

# **ARCHIVIO MADRI NIGRIZIA**

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**PUBLICATION OF THE *STUDIUM* MADRI NIGRIZIA**

**COMBONI MISSIONARY SISTERS 'PIE MADRI DELLA NIGRIZIA' - ROME**

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**THE CONGREGATION  
OF THE  
PIE MADRI  
DELLA NIGRIZIA**

*S/2*

**From the death of the Founder  
till the First General Chapter  
(1881 – 1898)**

**Mother Maria Bollezzoli (1828–1901)**  
First General Superior of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*

*“Dearest Daughters, Take courage! Be strong and generous. Don’t be disheartened and don’t lose hope. Remain constant and unwavering in the place assigned to you by Divine Providence. Do not turn back, but walk confidently in the footsteps indicated to you by your magnanimous Father. Listen to how he calls you from the mountain summit which he has now reached: Go ahead, Go ahead!” ...*

(Maria Bollezzoli, 18<sup>th</sup> of October 1881)



## Introduction

*“The truly capable woman – who can find her? She is far beyond the price of pearls ... she gets up while it is still dark, giving her household their food, giving orders to her servant girls ... She holds out her hands to the poor ... She is clothed in strength and dignity ... When she opens her mouth, she does so wisely”... (Proverbs, 31, 10-26).*

The historical period of the Congregation which is taken into consideration in this second volume, runs from the death of the Founder (1881) until the first General Chapter (1898). Therefore, we are considering almost twenty years of history at the end of which the young Institute will have completed its period of gestation, a period characterized by the figure of the Founder, and it will officially become a feminine missionary congregation of pontifical right.

We Comboni Missionary Sisters could say that now is the moment of the Mother, the time of **Maria Bollezzoli**. If it had not been for her, a faithful, strong and courageous woman, we would probably not exist today.

Daniel Comboni recognized this, and wrote to Fr. Francesco Giulianelli, *“My Sister Superior in Verona is an angel, and thoroughly well-intentioned.”* (W. 6013) *“She is a woman of piety, of principle, far-sighted and with common sense, even if she is shy, most humble and self dismissive”* (W. 7102).

In her, he had, without a doubt, recognized, *“the woman he had been looking for”*, the indispensable collaborator in the feminine apostolic ministry in Central Africa.

### **Very discreet, but equally determined**

Maria Bollezzoli could indeed have been shy and humble and, therefore, have a tendency to lack confidence in herself, but she believed firmly in God who had called her to offer her contribution, alongside Daniel Comboni, to the realization of the great **Plan** for the regeneration of Africa.

She had also understood, in those rare fleeting moments in which she had found herself beside the great apostle, how vitally important the presence of *women of the Gospel* was in carrying out the Combonian mission.

Unfortunately, due to his premature death, the Founder had left an inheritance which was weighty, and difficult to manage. Nevertheless, sustained in this task also by the rector of the Institute, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti, the Mother never doubted, and she was able to communicate also to the young missionary women entrusted to her care, this conviction that the Founder, “*from the summit of the mountain which he had now reached*”, spurred them on and encouraged them to go ahead, despite the difficulties of that moment. Those difficulties were not lacking, even if the Church, through the voice of *Propaganda Fide*, gave its support, assuring its desire to give continuity to the mission in Sudan.

### **The ‘sign’ of increasing numbers of vocations**

Despite the fact that *La Nigrizia* – the successor of the *Annali del Buon Pastore* – never remained silent about what was happening in the Sudan during the tragic period of the Mahdist Revolution, the number of young aspirants who came to knock on the door of *Santa Maria in Organo* continued to grow rather than diminish. Nevertheless, incredibly, to many of them, Maria Bollezzoli had to say no; there was not enough room in the house; there were insufficient resources to offer a good preparation. The successors of Daniel Comboni and their collaborators demonstrated that they had not grasped in full the great intuitions of the Apostle of *Nigrizia*.

This was a setback which required patience, forbearance, capacity to resist and much faith.

Sometimes, in fact, the darkness thickened so much that at times it

seemed that the luminous flame, held high until the end by Daniel Comboni, risked being extinguished by those who came after him.

Instead, to those who knew how to read events through the eyes of faith, it appeared between the lines that, in reality, what was being written by us as the missionary Church was another page of salvation history.

It was a story that Jesus and his disciples had lived before us. After the radiant dawn of resurrection and a springtime full of promise, the dark and cold of a long winter night descended, awaiting for a new more favourable season to begin, and for the seed, hidden in the womb of the earth to re-emerge and blossom with the promise of abundant fruit.

But it was necessary to believe, to be patient, and to keep the lamp of hope alight...

### **Approval of the Rules: mission accomplished!**

When *Propaganda Fide* finally approved the Constitutions of the congregation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* in February 1897, Mother Maria Bollezzoli understood that the dark night was about to give way to a promising dawn. Certainly, not all the difficulties had been overcome: the Missionary Institute in which the congregation had been born, no longer existed. So, now there was no 'mother', but rather, a twin congregation. The mission in Sudan had been entrusted to the *Sons of the Sacred Heart (Figli del Sacro Cuore)* and in addition, 'administrative separation' was being talked about...

Although she had been officially confirmed as Superior General by the first General Chapter of the Congregation in 1898, Mother Bollezzoli knew, however, that the moment had come for her to pass on the flame: a glowing flame with a fine reserve of pure oil.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 1901, she did just that, passing on the responsibility to that dear daughter, Costanza Caldara, whom the Founder himself had suggested.

It is an important period in our history which is not always easy to revisit due to so many gaps in the correspondence.

Despite that limit, we have been able to identify and highlight the thread that runs through these events, to grasp their significance and catch a glimpse of their importance so as to read this chapter of our history in the light of the development of our charism, taking stock at the same time both of the original tree and also of new and surprising buds.

May Saint Daniel Comboni, who was always foresighted remain with us in our reading, helping us to perceive the 'newness' hidden between the lines.

## 1.

### Onward: the mission continues!

*“Steep is the path, thorny the road, but your Founder mapped it out for you, therefore place your feet into His footsteps”...*

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 1881, when the news of the death of the Founder arrived in Verona, Maria Bollezzoli was in the Mother House alone, because the Rector had left for Rome. Therefore, it was Cardinal Canossa\* himself who *“with paternal kindness”* went *“in person, to give the sad news to Maria Bollezzoli and the Sisters”*.<sup>1</sup>

The anonymous author of the short volume mentioned above, does not reveal whether Luigi di Canossa expressed to the Superior of the Convent the same apprehension and the doubts that he shared in writing the following day with Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti.

*“My Comboni, dead at the age of 50?”*, one can read in that letter. *“Oh, my God. Unfathomable are your decrees. Give me the strength to align my own will with your adorable will. What a shock!!!”*

*And now, what is to be done? I certainly cannot and must not give myself over to directing such an important mission. Instead, while celebrating this morning for the dear deceased Monsignor, a thought came to my mind that might just be an inspiration. That thought was to hand over the entire mission to the prodigious Don Bosco”...*<sup>2</sup>

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\*For the biographical details of persons marked with an asterisk (\*), see the **Index of Names**

<sup>1</sup> *Nella Luce di un Cinquantesimo...* p. 55

<sup>2</sup> Canossa to Sembianti, Verona, 13<sup>th</sup> of October 1881. In ACR, A/38/45/2. Such an inspiration coming from Canossa should not surprise us, since Daniel Comboni, one month before dying was complaining with *Propaganda Fide* that the Bishop of Verona was not always *“serious, positive, firm, generous and coherent in regard to the mission”* (W. 6999).

## **Ready for everything, even at the cost of my life**

In contrast with the bishop, but faithful to the commitment which he himself had asked her to assume, Maria Bollezzoli, did not rush to write immediately in the days following that painful and worrying announcement.

Without a doubt, she wanted first to pray together with the community of the Mother House, at that time, four professed sisters, twelve novices and four postulants, seeking what may be the will of God for the future which presented itself now full of unknown factors.

Six days later, however, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October, the reply became clear to her mind and spirit. It was an urgent reply to be communicated especially to those daughters who were far and who had lost, as well as their Founder, also a third sister less than a month earlier.<sup>3</sup> Now that the Founder was no more, the Mother felt that it was up to her, first and foremost, to gather his inheritance and sustain the young missionary women on their journey. Therefore, she opened her heart and began to write:

***“Dearest Sisters in Jesus Christ,***

*[...].*

*The very sad news of the death of our Head and Leader struck me like a bolt of lightning and I could not bring myself to believe it, but... Oh! What a terrible tragedy! That ruthless sickle which struck down such a precious life was cruel indeed! Oh, the mysterious designs of God are so unfathomable! And now, what is to be done?... We call to our assistance religion and faith, and these inseparable companions whom God placed at our side will help us to understand that we have a Father above who sees all, who knows all and with great wisdom directs all. They will show us how nothing escapes that divine eye which penetrates even the most secret places of the heart, making us bow our heads and consent to the most wise will of Him who loves us with a love pure and true and enabling us to say more with the heart than with our lips: “fiat voluntas tua”.*

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<sup>3</sup> With the death of **Maria Rosa Colpo** on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September 1881, the number of young *Pie Madri* who had died in Sudan had now risen to three. [See, *AMN*, 10(2005)39-62]

*My Dearest, I imagine your desolation and I sympathise with you. You are right to cry, for the life that is now spent was precious. But take heart, and do not fear. Our beloved Father is not dead. He lives. He lives that joyous eternal life that will never end and is free from every care. He lives with the life and the beatitude of God. He is blessed. He is now held in the embrace of that Supreme Good for whose glory he sacrificed his life and from that blessed home he looks on his children and protects them. He looks on them and smiles, he looks on them and is pleased with the works they are doing. He looks on them and implores from the Eternal One, blessings and graces. Oh, generous Father, pray for all your children, present and future so that strong and constant in that difficult context, they may save the souls of the sons of Cam from the cruel grasp of the enemy of redeemed humanity. Pray that the sacred fire of the charity of Christ may reign not only among us, but may also extend itself beyond us [...]. Pray that the beautiful peace that dwells among us may always be conserved to the end of our days and that sacred bond which once gathered us will not be eternally broken.*

*Dearest Daughters, take courage, be strong and generous, don't lose heart and don't be dismayed, but constant and brave, maintain the place assigned to you by Divine Providence. Do not turn back but walk confidently in the footsteps mapped out for you by our magnanimous Father. Listen to how he calls you from the summit of the mountain which he has now reached. He cries out to you: Onward! Onward! He keeps the flag flying and he invites you to climb. Steep is the path, thorny the road, but your Father mapped it out for you, so place your feet into his footsteps. Do not doubt. He will hold out his hand to you and help you in this difficult mission. Keep your eyes always on him and you will certainly overcome all your difficulties. Be worthy imitators of your Father here below and with him you will share his glory above. My Dearest, my incompetence and misery are well known to you. You know how little I am worth, but whatever I can do for you, I am willing to do it without reserve. I am ready for everything, even if it may cost me my life.*

*But I ask you to be constant and faithful to the end. Always conserve among you that beautiful peace and holy harmony so that sufferings and pain may be felt less. Repeat often that sweet Fiat which from the Father's*

*breast once drew out the Divine word; that Fiat which well meditated calms every pain and soothes every wound; that Fiat which allows us to conform to that loving divine will which makes us forget ourselves and aim only at pleasing our lovable Jesus.*

*Dearest, how willingly I would embrace you once more! But the will of God requires us to be separated. So, let it be. We shall embrace in Paradise from where, if I am given to enter, I will be close to you and we shall be united eternally, never more to be separated. And if I must be far, I will content myself with seeing you rejoice with your dear African children who increase your joy and weave gems on your crowns [...].*

*The Reverend Superiors are absent, but I imagine that from where they are, they bless you [...]. Enter into the Sacred Heart of Jesus and there repeat often, may the Divine dispositions be adored.*

*In Jesus, your most affectionate Mother,  
Sr. Maria Bollezzoli”<sup>4</sup>.*

In another letter addressed to Faustina Stampais on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1881, Mother Bollezzoli repeated:

*“Truly just is your sorrow, dearest daughter in Jesus Christ because great is the loss you have suffered [...]. Yes, dearest, that Father who gained the admiration of all those who had the privilege of knowing him is now in heaven. The earth is no longer worthy to contain him. However, he left as a legacy to his children, in whom he lives on, his heroic virtues. New apostles, moved by his example, will always arise and walk in his footsteps and rush to catechize the poor sons of Cam”...<sup>5</sup>.*

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<sup>4</sup> Bollezzoli to all the communities, 18<sup>th</sup> of October 1881. In APMR, VI/B/1/2–888.

<sup>5</sup> Bollezzoli to Stampais, 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1881. In ACR, A/31/15. See, AMN, 8(2004)108-109. Number 8 of AMN is dedicated entirely to **Faustina Stampais**.

## Encouragement from Rome

Like the Mother, also the rector of the Institute seemed to have no doubts, right from the beginning, regarding the continuation of the mission. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 1881, in fact, while he was in Rome, he wrote to Fr. Francesco Giulianelli\*, who was at that time the Superior of the Combonian Institutes in Cairo, as follows:

*“Very Reverend Fr. Francesco,*

*As I arrived here on the evening of the 12<sup>th</sup> for the Brown affair, I immediately received the very sad news which you had sent by telegram on the same day to His Eminence, the Cardinal Prefect, Simeoni.*

*What a blow! None of us expected it ... May the divine dispositions be adored! [...].*

*The Cardinal Prefect is studying how to come to the aid of the troubled mission as early as possible. [...].*

*I feel that, in order to give some relief to the suffering they will be feeling in Khartoum, Obeid and Nuba, it would be better to send them a telegram telling them that His Eminence, Cardinal Simeoni **has the mission at heart and he is ready to help it in any way.** This is what I have understood from His Eminence in these last few days”...<sup>6</sup>*

A week later, on his return to Verona, Giuseppe Sembianti once again reassured [him]: *“I repeat that Propaganda is very interested in the Mission. Tell this also to the lay people and the Sisters so that they may be cheerful, and confident in the Lord”...<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Sembianti to Giulianelli, Rome, 15<sup>th</sup> of October 1881. In ACR, A/28/24/49.

<sup>7</sup> Sembianti to Giulianelli, Verona, 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 1881. In ACR, A/28/24/50.

## The Missionary men and women in the field also agree

*“The example of the endless confidence in Divine Providence which our distinguished deceased had, inspired us and having inherited it, it gave us strength during the difficult trial.”*

(Giovanni Losi, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 1881)

Despite the fact that, after the death of Bishop Comboni, the shadow of Sister Death continued to threaten the Vicariate of Central Africa<sup>8</sup>, the spirit of the missionaries was not subdued. On the contrary, they made sure that they let us know that even under “*the weight of the heavy Cross which the Good Jesus,*” had designed for their shoulders<sup>9</sup>, the mission would “*go ahead in the same manner as it had before*”<sup>10</sup>

The one common hope of all of them, in fact, was to remain where they were, in faithfulness to the oath made to their Father, gathering up his inheritance and realizing the Plan of missionary expansion set out by him.

In fact, Giovanni Losi\* wrote to Sembianti, after learning that he had been appointed interim Superior of the mission,<sup>11</sup> “*There is a need of some missionaries from Europe in order to establish the new station [Golfan] already settled and agreed upon by poor Monsignor*”. Less than two months later, the same Losi repeated in a letter of his to *Propaganda Fide*:

*“The members of the mission, while experiencing great suffering for the loss of their leader and of other companions, are not, however, disheartened. The luminous example of confidence which he left us as our inheritance,*

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<sup>8</sup> “*In Africa, poor souls, they are all suffering*”, Giuseppe Sembianti commented on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1881, when writing to Fr. Francesco Giulianelli. A week later he added, “*I received news that Vittoria [Paganini] was also in danger of death, but that by the 15<sup>th</sup> she was out of danger.*” (ACR, A/28/24/53).

<sup>9</sup> Grigolini to Giulianelli, El Obeid, 28<sup>th</sup> of October, 1881, in *AMN*, 12(2006)107.

<sup>10</sup> Grigolini to an uncle, El Obeid, 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1881, in *AMN* (12(2006)112.

<sup>11</sup> Losi to Sembianti, El Obeid, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 1881. In *ACR*, A/27/14/4.

*after having raised up this mission from nothing, providing it with sufficient resources under our very eyes, persuades us that it will be much less difficult to conserve and advance this work which has already been started well” ...<sup>12</sup>*

Even before him, from far off Delen, Fr. Luigi Bonomi had reassured the Rector of Verona, saying:

*“Only yesterday we received the sad news [...]. We were neither prepared nor disposed ... [but]:*

*All of us in Khartoum, El Obeid and Nuba, while we have felt an irreparable loss, we are not less deeply resolved to continuing the mission with that strength and grace that the Lord gives us. Even if we are not worthy of bearing much fruit, we are still disposed to suffer for Jesus Christ and for His glory”...<sup>13</sup>*

*“The mission is the work of God”, he echoed what Amalia Andreis had written to her father, and He will protect and keep it. The Lord entrusted his vineyard to Monsignor Daniel Comboni. We hope and pray that He will leave it to his beloved Sons and Daughters”...<sup>14</sup>*

One can understand then, from affirmations like these quoted above, why the Editor of the *Annali del Buon Pastore*, after having commented on the repercussions felt in the Institute at the death of the Founder, was able to write:

*“At the announcement of the death of Monsignor Daniel Comboni, there was great dejection among us all. Those who were more acquainted with how this arduous work was sustained, could have been also filled with doubts, at two levels. First of all, now that Monsignor Comboni was no more, would his mission be able to stand firm? [...] and secondly, would his missionaries and sisters remain in the field, or would they abandon the work?*

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<sup>12</sup> Losi to Simeoni, El Obeid, 17<sup>th</sup> of January 1882. In APF, Afr. C, vol. 9(1882)345.

<sup>13</sup> Bonomi to Sembianti, Delen, 7<sup>th</sup> of November, 1881. In ACR, A/26/12/9.

<sup>14</sup> AMN, 4(2002)85. Number 4 of AMN is dedicated to Amalia Andreis.

*We confess the truth; that neither one or other of these doubts arose for us [...].*

*The continuation or the cessation of a Catholic mission does not depend on whether a person, even one as apt and worthy for such a mission as our sorely missed Monsignor, exists or is no longer there.*

*Neither did the Missionaries and Sisters who found themselves in Africa have any such thoughts about this [...]. There was no place in us for such fears. They were far from our minds. Indeed, it would be insulting to our dear companions in the field, whose temperament, courage and feelings we well know, to think such a thing. In reality, the facts prove that we have hit the nail on the head”...<sup>15</sup>*

Without a doubt, one of the most meaningful facts, was the decision to carry on with the expansion of the mission which had been planned for by the beloved deceased. This is something which they would have done, if *Progaganda Fide* had not intervened, informing Sembianti that “*until the new head of the mission had been appointed*” it was not appropriate to make any radical changes “*neither in the Institutes nor in the Vicariate*”...<sup>16</sup>

### **New candidates begin to enter again in Verona**

In 1881, the last aspirant to enter the Congregation was Caterina Gerstmanns, originally from Belgium. She was received in Verona on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May.

Following this, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September, the postulants, Diomira Vaj, Leopolda Sandonà and Maria Dallabetta were admitted to vestition. After this, for reasons which are not clear, even to Maria Bollezzoli, the admission of new candidates was suspended and none of the novices that year were admitted to first profession.

Mother Bollezzoli confided in Faustina Stampais, “*I spoke with the Reverend Rector regarding the acceptance and promotion of candidates and he feels it is better to wait until he knows something about the last wishes of*

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<sup>15</sup> ANNALI, 27(1882)10-11.

<sup>16</sup> Sembianti to Giulianelli, 8<sup>th</sup> of February 1882. See, ACR, A/28/25/6.

*our sorely missed Monsignor. About this, nothing is known yet. I don't know how to interpret this mystery. FIAT! Here too we also have aspirants and candidates waiting, but we shall await further instructions" ...*<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, Sembianti also wrote, *"With regards to vestition and the profession of new sisters, I have decided to do nothing while things are provisional. I was also not able to ask His Eminence Cardinal Canossa about this. If everything goes well, a part of the period of postulancy can be counted as noviciate. This is what I think and do."*<sup>18</sup>

***"On the coming 19<sup>th</sup>, glorious feast of our patron, Saint Joseph, there will be two postulants receiving the habit. May the Lord make these two young candidates [...] become two excellent Sisters, capable of the sublime mission to which they are destined. Let us pray"***.<sup>19</sup>

The two young women finally admitted to the noviciate were Carolina Milani and Anna Giamella. The decision, it seems, was taken by Sembianti himself, who, approximately two months earlier, had written to Fr. Francesco Giulianelli:

*"I spoke with His Eminence, Cardinal Canossa about the vestitions and professions and he told me that he had no authority in this. I have no vestition ceremony, but I count the time which passes as noviciate for those who are suitable candidates. I admit people according to the actual needs" ...*<sup>20</sup>

Sembianti's way of expressing himself does not allow us to clearly understand his policy towards the feminine Institute. Did he also admit young female candidates according to the needs of the mission, or according to whether he deemed them suitable?

