deathbed. She had recovered for a while but consumed by intermittent coughs and fever, racked by interminable pain and spasms, she was but the shadow of her former self. Yet Benjamin was extraordinarily calm and serene, joyously awaiting the arrival of the Bridegroom. The bystanders were surprised more than once seeing her in ecstasy amidst acute sufferings. On the eve of her death Sr. Placida Albonetti, the Mother Superior, Sr. Seraphina and Sr. Veronica her companion, stood by her bed watching her countenance being lit up by an inexpressible joy. Seraphina, thinking it opportune to make her sister a courier to the celestial court, entrusted her with the commission to ask Jesus, if her constant burning desire for the expansion of the Institute was in accordance with God's will, and to let her know His answer by some sign. The messenger smiled back and flew away on December 1, 1892. Her schoolmate and companion of novitiate, Sr. Veronica, attests to the uprightness of her life:

*"Maria Theresa was frightened of sin; she shuddered at the mere shadow of sin... What an example of purity,*

5. Seraphina's personal diary, dated Sept. 1890. Scr. 30.

humility, uprightness, faith, hope and ardent love of God, has she given me! She used to confess often with tears of compunction. Fr. Bonaventure of Cesena, her confessor, used to tease her saying that she could as well confess her sins to the flowers on the altar. But she used to consider herself the worst sinner. When her confessor heard of her demise, he said, "She died with the baptismal stole on her".<sup>6</sup>

## Death Knell for St. Francis' School

Benjamin's death at the age of twenty-seven rang the knell for the boarding school. She was not the only victim of consumption; there was also a boarder (perhaps two) snatched away in the prime of youth. The wagging tongues triumphantly spread the news far and wide. Civil authorities from nearby Forli and far away Rome swooped down on the school in hoards. Report after report was filed against the unhygienic conditions of the boarding house: the dormitory was too crowded, hardly any space separated the beds; the rooms were unventilated and stuffy; the floors broken and uneven; the walls damp and mouldy; the corridors and staircases narrow and dark; the toilets not worth the name; the rooms were heated by braziers, the list went on! Musty air in the chapel, stale odour in the dormitory, stench in the lavatory: worse still, there was only one washtub in the laundry for the clothing of the sick and the healthy! So went the report of the sanitary inspection made in March 1893.<sup>7</sup> Identical was the one filed in June and July; and so the Prefecture issued the order to close down the school immediately.

The school could be reopened only after fulfilling the conditions laid down by the inspection committee. Walls had to be broken down; corridors widened; windows enlarged; floors levelled, stair-

6. Testimony of Sr. Veronica, Doc. X.

7. 11.11.1893, Forli Prefecture N. 328, Letter to the Headmistress, St. Francis' School.

cases refashioned; modern heating system installed; existing laundry and lavatory demolished completely and new ones constructed and equipped with modern sanitary wares. The elation of the school's opponents knew no bounds. This was the expected moment; the hour of victory! No more convent schools breeding nuns!

Seraphina was at Bagno when the axe fell. She acted quickly. She was not one to be cowed by such intimidation. In fact, the antagonism of her adversaries served but to whet the best in her: the iron-willed, impetuous woman, capable of rising to any occasion. Though Fr. Agnoletti had warned her as early as 1888 that strong-headed persons like her should count up to hundred before speaking and up to a million before acting, she wired to Catherine, her Aide-de-camp: "*Take the boarders to Bertinoro. I'll join you there*". Little did she suspect that her impulsive act would be a giant stride causing upheavals in the community of the Tertiaries of Forli: suspicions and misunderstandings, sufferings and sympathies, indifference and intolerance, among its members and well-wishers alike, and finally bringing forth out of the cataclysm a new shoot on the Franciscan Tree.

Seraphina rushed to Forli and met the Prefect and the Health Commissioner to wheedle out of them the permission to run the school while renovations were being carried on. But no! The Prefect was adamant; no concessions would be made unless all the requirements of the inspection committee were met! She turned next to the engineers, hoping that the estimate would be within reasonable bounds. No luck even there. The project required an exorbitant sum. Where was the amount to be found? Ever since the purchase of the Canestry castle every single lira available was spent on its repairs; there was simply no money left.

Finding dead-ends on all sides; she turned to the bishop who could use his influence with the Prefect to slacken his throttling hold on the school. But how could His Lordship play the mediator, when it was at his own request that the inspection was carried out? Nevertheless he blessed her plan of transferring the boarders to Bertinoro. It was unwise to move them on the eve of their examinations but it was the only remedy left to save the school. He ordered to close the day school and to inform the parents, that until the return of the teachers from Bertinoro, there would be no classes, either for the rich or for the poor students. He left Seraphina with the injunction: "Pray well; and do what the Lord inspires you".<sup>8</sup>

Whichever way Seraphina turned, she found a blind alley. She was not in the good books of the Commissary, Fr. Mario Mustacchi, who all along held the view, that the boarding house was a liability to the community. He was well aware of the rift in the community; the conservative sisters languishing for the good old days of penance and contemplation, the liberal ones clamouring for active apostolate, for minimum external penance, for less going out to beg alms and for expansion of the Institute. He could not stomach any of these changes brought about by the younger generation and he blamed Seraphina as the artificer of the rupture among the sisters. He had already begun canvassing for his favourite orthodox candidate, Sr. Concetta Zannoni, to be elected superior during the forthcoming chapter. What positive help could Seraphina expect from such a person? He certainly was not going to authorize the community to run into heavy debts in order to carry out the mammoth renovation work.

<sup>8</sup> 5.10.1893, Petition to Bp. Svampa. Fasc. 23.

## Bertinoro in Birth Pangs

*"I never had any goal other than that of becoming a saint. Since Jesus has brought me to Forli where I found matters that went against my mind and heart, I was ever ready to suffer for His sake. The thought of leaving the convent never once crossed my mind, and I abandoned myself to divine Providence. I was glad to suffer, but the fear of being wrong, of not having done God's will, was causing me inconceivable martyrdom. An inexplicable martyrdom it was, for my desire since the age of reason, was to know God's will and fulfill it. I would repeat day and night, 'O Jesus, why don't you show me your way as I yearn for nothing but to please you. Stirred by your love, haven't I been pining for you right from my infancy? Wasn't it then your voice that softly whispered in my heart, gently drew me away from the world, invited me to live in your house and to pour out my life-blood for you? To me the world is nothing; I want you alone. But how can I possess you, if I do not fulfill your will, nor make others do it? Have I not been praying to you in the simplicity of my heart to lead me to the place destined by you to offer my holocaust? At least show me now your way and make me follow it!' I passed twenty long years in such a state of mind."*<sup>9</sup>

Bertinoro, nestling in the Romagnese plain between the Appennine range and the Adriatic Sea, is a small town famous for its marvellous vineyards that produced the cherished gold albana and the red sangiovese wines for over a millenium. Its elegant fortress, the millennium-old crenellated castle with its four towers, the ancient thermal resort, the seven century old civic tower, the five-century old Cathedral, the steep cobbled

9. Bertinoro: 1898, Letter to Bishop Raimondi Jaffei

lanes and winding streets up the twin hills, the monuments dedicated to Garibaldi and Mazzini - the champions of the Unification of the Italy and the patriotic Risorgimento - all speak of the glory of this medieval citadel.

Since the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the town boasted of its pilgrim centre, the Sanctuary of the Madonna del Lago (Our Lady of the Lake) situated at its foothill. According to tradition, at the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, when iconoclasts waged their arson attacks on churches, a beautiful Greek effigy of the Virgin painted on a canvas and glued to a wooden tablet survived the fire, when it was thrown into the waters surrounding the hill. Since then, the artistic sanctuary became a destination of Marian pilgrimages and the Virgin of the Lake the patroness of the town.

Another of its millennium-old pride was the Camaldolese monastery, the Badia di Santa Maria d'Urano that stood below the Piazza della Liberta. The Benedictine monks had erected the priory long before the tenth century. Then it passed on to the Camaldolese monks who built the present abbey in the mid-sixteenth century. During the Napoleonic requisition the monks had to leave the abbey in 1806 and secularize themselves. However, the monk Ferdinando Marcucci was permitted to continue as the parish priest of Santa Maria d'Urano as a diocesan priest. Sadly he witnessed the sale and resale of the abbey and its state of disrepair down through the decades till his death on March 24, 1839. In the 1890s, it was owned by Count Manzoni. Only the guest house occupied by the Manzoni family during the summers, was kept in trim order; and of late, it was rented out to holiday makers.

The Bertinoro citizens were eagerly awaiting the return of the boarders ever since their first holidaying there in 1890. They were thrilled at the early arrival of the sisters on July 29, 1893...Now their daughters could attend the workshops and

catechism classes run by the sisters. The Mayor paid Seraphina a personal visit pledging his protection and offering her the municipal school. Then came the gentry pleading her to stay on in their beloved town. The educational authorities of the town repeated the request of the Mayor. Madam Manzoni, the owner of the abbey, offered to sell her property at a modest rate. Bishop Leonardi was ready to lend her the sum required to meet the initial expenses. He advised her to contact the Minister General and the Bishop of Forli about the possibility of running the school at Bertinoro till Forli was ready to receive the boarders.<sup>10</sup>

The holidays were drawing to a close but no repairs were carried out at Forli, except levelling the floor of the basement where classes for the poor were held. There was no talk of reopening the school for the current academic year. Whispers reached Seraphina that the ecclesiastical authorities were planning to close down the school definitely. Panic-stricken, Seraphina rushed to Assisi where the Minister General was on pastoral visit. Her sole hope was Fr. Canali who had known her since 1881. He had guided her in her recurring moods of depression and doubts, in her varying ups and downs in spiritual progress and in her soaring hopes and aspirations. As her spiritual director for over a decade, he could advise her rightly; as the Minister General he could do more. He could assure the future of the school and set things in their right perspective... Was she deluded in her faith in him?

The General was against any construction work that would place the community in deep waters. He could not authorize a loan when there was no means of paying it back in the near future... What was she as well as those sisters employed in the school going to do without a boarding house? Until now they

10. 27.10.1893, Letter to Bp. Svampa Fasc. 23.  
1.11.1893, Letter to the Provincial Superior

were busy pursuing the all-round good of the children entrusted to their care: their moral, religious and cultural growth on a par with their intellectual and physical development. How could they do justice to the integral education of the day-scholars within the limited school hours jammed with academic studies?

Apart from the spiritual aspect, one could not overlook the economic factor involved in running only the day school. The fees charged were nominal, hardly sufficient to meet recurring expenditure. How were they going to pay the lay teachers? In fact what were the sisters going to live on? Were they expected to live on alms all through the year? She wrote to the Commissary and to the Provincial Minister to weigh the pros and cons of closing down the boarding house. She dared to challenge the former to prove that the boarding was indeed a liability. She was absolutely certain that she could prove the contrary within a year's stay at Bertinoro.<sup>11</sup>

If the friars were planning to discontinue the school at Forli, there were the ecclesiastical and civil authorities of Bertinoro pressing Seraphina to run the school at the abbey, enticing her with financial and moral support. She herself was determined to save the school at all cost, and to redeem its besmirched name in public. She resolved to stay on at the abbey for the current academic year.

### Who Stirred up the Hornet's Nest?

*"Taking everything into consideration, reflecting on your Lordship's prohibition to construct and the opinion of the Minister General, and weighing the advice of engineer Guerini and the moral support of the Mayor and Councillors of Bertinoro, I have decided to stay on at the abbey. It will be*

11. 27.10.1893 Let. to Bp. Svampa, Fasc. 23.  
27.10.1893, Let. to Fr. M. Mustacchi, Scr. 51.

*like a prolonged vacation...I have taken this decision in the Portiuncola Church...I am well aware of the inevitable sufferings and sacrifice, the struggles and burdens of such a decision... But I cannot do otherwise...I'll do anything to save my school. The isolation at the abbey, the deprivation of certain spiritual comforts, being far away from the cell where my sister breathed her last, all these frighten me; but I feel that Jesus wants me to go through them...*<sup>12</sup>

The decision to stay at Bertinoro, (taken without the explicit sanction of the Major Superiors of the Order, of the Local Ordinary and the Mother Superior of Forli), shocked everyone. The Commissary, as the spokesman of the Bishop and of the community at Forli, severely reprimanded her for her lack of religious spirit, underlining her lack of submission to the will of the Chapter as the root cause of all the confusion. He asked her to make an honest examination of her conscience, to see if her motives were right before God and her decision pleasing to Him. He advised her to retrace her steps lest she should find herself in a pitfall. He warned her that the Bishop was already planning to take canonical measures against her for her insubordination to legitimate authority.<sup>13</sup>

It was a fact that Seraphina had wanted to postpone the Chapter from Tuesday to Thursday, because of her inability to attend it on the scheduled date. The pastoral visit of the bishop of Borgo San Sepolcro was due at Bagno and Seraphina had to be present there to discuss important matters regarding the school.<sup>14</sup> But Fr. Mustacchi was not going to be fooled by such a lame excuse. He categorically stated that she had deliberately abstained from the Chapter to avoid being elected superior. Nor

12. 6.11.1893, Let. to Bp. Svampa, Fasc. 27-D

13. 3.11.1893, Fr. Mustacchi's Letter to Seraphina, Scr. 51

14. 16.8.1893, Seraphina's letter to Sr. Veronica Fasc. III

was she in favour of Sr. Concetta replacing Sr. Placida, the favourite superior of the youngsters. He said that, she was happy only when she was away from Forli, at Palagano or at Bagno, or with the boarders at the summer resort.

The sisters viewed with suspicion the frequent transporting of furniture and equipment, fruits and foodstuff to Bertinoro. But neither the superior nor the sisters made any remonstrance.<sup>15</sup> They were sure that she would never ask for autonomy of the abbey, for it was she alone who wanted the affiliation of Palagano and Bagno against unprecedented Canon Laws. She had revived again in 1889 the question of Palagano being affiliated to Forli. So they surmised that what she really wanted was autonomy for herself - to be away from the conservative discipline of Forli and modernize everything at Bertinoro according to her sweet will.

"There was a new ripple in the community caused by the educated members due to their high aspirations and outlook, so contrary to that of the older ones. Since 1888, with the permission of Fr. Bonaventure, the Commissary, and Sr. Placida Albonetti, the Superior, the principal Sr. Seraphina Farolfi had taken the neo-professed under her care with the pretext of imparting them due formation in educational apostolate. Sr. Gertrude Angelini, the Mistress protested against it, but she had to yield to the Superior's decision, which led to so many abuses which no superiors, not even the Minister General Fr. Louigi Canali, had strongly disapproved

Consequently, the young sisters became passionately fond of the Principal whose opinion and objectives were like celestial oracle for them. The ideas and plans

15. Diary of the Tertiaries of Forli, pp.91-94

of Sr. Seraphina and her daring, high-minded, enthusiastic but inexpert proteges could not always win the approval and consensus of the prudent, modest and reserved older members”<sup>16</sup>

Seeds of doubts sown in individual minds soon grew into thick undergrowth, spreading its roots beyond the community and casting its ominous shadow over its benefactors and well wishers. The Commissary found her letters contradicting themselves. In one she wrote that she had taken the decision after consulting the authorities though without their explicit consent; in the next she said that she had done it to give peace of mind to both the parties, each living in harmony in its own sphere. Forli to be living on alms, on the produce of the orchard, on the usufruct of the dowry and on old age pension, carrying on the old monastic tradition of penance and prayer. Bertinoro to be devoting itself to active apostolate, living rarely on alms but mostly on the salary of the sisters and the income from the boarding house.<sup>17</sup> In a third letter she wrote that the election of the new superior had nothing to do with her decision, when the Commissary had all the proofs to the contrary. Had not she dropped words of an eventual division if Sr. Placida was not re-elected? Seraphina had no right to complain if he had talked to the gentry about the financial strait of the sisters. Hadn't she been criticizing him all along with the community? Hadn't she written to the superior that she would never come to Forli as long as Fr. Mustacchi was there? All the same, he extended to her his blessings, exhorting her to humble herself to the will of God and either to reduce the number of the boarders or to close down the boarding school.<sup>18</sup>

16. Sr. Christina Barusi: House Diary of Forli - Palagano

17. 27.10.1893, Letter to the Commissary.

18. 6.11.1893, The commissary's Letter to Seraphina.

Bishop Svampa, affronted by her independent attitude, labelled Seraphina, “a rebellious religious”, shaking off the yoke of obedience. He deemed it right to take legal steps against such an insubordinate religious, acting on her own, without his authorization or the Commissary's consent or even her superior's permission.<sup>19</sup> The Provincial Minister pledged his support to the Commissary to bring “the apostate and schismatic” to their knees.<sup>20</sup> In his letter dated 11.11.1893, the Minister General asked Seraphina for an unconditional surrender to the authority – “an entire, complete and total submission to the judgement of her immediate superiors, above all to the Bishop of Forli who exercised jurisdiction over the house where she had made her profession”. Fr. Arcangelo Frabetti asked her to restrain from making an option, leaving it to the superiors. It was their responsibility to choose an alternative and face its consequences; hers was to obey, not to choose. He reminded her that she had not kept her old pact of consulting him before taking any step. Now that she had made the choice herself he left her to face the consequences. He could not help her any more, much as he would have liked.<sup>21</sup>

Letters were flying to and from all directions. Seraphina was calm, certain that she had acted in good faith. She had the tacit permission of the superiors to stay at Bertinoro. Neither the Minister General nor the Bishop had opposed her move; both had told her to do what the Lord had inspired her. She had the consensus of the sisters to run the school at Bertinoro for a year; they were even willing to sell the convent and buy the abbey if things turned out well at Bertinoro. The Mother Superior, Sr. Concetta, herself had suggested to utilize the dowries of the sisters to buy the abbey.<sup>22</sup> Seraphina was, indeed, surprised how things were misconstrued, making a mountain out of a mole hill.

19. 4.11.1893, Bp. Svampa's letter to Mgr. Polloni, Scr. 27.

20. 6.11.1893, Let. of Fr. Seraphino of Fresonara to the Commissary, Doc. 27.

21. 19.11.1893/29.12.1893, Fr. Arcangelo Frabetti's Let. to Seraphina.

22. 5.11.1893, Letter to the Commissary.



*"Things were once taken for granted; but now everything has become topsy-turvy; an alarm, a mountain of suspicions, rumours that have no basis..."*<sup>23</sup>

A tiny crack in the community had become a deep chasm; peace was wrenched out of many a heart; and the sisters at the abbey were subjected to violent temptations, almost to the point of abandoning their vocation. Nevertheless, the hand of God sustained them all along.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile Fr. Bonaventure of Cesena, the Provincial Minister of the Capuchins, was requested by Bishop Svampa to act as intermediary between Bertinoro and Forli. He was a long-time friend of the community and a well wisher of Seraphina, esteemed by both parties. Thanks to his intervention, the clouds were lifted for a while. He guided Seraphina, even to the point of dictating her letters to the authorities. Under his tutelage, she wrote to the Provincial Minister professing absolute obedience to the Bishop and her willingness to place herself and her school, in the hands of the superiors, to be disposed of as they wished. She wrote a letter each to the Bishop, the Commissary and to the Mother Superior. It was signed by all the sisters at the abbey, formally stating that the outcome of the chapter had nothing at all to do with her decision to stay at Bertinoro, and that it was in fact taken earlier with the consent of all the sisters but one. She stated that she could prove at the end of the year that the boarding house was not a liability but an asset to the community, whereas the only apostolate they could do there was the workshop and Sunday oratory. The separation was never in her thought. She assured that any sister from Forli would always find a warm fraternal welcome at Bertinoro. She wound off the letter begging pardon for the suffering and misunderstanding caused by her involuntary act.<sup>25</sup>

23. 16.8.1893, Seraphina's Let. to Sr. Veronica

24. 5.11.1893, Letter to the Provincial Minister, Ser. 51.

25. 29.7.1894, Seraphina's letter to Card. Svampa, Ser. 50 p 51-53

Moved by her submission and humility, the Bishop applauded Fr. Bonaventure for the fine work he had done and granted her a year's stay at the abbey on December 1, 1893. He drew up a set of norms to guide the rapport between the two communities and asked each one to bury the hatchet. Besides the rent for the guesthouse, the day-to-day expenses of the school had to be borne by the fee of the boarders supplemented with alms seeking by the sisters. The surplus of income, if any, was to be sent to Forli whose bounden duty it was to provide for the balance of payments deficit of Bertinoro.

## CHAPTER VI

### Point of No Return

*"If the school could be run at Forli as in the past year during which all possible means were used to foster its development, as well as initiate new ventures, I am ever ready to return there. It will be my true consolation to obey Your Eminence, whatever sacrifices it might cost, and to pledge filial submission to all the authorities at Forli. But if I have to return there without the school, or with the sure danger of its closure, or even its eventual demolition, I am afraid I cannot put myself in a position that would contradict my original calling and the self same spirit by which the friars guided me in making me a Franciscan. However, I don't wish to go against the obligations of my vowed life, or against the laws of the Church, or its authorities. Therefore, I implore the ecclesiastical authorities for an absolute separation from Forli, and above all, for those very help, directions and disposition the authorities consider it opportune and necessary for the definitive founding of a new community at the abbey of Bertinoro".<sup>1</sup>*

The calm following the grant of a year's stay at Bertinoro, was but a prelude to a turbulent scene that would suck into its vortex, not only the Major Superiors of the Friars Minor or the Capuchins Provincial but also the diocesan curia, of both Forli and Bertinoro. If the Commissary, the Provincial and the Minister General were determined to discontinue the school and bring the strayed sheep back into the fold, the Bishop of Forli wanted either a complete separation or an absolute union of the sisters, with or without the school. The Bishop of Bertinoro, on the other hand,

1. 29.7.1894, Seraphina's Letter to Card. Svampa, Scr. 50 p 51-53

was all for the smooth running of the boarding school at the abbey and pledged it his full support. Mgr. Scozzoli and Mgr. Polloni, respective Vicars-General of Forli and Bertinoro, were the mouthpiece of their bishops and soon they became the main exponents of the controversy, with Seraphina feeding them data for their arguments.

Seraphina had to answer for every rumour connected with the abbey. The Minister General, having been informed that the sisters were squandering the income of the boarding school on outings, wanted an explanation. Seraphina was accused of lacking in respect and reverence, submission and obedience to her lawful superiors.

*"Our intentions are distorted; our observance of the norms as object of accusation; the sacrifices undergone as drawbacks. Every means is used to estrange the Bishop, the Minister General and the Provincial from us, painting us what we are not, making white appear black, abandoning us completely, paying no heed to our prayers and sighs....".<sup>2</sup>*

While clarifying the rumoured faults, Seraphina reminded the Minister General that he had all along deplored the founding of the school since it brought in features irreconcilable with the traditional characteristics of the Tertiaries of Forli.

*"You had all along deplored the establishment of the residential school which caused two opposing characteristics to spring up in the life of the community. In 1884, you yourself had stated that the two features could never be bonded together: one destroying the other and therefore, the reign of peace and perfection would be impossible. As things stand, I feel one should bless the Providence that has opened the way for separating the two elements, and for the different*

2. 20.11.1894, Seraphina's Letter to the Procurator General, Scr. 70.

means that equally enable them to arrive at the same goal. If it is necessary to remain physically separated in order to realize this objective, it doesn't, however, call for a moral rupture too. It is extremely unpleasant. If I have spent twenty years of merit-less martyrdom (as you had stated) in blindly obeying the sons of St. Francis, I would continue in such a state till my death, if circumstances beyond my control don't prevent me from doing so. Oh, if I had followed the advice of Card. Moretti and Mgr. Trucchi I would never had been in such excruciating anguish! I could have gladly pursued the way of holiness living my original vocation!

*Surely, separation would be more beneficial and convenient for us - both materially and spiritually. But I do not look for the particular good, but the general good. While I feel obliged to look for the future of the young sisters, I feel equally drawn to make every sacrifice to sustain the Forli community morally and materially."*

Seraphina begged Fr. Canali to seize to opportunity that Providence had given them, to realize simultaneously, both the objectives of contemplation and action - the former at Forli, the latter at Bertinoro.<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 1894, Bishop Svampa was elevated to the Cardinalate of Bologna. He was requested by the Minister General and by the sisters to settle things before he left Forli to take over his new See. His Eminence ordered Seraphina to prepare herself to return to Forli before the expiry of the allotted period, explaining to her that they were not an association of lay teachers but religious bound by the vow of obedience. Since the Minister General was not in favour of their stay at the abbey, they should bow to his will in filial submission.<sup>4</sup> Can.Lispi, the Chancellor of Bertinoro,

3. 4.4.1894, Seraphina's Letter to the Minister General, Scr. 51

4. 26.7.1894, Card. Svampa's letter to Seraphina. Roma, AGCFM - b.d. 12

pointed out to Mgr. Scozzoli the inadvisability of constraining the sisters to get back to Forli without the boarding school. How were they going to answer the sisters who had joined Forli to dedicate themselves to the education of the youth and whose dowry was invested in the purchase and renovation of the Canestry castle? They would never have joined Forli had it not been for St. Francis' School, where they could realize their vocation. Without a school, they would be turning away not only the boarders-both present and future-and depriving so many girls of a religious education, but also all those candidates aspiring to active religious life. Lispi warned Scozzoli that the antagonism in the community which Bishop Svampa had not succeeded in overcoming all these years, would flare up into an open rupture to the advantage of the younger members.<sup>5</sup>

Seraphina wrote to the Minister General and to Card. Svampa expressing her fears about closing the school permanently. The cardinal had asked her to leave the superiors to face the inevitable but neither His Eminence nor the Minister General had volunteered to do so. From her own experience she could predict that the sole person answerable for everything would be herself. She explained to them that not only she but also all those who had joined under her influence had done so because Forli had a school where they could devote themselves to the sanctification of the youth. In the absence of a school, they would all rather return to their families than stay on in a community where they would never have made their profession had they known the widening chasm in the objectives of the congregation. They did not feel drawn to an austere penitential life. The sisters would accuse her of having deceived them, of having hidden the antagonistic views in the community, of forcing them to invest their dowry in the boarding house and its premises. She could no longer encourage her pupils to join Forli.<sup>6</sup>

5. 31.7.1894, Canon Lispi's letter to Minister General, Scr. 51.

6. 1.9.1894, Cfr Seraphina's letter to Fr. Canali, Scr. 51

Above all, how were the sisters going to be maintained? They neither had their dowry or its usufruct, it being already utilized for the purchase and renovation of the building... could they be expected to seek alms? She gave the Cardinal a synopsis of her religious life: her initial desire to dedicate herself to the youth, her blind obedience to the friars, her early disillusion, the opposing views in the community, the twenty years of meritless martyrdom at Forli, the timely guidance and support of the Minister General and the Provincial and her present dilemma.<sup>7</sup>

*"Seeing my intentions, actions and works distorted into their opposites, I just turn to prayer. Jesus who judges the heart will defend his spouse who trusts in him. I want to work, suffer and immolate myself solely for his greater glory. I wish every good for those who calumniate me, considering them as my true benefactors."*<sup>8</sup>

Seraphina was once looked upon as the providential hand that brought about the needed change in the orthodox convent of Forli. Now she was accused of being the destroyer of the physiognomy of the same Tertiaries! Forli was recommended to her because its school needed a headmistress who would dedicate her life to the education of the girls; now she was asked by the friars themselves to close the school and forget about her vocation to active life! Fr. Luigi Canali, the same person who had upheld her for over a dozen years, was pointing his accusing finger at her; and even the bishop, one of whose greatest joys was the Farolfi school, was ordering her to bow to the wish of the Minister General!

*"Forli was not the place for me; it was a mistake opening the boarding school there. Here I do not do the will of God. Where and how shall I seek refuge to fulfill the will of God?"*<sup>9</sup>

7. Ibid./29.7.1894, Seraphina's letter to Card. Svampa, Fasc. 55.

8. 14.4.1894 Seraphina's letter to the minister General, Ser. 51

9. As in footnote 6 above.

Where was Seraphina to turn for advice? The future of the sisters hung heavily on her conscience. She felt deluded by the friars in joining Forli; she in turn had lured the innocent boarders into taking the veil at Forli. It was heart-rending to close the door to the aspirants to the convent. She had no answer to give them, she herself groping in the dark for a ray of light. She felt repugnant in revealing to her pupils and to their relatives the bickering in the community and in the ecclesiastical circle, if the school was going to be closed forever. She implored the Cardinal and the Minister General to have pity on them and to find a peaceful solution to the dragging dispute.

The Cardinal's reply was a decree ordering the sisters under virtue of obedience to return to Forli on November 1, 1894 and declaring them disobedient, fugitive and apostate if they were found at the abbey after the due date.<sup>10</sup> Stunned by this bolt from the blue, the sisters turned to His Eminence begging pardon for whatever they had done to merit such a chastisement. Whether mollified by their contrition or judging his own act too rash, the Cardinal annulled the decree and on 28.9.1894 granted them another year of grace at the abbey, at the end of which they had either to return to Forli or be separated from it. With the Cardinal's ultimatum, Seraphina had to act quickly. There was neither any talk of further construction, nor the prospect of buying a suitable building in the near future. She was not in favour of complete separation, nor was she ready to give up her cherished school. Apart from the inevitable scandal they would be creating, there was the risk of Forli being liquidated, for the abbey sisters would clamour for their dowry reducing their fellow sisters to utter penury. The only choice left was to have two houses divided physically but united spiritually with the possibility of interchange of personnel and financial help.

10. 19.9.1894, The Decree of Card. Svampa, Bertinoro AV - Terziarie della Badia

*"Our objectives are different; so are our paths: the two cannot be welded together but can be harmonized by the bond of mutual charity and help. It was entirely wrong on my part to embrace a rule that suited neither my vocation nor my health; and now I am faced with its saddest consequences."*<sup>11</sup>

Seraphina drafted a scheme by which such a division-union could be possible. The sisters of Bertinoro would retain their right over their dowry while Forli enjoyed its usufruct; both the communities would elect their respective superiors and the headmistress. To facilitate matters in future, there could be two novitiates: Forli receiving those candidates inclined to rigorous penitential life, Bertinoro for those leaning towards an active life. Thus the sisters might not be subjected to constant pangs of conscience about the discrepancy between what they professed and what they practised.

*"To profess a rule that cannot be observed is to cause a continuous struggle and along with it a wrong conscience. Promise little and observe a lot. A life of active apostolate is incompatible with a life of austerity, fasts and multifarious common acts. But it is in harmony with a blameless life, with the spirit of interiority that generates saints. This is the essence, the beginning, the means and the goal of the religious house at Bertinoro."*<sup>12</sup>

Seraphina sent the proposed scheme - signed by all the sisters - to the Procurator General of the Friars Minor. He washed his hands off the whole thing saying that it was the concern of the local ordinary. Religious authorities could not interfere in diocesan affairs; hence she should put the problem to the respective bishops and calmly await their decision.<sup>13</sup> The Commissary found the scheme a perfect vehicle for carrying out Seraphina's ambition to rule over all the houses in the name of education.

11. 14.3.1895, Letter of Seraphina to the M. Superior of Forli. (Forli archive)  
12. 20.11.1894, Seraphina's letter to Procurator General. Scr. 70  
13. 29.11.1894, The Procurator General's letter to Seraphina. Doc. 28.

"Article 5 is just to feed the Principal's ambitious goal, namely to be in command every where and to extend her activities in each house. Whoever is familiar with her plans is soon convinced that she is prone to encroach on every sphere under the pretext of directing the educational activities. As the Cardinal used to say, she wants to be the Boss and reduce all the houses - not excluding that of Forli - to be her domain and subjects who can easily be fooled by her.

Article 6 gives full freedom to the Principal to choose whomever she likes. Unfortunately with her uncanny knack of charming and enticing the sisters to her side, she would turn everything upside down, destroy peace and use everyone to further her aspiration."

Fr. Mastacchi was sure that with her magnetic charm to lure everyone to her side, seraphina would walk off with all the sisters and candidates, if freedom was given to them to opt for a specific community. He rejected the plan outright as it set up a trap for the unfortunate sisters of Forli.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, Mgr. Scozzoli and Polloni had prepared a project of their own, each viewing the case from his own angle. Scozzoli, who had the whole case at his fingertips, feared that if a division occurred, it would naturally be to the advantage of the abbey sisters. He requested his counterpart at Bertinoro, to keep in mind that the abbey should not flourish at the expense of Forli's ruin. His was a project for juridical and administrative division linked by moral and spiritual bond.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless the final version of the scheme underscored the wishes of Cardinal Svampa and the Minister General, i.e. absolute

14. March 1894, Fr. M. Mustacchi's letter to Polloni, Doc. 28.  
15. 1.10.1895: Mgr. Scozzoli, The Project of Division: Forli AV - B. XXIII / 192

separation of the two houses with nothing in common except the Rule of St. Francis. Mgr. Scozzoli reminded them that they had no right to seek alms, according to the norm set by Card. Svampa; and that they should hand over to Forli the interest of the dowry held in deposit by the sisters at Bertinoro. Mgr. Polloni defended the sisters against these rash impositions, on the ground that Bertinoro had to bear the entire expense of the boarding school and the community of nine sisters and eight postulants, besides the salary of the servants and the rent for the abbey. The interest on the dowry was spent on the maintenance of the postulants who would have been professed by now but for the firm stand of the Cardinal against opening the novitiate at Bertinoro.<sup>16</sup>

Early in 1895, Mgr. Polloni had requested Mgr. Scozzoli for permission to open the novitiate at the abbey as the aspirants were not willing to go to Forli, not being drawn to its penitential life. They had been waiting for the final decision of the curia with regard to the question of "separation-union" of the two houses for nearly two years. They made it known that they would not wait any longer. "Why deny them entry into religion when they were ready to throw their lot with Bertinoro whatever it might be?" - so argued the supporters of the abbey. But neither the Minister General nor the Cardinal would approve of a novitiate at the abbey. They knew that by sanctioning another novitiate, they would only speed up the growing rift between the two houses. If the abbey required a novitiate the matter should be put to Rome.<sup>17</sup>

It was October 1895, the last month of the year of prorogation. While presenting the final plan of separation, Mgr. Scozzoli had ordered Seraphina to settle all accounts within a fortnight. Faced

16. 3.10.1895, Mgr. Polloni's letter to Mgr. Scozzoli, Doc. 19

17. 6.3.1895, Card Svampa's letter to Mgr. Scozzoli, Forli AV - B. XXIII / 192

4.3.1895, Min. General's letter to Fr. M. Mustacchi, Forli AV - B. XXIII / 192

with the inevitable division against all their wishes and hopes of union the sisters turned to Bishop Leonardi seeking his juridical protection. The episcopal curia of Bertinoro was only too obliging to incorporate the "fugitives" into the diocese, with the decree of the bishop dated 29.10.1895.

As soon as Mgr. Scozzoli received a copy of the act of separation signed by all the sisters of the abbey, he was furious. He wrote to the Minister General informing him of their insolent defiance of legitimate authority, their heartlessness in abandoning the poor old sisters of Forli in utter penury, their callousness towards the hands that fed them all these years. He accused Seraphina of open disobedience. He stated that she had not followed the directives of Card. Svampa, namely, that she had not handed over the interest of the dowry, nor submitted the statement of account for the current year, nor settled the claim of the sisters whose dowry was utilized for the Forli house. She had no right to break off from the mother house without making it due indemnification. He threatened to issue a decree from the Cardinal suspending them from the religious state if things were not settled within a fortnight.<sup>18</sup>

### The Storm Gathers Speed

The decree of Bishop Leonardi sheltering the sisters of the abbey under his episcopal wings, acted as a catalyst, propelling the domestic feud into an accelerated diatribe among high ranking hierarchical figures, in which neither Forli nor Bertinoro had any voice. For three long years they were in the background, as silent spectators to the protracted, monotonous war of the pen carried on by their respective advocates in the court of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Regulars. Mgr. Scozzoli and Card. Svampa formed the prosecuting counsel, pleading for Forli against the invalidity of Bishops Leonardi's decree, against the claim of

18. 30.10.1895, Mgr. Scozzoli's letter to the M. General, Ser. 50.

Mgr. Scozzoli's letter to Sr. Seraphina, Doc. 19.

the abbey sisters, either to the interest of their dowry for 1895, or to the ownership of the dowry spent on the purchase of the orchards, or on the renovation of the convent. They demanded that Sisters Bernardina and Nazzarena should renounce their proprietorship over the large portion of their considerable sum utilized for the house and grounds. It was right and just that due compensation be made to Forli for the immense loss sustained by the poor sisters because of the desertion of the young sisters. Their sympathy went to the fourteen feeble sisters who had worn themselves out serving the boarding school and rearing the young sisters. Now in their hour of need they were left alone to maintain a large house with its useless grounds and pay its tax! One blushed seeing the poor sisters saddled with such a heavy burden! So went the successive premise in their chain of arguments.

Bitter was the invective against Mgr. Polloni for siding with the cause of the dissenters, when they were in fact under the jurisdiction of Forli. Their pen lashed out against Bishop Leonardi for his "overindulgence and protection" of the sisters. He should on no account have taken the fugitives under his wings without prior consultation with the Cardinal and the approbation of the administrator of Forli. He had been overprotective and it was no wonder that the sisters sidestepped the norms set by the Cardinal with impunity!

The defense counsel consisting of Mgr. Polloni, Bishop Leonardi and Vespignani—Bishop of Cesena and the Apostolic Administrator of Bertinoro after the death of Leonardi, held up Canon Law against the unjust demand of the opponents for the renouncement of personal right to hold ownership over one's patrimony - whether in kind or in cash. Scozzoli-Svampa thought only of the insecurity of the frail old sisters as long as the youngsters at the abbey held a claim over their house and orchards. On the other hand the Polloni-Vespignani-Leonardi triad, taking a leaf

from two religious suppressions within an arc of sixty years, wanted to ensure the future of the sisters against any eventuality of the sort. The Church had condemned Napoleon's seizure of religious property and Victor Emmanuel's usurpation of the Papal States. In both cases individual legacy could be retrieved, provided the religious had title deeds to prove their claim. What Scozzoli was asking was more than that which both emperors had executed! Card. Svampa parried the opponent's thrust by the expedient, that if the sisters wanted to enjoy their dowry they were welcome to return to Forli. If they wanted to remain at the abbey and still have their titles, it was the duty of their superior to restitute them the dowry spent for Forli!

The verbal duelling gathered momentum as each party picked the other to pieces, over a slip of the pen or over the transgression of common courtesy. Card. Svampa said that the term "separation" used in his decree meant the sisters' return to the secular state or break off from the mother house; after having obtained formal sanction of the local ordinary. He certainly had not meant the "desertion" effected by the rebellious group of sisters!

