



The power of God

*St. Pompilio Maria
Pirrotti, Sch. P.
(1710-1766)*

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Year of publication: 2026



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Translated by Jesús Lacarra

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Introduction

The biography of St. Pompilio Maria Pirrotti, SchP, is truly extraordinary. However, this should not surprise us, since collections of saints' lives contain a wide variety of stories: some saints are strong, humanly speaking, while others are weak. Pompilio Maria belonged to the latter group. Physically and mentally, he was very weak. Yet his work was truly passionate, as he himself testified on various occasions.

Still, certain details are common to all saints: the power of God is evident in them; it is present, and the passion and death of Jesus are a reality. Pompilio Maria was persecuted and condemned several times by both ecclesiastical and civil authorities, just as Calasanz, the founder, was, and as Christ was – because the disciple should not be greater than the master. This is why ordinary people admired and followed him.

Human events can be understood if we identify the historical and social context in which they occurred. Divine events can only be understood by those who believe in the Risen One, who lives, who is the Lord of history, and who gladly reveals himself in weakness. The life of a saint is a combination of human and divine events.

What can the life of an Italian Piarist from the eighteenth century tell us today? If you read on, you may be surprised.

A hole in the tunnel of time

Let us pierce the tunnel of time to glimpse life in Italy from 1710 to 1766. Summarizing the “Century of Enlightenment” in a few words is difficult. In the first half of the eighteenth century, a socio-political dynamic unfolded that caused Europe to lose part of its leading role, yielding ground to other dominions and empires in Asia and Africa.

Nevertheless, Europe’s supremacy remained evident, fueled by admiration for England, the model of modern states. Spain concluded its war of succession with the victory of the French Bourbon dynasty. Meanwhile, in Northern Europe, a devastating war was underway, ending with the fall of Sweden to Prussia and Russia.

The region of Naples, the largest in Italy, encompassed the southern areas of the peninsula, from Abruzzo to Calabria. It also included the island of Sicily, which was politically and socially distinct from the rest of the empire.

According to 1742 statistics, the city of Naples had 292,196 inhabitants. Only one-sixth of the population were workers. There were 12,825 people living in convents, schools, hospices, and similar institutions. The aristocracy or upper class was poorly educated, loved external pomp, and neglected the administration of their estates.

The clergy formed an autonomous group with many privileges, even more than the aristocrats, and thus shared the monopoly of wealth. In 1765, about 12,000 clergymen lived in Naples.

Pompilio Maria lived within this society. His letters say nothing directly about the political and social situation in the kingdom, but their content indirectly reflects the influence of the times: the misery of the cities, the rudeness of the people, the bureaucracy of the court, the corruption of customs, and more.

Three dangerous “ISMS”

To understand the biography of the saint, it is important to highlight the profound shift in ideas that occurred in Europe during this period. This transformation led to the emergence of modern European countries. The movement of ideas resulted from Illuminism, Jansenism, and Quietism.

Illuminism held that life should be guided by pure and simple reason, free from unstable emotional influences. In the religious sphere, it rejected Christian supernatural elements and replaced them with the general “natural religion” of deism. The power of the “sovereign” was considered unlimited. The clerical state was not to be excluded from controlling the country, which was responsible for promoting production, education, and the economic, spiritual, and material life of its subjects.

Freemasonry, which arrived in Italy from England and France, was responsible for spreading these ideas and took on a distinctly anti-clerical character. It spread rapidly in the Kingdom of Naples, and in 1750 the Constitutions of the Freemasons were published. This situation would indirectly influence the life of Pompilio Maria.

Jansenism arose from a strict Christian view of life. Instead of seeing God as a father, he was conceived as a demanding and strict judge. Human nature was considered corrupted. Only those who were predestined could be saved. Salvation was not universal.

This doctrine led many away from the sacraments. In this area, Pompilio would fight a difficult battle, courageously defending frequent participation in the sacraments against Jansenism, which attacked him with violence.

Quietism led people to laxity under the pretext of submission or indifference to the divine will. Michael Molinos, its founder, taught that the inner life consisted in a state of complete annihilation of the soul's faculties, replaced by the action of God. The soul that reached such a state could not sin. This soul should not worry about its defects and should reject devotions directed toward the humanity of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints.

Pompilio Maria would wage a fierce battle against the tendencies of Quietism. His promotion of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Beautiful Mother, and Blessed Calasanz, as well as his defense of frequent confession and communion, brought accusations from the quietists, though he always felt innocent.

We are now prepared to enter the turbulent biography of this Italian Piarist of the eighteenth century, a man both physical and spiritual. He was very weak, both physically and mentally. Nevertheless, the power of God would manifest itself in him in a powerful way.

His first formation

Pompilio Maria was born on September 29, 1710, in Montecalvo Irpino, in the province of Benevento, in the Campania region of Italy. He was baptized the following day in the collegiate church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary with the name Dominic.

At that time, the region was under the dominion of Naples, ruled by Austria, but 24 years later, Charles of Bourbon defeated the Austrians, and the region came under Spanish rule.

He was the sixth of eleven siblings. Three became religious, and one became a canon. His parents were Jerome Pirrotti and Ursula Bozzuti, both from noble families.

Jerome raised his son in the human virtues of honor and nobility. Pompilio expressed this as follows: “I remember with complete accuracy the paternal advice which, together with continuous works for God, formed me. And I especially remember the sentence: *Noble deeds require nobler ones*. And the other: *Virtue and honor were an enduring legacy of the Pirrotti family*. These two sentences are like two offshoots that will spur me on to the last breath of my life to attain virtue and honor.”

He lived with such gentleness and nobility that references to rudeness and impoliteness appear repeatedly in his letters. About the people in Turi, the city where he began his service at the Calasanzian school, he wrote: “The people in this city are too rude, and since almost all its citizens are clerics, they lack the necessary courtesy.” He wrote about Naples: “The poor gentlemen and poor ladies of Naples have no idea how to treat gentlemen and ladies.”

With the freedom that the spirit gives, he also complained about his companions: “The Piarist Province is full of abruptness in rela-

tionships. There are no good manners among the superiors. What a wonderful thing would be the beautiful courtesy and the precious and possible charity!”

Proof that the virtues instilled in him by his father accompanied him throughout his life is found in this courageous testimony shortly before his death: “In the many years I have lived in the Pious Schools, I cannot remember having done the slightest harm, not even to an ant. On the contrary, I have done good to all, and there is not a person among us who could say: I received this rudeness from Pompilio Maria.”

Jerome also taught him the classical humanities of the Renaissance, which were fundamental to education for many centuries in Italy. In many of his letters, we find sentences and Latin verses that he used skillfully; it seems they were part of his personal thinking.

The young Pompilio resembled his father not only in human virtues and literary taste, but also in physical and psychological aspects. “I am a spiky spike, like you: tall and thin.” Both were depressive-emotional, impressionable, and psychologically very sensitive.

Incidentally, contrary to what generally happens, his mother had very little influence on his upbringing: “The feelings of our dear mother – I know it very well – are always carnal and worldly. I have never liked them.”

At home, the Pirrotti family had a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Abundance. It was there that he learned the devotion he later showed by calling her “Mamma Bella” (Beautiful Mother).

He runs away from home to the novitiate

When he was 15 years old, he made his first spiritual retreat. We still have his written notes. Reflecting on his early writings, we can identify four important themes: the contrast between the present life and the future; the understanding of the eternal consequences of the present life; his focus on the persons of Christ and Our Lady; and his prompt willingness to abandon everything in this life to secure the eternal.

He concludes, “I have decided to accept the state that the Lord wants for me, for his greater glory.”

A year later, in 1726, a Piarist priest, Father Nicholas Mary Severino, preached in his town during Lent. He went to his spiritual director to intercede at his home: “I was ready to ask you to intercede with my father; more than once I have gone to you to ask you, but I have not dared to do it. God only knows how many tears have come from my eyes because I suffered so much from being in this world. And believe me, my grief was so great that I was ready to run away from home and leave my parents, my belongings, and everything that could be mine to serve God.”

And so it happened, as another letter testifies. On May 9, 1726, he ran away from home and left behind some written notes, from which we quote: “You will not blame me for running away without your permission. I am riding with much comfort to Benevento. There I will put on the Piarist cassock; in complete joy I pay homage to the Lord.”

The family – specifically his mother – did everything in their power to bring him back home, but all in vain. It took almost a year from the time he ran away to the day he took the cassock in Naples (February 2, 1727). This was the moment when he changed his baptismal name from Dominic to Pompilio Maria as an act of respect for his older brother, who had died in the seminary.

First steps in the Pious Schools

(February 1727-September 1732)

He was granted dispensation from his second year of novitiate, and in April 1728, he made his first profession. He then wrote to his father: “I inform you that, by the grace of God, I have arrived in Chieti, where I will remain until I complete my studies in Rhetoric and Philosophy, which will take five years. After I finish them, I will return to Naples for theological studies.”