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<sup>17</sup> Bollezzoli to Stampais, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 1881. In APMR, VI/B/3/40-591.

<sup>18</sup> Sembianti to Giulianelli, Verona, 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1881. In ACR, A/28/24/61.

<sup>19</sup> Bollezzoli to Stampais, Verona, 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1882. In APMR, VI/B/3/48-604. Highlighting is ours.

<sup>20</sup> Sembianti to Giulianelli, Verona, 11<sup>th</sup> of January 1882. In ACR, A/28/25/2.

Maria Bollezzoli herself sometimes showed some perplexity and even a certain discomfort: She confided to Faustina Stampais, the superior and formator in Cairo, “*You too know well how one is not always permitted to express her own opinion!!! But the Lord knows how to do his part well, she added, at the right time and in the right place. Do you remember this old and frequent saying of mine? Remember it always, but especially on certain occasions*”.<sup>21</sup>

### **Bartolomeo Rolleri, new Arabic teacher**

With the departure of Virginia Mansur\* at the end of December 1881, and the acceptance of new postulants,<sup>22</sup> it became necessary to have an Arabic teacher, a post which had remained vacant. Fr. Bartolomeo Rolleri, who had been in Verona since August 1881, offered himself for this post.

Maria Bollezzoli, writing to Faustina Stampais on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 1882, informed her that, “*some days ago, we started to study Arabic again. The teacher is the very prudent Fr. Bartolomeo Rolleri. We hope his teaching will be beneficial.*”

The time allotted for studying Arabic in the feminine noviciate was not, unfortunately, what Virginia Mansur had often asked for and recommended.<sup>23</sup>

There was just an hour and a half in the morning, and not even every day, or at least not for everyone. We know this because on the timetable of the Mother House one can read: 8.30 – 10.00: *work or study*.

Apart from this, we can also find in the timetable cited above, only half an hour a day for catechism and quarter of an hour for spiritual reading.

One could say this was rather minimal for young people preparing themselves for such an important task as the one which awaited them.

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<sup>21</sup> Bollezzoli to Stampais, Verona, 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1881, in APMN, VI/B/3/42-593.

<sup>22</sup> On the 12<sup>th</sup> of January 1882 Margherita Capraro entered and she was followed by six other companions during the year.

<sup>23</sup> “*She desired that the morning hours should be dedicated to study as they were the most suitable. She even asked that they study on rising and postpone the acts of piety till later. This was incompatible with the rigorous observance desired by Mother Bollezzoli*”... (APMR, VI/A/5-2722: Notes of E. Morelli regarding the beginnings and the finality of the Congregation, pp. 12-13)

## 2.

### Disturbing News from Africa

*“The good God desires that we [...] become living hosts which are sacrificed to Him every day, not by the hands of others, but by our own hand.”*

(Maria Bollezzoli, 26<sup>th</sup> of October 1881)

Did Mother Bollezzoli have some kind of premonition when she wrote the phrases cited above to Faustina Stampais? Or perhaps she had grasped the significance of what the Founder had written from Khartoum on the 13<sup>th</sup> of August 1881? In that letter, which arrived in Verona on the following 9<sup>th</sup> of September, immediately after his signature, one can read:

*“At this point, the Austrian Consul [Hansal] tells me that the Sudan has been swept up into a full blown rebellion because of a self-styled prophet who says he has been sent by God to free the Sudan from the Turks and from Christian influence”... (W. 6941)*

Daniel Comboni communicated this news to the Rector of Verona just two months before his death, and only two months after *this self styled prophet* had proclaimed himself to be the **Mahdi**.<sup>24</sup>

Worried by this, Fr. Sembianti had tried to find out something more from the Superior in Cairo to whom he wrote immediately: *“Yesterday I received a letter from Monsignor who told me about a rebellion in the Sudan. Do you know anything about it? It would be a very grave matter!”*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> **Mahdi** = “well guided by God”. The term, which had been familiar amongst Sunnite Muslims since the second Islamic civil war in the seventh century, applied periodically to whoever presented himself as a religious reformer sent by the Prophet as *Liberator* in a situation of oppression.

<sup>25</sup> Sembianti to Giulianelli, Verona, 10<sup>th</sup> of September 1881. In ACR, A/28/24/42.

It was grave indeed, and Sr. Teresa Grigolini, responsible for the three communities of the Sisters in Central Africa had not hidden it from him after she had been able to personally verify how things were going.

All that “*general movement*” she had seen in April 1882 “*while returning from Jebel Nuba*” did not seem to her “*to augur well*” she confessed to the Rector. In the same way, the rumours that were circulating about “*a Dervish or a revolutionary leader*” who had “*gathered a great number of Arabs*” and was only waiting for “*the right moment to attack El Obeid with fire and the sword*” were not reassuring.

Perhaps the people gossiping were exaggerating, Sr. Teresa added at the end, but unfortunately, there was “*something real*”, even if for the time being everything seemed peaceful in the capital of Kordofan.<sup>26</sup>

Less than one month later, however, Fr. Giovanni Losi considered it his duty to inform the Cardinal Prefect of *Propaganda Fide* [he had already informed Sembianti previously on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April] that the situation had become critical:

*“As the Sudan is plunged into revolution due to a Dervish who proclaims himself messiah, he explained, communications between El Obeid and Jebel Nuba have been cut off for the past two months [...]. In the meantime, the Government has informed the mission that it is withdrawing its troops from Nuba, and as a consequence, it is inviting all the personnel of the mission also to withdraw [...].*

*Here in El Obeid, we are also suffering some distress, he added, as the rebels are only one day from the city and the area is surrounded by bandits and thieves who get off scot free no matter what they do [...]. After having lost most of their livestock and fearing to be robbed further and even made slaves themselves, the Africans from our colony have all moved into the city.”*<sup>27</sup>

It appears that on the same day, Fr. Losi also wrote to the Rector in Verona to inform him about the situation. From the month of July 1882, the

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<sup>26</sup> Grigolini to Sembianti, El Obeid, 16<sup>th</sup> of April 1882, See, AMN, 12(2006)128.

<sup>27</sup> Losi to Simeoni, El Obeid, 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1882, in AP SC Afr. C. Vol. 9(1881-1885)419-419v.

Rector opened a column in the *Annali del Buon Pastore*, entitled, “**Political Unrest in Sudan**”.

Unfortunately, that column would remain until 1898.

### **Bad news also from Egypt**

Already worried enough about the news arriving from Central Africa and about what the newspapers were beginning to publish about “*painful news (if it were true) about revolt in Darfur and Kordofan*”<sup>28</sup>, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti had to take stock of the fact that something very serious was happening also in Egypt.

In the previous month of April, a plot organized by Circassian Officers against Arabi Pasha\*, who had recently been promoted to the rank of General and given responsibility for the Ministry of Defence, had been discovered.

The guilty officers were taken before a war council and condemned to exile on the White Nile. “*However, the Khedive, after having consulted the Consuls of France and Great Britain changed of his own accord that sentence and exiled them to Constantinople instead, placing himself in open conflict with his own government and with parliament. [...]*.”

*On their part, the Anglo-French agents, feeling strengthened by the arrival of the fleets in Alexandria (May 15<sup>th</sup>) and having gained the support of the President of the chamber of VIPs, collectively intimated on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May (1882) the dismissal of the Cabinet and the exile of Arabi Pascia*”<sup>29</sup>.

This measure, even though it was immediately revoked, soon proved itself to be a mistake without remedy. Arabi Pasha, in fact, who until then had sought to avoid conflicts of a religious nature, limited himself to

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<sup>28</sup> Sembianti to Giulianelli, Verona, 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1882 in ACR, A/28/25/22.

<sup>29</sup> D. Gozzi, *Note alla buona sugli avvenimenti di Egitto e Sudan dal 1882 al 1885*, pp. 20-21. See, L. Santoni, *Alto Egitto e Nubia – 1863-1898*, pp. 221-230.

indicating as enemies of Egypt the creditors of the State. This really meant however, “*war on Europeans*”. From that moment onwards he began to play on the religious feelings of the people, stirring up fanaticism.

### **The Fuse alighted in Alexandria**

It was inevitable at this point that an incident would occur like the one that took place in Alexandria on the 11<sup>th</sup> of June 1882. At any other time, a quarrel between a Maltese and an Egyptian, even if aggravated by a murder, would certainly not have led to a zonal war which then degenerated quickly into ruthlessly and senselessly hunting down all Europeans. It is calculated that 120 Europeans and around 300 Arabs lost their lives on that tragic afternoon with many more injured.

*“What happened in Alexandria was very serious, confirmed Francesco Giulianelli writing to Fr. Sembianti. Carcereri wrote to me that there were hundreds of dead and wounded and the details are devastating. The population is indescribably afflicted and fear is running very high. Everyone is trying to escape at any cost. The ships are full to overflowing. Many families have taken refuge on warships. The merchant ships are all occupied by European families who are ready to leave at the least sign of danger. Considering the situation that we have seen here with our own eyes, it is difficult to predict what might happen [...].*

*In Port Said, more than 10 million people sleep in the open air. The Government is doing what it can [...]. We are all in the hands of God...<sup>30</sup>.*

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<sup>30</sup> Giulianelli to Sembianti, Cairo, 17<sup>th</sup> of June 1882, in ACR, A/26/34/60.

***“The mission of Central Africa is the work of God,  
and for this reason it will not collapse”...***

(Maria Bollezzoli)

Despite the dangerous situation in Egypt, the superior of the Sisters community, Sr. Faustina Stampais, must have tried not to alarm the superiors in Verona too much if Maria Bollezzoli answered her as follows on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July:

*“Do not worry, dearest daughter in Jesus Christ, if you give me bad news in your letters [...].*

*Unfortunately, I am aware of the current situation of the Egyptians, as Sr. Vittoria and Sr. Teresa have informed me about it. To tell you the truth, this critical situation is a great worry for me because, due to the great distance which separates us, often the imagination thinks of the reality as worse than it actually is.*

*Reason then reminds me to reflect on the fact that we are all in the hands of God [...].*

*Many great calamities have rained down on the poor mission of Central Africa until now, but it is precisely for this reason that we have to consider it the work of God and remain firm in the knowledge that it will not collapse [...]. This, therefore, my dear daughter, is what we can lean on, the rock of our salvation: **faith**.*

*We are in the hands of God. May he lead you and the others who are found there and in the Centre [Sudan]. So let all excessive fears depart [...]. It is, however, prudent to be vigilant so as not to find oneself unprepared, but we must never lose our trust in God”. At this point, Mother Bollezzoli added:*

*I like it very much that all of you who are there renew often the sacrifice of your whole selves and I would like you to renew it every day and unite with it that of the Sisters in the Centre and I too, in my poverty, accompany you as well” ...<sup>31</sup>.*

*On the following 13<sup>th</sup> of July she wrote again to Vittoria Paganini in Khartoum, “Let us be happy in the Lord and in imitation of the deceased and always remembered Founder, cry out: Nigrizia or Death”.*

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<sup>31</sup> Bollezzoli to Stampais, Verona, 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1882. In APMR, VI/B/3/52-608.

## Forced re-entry of the community of Cairo

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 1882, worried about the turn events were taking, the man responsible for the Combonian Institutes in Cairo wrote also to the Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*:

*“As your Reverend Eminence will know, the events that took place in Alexandria were very serious. The procurator of the mission [Carcereri] who is ill, wrote to me that there were several hundred dead and injured [...]. Many families took refuge on the warships [...]. What might happen cannot be foreseen [...].*

*The Austrian Government has sent four ships for all its citizens and the Consulate is giving passports to everyone [...].*

*This made me think yesterday that we are not here in missions and we are not taking care of souls. Therefore I decided to write this telegram, which you will have now received, to your Eminence so that you may send me whatever instructions you wish to give me...”* <sup>32</sup>.

After having received the instructions requested<sup>33</sup>, Fr. Francesco Giulianelli decided on re-entry. The following 9<sup>th</sup> of July, from Alexandria, he informed Cardinal Simeoni:

*“Yesterday I decided to leave with my [dependants] from Cairo [...]. Tomorrow we will board the Austrian steam ship and we will leave for Trieste next Tuesday and will arrive on the 16<sup>th</sup> of this month. From Trieste, I will bring everyone to Verona [...].*

*Soon the English will be bombarding here. It may begin next Tuesday. There is great desolation” ...* <sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Giulianelli to Simeoni, Cairo, 19<sup>th</sup> of June 1882. In AP SC Afr. C. vol. 9(1881-1885)444.

<sup>33</sup> Cardinal Simeoni sent me a telegram on the 20<sup>th</sup> of this month in response to mine in which he writes: **“Do what you must to keep yourself and your dependants safe.”** (Giulianelli to Sembianti, Cairo, 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 1882. In ACR, A/26/34/61).

<sup>34</sup> Giulianelli to Simeoni, Cairo, 19<sup>th</sup> of June 1882. In AP SC Afr. C., vol.9(1882)457.

According to what the *Annali del Buon Pastore* later published,<sup>35</sup> the group of women arrived in the Mother House on the evening of the 19<sup>th</sup> of July. There were three Sisters: Faustina Stampais, Bartolomea Benamati and Maria Casella, the novice, Anna Kubitscheck, the postulant Concetta Massaud and an aspirant and two African girls who had been freed from slavery in Khartoum: Giuseppina Gemila and Rosina Kaltuma.

### **Growing uncertainty and anxiety for the personnel of Kordofan and Nuba Mountains**

In the correspondence exchanged between the personnel in Africa and the superiors in Rome and Verona, the words “*insurrection in Sudan*” appeared more frequently starting from the Spring of 1882.

After the letter written on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1882 which we have quoted above, Fr. Giovanni Losi did not hide from the Rector in Verona and the Prefect of Propaganda Fide that it was becoming more difficult for him to communicate with the mission station of Delen in order to agree about what was to be done.

*“Out of three messengers sent by the mission and one from the government, he wrote on May 20<sup>th</sup> 1882, only one of these was able, because he was disguised, to reach Jebel Nuba and bring back a response”.*<sup>36</sup>

It was a response which was not at all reassuring because, while it was ‘*absolutely*’ necessary to leave Delen, it was impossible to do so without the protection of the soldiers of the government. These soldiers, without reinforcements, were not willing to risk the journey ‘*because the rebels were many*’ and also because they controlled ‘*all the sources of water*’.

*“Even here in El Obeid we are not very happy to remain, the provincial superior in turn informed the Mother House. Almost every day people are killed outside the city. Even today, that is now, they have taken to the Muderia [the government headquarters] three men who were killed on the*

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<sup>35</sup> See, ANNALI, 30(1882)15.

<sup>36</sup> AP SC Afr.C, vol. 9(1881-1885)427.

road to Malbes. In the meanwhile, because of these frequent enemy raids, almost everyone confines himself to the city and the prices of goods have become very high because commerce has come to a halt. There is no merchandize coming from Khartoum and Dongola and everyone is struggling.<sup>37</sup>

### **The attempt to reach Khartoum is unsuccessful**

*“We no longer have any hope of getting out” ...*  
(Losi to Sembianti, 29<sup>th</sup> of July 1882)

The following months of June, July and August 1882 were spent in the fruitless attempt to take to safety the two communities of Delen and El Obeid.<sup>38</sup> At the end of June, Sr. Teresa Grigolini confided in Fr. Sembianti:

*“I tell you [...] that we find ourselves in great anxiety. I think you will have understood from Father [Losi] the plan devised to take us all to Khartoum as soon as possible. You can not believe Reverend father, how painful this decision is for me, but on the other hand, we cannot stay here [...]. The city is no longer safe. From Nuba we have no further news and this causes us great sorrow. At least we are in good health. We are preparing for the journey which I think will be disastrous because of the rain.”<sup>39</sup>*

Unfortunately, that journey, desired as much as it was feared, would never take place despite the efforts of the superiors of Delen, Fr. Luigi Bonomi, and of El Obeid. The indecision of the latter [Fr. Losi], in the end, would prove fatal:

*“We find ourselves in a situation of turmoil which is indescribable, Fr. Losi himself confessed on July 6<sup>th</sup> 1882. We have prepared the trunks for our withdrawal to Khartoum and agreed on the camels. But the Government, partly due to its own interests and partly because it fears disaster along the way, has denied us soldiers to accompany us [...]: Truly,*

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<sup>37</sup> Grigolini to Sembianti, El Obeid, 23<sup>rd</sup> of May, 1882. In: *AMN*, 12(2006)130.

<sup>38</sup> See, for more information on this: *I primi subbugli nel Kordofan e le incertezze di Don Giovanni Losi*, in C. BALLIN, *Il Cristo e il Mahdi*, pp. 413-422.

<sup>39</sup> Grigolini to Sembianti, El Obeid, 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1882. In: *AMN*, 12(2006)133.

*without any communication here from village to village, the continuous contradictions in the news is an agony. We are unable to make a decision which we feel sure about. The Sisters are the most courageous and they encourage me to leave despite the Government's position, journeying with the carovan of the many Arabs who wish to leave. But I, apart from carrying the responsibility of all the authorities being against it [...] am unable to make a desperate decision; to leave in defiance of the Saints, as we might say. Sometimes my companions encourage me as the Sisters do and sometimes they are against the idea. [...]. Enough! If I can not see more clearly, I shall wait"...<sup>40</sup>.*

It was this waiting that would see disappear the last chance to leave El Obeid on time. On the following 29<sup>th</sup> of August, in fact, Sr. Teresa Grigolini wrote the last letter that would arrive in Verona:

*"Father, she confided to the Rector, we find ourselves in a miserable position [...]. Now only the Lord can help us [...]. We do not suffer hunger, but food is very scarce and this is the least of our worries. The anxiety of uncertainty and not seeing any hope of improvement is worse. Our personnel in Nuba are suffering a slow martyrdom. The essentials for life are lacking. They fear being killed from one moment to the next. When I think of those poor Sisters, Amalia Andreis, Eulalia Pasavento and Maria Caprini, I feel faint"...<sup>41</sup>.*

### **September 1882: a month for all 'to forget'**

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1882, Fr. Sembianti wrote to Fr. Francesco Giulianelli, *"We are under water for the last three days. An extraordinary flood is keeping two thirds of the city very worried. In the two Institutes, we worked all day on the 16<sup>th</sup> and all of the following night to keep the water back, but then we had to cede to the force and the quantity of water which penetrated and covered the ground floor up to one and a half metres deep. We in the mens' Institute made a hole in the wall and passed to the*

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<sup>40</sup> Losi to Sembianti, El Obeid, 6<sup>th</sup> of July 1882. In ACR, A/27/17/18.

<sup>41</sup> Grigolini to Sembianti, El Obeid, 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1882. In AMN, 12(2006)143.

*adjoining seminary as we were afraid that the house would collapse against the force of the current of water. The womens' Institute was also flooded with water even deeper than a metre and a half and as the building is less solid than ours, they were in danger and very fearful. Yesterday at 4 in the afternoon we had to help them descend from the window in a boat and I took them to another convent on a nearby hill”...<sup>42</sup>.*

When the flood subsided and the inhabitants of Verona were able to return to normality, the Rector of the Combonian Institute had to take stock of the fact that the greater disaster was not that of the flood in Verona. From the correspondence which he was receiving more rarely now from Africa, he sensed as threatening and as a bad omen that silence that seemed to surround more and more as the days passed, the personnel from the missions of El Obeid and Delen.

Even the newspapers which he constantly scoured for news which he could then pass on to the readers of the *Annali del Buon Pastore* were not printing any reliable news about the situation.

What was known, and it was already worrying enough, was that the superior of the community of Khartoum, Fr. Leone Hanriot\*, had felt it was better, at the beginning of August, to leave the capital of Sudan and take refuge in Berber with the Sisters<sup>43</sup> and about seventy Christians.

He had written to Fr. Sembianti on July 28<sup>th</sup> 1882, “*With great displeasure, I have to inform you that due to the deplorable circumstances of our presence in Khartoum, we will, God willing, leave the city on Tuesday the 1<sup>st</sup> or Wednesday the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August for Suakin. From there, if we arrive safe and well, we will write in detail about the motives which led us to this extreme decision. We will go in two boats up to Berber, and with about twenty camels from Berber to Suakin”...<sup>44</sup>.*

This had not really been a good idea, also because those eighty odd Africans whom Fr. Leone had accepted to take with him, were not really all

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<sup>42</sup> Sembianti to Giulianelli, Verona, 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1882. In ACR, A/28/25/52.