Bishops Leonardi and Vespignani called into question His Eminence's declaration of the Bertinoro sisters as "fugitives and apostate" and the Vicar Capitular's repetition of the same a year later, when they themselves had driven the sisters to the wall. They were pleading for union when the Cardinal, the Minister General and the Vicar Capitular thrust absolute separation upon them. Indeed, they had not thrown off the jurisdiction of Forli, as the Cardinal upheld, taking advantage of the "overindulgence and protection" of the local bishop; Vespignani analyzed the meaning of the term "separation". If it meant departure or estrangement of the sisters from Forli, who was to be blamed? Those who were forced to leave under obedience or those who

sent them to Bertinoro? If the term connoted "break of", those who had driven them to this extreme ought to be blamed, not the sisters strangled by ecclesial power and hard pressed for time summing up the situation at Bertinoro Mgr. Polloni stated:

"Believe me, Most Rev. Father, these sisters are good, obedient and most exemplary religious, whatever anyone might say. While they dedicate themselves whole-heartedly to the education of the youth, they are leading a life in full conformity with their vocation. People of all rank have high regard for them as they take care of the destitute girls of the locality. If the public comes to know what is going on, there would be a hue and cry against the injustice and persecutions to which the sisters are being subjected." <sup>19</sup>

The Cardinal in turn questioned the legitimacy of Bishop Leonardi's officiating through his Vicar, at the Solemn ceremony of the postulants' entry into the novitiate. He pointed out that by doing so they had publicly manifested their support for the dissidents. Scozzoli justified his act on the ground that the sisters were really apostates according to the decree of the Cardinal, for they had openly rebelled against the ecclesiastical authorities. By disobeying the norms set by the Cardinal, they had automatically placed themselves in the unpleasant situation, even before his specific proclamation on October 30. Scozzoli fanned the flame by accusing Polloni of being the confidant of Seraphina, censuring her letters and answering them for her even without informing her of their content. He insisted that the separation was not so much motivated by the civil authorities' prohibition as by the sisters' obstinacy in following the rule of Forli. He would cull chance phrases from Seraphina's letters to prove his points one of which was her predicting Forli's financial loss in the event of a division. It was held up as a proof of her callousness in leaving

19. 31.10.1895, Polloni's letter to the Min. General S. 51 p.35-36

the feeble old sisters in dire straits. Not only she had withheld the interest of the dowry and the surplus of the income from the boarding school but also deliberately took the bread from the poor sisters' mouth by seeking alms for Bertinoro, thus reducing their only source of livelihood! The Cardinal had forbidden them to beg but they sought alms all the same and confounded the benefactors who were naturally annoyed at a "second begging" by the same sisters. <sup>20</sup>

## Dissension and Deadlock

Amidst all these accusations and rebuttals, Seraphina busied herself writing the rules and regulations for the postulants and novices and visiting distant localities where she was offered an opening for the Institute's expansion. The very week Scozzoli had declared the suspension of the sisters, she was at Parma weighing the pros and cons of Bussetto as a future filial house. She was happy to find in Polloni "a most loving father" - an expression that would be used as a trump card by Scozzoli against the Vicar General. She was in fact guided all along by Polloni's mature wisdom and timely counsel, his pristine prudence and priestly zeal, so much so, that she would call him the "true founder" of her institute.

She had influential persons on her side, besides the bishops of Bertinoro and Cesena. There was the Archbishop of Ravenna ready to act as mediator between the two dioceses; there was Cardinal Parocchi, the Pope's own Vicar! Indeed, she had made a score when on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1896, Sr. Placida Albonetti, who had been superior of Forli for eighteen years at various trienniums, opted to join the so-called rebels. Nevertheless the obstinate

20. 18.2.1896, Mgr. Scozzoli's letter to Card. Prefect of S.C. Forli AV - B. XXIII/192

7.3.1896, Cardinal Svampa's letter to the Card. Prefect of S.C. Roma, ASCVRR - 70 - Terziarie di Forli

17.3.1898, Cardinal Svampa's letter to the Card. Prefect of S.C. Roma, ASCVRR - Bricinorien., 70 - Terziarie di Bertinoro (b. 70)

6.7.1896, Bishop Leonardi's letter to the Card. Prefect Bertinoro, AV - Terziarie Francescane

12.2.1898, Bishop Vespignani's letter to the Card. Prefect of S.C. Scr. 50.



silence of the Minister General - "her one time father" - hurt her to the core. He had broken off all communications since Nov. 1893. Being forsaken by the Order left an open wound deep in her heart. She wrote confidential letters to influential persons pleading with them to approach the Minister General and break the wall between them and Forli. They were forbidden access to their former house and had to lodge with the seculars when they went to Forli. Bertinoro did not have a Teacher's Institute and postulants had to be sent to Forli for their Teachers' Certificate Examinations. Seraphina recoiled at the thought of creating scandal by lodging at some benefactor's house instead of at the convent. If peace could be obtained by the renouncement of their dowry, she was ready to persuade the sisters to do so, even if they were going to be roofless. She had firm faith in the unfailing bank of Providence.<sup>21</sup>

The novices, who had spent two years as postulants, had completed their year of novitiate in March 1897. It was November and still they were not allowed to make their profession. Seven others including a graduate from a noble family had entered the novitiate after them and were nearing the completion of their novitiate. Besides, there were six candidates aspiring to religious life. Nor were the requests infrequent from ecclesiastical circles to open schools in their respective town.

Seraphina faced with the deadlock over admitting novices to profession, turned to the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation expounding their numerous problems: the psychological and moral sufferings of the novices, the resulting confusions and temptations to abandon their vocation, the impossibility of employing them in the school, the consequent financial loss to the community, their inability to meet the many requests to open schools for lack of personnel and the absurdity of keeping the novices in suspense till the pending suit was decided.<sup>22</sup> She turned next to the Cardinal Vicar and then to the Pope himself.

21. 29.3.1897, Seraphina's letter to the Procurator General.

22. 9.11.1897, Seraphina's letter to Card. Vannutelli, Ser. 50.

*"Your Eminence has given me ineffable comfort in this trying situation. I'm still thrilled by the words you spoke as you placed your hand on my head in benediction, 'Hold on to Bertinoro. You'll branch out from there across various parts of the world.' You said, too, that the controversy regarding the dowry would not impede our mission. But Cardinal Svampa is the chosen instrument of God to inflict all sorts of afflictions on us and to hinder our promising mission... We were to open houses in some dioceses since October 1896; and now the educational authorities are fed up with the delay. Your Eminence can imagine the torments of the novices kept in suspense for such a long period, the rumours spread about us and the misgivings of the parents and relatives... Cardinal Svampa's stand will reduce us to utter penury and want, and all the good done by Mgr. Polloni will end up in smoke, if you do not come to our help in our harrowing anguish. It is a question of doing justice to us poor wretched beings, to the youth who have abandoned the world to consecrate themselves to Jesus as victims and to work in His vineyard. Your Eminence alone can save this house!"*<sup>23</sup>

On January 21, 1898, Cardinal Vannutelli intimated to Bishop Leonardi that the novices could not be admitted to the profession till the terms of Card. Svampa's notification of Sept. 26, 1897 were met. The conditions laid down by the Cardinal were (i) the surrender of all claims to the house and orchards of Forli by the Bertinoro sisters, (ii) the renouncement of the unused dowry of the abbey sisters by the Forli community and (iii) the equal sharing of the expenses for legal procedures by both the houses. Vespignani pleaded with the Prefect to let the sisters hold a mortgage over the Forli house during their life time, as a pledge against any future confiscation of convent property.<sup>24</sup>

23. 16.11.1897, Seraphina's letter to Card. Vica. Lucido M. Parocchi., Ser. 50

24. 18.2.1898, Bishop Vespignani's letter to the Card. Pref., Ser. 50.

Card. Svampa objected to the policy, since a "debt" had to be created as basis for the "mortgage" and as the old sisters would be legally saddled with the duty of paying an annual interest to the creditors. Moreover, who could be expected to trust the clause about the expiring of the mortgage upon the death of the two sisters, when either of them was free to add a codicil leaving her property to whomsoever she wished? And with a mortgage deed in hand how could Bertinoro be asked to pay compensation for the "immense financial loss", incurred by the Forli community? Legally speaking they had lost all claims to any property since they deserted the house where in they professed to live and die.<sup>25</sup> - So argued the prosecuting counsel.

The sisters, finding that nothing but the cession of their title deed would dissolve the deadlock, sent a formal letter to the Cardinal Vicar, renouncing their dowry spent on the house and orchard. Mgr. Polloni had drafted the letter for them on April 14<sup>th</sup>, incurring the displeasure of Vespignani, who had advised them against any such procedure and who had requested the Prefect to lift the ban on the profession of the novices. As soon as Card. Vannutelli was informed by Card. Parocchi about the cession of the dowry by the abbey sisters, His Eminence authorised Card. Svampa to rectify the errors, if any, committed in the act of division, since the novices were already granted permission to make their profession.<sup>26</sup> The Prefect instructed Vespignani to see that the abbey sisters wore a habit distinct from that of their counterparts at Forli, so that they could be easily distinguished by the people and the confusion over the donation of alms be

avoided to the benefit of all. Above all, the repudiation of dowry was to be made a legal act by the gift-deed of their legacy to the sisters of Forli, the ensuing court expenses being borne by both the donees and the donors.<sup>27</sup> Vespignani protested that it was quite an absurd demand asking the sisters not only to bequeath their patrimony but also to meet the notary's charges out of their own pocket!

According to Scozzoli's final project of division, Bagno was under the direction of Forli. However, the Mother Superior passed it to Bertinoro according to the original terms of contract, namely, that Bagno should always be under the direction of the Head mistress of St. Francis' School. The sisters of both Bagno and Bertinoro had to be represented in the negotiations as they had offered their dowry - large or small, for the renewal and upkeep of the Canestry building and grounds. The Bishop of San Sepolcro stepped in with Bagno on the Scene, defending his sisters against Jaffei, the newly consecrated Bishop of Forli, who accused Sr. Magdalene - the main claim-holder, of deliberately avoiding the gift deed.

Seraphina wrote to Bishop Jaffei that she just was not able to borrow money to pay for the gift-deed, since they were living on the charity of Polloni, the newly appointed Bishop of Bertinoro. Nor could they be expected to collect the amount by alms-seeking, for the maximum they could obtain would be less than one-tenth of the required sum.

*"We have no house or roof; we are deprived of our rights and possessions. We have no income except what comes through Providence... It is quite an interesting affair: to be stripped of everything and under obligation to pay for our complete despoliation! With St. Peter I repeat: 'I have no gold or silver; what I've, I give you... I have two dowry-*

25. 17.3.1898, Card. Svampa's letter to the Prefect. Roma, ASCVRR - Bricinorian., b.70=Terziarie di Bertinoro

26. 15.4.1898, Card. Vannutelli's letter to Card. Svampa, Roma, ASCVRR - Bricinorian., b.70=Terziarie di Bertinoro

27. 6.3.1898, Card. Vannutelli's letter to Bp. Vespignani, Bertinoro, AV - Terziarie Francescane

holders. I leave them to the house of Forli in order to save everyone the trouble (of selling or buying) ...However it is up to Your Lordship to persuade them to come there and have them accepted by the sisters of Forli" <sup>28</sup>

The gift deed was also delayed due to other reasons. Sisters Magdalene and Nazarene could not be present on the required date at Forli; when they could, the notary of Bagno was absent or his formulation of the transaction was not pleasing to his counterpart at Forli. Finally by the end of September, the deed was drawn up and signed by all concerned. Meanwhile, the Mother Superior of Forli asked the abbey sisters to return the few pieces of furniture they had taken with them when the boarding school was moved to Bertinoro. The sisters gladly returned the articles; why hold back a few paltry objects when they were also handing over their claim to the Canestry Mansion and orchards?

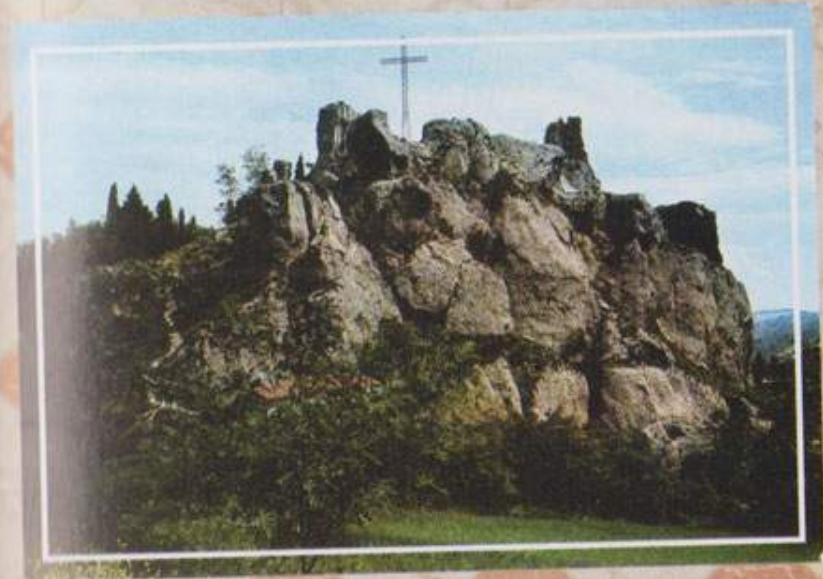
Finally, all the canonical irregularities that had occurred in the admission of candidates to the novitiate and profession were rectified by the decree of Cardinal Svampa issued on May 1, 1899, exactly a year after the official birth of the Institute. With regard to the modification of the habit, the sisters adopted the Franciscan emblem, with an ostensory instead of the cross, worn on the sleeves of their religious garb. In their extremely poor condition, it was out of the question to discard their habit and adopt new ones. Being Clarists of the Blessed Sacrament, their distinctive badge would be the monstrance in the centre of the Franciscan crest, ingeniously devised by some sisters with a flight of fancy, and adopted later as the seal of the Institute.

28. 4.8.1898, Seraphina's letter to Bishop Jaffei, Forli, AV - B. XXIII / 192

## TOSSIGNANO



Panorama



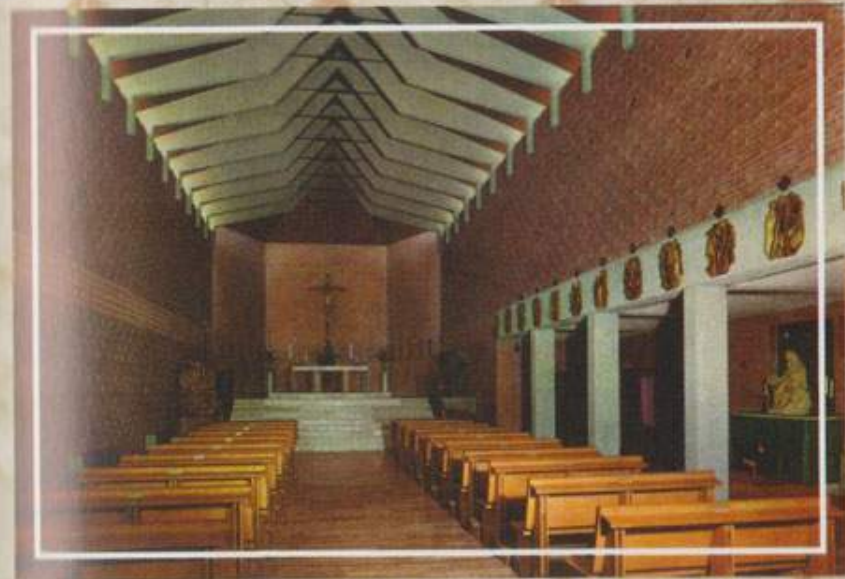
Ruins of the Fort



The Traditional Polenta Festival :  
The old Assumption Church on the left



St. Michael's Church (Rebuilt after World War II)



Interior of the Church



Side altar dedicated to Our  
Lady of the Sheaves



The Baptismal Font where  
Francesca Farolfi was  
baptized

# FORLI



Canestry Mansion :  
Presently the Convent of  
the Franciscans of the  
Immaculate Virgin.

Francesca Farolfi :  
Headmistress of  
St. Francis School

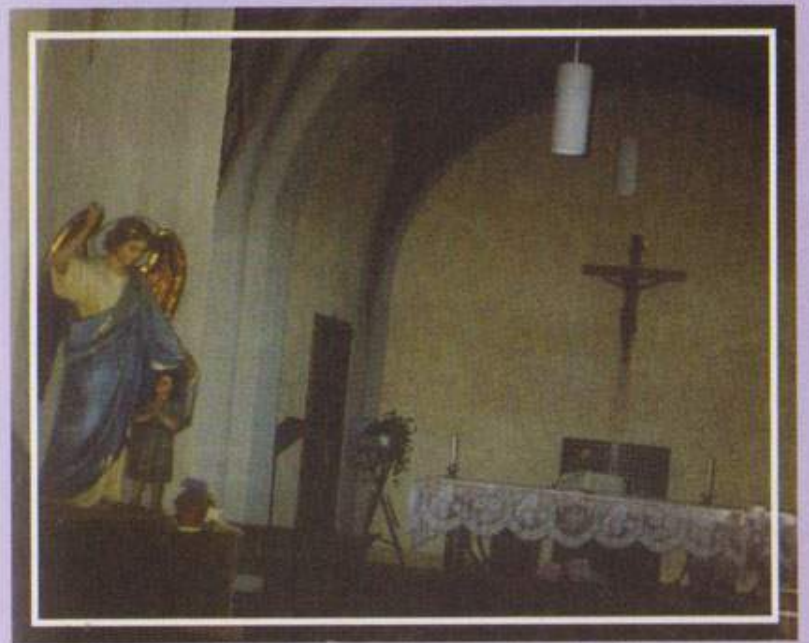


CFMSS from India along with a member of the  
Franciscans of the Immaculate with whom the Tertiaries of  
St. Elizabeth were amalgamated in 1924.

## BAGNO



Interior of the Chapel dedicated to the Guardian Angel.



"The Guardian Angel" dating back to 1891.

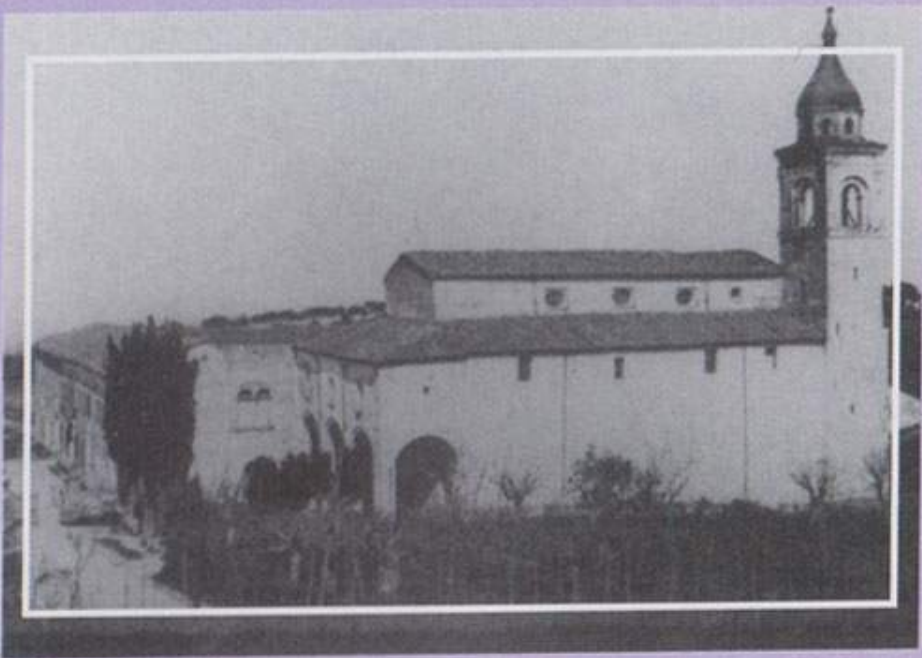


The bellfry of the Parish Church.

## LA BADIA



The Camaldolese abbey dating back to the 16th century and requisitioned in 1806 during the Napoleonic reign.



The Church of Santa Maria d'Urano attached to the abbey and destroyed during World War II.



The Quadrangle



The Convent Chapel

## CHAPTER VII

# *The New Shoot on the Franciscan Tree*

"This is to notify that Sr. Nazzarena of the Sacred Heart and Sr. Bernardina of the Most Holy Name of Jesus, both members of the Franciscan Tertiaries of Bertinoro, have sent to this Office through His Eminence Cardinal Parocchi, the declaration stating the renouncement of their dowries invested in the purchase and development of the property at Forli, the consequent forfeiture of their entitlement to the said property and all claim to their right to the Institute. Such waiver is deemed necessary for the settlement of the long-standing dispute between the two communities. Therefore, the prohibition imposed on the community of Bertinoro against admitting the novices to profession having ceased, this Sacred Assembly grants you the faculty to admit to profession all those who have completed the period of novitiate prescribed by the Canon Law and the Constitution of the Institute."<sup>1</sup>

Rome: 25.4.1898

Card. Vannutelli

Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Religious

The storm that had beset the frail bark of the abbey community since October 1893 showed signs of abatement by the spring of 1898. Clouds were being lifted and on the horizon was seen a rosy tint. The ratification of the division by the Sacred Congregation on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1898 had heralded the welcome weather that prospered the growth of the tiny shoot "sprung from the nakedness of the cross". Indeed, the Institute was born in literal poverty and lurid sufferings. The community had no roof of its own; the boarding school was a rented building; the sisters were deprived of the dowry they had once possessed;

1. Letter to Bishop Vespignani, Bertinoro, AV - Terziarie Francescane



they were even asked to bear the notary's charges for gifting their legacies to Forli. Theirs was a poverty, not of the crib but of the cross of the Saviour: for five long years the community had to bear the brunt of sufferings and humiliations, of misunderstanding and accusations, of harassment and deprivations. The religious, schooled in the folly of the Cross, waited patiently for day of the Lord.

By the end of April 1898, everything was ready for the solemn installation of the 'new offspring' in the bosom of the Mother Church. On May 1, 1898, the little chapel of the Mother of Fair Love re-echoed with the formula of Profession of the Clarist Franciscan Missionary Sisters of the Most Blessed Sacrament. The sisters, beginning with Seraphina, renewed their vows according to the New Constitutions. Then came the novices, hardly able to pronounce the words for joy and elation. At the conclusion of the moving ceremony, Bishop Polloni read out the telegram of Card. Parocchi greeting the newly professed. The entry in the House Diary for that "Happy day, wholly God's", gives us a beautiful picture of the moving scenes - from Mons. Polloni's arrival at about 6a.m. to the sisters' adoration of the Blessed Sacrament till late in the night, even Seraphina's little disappointment about not having her "beloved Father" to receive the vows of the newly-professed.

### **Sunday, May 1, 1898**

***A great Day! This is the day the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad in it!***

*"Today, the nine pillars of the Institute renewing their vows, have embraced the Rule of St. Clare modified by the Constitution. Today a religious profession has been made here for the first time; and that too a perpetual one! Five novices - fortunate handmaidens of the great King, would be shortly*

*taking those vows, pronouncing that oath by which the world would be dead to them and they to the world, and they would become spouses of Him who pastures his flock among the lilies, and who will be their great reward. Hosanna! Alleluia! Glory and praise to God!*

*The nine angelic beings who have launched a new era for the House, and whose names will be reverently repeated by the succeeding daughters of the Institute, are the following:-*

- 1 Sr. Maria Chiara Serafina of Jesus Mother General
- 2 Sr. Mary Caterina of the Sacred Heart
- 3 Sr. M. Nazarena of the Sacred Heart of Mary
- 4 " " Veronica of the Most Bl. Sacrament
- 5 " " Bernardina of the Name of Jesus
- 6 " " Germana of the Cross
- 7 " " Orsolina of the Guardian Angel
- 8 " " Cecilia of the Guardian Angel
- 9 " " Domenica of St. Francis

*The following are the fortunate ones admitted to profession today:-*

- 1 Sr. Mary Francesca of the Holy Stigmata
- 2 " " Agnes of the Sacred Bosom
- 3 " " Teresa of Carmel
- 4 " " Agata of St. Frederick
- 5 " " Filomena of the Angelic Choir

*Our beloved Father came at about 6 a.m. and celebrated the Holy Mass at 6.30. He was almost moved to tears. At the communion he preached a beautiful sermon expounding the verse, "Your children like olive plants around your table" (Ps.128:4). It was a fervent exhortation urging us to renew whole-heartedly our self-oblation to Jesus and to invite Him to*

reign over our mind, our heart and our soul. He prayed that Jesus be our General, leader and guide. After the sermon the nine<sup>2</sup> of us recited the formula of profession and received Holy Communion. Then all the others except the five to be professed, also received the Mysteries. At the end of the Mass, the incomparable Father concluded the Retreat recapitulating his talks in a few terse words, and left us three pointers:-

1. Jesus Crucified from whom we can learn humility, obedience, patience and all other virtues.
2. An ardent, genuine, profound love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.
3. A tender devotion to the Virgin. "Let those who do not love Jesus, be anathema!"

a deep groan There rose from the audience. The loving Father spent the whole day with us, assisting Bishop Vesignani's Mass, warm and genial with everyone, exchanging pleasantries with the newly-professed, and joining us for the adoration. He left at 8 p.m.

Rt. Rev. Alfonso M. Vesignani, Bishop of Cesena and Apostolic Administrator of Bertinoro, arrived at 8 p.m., and soon celebrated the Eucharist at which the five novices received Holy Communion. At 10 O'Clock - after tea and snacks - His Lordship initiated the profession ceremony according to the ritual in current use, and accompanied by solemn music and hymns. It was a moving scene. (No relatives of the neo-professed

2. The omission of the name of Mother Placida Albonetti remains a mystery. Though she had been the superior of the Forli community for nearly 20 years, she had opted for Bertinoro on July 26, 1896. In fact, her name is found among the addressee in Polloni's letter dated 6.5.1898. She died at Florence three months later.
- Sr. Mary Cecilia served the Indian Mission as its Visitator from February 9, 1903 to September 15, 1912.
- Sr. Bernardina died in Brazil on December 14, 1909 after a brief missionary life at Itambacury since July 3, 1907.
- Sr. Philomena played the crucial role at Sardhana during the Gentili-CFMSS episode (1901-1907)

could be present at this function). The Bishop, Mons. Polloni and priests of the neighbouring parishes joined the sisters and the neo-professed for lunch in the novitiate refectory. A few of the newly-professed, novices and boarders entertained the guests with their recital.

The Bishop left at 5 o'clock. Then the parish priest of Bracciano exposed the Blessed Sacrament for long hours, bringing thus the memorable day to a close at the feet of Jesus in the Sacred Host. Nevertheless, the fact that the Simple Profession could not be made in the hands of our beloved Father who has received us, protected us and nurtured us, cast a gloom on this happy day, totally belonging to God."

### Drafting a Constitution

"The Clarist Franciscan Missionaries of the Most Blessed sacrament shall profess the Form of Life given by St. Francis to St. Clare, his first-born." (Art.7)

If during 1893-96, Seraphina was busy drawing up rules and regulations for postulants and novices, during the next two years she busied herself with the compilation of the Constitutions of the new Congregation. She was capable at it, for as early as 1878, she was entrusted with the task of updating the Constitutions of the Franciscan Tertiaries of Forli. It was revised over a period of ten years (from 1881 to 1891) under the guidance of Bishop Svampa, Fr. Bernardine the Minister General and Fr. Louis Canali the Provincial Minister. Seraphina had written another Constitutions for the convent of Palagano in 1881. As a novice she had compiled the Regulations for the school and five years later, the Rules for the Daughters of Mary. But now the task was altogether different; it was not a mere adaptation or updating of existing constitution to the needs of the times, but writing a completely new one based on the Rules of the First and Second Order of St. Francis. "Since the rule should evolve out

of practice, I will try to observe and make others observe the norm before writing the Constitutions”, she had resolved in 1891. Seraphina turned to her old friends Fr. Bernardino - now archbishop of Sardica - and Mgr. Polloni, a specialist in Moral Theology and Canon Law and gifted with enlightened wisdom and keenness of mind. The hand of Polloni is nowhere so pronounced as in the articles dealing with devotion to the Eucharist<sup>3</sup>. So great was his influence on her that many of his expressions found their way into the writings of M. Seraphina on the Eucharist, on Holy Communion, on the Holy Hour, etc. As each chapter was compiled, Seraphina would send it to the various communities, requesting them to send her their observations.

*“The Norms of our Religious Life I’m sending you are on a trial basis. Therefore, dear daughters, you should vie with each other to fulfill them. At the same time you should be frank in informing me your observations and difficulties, every two or three months. Pray always, especially when you receive the Mysteries, so that Jesus may enlighten you about what we must do to please him even in the smallest things. Thus the Code of our Rule, cleansed and refined by the tenor of observance, made with the help of the Spirit of God, can be called solely of Jesus.”*<sup>4</sup>

Seraphina consulted the sisters even for the minutest details; for instance, the titles to be used for the various office bearers at the local and central level, the type of veil to be used, about having a different veil for Holy Communion, etc.<sup>5</sup>

Choosing a distinctive name for the Congregation was not easy. In her love for the Virgin and St. Clare, “the true image of Mary”, Seraphina wanted the Institute called, “Clarists of Mary Immaculate”.

3. See note on Polloni at the end of the Chapter.

4. 25.12.1900, Circ. Let. 8 Scr. 28

5. 25.3.1902, Circular Letter 11/25.3.1904, Circ. Let. 18.

*“Passionately do I love St. Clare for the most singular person that she is. And to be a Poor Clare, I would certainly have embraced the cloister.”*<sup>6</sup>

Then she was captivated by the florid title Mgr. Polloni had used for them in one of his conferences, “the new olive shoots around the Eucharistic table”. He had asked them to have the love for the Blessed Sacrament as the pivot of their Institute and to propagate the devotion to it. Moreover, the night vigil had set in as a cherished practice among the sisters. The problem of selecting an apt title was solved when “a certain Saint printed the name Clarist Franciscans of the Blessed Sacrament” and soon the appellation stuck. The Jesuit Louis Mazza wanted to delete one of the adjectives, as they were synonymous; in fact, hardly any one used both the terms, referring to the sisters as either Franciscan or Clares of the Bl. Sacrament. Finally the term “Missionaries” was added to the title when the sisters obeyed the call from the mission lands in India and Brazil.<sup>7</sup>

### Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament

*“A complete immolation of ourselves to Jesus and with Jesus in the Bl. Sacrament, a continuous reparation, an indefatigable apostolate. Lo, this is our aim, our spirit, the way of embodying the Eucharistic Jesus in us!”*<sup>8</sup>

Seraphina placed the Eucharist at the centre of her Institute for “It is everything for the religious: the compendium of our faith, the basis of our hope and the flame of our love”.<sup>9</sup> According to her personal “Form of Life” drawn and perfected over a period of sixteen years and given the final touch under the guidance of Don Clement at Bagno, the pivot of her life and activity was

6. 07.07.1907, Seraphina’s Let. to Sec. General of the Friars Minor

7. Ibid.

8. *Practical Guide*, Ch. I/Const. Article 1

9. 27.03.1881: Let. to the Sisters of Forli, Fasc. I

21.06.1898: Let. to Sr. Veronica, Fasc. VI-VIII.

Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Since childhood she was in the habit of discussing with the Lord all her problems, troubles, worries and aspirations. She had instilled in her pupils a deep love for the Divine Prisoner and had trained them to seek His light before taking any step. When she was faced with the dilemma of either returning to Forlì or separating from it, the option was made after long hours of adoration of the Bl. Sacrament, exposed before the entire community of sisters and boarders. Her first thought on waking was Jesus present in the tabernacle; her first act of the day was to offer herself as a victim in union with the sacrificial Lamb on the altar; her day was a continuous act of reparation and immolation with Jesus in the Bl. Sacrament, and her last gaze was turned to the Lord present in the Sacrament of the Altar, whose boundless love she had experienced during the day.

Long before Pope Pius X had popularized the daily reception of the Eucharist, Seraphina had cultivated in her pupils an ardent desire to receive Jesus every morning. When the authorities curtailed their devotion, great was her distress. Giving vent to her anguish and dismay, she jotted down in her diary :

*"My sorrow is incomparable to anything I have undergone in the past... As the friar announced to the boarders the Commissary's order to limit Holy Communion to thrice a week, I looked at the image of the Mother of Good Counsel... The whole of May I have received Communion only 18 times! What an emptiness without Jesus! How to live without Life?..."*<sup>10</sup>

To Seraphina, the Eucharist was the "gift par excellence" - the gift of Jesus in his sacred humanity; and she drew her life from this unsurpassable gift. She wished that everyone should assist at Mass with the heart beat of the Virgin, of the penitent Magdalene and of the beloved Apostle, talking to Jesus as if seen with her own eyes and asking Him for the grace to grasp the

marvel taking place on the altar.<sup>11</sup> In the leaflet on "*Active, Fruitful Participation in the Eucharistic Celebration*", compiled during 1896-1897, Seraphina writes:

*"...The Eucharist is the basis of our hope because, in giving himself to us in Communion, Jesus gives us his graces, applies his merits to us, and clothes us in his virtues, thanks to all of which we are able to attain eternal life. The Eucharist is the flame of our charity because God who imprisons Himself for love's sake, urges us to love Him; and gifting himself to us in communion, kindles in us the fire of divine love. This is the essence of charity..."*<sup>12</sup>

Drawing her inspiration from the early Christians who risked their lives in attending Holy Mass, Seraphina urged her daughters to assist daily at the Sacrifice of the Altar, to offer themselves in union with the sacrifice of Christ, to receive Holy Communion and to thank Jesus often during the day.

*"What will this earth be without Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament? Just as food for our body, the only true nourishment for our soul is the Eucharist. Whoever partakes of this heavenly meal with due disposition, will draw from it the strength to overcome her passions, the grace to grow in virtues and to detach herself from earthly affairs, so that she could be united with Jesus, the most endearing Lover who knocks at our hearts to enter and make his dwelling place therein. Oh, how blessed would we be, if the promise of the Saviour is fulfilled in us: "Whoever loves me will keep my word and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him." (Jn15:23) Undoubtedly, it can be effected through Holy Communion which transforms the carnal person into a spiritual being, as St.*

10. Memoirs

11. *Practical Guide*, Ch. II

12. *Directory; Holy Mass*, Scr. 68

Augustine attests in the tenth chapter of the seventh book of his 'Confession'...Like a thirsty deer, let us run to this wholesome spring... Half the day is to be spent in thanksgiving and the other half in preparation for the next Communion. All through the day, let us remember that we carry the Sacred Mysteries within us. Such a thought will give us strength to overcome our evil inclinations and to practice virtue to a heroic degree, provided it is accompanied by acts of love."<sup>13</sup>

In an age when the Waldenses questioned the efficacy of the sacraments administered by unworthy priests and the Cathars did away with both priesthood and sacraments, Francis had enlivened the faith of the people by his frequent exhortations to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus and to adore the Divine Presence in the tabernacles throughout the world.<sup>14</sup> Seraphina, throbbing with the Seraph's burning love for the Eucharistic Jesus, says:

*"The Holy Hour is the special tribute that we, the sisters of the Bl. Sacrament, have to pay to our Celestial Spouse enclosed in the ciborium. It is the badge of our Institute."*<sup>15</sup>

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament as an important daily practice had sprung up spontaneously among the sisters during the tumultuous years of anguish and uncertainties. They were tired after the long school hours; but each one vied with the other to spend an hour in loving colloquy with the Lord, in the silence and solitude of the night. It was a natural need of the soul... to taste of the peace and quiet of contemplation'. She exhorted the sisters and novices to spend time in silent Eucharistic adoration in heart-felt love, in spiritual converse, and to draw from this Sacrament their strength, consolation and support.

13. 21.04.1896, *Novitiate Regulations*, Ch. III: *Holy Communion*

14. *Let. to All the Faithful Let to All Custos Let. to the Clergy Testament/1C.45*

15. *Practical Guide*, Ch. V.

*"Certainly Jesus himself had effected this practice because I alone could not have thought of doing so; never would I have dared to hope that it was possible. It was introduced by a mysterious force and to my surprise it has gone on. Nevertheless, it is certain that Jesus has made it known to us that He wants this night vigil, that it is a homage most pleasing to his adorable heart in return for the abandonment of his dear ones as well as our own"*.<sup>16</sup>

Seraphina wished to have the nocturnal adoration daily in the Mother House, in the novitiate house and wherever the number of sisters would permit it. In the smaller houses, it was a weekly practice, preferably on Thursdays. But she recommended the Exposition of the Bl. Sacrament on the feasts of Corpus Christi, Sacred Heart, Immaculate Conception, St. Francis and St. Clare, on the day of profession and Vestition and on the first Friday of each month.

*"Since the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is a powerful means for the efficacy of the apostolate in pagan nations, let the sisters practice this devotion at the mission centres"*.<sup>17</sup>

The vow of poverty, as far as Seraphina was concerned, did not apply to the chapel. She would exclaim,

*"The temple, even if it is all gold, is nothing before God! Oh, would that all the wealth is poured into the house of the Lord!"*<sup>18</sup>

She wanted the sister Sacristan to have "great sense of propriety, cleanliness, order and aesthetics even in the smallest object used for the worship of the Celestial Spouse," and to grow a garden with all kinds of flowers to deck the Eucharistic table. And as for the sisters, they should deem it an honour to prepare corporals, purificators and altar linens not only for their

16. 16.03.1898, *The Sisters' Horarium*, The Holy Hour, Fasc. 26.

17. 1897, *The First Draft of the Constitutions*, Art. 12

18. *Practical Guide*, Ch. 25.

chapel but also for all the poor churches, especially in the mission lands (Art. 20). Truly Seraphina had learnt from Francis to give due respect and honour to the Divine Guest in each chapel, to have His table laid with spotless linen, sparkling vessels and fragrant flowers and above all, to adore Him as the author of our salvation and to cherish the Eucharist as a priceless treasure.

### Daughters of St. Clare

*"We are Clarists, not Tertiaries. We profess the Rule of St. Clare, with the recitation of the Divine Office and the Holy Hour from 11.00 p.m. to midnight".*<sup>19</sup>

In 1881, while at Palagano, Seraphina had toyed with the idea of drawing from the Rule of St. Clare, but was dissuaded by Bishop Guidelli of Modena, as hers was an active apostolate, diametrically opposed to the contemplative life of the cloister. However, the first draft of the Constitution (November-December 1896) was firmly rooted in the spirituality of St. Clare. Though she had repeatedly said that she and her sisters were not drawn to exclusive penitential life, Seraphina had never refuted the role of contemplation in the life of a Franciscan. And as years passed by, she was being drawn more and more towards Clare, "the saint of the Eucharist". Moreover, Mgr. Polloni would now and then drop hints of the need to fashion her life-style in tune with that of the Little Plant of St. Francis, who had wisely governed her Order with great concern and fear of God :

*"You should set aside five minutes every day to examine if you have been following Clare ① in prudently governing your institute, and ② in upholding the full observance of the Rule. Thirdly, to see if the tenor of your life is a school of love for the Sisters to learn the way of life."*<sup>20</sup>

19. 02.07.1915, Seraphina's Let. to Abbot Arcangelo Lolli, Scr. 52, p. 8-9.  
20. 14.08.1896, Mgr. Polloni's Let. to Seraphina

In the Rule of St. Clare, she saw a key to an interior life wedded to an active life, or for an active apostolate centered on the Eucharist. Clare had spent forty-one years in the cloister of St. Damian, contemplating the love of a God who became man and died on the cross to redeem mankind. Her long vigils and continuous fasts, in spite of her prolonged illness, was a source of constant anxiety to the Poor Ladies of St. Damiano. Seraphina wanted to imbibe Clare's spirit and learn from her the art of contemplating the Divine Victim in order to spend herself in a constant act of immolation. Her love for Clare almost bordered on the sentimental, so much so that she added the name of Clare to her own appellation and handed it down as a legacy to her successors in office.

Seraphina looked for an amulet to ward off all possible objections from ecclesiastical authorities in having the Rule of St. Clare as the norm of her Institute.

*"We recite the Divine Office and keep vigil from 11pm to midnight, blending contemplative life with the active one in such a way that the latter is not deprived of the sweetness of the former which accompanies and perfects every act of the other".*<sup>21</sup>

The novelty that Seraphina had introduced among her sisters, was the recitation of the entire Divine Office using the breviary of the Friars Minor. She had done so not merely to distinguish herself from the Tertiaries but because she had found in the Divine Office refreshment for the soul. Fr. Bonaventure of Cesena had strongly objected to the recitation of the Divine Office by the sisters.<sup>22</sup> According to him it wasn't much of a help to them in their spiritual growth. Nevertheless, it was a balm to Seraphina.