His fragile health made it impossible for him to follow the normal curriculum. On February 5, 1729, he received the Tonsure, and the following day, the Minor Orders. During the summer of 1730, the superiors sent him home, hoping that his native climate would help him recover his lost health.

From his family home, he was not sent back to Chieti, but to Melfi, a small town not far from Montecalvo. There, his professor of Sacred Sciences was the renowned Piarist and great preacher, Fr. Erasmo Frezza, who was a confessor at the Vatican and a consultant to the Holy Congregation for the Index.

In the letters we have from Melfi written by Pompilio, we see a young religious who feels the vanity of worldly things, aspires to eternity, and uses suffering as an ascetic means of perfection: “I refuse to be only a saint or only a learned person. I want to be both a saint and a learned person at the same time. (...) I hope in the Lord, who can bring all my desires to a good end, founded, in any case, upon the glory of God. (...) I assure you that among all the Piarist Brothers, at present I am the most ill, but I am never idle or without doing anything. (...) Saint Thomas was also ill and suffered terrible stomach pains, as Blessed Albert Magnus says, but he never stopped praying

or studying. (...) When God wants to grant favors to His servants, He leads them into solitude.”

At twenty-one years old, he shows in his letters an uncommon sensitivity. On some occasions, it seems he is called to great suffering. His emotionality, always present, would remain a permanent element in his life.

Pompilio Mary was so close to the people of Melfi that when he was about to be transferred, everyone in the town tried to prevent it. “I assure you,” he writes to his father, “that as soon as my departure was known, everyone in Melfi ran to our school to ask Fr. Rector not to take that step in any way.”

This would be repeated throughout his life, in every city he had to leave. His transfers were expulsions and exiles, the result of persecutions he suffered from religious and civil authorities. But the people were always faithful, as we will see: they were drawn to his effusive, affectionate, self-giving, and gentle personality.

The health of the young Pompilio Maria was very fragile. In all the letters from this period – from 1731 to 1735, when he lived in Melfi, Turi, and Francavilla Fontana – he always mentions his health, and his topics are the same: headaches, stomach problems, heart and blood pressure issues, and vertigo. All are parts of the body where emotional and affective states are most reflected. For the first time, nervous changes appear that would cause him great suffering. His weak body would be shaken by intense nervous emotions brought on by his apostolic work and the incomprehension of others. A prophet does not enjoy the approval and affection of all!

“It was necessary to draw blood from my ears with leeches because my blood pressure was again explosive. My head hurt and felt heavy and dull.” In the same letter, a little further down, he describes his condition: “I am always in a festive mood, always happy, though without flesh and all bloodied.”

The heart is the organ where affections and emotions are most reflected. Heart pressure and psychic depression generally go together, even if their origins differ: “I would not know how to express to you what a strong heart pressure I have felt these last days, because I did not receive any answer to my two letters and also because,

day and night, I have had ill-fated thoughts and dreams. (...) I was forced to take a purgative since the vertigo was very frequent and terrible. I eat less than a small bird and even so, I generally have a swollen stomach.”

Despite his weak health, he writes: “I always have my mind occupied with the Lord or with my studies.” His letters from these years show him as a keen observer of life and people, realities he describes with such vivid and free sentences that they impress those who read them. The main religious themes are: the vivid sense of the eternal amid the temporal, strong faith in God and His power, the premonition of his future participation in the mystery of the cross as the key point of his abundant apostolate, and complete confidence in the protection of Mary.

First ministerial assignments

October 1732-November 1737

The first assignment where he practiced the Piarist ministry was in Turi, Bari Province, where he arrived in October 1732, four years after his first profession. Writing to his father, he says: “I dedicate myself to carrying out my classes, though a little tiresome, with great dignity and respect, at home, among the students, and outside, being an enemy of chattering and a friend of my room, of studying, and of prayer.”

Pompilio Mary remained very attached to his family and to human honor. He writes: “God knows that my holy and right objective is to regain the honest flourishing of our paternal home through my efforts and my life, ennobling myself, re-conquering some of the buried family honor.”

One year later, in 1733, he was assigned to the Francavilla Fontana school, where he would remain for three full courses. During these years, he became subdeacon, deacon, and priest, and led the Death and Prayer Archconfraternity, beginning the apostolic work that would continue throughout his life: the cult of the dead, as an expression of one of the most characteristic aspects of his spirituality – almost a perception of eternity from this earth.

In one of his letters, he writes: “I have been assigned as a Teacher of Rhetoric, a subject the Order has given to me without any merit on my part, and I have been fulfilling it for three months with some satisfaction from the Order and the students.”

In another letter: “I do not ask any help (for the Priesthood ordination). I only request that you may ask God that I may prepare

well, since I always ruminate on that sentence: My God and my all.” This sentence is like a strong fire that illuminates the interior of his soul and reveals another characteristic of his spirituality: a deep understanding of the mystery of God. The word “God” is the most repeated in his letters, and with a truly meaningful characteristic: he writes it twice, three times, even four times in a row – “God, God, God, God and nothing else.” But this would happen after the encounter in Brindisi, where he arrived at the end of 1736.

He feels like a living part of his family, which had begun to break down: “I have read and re-read your letter with tears, sighs, and kisses... May it happen because of the love of God: I cannot say anything else, so much as I am writing this with a torrent of tears... I ask the brothers, with tears in my eyes, that they may show a little shame on their faces, taking into consideration the motto written at the top of the door of our home: Honor and virtue are the eternal patrimony of the Pirrotti house.”

The encounter of brindisi, a mystical grace

Christmas 1737

Just one year later, in December 1737, he began a novena in preparation for Christmas and surprised us with a solemn declaration. In it, we see him, on one hand, completely immersed in a profound vision of God, and on the other, overwhelmed by an indescribable sense of his own human misery.

A careful study of his words and the impact this event had on his later life leads us to affirm that it was a mystical grace, unexpectedly given to him by God, that unified his life and freed it from the negative aspects of his character, without changing his nature.

Pompilio Mary remained particularly affectionate and sensitive, both physically and psychologically, prone to imbalance, and easily wounded in his relationships with others. Yet, despite everything, from the time of this grace in Brindisi, his peculiarities and excesses coexisted with a profound spiritual life and a consistent commitment to his priestly and teaching ministry. At times, he would sink into depressions that lasted for months, but each time he would rise again to continue “the fight for souls,” as he used to say.

The grace of Brindisi introduced him to a strong, radical, and effective spiritual life that sustained him through his deep somatic and psychological imbalances and ultimately, as we will see, restored his inner system.

We have four solemn declarations, or “protests of death,” dated between December 16, 1737 and January 19. They are the keys to understanding his future life. They are the fruits of the light that

illuminated his mind and set his heart on fire, raising him to a new level of knowledge and love. In short, they are the declarations of the principles of the apostle who was born in that moment.

Let us transcribe some parts of the second declaration: "...my Lord... kneeling before your holy image...I ask forgiveness...and as a first protest of my repentance, I declare that, for love of you, I hate those things valued by the world: dignities, honors, glories; and I cherish dishonor, humiliation, and misery (...) I publicly declare that I am not attached to any created thing; I declare again, my Lord, that I will use only, out of necessity and naturally, the things I find along my way and those given by the Order. And I even promise to avoid them whenever possible. (...) I want to follow the naked Jesus on the naked cross, being myself stripped, and I promise this, from now on, from the bottom of my heart. My Jesus, accept my public declaration and give it value with your holy grace. I love only you. I trust only in you. Alas, world! Alas, foolish me! I have offended you, when I should have loved you more than others...

I embrace your Cross: I unite myself to it. Far be it from me to glory in anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. My beloved Redeemer, hear me, grant me, and preserve your grace in me. I despise the whole world. I despise all the things of this world. My God and my all. I desire only suffering in this life, my beloved Jesus: burn here, cut here, deny me everything here, so that you may forgive me in eternity."

The answer to the encounter with Jesus

Although we may be repeating ourselves, we fully copy the third protest: “A protest made by me, Pompilio Mary, on Christmas night of 1737, in Brindisi. I want it to be valid, poor sinner that I am, at the hour of my death. I also want this protest to be a grace from God, my Lord, from whom I hope to obtain in this world the opportunity to suffer for Him and for the salvation of redeemed souls, and later, in the next world, to be able to praise Him for all eternity.

Oh, my Lord, I wish to find myself at the moment of death with only this notebook, written on my knees before the image of the Cross! My Jesus, hear me!

I promise and declare before you, my Jesus, that I will live completely detached from the world, and if I could and it were allowed, I would wish to walk naked for your love. At the very least, I will live far from all comfort, as much as I can. I promise, my Jesus, not to expect from the world anything but what you had, that is, sufferings and contempt – to suffer and be despised for your love. I promise, my Jesus, that I will try not to commit any mortal sin again, not even venial, as far as my human frailty allows, although trusting in you, I will be able to do everything. I can do all things with you, who strengthen me with your grace. My Jesus, better to die than to offend you again. How much I regret having offended you! How much it pains me, and how much I repent of my past life!