<sup>43</sup> See, *AMN*, 7(2004)97-103.

<sup>44</sup> Hanriot to Sembianti, Khartoum, 28<sup>th</sup> of July 1882. In ACR, A/27/5/12.

from the mission. In the end, the costs, both financial and human, were very high. Almost all of them got sick and Sr. Elisa Suppi arrived at the point of death...

*“In Berber, they are living in a rented house, Fr. Francesco Pimazzoni explained to Fr. Sembianti. They are uncomfortable and they lack many things. Expenses are more than in Khartoum. Fr. Leone and Battista have problems with their eyes and can hardly leave their rooms. The Sisters, apart from being unwell themselves, have to take care of the sick, do the housework and think of more than seventy mouths to feed. Added to this, some are giving trouble and more than once they have had to go to the police to get them to bring things under control [...]. Mr. Marquet says that the Mother Superior, [Vittoria Paganini] does more than enough, but she cannot manage everything [...]. In the meanwhile, the reputation of the mission is suffering. Everyone is talking about the escape to Berber, the expenses are mounting up to considerable sums of money and spiritual welfare is negatively affected. The Sisters have not attended Mass or had holy communion or confession for nearly a month. This is the only thing they complained about to dear Fr. Dichtl. They did not say anything about all their other troubles. When will this catastrophe end?” ...<sup>45</sup>.*

The ‘catastrophe’ ended on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October, when, finally Fr. Leone Hanriot decided to return to Khartoum. He admitted fifteen days later that, *“fleeing from Khartoum, I gave an example of lack of courage. But I feared for the Africans who, if Khartoum were to fall, would be taken prisoners of the fanatics of the Mahdi, just in the same way as the Christians who would not become Muslims [...].*

*I also wanted the Sisters to be saved from serving those dogs of Muhammad”...*

At the beginning of the letter, Fr. Leone had also given the following information: *“From Kordofan and Nuba we have no news, nothing certain, except that at this moment there is a steam ship passing which is carrying a deputy of the false prophet who will be hanged or shot. There is no mail from Kordofan. The Governor has sent more than seven express letters more than 15 days ago and still no one has returned from El Obeid”...<sup>46</sup>.*

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<sup>45</sup> Pimazzoni to Sembianti, Cairo, 22<sup>nd</sup> of October, 1882. In ACR, A/27/47/5.

<sup>46</sup> Hanriot to Sembianti, Khartoum, 14<sup>th</sup> of November, 1882. In ACR, A/27/6/2.

The news which would arrive some weeks later was, unfortunately very worrying.

### **Delen falls and El Obeid is besieged**

In the month of October 1882, when the editor of the *Annali del Buon Pastore* was, for the second time, writing up the column entitled, *Political disturbances in Sudan* (see, p. 8-14), he still did not know, due to lack of direct news, that the missionary station of Delen had already been destroyed<sup>47</sup>, and its members were now prisoners in the camp of the Mahdists, the *Boga*, close to El Obeid.

The Mahdists, after having attempted for a first time to conquer El Obeid, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1882, were now camped around it, intending to starve it into submission.

Unfortunately, this would come about on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January 1883.

On the other hand, what the *Annali* could actually announce to its readers was that “*a year after its sad loss*”<sup>48</sup>, the mission of Central Africa had finally been assigned “*a new Leader*”.

At the end of the above mentioned column, one could read, “*presently, the new Apostolic Vicar is preparing himself to leave for Cairo with a good number of priests, Sisters and lay workers and they should arrive there in the month of November*” (p. 16).

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<sup>47</sup> The particular details of this very sad event became known in Verona only after Fr. Luigi Bonomi was able to send his first report, addressed to Luigi di Canossa, to Khartoum. See *La Nigrizia*, 3(1883)73-99.

<sup>48</sup> ANNALI, 30(1882)3.

### 3.

## The Successor of Daniel Comboni

*“The Reverend Monsignor Sogaro was a friend of Comboni and his [missionaries], and this friendship contributed to nurturing an extraordinary vocation. He always showed an interest in the mission, which was entrusted to him, and had known for a long time the difficulties and trials to which he would be exposed [...].*

*The gifts of the new Apostolic Vicar make us hope that the wound left by the death of Comboni who was ardently zealous in his apostolate will be healed”...<sup>49</sup>.*

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 1882, almost a year after the death of Daniel Comboni, the Holy See finally confirmed, with an apostolic brief, the election of **Francesco Sogaro\*** as Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa.

It had been, given the time it took, a difficult election and the result, evidently would not fully satisfy all those concerned.<sup>50</sup>

The motives were obvious and the first was based on the fact that the Parish Priest of St. Giorgio in Braida, the parish in Verona where the newly elected [Apostolic Vicar] came from, had never been to the mission.

### A proposal from Verona

The first person to propose the name of Francesco Sogaro to *Propaganda Fide* had been the rector of the Institutes of Verona, supported by the Superior of the Sisters' house.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *La Nigrizia*, I(1883)1, pp. 9-10.

<sup>50</sup> “I am afraid that things will still go badly for a while, even with Fr. Sogaro in charge, Fr. Giovanni Dichtl commented from Khartoum, because he is not the man to begin in Sudan especially in such a situation”. (Dichtl to Giulianelli, Khartoum, 15<sup>th</sup> of September 1882, in ACR, A/26/24/25).

<sup>51</sup> “Among those proposed as leader, Sembianti wrote to Giulianelli on December 7<sup>th</sup> 1881, is also the reverend priest from St. Giorgio in Braida in Verona, Fr. Francesco Sogaro, whom Sr. Faustina must know [...]. The Reverend Mother here would give her vote in order to have him”... (ACR, A/28/24/57).

He had done this, he explained because it was *“the desire of many here in Verona that our Mission and these Institutes, the merit for whose existence can be attributed only to Monsignor Comboni who was sorely missed after his death, should be preserved in memory of the distinguished deceased [bishop].*

*The most obvious way to attain this, one reads in the letter, would be for the Institutes to present one of their own to substitute the deceased leader. However, not being in a position to do this [...]. I would renew, submissively, the prayer that I made to your most Reverend Eminence in my letter of the 4<sup>th</sup> of this month for the most Reverend priest, Francesco Sogaro... ”*<sup>52</sup>

From Africa, Fr. Luigi Bonomi confirmed, when writing to Fr. Sembianti, *“I understood the proposal made regarding Fr. Sogaro and I was very happy about it. Then he added, it should be enough for you to know that this was my first thought after the death of our dearly missed Monsignor Comboni and I shared it also with my confreres [...].*

*If Cardinal Simeoni wants the good of the mission, as he says, he only needs to approve this choice, and hopefully Cardinal di Canossa will willingly make this sacrifice so as to maintain for our Institute the Vicariate of Central Africa which was gained at the cost of many lives and many sacrifices [...].*

*Also the Sisters, both those here and those in Nuba are all agreed and have expressed their satisfaction... ”*<sup>53</sup>.

The interim superior limited himself to saying, however, *“I am not able to decipher the personality to whom you allude in your letter as having been proposed to Cardinal [di Canossa] and who is known, you say, by all the missionaries and Sisters. It is sufficient for me to know that he has been proposed by you, for me to hold him in esteem [...]. Enough, let the merciful will of God be done ”*...<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Sembianti to Simeoni, Verona, 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1881. In AP SC Afr. C., vol. 9(1881)249-250.

<sup>53</sup> Bonomi to Sembianti, El Obeid, 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1882. In ACR, A/26/12/11.

<sup>54</sup> Losi to Sembianti, El Obeid, 28<sup>th</sup> of December 1881. In ACR, A/27/17/5.

## What the person most interested thought about it all

Evidently having been informed of this initiative, Fr. Francesco Sogaro made it known that he was available and willing, but only if those asked before him decided to decline.

In fact, it had been to the Jesuit Fathers that *Propaganda Fide*, after having consulted with Luigi di Canossa, had turned preferring that they might assume the direction of “*that important Vicariate*” which had been left without someone who could direct it “*adequately after the death of the zealous and active Apostolic Vicar [...] Monsignor Daniel Comboni*”...<sup>55</sup>

Having received a negative reply from the Supreme Moderator of the Company of Jesus, the Cardinal Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, had turned his attention to the name of Matteo Kirchner\*, who had also declined,<sup>56</sup> despite the great insistence of Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti, who feared that the Vicariate might be entrusted to another congregation, and in particular, to the Congregation of Monsignor Lavigerie.\*<sup>57</sup>

Nothing else could be done at this point, except to seriously examine carefully the possibility of presenting the priest of St. Giorgio in Braida as a candidate. This latter, after those people who had been talked about more than him declined, let it be known that he would accept only if the Cardinal Bishop of Verona would support him with all the weight of his authority.<sup>58</sup>

In the meantime, the news arriving from Africa was increasingly worrying, making *Propaganda Fide* more concerned about the necessity of entrusting the leadership of the Vicariate to someone that did not know it. In

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<sup>55</sup> Simeoni to Beckx, Rome, 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 1881. In AGGR, Africa (Sudan) vol. 1, f. V, 23.

<sup>56</sup> Sembianti to Giulianelli, Verona, 30<sup>th</sup> of November 1881. See, ACR, A/28/24/55.

<sup>57</sup> “*You see, Reverend Monsignor, he had written on April 5<sup>th</sup> 1882, the mission to which you dedicated yourself for a time [...] and which is now on more solid ground in terms of the establishments opened here and in Africa [...] is about to fall into foreign hands.*” (Sembianti to Kirchner. In ACR, A/28/26).

On the previous 4<sup>th</sup> of January, in fact, the rector of Verona had confided to Fr. Giulianelli: “*From Rome I know nothing, but some fear that the mission might pass to Monsignor Lavigerie. Will it happen?*” (ACR, A/28/25/1).

<sup>58</sup> See, ACR, A/28/22/4: Sembianti to Canossa, Verona, 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1882.

the end, however, on the suggestion made by Luigi di Canossa, and not having any other solution, “*the questionnaire which is used for the appointment of a bishop*” arrived in Verona from Rome.

Fr. Sembianti explained to Fr. Giulianelli, “*His Eminence di Canossa will send it back to Propaganda Fide with the responses and we hope to have a decision resolving the issue by the end of the month [of June].*”<sup>59</sup>

The month of June 1882, however, passed without any nomination of a bishop. Finally on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September, Leone XIII authorized the apostolic brief which made Francesco Sogaro the successor of Daniel Comboni and the new Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa.

### **Pray ... for the successor**

Approximately one month after that long awaited and desired nomination, Maria Bollezzoli wrote to the Superior of Khartoum, Vittoria Paganini who had recently returned there after the episode in Berber. It was a letter filled with hope and which still had a flavour of that charismatic inspiration of the 18<sup>th</sup> of October of the previous year. Unfortunately, however, it did not arrive on the dawn of a serene day, but only brought a ray of light to a sky which was becoming increasingly dark and threatening. Among other things Mother [Bollezzoli] wrote:

*“Dearest daughter in Jesus Christ,*

*Your letter of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September came as a great relief to me. Blessed be God who finally gives us a ray of hope for our dear ones who are separated from us.<sup>60</sup> Poor souls! How much they will have suffered!*

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<sup>59</sup> Sembianti to Giulianelli, Verona, 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1882. In ACR, A/28/25/30.

<sup>60</sup> Sr. Vittoria Paganini, evidently had immediately communicated to Verona all that Teresa Grigolini had written to her on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September 1882 from El Obeid. [See, AMN, 7(2004)100-101].

*Now, it seems, tribulations are beginning to cease [...] let us pray intensely to the Lord so that peace may reign and no one come to cause disturbance and more vexation [...].*

*I believe that my letter will find you in Khartoum, where you will have taken up your activities again. I imagine your joy at seeing again your house which had been abandoned and in being able to greet again the venerated tomb which holds the cold ashes of our dear deceased and much missed Founder. Don't forget, I beg you, to visit him for me too as he lies there while his soul rejoices with the Blessed, so that he can fill me with his spirit of holiness which in the last days of my life might save me from my past. Pray too, that his successor might enjoy tranquil and serene days free from shadowy ominous clouds which often darken the happiest horizon. Pray that all the members of this mission may be of one heart and mind and may all together help him who was destined by heaven to replace our great Founder who was taken from us a year ago. Oh, let this be the moment in which the hour of redemption rings out for poor Nigrizia! [...].*

*It is sweet for me to hope that all of you are animated, and so taken up by your sublime vocation, that trials become also the bonds which bind you more closely together. Well done, dear daughters, seek to grow always stronger and more generous, and you will have a great reward in heaven [...].*

*We are praying all the more for you, so that as the good Sisters that you are, you might not be discouraged by calamities which seem to be increasing. Be united in spirit, and one day you will also be united in eternal glory” ...<sup>61</sup>*

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<sup>61</sup> Bollezzoli to Paganini, Verona, 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1882. In APMR, VI/B/3/2-538.

## First missionary expedition of the new Apostolic Vicar

*“Even in the face of many tribulations, we are not afraid and we will not turn back, but with the Lord’s blessing, we shall fly to fight under that honoured flag which our intrepid Father and Predecessor, Monsignor Comboni raised in these desolate lands, willing also ourselves to die at the holy cry: “Redemption of Nigrizia or death”.*

(Francesco Sogaro, 21<sup>st</sup> of November 1882)

Following the example of his predecessor, once he had pronounced his oath of faithfulness to the mission, Francesco Sogaro did not want to waste time. Therefore, once his nomination was made public, he prepared to leave Verona with a small group of missionary men and women, including also some lay men and women.<sup>62</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no mention in any diary of when and how the new leader of the African mission was received in the Mother House of the Sisters’ Congregation.

What we do know is that he decided to include among those leaving, four Sisters:

a) Bartolomea Benamati and Marietta Casella who would in this way return to Egypt from where they had returned previously in the month of July.

b) Costanza Caldara and Leopolda Sandonà who were still novices, but whose period of noviciate was shortened due to this decision.

The **12<sup>th</sup> of November 1882**, the day established for the profession of Costanza and Leopolda, was therefore a feast day in the Mother House. After two years of waiting and uncertainty, hope returned for the young novices of Verona<sup>63</sup> that the door of the mission would finally be opened also for them.

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<sup>62</sup> See the list of those leaving in *La Nigrizia* I(1883)1, p. 12.

<sup>63</sup> In El Obeid (Sudan) instead, there was the celebration of the first profession of Fortunata Quascè in the month of April 1882 [see, *AMN*, 9(2005)93-96].

In addition, that 12<sup>th</sup> of November 1882, seemed to mark a significant stage of the history of the young Congregation: that is, the renewal of religious vows for three years. In fact, until the death of the Founder, from what we can deduce, only annual vows had been talked about <sup>64</sup> despite the fact that the rules of 1874 foresaw, explicitly, that the vows, as they were “*simple and temporary*” were renewable “*every three years*” (Article 5).

Monsignor Francesco Sogaro, instead, as we can gather from an undated letter which is not addressed to anyone in particular but is protocolled by *Propaganda Fide*<sup>65</sup>, and which contained information about his decision to anticipate the renewal of vows for three years<sup>66</sup> of Faustina Stampais, was probably sanctioning a new practice; that is, keeping to the text of the Rules and Constitutions of 1874.

### **The Sisters community reopened in Cairo**

Leaving Rome on the evening of September 25<sup>th</sup> 1882, Fr. Francesco Giulianelli had returned to Egypt after his forced re-entry to Italy in the month of July.

Now that the situation had returned to normal, it was necessary to restart as soon as possible the activities of the Combonian Institutes, also in view

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<sup>64</sup> On March 30<sup>th</sup> 1877, Daniel Comboni wrote, “*My Sisters pronounce vows for one year which are then renewed annually. On the other hand, he explained, I do not want to have this Institute approved by Rome until it has experienced at least 10 years of Mission in Central Africa.* (W. 4473)

<sup>65</sup> In that letter, one can read: “*It is true that when my much missed predecessor began this foundation, he placed it under the Bishop of Verona, but that was because he was still a priest and therefore since he lacked the authority necessary, he could not do otherwise. However, as things developed, the Institute was governed almost entirely by the leader of the mission. On my arrival, the thing was completed. Without having obtained any authorization from His Eminence di Canossa, just after being elected in 1882, I received the vows of some Sisters who had to leave for Africa. From that moment onwards, the full authority was recognized as lying only with the Apostolic Vicar*”... [APF NS, vol. 174(1893–1900)442, prot. N. 318].

<sup>66</sup> In the register of the *State of Personnel*, on page 34, one can read, in fact: “*Due to the event of the election of the new Apostolic Vicar, Monsignor Francesco Sogaro, this Sister, that is Faustina Stampais, renewed her vows for the first time [...] even although, the three year period had not been completed*”.

of an eventual exodus of the personnel in Central Africa due to the Mahdist revolution in Sudan.

For this reason, once it was known that the new Apostolic Vicar was preparing an expedition, there was a moment of reflection about whether the Sisters should also return from Verona to Cairo, or whether the feminine Institute should be left available for those who could come from Khartoum. In the end, the opinion which prevailed was that of the rector in Verona, who felt that it would be *a good thing and a positive and necessary sign* that some of the Sisters return as soon as possible to Cairo *to assist the missionary men in their needs; cooking, laundry and mending.*<sup>67</sup>

Therefore, since the new Apostolic Vicar did not raise any objections, four *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* were included in the list of those who would be leaving Verona in the month of December 1882. Two of those chosen, Bartolomea Benamati and Marietta Casella, were returning. The other two, instead, would be leaving for the first time. Nevertheless, it was precisely one of these, Costanza Caldara, who would be appointed as the Superior.

### **A rather stormy return**

Unfortunately, it seems that no correspondence has come down to us from the four young missionaries to inform us of their passage from the ‘*nest*’ of Verona to the Egyptian ‘*shore*’ which awaited them.

Fr. Domenico Vicentini\*, the Stigmatine Father who travelled with Sr. Bartolomea and Sr. Leopolda from Napoli to Cairo, was, in fact, the only one who had his writing regarding the adventures of the journey published in *Nigrizia*.

“*May the Lord be blessed a thousand times!*” Fr. Domenico exclaimed when writing to Fr. Sembianti. “*Finally, we have arrived in Africa, in our house in Cairo.*”

So, he recalled: *Our boarding was a very moving experience and I will*

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<sup>67</sup> Sembianti to Giulianelli, Verona, 22<sup>nd</sup> of November, 1882. In ACR, A/43/75/6.

*never forget it. Oh! If our journey had been similar to the moment of boarding! The sky was clear and the sunset beautiful. The sea was calm and limpid like oil.”*

Unfortunately however: *“The next day [...] the wind began to blow forcefully [...] the waves got higher and higher and from that moment onwards we did not enjoy another calm moment [...].*

*Around two o'clock on Christmas morning, the sky got very dark, the waves were very stormy and in the midst of thunder and lightning, hailstones fell abundantly [...]. However, don't think that we felt desperate in such a situation. No! We suffered of course [...] but we never lost courage. The Lord helped us in an extraordinary way. The Sisters also demonstrated courage and calm superior to that of their sex [...]*<sup>68</sup>.

In the end, thanks be to God, they disembarked safe and sound in Alexandria on the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup> of December. On the evening of the same day, after some hours on the train, they finally arrived in Cairo, where the two new arrivals could join their Sisters who, having left from Trieste, had preceded them by some days.

*“The life which I lead here is good training for the one which I will lead on the [mission] field whenever the Lord wishes to call me there”...*

(Leopolda Sandonà)

In this way, the sisters community in Cairo was re-established.

However, many things, too many, had changed from that 8<sup>th</sup> of July when they had had to leave in a hurry due to the threat of revolution.

First of all, eight of them had left and now only six had returned. Faustina Stampais, superior and formator, had been substituted by Costanza Caldara; the novice, Anna and the postulant Concetta had remained in Verona; the aspirant Cristina was no longer with them.

For the time being at least, the Institute of the *Sacred Heart of Mary* no longer had a noviciate. It continued, however, as a centre for immediate

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<sup>68</sup> *La Nigrizia*, I(1883)2, pp. 49-54.

preparation for the mission. In a letter which Sr. Leopolda Sandonà wrote to Fr. Sembianti some months after her arrival, one can read, in fact:

*“The life which I lead here is good training for the one which I will lead on the [mission] field. Yes, here in Cairo we get practice [...].*

*The study of Arabic, both theory and practice, because it is absolutely essential that we learn, is going well.*

*I thank you, she concludes at the end, for the promise made to send another two Sisters. Even if they come before the building is completed, we will still make room for them.”<sup>69</sup>*

Instead, however, of arriving from Verona, the Sisters awaited would arrive from Khartoum in the following month of June, accompanied by the new Apostolic Vicar on return from his visit to the capital of Sudan.