21. 19.03.1912, Seraphina's Let. to Pope Pius X, Scr. 66 p. 9-10  
22. 18.04.1897, Roma, AGCFM - b. Doc. 16 p. 16-17

*"The recitation of the Divine Office is our soul's delight. When we are weary, or weighed down with the travails of our apostolate, or unhappy about the offences against God, the recitation of the office comforts and gladdens us and heals all our wounds..."*<sup>23</sup>

Objection to the sisters' recitation of the Prayer of the Church continued for another decade. Even Cardinal Prefect Vives y Tuto joined the band wagon insisting that they could, like other Congregations, follow the Office of the Blessed Virgin along with the readings for the Saint of the day; and be content with the Liturgy of the Hours on feast days and the Holy Week.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Seraphina was truly swept by the beauty of the Psalter as a means to ascend to God and be united with Him:

*"As for the Divine office, it was Jesus who suggested it in various ways. To make sure that the inspiration came from the Spirit, I tried to instil in the sisters a love for the Liturgy of the Hours. A purely joyous thing it is to be united to the Church in raising God with his own praises. The Divine office is a prayer that illuminates and warms up the tepid souls, as well as unites us to Jesus, infusing inner joy and happiness."*<sup>25</sup>

The Psalms spoken by prophets and sung by Christ awakened all the deepest powers of her being and raised her up to God. In the Psalms she found a perennial spring that stilled the daily business rackets and seething passions.

Like her Seraphic Father, Seraphina wanted to have the sisters' apostolate subservient to the "spirit of prayer and devotion" in order to bear fruit. By feeding the soul with the word of God at regular intervals during the day, with frequent visits to the Bl. Sacrament and with an hour of adoration at the close of the day,

23. 18.04.1907, Seraphina's let. to Abbot A. Lolli, Scr. 52, p. 8-9.

24. 16.11.1906, Catherine's Let. to Seraphina, Roma, AGCFM - b. Doc. 17p. 12-13.

25. 21.11.1906, Seraphina's Let. to Cardinal Vives, Roma, AGCFM - b. Doc. 17 p. 30

she hoped to plant in her daughters the seeds of contemplation. This was her way of blending the roles of Mary and Martha into a harmonious whole, of being intimately united to the Lord while doing one's chores. On January 15, 1898, she wrote to Sr. Veronica.

*"I always thought of having presented everyone with a real gift by proposing the rule of St. Clare."*

With the catch phrase "I carry the Mystery", Seraphina introduced the sisters into the realm of action diffused with the balm of contemplation. In her thirty-five circular letters she had used the phrase twenty times, often in the plural. The term 'mystery' referred to any event in the life of Jesus from Annunciation to Resurrection. It was an expression borrowed from Bishop Polloni's sermons on the Eucharist. Perhaps, Seraphina was also influenced by the iconic representation of St. Clare holding a ciborium, as well as the Saint's letter to Agnes of Prague, in which she tells the latter to bear Jesus spiritually within her chaste body as the Immaculate Virgin bore Him physically in her womb. So Seraphina insisted that her daughters should be bearers of Jesus in the mysteries of His life, especially that of the Eucharist.

In her letters for the feast of Corpus Christi, she explained how the remembrance of carrying Jesus within her had alleviated her sufferings, lightened her fatigue, sweetened her desolation and enabled her to be gentle with those who hurt her. How often had she turned to the Eucharist to overcome her revulsion and anguish!

*"How is it, my daughters, that we are the same yesterday and today? Because we do not know the great, immense gift of the Eucharist. We do not know it because we do not meditate on it, immersed as we are in the fleeting things of the world..."*<sup>26</sup>

26. 08.06.1898, Circular Letter, No. 4

Hence she exhorted the sisters to contemplate the mysteries so that Jesus might work in them the desired metanoia and lead them to perfection.

## Franciscan Missionaries

*"As Our Lord Jesus Christ became man and immolated himself on the cross and continues to offer Himself daily in the Eucharist for the salvation of the souls, so the Clarist Franciscan Missionaries of the Bl. Sacrament, following his example, should dedicate themselves to expiation and to apostolate, offering themselves as victims along with Jesus Christ for the Church and for the souls". (Const. Art.5)*

The zeal for the Kingdom of God was innate in Seraphina. More than once she had referred to her childhood desire to devote herself for the good of the souls. Since her novitiate days, she had been thirsting to offer herself as a victim for the conversion of sinners and non-believers, for the spread of the Reign of Love; in short "to lead the entire world to the love of Jesus".

*"O Jesus, I burn with zeal for the salvation of souls. Would that everyone praised you, blessed you, loved you in time and in eternity, for ever, for ever...."*<sup>27</sup>

Seraphina had inherited the missionary zeal of the Seraphic Father who sent his friars two by two, not only to the distant cities and nations of Europe, but beyond the Adriatic Sea to the Middle East and to North Africa to convert the followers of Muhammad. When Clare heard of the first five friars laying down their lives to bring about the conversion of the Moors, she too wanted to join hands with the friars to bear witness to the faith. Not being able to leave the enclosure, Clare planned for herself and her sisters an apostolate of winning souls for Christ; to be fertile mothers like the 'Brother Marys' in the hermitage,

27. 30.02.1883, Memoirs

converting many by their prayers and penance,<sup>28</sup> to be the co-worker of God and the support of the weak members of the Mystical Body of Christ"<sup>29</sup>

Like Clare, Seraphina wanted to be in the forefront of the mission field. As a child she had wanted to flee home to seek martyrdom abroad. The desire had never left her; the more it was thwarted, the more ardent it became. With the revival of the missionary activities in the second half of the nineteenth century, the friars were being consumed by a greater zeal for evangelization. Seraphina dreamt of following the friars to Asia, Africa and to South America "as the virgin followed her Son on His divine mission".<sup>30</sup> Until a door would be opened to concretize her dream, she trained herself and her daughters to follow Clare's zeal for the Church.

*"With our heart on fire with love, like our Seraphic Father in the Portiuncula, let us ask Jesus for the conversion of sinners, heretics and infidels... Let us tell Him about our Holy Mother Church, about the Supreme Pontiff, the Catholic episcopacy, our Order, our work, our convents, our Bishop, the priests, our souls, the missions, the missionaries, the daughters entrusted to our care, the abandoned, our family and the whole world. Let us pray for the dead, for all those who grope in darkness, far away from God..."*<sup>31</sup>

Each sister had to be a victim of love and sacrifice, of adoration and reparation, of thanksgiving and petition, and "make her own the happiness and sorrow of the Beloved".

*"The Institute that I have dedicated to the Redeemer, the eternal victim on our Altar, will become a seedbed of saints*

28. 2 Celano : 164 / LM. VIII: 2/LP. 71 / SP. 72

29. Clare's Third Letter to Agnes of Prague: 8

30. Constitutions, Article 9.

31. Practical Guide, Ch. II



*who will spread the Kingdom of God on earth, increasing beyond all bounds the inhabitants of Paradise".*<sup>32</sup>

If two vocations could be poles apart, one would be that of the cloister and the other for the missions. Yet, it was what Seraphina was trying to weld together. Her sisters had to be Clarists contemplating the divine mysteries throughout the day; they had to rub shoulders with the sons of Francis in the mission field. What Clare had longed to achieve, was realized by her new daughters seven centuries later. For by 1901, the Clares of the Bl. Sacrament were complementing the evangelization work carried on by the Capuchins in North India and by 1907 in Brazil.

The hierarchy objected to these contradictory appellations. One just could not be a Clarist and an active missionary simultaneously. But Seraphina argued that it was not a utopian ideal. Francis had proved that contemplation and action, like the two faces of a coin, were complementary aspects of the unique Franciscan Charism. But the argument would not convince the semantic specialists of the Sacred Congregation, who could not digest the misnomer of a contemplative enclosed Clarist, instructing catechumens under a banyan tree in the Gangetic plain or teaching child-care to the Indios of Itambacury in the heart of Brazil. Like Clare fighting for the "Privilege of Poverty", Seraphina defended her Institute's special charism: an active life sustained and vitalized by the motive power of contemplation. And the personal intervention of the Supreme Pontiff, Pope Pius X, who was convinced of Seraphina's zeal for the Church, for the salvation of souls and for the glory of God, put an end to the hairsplitting discussion over the title of the "Clarist Missionary", with the decree of 9<sup>th</sup> May 1907.

32. 25.12.1900: Cir. Let. 8

## Under the Seraphic Banner

*"I wish to have perfect dependence on and obedience to Your Lordship, which I would like to go hand in hand with what I owe to the Minister General and his representatives, because it is to the head of the Friars Minor that I am indebted for my food and life. If I don't continue to march under the Franciscan flag, I wouldn't be able to live any further. Unless I drink from that fountain I would be a dry twig cut off from the vine. Therefore, without any hesitation I would hasten to graft me to that great Franciscan tree which has spread its branches throughout the world. O dear Franciscan Family, you will always be the inmost joy of my heart, the glory of my life - both present and future."*<sup>33</sup>

The Minister General, Fr. Louis Canali, had kept a safe distance throughout the controversy between Forli and Bertinoro. The few individual friars who had not abandoned her during the crisis were the unforgettable Bernardino of Portogruaro - ex-Minister General and Archbishop of Sardica - who passed away on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1895, the Capuchin Provincial Fr. Bonaventure of Cesena and the Friar Minor Arcangelo Frabetti. Yet, she placed her Institute under the direction of the Minister General of the Friars Minor, who being the "direct representative of Jesus", transmitted His will to her.<sup>34</sup> Seraphina wanted her sisters to obtain not only the spiritual benefits granted by the Church to the First and Second Order of St. Francis, but also the direct pastoral care of the friars as confessors, chaplains, retreat masters and spiritual directors, as well as the benefit of the canonical visit of the Minister General, whose privilege it was to preside over Vestiture of candidates, Profession of novices and the election of the Mother General. She petitioned Fr. Schuler to heal the wound inflicted by the indifference of his predecessor Fr. Canali and to resume the

33. 18.01.1892: Seraphina's Let. to Bp. Svampa Scr. 58

34. 05.11.1889, Seraphina's Let. to the Minister General, Fasc. 68.

10.09.1908, Seraphina's Let. to the Minister General, Fasc. 45.

paternal protection given to her by the departed Fr. Bernardino. "We have always been madly in love with our Order; and no conflict has been able to diminish our attachment".<sup>35</sup>

Seraphina was fortunate in having the friar Joseph Brunelli, the Consultant to the Sacred Congregation as her advocate. Thanks to his mediation, things were smoothed out between the new Minister General and the Clarists of the Bl. Sacrament and the rupture was healed with the balm of the Seraphic bond. On 28<sup>th</sup> April 1904, the Minister General issued the decree of aggregation, to the immense joy of the sisters and the well-wishers of the Institute.

### The Decree of Aggregation

"To the venerable Institute of the Franciscan Clarists of the Most Blessed Sacrament, health and Seraphic benediction. Your praiseworthy spirit of attachment to the Seraphic Order from which you have taken your habit and form of life, as attested by the documents forwarded, induce us to comply with and gratify your wish, trusting that your devotion and charity will be increased day by day by new graces and favours, and that the Seraphic spirit will always enrich you with copious fruits.

By virtue of this letter, we aggregate and declare aggregated, you and all your sisters - both present and future - to our Order, from which you have taken your name and habit, so that you and your sisters may enjoy all the indulgences granted by the Roman Pontiffs to the First and Second Order of St. Francis according to the Decree of the Sacred Congregation for Indulgences and Sacred Rites."

*Given at Rome, 28 April 1904 Fr. Dionysius Schuler,  
Minister General*

35. 24.01.1914, Seraphina's Let. to the Visitor of the Friars Minor, Let. 24. Fasc. 45

### The Legal Status of the Institute

*"By Virtue of its nature, the Institute of the Franciscan Clarists of the Bl. Sacrament, born and bred by the Order of Friars Minor, will continue to enjoy the dependence on and the spiritual direction of the Minister General of the Friars Minor or his delegate in order to maintain and foster the Seraphic spirit,...." (Art. 104)*

Seraphina soon realized that it was not enough for the Institute to be aggregated to the Order of Friars Minor; it had also to be approved by the Holy See for its life and growth. Practical problems were springing up both at home and abroad. The Clarist Missionaries in India were being pressurized by Archbishop Gentili to follow the constitution he had written, keeping in view the local needs, the autonomy of the convent and the jurisdiction of the Ordinary. It was a dagger-thrust deep into the heart of Mother Seraphina who had dreamt of her sisters working for the Lord in the distant mission lands or in the nearby towns of Bertinoro, united in one heart and soul as a family.

There were calls for the sisters from the Nuncio of Brazil and from the Bishop of Newark, New Jersey to help with their apostolic missions. With the bitter experience of India, Seraphina could not send her sisters to another mission land unless she had the Constitutions sealed by the Sacred Congregation. Then there was the project of opening a house at Trieste, the port of embarkation for her sisters. Trieste was under the Habsburg regime of Austria-Hungary that would not permit any religious house in its realm, unless approved by the Holy See. Trieste was important to Mother Seraphina as a transit camp for her sisters awaiting their ship.

Realizing the urgent need to place her Institute under the papal protection, Seraphina turned to her friends: Fr. Joseph Brunelli,

the Friar Minor consultant to the Sacred Congregation, Abbot Arcangelo Lolli, a Canon of the Lateran, the Jesuit Fr. Louis Mazza, Mgr. Bressan, the secretary of the Pope, Card. Parocchi, the Vicar of the Sacred College and finally to Pope Pius X. She would insist in all her correspondence that hers was not a new institute but an offshoot from the Tertiaries of St. Elizabeth, which dated back to 1451. In fact, it had never occurred to her that she had founded a new congregation, though she was conscious of its novelty: its apostolate, its foreign mission, the recitation of the Divine Office, the equal rank of the sisters and above all, the federal nature of the houses governed by a mother general and her councillors.<sup>36</sup>

Nor were the sisters categorized, as in other Religious Congregations, according to their lineage, dowry or educational qualifications.

*"Among the Clarist Missionaries of the Bl. Sacrament, there is no distinction of rank; they are all sisters alike in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ. Each one is assigned a specific task according to her aptitude and the need of the community, as Holy Obedience disposes. In the house of the Lord the humble housewife is no less useful than the scholarly mistress".*

(art.8)

The constitution, drawn in collaboration with Mgr. Polloni and Archbishop Bernardino, was presented to Abbot Lolli for a thorough revision before forwarding it to the Sacred Congregation for Religious. The vigorous penance imposed by the Rule of St. Clare was minimized keeping in view the active life of the sisters. Thus the perpetual fast of the Poor Clares was reduced to all Fridays of the year and to the vigils of the solemn feasts of the

36. 17.12.1906, Let. 229, Seraphina's Let. to Abbot Lolli, Fasc. 57.  
 18.04.1907, Let. 230, Seraphina's Let. to Abbot Lolli, "  
 25.04.1907, Let. 231, Seraphina's Let. to Abbot Lolli, "  
 30.06.1915, Let. 234, Seraphina's Let. to Abbot Lolli, "  
 25.03.1907, Let. 8, Seraphina's Let. to Pope Pius X, Fasc. 44

Church. "Enclosure" was dispensed with to enhance their apostolic ventures both at home and abroad. But poverty and prayer were tenaciously clung to as the means for the kenotic journey of love. Mgr. Sanfermo, Bressan, Abbot Lolli, Frs. Brunelli and Mazza went through the constitution, amending, altering, modifying or approving the articles as the case might be.

Wherever a practical difficulty was pointed out by the consultors, Seraphina would quell their fears stating that her Constitution was not a quixotic ideal, but the fruit of a lived experience. Since 1894, the sisters were living the Constitution. The Holy Hour was their favourite relaxation; the Divine Office "a balsam to their wounds".

*"The Constitution is zealously observed. The sisters have no other desire or aim than that of becoming perfect religious for the sanctification of others. Though they devote themselves to the apostolate, they love silence and contemplation. They hold the Holy Hour from 11 p.m to midnight as their special badge"*<sup>37</sup>

Abbot Lolli objected to Seraphina's liberal attitude towards "dowry". In Art. 12, regarding admissions to the Institute, Seraphina had not insisted on the same amount of dowry for all candidates. Allowance was made to those holding diplomas or certificates, in foreign language or fine arts, to those with an aptitude for some specialized field. Still more surprising was her exemption from dowry for "those girls who have the true spirit of the Lord", but not the purse to meet their expenses. She informed Abbot Lolli that by 1905, she had admitted ten girls without dowry. But the Abbot did not approve of her revolutionary ideas; neither reduction of dowry nor exemption from it. She explained to him that Art. 12 was dictated by her "inner voice"; that whenever she

37. 17.12.1906, Let. 229, Seraphina's Let to Can. Lolli, Fasc. 57

accepted an indigent girl, providence stepped in to supply her wants and that she was almost sure that Jesus wanted this charitable mission of her Institute. She further told him that St. Clare had insisted that the candidates sell their patrimony and distribute the proceeds to the poor before entering the cloister. The saint had not put her trust in fixed deposits but in God's Providence.<sup>38</sup>

Needless to say, Seraphina had based her Constitutions on the original charism of the Franciscan Order: a centralized democratic set up of the Fraternity, equal status of the friars, the exhortation to work and contemplation, the submission to the ecclesiastical authorities, the Christo-centric devotions and the consequent care of the chapels.

Meanwhile, Cardinal Ferrara, the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Religious, was flooded with the letters of recommendation from the bishops who had the Clarists working in their dioceses. Heading the well-wishers, was Bishop Nagl of Trieste, who held at bay the Austrian Government that threatened to send the Clares back to Italy. Thanks to the pressure of the Austrian Court and the personal interest of Bishop Nagl and others, the procedures of approbation moved faster than was expected. The Pope too, was in favour of approving the Institute commended by so many of his devoted sons. The longed for decree approving the Institute was issued by Card. Ferrara on May 9, 1907.

*"Competent persons say that it is a special favour denied to many a better placed congregation. In fact, the sisters who had offered us hospitality at Genova and who have two hundred members and twenty convents, have been trying in vain for the last three years to obtain what we have been granted in a few days".*<sup>39</sup>

38. 26-04-1915, Let. 241, Seraphina's Let. to Can. Lolli, Fasc. 57.

39. 07.06.1907, Circular Letter No. 30.

The Clares had ten houses and sixty-five sisters including twenty-two neo-professed. Seraphina had petitioned the Pope for approval on March 25, 1907 and the request was granted in forty-five days! The sisters celebrated the welcome decree with a solemn exposition of the Bl. Sacrament on the Feast of St. Clare, the saint of the Eucharist.

### ***"Practical Guide to Our Sanctification"***

*"I do not wish to have many sisters or houses; but I want all the sisters to be holy. True holiness does not consist in doing a lot of things, but in doing well what one does, and doing solely what Jesus wants."*<sup>40</sup>

As the title suggests, the booklet is a guide for the spiritual formation of the sisters. Written as "an introduction and commentary" to the Constitution, the *Practical Guide* is the fruit of Seraphina's twenty-five years of religious life. All that was best in the Constitution of Forli passed to it. It was originally titled "*The Secret of Our Sanctification*". In 1896 Seraphina had already got the *Rules for Novitiate* approved by Bishop Leonardi of Bertinoro. Then she began compiling a Manual for sisters with commentary on the Rule. The text was, of course, subjected to the scrutiny of Mgr. Polloni. The amended handbook went through a thorough revision when Seraphina came across Abbot Albert Battandier's "*Practical and Canonical Guide to the Constitution for the Sisters of Simple Vows*", published in 1898 to the legislative formulation of Battandier, Seraphina added the warmth and colour of her own spirituality. Divided into 27 chapters, the first draft was ready by December 25, 1900. And on January 29, 1901 Bishop Polloni had presented a copy each to the pioneer missioneries leaving for India. Seraphina requested the moral support of every sister for its completion.

40. 19.03.1901, Cir. Let. 9

*"I request fast and prayers for the completion of the "Key to our Sanctification". For sanctity is the duty of every Franciscan who immolates herself with Jesus in the tabernacle".<sup>41</sup>*

On May 2, 1902 she sent the final version to Mgr. Battandier for correction; and by the end of the year, all the convents had a copy of the same as a compendium of the Constitution. The *Practical Guide* reflects not only the spiritual ideals of Mother Seraphina and the ideas she had absorbed from Polloni's talks on the Eucharist, but also the quality of the religious life she lived and envisioned for the every day life of her daughters.

### Definitive Approbation of the Constitution

*"As devoted daughters we hope to obtain a new sanction, and that union with the Sacred Congregation, the Holy See and the Order, which alone can form saints...."<sup>42</sup>*

The Constitution was not forwarded with the request for the approbation of the Institute. Though Abbot Lolli had revised it in 1906, everyone concerned thought, that the time was not opportune for it to be introduced to the Sacred Congregation. Seraphina herself sensed that the Constitution was wanting in certain aspects. For within a short period, the apostolate of the CFMSS was branching out to frontline ministries. Though the specific aim of the Institute was "education of the youth, especially the most abandoned, the poorest, the least and those shunned by other Congregations", the sisters were also caring for the victims of natural calamities or political upheavals. Orphanages were opened to shelter the young girls deprived of their home and dear ones by the earthquakes of 1908 in Sicily. In the mission lands, the teaching sisters were taking up nursing careers. Articles

41. 13.01.1901, Let. 439, Seraphina's Let. to Sr. Veronica, Fasc. X-XI

42. 30.06.1915., Let. 254, Seraphina's Let. to Can. Lolli, Fasc. 57.

corresponding to these new apostolates had to be inserted and the old ones altered and modified.

Art. 104 referring to the *"Relationship with the Order of Friars Minor"*, was a bone of contention among the Canonists and Consultants of the Sacred Congregation. They feared that the dependence of the Institute on the Minister General of the Friars Minor, encroached upon the jurisdiction of the local Ordinary. With all her heart Seraphina wanted her Institute to be nurtured by the Order of Friars Minor in living the ideals of St. Francis. It was her fervent wish to enjoy the patronage of the Cardinal Protector, to use the same Franciscan Calendar, to have the Minister General to animate and uphold the spirit of Francis among the sisters, to benefit by the pastoral care of the Friars through Liturgical celebrations, spiritual directions, retreat etc.

Fr. Pacifico Monza, the Minister General, advised Seraphina to approach the Pope for the confirmation of the dependence on the Order. The Minister General feared that Seraphina might die any day; so worn out was she by sickness and fatigue. On March 19, 1912, she wrote to Pope Pius X begging His Holiness not to deprive the Institute of the direction of the Friars Minor.

*"This little twig, born, bred and reared by the primary Franciscan root, will become a great tree, producing abundant fruits of eternal life when Mary's Pontiff will sanction and bless our dependence on the one who represents the Patriarch of Assisi, our Seraphic Father..."<sup>43</sup>*

The Pope complied with her request and issued a brief on July 14, 1913, sanctioning the dependence on the Minister General of the Friars Minor, much to the discomfiture of the consultants of the Sacred Congregation for Religious.

43. 02.07.1913, Let. 32, Seraphina's Let. to Pope Pius X, Fasc. 44.

Hearing that the Consultants were planning to annul the brief, Seraphina wrote to Abbot Lolli stating that they were going against God's will. In her letter of December 8, 1908, she had given Lolli the freedom to change the Constitutions from the first word to the last, even to alter its matter and form, and had professed her acquiescence to his decision as the will of God. Yet, when it came to Art. 104, she clung to her own inner conviction, telling him that the consultants were absolutely in the wrong. She argued with the consultants who would not see eye to eye with her, about the dependence of the Institute on the Order:

*"For us the Order is not a bond but a beacon, a fortified haven, a cool shade that protects the young shoots...Should this life line be broken after five hundred years of existence? Not five years but five centuries!... ."*<sup>44</sup>

Her refrain was the same; that hers was an ancient congregation, dating almost from the time of St. Francis and enjoying the protection of his successors.

Seraphina, knowing that her days were numbered, left no stone unturned in getting the Constitutions approved definitively. She was told that there were thirty-three constitutions, awaiting approval of the Sacred Congregation. She wrote to Can. Lolli to treat her Constitutions as his very own and to speed up the process. Seraphina had a knack for diplomacy, whether ingenious or ingenuous we cannot say. While writing to Pope Pius X, she would address His Holiness as the "Pontiff of Mary", "the second Pope of the Immaculate", the one in whom she saw "her sweet celestial Spouse", etc., and would invariably add an invocation to the Immaculate Virgin. When referring to Pope Benedict XV, she would stress the number 15; "fifteen orphans in honour of

44. 30.06.1915, Let. 234, Seraphina's Let. to Abbot Lolli, Fasc. 57.

the Pope" or something similar.<sup>45</sup> When it came to Jesuits, she was all praise for the "true educators of the society" whom she had "tenderly loved since her childhood", considering it a "divine treasure to have a Jesuit Priest" among the Consultants at the Sacred Congregation.<sup>46</sup> To the Jesuit Consultant to the Sacred Congregation she would write that the Constitutions were corrected and revised by Fr. Louis Mazza, his confrere. The hand of the friars would be underscored, when writing to the Minister General or to the Franciscan consultant.<sup>47</sup>

Seraphina turned to the Bishops, under whose jurisdiction her daughters were serving the people of God, requesting them for a letter of recommendation. Cardinal Vannuttelli, three archbishops including Gentili of Agra and five bishops, among whom Scozzoli - Bishop of Rimini and a former critic of Seraphina during the Forli-Bertinoro rift, send in their endorsements. A good many had singled out traits like the religious zeal, spirit of sacrifice and generosity, commitment to educational activities, true Franciscan missionary spirit etc., of the CFMSS.

Finally at the insistence of Fr. Pacifico Monza, the Minister General, Seraphina wrote to the Pope asking him to grant the joy of having her Constitutions approved by His Holiness, before she closed her eyes forever:

*"Finding me at the door of eternity, I dare present to Your Holiness the Constitutions tested for over twenty years and corrected and revised by persons enjoying your trust. I beseech you Holy Father, to grant it the definitive and final approbation for the love of the Eucharistic Jesus. Thus, besides the comfort of seeing the little shoot sprung from the Seraphic*

45. 27.11.1906, Let. 234, Seraphina's Let. to Abbot Lolli, Fasc. 57  
 08.12.1907, Let. 9, Seraphina's Let. to Pope Pius X, Fasc. 44  
 13.10.1913, Let. 21, Seraphina's Let. to Pope Pius X, "  
 20.01.1915, Let. 17, Seraphina's Let. to Mgr. Sily, Fasc. 36

46. 01.12.1914, Let. 17 Seraphina's Let. to the Jesuit Consultant to the Sac. Congregation, Fasc.42

47. 28.05.1912, Let. 272, Seraphina's Let. to Minister Gen. Fr. Pacifico Monza, Fasc. 63

*Root, grafted on the great Tree of Mother Church, I am sure that it will produce copious fruits of apostolate and heroic sanctity, decking the table of the Lord with snow-white lilies and pure virgins".<sup>48</sup>*

But the death of Pope Pius X on August 21, 1914 and the election of the new Pope delayed the process of approbation of the Constitutions. As soon as Pope Benedict XV was installed in Peter's Chair, Seraphina resumed her correspondence. She wrote to His Holiness to reconfirm his predecessor's brief on the dependence of the Institute on the Order of Friars Minor and to grant the definitive approbation of the Constitutions.<sup>49</sup> On July 19, 1915, she wrote to Card. Justini, the Protector of the Order, that she was ready to surrender to the will of God expressed by His Holiness and His Eminence with regard to the controversial Art. 104.

*"However, please understand that what I am doing is for the Congregation. As for me I am at the door of eternity... The word of the August Pontiff has always been my guide...."*

Within a month of her request the Pope granted the approbation of the Constitution with the modified version of Art. 104: *"The Institute of the CFMSS is subjected to the direction of Most Rev. Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor, so that it may maintain well the spirit of Father St. Francis. However, such direction does not imply jurisdiction of any sort; it cannot and should not restrict even minimally, the rights and jurisdiction of the local Ordinary according to the Canon Law and the Apostolic Constitutions"*<sup>50</sup>. On August 12, 1915 - the feast of St. Clare, the Sacred Congregation for Religious officially issued the decree of approbation.

48. 01.07.1914, Let. 44, Seraphina's Let. to Pope Pius X. Fasc. 44

49. 22.06.1915, Let. 42, Seraphina's Let. to Pope Benedict XV Fasc. 44

50. 20.07.1915, Card. Cagiano, Prefect of the Sac. Cong. for Rel. Institute, Roma SCVV, RR. - Bricinorien - B. 70 - Terziarie Francescane

## The Decree of Approbation

*"His Holiness Benedict XV, by divine providence Pope, in the audience granted on July 20, 1915, to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Religious, having heard the opinion of the special commission and examined the commendatory letters of Bishops of those places where the pious Institute of Sisters, known as the Clarist Franciscan Missionaries of the Most Holy Sacrament, is found, having its Mother House at Bertinoro, has kindly deigned to approve and confirm its above written Constitutions which have been duly and officially edited in conformity with the original, an autographed copy of which is kept in the Archives of the mentioned Sacred Congregation, and therefore, approves and confirms them according to the tenor of present decree, the jurisdiction of Ordinaries being safeguarded according to the norm of Apostolic Constitutions."*

(Given in Rome by the Secretariat of the Sacred Congregation on the Twelfth Day of August 1915.)

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### Endnote

#### Bishop Frederic Polloni

Born on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1841, Frederic Polloni was ordained priest in December 1866, appointed Chancellor of Bertinoro Diocese in 1871, Professor of Moral Theology in 1874, and Vicar General in 1890. On the death of Bishop Leonardi on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1898, Mgr. Polloni was nominated Bishop-elect on 28<sup>th</sup> August and consecrated on 4<sup>th</sup> December of the same year. Both the Farolfi sisters were present at his consecration in Rome. His sermons and pastoral letters are an eloquent witness not only to the admirable qualities of his heart and mind, but also to the fine texture of his moral being. His Holiness, Pope Benedict

XV, had a special affection and esteem for Bertinoro's much loved Pastor. The Silver Jubilee Celebrations of his Episcopal ordination in 1923, was crowned by the announcement that Bishop Polloni was nominated Assistant to the Papal Throne. His efficient administration came to an abrupt end on March 10, 1924 as a result of a brief, sudden illness. The Clares of the Blessed Sacrament had, indeed, lost a staunch support in the demise of Bishop Polloni.

Polloni's letter to the pioneer members of the Institute, treasured by the Venerable Foundress, gives us a proof of his powerful influence on the Eucharistic-Missionary spirituality of Mother Seraphina.

"My Little Daughters, Sisters Seraphina, Caterina, Nazarena, Bernardina, Orsolina, Domenica, Placida, Veronica, Germana & Cecilia,

... It has been one of the most remarkable graces of the Good Lord that you have been brought together here to reinforce your spirit with the light of the eternal truth, and to renew the solemn oath by which you had consecrated yourselves to your celestial Spouse. *How good, how delightful it is for all to live together like brothers!*" (Ps.133:1) Yes, it is a joyous, salutary experience to be united in one single thought, affection and aim!

Now that you are about to be dispersed, I leave you with the words of St. Ignatius to his disciples: "*Go, enkindle and set on fire*" *You too have a mission to accomplish, that is, to educate the young in the Christian way by your word and example...Go then, enkindle Christ's love in every heart, and let it be lit with love for Jesus Christ.* But you cannot ignite others' hearts, unless the flame leaps out of your own heart. Oh, how hollow it sounds when one speaks for the sake of speaking! In vain are the efforts and the noise. Therefore, make your words efficacious by having Jesus reign in your hearts. He should be your sole sovereign ruler and supreme arbiter. *Jesus Christ!* Oh, it is a word that speaks volume, and who can grasp it? All the sciences, all the powers and all our being are condensed into the word, 'Jesus Christ'. We have Him so near us and every morning we can be united with Him. We should be wonder-struck at such an awesome marvel. What can be said about those who care very little about this great treasure, and turn away in pursuit of mere trifles?

My little daughters, I've already told you, and I say the same thing; nor would I be tired of repeating, that I would like you to have the love for the Eucharistic Jesus as the badge and seal of your institute. Your Institute is to be identified by the living, burning love for the Eucharist. Propagate love for the Mysteries which contain God's extreme love. If you do so, your whole being will be afire with the purest flame of love, your words and actions radiant with its brilliance, and your hearts fused into one. As the Lord himself said to his disciples, the people will know that you are true spouses of Jesus Christ, if you love one another...

...Mary next to Jesus. These two sweetest names always go together, they are inseparable. The crucifix reminds us of the Mother of Sorrows; it was for this reason that Jesus wanted his mother at the foot of the cross. Otherwise, he would certainly have spared her the most bitter pain of sharing in his sufferings. In short, He wants us to contemplate his passion along with the anguish of his mother, given to us as our mother from his deathbed. Jesus on the cross, Mary before the cross and Magdalene at the foot of the cross..."

**Bertinoro: 6.5.1898**

**Frederic Polloni**



## CHAPTER VIII

### "The World is Our Cloister" (sc. 63)

*"With the consent of the Holy See, the Clarist Missionaries will establish themselves in foreign missions, preferably among the most abandoned, the remote and the perilous. In Europe let the sisters dedicate themselves to the education of girls, especially of the working class and preferably the most destitute. In case of necessity and whenever their help is sought after, let them tend the sick in private houses or in the hospital; but no one is under obligation to do so. However, the specific aim of the Institute is Mission and the education of the youth".*

Constitutions 1913, Article 2

As a child Seraphina had three aims: to educate the youth, to work in some mission lands and to die a martyr for the Faith. Her first aim was realized when she joined the Tertiaries of St. Elizabeth at Forli. The experience at Palagano had taught her that not every educational Institute would accept the challenge of opening schools in remote or inaccessible towns or take care of the abandoned, or destitute children of the lower class families. Palagano, forsaken by the Sisters of Blessed Angelina of Marsciano during the Napoleonic Suppression, and by the Sisters of St. Anne and the Daughters of Charity in the seventies of the last century, aroused in Seraphina her latent call to be a missionary. Ever since the founding of a school at Palagano in 1881, Seraphina had a predilection for forlorn places and destitute people. Towns that had no convent or convent schools, were her first preference. What interested her was not the

affluence of the town, or the blue blood of the gentry, or the figure on the donation cheques, but the crying need of the place for the Christian formation of its inhabitants.

*"My heart burns with the desire to help the society oppressed by the Masonic tyranny... I would like to snatch all the souls and lead them to Jesus, our Salvation, Health and Resurrection... Their poverty does not impede me, rather my spontaneous preference is for the poor and the derelict..."<sup>1</sup>*

In order to guide souls in the grip of the rampant freemasonry, or groping in the darkness of sin and ignorance, there were in every convent, besides the day school for the children of the underprivileged and boarding school for the daughters of the gentry, festive oratories for teenagers, the Pious Association of the Daughters of Mary, work shops for all age groups and asylums for girls in danger of losing their virginity, or for the fallen women.

### Conditions for Opening a House

It was her zeal for the souls that urged Seraphina to accept the requests to open a convent at Cesenatico and at Ravenna before the Institute was one year old. She had no pretensions or demands; the only conditions she laid down were that her sisters should have (1) the freedom of apostolate (2), a house of their own and (3) they should live by their work and not on alms<sup>2</sup>. She was against living in rented houses or lodging with some benefactors. She wanted a house for the permanent use of the sisters; a house equipped with necessary furniture and the necessities for the chapel, like altar linen, vestments and the sacred vessels.

1. 12.03.1897: Letter-33, Seraphina's Let. to the Priest of Castrocaro, Scr. 62 p.12-13

2. 12.07.1916: Seraphina's Let. to a Priest, Fasc. 65 p.44.

Seraphina insisted, as one of the conditions for opening a house, that her sisters should not be expected to knock from door to door for their meals after having slogged through school works the whole day. She preferred not to open a house where the sisters would have to importune others for their maintenance.<sup>3</sup> Like her Seraphic Father, Seraphina wanted that the sisters maintain themselves by their work and have recourse to alms only if their wants exceeded their income.

*"Our food is frugal; soup, just one side dish, some fruit and a little wine... Our needs are scanty, as becomes persons totally dedicated to the good of their neighbours..."*<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Seraphina had unlimited trust in Providence. "He who feeds the birds of the air, will think of providing for his spouses", she would repeat whenever the sisters were in dire straits.<sup>5</sup>

Coupled with her revolutionary idea against alms seeking, was her demand for the freedom of apostolate. Her slogan was, "Souls, Love, Work" and she wanted her daughters to have the freedom to choose their means of apostolate according to the needs of the place and time and the right to be guided by their Mother House wherever their field of work be.<sup>6</sup> But this freedom did not mean exemption from the jurisdiction of the local Ordinary. A true daughter of Francis, Seraphina pledged obedience and respect to the ecclesiastical authorities and sought their advice and blessing before opening a house. Nevertheless, she wanted to safeguard her daughters against eventual obstacles and restrictions to their apostolic vision and

3. 22.08.1913: Letter 1217, Seraphina's Let. to Sr. Lorenzina, Fasc. 41.  
09.07.1901: Seraphina's Let. to a Bishop, Fasc. 68.  
29.03.1915: Letter-96, Seraphina's Let. to a Bishop, Fasc. 40  
4. 26.09.1899: Seraphina's Let. to the Secretary of the Cesenatico Hospital, Fasc. 73.  
5. 24.09.1902: Letter-255, Seraphina's Let. to Bishop Guido Conforti, Fasc. 34.  
6. 12.07.1916: Seraphina's letter to a priest, Fasc. 65.

activities, against those bishops who would plan to make the branch house an independent entity. The Clares of the Blessed Sacrament as a union of all the sisters governed by a Mother House, was a novel feature altogether in a tradition in which each convent was an autonomous unit under the jurisdiction of the local bishop.

## Developments at Home

*"Let there be schools appropriate to every class of people and let them show the tenderness of a mother towards the abandoned orphans". (Art. 76)*

*"Let them have great care for the sick, serving them with all love in their physical needs in order to obtain the integral health of body, mind and soul."*

*"Let them gladly accept even the poor pagans in the hope that touched by the efficacy of Christian charity, they may be converted to the true faith". (Art. 77)*

Convents sprang up all over Italy either necessitated by moral and social needs or by the exigencies of the Institute. In the apostolate of education the main motive was the good of the people - to lead all souls to Christ. She warned the sisters not to hanker after prestigious schools for their own sake. It was for the "good of the soul, the glory of God and as a means to help the poor" that Seraphina wanted to have boarding schools for the daughters of the elite - both believers and non believers alike. Even though her main target of girls' education was to "save innocent girls from corruption" and to foster vocations to Religious State, she did not fail to detect additional benefit to society or to the Institute. The beach of Cesenatico was good for the boarders in need of marine air. Ravenna had a hostel not only for the region's student-teachers but also for the boarders at the Bertinoro as well as for the promising

postulants to complete their Teacher's Training Course. At Trieste the missionaries could leisurely await their ships, while at Rome the victims of natural calamities could be quickly received and attended to, just as the formalities of the Institute at the Sacred Congregation could easily be carried out.

Each of the convents had a story of its own, a year's correspondence with civil and ecclesiastical authorities, initial troubles and set-backs, unexpected difficulties arising out of human frailty or political whim. Seraphina would exhort the sisters to hold on to God amidst the frustrating adversities, ruthless opposition and insurmountable obstacles strewn across their path.

*"All the works of God have their own difficulties which should be overcome by an unbounded faith in the loving Providence".*<sup>7</sup>

The multipurpose school at Ravenna, opened against the advice of Bishop Polloni, caused the sisters no end of trouble. Canon Buzzi who had invited the Clares to Ravenna and entrusted them with his progressive school, was not favoured by the civic authorities and the sisters had to bear the brunt of their constant opposition. Cardinal-Prefect Parocchi had advised Seraphina, when consulted about opening a house in Ravenna: "Go and do a world of good there". Weighing the words of the Cardinal against Polloni's practical knowledge of the situation at Ravenna, Seraphina went ahead with the plan of opening a school and hostel in the diocese of her old friend Bishop Conforti. Bishop Polloni continued to warn her against "throwing money into a heap of ruins" just as the Cardinal repeated to her, "Leave Ravenna? No! I would like to have more religious communities in that city"<sup>8</sup>. Resigned, Seraphina wrote".

7. 13.03.1897: Let.20, Seraphina's Let. to Monsr. Grilly of Cesenatico Fasc. 68

8. 09.03.1915: Let.22, Seraphina's Let. to a Bishop, Fasc. 69.

10.04.1915: Let. 98, Seraphina's Let. to Abbot Arcangelo Lolli, Fasc. 40.

22.02.1916: Let.53, Seraphina's Let. to Pope Benedict XV, Fasc. 44.