Lord Jesus, who endured for me the sufferings and insults of the cross, have mercy on me, especially during the agony of my death. My beloved Jesus, these acts, these protests, and these promises that I write with my own hand, may they be supported by your infinite merits and help me at the moment of my death.

No more sins, my Jesus. I will never offend you again. Never again in my life. It pains me to have sinned. I want to amend what I have done. Never again will I offend you, my beloved Redeemer.

What I have written, I have written. Better to die than to offend you again.”

After a few years, this young Piarist, working at the school, would become the Apostle of the Abruzzo region and a fighter against the religious deviations of his time: Illuminism, Jansenism, and Quietism.

The Father General considered sending Pompilio Mary to a new foundation in Ortona a Mare. At the end of the year, he wrote to him: “I have received your letter of November 30 and I see your religious sentiments and your detachment from your relatives, wanting to go far away, according to the maxims of the Holy Gospel; therefore, I am even more assured of your good dispositions, as I was before regarding your religious virtue. (...) Now, as I am considering a new foundation, I have already thought of you, sending you there...”

Professor at the seminary and a popular missionary

In March 1739, he arrived at Ortona a Mare, a small Adriatic coastal town in the Abruzzo region. He worked as a professor at the diocesan seminary amid material and psychological hardships, but the apostolic fire burned within him. He sought the blessing of the Virgin and requested permission to go to Loreto, the famous Marian sanctuary in the Marche region, which was granted.

On August 21, he wrote to Fr. General: “We are suffering here the most terrible pains you could imagine, exposed to the murmuring of all, dedicated to the direction of some young seminarians, most of them unruly, and I have developed severe pains and heart troubles because of the discomforts and pressures.”

During this time, the Piarists, along with other religious orders, were involved in a dispute over who had the right to teach the so-called “major sciences.” The Pope decided in favor of the Piarist Schools.

In 1740, Pompilio Mary began the popular missions. His seminarian students said he taught Latin, Rhetoric, Physics, and Sciences while kneeling, and that he never neglected preaching or attending to the spiritual and material needs of the people of Ortona, who venerated him as a great servant of God and a learned man.

His missionary zeal led him to write to the Pope, asking to be named Apostolic Preacher: “... I kneel at your feet with this humble letter. Christ gives me this command through an interior light, and it urges me constantly (...) I would like Your Holiness to kindly grant me the authority of an Apostolic Missionary, to sow among the people and cities the seed of God’s word (...) I will go with your apostolic authority, declaring war on vices and bringing medicine to souls...”

At the beginning of his first preaching to the people, he began advising daily communion, which was not common at the time and was viewed with suspicion by those influenced by Jansenism. This led to the first difficulties in his ministry: the Military Commander of Pescara warned him. Today, this seems unthinkable, but at that time, civil and ecclesiastical authorities were not clearly separated. On this occasion, the bishops defended him.

A diocesan priest, Fr. Marcantonio di Annibale, was impressed by the Piarist Father's preaching and brought him to the mission at Francavilla a Mare. There, an empathy developed between Pompilio and the people, who generally had strong faith but little knowledge; this was a constant phenomenon wherever he preached throughout his life. There are testimonies of his work from morning until evening. After the last sermon in the evening, he led a penitential procession, striking himself with an iron scourge. People imitated him, and since it is difficult to distinguish between fanaticism and mysticism, accusations were made against the preacher. But the people always gathered around him, kissing his hands and cutting pieces from his poor cassock.

He repeated the mission in Pescara and Castellammare. In the latter, he led a procession with a cross and a statue of the Virgin of Sorrows, the town's patroness. The cross and the Virgin were always his two great loves. There, he also began his apostolate among the nuns, which would bring him many headaches and persecutions throughout his life, often due to the puritanism and hypocrisy of the time, in opposition to his expressive affectivity.

Pompilio Mary established and directed a Confraternity in Ortona, the means then used for the Christian formation of laypeople. The seminary classes, popular missions, and the Confraternity required great energy, but his weak physical strength could not have endured without the strength of the Spirit.

The suspensions and expulsions begin

(1742-1747)

In 1742, he was transferred to the nearby town of Lanciano. The people welcomed him because of his reputation as a man of God. He took charge of the school, preached, and heard confessions. After only two years there, the Spanish Nuncio to the King of Naples arranged for his transfer to Naples, but for political reasons, he remained in Lanciano. He wrote: "I am in Lanciano, where the work is hard and plentiful. I steal from my sleep the necessary time, although I never rest on my bed, but rather sleep on the floor, and the Great Lady keeps me. One must tire oneself for the sanctification of the whole world."

The new Bishop of the city and the Bishop of Chieti, both influenced by Jansenism without realizing it, suspended Pompilio Mary from preaching, believing they were defending ecclesiastical discipline. He wrote, "God allows everything, and His plans are wonderful in all things."

In August 1745, he received a letter from the Father General: "The two favors you ask of me, to preach during Lent and to make a spiritual retreat for some time, are already granted." At the end of the year, he was allowed to conduct a mission in Penne.

The year 1746 began with two apostolic works: spiritual exercises for two convents of nuns and for the clerics of Penne, and Lenten preaching at Castellmare. At that time, he preached 150 sermons, outlined on 110 sheets of paper. People began to speak of healings and miracles. After Lent ended, he returned to his school in Lanciano.

In June 1746, he received permission to preach during Lent and Advent in all dioceses of the Piarist Province of Naples, as well as permission to make a pilgrimage to Loreto, which he never used. In

November, the Father General wrote to his Rector: “Because of the rumors I have received, I would look favorably if you could remove Fr. Pompilio Mary from the Dioceses of Chieti and Lanciano, and I am considering revoking his license to preach there.”

The reason could only be his manner of fulfilling his ministry of the word – preaching, confessions, and spiritual direction. In the theology of that time, one of the most difficult topics was the relationship between the faithful and God. The shadow of Molinos loomed over every attempt to address this matter. Pompilio Mary was not intimidated by this and guided couples and Sisters toward mystical union with God, forming them in the love of Christ in the Eucharist. His spiritual sensitivity made him the opposite of Jansenist rigidity. We have 862 letters of spiritual direction in which we find the constant struggle of the Piarist Father against heresy.

In 1747, Pompilio Mary faced his first great tribulation in this struggle. It followed his Lenten preaching in Tornareccio, where he performed actions considered excessive by his rivals. Driven by fervor, he left the town carrying a heavy wooden cross on his shoulders, crowned with thorns, barefoot, and bound with two large chains, accompanied by some clerics and faithful. In this way, they walked more than seven miles.

From March to June, he conducted an apostolic campaign in five regions. At the beginning of July, the Father General received a letter from the Bishop of Lanciano accusing Pompilio of grave excesses and urging his removal from the dioceses. The Father General ordered Pompilio Mary to go from Pescara, where he was, to Naples, without passing through Lanciano or his community, and requested that his conduct be observed and monitored: “Since some people have said many things about his way of living and his behavior with both sexes.”

Pompilio did not renounce these excesses, thanks be to God. He was accused of them many times during his life.

The expulsion made him ill, causing nervous attacks and deep depression. This is the first clear instance of the connection between his nervous illness and the psychological tension produced by persecution, in which his Brothers also bore some responsibility.

Again, without permission to hear confessions or to preach

The life of an exiled person is not easy. Nor is it any better for a religious who arrives at a community accused of heresy and licentiousness. When he arrives at the School of Duchesca, Naples, in mid-August 1747, he finds a letter from the Order's Vicar: "I revoke your faculty to hear confessions and to preach. All your work will be teaching and residing in our house, living together with the other religious. Furthermore, I do not think it suitable to give you permission to visit your parents." At the same time, he writes to the Provincial: "Although I have prohibited Fr. Pompilio Mary from preaching and hearing confessions, nevertheless, I would like him to preach on Saturdays in our church to increase devotion to that miraculous image of the Blessed Virgin (...) I ask you, from the bottom of my heart, to appoint a Father who would judge his spirit, to see if it is true or not (...) You will inform me, simply, if Pompilio Mary laments being slandered or persecuted; if he is hurt by the suspension from preaching and hearing confessions; if he complains about the work at school; if he is meek in obedience, ready for anything, humble and at peace, both in his will and in his mind."

Fortunately, we have documents in which he describes his spiritual situation: "I am upon the cross and I hope to imitate our beloved Jesus... to suffer, to suffer and not to die (...) I would like to go where nobody would have any news about me (...) What can one expect from a world where falsehood reigns? (...) Let the tempest pass until we arrive at the best place for the soul, the only thing to be desired."