### **The first reactions of Francesco Sogaro**

*“Monsignor Sogaro during the time he was in Africa demonstrated [...] wonderful qualities [...] but all got to know him quickly, even from first impressions, as a man who could raise one to the stars as easily as he could lower him to the depths”...*

(Anonymous to *Propaganda Fide*, October 17<sup>th</sup> 1883)

After having left Verona on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January 1883 to board in Naples on the 11<sup>th</sup>, Francesco Sogaro reached Cairo on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January just on time to hear the news, a few hours later, that El Obeid had surrendered due to hunger and all its inhabitants, including the personnel from the mission, were now prisoners of the Mahdi.

On the same evening, the new leader of the mission of Central Africa wrote a letter to *Propaganda Fide*: *“Alarming news is reaching us from the*

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<sup>69</sup> Sandonà to Sembianti, Cairo, 24<sup>th</sup> of May 1883. In ACR, A/31/37/2.

*Centre*". He then added later, "I ran straight to the Austro Hungarian Consulate and they promised me they would send a telegram today"...<sup>70</sup>

In the following days, according to what we can read in the ongoing correspondence, he went first to the Italian Consul. He asked to be received by the representative of the British government, Lord Dufferin and in the end managed to obtain an audience with the Khedive Tawfiq.

The result of all these contacts with the diplomatic agents of the various governments which were the most important in Egypt, was not only the more precise information gained regarding the prisoners, but also the possibility of going personally to Khartoum, even if only for a short time. In fact, the Apostolic Vicar was advised not to remain in the capital of Sudan where he would not have been able to receive accurate information regarding the ongoing military operations.

Having accepted this suggestion, Monsignor Sogaro informed the readers of *Nigrizia*, in March 1883, that he would be going to Sudan since he was able to join "an expedition of English officers who were about to leave for Khartoum". (p. 36)

#### **Arrival in the Sudanese capital**

After leaving Cairo on January 29<sup>th</sup> 1883 to go to Suez, from where he would embark for Suakin on the following 3<sup>rd</sup> of February, Francesco Sogaro arrived, unexpectedly, in Khartoum on the eve of March 6<sup>th</sup>.

We read further in *Nigrizia*, "Having gone straight to the Church, at the sound of the bells, the whole European community gathered and at the end of the Mass, the representative of the absent Governor [Abd al Kader], the Consuls and many gentlemen presented themselves to greet him and behind these were all those from the colony, both Europeans and Africans [...]. It

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<sup>70</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni, Cairo, 19<sup>th</sup> of January 1883. In AP SC Afr. C. vol. 9(1881-1885)628.

*was the missionaries and Sisters, weighed down by sadness at the fate of the Mission, who experienced the greatest happiness as their faces lit up with a joy that they had not experienced for some time”.*<sup>71</sup>

Sr. Vittoria Paganini wrote two days later, “*The arrival of the carovan with His Excellency, our Monsignor, at the head of it made us experience a kind of boost of energy. We Sisters felt so much better*”...<sup>72</sup>

In turn, the newly arrived [Monsignor] confirmed when writing to the bishop of Verona, “*My coming here was really **necessary**. You can not believe, your Eminence, how the morale of the missionaries and the Sisters was so low: Reverend Fr.Losi, dead; the excellent Fr.Ohrwalder<sup>73</sup>, dead, the other thirteen from Delen and El Obeid, prisoners*”...<sup>74</sup>

### **What was the real situation of the prisoners?**

The fact that Monsignor Sogaro had communicated to the bishop of Verona, at the end of March 1883, that Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder\* was dead and that there were 13 prisoners, revealed clearly that, in reality, even in Khartoum they had not received reliable information about the fate of the prisoners.

“*We have sent messengers, paid money, but until now everything has been useless, the Apostolic Vicar explained further in the above mentioned letter of March 24<sup>th</sup> 1883. Two days ago, I sent someone with a note hidden inside the faithful companion of the Arab, that is, the “bisciarino” (a stick which looks like a sceptre). Now, in the note addressed to Fr.Bonomi I wrote: Let me know what we can do to save you and we will do it*”...

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<sup>71</sup> *La Nigrizia*, I(1883)3, p. 66.

<sup>72</sup> Paganini to Giulianelli, Khartoum, 8<sup>th</sup> of March 1883. In *AMN*, 7(2004)108.

<sup>73</sup> This information received from “*an Israeli Arab, merchant by profession*” and an inhabitant of El Obeid (See, Sogaro to Simeoni, Khartoum, March 9<sup>th</sup> of March 1883. In *AP SC Afr. C.* vol. 9, f. 639) would turn out to be false.

<sup>74</sup> Sogaro to Canossa, Khartoum, 24<sup>th</sup> of March 1883. In *ACR*, A/38/48/6.

The much awaited reply finally reached Khartoum on the following 2<sup>nd</sup> of April.

It was a thick pile of correspondence which Fr. Luigi Bonomi had managed at the end of January to get secretly smuggled out of the *Boga*, that is, the Mahdist camp where the missionaries and the surviving Sisters were held prisoners. We know from many other previous publications on the Mahdia, what the contents were and how these were communicated to Verona and published almost fully by *Nigrizia*.<sup>75</sup> Amongst other things, the deaths of Sisters Eulalia Pesavento and Amalia Andreis and of brother Gabriele Marani were announced.

Without losing any time, and in agreement with the local authorities, Monsignor Sogaro tried all means possible to attain the liberation of the surviving prisoners, initially making some attempts at paying ransom for them.<sup>76</sup>

### **Unfortunately the Sisters community is not treated well**

If in Khartoum the successor of Daniel Comboni had been awaited by all, this was particularly true of the Sisters community. The superior, in name of the community, had already written to him as soon as he had been elected.

*“Very Reverend Father,*

*May God, who in his divine wisdom casts down and raises up, gives tribulation and consolation, and indescribable joy after long suffering, be always blessed.*

*What great pain our souls experienced! In what great tumult we passed our days! But God had pity on us and heard our prayer. He has given us a leader, a Father, a worthy successor of Him who has gone before us to Paradise. We give eternal praise to God, who saved our work from going under!*

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<sup>75</sup> See, *La Nigrizia*, I(1883)3, pp. 73-100.

<sup>76</sup> See, *La Nigrizia*, I(1883)4, pp. 105.

*With great joy we dare to call ourselves your devoted daughters and we desire to have you here among us so that we may show you our obedience and reverence for your will.*

*With great esteem, we kiss your ring and implore for the members of this family your paternal blessings.*

*The Sisters of Khartoum  
Your devoted daughters”<sup>77</sup>.*

On her part, Vittoria Paganini was really awaiting with an open heart and much hope the new Apostolic Vicar.

Instead, from the very first letters the new leader wrote after his arrival in Khartoum, it can be immediately seen how, between himself and the Sisters community, it was impossible right from the beginning to create that friendly relationship which is always desirable, but especially so in moments of difficulty and suffering.

The Sisters ‘*are not bad*’, Monsignor Sogaro wrote, obviously dissatisfied, to the Rector in Verona, ‘*but they are not like those of Egypt.*’<sup>78</sup>

“*The mission station was in great disorder for what regards the Sisters, he later noted in one of his reports. Discipline is lax: they are often out of the house to visit those merchants and the Syrians and Europeans, almost all of whom publicly frequent concubines*” ...<sup>79</sup>

Apart from the fact that it was inappropriate to compare a community which had just left Verona to another which instead had some years of missionary experience in Central Africa, where it had been begun by the founder himself, Francesco Sogaro, in this way, revealed, almost immediately, his character which gradually would have caused a lot of worry for those responsible for the Combonian Institutes.

The complaints and the objections which began to arrive in Verona from Africa were so many that, at a certain point, the suitability of the new

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<sup>77</sup> Paganini to Sogaro, Khartoum, 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 1882. In ACR, A/31/40/1.

<sup>78</sup> Sogaro to Sembianti, Khartoum, 13<sup>th</sup> of March 1883. In ACR, A/39/33/13.

<sup>79</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni, Cairo, 16<sup>th</sup> of July 1883. In AP SC Afr. C. , Vol. 9(1883)733.

Apostolic Vicar for the task entrusted to him was called into question. In fact, it is not by chance that, the following year, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti, as he concluded a long report regarding this matter, confided to the Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*: *If only there could be a remedy to the error which we have unintentionally made!*<sup>80</sup>

According to the above mentioned document, which makes reference to what Sogaro himself had written in his letter dated October 17<sup>th</sup> 1883, what most worried the Rector of Verona were the superficiality, impulsiveness, inconstancy and a certain vindictive spirit of the Apostolic Vicar. This, together with the fact that he so easily believed the first version of whoever would complain to him without then verifying objectively and serenely its reliability.

From here stemmed his difficulty to change his opinion about the persons accused whenever the truth of the facts required it.<sup>81</sup> Most probably, it was also for this reason that some measures adopted by him as ‘corrective’ for those considered ‘guilty’ were more often seen or interpreted as ‘persecution’ or ‘revenge’.

In this way, instead of contributing to reassure and relax the souls of a very disturbed and tried community due to the events taking place, Monsignor Sogaro only succeeded in increasing the tension and discomfort.

In the case of Khartoum in those first months of 1883, for example, it was especially Sr. Vittoria Paganini<sup>82</sup>, the superior of the Sisters community, to bear the burden most of all.<sup>83</sup> Fr. Leone Hanriot, superior of

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<sup>80</sup> Sembianti to Simeoni, Verona, 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1884. In AP SC Afr. C, Vol. 9(1884)976.

<sup>81</sup> One reads in f. 975 of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1884, “*When he has formed an opinion against someone this does not change even in the face of the most explicit and reliable proofs and witnesses. On the contrary, he almost persecutes those who seek with reason to change the opinion he has formed.*”

<sup>82</sup> For all that regards **Vittoria Paganini**, See AMN, 7(2004).

<sup>83</sup> One can also read in f. 967 of August 23<sup>rd</sup> 1884, “*Another proof of this deplorable obstinacy of Monsignor Sogaro, in not abandoning wrong first impressions gained about people, lies in the fact that he never let go of the bad ideas that he had about the Superior of the Sisters in Khartoum*”...

that mission station from the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 1881 had portrayed a picture of her, writing to Fr. Sembianti,<sup>84</sup> and speaking with Monsignor Sogaro, in which it is very difficult to recognize that ‘*superior woman*’ described instead by Daniel Comboni. (See W. 6478-79; 7069)

What leaves us preplexed in this particular case is the uselessness of an attempt by some members of the two communities to defend her. Unfortunately, this only made the situation of the person accused, and also those who defended her, worse.

Fr. Francesco Pimazzoni knew something about it when, tired of accusations which had no foundation, he tried to establish the truth. In reply, he was told that ‘*He had clearly been blinded by too much compassion for the Sisters*’ and even that *he had become entrapped in the nets of Sr. Vittoria.*<sup>85</sup>

### **As a consequence, a very painful ‘split’ for all the community**

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1883, the Apostolic Vicar was concluding his quite turbulent stay in Khartoum and setting out again for Cairo. He had decided that three Sisters would also be leaving the Sudan with him. They were: Sisters Elisa Suppi, Rosalia Conte and Francesca Dalmasso. The departure of the first, without a doubt, was necessary due to health concerns. For the other two, especially for Rosalia Conte, it was a ‘corrective’ measure.

We do not need to remember here the story of this young Sister from Piemonte as it can be found in the profile of Rosalia in *AMN*, 21–A/2 (2012), n. 26.

It was her fault, or perhaps it is more accurate to say, it was because of the things she reported during the journey from Khartoum to Cairo, the anonymous author of the document quoted above reveals, “*that Sr. Vittoria was cancelled entirely from the good books of Monsignor Sogaro ...* (f. 570)

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<sup>84</sup> See, ACR, A/27/5/5: Hanriot to Sembianti, Khartoum, 1<sup>st</sup> of May 1882; 19<sup>th</sup> of May, 29<sup>th</sup> of May, etc.

<sup>85</sup> Anonymous to Simeoni, 17<sup>th</sup> of October 1883. In AP SC Afr. C, vol. 9(1883)571.

And with her, all those who tried to defend her were also cancelled.

***“We are knocked down but still have some life in us”... (2 Cor. 4,7-9)***

These details, once known in Khartoum, certainly did not help to calm the atmosphere in the community where that peace and harmony, very dear to Mother [Bollezzoli] in Verona and always stimulated by her, had suffered a hard blow. Despite this, Vittoria Paganini managed to maintain her interior equilibrium and did not permit that priority be given to things that did not merit it. For her, even though hurt and pained by the treacherous and dangerous path on which Rosalia Conte had embarked, the greatest worry remained the Sisters and Brothers who had been imprisoned by the Mahdists.

*“From Kordofan there is no positive news, Sr. Vittoria wrote on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1883 to Fr. Francesco Giulianelli, the only person who conserved her letters.*

*She then added: Of the messengers sent there by the Mission, not one has returned. But God will certainly have great pity on our dear prisoners and on us!<sup>86</sup>*

Once again on the 16<sup>th</sup> of the following June she wrote: *We are halfway through the month of the Sacred Heart of Jesus without having any news of our prisoners. Despite this, our faith shall not be shaken. We shall be more insistent with our requests, sure that God will not leave unheard the prayers of those who entrust and abandon themselves to Him.*

*Oh that a new horizon could dawn for us to cheer our disheartened spirits! However, suffering is more to be desired than trying to avoid it. Therefore, let us gather around the Cross together and cry, considering that those who sow in tears will reap in joy” ...<sup>87</sup>*

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<sup>86</sup> AMN, 7(2004)111.

<sup>87</sup> AMN, 7(2004)114.

***“Don’t lose heart! Remain firm and keep going until the end”...***

From Verona, Maria Bollezzoli encouraged as she could. *“Dearest daughter in Jesus Christ, she wrote on September 7<sup>th</sup> 1883, to someone not better identified than ‘Superior’, but which all indications suggest was Vittoria Paganini.*

*“Even if I am not writing much now,<sup>88</sup> this does not mean that I forget you, but rather I think of you more often than before and always pray to the Lord that he may protect you according to your needs which I believe will grow with each day of your life. Do not be dismayed if the divine hand rests itself a little on your poor shoulders, but accept all with holy resignation as a sure guarantee that you are dear to the Sacred Heart of Jesus who suffered so much for us. I know that our nature is weak and poor and takes refuge only at the mention of tribulation, but I also know that our good Lord rushes to the help of those who abandon themselves to Him. I also know that with the fire of tribulations he also wants to purify His elect and that the tribulations and difficulties of this life are our purgatory on earth. Therefore, if we know how to profit from them, receiving them in a spirit of humility, we will gain infinite treasures for eternal life, as the only way to go to heaven is through suffering.*

*I wish to be persuaded that, with the new Rule<sup>89</sup> you must be greatly relieved. Nevertheless, you will have your cross all the same and if not, we*

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<sup>88</sup> According to Fr. Sembianti it was Monsignor Sogaro who did not approve of the correspondence between Maria Bollezzoli and the Sisters in the mission and therefore, this latter sought to limit herself. When he came to know about it, the Apostolic Vicar firmly denied this and wrote to the Rector: *“Regarding the Mother Superior of Verona, know that it is my opinion that not only she be called but that she also be, in fact, the Superior General of the Sisters Institute. [...] Imagine if I would want to prohibit the Sisters from writing when and how much and how they want to the Superior.”* (Cairo, 17<sup>th</sup> of October 1883. In ACR, A 39/33/66).

<sup>89</sup> *“In Khartoum, observance of the Rules was applied again and it seems that things are going well”.* Monsignor Sogaro communicated to *Propaganda Fide* on July 16<sup>th</sup> 1883 [AP SC Afr. C, vol. 9(1883)736]. *“I have not established any new Rule, he had explained previously on June 21<sup>st</sup>, I have only asked the observance of two rules that were written a long time ago and hang on the refectory wall, but have never been observed:*

- 1. No one may go to the Sisters without necessity and without permission from the Superior.*
- 2. No one is to present himself at the kitchen to ask for food without the permission of the Superior.* (Ivi, f. 719-720)

*know that each of us is a cross to herself. Take courage therefore: If you must now carry the Cross for a while, the day will come when the Cross will carry you, and it will carry you on that blessed chair which, with your sufferings, you will have made for yourself. Don't lose heart, therefore, for charity's sake! Remain firm and constant and keep going until the end. Let the holy Rules be observed with precision and don't be afraid of anything. Trust without limit in God and He will always be with you. From time to time, raise your eyes to the heavens and look at all those who from there look on you! Follow now, as they did, Jesus from Gethsemane to Calvary and then, like them, from Tabor you will follow Him to heaven where you will be for all eternity.*

*Forgive me, my dearest daughter, that I speak with you so informally, but I could not help but follow a secret and almost pressing impulse [...].*

*In Jesus, your affectionate Mother,  
Sr. Maria Bollezzoli”<sup>90</sup>*

### **First investigation of *Propaganda Fide* about Monsignor Sogaro**

It had been Fr. Sembianti himself who had, already from the month of October 1882, manifested a certain disappointment that the newly elected Apostolic Vicar had not been appointed bishop.<sup>91</sup> Evidently, it was the intention of *Propaganda Fide* to take this step only at a later stage and in the Spring of 1883, the Prefect of *Propaganda Fide* began an investigation of his practice, something which usually precedes the nomination of a bishop.

However, the result was not very encouraging. According to Luigi di Canossa who had sent an initial response on the following 21<sup>st</sup> of June, it was not appropriate *to talk of becoming bishop*. The subject demonstrated himself to be *'a little too proud'* and therefore he should be kept waiting just to make sure and especially until he grow *in apostolic spirit*.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Bollezzoli to Paganini, Verona 7<sup>th</sup> of September 1883. In APMN, VI/B/3/3–539.

<sup>91</sup> Sembianti to Simeoni, Verona, 8<sup>th</sup> of October 1882. See APSC Afr. C., vol. 9(1882)514.

<sup>92</sup> Ivi, f. 580: Canossa to Jacobini.

In turn, Monsignor Sogaro confided to the Rector in Verona, *“I feel lacking. I am slowly convincing myself that my mission is coming to an end [...]”*.

*On the other hand, I know for sure that I don't have the nerves of steel that are required to lead this mission. Therefore, agree, as a good brother and don't deny me the charity of your co-operation so that prudently and serenely we can place the burden onto other shoulders.”*<sup>93</sup>

Evidently informed about this request, the Bishop of Verona took up the pen again on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 1883 to write once more to the secretary of *Propaganda Fide*:

*“Contradicting pieces of news are arriving here and I don't know how to be sure about what I am hearing. There are those who say he is impetuous, sometimes hard, and too attached to his own opinions and that it would be difficult [for him] to gain souls and direct them to the charity of Christ for the good of souls. Others say he is zealous and appropriate [...]”*

*Therefore, I would ask your Eminence if he might like to collect secret information from Africa, from more than one person [...] then, considering this with the information I have, your Eminence can be better equipped to decide whether or not he should be definitively made leader of that mission and then, in that case, be consecrated bishop”*...<sup>94</sup>.

It had to be expected then that the *‘secret information’* which was sought out and later arrived, would also be discordant. One thing was to experience personally who Francesco Sogaro was and another was to receive his trust. It was probably for this reason that, at a certain point, *Propaganda Fide* had asked Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti a detailed and documented report of what had taken place during the new Apostolic Vicar's visit to Africa. Fr. Sembianti sent it in two parts but without signing it.

It would obviously not be appropriate to quote here all that was written on this subject. However, at least two of those people who intervened merit attention: Monsignor Anacleto from San Felice, Apostolic Delegate in Egypt and the Coptic bishop of Alexandria, Marco Morcos.

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<sup>93</sup> Sogaro to Sembianti, Cairo, 2<sup>nd</sup> of July 1883. In ACR, A/39/33/22.

<sup>94</sup> Canossa to Jacobini, Verona, 25<sup>th</sup> of August 1883. In APSC Afr. C, vol. 9(1883)578.