*"Today Ravenna, tomorrow the abbey; and thus will be proved the prophecy that our Institute is founded in the arena. I feel extremely sad: the news of Ravenna has filled my chalice".*<sup>9</sup>

The sisters remained at Ravenna and out of the spines an unexpected flower bloomed. Fr. Savino of Rimini, the missionary from Itambacury, came to know of the Missionaries of the Blessed Sacrament and set Seraphina aflame with love for the Indians of Brazil. Again it was through him that Bishop Nagl came to know about the Clares of Bertinoro and invited them to open a house at Trieste, the port of embarkation for sisters bound for the East. Seraphina who always saw the visible hand of God in every contradiction, would deepen her faith in Him, as unexpected good sprouted from apparent failures and unyielding obstructions:

*"I have always had an unlimited faith in the Divine Providence on which my Institute is founded. Glory to God! I must say, it has never failed me!"*<sup>10</sup>

At Trieste, Fr. Arcangelo of Fossombene had founded the Pious Association of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart. Bishop Nagl wanted to hand over to the Clares the school and recreation centre run by the "Handmaids". Ever since the departure of the first group of missionaries, Seraphina had wanted a house at Trieste. When Bishop Polloni showed her the request of the bishop of Trieste, she was elated. She sent her own sister Catherine to open the house fully "dedicated to the Sacred Heart". But there too, her "chalice" was quickly filled: the "Handmaids" did not want to give up their school!

The Austrian government, who ruled over Trieste and who looked askance at Religious Congregations unapproved by the

9. 16.07.1901: Seraphina's Let. to a Bishop, Fasc. 68.

10. 05.03.1898: Seraphina's Let. to a Bishop, Fasc. 68.

Holy See, threatened to send the Clares back to the Italian Territory. Thanks to the pressure from the Austrian Court, Bishop Nagl took an active interest in having the Institute approved by the Holy See. His initiative in asking Seraphina to approach the Sacred Congregation for the approbation of the Institute, launched a host of recommendation letters from Bishops Polloni, Comforti, Vespignani, Puleti and others who had the Clares in their dioceses - letters that acted as catalysts to speed up the procedure for approbation. On 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1907, Seraphina had requested the Pope for the approval of the Institute and the request was granted on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1907.

Catherine Farolfi won for the Institute not only benefactors from the nobility, whose words weighed in the court of the Austrian Emperor, but also two influential persons in the Sacred Congregation for Religious: Mgr. Petronio Sanfermo and through him Abbot Arcangelo Lolli, a Canon at St. John Lateran, who had the lion's share in the revision of the Constitutions in 1906 as well as in 1913. Ravenna, opened on October 21, 1899 and Trieste inaugurated on June 28, 1904, were the two houses that gave M. Seraphina the maximum agony among the convents in Italy; but out of them the Institute derived the maximum benefit, whether directly or indirectly.

## The Call from Hindustan

*"To go to the mission one has to receive a special call from God. Whoever is inspired by God should have the spirit of sacrifice and be ready and willing to give her life to the point of shedding her blood for Christ. She should be aglow with apostolic zeal and the flame of charity, eager for nothing but the expansion of God's Kingdom and of having the sweetest name of Jesus honoured in every corner of the world."*<sup>11</sup>

11. *Practical Guide*, Ch. XIX

Seraphina was not content with the houses opened in Italy; she wanted to reach beyond the blue and carry the Gospel message to those who had not yet received it. She confided her yearning to Bishop Polloni, her revered Pastor and cherished friend. His Lordship consoled her, saying that if God wanted her to be a missionary, he would provide a way to fulfill His plans for her. Seraphina did not have to wait more than a year to know the will of God. For in 1900, Charles Gentili, Archbishop of Agra, was at Bertinoro visiting his family. He was recently transferred from the diocese of Allahabad to the Archdiocese of Agra and had come to Rome on his *ad limina* visit. With His grace was Bishop Victor Sinibaldi, his successor at Allahabad.<sup>12</sup>

Agra had been a cradle of Christianity during the glorious reign of the Emperor Akbar: there was a flourishing community of traders belonging to the Armenian Church. Under the imperial patronage, the Jesuit mission founded in 1578, took root not only in Agra, but also in the cities along the trade route from Calcutta to Lahore and beyond. Nevertheless, Akbar's successor, Humayun, persecuted the Christians and nearly succeeded in wiping out the Catholic community of Agra. However, ever since the establishment of the East India Company in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Protestant Church had made rapid growth in the major ports of India. The decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of British India saw the expansion of the Anglican Church in the Gangetic plains. Charismatic Jesuit and Capuchin missionaries founded pockets of Catholic

12. Charles Gentili.

Born on 18th Nov. 1840, entered the Order of the Capuchins on 4th Nov. 1859 and ordained priest on 21st June 1863. Fr. Charles Gentili reached Patna on 4th Nov. 1870. He was successively stationed at Darjeeling, Lucknow and Nainital. In 1891 he was elected Superior Regular of the missions, in 1896 Vicar General of Allahabad diocese, consecrated Bishop of the same on 29th June 1897 and installed as Archbishop of Agra on 27th Aug. 1898. After having dedicated 46 years to the missions, His Grace passed away on 30th Dec. 1916, due to a cerebral hemorrhage and was buried in the sanctuary of the Cathedral Church of Agra. (Confr. Franciscan Annals of India, VIII (1917) 1-2, 34-36. II Massaja IV n. 4, pp. 97-101)

communities in the main cities along the Grand Trunk Road, or in towns where they enjoyed the protection of the local ruler. They also served as chaplains to the Anglo-Indian Catholics in the commercial centres or in the cantonment area. Yet hardly anything was done for the evangelization of the natives in the smaller towns and villages.

The Catholic hierarchy of North India was concerned about the deplorable state of the Church in the Gangetic Plains. The multifarious languages and dialects and the rigid social customs and cultures, were a solid barrier to the evangelization of the local people. There was no seminary to train indigent clergy and the missionaries depended on catechists to instruct the people in the rudiments of Christianity. Since the neo-converts were taught only the common prayers and elementary catechism, their faith was just skin-deep. And men could not preach to women and girls! For till the close of the 19th century no ladies could be seen at a public gathering: they travelled in palanquin and the parents jealously guarded their daughters against all strangers, irrespective of caste, creed or status. Muslim women wore 'burqua' in public; the Hindu ladies veiled their face before acquaintances and strangers: so rigid was the social mind-set. Thus women and girls were deprived of the benefit of education. So great was the need for a Religious Congregation of Sisters to evangelize not only the women but also the children and men.

The Congregation of Jesus and Mary had houses in the diocese of Agra since the middle of nineteenth century. But they served only the Anglo-Indian community, members of the Indian Civil Service and the landed gentry, whether Hindus, Muslims or Christians. There was no Catholic School for the poor, no one to teach religion to the people in their mother tongue; thus a good part of the population was shut off not

only from the Gospel light, but also basic education. Archbishop Gentili had come home to find a solution to the burning problems: personnel for a seminary to train local candidates for priesthood and a Congregation of Sisters willing to work among the suburban and rural people of India. Providence had brought him to the abbey just as the new Congregation was emerging out of the tempestuous scene that had beset it for six years.

Mother Seraphina was elated at the prospect of realizing her childhood dream. But she wanted time not only to prepare her sisters for a hazardous undertaking but also to give her Institute a solid footing before she left for the missions.

*"I, who have had the missionary vocation since the age of reason, would leave for India tomorrow morning, glad to offer my last days to Jesus. I have wasted my forty-seven years here: I'm wanting in all virtues: still I have the strength to sustain martyrdom... If my Father allows me, I would be the very first to go to found the mission and then I could happily die..."*<sup>13</sup>

For Seraphina, to be a missionary and to be a martyr were one and the same. She would exhort her sisters to have the spirit of the martyrs and to bear the martyrdom of love, if not that of blood.<sup>14</sup>

Bishop Polloni - her "Father" - repeated to Seraphina the words of Card. Hugolin when St. Francis had wanted to cross the Alps to preach to the French nation. She was needed in Italy, at the abbey, to see her nascent Institute well-rooted in the soil of the Mother Church. He further reminded her that being weak and frail, she could not brave the inclement weather

13. 12.08.1900: Let. 25, Seraphina's Let. to Catherine & Cmty., Fasc. 9.

14. 11.11.1906, Let. 47, Seraphina's Let. to the Archbishop of Diamantina, Fasc. 47.

of North India. Seraphina could not but complain to Jesus that when she had been longing to be a missionary since her childhood, He was letting her be superseded by others. Finally a "fiat" wrung from the bottom of her heart, mingled with her tears of joy at having her dream realized through her daughters.

Archbishop Gentili wanted the sisters to sail with him early in January 1901. But Seraphina did not want to send them that early. Volunteers had to be selected first, permission of their parents sought and the young sisters given a special training for the mission work. Moreover, they needed time to acquire a working knowledge of English. But His Grace would not hear of any such excuses. He pledged them his paternal care and solicitude and the assistance of the Capuchin friars. They could learn English better and faster in India than in Italy. He promised to have them taught the language by Sisters of Jesus and Mary or by some English teachers at the mission station. Meanwhile, Bishop Sinibaldi sent her a Guidebook to English. Hooked by the assurances of the Archbishop, Seraphina wrote to all the houses requesting volunteers for the longed for mission.

*"Only those who have a special vocation are sent to the mission. Superiors can neither order nor request a sister to go."*<sup>15</sup>

Many volunteered but Seraphina chose only four. Srs. Magdalene, Philomena, Margaret and Gertrude. She requested every community to offer special prayers for the success of the mission. At the Abbey the novices prayed constantly to the Lord to bless the missionaries. Seraphina dreamt of *"opening many houses in India, after exploring the situations*

15. 31.01.1905: Let. 149, Seraphina's Let. to an Aspirant, Fasc. 53.  
12.08.1900: Letter 425, Seraphina's Let. to Catherine & Community, Fasc. 9.  
11.09.1912: Seraphina's Let. to a priest, Fasc. 72.

*there and to erect a province superior to the Italian one."*<sup>16</sup> She prepared her daughters spiritually and materially. To her missionaries, uniformity of habit did not apply. She prepared for them a white cotton tunic, a silk veil and muslin wimple. Their wimple was not arranged in folds as in Italy but plain and simple, adapted to the warm climate of North India. In an age when dispensation from established norm was unheard of, here was M. Seraphina with her admirably large vision and broad-mindedness! The European sisters in India had to brave the sultry summer of the North for years before they could obtain permission to use cotton instead of woolen fabric!

The sisters made their retreat at the abbey, said farewell to their relatives and friends, begged pardon of their fellow sisters, received a blessing from Pope Leo XIII and the Minister General, received the crucifix from Bishop Polloni at a moving public function in the Cathedral of Bertinoro and left their dear abbey on February 1, 1901, the words of their Pastor still ringing in their ears :

"You are leaving for an apostolate in a foreign land. Fortunate are you a thousand times; You are like the virgins whom the Apostles chose to help them. Like St. Tecla who followed St. Paul in his apostolic journeys not as a servant, but as his companion ...It is essential on your part to cooperate with the grace of your calling. Remember, therefore, that you are virgins consecrated to God and as such should always live with Him and for Him. For you the world does not exist any more. Observe the Rule scrupulously, and every evening make an examination of conscience, noting down your omissions and negligence. During the day raise your mind often in prayer to God and turn all your work as preparation for the next Holy Communion...My daughters, remember

16. 12.08.1900: Letter 425, Seraphina's Let. to Catherine & Cmty. Fasc. 9.

that you are Franciscans of the Blessed Sacrament and that a single Communion is enough to make one a saint. Hence, have great love for the Mysteries. For from it flows the charity you should have for all, especially among you... From it springs the love for purity, humility, patience, sacrifice and a hidden life..."\*

Seraphina accompanied them to Trieste, her heart an arena of sorrow, joy, anguish and hope. She longed to follow them to India; she rejoiced that her daughters were selected by the Lord to sow the Gospel seeds in the northern belt of the Gangetic plain. She was anxious about their welfare but she trusted in Providence. On February 3<sup>rd</sup>, the sisters embarked on the "Lloyd Austria" in the company of Archbishop Gentili and Bishop Sinibaldi, and reached Agra on February 26<sup>th</sup>.

On their arrival at Agra, the kind Pastor sent them to the hill station of Shimla where sisters of Jesus and Mary ran a degree college. The Archbishop wanted them to learn English and Urdu and to get themselves acquainted with the customs and cultures of the region around Meerut in the state of U.P., their mission centre. Moreover, His Grace had wanted to spare them the frequent heat waves and dust storms of the approaching summer.

## The Legacy of Begum Samru

Sardhana figures in ecclesiastical history as the shortest lived Vicariate. On 12<sup>th</sup> September 1834, Pope Gregory XVI had created it at the request of its Catholic ruler, Begum Samru. It soon vanished from the Church map with the death of the Begum on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1836. For the Vicar Apostolic of Sardhana left his See about twenty days after her death and returned to Italy, resigning his post. But the Church in India had benefitted by the Muslim princess who had embraced

\* 1.2.1901: Bp. Polloni's Farewell speech to the Pioneers. AGCFM - Fondo Farolfi

Christianity at the height of her political power, three years after the death of her French Catholic husband Walter Reinhardt, nicknamed Sombre (Samru), risking the wrath of the Muslim Emperor Shah Alam II. Besides constructing the splendid church of Our Lady of Grace and protecting over 800 native Catholic families, she had donated a handsome sum to the Catholic missions of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, to the Archbishop of Canterbury and to the Churches of Sardhana, Meerut and Agra. She had left Rs. 100,000/- for the founding of a seminary for indigenous clergy and Rs. 50,000/- for her poor Catholic subjects.<sup>17</sup>

The Capuchin Tibet-Hindustan Mission had no personnel to train candidates for priesthood; nor was there anyone interested in the uplift of the poor. With the arrival of the Sisters of Jesus and Mary, Sardhana was entrusted to them. But none of the sisters accepted gladly an obedience to Sardhana, which had become a synonym for backwoods. Only sisters incapable of doing any other active apostolate were sent there. By the end of the nineteenth century Sardhana had become a forlorn place despite its imposing church. Yet the sisters were hurt when Archbishop Gentili ordered them to hand over the place to the Franciscan sisters.

The installation of the Bertinoro Sisters at Sardhana in October 1901, aroused animosity not only among the sisters but also among the friars. They accused Archbishop Gentili of being partial to the newcomers. The Archbishop justified his solicitude for the young sisters he had brought from Italy and who were depending on him for everything. According to him nothing worth mentioning was done at Sardhana by the two sisters for years together. It was, he held, right in having

<sup>17</sup> Fr. Fulgentius Vannini OFM Cap, *The Hindustan Tibet Mission*, Ch. VII.

them supplanted by the zealous young Franciscans eager to work among the poor.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the sisters had not disappointed the Archbishop. They had in no time acquired a working knowledge of both English and Urdu and within a year they were able to manage the school adjoining the orphanage. The archbishop's letters to M. Seraphina were full of praises for her daughters.

### Regular Franciscan Tertiaries

"If anyone asks to be admitted to the observance of this life, they may be received on permission being obtained from His Grace, the Archbishop of the archdiocese, and on its being found after a diligent examination that they have a true vocation from God".

Gentili's Constitutions : Ch. 11

A man of vision, Archbishop Gentili envisaged the founding of a Congregation for Women, adapted to the local needs and under the exclusive jurisdiction of the local ordinary as the key to propagate the Catholic faith among the rural inhabitants. He could hardly do anything towards the propagation of faith among the common people, with the sisters presently working in his diocese : the Congregation of Jesus and Mary, the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Presentation Sisters, all enjoying the protection of the government of British India. If evangelization had to be begun on grass root level, a diocesan congregation tailored to the purpose, was needed. Having diocesan women religious meant schools for underprivileged girls, instruction on health and hygiene, social uplift programmes etc.

18. 08.01.1902: Bp. Gentili's Letter to the Minister General, H4, III, Capuchin General Archive

His Grace soon set himself to work, writing Constitutions for his sisters at Sardhana, recruiting aspirants from Allahabad and the erection of another house at Meerut with Sr. Magdalene in charge. The constitutions, consisting of eleven chapters and the common prayers, were printed in English and Urdu in 1901. The seven postulants from his former See, were given to the care of Sr. Philomena, the new superior of Sardhana which had become the "Mother House" of the new congregation.

### St. Francis Convent, Meerut: (January 10, 1903)

On 19<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1903, another group of four - Srs. Angela, Cecilia, Angelica and Louisa left Trieste to join their fellow sisters at Meerut. They reached Agra on February 7<sup>th</sup>, and Sardhana two days later. Sr. Cecilia was appointed superior of Meerut and the other three were sent to the "Mother House" to replace those transferred to the branch house. Sr. Cecilia, who was sent as the Visitor, soon made M. Seraphina acquainted with the latest developments in India : the Archbishop was working at the autonomy of Sardhana in keeping with the current Canon Law! His Grace did not approve of sisters who kept repeating, "We depend on our Mother House"!

It was not only from her Visitor that M. Seraphina was receiving letters of an unexpected nature. As early as 1902, her desk was being piled with letters from the friars at Meerut, the Minister General of the Capuchins and from Propaganda Fide, asking her to recall Sr. Philomena to Italy. There were whispers of a suspicious relationship between the archbishop and the beautiful, intelligent, ambitious young Philomena. It was a painful task, recalling a sister within a year of her departure



to the missions! But the apostolate had to be saved before the local people and the Christians - the majority of them Protestants - got wind of the scandalous affair. Mother Seraphina wrote to the Archbishop to send back the sister. But the Pastor was not willing to send back the superior and co-foundress of his Congregation. He threatened to close the house at Meerut if Philomena was called back to Italy.

The friars, determined to ward off such an imprudent act, wrote to the Minister General that the eviction of the sisters from Meerut would be a great loss to the Church's missionary activity there. People were pleased with the exemplary work the sisters were carrying on in the town and in the adjacent villages of Meerut. Their women had longed for opportunity of being instructed in Catholic faith and a few had already received baptism. Their children had the benefit of schooling; the destitute and the abandoned an asylum in their orphanage; young men could now look for wives from among the baptized teenagers. The sisters had ministered to ailing infants and comforted many adults on the point of death. The sisters of Jesus and Mary had done none of this though they had been at Meerut for over fifty years.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile Propaganda Fide reproved M. Seraphina for not having yet called back the sister who had caused the scandal. On May 4<sup>th</sup> 1905, Seraphina sent an obedience to Philomena to return to Italy. She accepted it at first, informing M. Seraphina that she would be leaving by the first ship available. A few months later, however, she wrote to the abbey that she was independent of Bertinoro and that she had no other superior but Jesus. In the summer of 1907, Archbishop Gentili came again to Italy

19. 5.12.1901/21.6.1905: Fr. Raphael of Figline's (Superior Regular of the Mission), letter to the Minister General of the Capuchins, Capuchin General Archive, H4 III.

on home leave. Propaganda, taking advantage of his absence from his See, sent obedience to Philomena to leave immediately for Bertinoro. Gentili's reaction to it was to request Card. Gotti to evict the sisters from Sardhana and reinstall the sisters of Jesus and Mary there.

Seraphina, informed of the Archbishop's antipathy towards her daughters at Meerut for over five years, sought an opportunity to make peace with him, but in vain. Gentili kept away from the abbey refusing to comply with the repeated request of Polloni to meet the sisters. Fearing the worst for her sisters on his return to Agra, Seraphina wrote to Pope Pius X about the scandalous situation at Sardhana and the consequent persecution of her daughters at Meerut; and requested His Holiness to retain Gentili in Italy for the good of all concerned.<sup>20</sup> Though Gentili himself had expressed his unwillingness to return to India, Propaganda forced him to go.

When Seraphina heard about the return of Gentili, her anxiety for her sisters knew no bounds.

*"My dearest daughters, even when I am in bed I pray for you and I think of you; my heart and my thoughts are always at Meerut and I feel your pain in the depth of my heart..."*<sup>21</sup>

Her hope of "creating a province better than that of Italy" came crashing down. She thought of calling them home before they were expelled from Meerut. As usual she took her problems to the one who could use his authority over the archbishop and have His Grace assure the sisters that they would not be driven away from Meerut.

20. 01.11.1907: Seraphina's Let. to Pope Pius X. Roma, AGCFM - b. Ris. - India

21. 01.11.1906: Letter-817, Seraphina's letter to the Missionaries, Fasc. 14.

*"The Holy Father had been extraordinarily kind to me and I hope for a complete triumph. His Holiness appreciates your long martyrdom and looks upon you as fortunate victims, like the martyrs of Morocco and others..."*<sup>22</sup>

Seraphina also wrote to Father Philip of Recanati, the Guardian of Meerut mission, asking him if it would be wise to recall the sisters to Italy. Fr. Philip advised her against it. The local people and the government officials were pleased with the immense good the sisters had done at Meerut.<sup>23</sup> Even the Inspector of Schools had high praise for their methods of teaching. It would be an unwise move to call them back to Italy. He encouraged Seraphina to hope for the best and not to take too much to heart, the unpleasant events at Sardhana. Though the Archbishop was ignoring the existence of "his daughters in Christ and sisters in Francis", the people and the friars were all for them. Fr. Philip promised her their assistance, both spiritual and material, even to send them to Simla for the coming summer.<sup>24</sup> Encouraged by the assurances of Fr. Philip, Seraphina wrote to her daughters to offer themselves as holocausts for the Indian mission :

*"The martyrs have fostered our religion and you should develop the Indian mission with your suffering".*<sup>25</sup>

22. 11.12.1908: Letter 912, Seraphina's Let. to Sr. Cecilia & Cmty., Fasc. 15.

23. St. Francis' Boarding & Day School, Meerut  
The Franciscan nuns in Meerut are prepared to receive girls as boarders from the age of four years. The convent is well-situated in the civil part of the station, in a healthy locality, away from bazaars, and quite close to the Catholic church. It has ample accommodation, spacious playgrounds and a well wooded garden.  
The School is under the direct supervision of the Government Educational Department. The course of studies embraces all the subjects of liberal education, in accordance with the Government Code.  
Extra Subjects taught: Piano, Singing, Violin, Mandolin, Drawing and Painting, French.  
Directress: Sr. Magdalena No. of Pupils: 37  
(Directory of Agra Archdiocese, 1905)

24. 14.02.1908: Fr. Philip of Recanati's (Meerut) Letter to M. Seraphina.

25. 11.06.1909: Letter-916, Seraphina's Let. to Cecilia & Cmty. Fasc. 15.

The sisters bore as best as they could the brunt of the apathy of the archbishop, the indifference of the majority of the friars, the scorching heat of the sultry summer and the temptations to abandon the mission and return home. And with the return of Sr. Philomena, the Congregation of Gentili soon floundered. Two of the sisters - Josephine and Delphine - had died respectively on 21<sup>st</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> May 1905. The rest finding religious life unsuitable for them or scandalized by the unedifying events at Sardhana, or both, returned to their families. The seven Italian sisters struggled against all odds to carry on the apostolate.

*"The missionaries are my glory and my consolation. I prefer a single mission to a hundred convents in Italy. But I would like all the missionaries to be saints and martyrs. If not, what is the use of your heroism so much admired by all ?...."*<sup>26</sup>

#### St. Francis Convent, Agra: (29-01-1912)

In 1911 came Srs. Lorenzina and Prisca; and a year later Srs. Fosca, Fulgentia and Alphonsina, to reinforce their waning strength. But by the time the newcomers reached Agra, things had changed. The pioneers were planning to leave Meerut for Italy. The Archbishop housed the newcomers in a villa in the "padritola" (the Christian quarters), at a stone's throw from the Cathedral house.<sup>27</sup> St. Francis' convent was officially opened on January 29, 1912 with Sr. Lorenzina as its superior. The St. Vincent's Foundling Home soon became a refuge for the newly born babies abandoned on the dump-hill.

26. 06.03.1911: Let. to Angela, Fasc. 16.

27. St. Francis Convent 29.1.1912  
The Franciscan Sisters of the Congregation of Bertinoro have opened a new house in Agra which is to serve as a novitiate for Indian girls wishing to consecrate their lives to the service of God and their neighbours in the Sisterhood.  
(Franciscan Annals of India, Vol. III, March 1912, p. 112)

A year at Agra and Lorenzina was no more the blooming youth full of energy and activity but a skeleton of her former self. The doctors diagnosed tuberculosis in its advanced stage. The dawn of 1914 found her in the Dufferin Hospital, counting her days on earth. For thirty-four days she was in the hospital, edifying the medical staff and her ward-mates, by her silent suffering and calm resignation to the will of God. Hardly thirty years of age, she passed away in the morning of February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1914 and was buried in the Cathedral Church of Agra. Her qualities of heart and mind, her youthful enthusiasm in serving the destitute and forsaken children and her optimism in the midst of trials and disappointments, had endeared her not only to the infants in the creche or to the clergy of the diocese, but to all those who came in contact with her.<sup>28</sup>

The death of Sr. Lorenzina was a setback to the Indian mission; in Seraphina's words she was, "the hope of the mission, the consolation of all".

"The greatest sacrifice is to have patience with the little children and to work in the village...Agra is awfully hot...we hope to open a house in Delhi or go back to Meerut..." - So wrote Sr. Fulgentia on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1917. This little note speaks volumes of the desperation and depression the poor sisters were facing in their day-to-day life. They longed to meet their fellow sisters, to exchange news and to be relieved of some of their burden. But with World War I gathering momentum every month, communications and travel were becoming risky. They hoped and prayed for the end of the war in order to take a home leave.

Agra with its orphanage and vernacular school, continued to be the nucleus of the Indian mission for the quarter of a

28. *Franciscan Annals of India* V (1914), pp. 119-120.

century, opening a convent at Khera Khurd in the suburban area of Delhi, on 12<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1924, and another in the Metropolis itself on 19<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1934. Like the Institute, the Indian mission too, was born on the "nakedness of the cross", amidst sheer sufferings and untold privations, utter humiliations and apparent failures. But the seed sown in tears did not lie dormant for long; it germinated despite the "step-daughterly" treatment of the archbishops and the "step-sisterly" attitude of the friars for half a century, blossoming and producing fruits a hundred-fold in Free India.

### School for the Italian Immigrants, Newark, New Jersey

"There is an urgent need for the School that Fr. Joseph Perotti wants to open in his St. Lucia's parish in the diocese of Newark. I've approved his request to you. The boys and girls of that Italian parish are very much in want of faith formation. Without the help of sisters, it is practically impossible to instill in them the Christian doctrine for their parents are so careless about teaching them Catechism that the children grow up without knowing how to make the sign of the cross. Hence, dear Mother, I'll be highly obliged to you if you could be so kind as to send us some sisters".<sup>29</sup>

In the wake of the Indian mission came the request for opening a house in the diocese of Newark in the state of New Jersey, U.S.A. "St. Lucy" parish of Italian immigrants, was posing problems for its pastor, Fr. Joseph Perotti. The parents, immersed in their business or work, hardly cared for the education of their children. There was a co-educational school, but no dedicated souls to run it. Though Fr. Perotti had four

29. 30.10.1904: Bishop John O' Connor's Letter to Seraphina - Propaganda Fide Archive, 65061/1905.

secular Tertiaries to help him, the boarding school was running into greater debt every year. Finding the school too big to handle, Fr. Perotti turned to Bishop John O'Connor for advice. His Lordship wrote to Mother Seraphina stressing the need of some Italian sisters to impart faith formation to the children of their compatriots and of fostering vocations to religious life among the flock of St. Lucy. A month later he sent Fr. Perotti to Italy on home leave.

The request to found a mission in the United States had come when M. Seraphina was in the thick of her missionary projects. Ever since 1902, when she had come across some missionaries from Brazil, she was planning to send her daughters to announce the Good News to the Indios who had not heard of Christ nor seen the light of civilization. She was planning a similar expedition to China where her well-wisher, Bishop Guido Conforti of Ravenna, had his priests preach to the followers of Confucius and Buddha. She had gathered from missionaries information about life in China; the possibility of having the assistance of the Friars Minor, of the rapport between the branch house and the Mother house, the academic qualification of the sisters, the material they wore, the mode of community life, and so on.<sup>30</sup> She had an eye on Africa too though nothing was concretized about opening a house there.

Fr. Joseph Perotti reached the abbey on January 17, 1905. He pleaded with Mother Seraphina not to turn down his bishop's request. He assured her that with their educational and administrative experience, the sisters could not only make the school self-sufficient but also realize the bishop's project of fostering religious vocations among its pupils. Seraphina was aghast at the idea of a boarding school for both boys and girls. She was still more shocked to hear that both the sexes slept

30. 09.02.1903: M. Seraphina's Let. to Catherine, Fasc. 12.

in the same dormitory and that the four Tertiaries had to bathe and dress the small boys. She told Fr. Perotti that the sisters should not be expected to bathe the boys and that servants should be employed for their personal hygiene. Moreover, she made it clear to him that "mixed boarding schools" had no place in their system of education according to the decree issued by the Sacred Congregation in 1898.

One of the conditions laid down by the bishop was that the Tertiaries working in the school should be aggregated to the Clares of the Blessed Sacrament, when they took over the school with all its liabilities. Seraphina was not pleased with the prospect of being saddled with the responsibility of paying the debt incurred by the parish priest or that of maintaining the Tertiaries. The bishop had wanted her to open a novitiate immediately. Smarting from the fiasco of Archbishop Gentili's attempt at founding a native Congregation with the CFMSS as its pioneer members, Seraphina was not willing to swallow the bait. She had conceived her Institute as a mirror of the early Christian community or the primitive Franciscan fraternity - all united in one heart and soul. Her sisters were being dismembered in India; she did not want a repeat of it in the U.S.A. Seraphina explained to the bishop that for the time being the aspirants should come to Bertinoro for their novitiate. If there was a felt need one would be opened in Newark in due course.

*"It is necessary that the candidates come to the Mother House for the integrity of the Religious body, for shaping the spirit and holiness of the members."*<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, she did not want to reject his offer outright, for fear of going against the will of God. She wrote to Cardinal

31. 10.03.1905: Agreement between Bp. John O'Connor and Mother Seraphina, Prot. n. 66233/1905

Prefect Gotti asking His Eminence if she should accept the mission at Newark. In her letter dated February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1905, Seraphina explained to the cardinal her reservations about the co-educational boarding schools and the want of servants to look after the personal hygiene of the boys. She also wrote to Mgr. Bressan, the Pope's private secretary ;

*"What is God's will? To know it, we are continuously praying before the Blessed Sacrament exposed; but it's not enough. It is necessary that Jesus manifests his will through His Vicar. If the Supreme Pastor raises his hand in benediction over us, we shall go, assured of pleasing Jesus, of leading souls to Him and striving to be holy. We shall call the new venture, "the Mission of the Immaculate Mary's Second Pontiff".<sup>32</sup>*

It did not take long to know the manifest will of God. Bishop John O'Connor wanted a Congregation that would pasture his young flock, irrespective of sex, open a novitiate for his aspirants and aggregate willing members of the Secular Third Order; conditions that did not find favour with the Councillors of the Clares of the Blessed Sacrament. Besides, Propaganda had categorically stated that the sisters could not run boarding School for boys.<sup>33</sup>

## The Woodsmen of Itambacury

*"Day before yesterday, I met some missionaries returning from Brazil. I was shocked to hear that many die there without receiving the assistance of the Church because there are no priests to minister to them; and to find one they have to travel by train for a whole day. And here we have a priest at every turn."<sup>34</sup>*

32. 01.02.1905: M. Seraphina's Let. to Mgr. Bressan, Fasc. 42.

33. 19.05.1905: Card. G.M. Gotti's Let. to Bp. Polloni, Prot. N. 66480/1905

34. 24.09.1902: Letter-255, Seraphina's Let. to Bp. Guido Conforti, Fasc. 34.

Fr. Seraphim of Gorizia - the ex-minister of the Austrian Emperor Francis Joseph, was a charismatic Capuchin who worked, along with his zealous confrere Angelo of Fossombone, for the uplift of the Indios. Itambacury, an outpost in the state of Minas Gerais, was the home of the tribes of Xavantos\* Pugixao (pr. Pujishau) and Bugre, driven into the backwoods by the European settlers. The two radical friars, from the Capuchin province of Syracuse, had come to Itambacury in 1878. They constructed a little hut in a glade and with the help of the woodsmen began clearing the dense growth of brambles and bushes and cultivating the reclaimed land. Mass before breakfast, work in the cool hours of the morning, catechism in the afternoon; this was their daily routine. They ate what the tribesmen ate, felled trees quicker than the woodsmen, made burnt clay faster than the natives and constructed barracks to house men and women who had been living in the open, exposed to all the elements. The friars were the law-givers, judges, owners and rulers of Itambacury, for the government of Minas Gerais had given them all liberty and possible help: tools and materials for construction of barracks and roads, seeds for cultivation and carts for transportation.

Within twenty years the landscape took a completely new face : no more impenetrable undergrowth of tropical bushes and brambles. Instead, there were cornfields parted by winding mud-roads, orchards ripening in the hot sun, banana plantations dotted with the houses of prosperous Xavantos, the church of Our Lady of Angels reigning in all hearts. The only unpleasant event that marred the history of Itambacury was a vindictive act perpetrated by some resentful tribesmen. In 1893, a poisonous arrowhead shot by unseen hands found its way deep into the crown of Fr. Seraphin. Faithful followers rose to avenge the culprit and some lost their lives in the ensuing clash. Fr.

\* Xavantos = Pronounced Shavantos

Savino of Rimini who had joined the pioneers some years earlier, salvaged the mission and carried on the apostolate till the wounded friars were able to resume their work.

The Bishop of Diamantina, though pleased with the admirable work of the pioneers, found that much was desired in the mission. The cultural development of the natives was praiseworthy; no less was their spiritual progress. But the body and mind were not at par with the development of their mode of living. The rate of infant mortality was high as was that of death caused by common tropical diseases. Cooked food was unheard of. The children needed schooling. More dedicated persons were required at the mission. His Lordship promised the friars to contact the Nuncio and request His Excellency to send some sisters to take care of Itambacury. Mgr. Julius Tonti, the Nuncio at Rio de Janeiro, had known Mother Seraphina personally. As if to bait her, His Excellency enclosed a cheque for £3000 to meet the fare of two sisters to visit Itambacury and be convinced of the urgency of opening a mission there to educate the Indios.

When Seraphina received the appeal of the Nuncio, the Indian Mission was passing through its critical phase. She did not want to open another mission without knowing the future of the first one. Yet she could not refuse the Nuncio's request. For His Excellency, being a key figure at the Sacred Congregation for the approbation of the Institute, would be of great help to the Clares. Seraphina wrote to all the sisters, asking them if anyone was willing to do the role of the Baptist for the Brazilian missionaries.<sup>35</sup> She herself volunteered to do the ground work; but she needed a companion. The sisters protested unanimously against her going to Brazil.

Among the volunteers was Sr. Bernardina, directly moulded

35. 12.06.1906, Circular Letter 27.

by Seraphina after her ideals of education while a student at Forli and later in the school of suffering at the abbey. Of frail body and a delicate soul, she was the Superior of the house at Ravenna, opened on 21<sup>st</sup> Oct. 1899. With Bernardina at the helm of the mission, there was no need of an advanced party to prepare the ground for the missionaries. M. Seraphina informed Archbishop Joachim that instead of forerunners, the real party would be leaving in May 1907.

On 27<sup>th</sup> May 1907, Srs. Bernardina of the Name of Jesus, Francesca of the Holy Stigmata, Anne of the Innocents and Benedetta of the Redeemer, left the abbey fortified by the yearlong prayers of the sisters and novices, the blessing of Pope Pius X, the exhortation of Bishop Polloni and the personal guidance of their dear Mother. Three days later they boarded the "Umbria" at Geneva. Seraphina had accompanied them to their cabin; then an embrace and she was gone. "Oh the last embrace; the last word! Will we hear her voice again?", noted Bernardina in her diary on 30<sup>th</sup> May. There was no self-pity, no tears shed for themselves, their last thought was for their beloved Mother, a speck on the shore as the steamer gathered speed. They reached Rio on 15<sup>th</sup> June and on 22<sup>nd</sup>, they left Rio by the Lloyd Brasileiro Mayrink, a merchant ship in the company of Fr. Joseph of Castrogiovanni. From there it was an exciting journey partly by boat and partly on horseback to Itambacury.

"It is impossible to describe the journey up the muddy river through the dark dense forest who knows how many menacing crocodiles were lurking below, or leopards prowling in the undergrowth, not to speak of the savages watching us warily...An experience so gruesome and horrifying! To be in the thicket at night whose silence is broken only by the whine of the propeller and the screeching of the birds!...

Two Capuchin Fathers, a Friar Minor and 30-odd men and women escorted us from Theophilo. All on horse back, along the mule track, snaking through the jungle up and down the rugged mountain slopes. One has to be galloping always at full speed! The cavalcade grew in length as we neared Itambacury about 38 km.

We had hoped to reach our Mission Station unseen and unheard. But unfortunately it was not to be. None had ever met a nun before, and so whenever they see one they go down on one knee, taking the sisters for saints from heaven. I feel so embarrassed; and I'm sure the other three sisters too are moved. Rockets were fired at the outskirts of Itambacury, signaling our impending arrival. We reached the place at 4:30 in the afternoon of Wednesday, July 4, 1907. All of us dismounted at the threshold of the mission. Fr. Seraphino, Fr. Angelo, Fr. Gaspare and a crowd of people, came forward to receive us. Trumpets blew, fire-crackers zoomed and bells pealed out across the country-side. On either side of the path were rows of paper flags, bananas and lamps. It was for the first time that Itambacury heard the flourish of trumpets or seen the rockets."<sup>36</sup>

It was a world altogether different from that to which they had been accustomed which welcomed them. The 'citadel' of the woodsmen had nothing to equal it in the land of Caesar and Dante, of Michael Angelo and Garibaldi. To the accompaniment of rolling drums and swaying banana leaves, St. Clare's Boarding School was opened on July 4, 1907: the school of the Indios; their very own! The venerable old Fr. Seraphino sang the Song of Simeon; he had been looking for some Religious who would compliment the friars' work of evangelization, nurturing the seed already sown and preparing new ground for insemination.

36. Diary of Sister Bernardina, Wednesday June 26 & Wednesday July 3rd

## SARDHANA



The Main altar

The Begum's Tomb on the right side of the altar



The Basilica dedicated to Our Lady of Grace built by Begum Farzana Joanna Sumru in 1822.