The Bishop of Lanciano again asks the Provincial not to allow him to return. In August 1748, the town was still requesting his return. One month later, he is transferred to another school in Naples, Caravaggio. In the catalogue of the house we read: "Fr. Pompilio Mary, 38 years old, teacher of Rhetoric for thirteen years, mediocre in Humanities. Lenten preacher and now yearly. Wonderful religious, of good reputation."

Six years in peace

1748-1754

By surprise – everything is a surprise in the life of this Father – around the middle of October 1748, Fr. General called Fr. Pompilus Mary to go to Rome as a theological consultant to the Cardinal of York. Was it to observe him in person? To keep him far from Lanciano? He remained there from October 16 to December 28.

Again, he writes from Naples: “What can I say about Rome? Son, the Blessed Mother has worked clear miracles. What honors and veneration from those Prelates and Cardinals! What desire to be advised and to receive direction and counsel from this poor man of mine! What confusion I felt at the obligation to preach before them! Oh, how much love and delicacy from all our Superiors! The young people from the Nazareno School were attached to me (...) but poor Fr. General, after receiving a claim from our Caravaggio School and from many ladies, and admitting the real necessity, asked me with tears to return to Naples.”

In contrast, he writes in the same letter: “I do not have a moment for myself. I walk through Naples with the knapsack on my neck, begging for alms, doing any kind of job, even becoming a helper in the kitchen. I like doing things, fulfilling the will of God.”

Fr. General went to Naples in February 1749 and allowed him to preach during Lent in Atessa, a town in the Abruzzo region, not far from Lanciano. This marked his rehabilitation before the Superiors. Here, his reputation for sanctity grew so much that the people of the town came close to touch him and to cut pieces from his clothes. When they tried to pay him, he refused the money (fifty piastras) with these words: “I came from Naples to preach and to save souls, not to receive money.”

We know that in 1751 he was elected Provincial Assistant, but his evangelical intransigence made it impossible for him to remain in the position for long. Two years later, he resigned as Assistant and gave up both the active and passive voice in the chapters (the power to elect and to be elected).

The Yearly Preacher nomination he received was an object of ambition, both for the fame and the money one could earn. At that time, there was what they called the money each religious could receive for himself with the permission of the Superiors. This was also a cause of antipathy, gossip, and calumny, even though the few times he received stipends, he used them for charitable works and for the liturgy.

The key year for the order and for him

The year 1754 was pivotal in the history of the Pious Schools in Italy and in the life of Pompilio Mary. The Apulia Province was established, but Pompilio remained in the Naples Province, where he founded the Archconfraternity of the Charity of God in the church of Caravaggio, a place where he worked and suffered greatly. In the same year, Cardinal Sersale began his office – the very one who would later exile Pompilio from Naples.

We have the statutes of the Archconfraternity, written by Pompilio Mary. In them, several aspects of his characteristic spirituality appear: frequent reception of the sacraments, especially Mass and Communion; universal charity without class distinctions, born from genuine love of God; the power of good example as an apostolic method of social reform; rejection of any business, profit, or personal interest; remembrance of eternity as a present reality, since the objective is to remember the deceased; mutual assistance among the brothers; and, notably for that era, a strong sense of communion with the entire Christian family of God.

When he arrived in Naples, Saint Alphonsus Mary of Liguori had already been working there for eight years, seeking approval for his new Redemptorist Congregation. The great leader was fully engaged in combating the heresies of the time. In 1751, the first volume of the “Encyclopedia” appeared in France, spreading the ideas of philosophical Enlightenment, while Saint Alphonsus published his famous book *The Glories of Mary*. He was also working on the work that would make him immortal, *The Moral Theology*, published between 1753 and 1755. Thus, 1754 was indeed a key year in the life of Pompilio Mary. With his book, Saint Alphonsus confronted the false doctrines infecting society: regalism, freemasonry, gallicanism, and febronianism. In Naples, Saint Alphonsus sought approval

for his Congregation, while Pompilio sought approval for the Archconfraternity of the Charity of God, both from the same authorities.

His apostolate in the church of Caravaggio brought him many conflicts, beginning with the members of his community. However, the greatest problems arose from the leadership of the Archconfraternity. He found himself in an atmosphere of tension and passion, ultimately becoming a victim of these circumstances. Two religious, Frs. Anastasio Caro (Provincial) and Antonio Andrizzi (Rector)—both Piarists with a relaxed spirit, reflecting the general atmosphere of the Church at that time – led the opposition to Pompilio Mary. Fr. A. Caro accused him before the General of excessive zeal, impetuosity, causing disorder among the people with his eccentricities, and wandering the city at night. The General replied: “Give the order to the Father to abstain from any actions that are characteristic of his (...). Since you mention in your letter that he goes out of the house at night, I believe this can be corrected by ordering him to remain at home 24 hours a day”.

When the order was communicated, his nerves gave way, and he fell into a depressive crisis that forced him to remain in bed. After being informed, the General wrote: “I regret the illness of Fr. Pompilio Mary... I want all possible charity to be shown to him, since he is a distinguished Father of that house and church. But that charity should in no way alter the orders I have given you (...); the disorders must be addressed with the proper remedies, but with the least possible murmuring and complication, from him and from his supporters.” This denunciation, made before the Cardinal, resulted in the expulsion of Pompilio Mary from Naples.

All the authorities participated in the exile of Pompilio Mary: the King, through his minister Boncone; the Archbishop, Cardinal Seriale; and, above all, his two fellow Brothers. These two provided the information and misled the authorities. There were also important individuals who wrote in his defense.

Exiled from Naples to Lugo and suspension

January-August 1759

As a result, Pompilio Mary left Naples around January 20, 1759. From this period, we have few written records; it appears that someone made them disappear. He went to Chieti, but under orders not to preach, not to hear confessions, and to remain isolated from the people. He was permitted to celebrate Mass alone. He stayed in this town for only four months, since Chieti belonged to the Kingdom of Naples and his expulsion covered the entire territory. During this short time, he left his residence only once, but received many visitors from neighboring towns and wrote several letters of spiritual direction to different monasteries.

His new assignment was Ancona, which belonged to the Roman Province but, in terms of civil jurisdiction, to the Papal States. Upon leaving Chieti and passing through the cities along his route, the same scene was always repeated: people gathered to ask for his blessing and to kiss his hands and feet. By then, it was widely known that he had the charisms of healing, discernment, prophecy, and miracles. The journey took a month. Fr. Marcantonio di Annibale, the diocesan priest who had done so much for Pompilio Mary, reported to the Father General about the marvelous events of the trip and requested permission for him to preach during Lent in his church. The Father General replied: "I take the opportunity to give you my sincere thanks, which can never equal the kindness you have shown to that Religious of our Order, whom I esteem so much (...) I am very sorry I cannot fulfill your wishes, as I have planned to assign the Father elsewhere."

Pompilio stayed in Ancona only a short time. He received a letter from the General: “The Provincial of Tuscany has shown great interest and desire to send you, at least for a time, to our house in Lugo (a very small town in Romagna, almost at the far end of Italy, on the opposite side from Naples), where we have a parish and a church with much devotion (...), a good opportunity to do good for the people and to promote the good of our Order.”

Regarding this journey, Fr. Marcantonio wrote: “I tried to ensure he would travel with plenty of white clothes and money to meet his own needs, but God, who wished him to suffer continually, caused him to fall ill at an inn after arriving in the city of Forlì. He asked to be taken to the inn for the poor, without revealing his identity, and the kind owner of the inn stole all his money and clothes. After he recovered, he continued his journey without complaint, begging for his food and necessities.”

Happy and completely in peace

September 1759-May 1762

“When I arrived in Lugo on September 23, 1759, it was Sunday. They made me understand that I would remain there only a short time.” He found in those Piarist Brothers true brothers. They worked with the poor, in a poor place, and faced the challenges of establishing a foundation in a particularly difficult location. The Canons were against them. Soon, reports about him circulated: *“He is a religious of solid virtue, fond of solitude and obedience. He gives the impression of being always happy and completely at peace with the will of God. Every day, he gains more honor. He is going to do much good in this parish.”*

With the permission of the Bishop of Imola, he went to Correggio, Lombardy, where he gave spiritual retreats to the clergy, the nuns of Saint Clare, and the people. We have a sworn testimony that reads: *“...the Father... gave spiritual exercises to the clergy of Correggio; he did so in the church of Saint Joseph of the Piarist Schools, for eight days. The clergy were not only very satisfied, but also very surprised and admired the depth of his doctrine, winning the hearts of all.”*

At the beginning of December 1760, he was asked to preach at Comacchio, the Bishop's seat. From there, he wrote four letters in which he expressed with humility and clarity: *“The Lord wants me among these works, but I do not grow tired. He is the one who does everything. He is the one who works. I am only a miserable voice crying in the desert.”* On another occasion, he wrote with the same conviction: *“As soon as I go up to the pulpit, everyone becomes excited and noisy.”*

His work schedule was as follows: *“I now have three occupations: I preach to the priests in the afternoon; during the day, to the people; and morning and afternoon, to those who are to be ordained. And the*

multitude of people who want to confess...” There is not in his letter even a note of resentment for the work we have seen before.