We are indebted, in fact, to the first, for an interesting psychological analysis of the person concerned. According to him, there were two incidents that could bear weight on the scales of *Propaganda Fide* against Monsignor Sogaro: the sacking of the General Administrator, Fr. Francesco Giulianelli and the flight from Khartoum of Fr. Vincenzo Marzano.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of October 1883, Monsignor Anacleto, referring to the case of Marzano, wrote as follows: *“I have only heard tell of the incident from Monsignor himself. The Sacred Congregation knows, and I believe you have judged it. However, I must not hide the sorrowful impression that I had at the dismay that this incident seemed to produce in Monsignor Sogaro who seemed fearful, discouraged [...] and very anxious to know about what would be thought of him and how he would be judged in Rome [...]. This great panic and overwhelming anxiety [...] does not seem to demonstrate seriousness and if one were to investigate it fully, I fear that what would be discovered would be faint heartedness, a serious limitation for one who has to carry the weight of an extremely difficult mission. Perhaps, worse still, it could be impatience to see himself officially recognized as the leader of the mission entrusted to him.”*<sup>95</sup>

In the reply of Bishop Morcos of November 5<sup>th</sup> 1883, instead, we find the confirmation that there was by this time, a serious rift in the relationships between the Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa and those responsible for the African Institutes of Verona.

The confidante of Francesco Sogaro revealed, *“The sorrow that afflicts the heart of this Apostolic Vicar does not depend only on the attitude that his subordinates have towards him, but also on the direct interference that [...] the directors of the Institute [...] of Verona want to insist on in regulating the things and the personnel of the mission from afar”*<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ivi, f. 558-559: Anacleto of San Felice to Simeoni, 19<sup>th</sup> of October 1883. See ff. 729-730: Sogaro to Zitelli, Cairo 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1883.

<sup>96</sup> Ivi, f. 556: Morcos to Simeoni, 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1883.

## **A real problem**

It was the same discomfort felt with great suffering by Daniel Comboni, starting from his last stay in Europe. This had happened despite the fact that the bishop of Khartoum was also the founder of the Institutes of Verona and had considerable African experience.

The Institutes in Verona, in fact, were not simply religious congregations destined to carry out their activities on the territory of the diocese. *Propaganda Fide* itself had wanted the Institutes for the Vicariate of Central Africa and, even if they had a right to an autonomy which Daniel Comboni had always recognized, they could not forget this.

This was a situation which required a constant, respectful and open dialogue between the Rector of Verona and the Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa. It was a dialogue which had to be maintained without tiring of it and without giving in to the temptation to impose oneself, affirming one's own authority; a dialogue carried out in a spirit of understanding and patience and sometimes also tolerance.

It was especially necessary not to take steps in a hurry, like that of demanding, prematurely, the removal of someone who had received responsibility.

According to *Propaganda Fide*, at least from what we can deduce, those responsible for the two Institutions had to come to an understanding about this. It was necessary to play for time with Francesco Sogaro, give him new opportunities, see how he reacted to the observations and suggestions of his superiors.

As for the nomination of bishop, for the moment, it could wait.

## 4.

### **The Painful Necessity of leaving Khartoum**

*“All therefore, [...] left Khartoum on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December. They are two priests, four Sisters and three Brothers; they take with them the young African men and women from the establishments of that mission, some of whom are baptized and others who are chatecumens and some who are Christians and all of whom preferred to follow the missionaries rather than remain in their homes in danger of being forcibly dragged into apostasy”...*

[*La Nigrizia*, II(1884)1, pp. 4-5]

Towards the middle of 1883, a time in which the new Apostolic Vicar was leaving Khartoum to return to Cairo, the general situation in the Sudan was the following:

*“The Equatorial provinces and that of the Red Sea were calm. In the provinces of Berber and Dongola, there was a growing sense of disquiet and agitation due to the unceasing propaganda made by the messengers of the Mahdi [...]. In Dar For and Bahr el Ghazal, many attempts at revolution had been repressed by the two governors, but these disposed of only few troops who for many reasons were already revealing themselves more inclined to embrace the cause of the Mahdi than to fight against him[...].*

*In the North of Kordofan, the numerous tribes of the Kababisch, more inclined to farming than to fighting wars, had, out of fear, made an act of subjection to the Mahdi, but they lent an ear also to the proposals of the Government and at the first serious defeat of the rebels, they would openly declare themselves in favour of it [the government] [...].*

*All the government forces were concentrated in Khartoum for the next expedition to Kordofan”...<sup>97</sup>*

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<sup>97</sup> D. GOZZI, op. cit. p. 224.

From Kordofan, regarding the prisoners, there was only, as Vittoria Paganini said:

***“A silence heralding death”...***

From El Obeid, in fact, it was impossible to have reliable news from the prisoners held in the *Boga*, after that which had been received in the month of March.

*“Now, Sr. Vittoria confided in Fr. Francesco Giulianelli, I would so much like to give you some good news of our brother Confessors, prisoners in Kordofan, but it pains my heart to have to repeat that there exists between us an unsurmountable barrier; a silence heralding death. Great God, have mercy on your children!*

*However, I am greatly consoled by the thought of the virtue that distinguishes them. The Lord is with them in their tribulation and therefore, they will manage all things. They will be tried in many forms and afflicted in many ways, but will remain always like an unbreakable rock, serene and sure in the midst of the most distressing suffering. If the happiest day for a Christian is the day of tribulation, then how many days our dear Brothers and Sisters will be accumulating for that Life which knows no sunset! Considering this, my excellent Father, they are more worthy of envy than compassion! Therefore, let us adore the unfathomable will of God. Let us pray and hope. Still a little more, and then we will have finished to suffer [...]. The Cross is precious. Therefore, let us not allow it to be far from us, as it serves as our passport for entering heaven”...<sup>98</sup>*

Deeply troubled by all that had happened as a consequence of the visit of the new Apostolic Vicar, the Superior of the Sisters community, which had lost half of its members, since apart from herself, only Sisters Giuseppa Scandola, Matilde Lombardi and Fortunata Zanolli remained in Khartoum, tried every day despite everything to face courageously a situation which was becoming more critical, both at home and also externally.

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<sup>98</sup> Paganini to Giulianelli, Khartoum, 19<sup>th</sup> of June 1883 in *AMN*, 7(2004)116.

Fr. Leone Hanriot, who had had a lot to do with painting such a black picture of the discipline of the members, had not improved his attitude towards them and in particular, towards the “*Comboni Sisters*.”<sup>99</sup>

Fortunately, the Sisters could count on the brotherly support of Fr. Francesco Pimazzoni who had remained in Khartoum and had become their confessor after Fr. Giovanni Dichtl had had to return to Europe due to his health and also in order to do some business entrusted to him by the Apostolic Vicar.<sup>100</sup>

We can most probably, therefore, attribute to Fr. Pimazzoni the description of the military parade which preceded the departure of the army from Khartoum,<sup>101</sup> under the command of the English General, William Hicks, prepared by the Government to launch an attack against the Mahdist forces. It was an attack which was hoped would be decisive.

“*If the Good God will give us victory in the first battle,*<sup>102</sup> Major Evans wrote to Monsignor Sogaro, *I hope that towards the second half of next month our poor prisoners will be liberated from the hands of the rebels*”...  
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<sup>99</sup> Hanriot to Sembianti, Khartoum, 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 1883. In ACR, A/27/6/23. In fact, it is sufficient to re read this letter in fact – see, *AMN*, 7(2004)119-120 - to get an idea of how the Superior in Khartoum viewed feminine collaboration in Africa.

<sup>100</sup> He himself wrote the following year, “*I was sent to Europe by my most Reverend Superior as his Vicar to do some business regarding the Mission of Central Africa particularly in Vienna and Cologne.*” (Dichtl to Simeoni, Verona 4<sup>th</sup> of March 1884 in AP SC Afr. C. vol. 9, f. 891).

<sup>101</sup> See, *La Nigrizia* I(1883)6, pp. 153-159.

<sup>102</sup> Unfortunately, it would not go that way, also due to the hasty decision on the part of the English government to entrust to Hicks and Al ed-Din the command of the great army. According to Major Gozzi, in fact, the first, who came from India did not know Sudan sufficiently well. The second because he had been called in to substitute Abd el-Kader who was considered at that time the man most likely to be able to face the Mahdists in Kordofan (See, pp. 213-221).

“*If it hadn't been for **this Governor in Khartoum**”, Fr. Giovanni Dichtl had also confirmed a year earlier, referring to Abd el-Kader, “a massacre could not have been avoided. This is **common knowledge** and in **two months** without him, Sudan would be lost” (Dichtl to Giulianelli, Khartoum, 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1882. In ACR, A/26/25/2).*

<sup>103</sup> Evans to Sogaro, Khartoum, 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1883. In AP SC Afr. C. vol. 9(1883)810.

## **The departure of the great army for Kordofan**

*“On the 8<sup>th</sup> of September at six in the morning”, Fr. Sembianti, who had received the news from Khartoum wrote to Propaganda Fide, “the troops moved from Omdurman, which is close to Khartoum, and by seven thirty they were on the march. There were almost eight thousand infantrymen, two thousand horsemen, six thousand camels for transporting weapons and provisions, fifteen canons and submachine guns. One hundred armoured cavalry wore a red tunic over their armour and they formed the rearguard [...] behind the army, the Basci Buzuc (Turkish soldiers who were mostly Catholics) followed as part of the rearguard and their job was to guard the camels [...]. Two leaders, the Kabir [Hicks and Al-ed Din] were at the head of the army which was very impressive for this country. The English reckon that they will need 12 days to travel from Omdurman to Duem, and after having rested there for some days, they will take another 15 days from Duem to El Obeid. So, by the 9<sup>th</sup> of October they should be in El Obeid if they are not attacked on the journey”...<sup>104</sup>*

This was an event which would have revived the hope and have made more promising the last period of relative calm which the young missionaries in Khartoum had been experiencing. In Cairo, in fact, a ‘ceasefire’ had been announced by the Apostolic Vicar.

In the same letter cited above, the rector in Verona informed Propaganda Fide that, *“I also had another letter from Khartoum, from the missionaries and the Sisters which tell me that they have had comforting letters from Monsignor Sogaro in which he demonstrates that he is beginning to see that he was mistaken about Fr. Pimazzoni and the Superior of the Sisters. May the Lord put an end to the bitter and undeserved sufferings of those souls who are very attached and dedicated to the Mission”...*

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<sup>104</sup> Sembianti to Simeoni, 9<sup>th</sup> of October 1883 in AP SC Afr. C., vol. 9(1883)810–811.

## Unfortunately, instead

Not only did this ‘ceasefire’ between the Apostolic Vicar and the Superior of the Sisters community in Khartoum prove to be very fragile, but the sudden death of Fr. Francesco Pimazzoni on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October due to repeated episodes of typhoid fever, had thrown all the members of the mission into an atmosphere of sorrow which seemed to deepen every day.

There was also a lot of suspicion, which unfortunately turned out to be true, that things were not going well in Kordofan. From Cairo, Monsignor Sogaro informed *Propaganda Fide*:

*“Here, Your Eminence, he communicated on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 1883, there is trouble. It is certain that the military expedition is not going well. It seems certain that it has been partially defeated, but there is a lot of secrecy around this. Today, General Hicks is awaiting reinforcements and he is only a short distance from Duem from where he left on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September”...<sup>105</sup>*

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of November, he wrote again: *“For some days now, there is great uncertainty in the local Government and in all those who follow with great trepidation the unfolding of the rebellion in the Sudan. For several days now there is no more news about the military expedition of over 12 thousand men. It seems that General Hicks is cut off and that the rebels are occupying the territory between el Duem [...] and El Obeid. May God grant that the next news to arrive might be that General Hicks has defeated the rebel army and has triumphed so that the passage can be re-opened!”...<sup>106</sup>*

Then finally, the admission of disaster: He confessed on the 26<sup>th</sup> of November, *“The great apprehension manifested in my last letter regarding the military expedition in Kordofan has been incredibly confirmed in the last few days.*

*That army of twelve thousand men no longer exists! The stories told about the details differ, but all agree on the fatal conclusion, that is, that only a few individuals survived. Now what is to become of the poor*

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<sup>105</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni in AP SC Afr. C., vol. 9(1881-1885)821.

<sup>106</sup> Ivi, f. 826.

*Missionaries and Sisters, prisoners of the Mahdi? What will happen to that poor station in Khartoum? As soon as we knew the truth of the matter, about four days ago, in agreement with the Austro Hungarian consul, we recalled, by means of a telegraph, all the members of that station” ...<sup>107</sup>*

### **The order to withdraw**

A first telegram therefore, which left Cairo on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1883, had recalled to Scellal all the members of the missionary station in Khartoum.

*“Strangely, however, noone moved”,* Monsignor Sogaro told Fr. Sembianti, until, on the evening of the 25<sup>th</sup> of November *“a telegram from the Sisters arrived in Cairo which told me to leave them in Khartoum with Brother Polinari, given that they could not leave with all the Africans from the mission. They did not have the courage to abandon them. This morning, I sent another telegram: **All depart: Polinari may remain if he wishes to”**...<sup>108</sup>*

So, Giuseppa Scandola then wrote to Fr. Sembianti, *“Today we have received the order to leave with all the others of the Church. If you could see the confusion which reigns here now you would be amazed. Those who are going to follow us are jumping for joy. Those who would like to come, but cannot, suffer and those who are unable to decide, complain, gossip and quarrel with each other. Father, Mother and the Sisters have their hands full trying to calm everyone. Oh, my Father, how much more willingly we would die here than repeat the misery of last year [Berber]. But God wants this, so let it be done [...]. Right now, we were just anxiously waiting for the decision of our dear ones in Kordofan but instead we have to leave without knowing anything after 14 months of worrying about them. It seems to me that the Lord is asking too much of us this time. But let us be patient. May*

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<sup>107</sup> Ivi, f. 839-840.

<sup>108</sup> Sogaro to Sembianti, Cairo, 26<sup>th</sup> of November 1883. In ACR, A/39/33/50.

*He always be praised. We desire only to follow Him faithfully even in the midst of the dark night in which He leads us at present [...]. But nevertheless, let His will be always done. You, dear Father, don't worry about us, just remember us to God. All four of us are agreed and we will help each other. At the moment, Mother is also well in the midst of many struggles. They seem to make her younger!*

*The grace of God is really with us. We don't know yet though the day of our departure as there is a lot to do to get everything and everyone ready. When we will arrive somewhere from where it is possible to write, I will let you know. Fr. Vicentini has not arrived yet. What will he say when he sees our compound full of trunks? If we don't have time to write to Reverend Mother, please inform her and thank her on behalf of Mother and all the Sisters for the lovely letter she sent to us [...].*

*Be charitable enough to bless this big family and to ask people to pray for our dear ones in Kordofan and for our deceased. While I kiss your hand, keep your poor daughter in the Heart of Jesus.*

*Sr. Giuseppa*

PS 26 [November]

*Dear Father, there is more news today. Our departure is suspended. Father [Hanriot] has already sent a telegram to Cairo to inform them. They say that what was reported in the past days is not true. There is still a little hope for Kordofan. We feel as if we have risen from the dead and the people of the city feel the same way. Even although we have worked a lot, we are happy to redo the work. I am in charge of the sacristy which is in chaos. Never mind! We don't know whether the Lord was pleased with all the promises we made or whether he feared the threats of Mother [Vittoria] who was resolute and did not want to forgive. Poor Lord, he was taken in. Anyway, may God always be blessed whether he consoles us or makes us suffer. I am hurrying to finish this before some other less happy news arrives and I am forced to withdraw what I have written.”<sup>109</sup>*

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<sup>109</sup> Scandola to Sembianti, Khartoum, 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of November 1883. In ACR, A/31/38/1.

## Order for immediate departure

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 1883, not having understood what could have happened in Khartoum and why the departure had been suspended, the Apostolic Vicar wrote to Fr. Sembianti saying that he was “greatly worried” about the lack of news.

Therefore, he turned again to the “*diplomatic agencies of Austria, France and Italy*” and found out that no ship had been placed at their disposition by the government and that it was necessary to return and insist.<sup>110</sup>

Finally, thanks most of all to the Austro-Hungarian diplomatic agency in Cairo taking an interest, Monsignor Sogaro received the assurance that he could immediately recall all the personnel from Khartoum. He wrote further on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, “*Yesterday evening, I sent another telegram: I order your immediate departure: All are extremely worried about you.*”<sup>111</sup>

But even this telegram, compiled in agreement with Commander De Martino, from the Diplomatic Corps resident in Cairo, was not immediately responded to by those who received it, so much so that Monsignor Sogaro was obliged to send a more explicit and emphatic one: *Excusing your naivety, I order for the last time your immediate departure.*<sup>112</sup>

This time, the desired response arrived: “*We leave on Tuesday, more than 90 people. Polinari will remain. Hanriot.*”<sup>113</sup>

“*For now, one can read in the letter of the 10<sup>th</sup> of December cited above, I limit myself to letting your Most Reverend Eminence know the story of this regrettable delay, leaving for another time an investigation of the causes for it*”...

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<sup>110</sup> Sogaro to Sembianti, Cairo, 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 1883. In ACR, A/39/33/51.

<sup>111</sup> Sogaro to Sembianti. Cairo, 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1883. In ACR A/39/33/52.

<sup>112</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni, 10<sup>th</sup> of December 1883. In AP SC Afr. C. vol. 9(1883)846.

<sup>113</sup> Ivi, f. 854.

## Faithful to the spirit of the Good Shepherd

*“We don’t want to leave without the Africans...  
The Sisters and Polinari wish to remain”.*

The departure from Khartoum, as painful as it was necessary, took place on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December 1883, among the general consternation both of those who were leaving and of those who had to stay.

*“We are preparing for the departure,”* Matilde Lombardi had written three days earlier to Fr. Sembianti. *“You can just imagine the confusion of these past days and even more the heartbreak that we feel to have to leave this very dear mission to which we sacrificed ourselves entirely. But if the Good God [...] for His own unfathomable ends, has decreed this, may His Divine Will be done now and always”...<sup>114</sup>*

Then, in another of her letters, written from Scellal on the following 31<sup>st</sup> of January, Sr. Matilde shared some interesting details about the days preceding the departure from Khartoum, writing:

*“Very Reverend Father,*

*Since the Lord has given us the grace to arrive happily after this long and difficult journey, [in reality they had completed only the first stage of the journey] permit me as your dutiful and sincere daughter to notify you as best I can remember it, about the confusion and the struggles we lived during our last days in Khartoum [...].*

*As we undertood [...] the army was defeated on the 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> of November. But we came to know about it only on the 20<sup>th</sup> evening [...].*

*On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Reverend Superiors decided to send a telegram to your Excellency in order to know what to do for the future. Fearing that the reply might tell us to leave immediately and alone, and knowing in their hearts that they couldn’t, they worded it as follows: **If the Africans leave, we will leave. If they remain, we ask also to remain. Hanriot and Paganini.** In our hearts, we are there, but we are always willing to do the will of God and of*

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<sup>114</sup> Lombardi to Sembianti, Khartoum, 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1883. In ACR, A/31/26/2.

those who, here on earth, take His place. So, we were preparing our departure. How we spent the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> only God knows!

Knowing that our excellent Mother had the permission of your Excellency to send you a telegram in case of need, we felt no fear, and foreseeing what our Africans might have to suffer, in talking about it we told the Mother [...] that we should send a telegram. We wrote the telegram as follows: **Danger is not imminent. We do not feel to leave without the Africans. It is not feasible to leave with all of them. The Sisters and Polinari ask to stay [...].**

On the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup>, the Father left the house and came back with fresh news. On his return, he told us to stop preparing the trunks, because the previous news was not true and we were not in danger[...]. After five or six days another [telegram] arrived for the representative Consuls which obliged them to make us leave. Take note that we were also awaiting any day Fr. Domenico [Vicentini]. In the meantime, the Superior was collecting news and coming to tell us about it [...]. On the vigil of the feast of the Immaculate Conception, Fr. Domenico arrived. [He was supposed to substitute Fr. Francesco Pimazzoni]. The next day, the Reverend Fathers took advice from one another and thought of sending another telegram saying that for the moment **everything was calm** and that they desired to await the messenger who had been sent to Kordofan. On Sunday the 9<sup>th</sup> at lunch time, another telegram arrived ordering us to leave immediately excusing our inability to understand [...].

As he wrote, we left on the 11<sup>th</sup>. I think you will be aware of all the details of our journey through the letters of the Reverend Fathers, because we Sisters can't take time to describe them"...<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Lombardi to Sembianti, Scellal, 31<sup>st</sup> of January 1884. In ACR, A/31/26/3.