The Pioneers Srs. Margherita, Magdalena,  
Geltrude & Filomena



Srs. Cecilia, Angela, Louisa  
& Angelica  
Who left for India in 1903



The horse-drawn carriages piled with the  
Missionaries' luggage



St. Francis School, Meerut : 1903-1912 (Srs. Cecilia Margherita,  
Magdalena, Geltrude, Angela & Louisa, staff and the boarders)

## AGRA



The Cathedral Church of Immaculate Conception (1848)



Archbishop's House

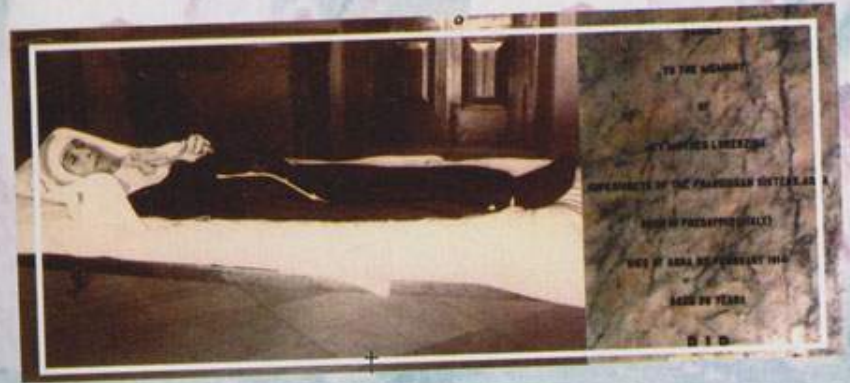




Archbishop Charles Gentili ( 27.8.1898-30.12.1916)



St. Francis Convent (1912)



Sr. Lorenzina ( 1914) & her Tombstone



Orphanage

# THE BRAZILIAN MISSION



The Pioneers Srs. Bernardina, Francesca, Anne & Benedetta



Itambacury : The first group of orphans



*"Oh Bernardina is no more!... Oh what a present, with what a gift has Jesus been asking from me to adorn His grotto! I ought to be happy to deck the crib with such a great sacrifice, but my heart bleeds and groans in the very act of offering it. Oh the heart-rending 'yes' that sweetens heroism! What a loss! What a great blow! Surely she is in heaven, because I enjoy heavenly peace in my anguish"*<sup>38</sup>

Sr. Bernardina, the visitator, was supposed to have returned to Italy after safely installing the pioneers. But within two months of the inception of the mission at Itambacury she fell a prey to her old enemy tuberculosis. Gangrene had spread to both her legs and the wounds were large and open but with her suffering she inspired her sisters to cheerfully carry on their mission among the illiterate tribal folks. There were no doctors to treat her, no chemists to supply medicines; they had to ride for miles to reach Diamantina to consult a physician. But amidst her sufferings she carried on negotiations with Bishop Joachim who wanted the CFMSS to open a hospital at Diamantina and a house at Conceicao. When the second group of sisters came, she gave them all the practical knowledge she was able to acquire about the ways of the Brazilians and how to solve their initial problems and difficulties. Bernardina gave them the rough sketch of the agreement between Archbishop Joachim and the CFMSS for the hospital at Diamantina. Bed-ridden as she was, it was all she could do for the mission. A mass of swollen body, she lay in agony, unable to move even a finger and consumed

38. 20.12.1909: M. Seraphina's Let. to Fr. Joseph of Rio de Janeiro, Fasc. 41.

by racking cough and fever, but serenely awaiting death with calm resignation to God's will. The sisters tended her night and day till Seraphina's dove flew away on December 14, 1909.

*"What an agony for me! What an immense loss to the mission and for the whole Institute"*<sup>39</sup>, exclaimed Seraphina as soon as she was informed of the death of Bernardina who was one of her favourite pupils. Twenty years earlier she had written to Emma Baldasserri who had entered the novitiate taking the name of Bernardina, "You are not a person distinct from me, but form one and the same being with me".<sup>40</sup> Ten years later she wrote to her, afflicted with consumption :

*"I prayed a lot for you. I do not recall if it was Wednesday or Thursday when I prayed insisently for you at 2.30 am, telling Jesus, "For the love of your Sacred Heart, I wish that my Bernardina soon return to Thee, ...I tell you frankly that I felt sure of being heard..."*<sup>41</sup>

But when the news of her death reached Seraphina, she was inconsolable. Only the conviction of Bernardina being in heaven comforted her. She would often turn to her in prayer, especially when the Brazilian mission faced difficulties. The Indios had revered her as a living saint while on earth, and after her death, her tomb became a centre of pilgrimage to the inhabitants of Itambacury. Conceicao was supposed to be opened along with Diamantina, but Bernardina's death delayed the execution of the plan. Seraphina wrote to the Chairman of the State Assembly, who had wanted some sisters from Itambacury to prepare the groundwork for Conceicao before the missionaries came.

39. 17.01.1910: M. Seraphina's Let. to the Chairman of the State Assembly, Fasc. 41.

40. 22.10.1887: M. Seraphina's Let. to Sr. Bernardina, Fasc. 2.

41. 04.04.1897: M. Seraphina's Let. to Sr. Bernardina, Fasc. 6.

The sisters were entrusted with the children, especially the little babies, as their parents toiled in the cool of the morning. As the sun's rays grew warmer, the women would return to the barracks to be instructed in religion, in cooking, child-care, needlework and other household works. It was a hard job acclimatizing them to the amenities of a civilized world; the ladies found learning child-care and tailoring a waste of time; the children invariably threw up cooked food and the teen-agers, accustomed to roam about in the open, found the class-rooms worse than a cage.

*"We are in the interior of Brazil, deprived of every comfort and rich in every hardships. We gather the children from the wilds, feed them, dress them and educate them in our school".<sup>37</sup>*

The Brazilian government allotted them an annual grant of £6000, with which the sisters had to provide for the inmates of the Orphanage and for the children in the day school. When the girls came of age, the sisters had to find them a life-partner. Sr. Francisca ran the marriage bureau for her Indios, finding them husbands within the race or outside among the colonists.

The news of a convent school flashed across the country and in no time daughters of the settlers began flocking into Itambacury. To accommodate them a boarding school was necessary and St. Clare's became a complex of Orphanage-cum-day-school-cum-Domestic Science Centre-cum-Boarding School. The growth of the school brought in more and more colonists who changed the landscape and wiped out all traces of a flourishing woodland life. The Xavantos are the lucky ones among the various tribes that inhabited Brazil, for their name is perpetuated by the cool drink XAVANTOS, though it has nothing to do with the local beer distilled by Fr. Seraphino's Indios.

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<sup>37</sup> 11.07.1912: Seraphina's Let. to the Director of the Shipping Line, Fasc. 43.

*"After Bernardina's unexpected and premature death no one can move from Itambacury. And I'm worried about the new group, for I ought to take care of their health..."*<sup>42</sup>

The premature death of Bernardina brought home to Seraphina an essential qualification, besides genuine disposition, required for the missionaries, namely health of body sound enough to face the inevitable hardships, alien food, climate. She prayed to the dear departed to *"obtain missionary vocation for those who are not inspired and health for those volunteers who lack it".\**

### Diamantina: The Cradle of the Brazilian Mission

*"The mission in Brazil gets on well : virgin forests, savages that have never heard of religion, hardships; but the sisters are venerated as heavenly visions. The Cardinal of Rio was generous with gratitude and admiration, we being the first Italian and the first Franciscan sisters to devote themselves to the natives and to the offspring of the African race, despite the fear of a brutal raid."*<sup>43</sup>

In October 1908, Cardinal Arcoverde of Rio de Janeiro and Archbishop Joachim of Diamantina paid a visit to the abbey with their usual request for missionaries. Archbishop Joachim wanted seven sisters to run the civil hospital in his metropolis. *"To tell you truth we are teachers not a nursing Order; but we have a goodwill that conquers all obstacles"*.<sup>44</sup> Volunteers enrolled themselves but as the date of embarkation drew near, a host of obstacles came their way. The Shipping Company either postponed the voyage or changed the route; one of the

42. 17.01.1910: M. Seraphina's Let. to the Chairman of the S. Assembly, Fasc. 41.

\* 03.01.1910: Seraphina's Let. to Fr. Joseph of Castrogiovanni Fasc. 41 p. 17

43. 02.12.1907: M. Seraphina's Let. to the Minister General, Scr. 38 p. 40-41

44. 21.08.1916: M. Seraphina's Let. to the Director of the Hospital, Rome, Rome AGCFM-b.40,p.41

group caught a bad flu while another died of it; a third one could not obtain parents' permission to leave for Brazil. But Seraphina was not disheartened by these hindrances; she saw in them the living hand of God :

*"It seems that this mission will be doing an immense good, because since December there is a lot of trouble, obstacles rising in number..."*<sup>45</sup>

Finally on May 20, 1909, the four sisters - Clara, Lucia, Scholastica and Lorenzina sailed on the "Argentina". Seraphina wanted them to go to Itambacury, not only to pay their respects to the Visitor and to learn Portuguese, but also to pick up a few tips on the mission, which only Bernardina could provide them. Among the four, only two had some basic health care training and Seraphina wanted the other two to remain at Itambacury; but she left it to the will of the Archbishop to decide the members of the new community. Nevertheless, she insisted that the sisters should be given a house of their own or a wing in the hospital for their permanent use. With the humiliating experience of her daughters in India, she did not want her sisters to be shuttled about according to the whims of anyone. Moreover, Seraphina did not like the Agreement sent by the new Visitor, Sr. Lorenzina. She drafted one as "Jesus had inspired her" and sent it in a French translation to the Administrator of the hospital and to the Archbishop who approved it.

The sisters' life in simplicity and poverty began attracting teenagers wishing to offer themselves in service to their brethren. In Bernardina's death Seraphina had seen the flowering of the Brazilian mission and the requests for entry into religion confirmed her faith. She instructed Sr. Lorenzina

45. 03.05.1909: M. Seraphina's Let. to the Archbishop of Diamantina, Fasc. 41.

to open a novitiate at Diamantina and sent her the *Regulations for Postulants and Novices*. With Italy in the thick of World War I, sending sisters equipped for formation, was out of question. Moreover, it was difficult finding volunteers for the mission. The death of Sr. Bernardina in Brazil and Sr. Lorenzina in India had dampened the spirit of the promising members.

*"Many have vocations but lack health or brain or formation. A few more years and everything will be all right. The Church had lain in the catacomb for three centuries... Have courage".<sup>46</sup>*

The eleven sisters working in three houses had to share the responsibility of sparing a member or two for the religious training of the future members of the Institute, realizing "that the formation of the novitiate was more important than the boarding school".<sup>47</sup> Not to overburden them with work Seraphina asked them to take kitchen hands and housemaids in the convents where helpers were not employed. Though Circular Letter 17, dated March 11, 1904 had stated, "Domestic helpers are indispensable in each house as we do not have lay-sisters", the sisters had been managing without even a charwoman, hard pressed as they were for finances. Seraphina warned them not to "kill themselves with work" and to take care of their health.

In 1913, the Holy See granted them permission to open a novitiate at Diamantina and on the feast of the Seraphic Father in 1915 the investiture of two Brazilian postulants was held. The novices had to wait a few more years before they could have daily Mass in the novitiate chapel. Seraphina, aghast at the news of the novices going out to the hospital every morning for the Eucharistic services, requested the Archbishop to

46. 21.01.1914: M. Seraphina's Let. to Sr. Anne, Fasc. 41.

47. 02.05.1915: M. Seraphina's Let. to Sr. Lorenzina, Fasc. 41.

provide Mass for them in the novitiate chapel, so that they did not have to violate the rule of enclosure. Diamantina remained the nucleus of the Brazilian mission, till 1949, when the novitiate was transferred to the metropolitan city of Belo Horizonte.

## The Woodland of Conceicao

*"The bishop of Diamantina has requested me to send some sisters for Conceicao. So far no sisters have penetrated that woodland. The poor people walk days and days to reach the convent. And as they enter the convent, they kneel down and kiss the ground. There is a great scarcity of priests and they write about touching episodes"...<sup>48</sup>*

Towards the end of 1908, Archbishop Joachim of Diamantina had sent a cheque for £1800 along with a request to Mother Seraphina to open a house at Conceicao. But vocations to the mission had become a rarity. Though right from the initial stages of formation Seraphina had tried to give missionary orientation to the candidates and novices she could now fan the flame of evangelization only in a select few. Besides, those who showed vocation lacked the health to brave the long voyage, the inclement weather and the life style of a foreign land. In her despair Seraphina turned to the foundress of the mission :

*"Oh my Bernardina, obtain missionary vocations to those who do not have it and health to those who are in need of it...."<sup>49</sup>*

The amount sent by the Archbishop took a long time to reach the abbey. Meanwhile Seraphina had scraped up enough money to pay the fare of four sisters to Rio. She requested Fr. Joseph, the mission superior at Rio de Janeiro, to find the means to

48. 23.12.1907: M. Seraphina's Let. to a Cardinal, Fasc. 69.

49. 03.01.1910: M. Seraphina's Let. to Fr. Joseph of Rio de Janeiro, Fasc. 41.

send them from the port to Conceicao. On March 3, 1910, sisters Virginia, Elisabetta, Cristina and Rosa boarded the steamer "Colombin" and sailed for Rio. On their arrival at the mission, the boarding school and orphanage were opened on April 16, 1910.

### Fresh Sorrow in the Mission

The sisters' happiness over the first investiture ceremony in Minas Gerais, was soon clouded by the death of Sr. Clara, who fell ill at Itambacury. They had taken her to Rio for treatment but the journey was too exhausting for the patient. The doctors could do nothing for her as she lay breathing her last in the strange city. Unable to pay the fare for the transportation of her body, the sisters buried her at Rio de Janeiro. Fr. Joseph, their long-time friend, had assisted Sr. Clara in her last hours. Her death on December 18, 1915 frightened the few sisters who were waiting for the end of the war to cross the seas to the West and the East. She was followed by the novice, Beatriz of St. Clare, who passed away in the prime of her youth on February 7, 1917, strengthening the foundation of the mission along with Bernardina and Clara.

### Reading the Signs of Time

*"The very moment the awful news reached me, my heart flew down there eager to open the doors of paradise to the dead and to offer a refuge to the survivors. But alas! News reached us late, cut off as we are by snow and ice in this hermitage of Badia... I have already written to the Bishops of Messina and Mileto, as well as to the Generalate of the Friars Minor, informing them that we are ready to accept 12 girls. The Prefect of Forli has asked us if we could*

*accommodate some refugees. In accordance with the directives of our Bishop we are preparing some shelter for them."*<sup>50</sup>

Seraphina knew how to read the signs of the times and to rise to any occasion. The Romagnese Province had a fair share of destitute children whose families were left impoverished by the political havoc wrought by the Republicans in the South and the Piedmontese in the North, besides the French troops that over ran Central and Northern Italy. Seraphina's heart not only melted at the sight of innocent children but also she did all in her power to bring them relief.

*"I am not daunted by the penury: rather I'm spontaneously drawn to give priority to the poverty-stricken and the forsaken. To accept a good number of abandoned children is just to widen the circle of my charity."*<sup>51</sup>

She would exhort her sisters: "You should always see the face of Jesus Christ in the poor and give alms to Him". Seraphina had great love for the poor and suffering; no one who knocked at the convent gate had to return empty handed. When she could not give them much, she aided them with words of kindness, comfort and encouragement. She wanted everyone around her to be happy...<sup>52</sup> When it was a question of helping out destitute pupils, Seraphina's heart knew no bounds. Recommending two absolutely needy orphans to the charity of a priest, Seraphina writes:

*"Jesus will reward you a hundred-fold in this life and the next. I just cannot explain the I experience whenever I help out a poor child. The school for the poor is doing well. On feast days the number goes up to 130. Oh that I could*

50. 13.01.1909: Let. to Pope Pius X, Fasc. XLIV

51. 12.03.1897: Let. to Don Agostino Bandini, Fasc. XXXVII

52. Sr. Michelina Donini's sworn Testimony.

*close the boarding school for the young ladies and the day school for the well to do, and devote myself to the daughters of the proletariat! I leave it to the will of Jesus..."*

(Fasc. LXXII)

## A Burning Concern for the Underprivileged

*"I'm ready to render all the services befitting our religious state, even to do the domestic chores in order to spare whatever we can for the hospital... I wish to be of use to the clinic and to the girl child in that town. My sole desire is to be able to do the impossible for the benefit of the poor."*<sup>53</sup>

The care of the orphans was not among the original objectives of the Institute, but with the earthquake of Messina in 1908, it became a regular feature. She loved the under-privileged and the down-trodden with a special love, but the orphans were her first choice. The term 'orphan' was the password to open the floodgates of her heart.

On December 28, 1908 many a town in Calabria and Messina was raised to the ground by a violent earth quake. She wrote to Mgr. Bressan, to the Bishop's of Messina and Mileto, offering her sisters and convents to tend the unfortunate victims. She even volunteered to provide for twelve orphans at the abbey.

*"I have consecrated my body and soul for the well-being of the youth, the orphans, the daughters of the working class, for the missions in foreign lands. I wish to alleviate every pain, wipe away every drop of tears."*<sup>54</sup>

Quixotic in her venture to take in orphan girls Seraphina had not counted the cost of feeding, clothing and educating them, forgetting the fact that Bishop Polloni would have to feed

53. 26.09.1899: Let. to the Sec. of the Cesenatico Hospital, Fasc. LXIII (b)  
54. 21.03.1906: Let. to Camilla Marchese, Fasc. XLVII

them out of his own bounty. In Seraphina's eyes, Polloni was the unfailing hand of Providence that fed, clothed and educated her poor postulants and novices, paid the hospital bills of her sick sisters and met the initial expenses of her missionaries.<sup>55</sup>

Seraphina had sought the advice of Fr. Brunelli - the consultant to the Sacred Congregation - who happened to be at the abbey when the news of disaster reached her. He wrote to her on January 6, 1909 :

*"I do not disapprove of your plan of accepting ten or twelve unfortunate orphans of Sicily and Calabria. Who knows if God who makes use of weak instruments to work prodigies, will not make this humble beginning a prelude to a full fledged orphanage!"*

Fr. Brunelli's prophecy came true six years later when besides the earth-quake of Marsica on January 13, 1915 the First World War churned out numerous orphans and destitute. By Jan. 1915, there were over 2000 orphans to be distributed among Religious Families and Charitable Associations. To Seraphina sheltering the homeless and the parentless was her prime duty, however unrealistic she might have sounded to her contemporaries. With her infinite faith in Providence, Seraphina offered the free services of her sisters. She wrote not only to ecclesiastical authorities but also to the civil authorities including Col. Verdi of Queen Helen's Aid Society, to find them a house in Rome to care for the orphans. Ever since the disaster of Messina Seraphina had wanted a house in the metropolis to be of immediate help to the victims of future calamities.

Seraphina did not wait to be contacted by the Rescue and Rehabilitation Team. As soon as she heard of the earthquake, she "prayed to Jesus to work a miracle and to provide for the

55. 27.01.1909: Seraphina's Let. to a priest. Fasc. 72.



victims". From her sick bed she cajoled and urged each community to make room for at least two hapless children. Little did she realize that 'two' will become a 'score' within a year. Seraphina wrote to both Archbishop Sily, the director of relief fund at the Vatican and Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, Secretary of State, informing them of her readiness to give free shelter to fifteen orphans.

*"As soon as I came to know about the unheard of disaster, I longed to be of help to the living and the dead. Hearing that a signature campaign for sheltering the unfortunate orphans is already being held, I hasten to beg Your Eminence to enlist also the Missionaries of the Blessed Sacrament among the volunteers. Right now I am ready to take 15 children free, in honour of the Mysteries of the Rosary and in the name of Pope Benedict XV. Once they are well placed, perhaps I might be able to take more children... I offer all that we have, whatever be the sacrifice, to the benefit of the poor ones struck by this colossal calamity and to assuage the pain of the Holy Father..."<sup>56</sup>*

The graphic portrayal of the earthquake scene in one of her letters reveals how Seraphina could not only empathize with people in the throes of suffering but also arouse the emotive powers in others. She flashes kaleidoscopic images of the catastrophe before Sr. Beniamina in order to alleviate her grief for her dear departed:

*"Just think, dearest Beniamina, you have enjoyed your dear ones for all these years, a grace not granted to many others. In your thoughts fly to that devastated region in Marsica.*

56. 21.05.1915: Seraphina's Let. to Card Gasparri: Fasc. 36

*Look at those fifty villages razed to the ground. Hear the lament of those widows in search of their husbands. Harken to the cries of the children looking for their mothers. Listen to the heart-rending groans of the injured. Walk along the roads lined with corpses and prowling dogs. Watch the people fleeing for their lives but are being swallowed by the earth into its crater. People, towns and possessions vanished in the twinkling of an eye! The survivors half-naked and their homes buried in the snow! O my beloved daughter, if you can compare your loss to the terrible tragedy of those unfortunate Marsicans, you'll be able to find great solace in your grief."<sup>57</sup>*

Seraphina urged the sisters to plead and beg all men of goodwill to come to the rescue of the roofless. She had abolished alms-seeking in the Congregation, but when the orphanages sprouted, she did not hesitate to take the begging bowl and stretch it to the affluent to come to the rescue of those reduced to the humiliation of living on the fringes of society. She promised them a hundred-fold from the Divine Alms-giver if they fed and clothed her orphans.

### In the Casualty Ward

*"Though I am calm and resigned, I cannot write for the anguish of war. Before me rises the heart-rending scene of the families and the poor young men dying in the field".<sup>58</sup>*

The First World War again revolutionized the apostolate of the CFMSS, upgrading the care of the sick to an equal footing with the education of the youth. With the tide of war surging high every month, the sisters at Trieste had to be evacuated

57. 09.02.1915: Seraphina's Let. to Sr. Beniamina Ser. 46, p.16-17.

58. 23.05.1915: Seraphina's Letter to the Min. General Fasc. 45

and the convent at Valle d'Istria closed down. Though the majority of sisters were not professional nurses, they began tending the wounded in ten makeshift hospitals : five at Ravenna, one at Foligno, another at Bologna and three in Rome.

*"We are certainly not nurses and personally I'm not for medical profession. The sisters make a lot of sacrifice to serve in the hospitals. Since it is a temporary affair who can refuse to do the compassionate duty of Tobias in the face of this global sepulchre?"*<sup>59</sup>

There was no article to guide the sisters, for the Constitutions were finally revised in 1913 and approved two years later. Seraphina sent them with the admonition :

*"Sanctify yourself and then the others. Have great love for the wounded. As you enter the ward, greet their Guardian Angels beseeching them to speak for you to the maimed and dying."*<sup>60</sup>

She encouraged the sisters to make each one's contribution to relieve the universal sufferings, either by personal ministrations to the victims or by sparing a member or two by shouldering, in addition to her own, the duty of others:

*"I do not know where to look for personnel for the hospitals. On the other hand, we cannot refuse such acts of mercy. Therefore, everyone should try to shoulder the work of two persons, thus sparing a sister each for tending the injured. The hardships are only for a while but the charity we show to the wounded will produce lasting fruits to the Institute."*

59. 21.12.1916: Seraphina's Let. to Abbot Arcangelo Lolli, Fasc. 42.

60. Testimony of M. Agatha, Roma, AGCFM - Doc. I, p. 25-28

*There are Congregations that have closed down their convents in order to offer their services for the bleeding soldiers... The war still rages on and the whole world has become a sepulchre."*<sup>61</sup>

Seraphina continued to encourage the nursing staff serving in the various hospitals to patiently bear with their additional burden due to shortage of assistants.

*"If I am responsible for this new form of martyrdom in opening medical care centres, it is exclusively for the good of the Institute and for the young sisters who will be there, when we older members are no more alive. But I am sure that every religious has to undergo privations and hardships in order to gain some lasting benefits. It will be beneficial for ever."*<sup>62</sup>

On January 16, 1915, she wrote to Pope Benedict XV :

*"Holy Father, for the dead our suffrages of prayer and acts of expiation; for the living we place at Your Holiness' service all that we have - persons, convents and other resources - to be disposed of as your own... We shall be happy if we are allowed to wipe a teardrop; and we are ready to lay down our life to mitigate pain and suffering"*.

### Prayer Missile:

Seraphina was not a general who lives a happy-go-lucky life while the soldiers sweat blood in the front line. If her daughters were assisting the wounded and dying in the barracks, she sat before the Blessed Sacrament imploring the Divine Majesty to

61. 31.12.1916: Seraphina's Let. to the Sisters of Cesenatico, Fasc. 18.

62. 30.12.1916: Let. to Sr. Orsolina Fasc. 18'

move the hearts of the rulers to put an end to the war. She had the Blessed Sacrament exposed day and night and the novices joining her in hour-long adoration and acts of expiation to beseech the Almighty to bring the raging war to an end. By the middle of 1916 she was completely bed-ridden; but she would open the little window of her room facing the altar and recommend everyone to the Divine Prisoner: her daughters far and near, the growing number of orphans depending solely on Providence, the soldiers bleeding in the battleground, the souls of the dying and the dead, the families devastated by the ravaging war, the conquered and the conquering nations. Unable to rise from her bed, she made Catherine write a letter to all the sisters asking them to have a special Eucharistic Day to avert the scourge of war :

“Mother wishes that Jesus be adored by us day and night. Through this means she has thought of invoking solace and peace for our times so rife with pain and grief. May the peace that surpasses every sense penetrate the hearts of the Rulers and impel them to terminate the appalling scourge that lacerates the nations!. For this very purpose, so noble and so ardently longed for by the war-weary men groaning in the battle field, our Mother, as I have already said, has decided to fix a day of special celebration every month”.<sup>63</sup>

When the Constitution was written, medical care was not foreseen as a possible field of the apostolate of the CFMSS. But in the missions basic knowledge of medicine was imperative and professional nurses had to be provided, at least one for each house. In Italy, the care of the sick was looked upon as an act of mercy and concessions were granted to individual

63. 31.03.1917: Cir. Let. dictated to Catherine Farolfi

sisters to tend the sick in private homes. Seraphina had hoped that the war would soon come to an end and that her daughters would be back in the schools carrying on their normal apostolate. However the war opened another avenue to the Clares of the Blessed Sacrament namely, medical care as a regular apostolate of the Institute, fulfilling again Brunelli's prophecy of January 6, 1909:

“The Lord has made me touch with my own hands what I could hardly believe before. If I'm not mistaken, there wafts a breeze of sanctity at the Badia, binding everyone into one heart and one soul. I am fully convinced in the opinion I formed on the first day of my stay at the abbey, that the Institute of the Franciscan Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament is the work of God and that it cannot but prosper and produce abundant fruit”.

## CHAPTER IX

### *The Passover*

"Every time I have been at Badia, I felt I am in touch with persons truly extraordinary, and I thank the Lord for having showered the treasures of His graces upon this little twig of the great Seraphic Tree. That Holy joy, that full harmony, that earnest fervour with which your daughters are enraptured, and that self-same sentiment that animates everyone, are all a fresh revelation of the salutary, saintly work the Lord has been pleasantly accomplishing through you. Be at rest, Mother, and be assured that this tiny shoot will soon become a great tree. What a joy will it be to see once again many of your daughters, occupying prominent seats in Paradise for having marched under the seraphic banner."<sup>1</sup>

July 1916 found Seraphina trudging along the Tuscan roads towards the abbey. She had completed the last of her pastoral visits. She was completely worn out by the time she reached Bertinoro after visiting the houses along the route from Rome to the abbey. Yet she set to work keeping everything in order and instructing Catherine, the Assistant General, how to manage the Institute without her. She had led a hectic life in spite of her frail constitution. Even when confined to bed or isolation she had kept a steady correspondence with everyone concerned, either about the Institute as a whole or about a particular convent. All her energy was used up for the spiritual and material good of the Institute and the actualization of its aims; now it was time to say with her Father, "*I have done my part; let Christ teach you yours*". (2C : 214/LM.XIV:3)

As a neo-professed Seraphina had written the Rules and Regulations for the Boarding School, the Day-School and the Staff. The Constitutions of Forli and Palagano were drawn up before she was 28 years old. As the foundress of a new congregation, she had compiled the Rules and Regulations for the Postulants, Novices and Juniors, besides the Constitutions and the Practical Guide. The faculties of her heart and mind as well as prolonged adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, various acts of penance and minute observation of what was written down, contributed to a great extent to the richness and depth of her writings. She had fought a valiant fight to have some of the articles approved : the abolition of alms-seeking and the age old classification of sisters according to the social status, the concession or exemption from dowry given to deserving candidates, the recitation of the Divine Office, the dependence on the Order of Friars Minor and other novelties springing from her progressive ideas.

By 1917, the Clares of the Blessed Sacrament had opened forty convents; 34 in Italy, 3 in India and 3 in Brazil. Six out of these had to be closed down due to unavoidable circumstances : 4 in Italy and 2 in India. As if to compensate for the closure of these six, two refugee centres and ten war hospitals were opened to them during World War I.

The opening of each convent or new apostolate like orphanages and hospitals, had demanded Seraphina's personal attention : letters to the religious and civil authorities in the respective locality for detailed information about the needs of the people, the nature of the apostolate, the means of sustenance for the sisters, the availability of Friars Minor for their spiritual needs and the like. She had invariably accompanied the pioneers to most of the foundations and had stayed with them a month or two to get things moving.

1. 04.09.1913: Fr. Joseph Brunelli's Let. to Mother Seraphina, Roma, AGCFM-b. Doc. 16, p.63

In the eyes of the world Seraphina had done a lot and she could die in peace, happy and content : she had founded and set an Institute on a sure footing ; in Italy it was expanding; the Brazilian mission had a rosy future ; and though the Indian mission was still sailing in troubled waters, the shore was not far away. The Institute as well as its Constitution, was approved by the Holy See and in her own words, she "had the comfort of finding the peace of the Lord in every convent and the complete satisfaction of those who came in contact with her sisters."<sup>2</sup> But in her eyes, she had done nothing. In all her writings there is no word of self-praise or self-righteousness; her sole preoccupation being to please God by doing His will. All that she cared about was to offer herself as a victim to God in order to obtain the conversion of sinners; and God sent her suffering in abundance : chronic illness, frequent spells of darkness and aridity of soul, disheartening defection of certain sisters, unforeseen pressures to close down a few houses, accusations and condemnations by high-ranking personages, lack of fervour among the sisters and uncertainties and anxieties about her own spiritual progress. The worst sting came from her own sisters who looked askance at her intimate friendship with Bishop Polloni, whom she addressed as "the true founder" of her Institute.

Seraphina was in the habit of consulting Bishop Polloni in all matters regarding the Institute; in the drafting and revision of the Constitutions, in opening new convents or closing a house where their apostolate was being stifled by unexpected opposition. In her letters to the sisters, there was invariably a quotation from or reference to his homilies. Occasionally she sent them his pastorals. It was too much for the sisters who resented the Mother General's familiarity with the Bishop.

2. 12.08.1915: Let. 45 to Pope Benedict XV, Fasc. 44.

The clergy of Bertinoro on their part, added fuel to the fire. They commented that the Bishop should not be occupied so much with a religious community; giving talks to the novices, conferences to the sisters, teaching catechism to the students, spending a lot of time with the Mother General either listening to her long confessions or answering her lengthy epistles. Very soon the rumours reached the Bishop's ears and he curtailed his visit to the abbey. Seraphina was aghast at the attitudinal change in her beloved Pastor. He was no more the ever obliging friend whom she had relied on for so long; he had become haughty and detached, cold and aloof. She turned to the tabernacle and poured out her grief : "Why have you brought me to Bertinoro to give pain to the one whom I love as you alone know?" And the poor Lord had to wipe her tears, put an end to the gossip and give her old friend back to her - though all in His own time.

### Long Years of Illness:

Within three years of her entry into the religious life, Seraphina had fallen a prey to recurring attacks of asthma and tuberculosis. In Forli's oppressive humid weather her lungs longed for the pine-scented fresh air of places like her native town Tossignano. Any little exertion, the minimal exposure to the biting cold or to sweltering heat, drove her to agonizing days in bed. Wheezing chest, racking coughs, bloodied spittle, long periods of isolation, longer stay at some hill resorts or hot springs or at the beach to rejuvenate her weakened respiratory system, became a regular feature of the 41 years of her "active" life. During her quarantine her harrowing physical suffering, paled in comparison with her spiritual anguish in being deprived of the food for her soul namely, the opportunity to participate in the Eucharistic Service or Holy Hour, or to partake of Holy Communion.

The long period of rest and inactivity was sheer agony to an energetic person like Seraphina. It brought more pangs and torments than cure. She longed to be up and about in her eagerness to pursue her cherished educational goals, to open more tabernacles to the Eucharistic Lord, to reach out to the destitute and to alleviate the misery of the suffering. Occasionally she would reveal her anxiety to her co-sisters apologizing for her inability to do anything for the Institute. During such excruciating pain, Seraphina was frequently assailed by spells of spiritual aridity, doubts about her call to the Tertiaries of St. Elizabeth, the near certainty about her ill health as proof of her misguided vocation, and above all, by the temptation to leave Forli for some other Congregations. However, she had the humility to bare her soul to her spiritual directors, especially to Fr. Bernardino who continued to guide her during his tenure of office as Minister General of the Order and even later.

“My daughter, I assure you that the state of your soul right now is one of suffering willed and ordained by God to purify you, to make you humble and patient: a state so disgusting to you, but so much pleasing to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Be brave, my daughter! Make frequent acts of submission to the holy will of God. Throw yourself totally on His mercy. Do not focus on yourself, but gaze upon Jesus agonizing in the garden, desolate on the Cross and unite your sufferings to his Passion. In spite of all the revulsion you feel, despite your frail health, continue doing all possible good to your sisters and children, and eschew making blunders.”<sup>3</sup>

Seraphina's tremendous goodwill was a source of wonder and surprise to the sisters. Despite the recurrent bout of illness, she visited the various communities, even the distant one at

3. 15.03.1891: Fr. Bernardino's Let. to Seraphina, Roma AGCFM – b. Doc. II

Trieste. Though overcome with fatigue after the frequent trips to Rome in connection with the approbation of the Constitutions, she would sit up late at night to write to prominent patrons among the ecclesiastical or civil hierarchy for the pressing needs of the Institute at home or abroad. The set back to the Indian mission, the death of Sr. Bernardina in Brazil and of Sr. Lorenzina in India, gnawed at her anguished heart. Yet nothing deterred her from launching out into medical care among the casualties of the First World War, or to request the communities to open their doors to the children orphaned by natural calamities like the earth-quakes of Messina in 1909 or Marsica in 1915, or by man-made catastrophe like the World War.

February 1916, saw Seraphina in Rome for the last time. On her return to Bertinoro, she took to her bed spending months in inconceivable pain, interior struggle and bitter spiritual anguish. In October 1916, Seraphina's condition became worse as the racking fever, the incessant cough and the steady swelling, gave no signs of abatement. Intense was her anguish at her inability to do anything further for the others or for herself. As her life drew to its close, she was assailed not only by doubts about God's will but also by harrowing torments about her inability to do whatever she had hoped to have done for the cultural and religious formation of the sisters. She was anxious about the safety and future of the houses in the war zones, the spiritual welfare of the sisters tending the wounded in the army hospitals, and above all, about the missionaries, news about whom was scanty and far between. Nothing reveals better her state of soul than her letter to Pope Benedict XV :

*“Most Holy Father, pray for me and tell Jesus to show me His ways. I want nothing but Him alone. I am going through Purgatory not knowing what He wants. In the*

*morning I see a door opening; but in the evening it closes suddenly and my days have become a steady succession of these illusions".<sup>4</sup>*

The Eucharistic Lord had always been her unfailing refuge in all her troubles. But now she could not join the novices for the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament exposed all through the day and late into the night. She lay on a pile of pillows and cushions; her swollen body racked by spasmodic pains and violent coughs; her soul gripped in agonizing throes of doubts and fears. She had a little window opened in the wall of her cell through which she could greet the Lord of the altar.

That she was converting her bed of Calvary into the mount of Tabor is attested by her own sister Catherine :

*"Alone with Him in her lonely cell, in those indescribable moments of intimate union with him, before that unbeguiling light, she has seen that we have not done what we ought to have done to propagate the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and to earn us the beautiful title of the Clares of the Blessed Sacrament. How many..., how many things to be corrected ...to be activated ...to get going...Jesus has revealed them to her in those intimate moments...Matters that will be made known and communicated to us later on..."<sup>5</sup>*

Catherine informed everyone - from the Pope to their regular benefactors - of the gravity of Seraphina's illness. Sisters came to comfort and console the dying Mother; but they went back

4. 19.01.1916: Seraphina's Let. (59) to Pope Benedict XV, Fasc. 63.
- 19.04.1916: Seraphina's Let. (55) to Pope Benedict XV, Fasc. 44.
- 16.04.1916: Seraphina's Let. (47) to the Minister General, Fasc. 45.
5. 31.03.1917: Circular Letter written by Catherine.

strengthened by her exhortations and edified by her heroic suffering. True to her norm of suffering in silence, Seraphina hid from everyone the depth of her physical and moral suffering. She would ask the sisters pardon for her omissions and deficiencies in governing the Institute and exhort them to have great love for the Eucharist, the desire to contemplate Him in eternal glory, to propagate the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and to love and spread the devotion to the Immaculate Virgin. Her parting words were:

*"We shall meet in Paradise. Pray for me when you hear about my death. I count on your suffrages. Pardon me if I have overlooked what I ought to have done. Tell Jesus to forgive me all my sins and to admit me to His eternal glory".*

There flowed a stream of letters from Bishops, Cardinals and the Pope admonishing her to be resigned to the will of God and cheering her up with some glad news about her daughters in their dioceses. Writing on February 14, 1917, Mgr. Joseph Migone, Pope Benedict's Secretary, not only imparted the Apostolic Blessing but gave her also the welcome news that her old friend Card. Julius Tonti - the former Nuncio of Brazil - was nominated Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Religious. He even quoted the remark the Pope had made: "Sr. Seraphina will be happy to hear it". It was a delicate touch of kindness and courtesy. Besides Mgr. Migone, there were scores of notable persons who tried to alleviate her pains by words of encouragement, comfort and consolation.

As weeks passed by Seraphina was tormented by temptations. Before her flashed by all her sins and imperfections: her fits of temper, her indifference to the pursuit

of perfection, her sluggishness in taking decisions affecting the life of the Institute, her delay in obeying, her negligence in giving adequate formation to the sisters; there was no end to the scenes of faults and omissions.

All the good she had done was completely obliterated from her mind : there was no comforting scene of the sacrifices made, of the privations undergone gladly, of the self-denials and abnegation borne cheerfully, or of the acts of reparation and expiation offered in union with the immolated Lamb. Finding herself sinking deeper and deeper into the Slough of Despondency, she asked for pen and paper and scribbled a note to the Pope revealing to His Holiness the sad state of her soul. She charged Catherine to send it to the Pope without reading it and hoping that he would be able to decipher her scrawl. The universal Pastor was quick to answer :

"I gather from your letter dated March 22<sup>nd</sup>, that the Lord still keeps you on the cross. And the telegram I received yesterday announces that the hour has been struck for your resurrection from physical and moral pains. Therefore, right away I wish to personally write to you a word of comfort. But what can that word be? Just this, '*May God's will be done*'. I know that you are well aware of it being the basic keystone for strengthening the edifice of our sanctification. Try, therefore, to repeat this word often, not so much with the lips as with the heart, more in moments of trial than in peace. Then you will surely be able one day to fulfill the function of the Seraphim in heaven, after having borne their name on earth, namely, to give glory and praise to the Divine Entity".

I thank you for your prayers for me and hope that you will continue doing the same. With all my heart I bless you, your sisters, both far and near, and the whole Institute, the direction of which has been entrusted to you.

Yours affectionately in Jesus Christ,  
Benedict P.P. XV,  
Easter Monday 1917.

Pope Benedict XV's autograph bolstered her up spiritually and physically. Seraphina had spent the Holy Week in extreme agony. Yet she joined the liturgical services through her porthole. At her request some sisters had recited the Divine Office by her bed side, holding the breviary before her and letting her eyes follow the verses. By Easter there was a notable change in her condition. The swelling began to subside, hope replaced the month-long anguish and death seemed far away. Though "she could not even hear a word spoken aloud, nor occupy herself with anything at all", she requested Catherine to write to all the sisters to hold a Eucharistic Day to invoke peace on all; on the dying soldiers, on the souls in Purgatory, on the warring nations; and to beseech the Almighty to touch the hearts of the conquered and the conquerors to put an end to the war. Her whole body writhing in pain, her head drooping for want of strength, Seraphina was "glad to continue her role of the victim in order to appease the Divine wrath kindled also by our past negligence in promoting the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament".<sup>6</sup>

"She was ever on the cross, smiling in spite of incredible pains, serene, abandoning herself to the loving embrace of Jesus, happy to suffer for Him, saying that her sufferings

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6. Ibid



were hardly anything at all and wishing that they may increase, provided that she was given enough strength to bear it.”<sup>7</sup>

The spell of euphoria, brought about by the Pope’s benediction, did not last long. New complications began to develop and towards the end of April Seraphina lost her voice completely. Her loving daughters began a novena to her favourite Archangel Michael. On May 8, the feast of the apparition of the Archangel, she regained her voice. She announced the miracle with the words, “Hail Mary!”. Fr. J. Brunelli and Sisters Veronica and Agatha who had spent nearly a week by her bedside, were surprised to hear her resume business talks. She sent Sr. Agatha back to Rome with the words:

*“Go, my daughters. May the Virgin be with you and bless you! Have great love for Mary, our Mother; teach the children to honour her and spread the devotion to Mary. Be zealous in propagating love for the Mysteries, the Holy Communion and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Make the Eucharistic table surrounded by the children. Pray to Jesus to instill in you a deep longing to contemplate Him face to face in the splendour of His glory. O Paradise! We shall all be reunited for ever in Paradise.”*<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, the Commandant at Foligno requested for some sisters to help with the Military hospital there. When the petition came, Seraphina was in protracted agony. Yet she assured Sr. Veronica who was tending her, that the wounded soldiers needed the assistance of the sisters more than herself. Seraphina sent her along with four chosen sisters to Foligno, with the instruction to have great charity for the poor helpless men, to kindle the

7. Sworn testimony of Sr. Imelde Pedrini, the nurse who attended to Mother Seraphina during her last years. Roma, AGCFM – S. Doc. 4; 8, p. 38–58

8. Ibid

love of the Eucharist in every heart and to sanctify themselves first and then the others. The sisters took charge of the casualty ward on May 29.