The year 1761 was a year of apostolic fruitfulness. The people of Lugo, who had received the Piarist Fathers with some fear, increased by those in authority, were gradually won over at all levels of society. The church of the Piarist Fathers became the center of spirituality in the city, arousing envy from members of other religious congregations. The Sisters in Lugo and nearby cities came to drink from that fountain. “*While I write,*” affirms Pompilio Mary, “*my room is full of people who come to talk, to confess, and for conversion. Oh, how much we have to do in Lugo! I live with my beloved Jesus and I want to become a saint.*”

In another letter, we see the devotion of the son of Calasanz to the Founder, at that time still Blessed: “*I have received the precious and holy relics of our Blessed Founder, and they arrived at just the right time, since now I have great need of his protection, because in this foundation we are exposed to great trials.*” And he adds: “*Here is our work: to accompany the dead, to go to the cemeteries, to sing, litanies, sermons, knapsack on the shoulders. That is all. I would like to be a hermit, but the habit requires us to be delicate, understanding, attentive to others, all for all, so that in this way we may win everyone to God. Long live Jesus! I comfort myself with my Spouse Jesus, crucified, and I exclaim with Saint Francis Xavier: more, Lord, more.*”

He faces the Inquisition: expulsion and suspension

During this year, the documents contain news that would become historic in the life of Pompilio Mary: the envy of two Religious from another Congregation was about to disturb the relative tranquility in Lugo. Fr. Vivencio Cavalleti, the representative of the Inquisition, accused him of being a false prophet. The entire town was unsettled. The nobles wrote an unsigned memorial, and the Piarist Community also came to the defense of the accused.

At the beginning of July, another obstacle arose regarding his stay in Lugo. His admirers from Ancona obtained his transfer from Fr. General, but it was not carried out due to requests from the Piarists in Lugo. It appears that a few months later, Fr. Cavalleti intercepted a letter from Pompilio to a Sister, in which he found some moral and dogmatic doubts. He sent the letter to the Bishop of Imola, who ordered the Superiors to remove Pompilio from Lugo so that the Bishop would not be obliged to revoke his permission to hear confessions. Fr. General took the opportunity to fulfill the promise made to the people of Ancona, without giving any explanation to Pompilio, and wrote to his new Rector: "He is not to hear confessions, nor preach... he is not to visit any monastery, nor write letters on his own initiative or respond to anyone from the city or Diocese of Ancona (...) I add, too, that if he receives letters from Lugo, he must give the response to you if it concerns spiritual or ascetic matters; and if it is a confessional matter, he must not reply, or if he does, he should do so only in general terms, telling the penitent that he cannot address such matters by letter. I only give him permission to hear the confessions of our Religious."

Again, the injustice and abuse made him very ill: "I go to Ancona," he writes on January 21, 1762, "out of pure obedience... although I

do not feel well, because these nerves and these viscera cause me great suffering, day and night. All this is not enough for my sins (...) I truly do not know the reason Fr. General had to give me such a sudden obedience (transfer).” He could not begin the journey before May 4: “an illness lasting three full months has prevented it... but I definitely want to leave on May 4.”

With the simplicity and truth of those who walk in the Spirit, he himself summarizes his stay in Lugo: “I have tried to work with all my strength, with zeal, separated from the world and with effort. I have not spared any work, and I hope that the seed may continue to grow. I have put things in order. I have tried to ensure that the Parish would be honored and that our habit would be greatly respected.”

“I want to be a saint and still i have not found the way”

If we consider the ironies that history presents, we can see marvelous things. On his way to Ancona, Pompilio Mary, exiled because of a letter written to a Sister, writes on May 18: “I was busy in Ravenna finishing with those good Sisters, and I had to finish immediately so as not to take more time with them, because I was really afraid of a relapse. I defended myself by not eating in the morning and taking only a small piece of fish in the afternoon.” Later, he writes to Fr. General: “I am still not completely well, but I go on little by little.”

Later, he tells Fr. General: “After that, I went to Saint Archangel of Rimini, where the Bishop wanted me to remain for a while for the solace of the Superior of a Benedictine Monastery. Later, he commanded me to give them Spiritual Exercises and to hear their confessions. I feel the obligation to tell you this, to have the merit of Obedience, as well as to ask you to really remember me in your prayers before the Lord, because these pains in my stomach and these colics make me suffer greatly. I want to become a saint and I have not yet found the way. I am completely full of self-love.”

On July 2, he is in Florence. He goes to meet the Provincial, who receives him rudely and, without consideration, sends him to the Novitiate House, where he has the occasion to say goodbye to the beloved Brothers: Frs. Talenti and Quaranda. He writes about this: “Oh, my God, what a pity those Fathers from Florence. The Provincial met me as if he did not know me. The rest of the Provincial house, as severe judges. I love them very much and I will love them, even if they are rude, because education is always beautiful in any circumstance.”

From Florence, where he stayed only one night, he went to Fano. There, he gave a spiritual retreat to the clerics, preached to the Phil-

ippine Fathers, and received a petition from the Bishop to return during Christmas for a retreat for the people and to care for the Discalced Carmelite Sisters and the Corpus Domini Monastery.

At the end of July, he arrives in Ancona for the second time, three months after he had left Lugo in a sickly state. From Fr. General, we have 50 letters about Pompilio Mary during this long period in 1762. The number indicates his concern in this matter.

“I am an ignorant, but when i go up to the pulpit...”

In mid-September, he had to return to Fano for the spiritual retreat of the Discalced Carmelite Sisters, by order of Fr. General. He remained there until mid-December. During the winter of the following year, 1763, he went to preach for Lent in Manfredonia, a town in the Kingdom of Naples. This journey was a memorable event in his life. He was occupied almost the entire year, and it was a severe test of his health and a demonstration of his heroic obedience. He responded in this way: “Regarding going to Manfredonia for Lent, I know that in those cathedrals they want eloquent preachers, with many literary flourishes, extraordinary men (...) I am not an eloquent preacher and I am not suited to entertain idle people in churches, but I am made to call people to penance, with the trumpet of the sanctuary. If they want this, wonderful, I will go. I mean, if they are satisfied with Holy Scripture and the Crucifix, yes. But if not, let them find another preacher.”

Before that daunting trip to Manfredonia, he gave a mission in Ancona, where we again see the power of the Spirit: “I am ignorant, coarse, and rude. But as soon as I ascend the pulpit, I am not myself; it is God who works, to my great confusion (...) I am very busy with general confessions. All the people have been moved by a few words I said in public. Now a great harvest is gathered.”

His deep love for the Order of the Pious Schools is expressed in these words: “I have loved my poor Order, but what have I done for her? I would now like to be a simple teacher and serve in this way our Blessed Fr. Calasanz. Oh, if I had the honor of dying for my Order!”

The fear of the difficulty of the journey made him write: “Around mid-January I would like to go to Manfredonia... You know very

well how hard the trip through the Abruzzi and Apulia is. Therefore, I would like you to consider everything, so that I may reach that city at least eight days before Lent, since the 'memento homo' (remember, man) is this year on February 18. If obedience commands it, it will be done (...). The 240 km journey was not easy through those dreadful places and in such a harsh winter.

The impatient preacher writes: "It is January 20 and still we do not leave. May God be blessed for such jokes (...). I do not feel well, suffering from these nervous pains, but as soon as obedience arrives, we will leave..." What happened? In Naples, the same authorities who had expelled him remained, although the King was no longer Charles III; and upon learning of the return of Pompilio Mary, they denied him permission to preach in the Kingdom.

Meanwhile, Fr. General writes angrily because Pompilio Mary continues preaching and hearing confessions in Ancona and because he has returned to Falco, going to Manfredonia, without knowing the revocation of the agreement.

“I remained alive by a miracle”

Until the end of the long trip, he did not know about the prohibition. His reaction was this: “Heavy, very heavy are the jokes of our Beloved Spouse. But beautiful, very beautiful. It seems I must go back again after arriving in this poor city on this journey full of many dangers and disasters. I would not say that I am angry at all because of what has happened. Never, never at all. On the contrary, I received great consolation because of it. I would like to be ready even for greater sufferings. But the inferior part does not fully accept suffering and being despised. It happens that the Spouse wants us happy during suffering, and, when one does not suffer with joy, certainly, the suffering has no value at all; it is not of any utility.”

When he wrote this letter, he had not yet become sick. But he felt that the inferior part would not obey him. Facing the sadness he felt with the prohibition, his physical strength weakened and he was bedridden for 10 months, until the end of October 1763, and even then, he was not yet completely healthy.