## In Scellal for three months

*“Scellal, an Arabic word which means cataract because in the neighbourhood the first cataract is found, in a village situated in lower Nubia and [...] it marks the border of the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Africa to the North, the border with Egypt to the South. At an hour and a half on horseback from Scellal one reaches Aswan, station of the steamboats from where, in four and a half days on a steamboat on the Nile and a day on the train, one can reach Cairo”*

*[La Nigrizia, II(1884)1, p. 6].*

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 1884, Fr. Domenico Vicentini wrote to the editor of *Nigrizia*, “You will be pleased to know, a little in detail, our mission station in Scellal, place of refuge from the deeply troubled Mission of Central Africa and the extreme border of its territory. We hope that this almost enforced house arrest in which [...] the painful events of the Sudan have confined us, will not last for a long time”.

Fr. Domenico then called to mind that the station, which had been erected “in 1861 when Monsignor Kirchner was Pro Vicar”, had been abandoned “after the construction of the railway line, Cairo to Suez, which opened a much shorter and easier route from the Red Sea to the desert of Suakin [...]. Now, however, the ruinous events in the Sudan witnessed once again that Divine Providence foresees and provides [...]. Certainly, when this mission was established, noone could foresee [...] or even think that it would be, in the not too distant future, a necessary and opportune refuge for the Mission of Central Africa. As the route from Berber to Suakin was closed, on withdrawing from Khartoum, it was the desert route of Korosco that had to be taken. It is true that the Mission has its houses for acclimatization in Cairo, but these are in territory which does not belong to it. Then, where and how to settle all the newly converted Christians who had come with us[...]? Here we are still on the territory of the Mission, away from the great centres, which are unfortunately fatal to the faith of these new Christians. In addition, we have a plot of land which is suitable for cultivation and big enough to occupy a number of families” ...<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> *La Nigrizia*, II(1884)3, pp. 70-72.

### ***The hope was to be able to stay there***

Having left Cairo on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1883, Francesco Sogaro had arrived in Scellal five days later, accompanied by some lay brothers, so as to put the house, which had been abandoned for a long time, in order. There, for two weeks, he anxiously awaited to hear news of those who had escaped or of the prisoners.

Finally, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 1884 he was informed, first by the newspapers and then by Fr. Rolleri, that on the 29<sup>th</sup> of December, ‘*the African girl called Marietta*’<sup>117</sup> had arrived in Khartoum from Kordofan carrying written and oral messages for the missionaries who were held as prisoners.

According to what she had told them, the three Fathers, the two brothers and the six Sisters were alive. Their health was not worrying, but they had been deprived of everything and the situation was getting worse day by day. Therefore, they were urgently in need of assistance.

This news was confirmed by a letter which arrived in Scellal from Domenico Polinari, who from Khartoum informed the Apostolic Vicar:

*“Marietta, from Kordofan, arrived after having been sent by Fr. Bonomi and she was arrested [...]. The Austro Hungarian Consul obtained her freedom immediately. She says that all are alive but they need food and clothes because they find themselves in extreme poverty. They are closed inside small huts and they can’t come out because the Arabs are on their doorsteps threatening them continuously either with death or with the promise that the Sisters will be made concubines if they don’t become Muslims. Marietta says that the Arabs have destroyed the Church and all the houses of the merchants, considering them impure. They have taken all the religious objects and they have made drapes for the horses and the chasubles and the chalices are either used for drinking or are sold for quarter of a thaler each”...<sup>118</sup>*

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<sup>117</sup> This was Marietta Maragasse\*, who had been able to leave El Obeid on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 1883 in order to go to Khartoum to seek help for the prisoners [See, *AMN*, 1(2000)32].

<sup>118</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni, Scellal, 21<sup>st</sup> of January 1884. In *AP SC Afr. C.*, vol. 9(1884)1124.

Now, among the letters which the courageous Marietta had carried from El Obeid, there were three from Teresa Grigolini for Vittoria Paganini. These are letters which are well known and which the recipient, who arrived in Scellal on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January with all her carovan, was able to read some days later. They gave her a picture not only of some of the details of the terrible drama which the Sisters who were prisoners of the Mahdi were living, but also of the greatness of the soul, the height of spiritual maternity which Teresa had attained.

Practically, the once Provincial Superior had not encouraged Marietta to go to Khartoum in order to have some help, but rather, to warn the Sisters of the impending danger.

She warned in fact, *“You can consider Khartoum lost. Do all you can to save yourselves, for woe to you should you find yourselves in such a disastrous situation as ours. What we have suffered until now, and what we may have to suffer in the future, only God knows [...].”*

*At the moment, we have enough to live on [...] but we spent some months [...] in absolute destitution. Sr. Amalia, Sr. Eulalia and Gabriele died in only eleven days due to the lack of essential supplies [...].*

*But what is important at the moment is to make you understand that you must all leave as soon as possible”...<sup>119</sup>*

*Oh, how much I would love to come with you, Teresa added in the second note, referring to Marietta who was about to leave. What a terrible place El Obeid has become. So many disasters, so many dead, incalculable ruin! Our blood curdles at the frights and the continuous fear in which we live. Blessed are those who have died!<sup>120</sup>*

Finally, in the third letter, she asked, *“I ask you please to write to our families telling them simply that we are well, but that we cannot write. Entrust us to their prayer and to the prayer of all [...].”*

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<sup>119</sup> Grigolini to Paganini: Message on cloth, without a signature or a date. In *AMN*, 12(2006)149-50.

<sup>120</sup> *AMN*, 12(2006)151: El Obeid, 30th of November 1883.

*All of us greet you wholeheartedly [...] Remember me to Sr. Giuseppa and to the others [...]. O, if only we could see each other again!” ...*<sup>121</sup>

Unfortunately, Teresa and Vittoria would never see each other again. However, until her death in 1891, the latter carried in her heart the drama of her Sisters made prisoners, suffering with them and for them in a communion so deep that it led her to offer her life for their liberation.

### **The arrival of Gordon re-ignites hope**

According to Teresa Grigolini, Khartoum was already lost. So, one had to ask: and Scellal? Writing to the Cardinal Prefect of *Propaganda Fide* on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 1884, Monsignor Sogaro did not hide from him that, *the hesitation* of the English on the one hand, and the victories of the Mahdi on the other, *could not help but create grave apprehension* in him too regarding the near future awaiting them.<sup>122</sup>

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, continuing the above mentioned letter from the day before, he seemed a little more confident as he informed him that, *“this morning His Excellency Gordon Pasha came to Scellal. We discussed the situation together and I was very satisfied to see that he is very committed to working for the liberation of [our missionaries].*

*Having asked him his opinion regarding our position here with about a hundred people, he told me that everything is calm”. As a precaution however, on his arrival at Korosco, “he would be in touch with Sir Baring by telegraph saying: Even though all is calm, it would be better to send a garrison to Aswan”...*

Instead, however, the revolution continued to spread and in those very days there was great fear for the fate of Berber and Dongola.

So, for how long then would Scellal be secure? Adding to the fears of

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<sup>121</sup> AMN, 12(2006)152-153.

<sup>122</sup> See, AP SC Afr. C., vol. 9(1881-1885)1135–1136.

the Apostolic Vicar was his realization that the season was not favourable for help to arrive should this become necessary.

With so many people under his responsibility and the difficulty of transport, perhaps it was better not to risk...

### **In fact ‘hope disappears’**

Monsignor Sogaro explained to Cardinal Simeoni, *“The part of the building occupied by the Missionaries and the African boys has been restored, while a new wing has been built for the Sisters and the African girls and it includes both a regular and a technical school. The boys’ school has also been completed and there are requests for admission from the families in Aswan [...]. We would have immediately started the construction of the Church, the awaited completion of the mission station [...] when suddenly all hope vanished and the inevitable sorrows and afflictions of such a grave situation were upon us”*...<sup>123</sup>

What had happened was that *“as the situation in the desert became increasingly serious and fears grew, we read in the same letter cited above, it seemed to me convenient to ask the opinion of the Austro Hungarian General Consul [Gsiller]. Having sent him a telegraph on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, we received his answer on the same day: I advise you to leave.”*

The population, even although all were Muslims, were sorry to see the departure of the personnel from the mission. Six months later, when Fr. Domenico Vicentini returned briefly *“to visit the people whom he knew in the village, they were so happy to see me!, he wrote later to Fr. Sembianti. They thought that I had come to stay there. They asked me news of Monsignor and of the Fathers, Brothers and Sisters and the African children. They kept asking me; when will they return?”*...<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> AP SC Afr. C., Vol. 9(1884)943: Assiut, 15<sup>th</sup> of May 1884.

<sup>124</sup> *La Nigrizia*, II(1884)6, p. 171.

## Where shall we go to settle with the Church of Sudan?

*“This was the thought that kept going through my mind tormenting me even before we left”, the Apostolic Vicar confessed on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 1884 to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda Fide. “This made the abandonment of our dear mission station in Scellal all the more bitter”... (f. 943)*

Precisely for this, that is, so that they could look for a place where they could settle the exiles from the Sudan, Francesco Sogaro left first and he had arrived in Cairo just after the middle of May 1884. Unfortunately, he found there an unpleasant surprise: a letter from *“The rector of the college in Verona”* who told him that *“the Apostolic Nunzio, Monsignor Vanutelli had made a case with the Archbishop of Vienna so that the offerings collected by the Marien-verein could be diverted to aid the missions in Bulgaria”*.

Now, while the Archbishop of Vienna who was perplexed by this matter, asked *‘through a circular letter’*, the opinion of *“all the Bishops of the Empire [...], Monsignor Vanutelli on his part, argued that as the mission in Khartoum had collapsed, we no longer needed the money”*.

The successor of Daniel Comboni reacted to this as follows: *“My dear Father, permit me just two words: If the Lord no longer wants us, his Eminence Vanutelli should just let us know; and we will bow our heads in docility and readiness, and will proceed on our way to wherever will be indicated to us. If the suggestion of the Nunzio [...] derives from the conviction that the mission in Khartoum has really and truly collapsed, I will add that, not only does **the mission still exist** materially in our **beloved Christianity**, fruit of many sacrifices, and the cost of many noble lives, which were lost mostly at a young age in the midst of crushing privations. This Christianity in a few months time, maybe a year, will produce much fruit for the foundation of new stations. Let it be said for the praise and glory of God that the mission still exists today, stronger than ever, because of the good number of Priests and Sisters it has at its service [...] but even more so because of the good will of all to be formed, with the help of God, in true missionary spirit: praying, suffering, working”...<sup>125</sup>*

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<sup>125</sup> AP SC Afr. C., vol. 9(1881-1885)947–948 (highlighting is ours).

## In the Community of Cairo

*“After a journey of 33 days full of dangers and discomforts, our [missionaries] arrived in Cairo on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June. Fr. Vicentini and two Sisters had severe inflammation of their eyes [...] but as we write now, they are almost completely healed. The Africans who were married were given accomodation in a rented house, while the boys and girls were kept at the mission station”.*

*(La Nigrizia, July 1884, p.127)*

Fr. Lorenzo Bertocchi wrote to his brother, *“We have here a great number of African boys and girls who have come from Scellal and they are accomodated in a house near Cairo [...]. The other day, the Sisters arrived on a boat, or a Dahabia as they call it here, with about thirty little girls [...]. I took a donkey and went out to meet them and gave them instructions on the orders of Monsignor Vicar [...]. The Sisters and the African girls, when they caught sight of me, came out of their huts and greeted me and kissed my hand. How tired and exhausted those Sisters looked after having navigated the Nile for 34 days with those little African girls. I gathered them together with the Mother Superior and the other three Sisters and took them to a house nearby which had been given to us by the Government and so now they are under cover and are well” ...*<sup>126</sup>

There are no writings, on the part of the Sisters, which document the encounter between the Sisters' community in Cairo and the refugees from the Sudan. What we can deduce, from a letter of Mother Bollezzoli addressed to Costanza Caldara, is that Vittoria Paganini, Superior in Khartoum, would assume the direction of the house in Cairo, despite the fact that Monsignor Sogaro was not too happy about it.<sup>127</sup>

With great delicacy, the Mother from Verona prepared Sr. Costanza to withdraw discreetly, and to assume her new role in the community. To

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<sup>126</sup> Bertocchi to his brother, 20<sup>th</sup> of June 1884. In ACR, A/26/2/27.

<sup>127</sup> *“On her arrival in Cairo, Monsignor Sogaro did not want her to be the Superior and he kept her in this position against his own better judgement” ... (Sembianti to Simeoni, AP SC Afr. C., vol. 9, f. 976)*

begin with, she asked her in a friendly way;

*“Dearest daughter in Jesus Christ,*

*By now you you have come to know all the sisters personally, haven't you? What do you think? So, in a short time you will be given the opportunity to taste the holy sweetness of obedience. Isn't that so? Therefore, take advantage of this time that the Lord grants you and seek to treasure this beautiful virtue. I believe that in the time you have stayed there, you will have to come to know by experience how necessary is this virtue of simple, ready and willing obedience. So, I am persuaded that you yourself will carry it out to perfection and to the letter. What I encourage you wholeheartedly is to be always as open and sincere as you have been until now. Don't keep anything hidden from your Mother and you will be happy. Proceed with holy simplicity and righteousness, then you will enjoy that beautiful peace of mind and heart which is the fruit of good conscience. In addition, help your Mother in all that you can in the office which you will be assigned to and as much as it is possible for you, conserve order, peace and harmony.*

*And how is Sr. Giuseppa? I am certain that she will have received the necessary treatment there. Do what you can to keep her happy and comforted in these difficult moments. I ask you to do this also with the good Sr. Vittoria who will be feeling the weight of many tribulations which the poor mission bears. Try to be near to her as much as you can and do all you can so that she may find in you a true **daughter in heart**.*

*Be happy at the thought that everything on earth passes and our homeland is in heaven. Don't be discouraged if you see that things don't go as well as we would like them to. But think that all things are disposed by God and permitted by Him so that we might draw greater good from them. We live by faith.*

*The Reverend Superiors and the Father Confessor send their blessings. The Sisters wish to be remembered to you and they await you in the Sacred Heart of Jesus where all of us [want to] repeat = May the Divine Dispositions which are always lovable be adored.*

*In Jesus, Your affectionate Mother,*

*Sr. Maria Bollezzoli”<sup>128</sup>*

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<sup>128</sup> Bollezzoli to Caldara, Verona, 7<sup>th</sup> of July 1884. In APMR, VI/B/3/1–1915.

**For Monsignor Sogaro, however, all was well,  
even if something was still missing**

*“Finally, we are here united with our poor Christians”, he communicated on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1884. “The young boys are with us and the girls are with the Sisters. We try to accomodate those who are married as best as we can.”*<sup>129</sup>

A month later he wrote: *“Those who are married have been accomodated temporarily in a house belonging to the Fathers of the Holy Land, until such times as I can place them with Christian families. I have already started doing this. I cannot hide from your Eminence the sense of profound consolation and hope that the Lord, in the midst of many tribulations, makes us experience in gathering us all close to His Sacred Heart. In addition it is consoling to see how the Brothers and Sisters are sincerely convinced that this is a time of mercy given to us to revive in us the spirit of our vocation [...].*

*I have to say, to the glory of the Lord Jesus, and for the consolation of your Eminence, that it is very pleasing to see how everyone is very prompt in carrying out their duties. What occupies us the most is the education and the instruction of our Africans. [...].*

*I believe that that excellent idea of regenerating Africa with Africa [ ...] is nearer than ever to becoming reality today”...*

Then, before concluding, he added: *“Between the Fathers’ house and the Sisters there is a **perfect separation**, and no one goes to this latter without necessity and without permission from the Superior. Only, as I expressed and pleaded in another letter of mine, we are missing the **form**; and we are awaiting the **form** from the wise charity and co-operation of our Mother, the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide” ...*<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni. In AP SC, Afr. C., vol. 9(1881–1885)952.

<sup>130</sup> Ivi, ff. 961-962: Sogaro to Simeoni, Cairo, 15<sup>th</sup> of July 1884.

### **Fr. Sembianti's version is somehow different**

At this point, the tone of this letter and the information in it that the Rector of Verona sent to Cardinal Simeoni, on his request, on that 23<sup>rd</sup> of August, are surprising.

One of the missionaries had written earlier on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June, *“If Monsignor Sogaro insists on continuing to act in this way, very few will remain faithful. He is rigorous with the others, but he uses a different measure for himself” ...*

Another had written on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July, *“In general, Monsignor Sogaro knows how to take decisions when he is angry [...] but then, he tends to let things go and this reveals his inconsistency” ...*

The same missionary, five days later wrote: *“We pray that the Lord will intervene because I see that with the nature of Monsignor being as it is, we will have much grief and little peace” ...*

Continuing in the same tone, the letter of Fr. Sembianti insisted on the ‘instability’ of the Apostolic Vicar, but especially on his *superficiality*, something which would often lead him to *“wrong judgements and consequently to grave actions on his subjects, to misunderstand the meaning of the letters and to talk about the contents in a way which contradicted what was written and to cause pain because the Pro Vicar showed lack of tact in choosing to discuss these matters with whom it was not necessary to do so” ...*

At the end of many pages, Fr. Sembianti, deeply bewildered and in crisis one could say, concluded by saying: *“Oh that we could find a remedy to the error which we unwittingly made! I will dialogue with His Excellency, Monsignor Canossa, and then I will let your Eminence know” ...*<sup>131</sup>

So, was the Rector in Verona still in the dark about how Monsignor Sogaro was thinking of proceeding with regard to the Combonian Institute?

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<sup>131</sup> Sembianti to Simeoni, Verona, 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1884. In AP SC Afr. C. Vol. 9(1884)974-976.

## **The project of the Apostolic Vicar**

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1884, Monsignor Sogaro wrote from Cairo in the following terms to the Bishop of Verona.

*“Most Eminent Prince and Father,*

*[...] The day before yesterday, I finally received the reply from the Eminent Cardinal Prefect [of Propaganda] regarding giving a stable form to our Institution. He says that the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide will be happy to approve a practical project leading to this end. So, without hesitation, I am thinking of entrusting this issue entirely to your Eminence because of the great interest you always had in this, so much so that the Institution can be said to be yours. In addition, as you know its needs, you are in a better position than others to make a concrete proposal. I am writing about these things now to the eminent Cardinal Prefect”...<sup>132</sup>*

In fact, on the same day, Monsignor Sogaro wrote to Cardinal Simeoni: *“regarding the presentation of a practical project for the stable organization of our Institute, I decided to write immediately asking for light and co-operation from Cardinal Canossa, the Cardinal Protector. As soon as something will be made concrete, I will dutifully submit it to your Eminence”...<sup>133</sup>*

## **Fr. Sembianti visits Cairo**

Throughout the following months, from September to December 1884, the correspondence between the Apostolic Vicar and Verona or Rome always made reference, however, also to the drama of the Fathers and Sisters who were prisoners of the Mahdi and whom they were trying, until now unsuccessfully, to reach or have freed.

To simply remain in Verona and wait for news, must have become unbearable at some point for Fr. Sembianti, who, in the end, decided to go

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<sup>132</sup> Sogaro to Canossa, Cairo, 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1884. In ACR, A/39/34/22.

<sup>133</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni, Cairo, 23<sup>rd</sup> of August, 1884. In AP SC, Afr. C., vol. 9(1884)978.

personally to see how things were.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 1885, precisely one month after the fall of Khartoum, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti arrived, for the first time, in Cairo. He spent approximately a month and a half there and he was satisfied with his visit. However, we have no documentation of this visit, except for the two letters cited here below.

In the first of these, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 1885, addressed to Fr. Luciano Rosa, the spiritual director of the Institutes in Verona at the time, he wrote:

*“I have been in Cairo for the past ten days [...].*

*I will not tell you, who have already been in these countries, the impressions that I had [...]. I will tell you rather of my happiness at seeing our [missionaries] in good health and dedicated to the education of the African children in the two houses. It is really comforting to see this group of young boys on one side and girls on the other saved through the work of the mission from the slavery which they would have fallen foul of again had the mission not fled Khartoum on time. Comforting too to see them here happy and content to receive that Christian education which will be for them the richest treasure which God has stored up for them. This is a reason of happy hope for the mission [...].*

*The happiness I experienced at these things mentioned above is rendered bitter by the knowledge that our [missionaries] are still prisoners in Sudan and by the inability to see how or when we may be able to free them. This is a very heavy affliction!” ...<sup>134</sup>*

Three days later, more or less in the same tone, but with some more news regarding the prisoners, he informed also the Bishop of Verona:

*“As you see from the date of this letter,” he wrote, “I arrived and I am still in Africa [...].*

*From what I could gather until now, things are going well in both Institutes<sup>135</sup>, but we are still bitter about the fact that our*

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<sup>134</sup> *La Nigrizia*, III(1885)2, pp. 42-43.