“On the morning of June 7, her condition worsened. Her whole body was a throbbing mass of searing pain. When Can. Ricci came to visit her, Mother asked him for absolution from all her sins both past and present: sins of omissions and commissions against the vows and the Rule and Constitutions. She begged pardon of all the sisters, those present and absent, far and near. She requested for the strength to gladly bear more pain. During a brief respite from the throes of pain, she asked about the progress of the Institute’s various undertakings, especially the works of mercy among the wounded.”<sup>9</sup>

In the mean time a request for help came from the Army Commander in Rome: a community of sisters to minister to the casualties in the military hospital *Vittorino da Feltre*. Catherine hesitated to accept the offer. For two of the office-bearers of the General Council were already away from the abbey and she could not leave her dying sister alone in order to execute the Commander’s request. Sensing her reluctance Seraphina exclaimed:

*“I do not want my sickness to interrupt the work of the Institute. I would like you to go ahead with the proposed plan”*.<sup>10</sup>

She told Catherine to wire Sr. Veronica back to the Badia. She also named the sisters who would form the new community under the tutelage of Sr. Veronica. Three days later Seraphina sent the select group to *Vittorino da Feltre* with the words:

*“Go, enkindle and carry the love of the Eucharistic Jesus*

9. Ibid

10. Ibid

*to all. Sanctify yourself and then the others, have deep love for all."*

On June 8<sup>th</sup> - ten days before her death - the Commander was glad to receive the news that the Clares would be soon arriving to tend his bleeding soldiers, over a thousand in number. Since October 1916, in the nine bed-ridden months, Seraphina had directed the opening of four convents: Monghidoro, Venafro, San Quirico and Ozieri, and had sent her daughters to tend the wounded in four hospital barracks, thinking of nothing but the glory of God and the good of the souls.

Mid-May through June Seraphina was subject to frequent spells of swooning. In her waking hours, she was assailed by fresh temptations : an aridity of soul that gave her no joy in suffering, an attachment to her daughters that stood in the way of her absorption in God, and an utter bleakness that wiped out all spiritual consolation though she kept repeating, according to the Pope's advice, 'May Your will be done!'. Sister Imelda, her nurse and Mgr. Benedict Censi, her confessor, attested that amidst those dark hours, there was occasional hiatus from her gruesome pains, enabling her a foretaste of the celestial joy. With Catherine in constant attention, she talked of thoughts that occupied her most: her ardent desire to have perfect charity and of contemplating the Beatific vision. She often asked Catherine to pray along with her for forgiveness of her sins.

"Her calm, serene face reflected a soul of martyr and saint. She talked to us of God, of Paradise and of death with an ineffable sweetness and joy....Have I done everything? Is there nothing left to be done? ....How beautiful Paradise is! How sweet to talk of Jesus ! .... I want to die like St. Francis,

like St. Clare. They have promised me that all would be around my bed... I want to die in the study with all the sisters around..."<sup>11</sup>

## June 15, Feast of the Sacred Heart

Seraphina lay gasping for breath, each breath plunging her into fresh waves of pain. Yet her thought was for others. Gently she said : "Poor Catherine, you are going to lose your sister. Cheer up! I recommend to you all the sisters. "Turning to her nursing attendants, Sr. Imelde and Sr. Josephine, she said: "I commit my sister to you. She is really good". Overcome with emotion, Catherine blurted out : "What can we do without you?" Calmly Seraphina replied, "Have no fear. The Lord can choose anyone to do His mission". Then she asked Catherine and Imelde to recite the Divine Office for her. On 16<sup>th</sup>, Canon Ricci was called to her bedside to recite the Prayers for the Dying. Seraphina joined the prayers though her whole body was quivering with red hot pain. On May 13<sup>th</sup>, Bishop Polloni had administered her the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Now, a month later, Canon Ricci was repeating the same prayers. The agonizing day crawled on, punctuated by Seraphina's faint ejaculation, "May His will be done"! Though struggling for breath, she tried to whisper a word or two to cheer up those around her. She had hidden from everyone as far as possible the intensity of her sufferings.

*"I have asked the Lord for two more days just for your sake Catherine...What a joy to see God face to face! To see Our Lady ! O Lord, give me perfect charity, forgiveness of all my sins and the hunger to see you in heaven ..."*

11. Ibid

Sunday, June 17

Seraphina was washed in Lourdes water. She had asked Catherine not to leave her bedside that day. She was joined by Sisters Orsolina and Domenica who had come to pay their respect to the ailing Mother. They kept vigils in turn, giving a much needed rest to the bone-weary sisters Imelde and Josephine, who had been nursing Seraphina for nearly a year, day in and day out.

Seraphina talked to them about the medical care being given to the wounded in the barracks and about the sisters who were making enormous sacrifice at home and abroad because of the war.

*"Poor things! Who knows how sad they will be when they hear of my death. For I love them very much and they too love me and bear with a lot of sufferings! The Lord will help you. You must be calm, for I die peacefully, glad to go to my God in order to be united to Him to whom I have been consecrated since childhood".<sup>12</sup>*

At 2'O clock, Sr. Josephine came to see her patient but was sent back to bed. An hour and a half later came a bleary-eyed Catherine. "What a long night Catherine!", sighed her elder sister. Seraphina caressed her - the last caress Catherine would be receiving from her sister - and sent her back to sleep with the request to pray for God's grace to cheerfully accept if God sent her more sufferings. At 3.45, the watchful Orsolina found Seraphina sad and frightened. At her solicitous request the dying Mother said: "I feel so sad, so weary.... It hurts awfully... I do not feel any joy in suffering... For Heaven's sake pray, pray for me..." Orsolina had to gather all her strength to comfort the desolate soul. She reminded her that the Saviour on the

12. 20.06.1917: Sr. Orsolina's Let. to Sr. Veronica. Roma, AGCFM - b. doc. 21, p.2-3

cross had experienced the abandonment of his Father. Her eyes opened wide in sudden surprise and realization. "You're right...May His will be done...I can't pray, can't recite the rosary... or the Divine Office...May His will be done!" She took Orsolina's hand and squeezing it tightly, kissed it weeping.

It was a tender act, a touching act of love and reconciliation. Orsolina was one of those sisters who had sharply criticized some of the moves Seraphina had made as foundress. In fact, in April 1912 she had sent an anonymous letter to the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Religious complaining against administrative set up at the Badia.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, Seraphina had no rancour against those who did not see eye to eye with her; she nurtured no ill feeling towards those who hurt her in anyway. Whether she was reminded of the old wound or not, we cannot say; the fact remains that Orsolina, in her testimony, alludes twice to Seraphina's kissing her hand before death.<sup>14</sup>

Monday 4 am

Seraphina began sweating profusely towards early dawn. As she needed fresh air, Sr. Orsolina drew the curtains aside and draped a shawl around the patient to protect her from the draught. Then, at the Mother's request, she went to call Sr. Imelde to dry the sweat streaming down her head. Before sending her on her errand, Seraphina had again held her hand and kissed it lovingly. Noticing her head drooping on her shoulder, Sr. Domenica cushioned her arm to support her. She hardly realized that she was holding a lifeless body. Sr. Imelde who entered the room ahead of Sr. Josephine, saw Seraphina closing her eyes. There was not the slightest movement, no agonizing convulsion. Seraphina had quietly followed the Bridegroom to the bridal chamber. Sr. Imelde rang the alarm

13. 13.09.1912: Polloni's Let. to the Cardinal Prefect, Roma, ASCVRR. - Bricinorien - B.70- Terziarie Francescane

14. 20.06.1917: Sr. Orsolina's Let. to Sr. Veronica (see footnote 12)

bells immediately and sent for Mgr. Censi, who had been preparing Seraphina for this great day since October, comforting her in her desolation, soaking her aridity with trusting abandonment to the loving God. He recited the Prayers for the Dead in the cell that was awash with the sighs and tears of the assembled community. Two days later he would be publicly eulogizing her, incurring the censure of his Bishop. Being her confessor, he was the only one who knew her thoroughly and in his eyes Seraphina needed hardly any suffrages.

Soon the little cell was teeming with her daughters who kept coming from all parts of Italy and who vied with each other in having the Mother's body bathed in their tears. Her face communicated to them peace and hope; in fact, it bore no traces of the terrible anguish of body and soul she had been undergoing during the last nine months; rather it radiated an extraordinary serenity and joy. Those who entered the cell with a terrible sense of loss and foreboding, left it with a tranquil mind strengthened by the assurance of her intercession and protection from above.

"Mother did not seem dead at all, but wrapped in ecstasy, radiant with a celestial smile. Her body evoked devotion and reverence. Her face became more and more beautiful as hours passed by. Her limbs were flexible as a child's. Peace and serenity emanated from her face, assuring everyone with the certainty that she was enjoying Paradise.... The people of Bertinoro kept repeating, "A saint is dead".<sup>15</sup>

Telegrams poured in to console the grieving daughters, telling them not to weep but to rejoice with their blessed Mother. "The Holy Father hopes she is in Paradise protecting her daughters who have not lost but gained her" (Card. Gaspari). "Participate

15. Sworn testimony of Sr. Imelde Pedrini, the nurse who attended to Mother Seraphina during her last years. Roma, AGCFM - S. Doc. 4 & 8, p. 38 - 68.

in the bitter grief; rejoice in the blessedness of the chosen soul", (Card. Tonti). "Delighted with the glorification of the saintly mother; weep with the orphaned daughters" (Abbot Lolli). Cardinals and bishops, Minister General and Provincial Superiors, even the Postulator for the Cause of Beatification, sent their condolences, each one assuring the sisters that Seraphina had undergone her Purgatory here on earth, that she was already enjoying heaven as a reward for her zeal, abnegation and fruitful apostolate, that they should not lament for her who is watching over them from above, and that they should abandon themselves to Providence.

### June 20: Solemn Mass for the Dead & Funeral Procession.

The clergy and people of Bertinoro, the friars and the Tertiaries of Forli, students from the abbey and nearby schools of Forlimpopoli, and sisters from the various convents made up the cortege. Borne by her daughters, the revered coffin was brought to the hearse; but the horses refused to move. The coachman whipped and flogged them; the horses did not budge an inch and an exasperated coachman stopped cracking his whip. "Mother does not want to leave the sisters. She wants to rest at the abbey", murmured the mourners. Finally with coaxing and cajoling the horses and pushing the hearse from behind, the procession wound its way up the hillock. There was no one praying for the eternal repose of the dear departed. The oft-repeated exclamation was, "A saint is dead. May she protect us from heaven and save our soldiers"! The people had known of her long hours of adoration and acts of penance and abnegation for peace in the war-torn Europe, her solicitude for the poor soldiers in the front line and her tenderness for the maimed and the orphaned. And so they invoked her protection for their dear ones in the battlefield.

Epigraph Composed by Bishop Polloni

(Placed by the Catafalque)

Under the auspices of the Eucharistic Lord  
Her Institute she founded  
Rapidly it grew bearing copious fruits  
Among the youth, amidst the battle-scarred  
and in lands beyond the seas.

Received into the House of Francis  
She loved to be called Seraphina of Jesus,  
Foretelling her mission singular  
of kindling anew the fiery flame  
of the holy patriarch

Many holy virgins she gathered  
As new olive shoots round the altar;  
By her own model, after the manner of Clare,  
She moulded them in spirit sublime  
of the Founders Seraphic.

Ravaged by long and raging illness  
She made a holocaust of her life to God,  
Yet grieving she did naught for Him.  
With faith in the Communion of Saints,  
She consoled her daughters and blessed them.

As the cortege reached the grave, Mgr. Censi made a short funeral oration. His speech at the Month's Mind earned him the rebuke of Bishop Polloni, "I think you spoke a bit too much". "A day will come when it will be said, I spoke too little", retorted the Rector.

Adieu, O Seraphina!

(Mons. Benedict Censi's Farewell Speech at the grave  
of Mother Seraphina, 20.6.1917)

You are about to be lowered into the grave, O revered body; but that cold slab will not be able to consign you to the oblivion of the tomb. You are entering the realm of death; but you enter it alive. For immortal are your heroic virtues and noble works, of which you were a chosen soul and a marvellous instrument. You slenderest stem, a thousand times have you braved the fury of the tempest. You were never frightened but held your head high, calmly fixing your eyes ever on heaven. And gathering your seeds scattered by the storm, there burst forth a lush garden radiant with aromatic herbs and fragrant flowers, the luxuriant growth of which gladden and delight heaven and earth by their pleasing sight and scent. And now you, in the momentary abandonment of the spirit that had animated you, abide in this precinct where emerge the laurels of suffering, which is considered to be the father of death. You, on the contrary, enter it as the trophy of that suffering which is the father of life. You had a mysterious yearning for this suffering, the exquisite bitterness and sublime sweetness of which you had tasted, till your last breath.

Christ had called you to Calvary in your green years, and you ran to Him like the thirsty deer that pants for the flowing streams. You clung to the Crucified Christ in his divine suffering, holding with one arm to the Cross and extending the other to accomplish the wonderful works of your Institute. And at the end when pain came again to search the fibres of your frail, lacerated body and your human nature recoiled in horror, you cried out the slogan of victory, learnt in the school of Divine

patience: "May God's will be done!" and other similar words which are the sweetest expressions of Christian serenity in anguish. They echo now in this sublime moment, making mournful reverberations in the hearts of your daughters and mine groaning for our bitter loss, and breaking forth into a single sob : "May God's will be done!". But our last adieu is a joyous one. However, permit us, yea, allow us to bid you good-bye with a smile on our lips though tears course down our cheeks.

Hail! O corpse virginal! Hail! After your daily, arduous work in the vineyard of the Lord, you have closed your eyes for a brief rest. Rest in peace, O Seraphina, in this lowly tomb! My sweetest mother and sister will have a thrill of joy in having you lie beside them\* and I rejoice with them over it. I delight in the certainty that soon you'll rise and live in the stupendous works with which God will glorify you and your sepulchre, and we will be returning here, no more in tears of affliction but of alacrity, to kiss your glorious tomb. Hail!

(\*Mother Seraphina was buried in the family tomb of Mons. Censi)

Seraphina had left behind a rich legacy; a regiment of consecrated souls at the service of God and their fellow beings, an authentic example of a life wedded to contemplation in a world of action, a heritage of Franciscan devotions - personal love for the Eucharist, for the Cross, for the Virgin and for the liturgy - and finally, the banner of Franciscan virtues : humility, poverty, simplicity, loyalty to the Church, obedience to the hierarchy and filial reverence to the Pope.

## The Tribute in Life and Death by the Community of Forli

Among the crowd that thronged the cortege of Seraphina, were the Franciscan Tertiaries of Forli, come to pay homage to the one-time "heartless apostate" who "left the poor old sisters in penury and want". Seraphina who loved them all along the "twenty years of martyrdom at Forli", and during the crisis that led to the division and even afterwards, had kept sisterly rapport with her former sisters in religion. As predicted by the Commissary, Fr. Mario Mastacchi, all the youngsters had joined hands with Seraphina, leaving the Forli convent practically a home for the aged members. Even Sr. Placida Albonetti who had held six terms as its superior had left the community to join the rebel group. Without the boarding school or a day school, without its fascinating headmistress who lured young girls into embracing religious state, the community of Forli began to dwindle away.

Cardinal Svampa, his heart still beating with love for his former See, advised the sisters to aggregate themselves to Bertinoro from whom they had separated five years ago. Seraphina rejoiced at the move being made by the cardinal who had thus acknowledged her rectitude and uprightness of character.

His Eminence sent Fr. Bonaventure of Cesena - the much loved mediator that he was - and Fr. Leo Cagnola to persuade the Tertiaries and their Bishop to have the community united to the Clares of the Blessed Sacrament. But Bishop Jaffei would not hear of any aggregation to Bertinoro. He was willing to let the Tertiaries join any congregation but the Clares of Bertinoro. The fathers tried in vain to convince the bishop that the community would die out soon if not grafted to the

flourishing vine of Bertinoro. With the election of Sr. Assunta as superior in 1906, another attempt was made. Still the obstinate stand of Bishop Jaffei stood in its way, obstructing any move towards union. The bishop still held the fort during the third assay in 1910-11. The final try was in 1921; the sisters were too weak to knock down the reinforced barricade put up by the Forli curia. The community was reduced to four feeble aged members and a decision had to be taken sooner than expected. In 1924, they joined the convent at Palagano, the first house opened by Mother Seraphina.

### The Mother Comes Back to Rest at the Abbey

Seraphina's mortal remains rested in the family tomb of the Censi till they were exhumed on November 11, 1936. Catherine too was buried by her sister's side in March 1936. As the coffin was lifted up, the sisters craned forward to have a glimpse of their revered Mother. To quote Sr. Michelina Donini:

"We were aching to see her. The workmen dug into the brickwork and brought out the coffin; its wood was falling apart. Through the misty glass top of the zinc coffin inside, we gazed at her mortal remains. Her head was intact and reclined on the left shoulder, the mouth was half-open, the teeth still in their places, and the flesh still pale - a bit dried though. The hair had fallen off but the silk chaplet was still fresh. And her habit was riddled with holes"<sup>16</sup>.

The zinc plate and the hard glass prevented the sisters from reaching her though many had a mind to break it open and take her in their arms. Placed in a new wooden coffin on November 11, both the Farolfi sisters were carried to their tombs in the newly built mortuary chapel of the Clares, accompanied by her weeping daughters. It was a solemn occasion presided over by the Bishop Gardini of Bertinoro.

16. Sworn testimony of Sr. Michelina Donini Roma, AGCFM - Doc. IV p. 34

Nevertheless, neither the mortuary chapel, nor the abbey could escape the bomb-raids during World War II. The abbey fell burying alive some of its occupants and the mortuary chapel took the remains of the dead as it went down. The fateful day was October 24, 1944. About 300 persons - sisters, novices, some women and children - who had sought shelter in the basement of the abbey, miraculously escaped death, while the German troops who had occupied the ground floor, presented a grim sight. Only two were found alive and unharmed and a third seriously injured, while thirteen of their companions were crushed to death. The entire building was but a heap of ruins; the only things that remained intact were one wall of the chapel and the image of the Mother of Fair Love, much loved and honoured by Seraphina. The Blessed Sacrament, placed earlier on a make-shift altar in the cavern and adored by the sisters and the refugees day and night, continued to guard them throughout the war<sup>17</sup>.

The abbey was rebuilt in the 1950s at the express wish of the Municipal Corporation of Bertinoro that had donated the old edifice with its adjoining lands on March 12, 1948. Seraphina's mortal remains were brought to the chapel on April 12, 1970. After all, the people of Bertinoro had interpreted rightly the strange behaviour of the horses that refused to draw the hearse: Seraphina indeed wanted to be with her daughters.

On May 1, 1968, the Diocesan Court for the Process of Beatification of Mother Seraphina was inaugurated by His Lordship, Joseph Bonacini, Bishop of Bertinoro. It was the golden jubilee year of her death and the seventieth birthday of the Institute, which had grown incredulously in this short period. The Indian mission which had given Seraphina a lot of heart-aches, was flourishing, opening tabernacles in towns and localities where the light of Christ was not yet lit. In Latin

17. See endnote p. 202

America the Clares had spread out to the various parts of Brazil, Boliva and Argentina.

## Catherine Steps into her Sister's Shoes

Catherine was Seraphina's aide-de-camp ever since she joined the convent of Forli in 1875. Even as a postulant she had to shoulder the responsibility of the boarding school, since Seraphina, down with consumption, was obliged to take a long rest away from Forli. Catherine was indispensable to her elder sister as duty or illness often kept her away from St. Francis' School. To seek the help of Fr. Bernardine in writing the Constitutions for Forli, Seraphina used to shuttle to and from Rome, Bologna, Assisi, La Verna or wherever the Minister General happened to be staying. The frequent attack of consumption drove her for long periods to the health resort of Rimini or Bagno or Cesena. During her absence or illness Catherine had to run errands for her, visiting religious or civil or educational authorities. She did most of the field work for Seraphina, gathering required information, waiting long hours for bishops or cardinals to deliver letters of petition, or representing Seraphina at important functions. The cultural and spiritual formation began at home under the tutelage of her elder sister, continued in the convent and Catherine imbibed the spirit and mind of Seraphina, following her ideals at close quarters. No one had grasped better the ideals and aspirations of the Mother than her younger sister; none was better suited to fill the vacuum left by the departed Foundress than the one who was her right hand in the founding and development of the Institute.

On October 14, 1917 Pope Benedict XV called Catherine to Rome and said to her :

"You must be resigned to God's will now : to take the cross He is offering you. I appoint you Mother General for six years,

at the completion of which there will be the Chapter. Usually I like these things to get through the Sacred Congregation; but today I want it this way. You as the Co-foundress will continue your sisters's work".

Six days later, confirming her nomination, the Pope sent his portrait with the following autograph :

"To Sr. Mary Catherine of the Sacred Heart, Mother General of the Franciscans of the Blessed Sacrament, We wholeheartedly impart the Apostolic Benediction, praying that she may always wisely govern the Institute, the direction of which she has inherited from her saintly sister".

Vatican, 20.11.1917

Benedictus P.P. XV.

The sisters hailed with one heart and voice the Pope's nomination of Catherine as their Mother General. Had there been an election, all the votes would have been cast in her favour. She was the obvious candidate, not because she was physically and culturally close to their Mother. Catherine had qualities of heart and mind that inspired their confidence and won her their esteem: good nature, mature, maternal comprehension, unmistakable intuition, solicitude for the Institute and the continued realization of its objectives. Catherine was re-elected in the succeeding Chapters held in October 1923 and September 1931. However, she did not complete her third term, as she passed away on March 9, 1936, on the feast of St. Catherine of Bologna, after governing the Institute for nearly nineteen years.

## Growth of the Institute

Catherine Farolfi continued the missionary endeavours of the Foundress. On April 30, 1925 she sent seven pioneers



to open a house at *Cuevo, Bolivia*. After a hazardous journey across the inhospitable Atlantic ocean, up steep and slippery mule tracks, along dry stream-beds and down deep gorges that fed the Grand Chaco in the monsoon, the sisters reached Cuevo on June 24, 1925, on the feast of St. John Baptist, Cuevo's Patron Saint. As they rode towards the cathedral church, they were mobbed by an over enthusiastic populace : the poncho clad riders spurring on their steeds, excited women asking each other if las hermanas spoke Castillian, the children shouting, "han llegada las hermanas" (The sisters have arrived) - all inching forward to have a better look at the sisters.

In the 1920s, the great majority of the Chiriguani, the Tobas and other tribes were still a primitive race. The natives were just emerging from their sylvan culture and had already begun farming and cattle-rearing. The crowd followed them into the church where the Te Deum was sung and to the mission house - a sprawling hut of straw and clay.

In 1926, the sisters were able to open another mission at Machareti and two years later a third at Santa Rosa, working among the Spaniards and the natives. During the war between Bolivia and Paraguay (1930-35), the newly converted natives fled to the safety of the jungles, thus terminating the sisters' apostolate among them. Another and a much rewarding apostolate was opened to them among the victims of the war: the wounded and dying soldiers as well as destitute and homeless children. The houses at Machareti and Santa Rosa were turned into hospitals and the sisters tended the casualties, rekindling their dormant faith or bringing them back to the bosom of the Church. The house at Machareti was razed to the ground in 1934, but the sisters had the happiness of assisting over 20,000 soldiers, either in healing them physically and spiritually or in letting them see the light of Christ before they closed their

eyes. At Santa Rosa, by the end of the war, they had tended over 7, 500 soldiers. If the war had destroyed their house at Machareti, it opened to them another : the house at Ivu, inaugurated in January 1935.

## Argentina

It was the lot of Mother Eugenia, the third Superior General, to open the Argentinian mission. On January 24, 1937 six sisters left the shores of Italy for Tartagal, their mission station. Violent storms and surging tides in the Atlantic, choking dust-storms from Buenos Aires to Jujuy, torrential rains washing out railway bridges along the route to Tartagal, rafts ferrying passengers and luggage across inundated tracts to Embarcacion: this was the fate that awaited the zealous missionaries who preferred "remote, dangerous" localities to cities choking with the amenities of civilization. On February 23, 1937 they finally reached their destination-Tartagal, a one time veritable paradise of junglemen and venomous serpents. Its dense forests had attracted timber merchants and wood-carvers from all over the world, who turned the landscape into a sprawling growth of wood and zinc. With the discovery of petrol in the early thirties of the twentieth century, Tartagal became a commercial centre for men from every part of the world. There were Russian orthodox, German Lutherans, Protestant sects and atheists, besides the native tribes of Matacos, Tobas, Choriti and the like, who were employed on the railways, or oil rigs, or timber-yards.

In the 1930s, Pedro Jose Roffini, a Spanish immigrant had left a small house, nestling amidst vast fields of tropical shrubs, for an Asilo de Pobres (home for the poor), Sala de Maternidad (Women's Welfare Centre) and a boarding school to perpetuate the memory of his dear wife Luisa Oviedo. The property was

handed over to the sisters. Other benefactors came forward and built for them a school and orphanage. In 1948, the Argentinian government, pleased with the indefatigable zeal and unlimited charity of las hermanas, entrusted to them the District Hospital at Tartagal.

In March 1943, the Clares received a telegram from the Nuncio of Buenos Aires : "A benefactress offers the sisters her villa". The news was as thrilling as it was unexpected. The sisters travelling from Bolivia to Tartagal on horseback over inhospitable terrain in inclement weather, were much in need of a stop-over. And to be offered a house in the heart of the capital was too good to be true! Within a year a school wing was added to the villa and after school hours, the sisters busied themselves looking after the sick and the poor in the barrios as well as in the suburbs of the metropolis.

## Spain

During the Second World War, the houses in Yugoslavia were closed to the Clares of the Blessed Sacrament ; but a few years later, Spain opened its arms to them on August 6, 1965. Rev. M. Pasqualina, the fifth Superior General sent a small team of sisters to Palencia, a town that stands on the River Carrion between Castille and Leon. A plot of land on the campos Goticos in barrio San Juanillo on the outskirts of the city was bought, and the foundation stone for Colegio Santa Clara de Asis laid on April 17, 1966. St. Clare's Boarding School was opened with 19 boarders and 30 day-scholars on January 7, 1967, became a middle school within a few years, and later a high school.

## Guinea-Bissau

The dream of the Foundress to have her daughters working in Africa, was realized on March 21, 1981 when three Brazilians

and an Italian landed in Guinea-Bissau one of the smallest and poorest African countries. It was a Portuguese colony till 1974. Creole is the link language among the natives who speak a number of dialects. People live in thatched mud-houses, and they are constant prey to tropical diseases besides leprosy and tuberculosis. Infant mortality is quite high while schools, hospitals and means of transport are non-existent except in the capital town. Majority of people are animists and have unshaken faith in divination, sorcery, witchcraft, ancestor worship and other cultic rituals of primitive religions. To them ripe old age, a death bewailed by a host of offspring, a hallowed memory cherished by a clan of descendants is the peak of self-realization. Hence, the premature, violent death of Jesus on the cross is looked upon as the most unthinkable stigma a man can have.

(+An abortive attempt at an African Mission was made when a house was opened on March 19, 1935 in Tripoli. It had to be abandoned on June 4, 1936 due to political upheavals.)

Rev. M. Beatriz Pessoa, a Brazilian and the sixth Superior General, is the architect of the African mission, translating Seraphina's dream into a reality. Bolama was selected at the express wish of Bishop Arturo Settimio Ferrazzetta, an Italian Friar Minor, whose swarthy face and beaming smile had endeared him to the Creoles of this one time Portuguese colony. The Bolama mission was officially opened on the Feast of Annunciation in 1981, amidst the chanting of hymns in Creol, Portuguese and Italian, the last rendered by Venetian immigrants. Incidentally, Sr. Maria Jose D'Silva, one of the three Brazilian founding members, is of Guinean origin, her grandparents having immigrated to Brazil some decades ago.

The Guinea-Bissau mission had another happy day, when its second house was opened at Tite on December 8, 1983.

A third community was erected a few years later at Bissaquin. However, the mission of Bolama and Tite were closed down a decade later, and two convents opened in Bissau: one at Bairro Mindara and the other of Gabu. The three houses are nuclei of social uplift projects geared to raise the exploited, penurious people from their socio-economic deprivation, and to sow the seeds of harmony among the tribal folks torn by violent ethnic feuds.

## Romania

With the fall of Ceausescu in 1991, the oppressive communist rule in Romania had come to an end and the few surviving religious appealed to the Italian Major Superiors' Union to come to their aid in grappling with the traumatic post communist era. The Italian Province of the CFMSS jumped on the missionary bandwagon on May 4, 1995. The scene of sisters' activities is Braile in Bucharest - a border town few kilometers away from the river Danube on the west shore of the black sea - seething with unemployed, alcoholic youth and adults, abandoned infants and a rising population of AIDS patients. The sisters try as best as they can to bring hope and solace to a people whose religious practices were suppressed during the 50 years of atheistic regime, and whose babes and children grew up in the infamous "camins" of Ceausescu, confined like sardines in packing boxes.

## Peru

Mother Emmanuela Falleria, the first Indian elected to the office of the Superior General, carried the missionary torch to Peru on March 4, 1999 when an inter-national group of six sisters - an Argentinean, a Bolivian, a Brazilian, two Indians and an Italian - left Rome for Lima. On arrival at Lima, the little group broke in to two and initiated their daring mission

at Pedro Ruiz in Chachapoya - about 24 hours' journey from Lima, the capital city and Huaycan about 2 hours' ride from Lima. Chachapoya is home to the Kechua race, a people with limitless power of endurance, high rate of single parents, unwed mothers and teenagers peddling drugs and sex. When Peru gained Independence from their Spanish conquerors, the nation was left without the know-how of running the government machinery, industry et al, so much so the personal and collective trauma of this wounded people continued to be exploited by the ruthless dictators like Fugimori and mushrooming political parties.

The sisters find it very difficult to make inroads into communities where morality is at an all time low. Women and girls are sexually exploited by kith and kin, children ill-treated by parents or step-parents, wives and husbands changed at will under a Constitution that sanctions concubines. However, the community at Pedro Ruiz wound up their socio-medical service and took up a new mission station at Canta - about 5 hours' journey from Lima, on November 25, 2001.

## Decentralization of the Institute

*"The Institute of the Clarist Franciscan Missionaries of the Blessed Sacrament consists of sisters belonging to the Provinces or other organisms. It is governed by the Mother General with her Council according to the norms of the general Constitutions". (Art. 122 Constitutions 1981)*

In obedience to the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council with regard to the renewal of the Religious Institutes, the Congregations of the Clarist Franciscan Missionaries of the Most Blessed Sacrament held a Special Chapter in May-June 1970. Up to the middle of 1971, the Institute was governed directly by the Mother General and her Council. In accordance

with the norms of the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesiae Sanctae* to establish participatory and consultative bodies on a wider scale, the Plenary Assembly voted for the decentralization of the government on June 12, 1970. Thus the Province of the "Immaculate Conception" (Italy-Spain) and "St. Francis" (India) came into being on May 20, 1971. "Our Lady of Nazareth" (Brazil) was born on July 12, 1971 while the Vice-Province "The Eucharistic Jesus" (Bolivia-Argentina) which saw the light of the day on July 8, 1971 was raised to the status of a Province on July 26, 1976.

Two decades later, the Institute saw the birth of two Vice-provinces: Madre Serafina in North-East Brazil on June 18, 1992 and Santa Clara in Bolivia on July 18, 1992. The Bolivian vice-province became a province on December 30, 1994 and the Brazilian vice-province on February 13, 2001.

In 1994, the Indian province was bifurcated, thus giving birth to St. Clare's Province on June 2, 1994. St. Francis Province had another offshoot, namely Mother Seraphina Vice-Province erected on November 21, 1998.

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### Endnote

#### The Bombing of the Badia: October 24, 1944

In the early 1940s, Bertinoro was not much affected by the Second World War. People anxiously listened to the radio announcing the events as they unrolled: the landing of the Allies in Sicily in 1943, the bombardment of Rome, the fall of Mussolini, the German occupation et al. However, in the

summer of 1943, the Bertinorese began to feel the fury of the war at close quarters. There wasn't a family which didn't have a member serving at the front. As the Allies advanced up North Italy, Rimini, Cesena, Forli and Ravenna became caught up in their pincer movement.

Meanwhile, a detachment of Wehrmacht under General Kesselring, had occupied Bertinoro on October 10. The Germans plundered and looted everything they could lay hands on: orchards, vineyards, poultry, cattle, horses and even able-bodied young men. They confiscated whatever buildings they fancied, be it the seminary, the school, the Bishop's House or the rectory, forcing the occupants out. They captured the youth and deported them Germany to do forced labour in harsh conditions.

"Our old farm house piled with firewood was a safe hideout for many a young man. The tenant sheltered the cows under the projection of our balcony. As days passed by we could hear canons booming and bombers droning closer and closer. We transferred the tabernacle to a room on the ground floor and some of us slept in the basement for fear of bombardment. On October 18, a 100-odd soldiers came asking for accomodation in the convent. We had to accede to their demand. We allotted the officers some beds and the "Corridor of the Mysteries" to the rest of the troops. However they were an orderly sort and left the place the following afternoon. We gave each one a small medal."

"Not only the young men of Bertinoro, but also the evacuees from far and near found a safe refuge in our underground shelter. Rev. Mother Eugenia had left instructions at the gate to welcome everyone who needed a shelter. Among the people sheltered in our grotto were not only the local residents who were ousted

from their home and hearth, but also a young priest along with his kinsfolks, the relatives of Don Vincenzo Pondini, the parish priest, three nuns and a sister of Mons. P Borghesi, who had fled Gatteo on foot before the invaders. This young priest did not know the whereabouts of his father and risking his own life, he would occasionally go out searching for him in the refugee camps in Emilia.

One day while the sisters and the novices were having lunch, suddenly some soldiers entered the refectory. They were fully armed and drunk to boot. We novices were too frightened to move and kept our eyes glued on our plates. We surreptitiously watched their movements as they walked up and down the tables. Some of the sisters ran to the chapel. Sr. Albina who had studied German language knew what they were looking for. She was familiar with some of the German superstitious fears too. Quickly she wrote on the door of the passage leading to the wine-cellar: "Typhus: Beware of Contagion". She pushed into the passage a few lean, pale sisters and made them lie down on mattresses on the floor, while she requested the taller ones to lie by the low door of the cellar. The door was blackened with smoke and hardly visible for the gloom within: a perfect screen for the young men crouched in the cellar. No sooner had Sr. Albina had time to work out her ruse, than the soldiers reached the corridor. But the glaring warning etched on the door about typhus scared the daylights out of them. They took to their heels and ran all the way out of the gate.

Our subterranean life was becoming harsher day by day. We were over 200 persons spending the night in the cavern. We had nothing to eat except pieces of hard-baked bread. We could not venture out as the Nazis had mined the roads and the surrounding countryside. We went without a wash for days at a stretch. A large drum placed at the rear of the grotto served as a receptacle for the chamber pots. The sewage could be

disposed of only at night. And there was an aerial reconnaissance of the town every night at 11 o'clock! Needless to say our sweaters were crawling with lice!

Since October 20<sup>th</sup>, Bertinoro was regularly bombed. One night we heard a loud banging at the gate with fists and kicks. The SS, the dreaded Nazi unit, was at our door demanding to inspect our buildings and grounds! Unlike the earlier troops, they were a menacing lot, arrogant and domineering. They bullied us into silence and ordered us to do their bidding. "Be quiet ! or else, the whole lot of you will be thrown out." To quiet down 200-odd persons was easier said than done. There were infants and children yowling in hunger and cold and the misery of their everyday living cooped up in the cavern. But those bullies required absolute stillness for their sensitive equipment for receiving messages or transmitting enemy location to the headquarters. Though they initially claimed to be Army Medical Corps, they were in fact saboteurs busily turning the roads, even our premises, to a veritable minefield.

Since the dawn of October 24<sup>th</sup>, the number of people seeking safety in our basement rose every hour. Suddenly at about 2 p.m., the sky became overcast and we heard the SS men speak, " Today everything will go kaput". The refugee priest, fearing a massacre, gathered everyone in prayer and gave us absolution. Mother Eugenia and Mother Agatha knelt down on the floor in front of the Blessed Sacrament. Then it happened. The whole Badia shuddered with a violent explosion. Mio Dio! Who can describe that bomb blast ! or the mayhem that followed instantly!

A doctor from the City Hospital and the Manager of the Banco Romagnolo who had dropped in on us a few minutes before the strafing were also in the grotto. The doctor asked

Mother for the list of sisters and requested her to take the roll call. Sr. Michelina did not answer and someone crept upstairs calling her name. Many stood beating their heads against the wall. Even Don Podini was moaning in the corner. Someone groped for the two bed-ridden sisters in the novitiate wing. Surprisingly they were safe and serene. Amidst the infernal flames and exploding mines and the shower of plaster fragments, they saw an old man with a stick who assured them: "Have no fear, you will not be harmed!" The sisters say that it was St. Joseph who had protected them during those appalling moments.

In the grotto thick with dust and smoke, no one was injured, no life was lost, but thirteen Germans lay dead under the ruins of the ancient abbey. We spent the rest of the day and the long night whimpering and whining, fearful of what further havoc the dawn would wreak. My throat was too dry even to pray for God's mercy upon us.

At the day break as Don Podini was offering the Holy Eucharist, we heard people shout: "Sisters, come out! The allies have arrived. The Americans are here to liberate us!" As soon as the Mass was over, we crept out of the cavern. What a frightful scene! The dear old Badia razed to the ground! The SS men lay dead on the floor; tanks whirring up the hillside, motorbikes whizzing by, massive troops advancing up the winding road, soldiers of all colours and races! An American officer came forward to greet us. "What have you done!", Mother cried out. "Unfortunately, such things do happen in warfare", he responded. They gave us boxes of white bread.

We could still hear the droning of bombers, mines exploding here and there, as the war raged on in Forli and in its confines. We salvaged whatever we could from beneath the rubbles, and carried mattresses and tables to the hospital. Fortunately a day

before the bombardment we had found a safe den for the letters and writings of our dear Mother Foundress. We carried the suitcases containing the precious manuscripts of Mother Seraphina and lowered them into the hollow under the trapdoor at the end of the arcade of the guest quarters. Nothing had happened to our cherished possessions.

Sr. Michelina appeared on the third day, distraught and delirious. We had given her up for dead. Being in charge of receiving the refugees, she used to spend most of the time in the quadrangle. When the bomb fell, she was blown off by the blast of air and when she came to herself, she had no veil or wimple but her spectacles were intact. She staggered in crying hysterically. God save us from such a trauma!

The novices - whoever had a house intact and away from the war zone - were sent home, as soon as the buses started plying on the ruined roads. Sisters in small groups were sent to convents in Cesenatico, Ravenna or Bagno. The Mother General and a few sisters and novices stayed at the seminary till Christmas trying to recover the little they could from the ruins of their beloved Badia, before it was ransacked by the vandals. Finally, they left for Rome. It took them nine days to reach the capital, resting in concentration camps, eating out the soldiers' rations en route".