On September 3, Fr. General answered him that he had ordered him to return to Ancona as soon as his health would allow: “The Supreme God has wanted to keep me in a horrible state, with continuous fever and with such intensity that I have become a skeleton, and if I am living, it is by a real miracle. As soon as I see that I am able to leave, I will start for Ancona. I am afraid of the rivers and the mountain route one has to cross, but I can do everything in the One who gives me strength. Fr. General, I truly feel the hand of God upon this poor servant in all the present happenings, and I have found rest only by being alone in a small room, with God alone.”

He could not leave Manfredonia until November 4. Instead of going back through the Abruzzi, he took the road of S. German, that is, through Montecassino. Fr. General tells Fr. Rector: “You may know

that I have warned the Cardinal not to give him any work with Sisters. He has promised me that he will keep this, and in his letter he asks me to remove him from Ancona. Try, as much as you can, to have Fr. Pompilio stay there only helping in our church and not with people outside the church. The devotees of the Father should do the same; otherwise, they will lose him.”

On the road, the sick Father writes: “Full of ailments and full of infidelities to God, I left Manfredonia. The two monasteries remained in deep pain and my work has increased, having to write to so many nuns who are in need. They are jokes of our Spouse Jesus. I always sought to become a good religious and tried not to have any wish but that of God. God, God, and nothing else!”

After arriving in Foligno, he writes again: “I have been here ten full days. My stomach is destroyed by the poor meals. Monteflorido still cannot be crossed, because there the snow is as high as two men. Although I am suffering much because of the discomfort of the inn, I am happy, because in spite of everything, the will of God should be carried out in happiness. I remained alive by a miracle. I do not know how I could remain alive among so many dead persons. The wagon leader, together with the animals and the other passengers, were killed. I remained alive without knowing how.”

After crossing Monteflorido, he did not go directly to Ancona, but went ahead and arrived in Fano, where he was very well cared for by the Countess of Bertoni. In Fano, he received a letter from Fr. General telling him the reason for the expulsion from Lugo: “I am not sure if you know that all your suffering and that of the Order in Lugo, and the reason why we had to take you out of there, originated in some letters written to nuns, which fell into the hands of not so prudent persons, not to say otherwise, and after they were shown to the Bishop, it was necessary to take you out of Lugo. You write with simplicity, but if this is not accompanied by some prudence, they interpret you in a bad way, to the detriment of the one who has written them. I have made an agreement with the Cardinal so that you will only attend the services in our church, and you will not help any other monastery. Even more, you will not answer, if you receive, any letter from nuns. I thank you for the three zequinos (money) I have received. They will serve for the chapel of our Blessed Calasanz, whose works will start soon.”

Six months of relative calm and new prohibition

February-August 1764

Until the end of the long trip, he did not know about the prohibition. His reaction was as follows: “Heavy, very heavy are the jokes of our Beloved Spouse. But beautiful, very beautiful. It seems I must go back again after arriving in this poor city on this journey full of many dangers and disasters. I would not say that I am angry at all because of what has happened. Never, never at all. On the contrary, I have received great consolation because of it. I would like to be ready even for greater sufferings. But the inferior part does not fully accept suffering and being despised. It happens that the Spouse wants us to be happy during suffering, and when one does not suffer with joy, certainly, the suffering has no value at all; it is of no use.”

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The convulsions are such that they impede him to talk

Ten days later, Fr. Rector writes again: “The Father has been sick with convulsions since the afternoon of the Ascension; the convulsions are so severe that they prevent him from speaking. Moreover, the illness is such that since that afternoon he has been unable to eat or drink anything. This has been confirmed by doctors, noblemen, and myself. When he brings food or drink to his mouth, vomiting occurs, and he experiences such convulsions that he appears to be dead. Yet, by an admirable contrast that amazes everyone, he stands and walks, going alone from his room to the chapel and back. In addition, he writes about his own condition. In the morning, he goes down to the church for Communion, where he receives the host and is able to consume it, after which we find him happy. How will all this end? I do not know; the three doctors who visit him several times a day cannot predict it. He greets you reverently and asks for your blessing, but all this is done by signs.”

The strange aspect of the case is that, despite his physical condition, he retained the use of his mental faculties and, reflecting on his situation, reached notable conclusions. The first was a critical one: he knew that the General wanted him to be reintegrated into his Apulia Province, and, considering this, he stated, “Let us go slowly; let us not face this second time with the obstacles we should not have faced the first time.” The phrase is strong and implies an accusation of imprudence against those who sent him to the Manfredonia Lent.

The second conclusion was his certainty that his illness was of a psychic nature, as it had recurred every time he was exiled from a city due to problems caused by his apostolate. This is an important conclusion and confirms the interpretation we have given of his

illness, especially those episodes that occurred with the exiles from Lanciano, Naples, Lugo, and the one we are now witnessing.

The third, without doubt, was the core of the terrible trial he was enduring on this occasion: God Himself had inspired his apostolic vocation and prepared him for it. The entire reason for his existence was his vocation, and now he had to abandon, by the command of some men, the center of his apostolic work: preaching, hearing confessions, and spiritual direction. “The Cardinal has written to Fr. Rector, as a command from above, the prohibition of preaching and hearing confessions until further notice. Tell him (Fr. Provincial), by charity, to obtain for me, if I am still living, at least the faculty to hear confessions, since all this is due to the envy of a religious from another congregation in Lugo... I care nothing for myself, but rather for the honor of our Piarist habit, since I laugh at this and always repeat: more, Lord, more. We must follow Christ to Calvary, not to Tabor.”

Everything about this illness is curious, if not strange; it began on the day of the Ascension and ended on the day of the Holy Cross. During this time, he spoke (or wrote) only about the cross. This is his great lesson for us: “On the solemn day of the Holy Cross, I went to the church mute, to receive Holy Communion, and immediately decided to say Mass. During the night, in dreams, I felt as if I should say it. I did, and I continue like this (with my voice). I am a misery, and only the knowledge that it is necessary to accept suffering gives me courage. I just go on trying... I would like to go to a novitiate house as a master of novices, to be away from everything, but in the Order it is necessary neither to seek nor to reject anything.”

Another six months of waiting and suffering

September 1764-April 1765

The end of the long nervous attack did not coincide with the end of the spiritual trial Pompilio Mary was enduring. This trial lasted six months, the entire time he remained in Ancona. The cause of his suffering was different. His fifteen letters from this period reveal the nature of his struggles. When they tried to remove him from Ancona to prevent the people from learning about the punishment of the Inquisition, they considered sending him to Naples. This revived the old wound of his exile from Naples. “The matters concerning the Roman Tribunal (the Inquisition) and Naples (the possible transfer) cause me some uneasiness, since now I am in a Piarist Province that is not my own. The demon knows how well he performs his task. Please recommend me to the Lord, so that I will not be crushed by this cross of being in a foreign province and under this suspension, which I thought they would lift. The looks from my Brothers trouble me. As happens in communities, there are unfriendly looks, always tainted with small envies. I try to hide my feelings and behave appropriately, being kind and affable, treating everyone with kindness, gentleness, and submission. I do not recall ever having harmed even an ant during the years I have been in the Pious Schools. Therefore, my Spouse Jesus will have pity on my ingratitude.”

The life of the Spirit gives Pompilio Mary the freedom to speak plainly. “How many scenes have made me suffer (Jesus) in the Pious Schools! Oh, my God! And what situations! Not everyone can bear living in a foreign province. One must have a strong stomach to digest so many bitter fruits and to attend to everyone equally,

without avoiding anyone, just becoming deaf, blind, and mute, because we are 'religious' (friars), and religious people tend never to be satisfied and to desire everything for themselves, without thinking of others. That is why one needs patience and prudence."

With the same freedom with which he criticizes the negative, he praises the positive. "Give my regards to Fr. Procurator. Take good care of him and be deeply concerned for him, because at present there is a great scarcity of men of integrity. The existence of such men brings great strength to Apulia as well as to the Order. He is a jewel of our Order, and keeping him alive preserves the glory and benefit of the Pious Schools, and thus advances the honor of God."

Last trip: from Ancona to Campi

April-July 1765

The Piarist house of Campi Salentina, located in the southern part of Apulia in the Lecce region, was in poor condition internally. One embittered and unstable religious was on the verge of destroying the novitiate house, which had been founded by Calasanz himself. He sowed discord among the novices, who, without knowing the content, signed a document that was sent to the King of Naples. This document was an accusation against the Master of Novices.

Pompilio Mary had known about the situation in Campi since October 1764, as his letters show. However, he did not know that a few months later he would be transferred there. After considering the request presented by the Piarist Fathers, the Camara of Saint Clare gave its response on January 21, 1765. In this response, all the accusations against the Father from 1759, when he was exiled from the kingdom, as well as those from 1763 regarding the trip to Manfredonia, were included. It was decided that he could return to the kingdom, provided he obeyed his superiors, on the condition that he would not reside in the capital and that the local governor would send periodic reports about him.