<sup>135</sup> In November 1884, Maria Bollezzoli had also received good news from Cairo and therefore, she answered: *“I find it truly consoling to hear about the lovely peace which you are experiencing there and how all of you make efforts to become even dearer to Jesus, the Spouse, through the perfect observance of the holy Rules. May our Good Lord be pleased that these good efforts persevere in all of you and no one deviates even minimally”...* (Bollezzoli to Caldara, 7<sup>th</sup> of November 1884. In APMR, VI/B/3/3-482).

*[missionaries] are prisoners in Kordofan and we can do nothing about it. This is a great sorrow! Today we are expecting Fr. Vicentini on his return from Dongola<sup>136</sup> and tomorrow, if we have calculated well, also the letter which is said to be written by Sr. Grigolini and taken by a messenger sent there in December. We shall see if it is authentic or a fake (to get money) and what news it contains”...<sup>137</sup>*

**‘Our misfortunes are an incalculable abyss’...**

The letter which Teresa Grigolini had written on the previous 3<sup>rd</sup> of February and had then entrusted to the messenger sent by Fr. Domenico Vicentini and which reached Cairo on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 1885, was unfortunately and dramatically authentic.

“*Our misfortunes are an incalculable abyss*” the author wrote without weighing her words. But she did not enter into details. She was letting them know that the only way for them to get out was to organize an escape plan. She explained that it would be completely useless, and even dangerous, to try to persuade the Mahdi to let them go. Therefore, she advised them: Don’t write “*ever again to this King of ours, otherwise, we will lose our heads.*”

At the end, she added some other news: “*Khartoum was **completely massacred***”. *The short message ended with a note of supplication: Come quickly to our aid!*<sup>138</sup>

As if that weren’t enough, fifteen days later, Monsignor Sogaro wrote to

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<sup>136</sup> The missionary had been sent to Dongola in the previous month of October, with the duty of delivering official letters to the Mahdi, in favour of the liberation of the prisoners and possibly, to have from the prisoners themselves, some indication about how to proceed in order to achieve this. [See, *La Nigrizia* II(1884)6, pp. 164-173]. Unfortunately, Fr. Domenico who was bitterly disappointed, could not remain until the end of his mission [See, *La Nigrizia*, III(1885)1, pp. 27-28], which was concluded by Licurgo Santoni, Director of the Post in Dongola.

<sup>137</sup> Sembianti to Canossa, Cairo, 9<sup>th</sup> of March 1885. In ACR, A/38/46/2.

<sup>138</sup> See, *AMN*, 12 ( 2006) 155: Grigolini to Vicentini, Omdurman, 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 1885.

Cardinal Simeoni, “*the other evening, there was a certain Mr. Manoli here who knew the mission well and until the last minute, he was employed by the Khedival steamboats of the Sudan. He left Khartoum after the middle of November to go towards the English [...].*”

*This man told me that the Mahdi had sent a man of his to Gordon suggesting to him the surrender of Khartoum. In case he refused, he was to persuade the Europeans in general, and eventually also the Greeks, to leave the city and give themselves over to the Mahdi and embrace Islam. The messenger was a certain Giorgio Calamitano, Greek by nationality. [...]. He was the one who told those trapped in Khartoum that the Sisters had been forced by the Mahdi to get married [...]. The Mahdi’s spokesman said that he had married one of the youngest Sisters and, from the description, he could have been referring to Maria Caprini [...]. I could not get any other details about the Sisters and could not even find out whether these marriages were only for the sake of appearances.”*<sup>139</sup>

In reality, the writer already knew that more serious things were rumoured but, as Mr. Santoni, when he had written to Fr. Vicentini, suggested, it was not good to “*believe too easily*” all that was being said with regard to the missionaries until they themselves could either confirm or deny the rumours.<sup>140</sup>

Giuseppe Sembianti, however, who was by now preparing himself to return to Verona, and had come to know about all that was being said, left Cairo with a broken heart, because, according to the rumours:

### **The defection had been general**

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of April, 1885, Francesco Sogaro wrote again to the Prefect of *Propaganda Fide* to confide in him that his fears were growing.

He said, “*In these days, I have received four letters from Khartoum. Three are from poor Mr. Hansal [who died during the fight for Khartoum].*”

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<sup>139</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni, Cairo, 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1885. In AP SC Afr. C., vol. 9(1885)1111.

<sup>140</sup> See, ACR, A/32/9/5: Santoni to Vicentini, Wadi Halfa, 29<sup>th</sup> of May 1885.

*Something very serious is written: He heard from a certain Calamitano, about whom I spoke to you in one of my last letters, that all the men and women, with the exception of Fr. Luigi Bonomi, accepted Islam under extreme pressure; and that Bonomi, if he continues to resist, will have to be ready for martyrdom. The letter is dated October 7<sup>th</sup> 1884” ...*<sup>141</sup>

It would have been better not to give too much weight to ‘*that Calamitano*’ and not to believe too much that correspondence. However, there were the newspapers, especially the English ones, which informed by General Gordon himself, continued to give maximum publicity to the apostasy of the Europeans.<sup>142</sup>

And there was “*the latest news from Fr. Giovanni Dichtl*<sup>143</sup>, Monsignor Sogaro wrote to Luigi di Canossa, “*regarding our dear prisoners [which] even though it was uncertain, filled me with such sadness that I would be unable to express in words. To think of the heart rendering situation of the Sisters; think that in a short time, the veil will be torn and certain things will come to light*<sup>144</sup> *Oh! Father, I confess that such a thought makes me feel faint*”...<sup>145</sup>

Therefore, since Monsignor Sogaro was in Rome in the month of June 1885, the letter cited above concluded, assuring the Bishop of Verona: “*I had desired and hoped to find myself in Verona for the celebration of the Saint’s day of your Eminence, but the great difficulty of obtaining an audience with the Holy Father does not allow me to be there*”...

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<sup>141</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni, Cairo, 16<sup>th</sup> of April 1885. In APSC Afr.C., vol. 9(1885)1113–1114.

<sup>142</sup> See, See, ACR, A/27/6/46: Hanriot to Vicentini, Namur, 27<sup>th</sup> of July 1885.

<sup>143</sup> Fr. Giovanni **Dichtl**, after his stay in Europe requested by Monsignor Sogaro, had returned to Africa in the month of May 1885 to substitute Fr. Domenico Vicentini, who had become Administrator and Superior of the houses in Cairo, with the task of maintaining contact with the prisoners.

<sup>144</sup> One can read in the *Diary* of Fr. Domenico Vicentini, “*Today I saw a letter from Lord Wolseley to Monsignor Sogaro. It says that a messenger sent by the English to Mohammed Ahmed to obtain the liberation of the European prisoners has returned. The Mahdi refused absolutely. In the letter of the Mahdi, there was a piece of writing, a speech signed by all the Europeans there declaring themselves content and happy under Mohammed Ahmed [...]. Among the signatures, there are those of our prisoners. No one is excluded. It remains to be seen whether the signatures are authentic. It would be the greatest tragedy for our prisoners and for the mission*”... (Diario di Fr. Domenico Vicentini, June 16<sup>th</sup> 1885. In AGS, DE/3/7.)

<sup>145</sup> Sogaro to Canossa, Rome, June 1885. In ACR, A/38/49/1.

## Episcopal election

That papal audience, requested by the Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa to Leone XIII, took place on the following 3<sup>rd</sup> of July. Evidently, the Vatican wanted to take its time.

Monsignor Sogaro took to the Pope, not only the sad and worrying news, but also the consoling news of the liberation of Fr. Bonomi, made possible thanks to the precious collaboration of Licurgo Santoni.<sup>146</sup> He did not know, or perhaps he imagined it, that the Pope, in turn, was preparing another piece of news for him: that of his elevation to bishop.

We don't know what the reaction of the rector of Verona was on hearing that news; neither do we know if he had modified his opinion of the Apostolic Vicar during his visit to Cairo. Something, however, he was able to make known to *Propaganda Fide* after his return and after the personal conversations he had had with all the members of the masculine and feminine Institutes.

However, the Sisters certainly did have an opinion which they desired to make known to Rome before the final decision. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1885, in fact, therefore, after the departure of Monsignor Sogaro, the Superior of the *Pie Madri* in Cairo, *in the name of all*, addressed the following letter, with some typically Combonian comments, to Cardinal Simeoni.

*“Most Eminent Prince and Father,*

*Last Friday our Reverend Monsignor, Apostolic Vicar left. Even though I blush at the thought, given my extreme poverty and misery, nevertheless, for the love of God and of this poor Institution, I feel encouraged to present this letter of mine to your Eminence.*

*With my eyes firmly fixed on the dangers of every kind that we would find ourselves in if the Lord had not been pleased to rescue us on time by sending us this man in a providential way, I feel obliged not only out of a sense of gratitude, but also of justice, to first of all thank the Lord God, giver of every good thing and also your Eminence. We are just a bit worried*

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<sup>146</sup> Given that it was a very famous event, there is no need to discuss it further here. [see, *La Nigrizia*, III(1885)4, pp. 103ff.].

*by the thought that Monsignor Vicar, who has undergone from the beginning many difficult trials with holy courage, might be tempted now to abandon us. Perhaps this is just a fear of ours, caused by the hope that we had placed in him whom the Lord sent to save us and to form in true apostolic spirit our dear Institution. In addition, we have to thank the Lord for the attachment that Monsignor has always demonstrated even in the moments of our worst suffering.*

*Now, it is to find comfort in our fear that we turn to your Eminence as if to our beloved Father and protector who has always demonstrated true interest in this very troubled Work of God so that you may preserve for us that man who due to divine goodness we have as our very dear and venerated leader. We who love the well-being of this dear Institute bless God for the presence of Monsignor Sogaro and we would truly deplore such a loss if he chose to abandon it. We are confident that our fear will be banished and our Father and leader will return among the dear Africans who suffered at seeing him leave. We give sincere thanks to the Lord and to your Eminence.*

*As I kiss your ring, I implore your Apostolic Blessing on myself and on all the community. With sentiments of profound veneration, I am honoured to call myself*

*Your devoted and humble servant,  
Sr. Vittoria Paganini superior  
In the name of all the Sisters in the Institute.”<sup>147</sup>*

One can point out, and it is interesting to do so, that Vittoria Paganini in the letter cited above, reveals clearly the Comboni Missionary matrix from which she came. Educated at the school of the Father, she had evidently adopted the same scale of values regarding the mission.

In writing to Rome, she did not hint in any way, in fact, at how much Francesco Sogaro had made her suffer in Khartoum, or those unkind aspects

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<sup>147</sup> Paganini to Simeoni, Cairo, 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1885. In AP SC Afr. C., vol. 9(1885)1181-1182.

of his character which he had revealed at that time. What was important was, that in events which took place after this, the successor of Daniel Comboni had demonstrated himself to be, in that particular time of the history of the Vicariate, “*a truly providential man*”, sent by the Lord, “*to save, and form in true apostolic spirit our dear Institution.*”

And for this, with the community, she gave “*thanks to God for the attachment that Monsignor had always demonstrated even in moments of great suffering.*”

Love for the mission, attachment to the ‘*dear Institute*’ and trust in this Institute, for which the Father had sweated and suffered, was what counted, and in this perspective, Sr. Vittoria had also helped those young sisters, who in Cairo were preparing themselves for the apostolic life while waiting for circumstances to change so that the way may be re-opened, to grow. Not by chance, we think, Leopolda Sandona’<sup>148</sup> wrote to Fr. Sembianti shortly after he departed from Cairo:

“*Very Reverend Father Rector,*

*[...]. All [the African girls] remember you and often speak of you and they pray [...].*

*I myself am well and I am very happy in thinking about the grace of my vocation rather than finding in it obstacles and hurtful things and reasons for regret. It seems to me that if I were to find myself older and feel myself called as I felt in the past, despite all the possible bad things that might be said to me, **I would still prefer this Congregation to any other.** Yes, I love it and every day I feel that I love it more. I live in it and for it because this is what I feel is the will of God for me. And as my life is dedicated to it, **so too will my death be and from now I pray that it may be a sacrifice to God so that he may always bless [the Congregation] more**”...<sup>149</sup>*

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<sup>148</sup> For a better knowledge of Leopolda Sandona, see *AMN*, 21–A/2(2012), N. 35, dedicated to the *Biographical Collection*.

<sup>149</sup> Sandona to Sembianti. Cairo, 9<sup>th</sup> of June 1885. In *ACR*, A/31/37/10. Highlighting is ours.

## **The offering of a young life for the liberation of the Sisters**

About two months later, struck by typhoid fever, which worsened suddenly in contrast to the doctors' opinions, the young, 23 year old, Sr. Leopolda renewed her offering, revealing a secret: *"I offered myself to the Lord for the liberation of our prisoners."*

After the positive outcome of the liberation of Fr. Luigi Bonomi, it was known in Cairo that a decision had been made to make a second attempt in favour of the Sisters in Omdurman.<sup>150</sup> However, it was necessary to pray much, because this time, the operation would be much more risky. On the other hand, a letter from Fr. Giovanni Dichtl which had arrived from Wadi Halfa in the month of July, painted a picture of terrible suffering. It related that a Greek who had managed to escape from Khartoum the previous April, claimed that he had *"often seen the six Sisters (including the African) and a priest who was a Muslim (according to the description this would be Rossignoli) and another, but he did not see more [...]."*

Fr. Dichtl explained that *"this Greek was six years in Khartoum and was exhausted by hardships and trials [...]. He affirmed the death of Gordon who was dragged through the city while his beard and skin were torn from him and was then cut into pieces and his head put on display in Omdurman."*

*The Sisters had been tied to horses and beaten while the horses were running and they had been very badly treated so as to persuade them to become Muslims. They are living fake marriages [...]. Sr. Teresa has become very old and stooped. They are resigned and work a bit to earn something to live on, but before they used to cry a lot"...*<sup>151</sup>

Would it have been this terrible account that had made Leopolda decide?

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<sup>150</sup> *"May God bless the steps that are underway to liberate the others"*, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti wished from Rome, 5<sup>th</sup> of August 1885, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti (ACR, A/28/28/18)

<sup>151</sup> Dichtl to Vicentini, Wadi Halfa, 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1885. In ACR, A/26/26/15.

On the same day as her death, Sr. Ermenegilda Morelli would later note, *“the steps for the liberation of the prisoners were unexpectedly successful and on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October Sr. Maria Caprini and Sr. Fortunata Quasce arrived in Cairo.”*<sup>152</sup>

### **With maximum reserve**

The intention of those who had organized this new attempt at liberation was to bring to safety at least all of the Sisters. For this reason, *17 camels*<sup>153</sup> had been sent, one more, that is, than Teresa Grigolini had asked. It was a very risky attempt, therefore, which was successful precisely because the circumstances, incredibly unfavourable, did not make it possible for all the prisoners to leave.

Since it was not known exactly which route the camel drivers would take to get out of Mahdist Sudan, those fleeing were awaited both in Suakin and also in Wadi Halfa where Fr. Geyer\* was. It was he who went to meet the two Sisters and to give them the first care and, after three days rest at Wadi Halfa, accompany them to Cairo where the Superior of the house was waiting for them.

*“This morning at around eight, we read further in the Diary of Fr. Vicentini, the two Sisters, Maria Caprini and Fortunata Quasce arrived. They were dressed as Arabs, with marcup [sandals] without tights, and with a blue Tob with which they were completely covered from head to toe. Their entrance to the Sisters etc”...*<sup>154</sup>

On the same day, as soon as it was possible, Fr. Domenico informed Monsignor Sogaro, who was still in Italy after his episcopal consecration, about the liberation.

*“Your Excellency”, he wrote, “Finally this morning, the two Sisters arrived dressed completely as poor Arabs.*

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<sup>152</sup> E. MORELLI, *M. Giuseppa Scandola e le Figlie del Comboni in Africa*, p. 83.

<sup>153</sup> Sogaro to Canossa, Cairo, 27<sup>th</sup> of November 1890. In ACR, A/38/49/31.

<sup>154</sup> Diary of Fr. Vicentini, 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1885. In AGS, DE/3/7.

*I did not yet speak with the Sisters. I only told Sr. Caprini to be wary of talking about certain things and she should especially say nothing to the Mother about the situation of Sr. Concetta. The Mother told me that the Sisters have already confessed to Fr. Geyer – a clear reference to the supposed abjuration. – so we don't need to think about this”...<sup>155</sup>*

**“He then rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb”**

(Mk. 15,46)

The reason why the situation of Sr. Concetta was not to be mentioned, is made explicit in the letter which the Apostolic Vicar addressed to Cardinal Simeoni immediately after his re-entry in Cairo. After a brief introduction, he wrote:

*“First of all, it is clear from the questioning of the two Sisters who were prisoners, that the torments to which they were subjected were very cruel and ongoing. They were always respected in their charitable and courageous protection by the Greeks. One of them, however, entrusted to Isidoro Locatelli, from the mission, was miserably betrayed by him and now she is **pregnant**. This unhappy Sister was one of the most virtuous and pious and now she is overcome by sorrow and she may succumb! Oh, Most eminent Father, how this fact makes me cry! While I write ... no, enough”...<sup>156</sup>*

Thus began, it seems, the ‘great silence’, already imposed by Fr. Sembianti on Fr. Luigi Bonomi immediately after his liberation<sup>157</sup>, which from that moment covered for a long time the events of our martyrs of the Mahdia.

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<sup>155</sup> Vicentini to Sogaro, Cairo, 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1885. In ACR, A/32/5/13/10.

<sup>156</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni, Cairo, 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1885. In AP SC Afr. C., vol. 9(1885)1236.

<sup>157</sup> See, ACR, A/28/28/15: Sembianti to Vicentini, 17<sup>th</sup> of July 1885.

From time to time, inevitably, some news filtered through, usually making more confused, the reading of what became known as the “*black page of the Sudan*”.<sup>158</sup>

Now that some ‘angel’ has helped to remove that heavy stone which had been rolled across the entrance to the sepulchre of our first martyrs, an increasingly luminous light allows us to re-read, in order to meditate deeply that page written with tears and blood which introduces us to the mystery of the Cross.<sup>159</sup>

This is a Mystery which can never be only passion and death, because, in the end, it is always illuminated by the light of the Resurrection. The same thing happened to Jesus, and also to the Father; the same thing will also happen with our first martyrs...

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<sup>158</sup> See, APMR, VI/B/4/36-1781: Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 27<sup>th</sup> of September 1898.

<sup>159</sup> See Numbers 18 and 19 of *AMN*, dedicated completely to the Mahdia.

## 5.

### From the Institute to the ‘twin’ Congregation

*“This event which is about to take place, of finding reunited here all the members of the mission, persuades me that the time established by the Lord has come to show his mercy to this very troubled work. I shall explain myself more clearly”...*

(Francesco Sogaro, June 9<sup>th</sup> 1884)

The letter which the successor of Daniel Comboni addressed to the Cardinal Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, continued by remembering:

*“As soon as I was called to the very difficult task of leading the Mission for Central Africa, completely aware of its needs, I worked with all my heart to give a shape and institution, just like that of the Sisters, to the Missionaries.*

*When I came to Rome and I understood that it was also the desire of Your Eminence, and that without this the work would be neither fruitful nor long lasting, I became all the more convinced [...].*

*The majority and the best of our Priests are also persuaded of this and without a doubt, we can count on most of them to be faithful and, therefore, we will have sufficient numbers for two stations”...<sup>160</sup>*

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<sup>160</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni, Cairo, 9<sup>th</sup> of June 1884. In AP SC Afr. C., vol. 9(1881–1885)950.

## Had he spoken about it with Comboni?

It is interesting to note in the letter cited above that, as soon as he was elected Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa, Francesco Sogaro felt the need to give a more solid and lasting '*shape and institution*' also to the male branch of the Institute born from the charism of Daniel Comboni. Had they talked about it together, the last time they had seen each other in Verona?

According to Giovanni Dichtl, secretary of the Bishop in Khartoum and his confidante at the time of his death, this was not improbable. In a long report written in Graz, twenty days after the letter of Monsignor Sogaro, he [Dichtl] too felt the need, in name "*of the never forgotten Bishop, Monsignor Daniel Comboni*" to send to *Propaganda Fide* a letter with which he intended to carry out the promise made to his '*deceased Father*' six hours before he died in his arms.

The young missionary had to promise him that "***he would be faithful to him and to his work and he would not neglect anything that could contribute to the growth of the mission*** which had been loved and sustained by Comboni until his death. He promised.