[Compiled from S. Ignazia Carta's write-up, "*Ricordi Bellici*", October 24, 1944, ore 14.30, Enzo Ronchi: Monsignor Piersante Borghesi, p. 171 - 176, Bertinoro e la sua Badia nei Secoli, p. 83 - 85.]

## A Survivor Writes\*

Reverend Sisters of Bertinoro Convent,

I am an old medical officer maimed during the strafing of your convent. I am the person extricated from beneath the debris by some Italians and two German soldiers. They had struggled the whole night to pull me out of the wreckage. The convent was bombarded at about 3 p.m. and from 3 in the afternoon of October 24 to 5 O'clock in the following morning, I was trapped under the rubbles. An agony of 14 hours before I was pulled out of the debris. You Rev. sisters, you tended my wounds, covered me with warm blankets and refreshed me with a glass of liqueur as I lay on a stretcher. I still have the medal of Our Lady which you gave me as a safe-guard during my journey home. I hope you remember me, for you had helped me from the wreckage that pinned me down.

From the convent I was carried to the hospital at Forli by those two German soldiers. I lay on rack of pain for three months. Both my legs were crushed and my skull cracked. When I was able to hobble along, I followed the troops to Germany. A year later I reached home. I'm glad to be with my wife and son though I've my cross to bear. I thank the good Lord for having granted me the grace to return to my family, while many could not, perished as they were in the bomb-raids.

Rev. sisters, I would like to know how many were killed in the bombing of your convent. I was their doctor and all my medical instruments and apparatus lie twisted there by the fallen masonry. I would indeed be highly obliged to you, if you could kindly inform me how many Germans had lost their lives in the blast, and what you found under the debris. It is a year I'm at home; we are having a hard time and we continue to bear our cross. I'm eagerly awaiting your reply for which I thank you in anticipation.

Once again my heart-felt thanks.

October 14, 1946

(\* Enzo Ronchi: *Monsignor Piersante Borghesi*, p. 176 - 177)



Mother Seraphina



Indian daughters around the bed of the Venerable Foundress. Placed on the bed is the cross inscribed with the date 1.5.1898 and the name of the nine founding members.



The Mortuary Chapel of the CFMSS in the Bertinoro cemetery



The author paying homage to the mortal remains of the Mother buried beneath the altar in the convent Chapel

## LA BADIA : Rebuilt in the 1950's



The Quadrangle



The Mother Province welcomes the members of the Indian Provinces



## Glimpses of the Bolivian Mission



## GUINEA-BISSAU



## CHAPTER X

# The Legacy Of The Foundress

*"The Lord has showered on you a lot of graces; He has filled you with extraordinary natural and spiritual gifts. Above all, He has imprinted on your soul, the mark of divinity more than all the others. Oh! You should strive to be holy: sooner the better! My heart-felt wish for you is that you should become a Seraph of Jesus that burns with the fire of purest and holy love!"<sup>1</sup>*

Seraphina, like her Seraphic Founders, had no theological grounding. But like them, she knew how to draw from the divine font. There is nothing new in her spirituality, for it is exclusively the Christo-centric spirituality of Francis and Clare. They had modelled their life on Christ whose food it was to do the will of His father, who sought the Father's glory in all His actions, who revealed the Father's merciful love to the fallen men and women, reconciled them to the Father through His humiliating death on the Cross and who still continues His salvific mission through His chosen disciples, empowering them by his Spirit of Life and Love. Treading the path traced by the Seraphic Founders, Seraphina strove to model herself on the Son of God who annihilated Himself on the altar of the cross for his sinful brethren. Seraphina's spirituality has a marked Eucharistic tint: an ardent desire to please God by fulfilling His will, a steadfast striving to be united to the Lamb being immolated on every altar, an eagerness to participate in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, to receive Him daily and to spend the whole day adoring the Mysteries sacramentally or spiritually, an intense longing for a life of

1. Sr. Catherine Farolfi, Spring 1892, Doc. 70



contemplation in the company of Magdalene and the beloved Apostle, and a fervent yearning to kindle God's love in every heart by an active apostolate under the guidance of the Virgin Mother. To sum up, the main features of her spirituality are : (a) Search for the will of God in all the events of life; (b) Passionate love for the Eucharist and her consequent devotion to the liturgy; (c) Intense yearning to be a victim of love along with the Crucified; (d) Apostolic zeal for the Mystical Body of Christ and for the expansion of the Kingdom of God; (e) Devotion to the Immaculate Virgin; and (f) Reverence for the Hierarchy

### Pursuit of Perfection

*If we can rise above our senses and contemplate God's infinite goodness, his incomprehensible perfection and the splendour of his beauty, we will surely be gripped by an overflowing love and ecstasy of wonder that makes us cry out: "How great you are, O Lord! How lovable and adorable to your servants! How infinite is your generosity! How pleasant it is to serve you and love you! How sweeter still to suffer for you and with you and to do your will through and through!"*<sup>2</sup>

"Love, Work, Sacrifice", was Seraphina's slogan right from the very outset of her religious life: to *love* the God of love, to make Him known to all human beings and to make them love Him in return; to *work* for the glory of God - to instruct the ignorant, the sinful and the unbelieving, to care for the orphans and the destitute, to console the suffering and the desolate and to expand the Kingdom of God in every nation; to *sacrifice* all that she had once held close: her self-will, her comforts and pleasures, her aspirations and dreams, her health and joy; in short, every fibre of her being in union with the Crucified Christ for the salvation of humankind.

2. Seraphina's let. to Catherine Farolfi, Let.20, Fasc.1

*O Jesus, you alone are my portion, my joy, my everything now and for ever more. By your name so powerful and holy, grant me perseverance in your service, fervour in your love and total transformation in you. The sole longing of my heart is that every human heart be possessed by you and wholly consecrated to you in order to thus atone for its infinite faults and failures.*<sup>3</sup>

Her personal diary and letters to her students and sisters, especially the formees, and above all, to her spiritual directors are criss-crossed with her burning zeal for holiness, closer intimacy with God and growth in perfection. Writing to her younger sister Catherine, she says: "*I do not yearn for anything but to zealously do the will of Jesus and to love him with all my heart.*"<sup>4</sup>

Seraphina was frequently ill and she turned her quarantine periods into fruitful days of interior recollection and stocktaking of the state of her soul. In silence and retirement she would review all her thoughts, words, writings and doings in the light of her avowed wish to do the best in God's sight. The level of excellence not yet reached, her weariness in prayer, the uprightness of the way of perfection undertaken, the suitability and propriety of the various foundations—all would be scrupulously taken stock of.

Nonetheless, Seraphina had to wage her own war against her defects and acquire the virtues opposed to them under the guidance of her spiritual directors. They explained to her that progress in virtue required, above all, mastery over self, conquest of ego and perfect control over one's feelings and affectivity. They exhorted her to concentrate more and more on weeding out the forces of evil lurking deep within her and to purge her heart of all unpleasant feelings.

3. 14.01.1884: Seraphina's Prayer to the Most Holy Name of Jesus, AGCFM – S. 53

4. 25.02.1885 : Seraphina's Let. to Catherine , Let.26, Fasc.1

“Seraphina, you are ever the same! When you are gripped by some holy enthusiasm you soar high into the air till you can touch the sky... And then? You are back on the earth within a few seconds. Till you are borne aloft by the Lord, have both your feet firmly planted on the ground. You should never ever try to fly off, because it is in this life that one practises virtues, strives to be holy through humility, patience and self-denial. Go often to the manger in Bethlehem and in the quietude there, you will acquire virtues so beautiful... Go to the Ciborium and you will learn how to love... go to Calvary and you will fall in love with suffering. This is how you have to become holy: this is how the path to holiness is paved...”<sup>5</sup>

Polloni too warned her to be wary of the enemy of her soul whose powerful weapons were her own pride, self-exaltation, jealousy, envy etc. He pointed out to her that if she retained even a tenuous hold on to jealousy, the devil would use it to weave a snare to trap her. But her proud nature would not admit even to herself that she was guilty of envy and that the wily Satan would twist her around him by that very weakness. Mgr. Polloni's letter dated 8.5.1897, gives us a remarkable profile of Seraphina's character, both her strength and weakness.

“Last night a thought came to me: ‘How is that Seraphina hasn't made much progress on the path of perfection despite having expert, learned and holy directors all these 20 years? Perhaps they just admired the manifold gifts and talents the Lord has showered on her, but stopped short of warning her against the pitfall of squandering them...’

For example, you have been endowed with uncommon intelligence, but you waste it on daydreams and reveries. God has given you a sharp mind and you use it on maligning others' intentions and behaviour. Your gift of eloquence runs into never

ending loquacity. Jealousy sways your tender sensitive heart the Good Lord has bestowed on you. And you lose yourself in trivia that bring you enormous emptiness of spirit. The same can be said of the rest of your defects. What must you do?

Deal with your defects one at a time and fight against it till you overcome it all. Begin the combat at once; you have a lot to do and the time is short. You have been slow in running, you need to redouble your speed in order to win the race... Remember, that the more entrenched the defects are, the more hard it is to uproot them...”

Finding herself wanting in the scale of divine justice and charity, Seraphina would recharge her resolution. At the dawn of the year 1898, she noted down in her diary:

*“Keener watchfulness, new ardour ... The Magi followed the star without any delay, and you Seraphina, how have you returned God's favours? The Messiah was promised to the Hebrew people, but they rejected Him while the Gentiles received Him. I am chilled to the marrow at the very thought of it... If anyone is found more faithful than us, O Seraphina, we shall be deprived of the seat of glory reserved for us in Paradise! Hence, let us try to be holy. Let us seriously meditate on the reproach of the Jews and the call of the Gentiles.”*<sup>6</sup>

It was a long journey for Francesca Farolfi with her sanguine temperament to become Seraphina of Jesus literally and figuratively, with a pleasant disposition that completely over-came her assertive, self-willed character - a serene temperament that neutralized her impulsive, susceptible nature. With the Eucharistic Lord as her model and Mary as her guide, she learnt to cleanse her soul of all that was displeasing in her in the sight of God, “to renounce everything rather than offend God, to die a thousand times than stain my soul”.

5. 06.01.1892: Fr. Luigi of Parma, Roma, AGCFM - b. doc. 11, p.52.

6. 05.01.1898 Memoirs Fasc.XXXI, p.26

“She was horrified at committing even the slightest fault and instilled in us the same attitude towards sin. “Let us not hurt our Crucified Love even in the smallest things,” she would often tell us. “Let us be benevolent and helpful to our enemies, interceding with the Immaculate Lamb for the salvation of mankind.”<sup>7</sup>

The forty-four years of her religious life is marked by her humility to acknowledge her human frailty, her absolute faith in God’s mercy despite her frequent falls, her eagerness to atone for her failings and her yearning to sanctify herself and others.

*“In all my life I can not even find a single moment wholly dedicated to Jesus alone. All that is not of God, or what does not belong to God is mere trash, utter foolishness.”*

– So she noted down in her memoirs.<sup>8</sup> Hence she warns the sisters against the lassitude so common among the religious, forgetting that there is no stand-still in the ascent towards perfection; there is always a stage higher and better. She proposes that the sisters encourage each other to perfection by writing about their promises, their endeavours and their progress in the path of holiness.

The tender love of Jesus for each sinful person was Seraphina’s strength in overcoming her natural aversion to certain sisters. For instance, while at Bagno she had dreaded the arrival of Sr. Geltrude; but, advised by her confessor, she could not only welcome her warmly but also live with and love her as if she were her own sister in flesh.<sup>9</sup> The self-giving of Jesus to all the members of the community propelled her to overlook the fault of others, to love them and to be gentle with them despite their weaknesses.

“Every morning, before the Lord, she tried to understand the tastes and needs of those around her and whatever would please

7. Sr. Agatha Visani’s Testimony, AGCFM - Doc. I, n.27

8. Memoirs: 19 – 29, September 1888. Fasc. 29 p.13-14.

9. 06.01.1892, Seraphina’s Let. to Catherine and Benjamina Fasc. I

them... Her speech was always courteous and refined..... With the importunate and the impatient, she was kind and considerate... She strove to be affable and gentle while admonishing or correcting someone... She would encourage and cheer up those in sorrow... apologized as soon as she realized or doubted of being disrespectful... She confessed her mistakes and failings without making excuses... She rendered services that would never be known or requited on this earth. She was ever ready to humble herself before the Lord or before those who represented Him.....”

Seraphina had to journey through the “Triple Ways of Perfection” before she could be dissolved with Christ. All through the Purgative and Illuminative Way she tried more and more to be cleansed of all sins and imperfections through a life of impurities, mortification, self-denial and conformity to God’s will. During the periods of aridity, darkness, weariness, sufferings, affliction and other characteristic trials of spiritual desolation, she learned to fix her mind and heart on God repeating her mantra: “*May God’s will be done!*”. Her life-long practice of whole-hearted obedience to God’s will and her intense love and thirst for God sustained her throughout the dark night of her soul and brought her into closer communion with God.

“Mother lived in constant union with God and always spoke of Him... I have never seen her lose her temper. Though spirited and sprightly by nature, she was always calm and serene. She held all the sisters in one bond of love, participating in their pains. Whenever she was in doubt, she would ask our advice or opinion. She wanted everyone around her to be happy, to share her joy and works so that all of us together could pray and thank the Lord for his greater glory... She patiently bore her afflictions. Never a word of complaint escaped her lips: nor was she ever swept into a whirlpool of despair or depression. Even during her terrible ordeal, her face was lit with joy, sweetness and kindness.

She overlooked the defects of others, made peace where there was discord; and consoled the sick, visiting them often and bringing them joy and comfort by her presence. The sick entrusted to her care lacked nothing; neither spiritual nor material help... Such was her affability with those who approached her that everyone wanted to be with her for as long as possible, to listen to her holy words and to gaze at her pure, serene, smiling countenance”.

– This sworn testimony of Sr. Michelina Donini, speaks volumes for the marvellous metanoia that the Lord had worked in Seraphina.

Her soul cleansed and purified, her will and affections surrendered to Him “as a fragrant sacrifice” to the Father, Seraphina was invited to savour the sweetness of God’s love. In the ecstatic raptures of divine sweetness she exclaims:

*“Can there be greater joy in heaven than what I feel in loving you!”*

That Seraphina was granted a foretaste of the hidden sweetness granted to contemplative souls is attested by her Memoirs.

*“O Jesus, Jesus, either hold back your gifts or enlarge my wee little heart to receive the delights of your love!”*

– She cries out in the ecstasy of contemplating the Eucharistic Lord. In the school of perfection Seraphina strove not only to become more and more intimately and steadfastly united to Christ, but also to infuse in the sisters a thirst for unbroken communion with God. Many of the sisters moulded and shaped by Seraphina, attest to her living always in the presence of God - her mind ever fixed on God, her eagerness to see her daughters always rejoicing in the Lord, her zeal to instill in them her own burning love for Him and to inculcate in them the very same spirituality:

“Mother was a person of profound interior life and union with God, someone who could control her feelings and inclinations. In her behaviour, in her words and exhortations, one could catch

a glimpse of the depth of the interior silence and recollection in which her soul dwelt... She used to enthuse the sisters to aspire for a life of inner union with God.<sup>10</sup>

Seraphina gives her daughters the key of her own perfection: a listening attitude to the Spirit of Christ, an interior life in union with the Eucharistic Lord, an unfailing trust in the mercy of God, daily examination of conscience, the resolution to begin anew with the help of the Virgin Mother, the desire to atone not only for her sins but even for those of the others in union with the Crucified and her faith in the life-giving power of the sacraments to gain complete victory over her self:

*“Yesterday morning during Holy Communion, I promised Jesus to do my best to acquire that equanimity which enables one to have a pleasant disposition and perfect charity, to foster interior silence, to examine myself every hour, to cling to the crucifix without being disheartened by my failings, to impose a penance on me while invoking the blood of Redemption on my head. To mark in my diary the number of times I failed to keep my resolutions and to begin anew with greater alacrity, sustained by my faithful angel and under the guidance of our tenderest mother Mary, imploring the Mysteries day and night for a complete victory”.*

*(Cir. Let. 13)*

## Searching For the Will of God

*“ I am ill and useless to myself and for others. God’s will! I feel continuously the terrible agony that my physical health does not correspond to the desire of my spirit that groans and suffers finding itself a captive to my frail body. God’s will in everything! His will always! I’ll fulfill His will in my diet, in everything and for everything in a spirit of sacrifice*

10. Margherita Vigarani’s Witness AGCMF - Doc. II n.36 Fasc. XLIX.

*and abnegation, for the glory of the Church, the conversion of sinners, and for the liberation of the souls in purgatory.*"<sup>11</sup>

The expression "will of God" runs like a refrain in all the writings of Seraphina, whether in her letters to the students or to the Cardinals, in her admonitions to her sisters or in her formal requests to the Popes. Before accepting a request to open a convent she would order special prayers and extra Holy Hours to know God's will, besides consulting at least three Bishops including Polloni - her constant advisor - one or two Cardinals and the reigning Pope. If it is a question of accepting a foreign mission, longer would be the hours spent before the Blessed Sacrament and greater the number of counsellors. No house would be opened without an apostolic blessing; no missionaries would be sent without the benediction of the Vicar of Christ as well as the successor of Francis. She would have no remorse to close down a convent, if it was really the manifest will of God.

*"One thing alone I desire: to know the will of God and to follow it".*<sup>12</sup>

With Seraphina, seeking the will of God almost bordered on obsession, so much so, that she was frequently assailed by doubts and fears about the purity of her intention and she would have no peace until assured by her spiritual directors before whom she would place not only her anxieties and scruples but also the illuminations received from above. As soon as she felt that the Institute of the Tertiaries of St. Elizabeth at Forli, was not the place for her, she had bared her soul to her spiritual directors.

Card. Vincent Moreti of Ravenna and Fr. Bonaventure of Cesena advised her to take a decision as early as possible. Bishop Trucchi and Fr. Louis Canali bluntly told her that she had entered the wrong convent. The only person who encouraged her was Fr. Bernardino

11. *My Duty as a Principal*, Memoirs Fasc. 29, p.21

12. Easter 1915, Seraphina's Let. to Pope Benedict XV, Fasc. 44.

of Portogruaro, who, being the Minister General, "represented to her Christ Himself". He told her that if God wanted her to join another Congregation or to found a new one, He Himself would lead her to it in his own time. Taking his word as God's will, Seraphina submitted herself to "twenty years of merit-less martyrdom" at Forli.

"Stay where you are, where the hand of God has led you, where He wants you. What does it matter if you haven't got what you wish to have for the school? It isn't the area of the circle within which you can expand your activities that pleases God, but the rectitude of your intentions and the tenacity to work even in the smallest circle where God has placed you. Mind you, I am not saying that you shouldn't procure the best for the children's education, but go about it slowly, calmly and without anxiety, one thing at a time. By nature you are quite daring. You should control this spirited nature of yours: for though apparently it seems to be a virtue, in reality it isn't..."<sup>13</sup>

"One thing I would like to insist on is that you should be convinced that yours is not a misplaced vocation. Whatever changes might occur later, you shouldn't be upset or lament over the past. Ever since your entry into religion you have been following God's will. He has been leading you and providing you with everything. Bless Him and thank Him always."<sup>14</sup>

Seraphina learned the hard way, that perfect religious obedience required constant prayer, spirit of self-denial, right discernment process and adherence to God's will. It was drilled into her by her spiritual directors especially Fr. Arcangelo Frabetti, that true obedience is incomplete, imperfect and flawed without the surrender of one's intellect and will. One has to subject one's way of thinking, seeing, reasoning, judging etc., to the light of the spirit of Christ. In short, one has to refine the faculties of one's mind and heart in the

13. 24.11.1880 Fr. Bernardino's Let. to Seraphina, Roma AGCFM - b. doc. 11

14. 16.11.1889 Fr. Bernardino's Let. to Seraphina, Roma AGCFM - b. doc. 11

furnace of God's Love till one's whole being is attuned to the will of God. Fr. Frabetti even went a step further telling her to wholly abandon herself to the superior's will like a corpse that neither reasons nor judges or complains about how the grave-diggers often treat it. She merely had to trust in God and wait for the marvels the Lord would accomplish in his own time.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, Seraphina sought the advice of Fr. L Canali (elected Minister General on October 3, 1889), with regard to the dilemma she was faced with:

*"Your advice for me is final in everything; and today I just need it urgently. To do otherwise, I fear, will be going against God's own will. If you continue to hold the same opinion as you had as Provincial superior, this school has to revert to its initial state and I should go away taking the staff along with me. My human nature urges me to stay on with the religious teachers either here or in some houses invited by the various Bishops. But my religious spirit wants me to abandon myself to the sweet will of Jesus without choosing one or the other, indifferent to places and conditions but with the soul desire to strive for holiness through the means acceptable to Jesus. Since the essence of Sanctity consists in the fulfillment of divine will which I can know only through you who directly represent Jesus for me, I beg you to tell me without reserve what God wants of me.."*<sup>16</sup>

Early in her life Seraphina had realized that in order to have peace of mind, one should do God's will at all times:

*"Oh my Jesus! Your will is always our glory, our only happiness. Grant that our sufferings find rest in your loving will and that our hearts rejoice in it - the hearts of all my*

15. 19.8.1894/ 7.10.1894 Fr. Frabetti's Let. to Seraphina, AGCFM-b. S.doc. 15 p 29-30 / p 37-38

16. 05.11.1889 Seraphina's Let. to Fr. Canali, Scritti 58

*co-sisters, my teachers, students and mine, which though crushed by pain, seeks only you, my portion and my heredity."*<sup>17</sup>

In her eagerness to please God Seraphina wanted her staff and students, whether religious or lay, to search always God's will :

*"Take care that your sole desire should be to do God's will in the way and in the manner that He wants. Remember the words of Jesus to Martha: 'There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part'. These words contain the most sublime document of perfection."*<sup>18</sup>

She had written this in 1881 to her younger sister, unaware that within six years, she herself would be called upon to prove her faith in God in situations so trying and hard, abandoned by all in whom she had placed her trust, accused, condemned and maligned by the very persons upon whom she had relied. During those dark years (1893-98), Seraphina groped about seeking the will of God, begging priests and friars who held eminent posts in the Order, Bishops and Cardinals to illumine her path.<sup>19</sup>

*"My Jesus, you see my heart and you know that I want only what you wish, how you wish, and when you wish, ready to sacrifice even the most pure and holy affections."*<sup>20</sup>

Seraphina's unlimited faith in God and her child like trust in those who took God's place on earth, were the unfailing pilots that guided her during those turbulent years. She sought the will of God during common and personal adoration of the Blessed Sacrament Exposed and she learnt to see the hand of God in apparently adverse situations: in the rampant consumption in the boarding school, in the malicious gossip against her school, in the death of her youngest sister and

17. 21.02.1892: Seraphina's Let. to the community of Forli, Fasc. 2b

18. 29.04.1896: Seraphina's Let. to Catherine, Fasc.V

19. 25.04.1907: Let. 231, Letter to Abbot Lolli, Fasc. 52, p.10

20. 29.04.1896 Let. to Catherine, Fasc. V



that of another pupil, in the sanitary inspection, in the hostile report and the consequent closure of the school - all tools used by the Divine Sower to prepare the ground for the planting of a new Religious Family. Whenever she found contradictions and setbacks at the outset of an apostolate, Seraphina was sure that the projected work was in accordance with God's will. The house at Ravenna had given her no end of trouble right from its inception. When knowledgeable persons counselled her to close down the convent, she sought the advice of three bishops, a cardinal and the Pope to make sure it was God speaking through those experts.

Assured of God's plan by the Vicar of Christ, she wrote to the sisters at Ravenna :

*"The tempest will subside because Jesus is with us in the boat. We should not be frightened; let us confide in Him."*

When World War I broke out and Trieste had to be evacuated, she turned to Mgr. Sily with her fear of losing the convent by abandoning it all through the uncertain years.<sup>21</sup> She consulted the Pope not only for opening or closing down a convent or a mission but also about the advisability of sending missionaries during the war.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, when Seraphina was convinced of God's will, she stuck to it even if she had to face a string of opposition. During the critical years of 1894-95, when a decision had to be taken about absolute union or division of the two convents at Forli and Bertinoro, Seraphina followed what appeared to her as the providential hand of God, risking the displeasure of Card. Svampa, the Minister General of the Friars Minor and the Diocese Curia of Forli. Later, when Abbot Lolli objected to her radical attitude to 'dowry', she

21. 22.05.1915, Letter to Mgr. Sily, Fasc. 70.

22. 11.10.1914, Letter to Mgr. Migone (Secy. To Pope Benedict XV), Fasc. 42.

fought back saying that the article 12 was dictated by "an inner voice". It was the same stubborn stand for the Art. 104, bluntly telling the consultants at the Sacred Congregation that they were going against God's will in withholding the dependence on the Order of Friars Minor.<sup>23</sup>

It was not only for the inauguration of convents or for the installations of new apostolate or for the approval of unorthodox articles that Seraphina sought God's will. She searched it for its own sake, glad to please God in all that she did, unwilling to hurt Him even in the slightest matter, relentlessly sifting her thoughts to cleanse them of the grains of self-will. Ever bent on treading the path traced by God for her, she would watch over each of her steps. A year before her death, she wrote to the Minister General:

*"How can I know the will of God if you do not make it known to me? Believe me, Most Rev. Father, that I live in a real purgatory, not knowing His will but wishing only what Jesus wants..."*<sup>24</sup>

Even amidst excruciating pain and sorrow, Seraphina repeated, "May God's will be done!" - the word of consolation that Pope Benedict XV had sent her on Easter Monday 1917, an apt motto for a soul on constant search for God's will. It was a prayer wrung from the bottom of her heart torn by anguish and sorrow. She had no news of her daughters abroad ; her incapacity to alleviate the miseries wrought by the war, gnawed at her inmost being; and, wracked by physical pain, she could not pray as much as she wanted, to appease the divine wrath sparked by the atrocities committed by heedless nations. The text of her telegrams to the Pope contained nothing but her submission to God's will :

23. 26.04.1915 / 30.06.1915 Let. to Abbot Lolli, Let. 241 Fasc. 52. p.30-31

24. 16.04.1916, Let. to the Minister General, Let. 47 Fasc. 45.

*"Holy Father, I long to fulfill the will of God. You alone can obtain it for me by your divine charity and benediction."*

## **The Eucharist: The Centre of Her Life**

*".....A complete immolation ourselves to Jesus with the Eucharistic Lord, a continuous reparation, an indefatigable apostolate, should be the characteristics of our life". Art.1*

*"Missionaries of the Blessed Sacrament"* was not an ornamental title chosen for her Institute out of a pre-established nomenclature; it was an extension of Seraphina's own life centred around the Eucharist. Jesus in the tabernacle was her light in the hours of gloom and darkness, her strength in times of doubt and confusion, and her stronghold in moments of weakness and suffering. If Christ Crucified was the path of Francis' life, Seraphina's *raison d'être* was Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar. She would often turn to the tabernacle with the words of the Seraphic Father: "Lord, what do you want me to do"?. As the Poverello wanted to lose himself in the Tree of Life, Seraphina strove to immerse herself in the Sacramental Host. All her thoughts converged upon the Divine Prisoner in the tabernacle; her words were turned to the complaints of a loving Lord forgotten in the sanctuary by many a consecrated soul; and her actions were charged with the vital force of Eucharistic love. From the Eucharist flowed her humble sub-mission to the will of God, her constant aspiration to be a sacrificial victim, her ardent longing to suffer more and more, her affectionate love for her daughters and her apostolic charity for all, especially the orphans, the destitute, the poor and non-believers. In short, the obedience of the Incarnate God to the words of a priest, transubstantiating the elements into His body and blood, the infinite charity of the Son of God, immolating Himself for the salvation of His brethren and His life-giving annihilation in the Eucharist, were the foundations of Seraphina's spirituality.

Right from her childhood, Seraphina had trained herself to have her thoughts focused on Jesus awaiting her in the chapel. The "Method of Life", she had drawn for herself, bears witness to the fact that she had learnt to sanctify her day in company with the Eucharistic Lord and His Virgin Mother who had associated herself with the redemptive act of her Son from the Incarnation to the Crucifixion. In chapters II, IV and V of the "Practical Guide" and in her circular letters dealing with the Eucharist, one can identify the hand of Bishop Polloni; but in the "Method of Life" and in her letters written prior to her meeting with him, there is ample evidence of her life in, for and with the Eucharistic Lord. From the very outset of her career as Headmistress of St. Francis' School at Forlì, she had trained her pupils to take their problems and anxieties, their hopes and aspirations to the Lord of the Altar and to seek His light in every step they took. Explaining how life with Christ gives one unlimited faith, ardent charity and unblemished purity of life, Seraphina writes to one of her students:

*"Be quick, do not delay...Love Jesus....Love Him often.... Love Him a lot. Offer yourself frequently to Jesus as a victim and close yourself in his adorable heart, beseeching Him to wound your heart with His love. Pay attention to His whisperings and for Heaven's sake, do not let a single inspiration slip by; in it rests your major and minor progress".<sup>25</sup>*

The Eucharist being the pivot of her life, Seraphina wished that everyone had realized the greatness of Mass - "the Sacrifice par excellence", the homage that gives glory to God, a fitting thanksgiving for His innumerable gifts, a worthy act of expiation for our sins and an efficacious means to obtain divine favours. Imagining herself to be at Calvary in company with the Virgin and the Penitent, the religious "must contemplate that scene in which God is slain for men" and "ask Jesus to teach her the marvels of His divine sacrifice and to

25. 05.03.1885, Let. to Emma Baldassari, Let. 29, Fasc. 1.

grant her the grace to assist at it with the contrition of Magdalene, the purity of John and the love of the Virgin".<sup>26</sup> At Palagano the sisters had to bear the absence of Jesus in the tabernacle, for the Sacred Species were not reserved in their chapel. Writing to the sisters at Forli in March 1881, she says :

*"The privations of Palagano could not certainly be compared to the absence of the Divine Host. The Lord, who knows my coldness towards so august a sacrament, has let me feel the weight for a whole month. Oh! Would that I knew what Paradise Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is! Would that everyone were penetrated by so great a truth, namely, that for a religious the Blessed Sacrament is the be-all and end-all! A spouse of Christ should live for God, with God, in God, in Jesus, her only good. Be faithful to your loving Spouse with the fidelity you have solemnly vowed. May love, purity, fervour and penance be the constant companions of your thoughts, affections, desires, yearnings, words and actions which should be directed to the attainment of our goal, namely union with God towards which each religious should strive continuously. Be devoted to the Holy Eucharist; meditate often what an immense treasure the religious possesses in it. As you take leave of Him to attend to your duties, tell Him from your heart, 'O God of my soul! My only Good – O Life of my heart! O Heart of my life! My body leaves You; but my soul continues to adore you profoundly. I unite myself to the Seraphim in heaven to pay you my homage of gratitude, thanksgiving and love. I love you and want to love you but how can I love you if you will not wound this heart of mine with that flaming dart with which you struck the hearts of the Seraphic Father St. Francis and the angelic St. Clare?"<sup>27</sup>*

26. Practical Guide : Ch. II

27. 27.03.1881, Let. to the Sisters of Forli, Let. 16,

Fasc. 1.

To leave one's heart in the chapel, one needs be recollected throughout the day. As St. Francis exhorts the friars to make a cell of their body (LP.80), Seraphina tells the sisters to make a tabernacle of their hearts and to be recollected while doing their chores:

*"My daughters, remember the tabernacle that encloses our Love; rather make a tabernacle of your heart, the more pleasing to Jesus, the more the latter excels the former".<sup>28</sup>*

Seraphina exhorts the sisters to be aware of Jesus within their hearts so that they are strengthened, purified and sanctified by His indwelling presence :

*"Had Peter remembered his having received Jesus into his heart he would not have denied Him... Remember throughout the day of having received the Mysteries. Such a remembrance sweetens my suffering, mellows the abandonment of creatures - whether real or imagined, lightens my fatigue and my duty".<sup>29</sup>*

Consoling the teaching sisters whose multifarious duties kept them from community prayers and devotions and who thought that one could feel the presence of Jesus only during the silent Hours of Adoration, Seraphina writes in her "A Word to the Teachers" :

*"Let not the duty of keeping company with Martha hurt us, because if we wish, we can very well unite the sublime stillness of Mary to the activities... of her sister... I tell you that the height of perfection consists in the perfect fulfillment of the Divine will and that in whatever state or condition we might be, we can carry on intimate colloquy with God and carve in the innermost recess of our heart a sacred niche closed to everyone but God. This should rather be our prime*

28. 02.01.1903, Circ. Letter 13.

29. 08.06.1898, Circ. Letter 4.

*endeavour, the exclusive aim of our heart, to which all our energy should be channelled....”*

The Circular Letter No.4 gives us the gist of Seraphina's Eucharistic love. Though it has echoes of Bishop Polloni's sermons, her own personal relation with the Eucharistic Lord is clear :

*“I carry the Mysteries! And carrying them I contemplate them ecstatically with Magdalene who, absorbed in the Highest Good, loves Him and is loved in return; or like John who keeps his ears to the breast of the Divine Master in order to listen to His words. Like the Prodigal Son I narrate to Him my faults and kiss His holy feet, bathing them with my tears and imploring him to cleanse and purify me by His touch.....”*

— A succession of Gospel scenes, though not in the order of synoptic accounts, or for that matter, as events and parables are narrated. The living presence of Jesus in the consecrated host evokes a series of events in His earthly life : cleansing the lepers or healing the sick by the imposition of His hands (Lk.4:40-41/ 5:12-15/ 8:40-54/ 13:10-13/ 14:1 - 4), forgiving the sinful weeping woman at his feet (Lk.7:36-50), welcoming the repentant prodigal (Lk.15:11-31), exalting Mary who had chosen the best part (Lk.10:38-42), and finally the beloved disciple leaning against Jesus' heart (Jn.13:21-26).

What Seraphina expects of the sacramental presence of Jesus is a personal experience of what each one of these protagonists of divine mercy and love had experienced : to be given a true contrition for her sins, to be cleansed and purified of her blemishes, to be welcomed back to the bosom of His love, to be lost in loving contemplation of His face, to lean on his shoulders to listen to His words. This powerful metanoia that Jesus works in the chosen soul by His Eucharistic presence, is the motive power of her desire to receive Him daily, her sorrow when deprived of Holy Communion

by the order of the Commissary, who restricted it to thrice a week, her exhortation to the sisters to let their cold heart be warmed and inflamed by His radiating presence and her grief at seeing indifferent religious blocking the flow of his love by their apathy. She attributes their lack of progress in perfection, in spite of daily Communion, to their incomprehension of the infinite gift of God in the Eucharist.

*“How is it my daughters, that after so many Communions, we are very same today just as we were yesterday? Can one bask in the sun without feeling its warmth or seeing its light? Alas, my daughters, it is either because we do not realize the grandeur of this favour, or because of our lack of preparation and thanksgiving...” “...We do not comprehend the immense gift of the Eucharist, because we do not meditate on it, lost as we are in the fleeting things of this world”.<sup>30</sup>*

She tells the sisters to meditate on the great Mysteries, to give Him due thanksgiving and to adorn themselves with the graces He imparts in Holy Communion so that they could have His charity and meekness and love Him with His own heartbeat.

As her *Method of life* testifies, Seraphina spent half the day in thanksgiving for the gift of the Eucharist and the other half in preparation for Holy Communion, offering herself, her pains, sorrows, sufferings and acts of expiation along with the Host raised to the Father in all parts of the world at all hours of the day.

*A single Communion well received will take us into the very embrace of God. Let whatever good we do, be an act of continual preparation and an uninterrupted thanksgiving!<sup>31</sup>*

Seraphina was magnetized by the effectiveness of the Eucharist in fostering fraternal communion. She strove to keep her heart a sacred sanctuary for the Eucharistic Lord, “hiddden in the urn of

30. Practical Guide : Ch. II / 08.06.1898, Circ. Letter 4

31. Practical Guide : Ch. II

contemplation". She made all efforts to draw the souls of her sisters, students and everyone she met in her day-to-day life, to the Lord of the Altar in order to have their lives transformed by His merciful, forgiving, self-giving love. She called her sisters, "Olive shoots around the table of the Lord", to remind them of their Eucharistic-centred life and Institute. It was an adaptation of Psalm 128, V.3 and of Bishop Polloni's coat-of-arms, which represented an olive tree with the words "like olive plants". The expression came naturally to Seraphina who wanted everyone to be bound by the Eucharistic bond of charity that overlooks external appearances, forgives repeated relapses into sin and showers the communicants with manifold graces. She kindly admonishes :

*"Remember that one cannot communicate to others what one does not have ....If we do not mould our spirit in the tabernacle, our mission becomes rather harmful than useful".*<sup>32</sup>

The early Christian fraternity united in one heart and one soul, was her model of religious community. Communion with God and among the members of the religious family, the boarders and the day-scholars in the school, the people in the parish, the sinners and the sinned against, the poor and the rich, the gnostic and the agnostic, the adherent and the renegade; in short, the entire humanity: this was what Seraphina wanted as the fruit of one's participation in God's love, especially in the Eucharist that united all, irrespective of age, rank, culture or nationality.

### **In Union with the Lamb Immolated on the Cross**

*"I wish to dedicate and consecrate to Jesus alone all that I have and all the rest of my days. I offer myself to Him as fragrant incense, as a victim of earnest reparation, generous sacrifice and ardent love, operating wholly for the glory of God and for the salvation of souls. I am glad to immolate*

32. 25.03.1903: Cir. Let. 14

*myself so that everyone could be led to the adorable Heart of Jesus".*<sup>33</sup>

Seraphina was drawn more to the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist than to its sacramental value and she strove to identify herself with the Lamb immolated on the Tree of Redemption in order to give salvific value to her own sufferings and acts of expiation. She had well understood the mind of the Church that exhorted the faithful down the centuries to unite themselves to the Eucharistic Victim and to reproduce in themselves His sentiments of expiation, adoration, obedience, praise and thanksgiving as He offers Himself to the Father for the redemption of humankind. Hence she exhorted the sisters to offer themselves,

*"As victims for the conversion of sinners, desiring particularly to form of all living hearts one heart and one soul that perennially praises, thanks, glorifies and loves the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit who live and reign for ever and ever".*<sup>34</sup>

She had grasped well what the Document, *Eucharisticum Mysterium* would affirm years later : "Participation in the Lord's Supper is always communion with Christ offering Himself for us as a sacrifice to the Father" (EM : 3c)

*"I shouldn't be anxious about not being able to follow the common penitential acts due to my ill health. On days of fast and other external penance, I would do some sacrifice known only to God. I will unite myself with all the penitents and offer myself as a fragrant holocaust, placing my heart at the martyrs' block. I long to suffer great things for Jesus, and I will seize every opportunity to offer an act of love to His adorable heart, resting gently in the recess of His sweet wounds."*<sup>35</sup>

33. Memoirs: Christmas 1888, Fasc. 29, p-15

34. 20.09.1890, Annotations, Fasc. 20.

35. Method of Life 1891, Scr. 29

Seraphina urged her sisters and students to keep their heart a sacred sanctuary for the Eucharistic Lord, making frequent acts of immolation, leading a life of abnegation, accepting sufferings as a precious pearl, hiding themselves in the open heart of Jesus and begging Him to wound them with His love. During the sensitive period when Fr. Luigi canvassed for the election of Sr. Maria Concetta Zannoni as Superior, against the wishes of the majority of the members and causing thereby a crisis of conscience among them, Seraphina who was away at Bagno, wrote to the sisters:

*“Let us unite our sufferings with the anguish of Mary at the foot of the cross and her merits will make up for our shortcomings. Let us join Jesus in the garden of Gethsemani and above all, with the Eucharistic Lord who suffers, groans and aches for us in this continued humiliating situation of ours. But let us not blame anyone: neither the Bishop, nor Fr. Luigi nor others. Let us accept this affliction as ordained by the loving Providence for our own good; and we shall see everything settled down sooner than we expect...”*

*Meanwhile, let us gather this harrowing torment as a precious pearl for Paradise. During the day make frequent acts of true sacrifice, and make of your oblation a gift offering to thank Jesus for having made you a partaker in his passion. In fact, suffering in the true sense of the word is an inestimable treasure of infinite value. Therefore, let us embrace the cross and repeat, “To suffer, but not to die”.*<sup>36</sup>

Seraphina’s constant prayer was to suffer for Christ, to suffer in silence without the sympathy of the dear ones, without permitting her mind to dwell on the intensity of her sufferings :

*“To love, to suffer - watched by God alone, should be our sole aspiration for the rest of our life”.*<sup>37</sup>

36. Bagno, 1892: Let. to the sisters, Scr.2b

37. 20.04. 1892, Let. to Catherine & Community, Let. 86, Fasc. 2.