After receiving approval, the Fathers initially considered sending him to Manfredonia but then changed their minds. Campi was thought to be the house that could benefit most from the Father's sanctity, which is why he was sent there. The obedience was signed on March 30, and on April 15 he left Ancona. He considered himself suspended until he arrived in Lecce. On July 21, he wrote in his diary that he preached for the first time in Campi. However, in October, the General reminded the Provincial that the Roman Inquisition still considered Fr. Pompilio Mary suspended.

His travel diary still exists. Its value lies in the degree of union with God that it reveals. The first thing worth noting is the names he gives to the three divine persons: my daddy, my spouse, my beloved dove. The Trinitarian rhythm continues without interruption from the start on April 15, 1765, with each day dedicated to one of the three persons.

Until the end of July that year, he recorded the places he passed through, adding small details about certain events and noting exactly where he celebrated Mass. He did not miss a single day. On rare occasions, he added the reasons for any delays in his journey.

The first stage was from Ancona to Rome. He left in good spirits. The people were moved. In Loreto, he stayed three days: "On Saturday I had the opportunity to be enclosed in the Virgin's room." Even on the third day, he said Mass in the holy chapel. "I wanted to say goodbye to the beautiful mama, but she did not want me to." On April 23, he arrived in Foligno, visited the Sisters – whose names he recorded – and on the 25th, he rested in Spoleto, a city with Franciscan memories. Two days later, he arrived in Rome: "At the customs office there was much trouble. Oh, my beloved Love, ceremonies and hand-kissing; in this way the first day in Rome ended." "On April 30, it was your day, oh my beloved Daddy, and I left Rome. Although they did not want me to leave... I said Mass on the altar of our Blessed Father Calasanz."

The second stage was again in the Abruzzi. Three days of travel took him through Rieti and Aquila, and on the fourth day he met his good friend D. Marcantonio. With him, he visited the neighboring towns, where he had done so much good with his "eccentricities" almost twenty years before.

“I see that god wants something great”

On the way from Chieti to Sulmona, the person who was supposed to take him on horseback robbed him of everything and abandoned him. On May 22, he entered Aversa, where he stayed for six days. On the 30th, in the afternoon, he arrived at his native place, Montecalvo. Only four of his brothers were still living. He left his hometown on June 17. For him, the years he had spent away from his town felt like centuries. What an abyss between the young, impulsive man who ran away to the novitiate and the “grown-up” mystic, imbued with the Holy Trinity! One testimony from that time states that he was the first to introduce the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and – according to the witness – “at the request of my mother, he wrote the novena”. At the same time, people believed that some of the events that occurred during those days in Montecalvo were miracles of God to honor his servant.

On the 21st, he arrived in Trani, where he stayed for a week, without explaining the reason in his diary. In Lecce, a beautiful city on the Salentine peninsula and the capital of the region, he stayed eight days, accompanied by the War Commissary, an old spiritual friend of the Father. He was the one who took him by ship to Campi, ten miles from Lecce, and who informed people in the nearby towns about his arrival so they could benefit from the sanctity of Pompilio Mary. The date was July 12, 1765.

Upon arriving in Campi, his diary continues for one month before his death, but we find in it only one thing: the unchanging repetition of the names of the Holy Trinity. It could be said that nothing in this world could draw him away from intimacy with God, a true prelude to what eternity will be; but he did not fall into apostolic

inactivity – on the contrary. When we read his correspondence, we are struck by the contrast with this apparent monotony: Pompilio Mary, who writes to Brother Pedro, is an active Pompilio, who goes about serving people, giving advice, and remedying almost everything; and he suffers over trivial things.

“God keeps me alive thanks to a miracle of the Beautiful Mama. And I see and touch with my hands that God wants something great... The honor of God should take precedence over our comfort... This is the only reason for my working, sleeping, and eating: the glory of God, the glory of God, and nothing else.” This is the spiritual world in which the Father lived, the one that explains his great activity and its success. He failed to open the school in Lecce, but he succeeded in transforming the Community of Campi.

“He had asked for a place to make penance”

The Piarists in Campi had caused serious scandals among the people and in the province of Lecce. Driven by rivalries, the two factions sought help outside the community, even appealing to the King of Naples. Pompilio Mary's descriptions of the situation are dire: “What can I tell you, my beloved Pedro, about the school? Here, the situation is absurd: everyone is in a bad mood; the Prussian birds are fighting the Austrians; terrible faces everywhere. There is no concord or religious harmony; minds are muddled; there is little fear of God; nothing resembling observance; nothing of good manners, good behavior, or charity; everyone is at odds; the queen of all virtues, that is, paternal discretion, does not exist here (...).”

“What confusion! Flee, flee from these cruel lands. They are truly Prussians. I could not believe such rudeness and such lack of gentility. Flee, flee... I would run to Lecce, from there to Trani, from Trani to Foggia, to Manfredonia, or if not, to Ancona (...). Long live always my spouse Jesus, who wants me to stay in Campi, where I am truly disgusted because I see nothing but strange rudeness and witness only behavior far from religious charity (...).”

“I had asked my spouse to take me to a place where I could do penance for my sins. And He has truly chosen the right one for my nature, for any uneducated behavior causes me terrible pain in every sense. There is talk of the canonization of our Blessed Father; I would like the Pious Schools to be canonized, and for us to begin to see in ourselves piety and not rudeness, piety and not falsehood, piety and not pride and arrogance, piety and not servility in the service of God, Supreme Good, who wants to be served with joy, confidence, and gracefulness, and who wants us to be very sensitive

to the essentials of the Liturgy (...). The Lay Brothers are a group of rascals and pigs, who have no fear of God and do not know what it means to work for God. They are in great need of being recommended to God, since anything else is a waste of time.”

We have read a picture of the situation. His letters give us hints about the remedy he envisioned: “I give hints with good manners, I smile, I make fun and try to joke (...). If I had to remain in Campi, I would focus on four essential points: the chapel, the dining room, where we eat like pigs... since they feed the dogs and cats using the same plates that are used for the Fathers...”

Soon he had the opportunity to put his plan into practice: the Rector resigned and was replaced by him on August 24. Along with the role of Superior, he took care of the novices, although he was never officially appointed Master of Novices. Just a month after taking on the responsibility, he writes: “I see that things are changing quickly. I hope that all the disorders will be easily remedied, and especially that we will be able to set a good example for the people (...). The school seems different: everyone tries to take care of themselves, they agree to follow me because I treat them with charity. No more Prussian faces. I encourage them to talk in the dining room and during recreation. I personally supervise the kitchen and the dining room. If it were not for the expenses in the chapel, where I am making new pews, a seat for the Superior, and an altar, I would also make some repairs in the offices. But I cannot. I am troubled by the church, which lacks sacred items (...). I promise myself to visit the classrooms regularly. I will try to show the lay people what our Institute is, and I will guide the teachers as much as possible (...). Little by little, I will try to understand the finances and will inform you about them. I have not seen the books yet.”

Two months before his death, he writes: “I have already written to you about the two novices who took the habit. They behave well. I attend to and educate them according to my spirit – study and piety – and I do it with fervor (the Piarist motto is ‘piety and learning’). Now, the Piarist habit is honored throughout Campi, and thanks are given to the Lord for the calm after so many storms. Everything runs like clockwork (...). The whole weight of the house is on my shoulders. The good treasurer Father is sick... and I have to think about the daily food, and only God knows how we can get it. But more, Lord, more.”

‘The things you are accusing me, have never crossed my mind’

And he had to suffer even more: “I cannot imagine how it was possible that our good Fr. Procurator General would dare to write to me, without any foundation, a letter so terribly strong. I will remember it all my life. The things you are accusing me of have never crossed my mind, not even in dreams. I do not pretend to become a Provincial, nor a Rector, nor even anything at all, since I am here in Campi as a poor Lay Brother, serving the Community. Let us be happy and put away our pains. Let us love God and everything will go well.”

For the first time, he became ill from great distress. But the letter of November 21 shows that he was suffering from a deep sense of guilt that caused him pain, as he wrote to Bro. Pedro: “Although I have been for a long time in the Institute, I have not yet become accustomed to receiving blows from the hands of the Lord, who is all love, although I know very well that everything is allowed by the will of God, who does everything for our good. Write to me telling me that you forgive me. In this way, I will be at peace and I will have consolation.”

The feeling of guilt was always with him, although it never crushed him; his mystical life saved his weak and peculiar psyche. What he did during his last year of life shows this perfectly: he shared his psychic and spiritual life with his Brothers and with the whole town of Campi.

Pompilio Mary wanted to begin the year 1788 with an act very important to him: the erection of the Way of the Cross. During the sermon, he compared the Passion of Christ to a ship, able to save everyone in the sea of this world, because it has the merits of Christ.