For she knew that it was in suffering that the soul is purified and embellished, that suffering is the food of the saints.

*“Doesn’t the soul become refined and adorned in suffering? Isn’t suffering the bread of saints? You are fortunate to have something to offer Jesus; do not delay in presenting it to him. Offer your gift immediately, wholly; otherwise it wouldn’t be accepted. Present all your thoughts, afflictions and temptations to our Blessed Mother and she will turn them all into gems of grace and glory”*<sup>38</sup>

### **Burning love for the Crucified**

*What is the whole world before the Lord? It is necessary to undergo a lot of sufferings in order to be a saint. During this month dedicated to Mary, place on her altar the triple flowers of prayer, silence and suffering. You will be fortunate if your days studded with crosses.”*<sup>39</sup>

Seraphina learnt over the years to dwell on the Passion of Christ from the Seraphic Founders Francis and Clare whose object of contemplation was the Man of Sorrows and whose deepest yearning was to be wholly transformed into the Crucified by the fire of divine love. To her pupil Zenobia, dying of consumption, she wrote :

*“My beloved daughter, sanctify yourself in your sufferings, in your privations, in your isolations...Jesus on the cross, Mary at his feet; what an example to imitate!”*<sup>40</sup> *“Remember that the elect of God are formed exclusively in suffering; that the Lord communicates only in the seclusion from the world.”*<sup>41</sup>

38. 19.01.1892, Let. to Sr. Bernardine, Let. 64, Fasc. 2b

39. 10.05.1910, Let. to Angela, Let. 929, Fasc. XVI

40. 15.12.1894, Letter to Zenobia, Fasc. 75.

41. 07.01.1895, Letter to Zenobia, Fasc. 75.

In the *Regulations for Postulants and Novices*, Seraphina exhorts the postulants “to keep glad company of their Crucified Lover, since the beloved makes her own the joys and sorrows of the loved one”, and to ask God insistently for the gift of suffering. For,

*“True love springs from suffering. In the school of suffering one acquires strong generous love - a love that germinates martyrs, confessors and virgins”.*

To Seraphina, suffering was not a negative element from which liberation had to be sought; it was rather the gift of a loving God. The words of Fr. A. Frabetti, one of her spiritual directors, rang in her ears whenever a fresh wave of pain assaulted her: “Rejoice that you have been invited to share in the chalice which Our Lord had drained to the dregs during his passion. If there is a drop left, it is for you. Drink it in spite of your natural revulsion and heart-rending anguish”.<sup>42</sup> Hers was a Pauline concept of suffering: to make up for what is missing in the Passion of Christ, to continue His perennial Sacrifice not only on the altar but also in His Mystical Body for the salvation of humanity.

Seraphina’s yearning for divine love and her ardent longing for suffering in silence, were the first notes that struck her spiritual directors. Writing on February 13, 1881, Fr. Louis Canali had given her the key of seraphic love: “A glance at the crucifix will teach you the way and the means to arrive at perfect love”. But he had also warned her that she would have to pass through the dark night of the soul before she could draw directly from the divine font.<sup>43</sup> Four years later, on April 11, 1885, he informed the Minister General:

“As for Seraphina... I tell you Rev. Father, that ever since I have assumed her direction, my aim was to inspire and encourage her to the spirit of abnegation and sacrifice; for it seems to me

42. 7.10.1894 Roma, AGCFM - b. Doc. 15 p-39-40

43. Nov.-Dec. (1882), Memoirs, Fasc. 29.

(everything considered) that the Lord wants her sanctification through this path”.

Seraphina had been suffering ever since her novitiate days. With the passing years, her physical ailments were aggravated by moral and spiritual suffering: temptations, doubts, uncertainties, calumnies, condemnations, abandonment by persons she had trusted and relied upon, misunderstandings and accusations even from her fellow-sisters: a long process of purification and embellishment of her soul. She realized over the years that her soul was being cleansed and purified in the furnace of suffering:

*“My spirit being purified by great pain, abandonment and disappointments from all sorts of persons, with which Jesus has chastised me for my infidelities, the only desire I have is for union with Christ, which is the fruit of love and which forms Paradise”.*<sup>44</sup>

It was her desire to be always united to the Lord that made her yearn for recollection - interior as well as exterior, a seclusion that brought her closer to the creatures.

*‘I thirst for solitude and in my seclusion I have a strong desire to invite all the creatures and elements to praise God. Company, whosoever it may be, bores me and even if they speak of God, it seems to me that they take away some of my recollection except in certain cases when they increase it’.*<sup>45</sup>

— Thus she wrote during one of her early quarantine periods which she always turned to her spiritual advantage. During those days of isolation she would examine her soul, chalk out programmes for betterment of her spiritual progress and draw herself closer to God by uninterrupted contemplation of His goodness and beauty and by redoubled acts of abnegation.

44. 08.12.1907, Circular Letter 30.

45. Let. to Sr. Catherine Farolfi, Let. 194 Fasc. V.

*'I need redeem my past infidelities, which, to my profound sorrow, are always before me. To atone for them I am ready for any sacrifice. The more painful they appear, the more joyously I accept the sacrifices. Even if I have to undergo the worst suffering ever heard of, what is it before Eternity, worthy of God alone?'*"<sup>46</sup>

Though nailed to the bed of excruciating pain, Seraphina longed for a still greater share in the sacrifice of the Redeemer. In the sanctuary of her inmost being, she was ever attentive to the inner voice that tapped secret messages constantly, treasuring up each vibration with the thought, "Oh what good could have produced an unheeded inspiration!".

*"True love is revealed in suffering. If I have to deny myself every time, I should gloriously do so during my most serious illness, making the best use of the suffering that Jesus sends me everyday. When the nature revolts against the wracking pain, when I experience lack of care and concern..., oh then, I gaze upon Jesus on the cross, on Mary motionless at his feet... When my body writhes in pain, I must repeat, "Thank you Jesus. How glad am I to suffer for you. Make me worthy to suffer and to rejoice in my sufferings". When I think of the martyrs and missionaries I feel ashamed of advertising my pain. Jesus wants me to suffer quietly, without looking for sympathy from our dear ones, to hide from others my own aches and pain as if they did not exist. Will there be any pain that is unwelcome, if we cling to the Crucifix?"*<sup>47</sup>

When physical suffering deterred her from reciting the Divine Office, or from the preparation for the solemn feasts of the Church, or from corporal penances – wearing hair-shirts, observing fasts, participation in community acts etc., she was restless.

46. Let. to Sr. Catherine Farolfi, Fasc. 5.  
47. Method of life 1891 Scr. 29

*"Jesus alone knows to measure my grief at my lack of physical strength to meet the ardour of my soul".*<sup>48</sup>

– So she wrote six months before her death, completely bed-ridden and racked by growing pain. Often she turned to the Mother of Sorrows, who standing at the foot of the cross, had undergone untold pain and desolation, and begged her to give her "a true irrevocable resurrection to new life." A life hidden with Christ, to undergo suffering known only to God, to lead a life of love, to bring all souls to the love of God : these are the ingredients of her Eucharistic love.

*"The sole happiness consists in being hidden with Christ in God and to suck in His ineffable secrets like the blessed Apostle John".*<sup>49</sup>

## **In The Footsteps of a God Who Died For Humankind**

*".....How do I deplore the misfortune for those who do not know so loving a God! How do I grieve over myself for having a heart so small and unworthy of God! In comparison with the deprivation of God's love, I consider sweet all the torments, the cross and whatever tortures human cruelty can invent".*<sup>50</sup>

Seraphina wanted her whole being to reverberate with the love of God that knows no limit of time or circumstances, that seeks to pour itself in to all hearts, in all places, in all ages. She wished that her journeys were like that of Christ who walked about the Judean plains doing good to all and making them whole. Just as Francis' passionate love for the Crucified made him embrace all those who were redeemed by Christ's blood,<sup>51</sup> Seraphina was consumed by

48. 30.12.1916, Let. to the Sisters of Cesenatico, Let. 1141 Fasc. 18.  
49. 10.04.1914, Let. to a Bishop, Let 62, Fasc. 68.  
50. Let. to Catherine, Let. 20, Fasc. 1  
51. Bonaventure's Major Life of St. Francis, Ch. IX:4



heart-felt compassion for the salvation of every human being for whom Jesus had hung upon the Cross. During the novena days preceding the feast of the Seraphic Father, she longed to be "illuminated by and transformed into that spirit which made Francis mad with love".<sup>52</sup>

*"Oh how pleasant it is to dwell in the open wound of the Sacred Heart and to have the divine blood sprinkled on us, on the girls entrusted to us, on all the sinners and on all men so that all could be led to the sweet Heart of Jesus".*<sup>53</sup>

The corollary of her Eucharistic love was her apostolic charity that filled her heart and spurred her on to reach out to everyone till all could praise and thank the Trinity. The twin weapons Seraphina wielded to conquer souls for Christ, were her acts of abnegation and hours of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. *"My spirit longs to race off, but it is held a prisoner in my frail body. O God, give me health, give me a lot of souls for whom my heart is athirst."* So she wrote in her Memoirs.\*

Kneeling before the tabernacle she not only contemplated the Incarnate God hidden in the white host, but also interceded for everyone she cared about: the pupils in the school, the victims of natural and political catastrophe, the men who refused to acknowledge the loving designs of a merciful Creator, the Freemasons<sup>54</sup> who wrecked the faith of unsuspecting people and the Non-Christians in far-off lands awaiting the light of Christ.

52. 20.09.1890, Annotations, Fasc. 20.

53. 23.06.1890, Exhortations to Teachers, Fasc. 20.

\* Memoirs, Fasc. 55, p.18-19

54. **Freemasonry:** An organization that does not sponsor any particular denomination of faith or any religious creed. The Freemasons observe deadly secrecy and mysterious rites, basing most of their symbols and rituals on the tools and practices of the building professions. They dress in colourful elaborate costumes and take part in dramatic rituals, many of which are secret to all except the members. Some faiths forbid their members to become Masons.

"Seraphina never stopped praying for sinners and urged all her sisters as well, to pray for blocking all offences against God. Her great love and zeal for preventing sins as well as her talks on God enthused their hearts with great fervour that she seemed to be a heavenly Seraph afire with love."<sup>55</sup>

"I was convinced during my two years' stay at the Badia that Mother's spirituality was characterized by her prayers and zeal for the conversion of sinners and for the mission. She has stamped an apostolic thrust on the whole Institute which is still carried on by their sisters with an intense ardour... Mother seized every opportunity to energize the sisters to missionary life. She insisted upon our praying for the nation and the task of collaborating in whichever way in the missionary activities."<sup>56</sup>

Blasphemy frightened Seraphina and she shuddered at the very thought that people committed outrages against Jesus. It pained her too that many did not love Jesus and she tried all in her power to make Him known and accepted by all. She tried to infuse into the sisters some of her own fervour for the Kingdom of God. She wished that her Institute overflowed with apostolic love and zeal for the conversion of the sinful and the ungodly. She hoped too that all the sisters offered themselves as victims for the well-being of all.<sup>57</sup>

"Mother used to request us to pray for the conversion of sinners. There was Dr. Pedrella who used to give free medical treatment at the Badia. Knowing that he had not been to confession for nearly 30 years, Mother often urged him to attend the Sacrament of Reconciliation. One day she asked him: "Which confessor would you like to have?" He mentioned the name of Fr. Nicolino Natera from the south. Mother sent a telegram to Fr. Nicolino

55. 19.07.1948: Sr. Costanza's Testimony, Roma, AGCFM - Doc. I n.13

56. Sr. Costanza's Testimony: Second Collection of Witnesses, n.2 May 23 - September 22, 1969

57. Sr. Michelina Donini's Testimony, AGCFM - Doc. IV, p. 1-34.

and when he arrived at Badia, she sent for Dr. Pedrella under the pretext of attending an ailing sister. Meanwhile, she had the Blessed Sacrament exposed and she asked all the sisters and boarders to pray for his conversion. The Lord touched him, for he not only made his confession that evening, but also lived a devout Christian life, regularly partaking in the Divine Sacrament. A year later he was injured during a hunting expedition and died of tetanus. During his last days he was fortified by the comforts of the Sacraments.”<sup>58</sup>

Seraphina knelt in profound adoration in the name of all those who spurned His love: the tepid religious heedless of their consecration, hectic housewives caught in feverish activities, heartless men setting traps for the innocent, ruthless tycoons deaf to the cries of the poor and soulless nations plotting the extermination of defenceless countries. She would recommend them all to the mercy of God offering herself as a victim to appease His just anger.

*“O that we could sanctify ourselves and lead all mankind to Jesus; Oh that the sweet Name of Jesus be praised and loved by the whole world!”*<sup>59</sup>

“Her words were darts of love that pierced us with hope and courage to face any hurdles, even cross the ocean to save souls. Tremendous was her faith; unlimited her compassion for the needy. She would rush in to pour the oil of her love wherever she found people in sorrow and pain. She would often exhort us: “Always do good to others. If you can’t reach out to them with your words or deeds, offer your prayers and sacrifice for their well being.”<sup>60</sup>

– So narrates Sr. Constantina, a missionary in Brazil who was received by Mother Seraphina in August 1904.

58. Testimony of Sr. Orsolina Scaccaglia, Roma, AGCFM – Doc. VII, Fasc. LIX

59. 19.01.1904, Letter to a Bishop, Fasc. 68.

60. Sr. Constantina’s Testimony, AGCFM – Doc. II, n.55 Fasc. XLIX

Though completely bed-ridden, her whole body vibrating with excruciating pain and her head drooping for want of strength, Seraphina gladly continued to offer herself as a victim in order to bring to an end the “appalling scourge that lacerated the nations and turned the world into an open sepulchre”. She recommended to the divine mercy the vanquished and the victorious, the war-mongers and the war-torn, the soldiers in the battle-field, the wounded in the field-hospitals and the souls in Purgatory.<sup>61</sup> Thus did Seraphina strive to emulate saint Clare who “in the austerity of her cloistered solitude, broke the alabaster jar of her body with her severity and thoroughly imbued the whole Church with the fragrance of her sanctity”.<sup>62</sup>

### Living the Liturgy

*“The feasts of the Mother Church are a prelude to Paradise; but to enjoy their beneficial effects we need prepare ourselves in prayer, so that the Lord may reveal to us as far as possible, the greatness of the Mysteries being commemorated. Only in this manner can we derive the benefits that the Church offers us in celebrating these feasts. ...O how sweet it is to be united to the Mother Church, to penetrate its spirit which is the same as that of Christ, to cling to Him in faith and love!”*<sup>63</sup>

A prolongation of Seraphina’s Eucharistic-centred day was her active participation in the Church’s liturgical celebrations of the various Mysteries of Christ. She wanted that everyone should grasp the meaning of the mystery being celebrated and spend the feast day only for Jesus, sanctifying oneself and the others. Even while a postulant, she used to explain to the students the significance of the various feasts, commenting on the Gospel of the day:

61. 31.03.1917, Circ. Letter written by Catherine.

62. Bull of Canonization of St. Clare, n. 4

63. Rule For the Novitiate, Ch. V

*"It is essential to penetrate the mind of the girls with the spirit of the Church which is so divine in her festivities and to offer the feasts in anticipation of the celestial glory".*<sup>64</sup>

Whenever circumstances permitted, she invited experts to give them talks on special themes in order to deepen their faith in the Divine Mysteries. During the novenas of the principal feasts of the Church, the sisters and students were exhorted to listen attentively to the sermons, meditate on them during the day and to draw the maximum graces out of the current liturgy by deepening their knowledge of the Mystery being celebrated and by instilling in them the desire to emulate the virtues associated with the feast.

Among all the events in the life of Christ, the Annunciation – “the mystery of mysteries”, the miracle of Christ’s charity”<sup>65</sup> – had a particular appeal to Seraphina, not only because it was the beginning of our Redemption but also because of its Marian role in salvation history. “Mary greeted by the Angel in the humble, lonely, little room of Nazareth”, “the Virgin who becomes the Mother of God”, is her sure guide to comprehend the depth of the person of her Incarnate Son.<sup>66</sup> She wants the sisters to spend the novena days in preparation for this “august Mystery” in the company of the Virgin at Nazareth, “beseeching her to grant them her disposition during the solemn moment of Incarnation”:

*"Oh the Divine Babe in her womb! When we carry the Mysteries in our heart, do we have the faith, hope and charity of the virgin Mary?"*<sup>67</sup>

She exhorts the sisters to repeat from the depths of their hearts Mary’s reply to Gabriel: “Behold your handmaid, O Lord, desirous of nothing but the fulfilment of your divine will in the perfect execution of my duties”.<sup>68</sup>

64. Memoirs : 1881-90; *My Duty as a Principal* Fasc. 29, p.17

65. 25.03.1902, Circ. Letter 11.

66. 24.03.1898, Circ. Letter 3/13.03.1899, Circ. Letter 5.

67. 13.03.1899, Circ. Letter 5.

68. 25.03.1902, Circ. Letter 11.

Advent is to be spent in overcoming whatever is repulsive to our ego, through acts of humility, dependence on superiors and a life of union with Jesus. Here too, Mary’s help is an efficacious means not only to “know our defects but also to prepare our hearts for the joyous feast of Christmas”.<sup>69</sup> Seraphina’s Christmas gift to each sister was the peace born of true charity that knows how to hide the faults of others, seeing only good in others and evil in oneself.

*"Let us remember that to love those who are good, who love us and help us, who are social and nice, is so natural a thing. But to love the enemies, those who disagree with us, to tolerate, sympathize and bear with the defects of others, to keep their failings a secret, to toil leaving the credit to others, is the real charity that generates a delicious peace, for which all of us united, shall have to invoke the Virgin at the Blessed grotto, specially on the Holy Night."*<sup>70</sup>

During the lent one has to be with Jesus in the desert, working at her sanctification through, “(i) Zealous apostolate, being gentle and kind to the girls; (ii) always being patient and courteous to all; (iii) rising again with a quick act of humility after a fall.(iv) Observing strict silence during the prescribed hours”<sup>71</sup>As for the ailing ones, there is no better way of observing the Lent than sanctifying their sick-bed by kissing the cross gratefully for being made partakers of Calvary, by joyfully enduring the lack of care and concern and not complaining about the food, thinking of the many poor, sick and old deprived of food, bed, fire and other necessities of life, and who die with no one to care for them.<sup>72</sup>

Seraphina exhorts her daughters to be absorbed in the Mysteries being celebrated during the Holy Week

69. 09.11.1916, Let. to Sr. Luisina, Let. 1138 Fasc. 18.

70. 16.12.1915, Circular Letter 32.

71. 04.04.1897, Let. to Sr. Bernardina, Let. 233 Fasc. VII.

72. 13.02.1907, Exercise for Lent, Fasc. 20.

*Holy Thursday: The day of the Mysteries, the most adorable and memorable day! But who thinks about it? It was a splurge and frenzy of love. Poor Jesus, how he is requited! Every CFMSS should be lost in wonder during that hour when Jesus instituted the Sacrament of Love.*<sup>73</sup>

One has to follow the Saviour from the Cenacle to the Mount of Olives, from Gethsemani to the Praetorium, along the Via Dolorosa up to Calvary and down to the Sepulchre; keep vigil with Magdalene till the Risen Lord is found and adore Him with the heartbeat of the Virgin and the joy of Magdalene as she hears Him call her by name. On the feast of the Ascension, one has to feel the sorrow of the Virgin Mother, Magdalene and the Apostles “to be deprived of the adorable presence of their Divine Master”, and await the Holy Spirit in their company.<sup>74</sup>

*“O Ascension! The feast that transports us to Paradise! We really have to wrench our heart away to attend to earthly affairs”.*<sup>75</sup>

**Corpus Domini:** *the Feast of feasts, the feast par excellence, is to be celebrated with a magnificent display in every convent: Exposition, procession, festoon, strings of lights etc. During the preceding days the sisters should prepare themselves with meditation on the love of Jesus in the Divine Sacrament.*<sup>76</sup>

From her own assertion, we can gather how vivifying each feast was to Seraphina and how she lived each mystery of the Redeemer: “On the Feast of Ascension, I felt something mysterious and delicious. I felt like being reborn in the soul and healed in the body”.<sup>77</sup>

73. Practical Guide, Ch.V

74. Let. to Sr. Catherine, Let. 197, Fasc. 5.

75. 06.05.1899, Let. to Sr. Veronica, Let. 312 Fasc. 8-9.

76. Practical Guide, Ch. V

77. 06.05.1914, Let. 65, to Mgr. Bressan, Let. 65 Fasc. 59.

## The Virgin's Role in Seraphina's Life :

*“Today the sweet feast of your Presentation in the Temple is being celebrated in heaven and on earth. I come before you in order to renew the holocaust of myself in a very special way. I offer you my intellect, my will, my heart, my body and all that belongs to me. With all my being I offer you this newborn Institute. In your heart I place Srs. M. Catherine, Nazzarena, Veronica, Bernardina, Germana, Orsolina, Cecilia and Domenica who are the foundations of this edifice. To your care I entrust the novices, the postulants and all the mystical plants that will spring forth or will be transplanted in this garden of yours. In the core of your tender heart I enclose the boarders - past, present and future - the daughters and all other living beings whom I carry in my heart, and whom I long to lead to Jesus and make them blessed for ever. In short, through you I wish to offer this nascent Seraphic family to Jesus - just as you offered yourself to God in the temple, so that it may grow and spread out solely for the glory of God, for our own sanctification and the good of our brothers and sisters. O Mary, my Mother, the powerful Virgin of the Lake, I appoint you mother, mistress and superior and next to Jesus the guide of this little boat that rests secure in your port. Today begins a new era for the Badia, because it is no more steered by Sr. M. Seraphina but by the august Lady, the Most Holy Virgin of the Lake!”*<sup>78</sup>

Seraphina's love for the Virgin, “Our Guide, Counsellor and Mother”,<sup>79</sup> is exclusively Franciscan. To the Seraph of Assisi Mary was the “daughter and handmaid of the Most High King and Father of Heaven, the Mother of our Most Holy Lord Jesus Christ and the Spouse of the Holy Spirit”.<sup>80</sup> Like Francis, Seraphina too

78. 21.11.1896 Seraphina's Prayer to the Virgin Scr. 68 p. 15-16

79. 08.12.1907, Circular Letter 30.

80. “Antiphon to the Office of the Passion”, Omnibus p. 142.

contemplated Mary in her concrete relations to the three persons of the Holy Trinity. Echoes of his "Salutation to the Virgin" can be detected in the following passage :

*"Let us rejoice with Mary for the unique privilege of her Immaculate Conception. Let us give praise and thanks to the August Trinity who elected her daughter, mother and spouse, and therefore preserved her from original sin..... Oh Mary, cover us with your virginal mantle, giving us your faith and ardent love for Jesus... ..Let us celebrate her feast with holy gaiety and unique joy. Let our whole being vibrate with melodious notes of filial tenderness and sincere devotion....."*<sup>81</sup>

In her tender love for Mary she recommended the daily recitation of the Angelus, the Ave Maris Stella and the Rosary. She exhorted the sisters to diffuse the devotion to the Virgin among the boarders and students, the youth in the oratories, tailoring classes and recreation centers. Not satisfied with all these, she founded the Association of the Daughters of Mary in 1881 and established units of it in the filial convents, inviting adolescents to enroll themselves as avowed children of the Heavenly Mother.

"Would that I find in Mary a guide who helps me efficaciously to divest myself of my ego, so that my childhood desire of being a saint might not remain a pure wish".<sup>82</sup>

At the dawn of May Seraphina would direct her pupils to the feet of Mary, praising her in the picturesque language of Dante. 'Mary, whom all generations call blessed', 'the noonday sun of charity and the sparkling fountain of hope' for men, 'humble yet higher than all creatures', 'the spotless beautiful virgin', 'the

81. 06.12.1897, Circular Letter 1.

82. 18.01.1897, Let. to a Bishop, Fasc. 68.

compendium of all inconceivable prerogatives', 'the converging point of all virtues', 'the lady in whom humanity was so ennobled as to invite the Creator to become her creature'; the list goes on and on.<sup>83</sup> She exhorts everyone - both the teachers and the taught - to cultivate the virtues of Mary, especially her purity, humility and obedience which drew down on the Virgin the favors of God, and to make for her a daily chaplet of their acts of mortification and penance.<sup>84</sup>

*"Oh that I could let you taste the marrow of spiritual life! Oh that I could kindle in your heart a steady devotion to the all-pure Virgin!"*<sup>85</sup>

Seraphina had a bunch of novena keys to celebrate the feasts of Mary. In 1888, the sisters had to imitate the virtues of Mary contained in the hymn, "Tota pulchra es Maria". For the year 1889, the efficacious preparation for the feast of the Immaculate Conception was to imagine Our Lady ringing the bell for each community act :

*"If so, how will our promptness to the bell be? How will our silence be? Our modesty, our affections in her presence?"*<sup>86</sup>

Surely with such a key for self-examination, the sisters' attitude towards everything would not only be different, but also conducive to their sanctification and progress in virtue. She tells her daughters how to imitate the Immaculate :

*"To live the life of the Immaculate Mary, is to bathe the past in the blood of Christ, to adorn the soul with the choicest virtues and to correspond faithfully to the divine call".*<sup>87</sup>

83. 28.04.1881, Let. 5, to the students Scr. 35. p.5-7

84. 01.05.1878, Let. to the students, Fasc. 20.

Novena for the Feast of Imm. Conc. Fasc. 20.

Nativity of Mary 1888, Fasc. 20.

29.04.1889, Exhortations for the Month of May, Fasc. 20.

85. 26.03.1906, Let. to the Missionaries in India. Let. 824 Fasc. XIV

86. 27.11.1899, Circular Letter 6.

87. 08.12.1907, Cir. Let. 30.

The novena days had to be marked by “(i) *care of the sick as if in each one of them you saw the Virgin herself*; (ii) *A lot of sweetness in your words and actions, in everything and with everyone*”.<sup>88</sup>

In short, the religious had to imitate Mary in everything : in her hidden life at Nazareth, her contemplation of the divine Mysteries as the Angel announced to her God’s salvific plan, her modest conversation, her absorption in prayer, her mind emptied of everything but God and her participation in her Son’s redemptive act.<sup>89</sup> One has to celebrate not only the feasts of Mary but also those of her Son in her company, asking her for the light to see the dark recesses of one’s soul, to reveal the lurking roots of ego and to cleanse and purify the heart of all that is displeasing to her Son, and filling it with virtues most pleasing to Him.

*“Whoever loves Jesus cannot but love Mary. Would that everyone be enamoured of Mary as St. Bernardine of Siena was! Would that every sister loved her and made her loved under the title “Immaculate”, propagating the ejaculation: “Immaculate Virgin, grant that my body and my soul always remain pure” ...If Jesus is our salvation, Mary is our hope.....”*

Practical Guide : VI

As the Seraphic Founders stressed the Trinitarian relationship of the consecrated soul, Seraphina too wanted every religious to imitate Mary who devoted herself totally to the person and work of her Son :

*“We see her with Christ in the house at Nazareth, in the grotto of Bethlehem, from Bethlehem to Calvary and from Calvary to the Cenacle. At Nazareth begins our redemption; at Calvary it is completed; in the Cenacle it is diffused. What an intertwining of the Mysteries with Mary! But above all,*

88. 29.11.1897, Let. 6 Sr. Veronica, Let. 266 Fasc. 6-7.

89. 05.08.1900, Novena for the Feast of Assumption, Fasc. 20.

*let us think of her at Calvary where the Mother becomes a priestess and sacrifices the great Victim. It was precisely at this moment that she became the Co-redemptrix of mankind and we her redeemed people...”* (Practical Guide : VI)

A true Catholic, Seraphina had imbibed the teachings of the Church about Mary, down through the centuries: Mary’s role in the economy of salvation, her close association with Christ in His salvific work, her intercession for the brethren of her Son, and the call to the faithful to imitate her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity.

### **The Advocate of Papacy**

*“The Clares of the Blessed Sacrament will have a special devotion and a full and filial obedience to the Supreme Pontiff, to the Sacred Congregation that represents him, to the Bishops and Vicars of the dioceses in which they find themselves, having recourse to them as daughters to their father, placing themselves at their disposal and trying to be of help and comfort to them in the apostolic ministry in whatever is permitted by the Constitutions and the spirit of this last Franciscan shoot”. (Constitution 1915, Art. 103)*

A true daughter of Francis and Clare, Seraphina owed to the successor of Peter not only filial reverence but also all those sentiments due to Christ. She turned to the Vicar of Christ with the same confidence and trust with which she turned to Jesus. She sympathized with the sorrows and anxieties of the Universal Pastor as she made her own the outrages and affronts done to her Celestial Spouse. Her love for the Mystical Body of Christ and its visible Head on earth, flowed from her Eucharistic love. She tenderly loved the Church, the dispenser of the Sacraments and the perpetuator of the Eucharist through its ministers. Her head bowed in deference to its hierarchy; her heart beat with apostolic charity for its frail members as well as for those outside its flock and her mind treasured its teachings.

Seraphina's filial devotion towards the Church, her burning love for the souls, her unquestioned loyalty to the hierarchy, her childlike docility to the bishops, her unlimited trust in the Pope and her humble obedience to the successor of St. Francis, won for her a lot of admirers and supporters among the high-ranking hierarchical figures of the Church from Pope Leo XIII to Pope Benedict XV.

Pope Pius IX, the former bishop of her native Imola, had done her a favour in 1879, by healing her of an attack of typhus. During his pastoral visit, His Holiness had left his hat as a souvenir to the convent of Forlì; and the sisters made use of it to work a miracle for Seraphina through the intercession of the deceased Pope. His successor, Pope Leo XIII had recommended the Farolfi sisters to Bishop Polloni during the private audience granted to the newly consecrated Pastor and the select group of well-wishers:

*"Take care of these two daughters. They will be of great help and consolation to your diocese".*

The Pope had prophesied it when the Institute was just eight months old and had not yet obtained the goodwill of Cardinal Svampa and the approbation of the Holy See. As an educationist, Seraphina treasured the "Providentissimus Deus" (1893), the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on education. Hers was an educational system based on the teachings of the Church, the philosophy of the nineteenth-century Italian educationist Lambruschini, Don Bosco and the methods of the German educationist Froebel, in the age when the Revival Movement in Italy was upholding the principle of absolute state, dissociated from the control of the Church and the influence of religion. For the Jubilee of Pope Leo XIII she joined the universal celebration with her widow's mite: collection made from the children of every convent school, towards the erection of the cross on Mount Maggio said to be one of the twenty national monuments.<sup>90</sup>

With Pope Pius X began a series of correspondence that included formal petition for the approbation of the Institute and the Constitutions, humble requests for a papal blessing for the inauguration of convents in Italy and abroad, personal letters for ascertaining God's will in times of crises, prayers for the Pope's benediction for the ailing sisters and protestations of filial love and devotion to the second Pope of the Immaculate. She had been the beneficiary of Cardinal Joseph Sarto, Patriarch of Venice, who had sent her a donation in his own autograph on February 17, 1902. When His Eminence was elected to the Peter's Chair, he kept in constant touch with Seraphina either directly or through his secretary, Mgr. Bressan. Over forty autographs of Pius X bear testimony to the Pope's solicitude for Seraphina who had won his esteem by her filial affection, absolute trust and unshakable faith in the Vicar of Christ. When faced with uncertainties, she turned to the Pope for a word of assurance; in moments of sorrow and suffering for a word of comfort; in hours of doubt and anxiety for the manifest will of God. She sought the papal blessing for her missionaries so that with the merit of obedience they could "form an angelic choir of the pagan children, baptized, confirmed, and communicated, to guard and defend the Vatican".<sup>91</sup> Before making her Canonical visits, she sought the Pope's benediction so that it might sanctify the places and persons she would be visiting.<sup>92</sup> When her sisters were ill, she implored the Pope to bless them, confident that the Vicar of Christ could make use of his invested power to heal not only spiritual but also physical maladies.

Early in January 1914, Catherine was down with diphtheria and finding her condition worsening day by day, Seraphina wrote to Mgr. Bressan to request the Pope to bless her and ward off the danger if God so willed it. On January 12, the Pope imparted his healing touch, leaving the doctors stupefied at the miracle. The

91. 29.07.1910, Let. to Pope Pius X, Let. 29 Fasc. 44

92. 10.06.1916, Let. to Pope Benedict XV, Let. 57 Fasc. 44.

diphtheria that was bringing Catherine closer and closer to her grave, was not only arrested but driven out completely by the saintly Pope who was won over by the candid simplicity of Seraphina. She repeated the same request a year later to Pope Benedict XV, this time for the ailing boarding Mistress, confident that “whatever the Pope prayed for and blessed, would be granted”.<sup>93</sup> For Seraphina it made no difference who sat in Peter’s Chair; to her the Pope represented her ‘Celestial Spouse, Jesus Christ on earth’ and no other consideration could “inspire her to a greater devotion, confidence and trust”.<sup>94</sup>

In all her letters to the Pope she would profess absolute obeisance, “most happy to accomplish whatever Your Holiness desire of us”, and “glad to give our life rather than do the least thing against the wishes of the Holy Father”. The request for the approbation of the Institute ends with a daring note of challenge and trust :

*“Most Holy Father, listen to my humble prayers. It is Mary, my Mother, who sends me to your feet, assuring me of being heard. You are the second Pontiff of the Immaculate and that is enough for us”.*

Both Pope Pius X and Pope Benedict XV had been extraordinarily kind to her, not only answering a good number of her letters in their own hand but also granting her an audience outside the scheduled time.

On August 3, 11 and 16, 1914, (the very month His Holiness departed from this world), Seraphina was received by Pope Pius X, treating her with paternal indulgence and solicitude, asking her about the state of the various activities and convents, inquiring about things she had confided to him in 1908 and making her feel at home in his august presence.<sup>95</sup> On the feast of Ascension 1915, she had

93. 19.04.1915, Let. to Mgr. Migone, Let. 100 Fasc. 40.

94. 17.11.1906, Let. to Pope Pius X, Let. 6 Fasc. 44.

95. 31.08.1914, Let. to the Minister General, Let. 3 Fasc. 45.

the fortune to attend the Mass celebrated by Pope Benedict XV and receive Communion from his hands, whose presence in the chapel, she had compared to that of Jesus among the Apostles before He ascended into heaven.<sup>96</sup>

Pope Benedict XV had known Seraphina during his tenure as Cardinal of Bologna - the See left vacant by Card. Svampa in 1907. It was at his insistence that Seraphina turned a deaf ear to Bishop Polloni who repeatedly advised her to close down the convent at Ravenna. On September 3, 1914, the newly-elected Pope, Benedict XV, sent a special blessing to the sisters gathered in retreat at the abbey, invoking the Holy Spirit to transform the convent into a cenacle with His gifts. Knowing that the Pontiff was passing through agonizing moments, faced with the darkening clouds of World War I, she wrote to him :

*“Would that the humble troops of the Franciscan virgins be the consolation of the august Pontiff on whom Jesus has loving and ineffable designs, having entrusted the Church to him in so critical and painful a moment”.*<sup>97</sup>

Seraphina placed her sisters and convents at his service, “feeling the pains of the Holy Father like loving daughters” and “ready to sacrifice themselves with filial joy” in serving the orphaned and the wounded in the battle-field.

*“The Christmas gift I ask Your Holiness is that you make me holy by your prayers, by your special help, because we want to be the little phalanx of your paternal heart”*<sup>98</sup>

The “phalanx” consisted of the “medical corps” and the “peace corps” : the former in active service in the casualty wards of the make-shift hospitals tending the wounded and dying ; the latter

96. 13.05.1915, Let. to Pope Benedict XV, Let. 40 Fasc. 44.

97. 16.04.1915, Let. to Pope Benedict XV, Let. 3 Fasc. 40.

98. 21.12.1915, Let. to Pope Benedict XV, Let. 50 Fasc. 44.



pleading with the Eucharistic Lord exposed throughout the day and part of the night for the soldiers serving at the front, or taking care of the orphans and the homeless rendered destitute by the avenging fury of war.

When the Italian government was looking for Religious and Charitable Associations to entrust the thousands of orphans, Seraphina rushed to the Pope "wishing to pour some balsam into the heart of His Holiness".

*"I assure you, Holy Father, that even the deepest nuance of your desire becomes our will the very instant you order; to do otherwise will cost us dearly.....In one word, we are yours; and you can dispose of us as and when you wish".<sup>99</sup>*

Indeed, her zeal for the Church and for souls, her predilection for the poor and the abandoned, specially in the remotest and forsaken parts of the world, her life of abnegation for the conversion of sinners and unbelievers, her unquestioned loyalty and ready availability to the cause of the Church, her filial devotion profound veneration and child-like abandonment to the Vicar of Christ, entitle her to the appellation, "The Advocate of Papacy".

**To sum up, Seraphina's spirituality is marked** by what the Church has been looking for in its faithful followers :-

- An intense desire for holiness and a steady pursuit of Christian perfection.
- A constant seeking for God's will and an unconditional submission to it.
- An undivided love for Christ, His Cross and for sharing in His sacrifice through acts of self-denial.
- A profound union with God amidst one's activities through interior silence and recollection.

99. 29.08.1915, Let. to Pope Benedict XV, Let. 46

Fasc. 44.

- An absolute dedication to the growth of God's Kingdom on earth.
- Obedience to the Mother Church and a filial devotion for the implementation of its dogmatic, liturgical, pastoral, missionary and social undertakings.

## Conclusion

Seraphina truly deserves to be called an ardent follower of Christ and a loyal daughter of the Church. She was a committed religious:-

- Who placed the Eucharist not only at the centre of her life, but also at the core of her Institute;
- Whose everyday endeavour was to contemplate the Son of God like the Virgin and Magdalene,
- Whose interior driving force amidst the pain and preoccupations of her daily life was the worship of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament,
- Who strove to offer herself as a victim in union with the Lamb on the Cross for the salvation of humankind,
- Whose sole aspiration was to die to self and be wholly of Jesus,
- Whose ardent desire was to cultivate the virtues of Mary
- Whose constant yearning was to please God by fulfilling His will manifested through ecclesiastical authorities and Religious Superiors,
- Above all, whose earnest effort was to live in the presence of God and glorify His name by the apostolate of prayer, sacrifice and activities.

It was, indeed, God's glory that Seraphina sought in her various undertakings, especially in "opening new Tabernacles". A true daughter of St. Clare, she considered her vocation as the daily fulfillment of the prophecy St. Francis had made concerning the

Monastery of San Damiano, "...Ladies are yet to dwell here who will glorify our heavenly Father throughout his universal Church by their celebrated and holy manner of life."<sup>100</sup>

*Lumen Gentium*<sup>101</sup> defines the call to holiness as a call to "the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of love"(LG. 40). The faithful are exhorted to reach this perfection "by following in the footsteps of Christ", "doing the will of God in everything" and "whole-heartedly devoting themselves to the glory and service of their neighbour" (LG. 41). Accordingly, Seraphina's life was an ascent to greater holiness, a steady growth in the love of God and in implanting the Kingdom of Christ in souls, which she nourished and fostered by her daily contemplation of the Eucharistic Lord. As is expected of every religious she has taken "earnest care to persevere and excel still more in the life in which God had called her for the increase of the holiness of the Church and to the greater glory of the one and undivided Trinity." (LG 47).

100. Testament of St. Clare: 12 - 14

101. Vatican II: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church