Ordinary people and important persons from the whole province of Lecce gave themselves to the Father. The help they gave him dur-

ing the terrible famine at the end of 1765 and the beginning of 1766 shows that he reached their consciences. Without this, the Piarist Father would not have been able to carry out the humanitarian feat he accomplished with the poor people of the area, according to the records we keep. During the process of canonization, people spoke of miracles and the multiplication of goods. We are sure he performed them more than once, because the scarcity was terrible and the hunger was extraordinary, and tradition says that the saint would put a piece of bread in his pocket or knapsack and go visiting the hungry, sharing bread and never running out.

He also found time to personally attend to the nuns and answer hundreds of letters. “The nuns of Saint Clare say that they have never received any spiritual retreat of this kind. I did not want to receive anything from the nuns. It is enough for me to work for the glory of God and the honor of our habit. The War Commissary pays for my mail, which I receive in great quantity. If it were not for such a good servant of God, what could I do? The letters I have to answer to the Romana make me really poor.”

The fruits of his work are felt, and he knows it. “Here in Campi, the holy peace is felt like a gentle breeze. Everybody fulfills his duty. The classrooms are many, and I cannot complain about the teachers, who see me on the alert at the entrance of the classroom.”

We reach May, just two months before his death. His concern for the material things of the house accompanied him until the end. “I take care of the economy; the religious would like to spend much, but I allow them just the right amount and no more. I assure you that the house is not in debt except to me, because all the alms that arrive, I put them into the economy and I have not been able to receive back even a cent. I have cultivated the lands, even though some legal papers are missing, which I have ordered to be prepared; I have tried to put the archive in order, since everything was in such a mess that it was a shame.”

A mystic with his feet on the ground

It is truly heartening to read these details about the household economy of a man who stood at the pinnacle of the mystic path: “I watch over the household economy because there is no permanent contribution; there is no wine or oil, and vegetables are very expensive. I manage as best I can. I save as much as possible so I can give the Brothers some money and clothes at Christmas, according to our statutes. I am obliged to ask Mr. Andre Maddalo, who helps me greatly, but they are lay people and look after their own interests, not ours. In summary, the household economy worries me because the year is rather bad throughout the Lecce province, with everything in short supply, especially wine, oil, and vegetables. This year, there are not even dried figs in Campi. The year is very bad, and you cannot imagine the situation of all the poor, whom I help in some way through various alms, giving them a piece of bread – not from the school, because we have none, but from some people who send me bread, which I share. There is a terrible outcry. Everything is sold at a very high price, far too much, and it is necessary to buy some garlic, wine, and vegetables at a very high price.”

And like a seagull that rises from the earth to the highest point in heaven, he writes: “Let us remove from our side what is a stumbling block for us. Let us seek only God. We will meet God in eternity; other things cannot be found in eternity! Everything grows old, but God never grows old, never! Let us love God and we will have everything!”

It is clear that his room became a place of encounter for many priests who had begun to receive spiritual direction from this remarkable spiritual leader. “Here, my beloved Pedro, I cannot breathe because priests are continually coming to my room, and I would like to lose myself in a hermitage. I have a certain warmth that opens the unripe pineapples that are the people from Campi.”

Pompilio Mary sensed his end approaching, and it made him grow in love. “I take on the responsibility of Superior in this poor house of the novitiate, with four novices, during a year of great scarcity. I have no other help but my beloved God. My God and my all. I have God, and in this way I have everything, and I seek nothing else but the will of God in all my actions. My beloved Fr. Parish Priest: let us see each other in God and hope to meet again in the beautiful celestial land, so we may joyfully sing ‘holy, holy, holy Lord God.’ We have known each other in this world, though for a short time, but we will meet again in heaven, in the happy possession of God. This world is a passing show, just a simple distribution of roles in a comedy. Everything passes: Paradise, paradise, as the great Saint Philip Neri used to say.”

It seems that during the months of May and June, his soul experienced a deepening of the mystery of God and of his surrender to Him: “I find myself with God, in God, in God. It is there that I place my confidence and where I have always placed my confidence. The way is to accept the will of God – in the words of Pompilio Mary, ‘the wish of God’ – and always and only to seek His glory. Anyway, my son, I seek only the glory of God and I taste only God, the love of God before which I bow my head. I venerate the divine conduct (the way God works) and I adore what my beloved God permits, because the owner of time is God, in whom all time is found. We should always await what God wants to do, according to His divine and eternal dispositions.”

“I always adore more and more the way of god’s acting”

The catalogue of Campi’s house states the following, five months before his death: “Rector, public confessor, in charge of the archives and of the general and the money box key of the Religious, Lent and yearly preacher, learned man and a saint.”

Considering the general transfers after the chapters, Pompilio Mary felt he was going to be moved: “I think that I have to go out during these hot months to Apulia (...) The people from Campi are disturbed and afraid of my departure. But I am with my beloved God... God and nothing else. I adore more and more the way God works.” In fact, on May 19, he was elected Provincial Assistant.

But these were not the plans of his beloved Spouse. Fr. Antonio Mary Albanese wrote: “On Sunday, July 13, after he had celebrated Mass and preached to the people, he went to the confessional; but I was informed that he had fainted. We took him to his room, where he sat on a chair, refusing to rest on the bed. On Monday, he went with me to the church to receive the Eucharist. He received the Holy Viaticum at two thirty. On Tuesday, being unable to go downstairs, I brought the Holy Eucharist to his room, and around two in the afternoon, we gave him the Last Unction. During his agony, he was assisted by the entire clergy of Campi and by many gentlemen who remained until he gave his soul to the Creator at sunset. He died seated on his trunk (...) He was truly zealous and tireless in his apostolic life. Neither I nor the other Fathers of the Community knew of his illness, although he had already been suffering for thirteen days, since he would get up in the morning with a fever, and even at night, to celebrate Mass and preach to the people. After that, tirelessly, he would sit in the confessional and distribute the

Eucharist until noon. At lunch, he would come to the dining room and read. In the morning, he answered letters, exposed the Blessed Sacrament for adoration, and gave meditations and talks, accompanied by the rosary. In the afternoon, he attended the Community prayer and supper, and although present in the dining room, he would not eat at night or at lunch. He continued to hear confessions (...) even though he had a fever.”

His great friend Fr. Juan Francisco de Nobili ensured that the memory of the extraordinary events after his death was preserved. But it is not necessary to repeat that above these extraordinary events, there is the miracle of his life, lived in union with God and in service to men and women. On March 19, 1943, Pope Pius XI declared him a saint.

A letter of Saint Pompilio Mary Pirrotti

Be a saint, be a true son of the great Calasanz – that is, a person of peaceful habits, humble and modest. Do not worry, since you have a natural tendency toward anxiety. Let us not be preoccupied with the things of this miserable world: God, only God – my God and my all.

Love God, love Him, my son, with your whole heart, and do not worry about anything else. Always strive to be a good religious, having no will but that of God: God, God, God, and nothing else. Be modest, do not be curious, do not concern yourself with Roman greatness; to be, to have been, to be in the future – three garlands without flowers. Take care to meditate on eternity; think about the eternal years, and in that way I will love you in God, and we will see each other in God and again in the world, when God wills, on whom we depend.

We religious think very little about eternity; we must admit this with shame, since often religious do not seek God, but each seeks himself and works for himself. We do not seek the honor of God or the honor of the habit; we seek our own advantage. From this comes the relaxation of religious houses.

But you must answer with the Holy Apostle, as a brave and good disciple of Joseph Calasanz: Everything that was a gain for me, I have counted as loss compared to Christ. Without God, everything is emptiness, and the only profit is to gain Christ, serving Him faithfully and striving to be detached from everything, even from oneself. So many lay brothers of many religious orders have become saints! You know many cases, and you must become a saint – think about that. Be a good brother: humble, charitable, respectful, modest, kind, loving poverty, and thrifty in using the things of the house. Poverty is a great vow for us, and it is practiced especially by living with parsimony.

Never be negligent in prayer, where you will always find light to order your life in all circumstances. But if someday you live in spiritual darkness and dryness, persevere in prayer even more until God illumines your mind with clarity. Beware of the devil's cunning, who with his tricks tries to keep us from prayer; without it, the spiritual edifice collapses and all virtues die out, just as a plant dries up unless we water it at the proper time.

Take utmost care to become a saint, but according to the ways chosen by Jesus; never seek other ways. Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament may become your medicine, always keeping you sound in soul and body. Never be discouraged; strive only to please God. Frequently implore the help of the Virgin Mary and pray to her with simplicity: My beloved Lady, hurry to help me; never abandon me, but help me to become more pleasing to my Lord Jesus.

While you suppress your passions and seek the death of your own will, in order to properly integrate what is in confusion, always keep a joyful spirit, since you are working for eternity.