"So, this is sufficient and I am happy" were the last words which, while crying and ***still conscious***, he said to me" <sup>161</sup>

## From the charism to the Institution

"As long as he lived, we can read in point **A** of the report cited above, *Monsignor Comboni formed the centre and he was the bond between all, although even he sometimes had a group against him. Nevertheless, he was able to unite all of them and it was in August 1881 that he saw the results of his struggles and his aims and that the mission was, in reality, well established. In this happy state, he often said to me: "Now we are in a vault*

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<sup>161</sup> Dichtl to Simeoni, Graz, 29<sup>th</sup> of June 1884. In AP CV, vol. 43, Collegi d'Italia, ff. 1297.

*of iron”His work, at this point would not be terminated, but his plans were directed to assuring the future with a solid base” (f. 1298).*

That base, according to Fr. Dichtl, would be achieved by a “*firm and stable regulation*”, something like the one the Sisters had, despite the fact that even their Rules were “*provisional, that is not yet approved and confirmed*”. Even in some of the Sisters, the secretary of the Bishop observed, a certain “*spirit of independance*” could be noted, but “*the duty of obedience and reciprocal charity*” did not allow that disordered behaviour which, instead, one had to complain about with a certain frequency among “*the priests and lay brothers*”. (f. 1298)

The Founder had indeed drafted Rules for all which “*contained the spirit required of a missionary of Central Africa and he had submitted them for approval. But, as his Vicar General, Fr. Stanislao Carcereri, had made considerable changes to them in 1874, they were left aside and something temporary was prepared and every Superior explained them and changed them in his own way.*” (f. 1298)

### **A project which takes shape after the Apostolic Vicar’s stay in Khartoum**

Unfortunately, Francesco Sogaro had had to face this setback in Khartoum during his visit. It was a setback that was rendered more painful and difficult to live with by the attitude of the Superior towards the Sisters, and to whoever had to interact with them, and it made the life of those who had to obey more distressing and difficult.

The new Apostolic Vicar, who had been too easily influenced to look at reality through the same lens as Fr. Leone Hanriot, had therefore left the Sudan quite perturbed and worried about the possible consequences of his own actions.

Therefore, during the return journey to Cairo, after the ‘revelations’ and comments of Rosalia Conte, which he himself had provoked and which had certainly not been reassuring, he examined again the proposition of giving a

new order to the masculine Institute.<sup>162</sup> On his arrival in Cairo, he had probably exchanged opinions with Fr. Domenico Vicentini, but it was, however, a violent epidemic of cholera which brought him, after some weeks of reflection, to write in the following terms to Cardinal Simeoni:

*“Most Eminent Prince and Father,*

*I commend this poor mission to your charity: In the fear that I may soon be called to judgement before God, I have hurriedly put pen to paper regarding my visit to Khartoum. But this is not everything. If the Lord will preserve me, I shall conclude this in Rome. In the meantime, permit me, Your Eminence [...] to humbly share my thoughts. As long as the male members of the mission will remain without a **true religious institution**, like the one the Sisters have, their presence will always be a danger. The missionary priest who does not have a **good education in asceticism**, without wanting to, without intending to and without noticing, will lead the Sisters into a tepid life which, while dangerous for everyone, is fatal in Africa”...*<sup>163</sup>

#### ***A rather surprising motivation***

We have already seen that this proposal of the successor of Comboni was not new. What is surprising, however, at this point, is the motivation he presented to *Propaganda Fide*, almost as if the change he was asking the missionaries to make was necessary in order to permit the Sisters to remain and to work in the mission, without their vocation being placed in danger because of insufficient formation and discipline on the part of the Fathers and brothers.

On the one hand, it is important for us to know that, despite the opinion of Leone Hanriot who was contrary to the idea, and was perhaps not alone in this, Monsignor Sogaro wished to maintain the presence of the

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<sup>162</sup> Apparently, however, Monsignor Sogaro must have said something while he was still in Khartoum, as Fr. Marzano, on his re-entry to Verona a short time later wanted to ask Luigi di Canossa if he foresaw “*that the mission would be [given over to] the Stigmatine Fathers*” (Sembianti to Sogaro, Verona, 21<sup>st</sup> of November, 1883. In ACR, A/43/77a).

<sup>163</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni, Cairo, 30<sup>th</sup> of July 1883. In AP SC Afr. C., vol. 9(1883)741.

consecrated woman. On the other hand, to sustain that the reform of the masculine Institute was necessary due to their presence, is regrettable.

We do not know, however, at least until now, if Cardinal Simeoni replied immediately to the letter cited above and if so, what he answered. But what we can say is that Fr. Giovanni Dichtl was informed about this letter and he, in turn, wrote to *Propaganda Fide* to express his approval and support.

The last secretary of Daniel Comboni, with his limited but sufficient Italian, revealed: *“Indirectly, I have been preparing my Apostolic Vicar, Monsignor Sogaro, for months now to structure the Institutes in Europe and Cairo as Comboni had planned to, but did not do so, because he could not carry out everything alone. When he was in Africa, things were going badly here and when he was here, the mission in Africa was going badly. He was missing a strong right arm and the best of his missionaries died. On the day on which my Father, Bishop Comboni died, I made him a promise to do all I possibly could to see that the mission would continue in the way that he had designed it [...].”*

*Monsignor Sogaro has already made by now quite a critical noviciate in all respects and in his writings I find him, well on the way towards such a difficult and great work.*<sup>164</sup>

It should be noted, at this point, that the restructuring of the Institutes, was understood by Dichtl, as a total remodelling, that is, for both the masculine and the feminine branch.

He pointed out, in the report of June 29<sup>th</sup> 1884 (See, f. 1299v), already cited, that one of the things that was most lacking in both [Institutes] was a serious *“linguistic preparation”*, as well as, generally speaking, *“better education”*<sup>165</sup>.

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<sup>164</sup> Ivi, ff. 930-931: Dichtl to Simeoni, Verona, 16<sup>th</sup> of April, 1884.

<sup>165</sup> *“Monsignor Comboni desired that the educational institute inherited from the Astori\* be maintained for the benefit of the city and also to consolidate and develop the Institute [...] as well as to give the Sisters a possibility of practical training in the work of education which they would undertake in Africa” ... (E. MORELLI, Unedited notes, in APMR, 32/D, p. 13).*

Still, according to Dichtl, the successor of the Bishop of Sudan who, much more so than the Rector in Verona, defended the principle that the missionary Institute was not born in order to respond to local needs, and that, therefore, it had to receive that necessary boost already attempted by Daniel Comboni since 1868, and which was supposed to make the Institute truly international, was evidently the most suitable person to take up that project for the realization of the **plan for the Regeneration for Africa**.

### **The first step of Monsignor Sogaro**

In the month of June 1884, while he was in Cairo waiting for those exiled from Sudan, the successor of Daniel Comboni felt that he was reading ‘a sign of the times’ in the events that were taking place.

At that time, as we have already seen, he wrote to Cardinal Simeoni, *“This event that is about to take place, of finding all the members of the mission gathered here together leads me to think that the time established by the Lord to show his mercy, has come”* ...

The letter of the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 1884, already cited, continued: *“Now the painful events which have taken place gradually and which have caused the mission much harm, have also brought about some good, in that they have made not only possible, but easy, the fulfillment of the desires of Your Eminence which are also the desires of the Lord.*

*The majority <sup>166</sup>of our priests agree with this [...].*

*I bow before Your Eminence and I beg you for the love of God and for the redemption of Central Africa to enter into discussion [...] with one of the following Congregations: either the Apostolic Missionaries in deference to the Bishops of Vienna; or with the Most Reverend Fr. John Bosco [...] or with the French priests of Lyons”*... (f. 951).

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<sup>166</sup> The majority agreed, but there was a group who, from the beginning, declared themselves completely opposed to this. Sembianti was among them. (See, ACR, B/225: *Monsignor Sogaro e la Congregazione dei Figli del Sacro Cuore* of A. Capovilla).

After this, for more than a month, the Apostolic Vicar waited until, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August, he could communicate to the Bishop of Verona:

*“The other day, I finally received the reply from the Most Eminent Cardinal Prefect [Simeoni] with regards to giving a stable foundation to our Institution. He says that the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide will be happy to approve a practical project leading to this end proposed. Now, without delay, I intend to entrust the issue entirely to Your Eminence, both because of the sincere interest you have always had for this Institution which could rightly be called yours, and also because your knowledge of what it needs is better than others who have never been able to make a concrete proposal in this regard.”*<sup>167</sup>

### **The desire of Daniel Comboni is realized**

Fr. Dichtl wrote again, referring to his letter of June 29<sup>th</sup> 1884: *“In the report cited above, I explained to Your Eminence, amongst other things, the desire of the deceased Daniel Comboni to see His Institute in the hands of some Fathers from the Company of Jesus and his seminary in Verona become an Institution or Religious Congregation.*

*Whether it was because of this report, I will never know, but, in fact, this desire of the illustrious Founder of the Institute of Verona was verified and the fruits are already visible in that house.”*<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Sogaro to Canossa, Cairo, 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1884. In ACR, A/39/34/22.

<sup>168</sup> Dichtl to Simeoni, Strassgang, 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1887. In AP SC Afr. C., vol. 10(1887)400.

In the report cited above at point V. Fr. Dichtl wrote as follows: *“The Direction according to the **continuous desire** of Monsignor Comboni and according to my way of thinking, and other members of ours think the same, would be to put ourselves into the hands of some Fathers chosen from the Company of Jesus, who, because they have experience of mission, could compose the Constitution to which each member would be bound with a simple vow and thus form a **Congregation of Missionaries for Central Africa**. This was the idea and the spirit of Monsignor Daniel Comboni”...* (f. 1305r).

To consult the thought of the Founder with regard to the Jesuit Fathers, see W. 2811; 3627; 5727; **5754**; 6173-75; 6198; 6472; 6763.

It appears that the discussions with the Jesuit Fathers were taken up by Monsignor Sogaro in the month of July 1885<sup>169</sup> while he was still in Rome for his episcopal ordination. However, when he finally received a positive reply from them, he was forced to request the intervention of *Propaganda Fide* for fear of “*seeing everything flounder*” again.

He explained to Cardinal Simeoni on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 1885, “*I have agreed with the Fathers of the Company of Jesus and two of them will come to Verona after the middle of this month, one as Rector and the other as Spiritual Director. But now the Superior of the Institute of the Stigmatine Fathers [...] seeing the Jesuits, seem to want to remove Fr. Sembianti and Fr. Vicentini, Superior of the Institutes in Cairo and General Administrator of the Mission, a man of great common sense [...]; such a man that I would be incapable of replacing.*

*I am turning to your Eminence, asking you to come to our aid.*

*I need only one line from Your Eminence [...] through which they are invited to remain, the first at his post in Cairo and Sembianti as Administrator and Procurator in Verona.*

*If Your Eminence can obtain this for me, I assume the commitment and the responsibility. With the new assistance from the Company of Jesus in Verona, in a few years we will be able to have available excellent evangelical workers, and more importantly, the future will be provided for.”...<sup>170</sup>*

### **Hope of a better future**

This appeal cited above did not go unheard. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1885, Fr. Pietro Frigerio\*, the new Rector, and Fr. Samuele Asperti\*, Spiritual Director, arrived in Verona.

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<sup>169</sup> “Monsignor writes that he will definitely be able to have the greatly desired help from the Jesuits for us here” (Sembianti to Vicentini, Verona 21<sup>st</sup> of July, 1885. In ACR, A/28/28/16).

<sup>170</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni, Lonigo, 6<sup>th</sup> of October 1885. In AP SC Afr. C., vol. 9(1881-1885)1213.

Monsignor Sogaro wrote, “*Fr. Sembianti will retain the direction of the Sisters’ house and the administration here in Verona.*”

Therefore, evidently highly relieved, he added, “*All those internal to the Institute and those external to it, beginning from the Eminent di Canossa, see in this arrangement a sure pledge of abundant blessings for the future of the mission. Now we will start compiling the rules and in due time they will be submitted to the Sacred Congregation*”...<sup>171</sup>

No document has come down to us, at least until now, which lets us know if Maria Bollezzoli followed this process, which would have consequences also for us, personally.

Constanza Caldara instead, who was in Cairo at that time and knew only too well the importance of that project which Monsignor Sogaro intended to complete, always referred to the new Combonian Congregation as the ‘twin’ to the already existing feminine Institute.

‘Twins’, we think, so that it may not be forgotten, as time passed, that we had the same Father who, from the first moment thought of a missionary Institute which was intended to be, from its birth, masculine and feminine, with its own Rule and a Plan.

It must have been significant that, in fact, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 1901, during the retreat which preceded the Chapter that would elect her the second General Superior of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, almost foreseeing what the future would reserve for her, Sr. Costanza felt the need of writing in her notes:

*“Lord Jesus, I offer myself to you that You may do with me what you will, for the salvation of the Africans and those who do not know you, for the conversion of all sinners and for the perfection of all members, present and future, of the **twin Congregations.**”*<sup>172</sup>

This concern, that the sons and daughters of Daniel Comboni might continue to unite their efforts for the regeneration of Nigrizia, would

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<sup>171</sup> Ivi, f. 1223: Sogaro to Simeoni, Verona, 30<sup>th</sup> of October 1885.

<sup>172</sup> APMR, VI/C2/8/1–2009. Highlighting is ours.

accompany Costanza Caldara for all of the thirty years of her service as General Superior, and even afterwards.

In the *Unedited notes* of Ermenegilda Morelli then, on page 12 of the first set of typewritten notes, one can read: “*On her death bed, Mother Costanza Caldara, in the presence of two missionaries and her Sisters, with her last breath declared, ‘twin’ [the foundation of the Congregation of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia] with that of the Institute of the Missionaries.*”

## 6.

### Opening of New Communities in Egypt

*“Let us pray together that the day may come in which we might open another house and the number of those working in the mystical vineyard may be increased” ...*

(Maria Bollezzoli, January 4<sup>th</sup> 1887)

After the departure of the last *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* for the mission in December 1882, on the decision of Monsignor Sogaro, noone left Verona again until 1885 when the Apostolic Vicar himself returned to Italy for his episcopal consecration.

When, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of August 1885, the new bishop visited the Mother House of the Sisters in *Via Santa Maria in Organo*, he could see that there were six young missionary Sisters waiting to leave and another two preparing for their profession at the end of that same year. In addition, in the same house there were still novices and postulants.

The postulants, who were six in number, could have been many more because, *“despite the disasters which had befallen the mission, disasters which would be inclined to discourage vocations rather than encourage them, a good number [of aspirants] presented themselves but not all could be accepted as the Memorie dell’Istituto tell us, since new impediments to the work of the regeneration of Africa were feared”* (p. 29).

## Encouragement from the Holy See

The *Memorie* continue, “*But the encouragement which came indirectly from the Holy See not long afterwards with Monsignor Sogaro’s consecration as bishop on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 1885, led us to believe that the development and the increase of personnel in the two Institutes of Verona would be pleasing to the Lord*”... (p. 29).

In fact, Francesco Sogaro had written, “*There is no doubt that the Holy Father wanted in this way to express his affection and make clear his lively interest in our poor Mission at this time and this is a great source of comfort for all of us*”...<sup>173</sup>

*La Nigrizia* echoed, “*It has been rightly said that the promotion of Monsignor Sogaro as bishop would be a great comfort to all the friends of our poor mission. The first to experience these sweet feelings were the members of the Mission themselves and they expressed this through letters full of exultation and happiness to their bishop*”...<sup>174</sup>

These letters, according to the editors had been so numerous and as they could not publish all of them, it had been decided to print the full version of one of the most significant of these, that is, the letter of the male community in Cairo. (See, pp. 133-134)

We in turn, will print here another equally significant letter which the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, also in Cairo, addressed to the bishop of Verona on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1885, that is, some days after the return from Italy of his new colleague. In that letter, we read:

“*Most Eminent Prince,*

*Many times we have been tempted to present ourselves to your Eminence with our humble letters to express our feelings of gratitude for all the good that you have been doing for our poor mission. But we always refrained [...] due to our lowliness. Now that, to those many*

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<sup>173</sup> *La Nigrizia*, III(1885)4, p. 101: Sogaro to Canossa. Rome, 7<sup>th</sup> of July 1885.

<sup>174</sup> *La Nigrizia*, III(1885)5, p. 133.

*reasons there is added the fact that Your Eminence has given new life to our Institution by giving us our beloved leader, Monsignor Francesco Sogaro, forgetting our unworthiness, and thinking only of all that we have received from you, we dare present ourselves to you.*

*In truth, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August was one of the happiest days of our missionary life. On that day, this very tried mission was assured an Apostle whose zeal in favour of the poor Africans made us foresee what a great advantage he would be for the mission. It was the day on which heaven gave these humble Sisters, in his venerable person, a leader and Father who, with holy care and charity, pays attention to meeting all our material needs and who forms our spirits to virtue which, as true religious missionaries, makes us able for the great and holy enterprise of saving souls.*

*We also offer our heartfelt thanks to Your Eminence for the great care you have taken with regard to our beloved Institute. We are happy and sure of having in you, Eminent Prince, a most affectionate Father and zealous protector and we will do our best through our prayer and our conduct to satisfy your holy aims. Eminent Father, please accept our most sincere greetings for the forthcoming feast and permit that, after having implored on our part with great fervour the heavenly Child for every grace and special blessings on your Eminence, we pray also to Him to preserve for many years to come your precious life which is dear to the well being and health of many souls. May our words be pleasing to Your Eminence and may you in your generosity give us the holy blessing for which we humbly ask. Offering you our deepest esteem, we feel honoured to present ourselves,*

*humble servants and daughters  
of Your Eminence,  
Pie Madri della Nigrizia”<sup>175</sup>*

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<sup>175</sup> Sisters of Nigrizia to Canossa, Cairo, 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1885. In ACR, A/31/40/2.

## 1886: Departures from Verona begin again

Returning to Egypt in the month of December 1885, after having succeeding in starting off the new Institutional form of the male College, the new bishop had not, however, authorized the departure of any Sisters. The real reason for this, at least until now, cannot be traced in any document, even if something can be inferred from what Giuseppe Sembianti, who had been confirmed *'Director of the Feminine Institute'*, as we have already seen, wanted to remind *Propaganda Fide* at a later stage:

One can read in one of his later, undated reports, "*When Monsignor Sogaro came to Verona in 1885, he blamed [the Superior] in the sharpest terms for the way she educated the Sisters. He scolded her alone and in the presence of other Sisters*"....<sup>176</sup>

Evidently, from what is said in that report, and from what is said before and also afterwards, the meetings between the successor of Daniel Comboni and the formator of the novices did not take place on the best of terms. On her part, however, Maria Bollezzoli could not have failed to notice how the relationship between Sembianti and Sogaro had deteriorated. Was it because she did not want to break a bond already under great tension that she preferred to remain in silence, without declaring herself openly, neither for one nor the other?

All that we know is that the leader of the Vicariate of Central Africa took up the same theme by sending to Verona in the following month of April, two 'ambassadors': Vittoria Paganini and Matilde Lombardi, both educated by the Founder and on the best of terms with the Mother in Verona.

The official, and also real, reason of that journey was the state of health of Sr. Vittoria, but there is no doubt that both she and Maria Bollezzoli had a real and urgent need to meet each other and to talk from the heart without witnesses and without interference.

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<sup>176</sup> Sembianti to Jacobini, undated. In APF New Series, vol. 174(1893-1900)429.

*“Rejoice, therefore, and let your collaborators rejoice with you for having been chosen by the Lord for such a sublime work”...*

The following letter seems to demonstrate that Maria Bollezzoli was satisfied and also reassured after the meetings held with the Sisters from the community of Cairo. This is the only letter of hers, addressed to the Superior on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1887, that has come down to us.

It is a letter in which the Mother from Verona confides in Sr. Vittoria about her consolation, but also her worries, among which is the constant suffering and worry for the prisoners far off. In it, we read:

*“Dearest Daughter in the Lord,*

*I learned with great pleasure of the grace obtained from Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, that is, of the cessation of the smallpox [...].*

*I found also very consoling the fact that the African girl, Giulia, was baptized before she died. What a fortunate soul. She went straight to Paradise!! How lovely it must be to be present at such a death! [...] This alone would banish every worry. Oh, the good fortune of those who find themselves in such situations! Rejoice then and let your collaborators rejoice with you at having been chosen by the Lord for such a sublime work. So let each for her own part seek to do everything possible to respond in such a way as to please Jesus who suffered much for the salvation of souls.*

*Let us also pray together so that the day may come when we may be able to open some other houses and the number of those who can work in the vineyard of the Lord can increase. But in a special way, let us also keep in mind those who, after having laid their hand to the task, were obliged to interrupt their work. Let us pray so very much that divine assistance may never be lacking for them and that they may be strong in the face of any event until the end. And, if God wills it, may they be returned to us soon. Now I will tell you something about here [...].*

*On the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, two of our postulants, that is Amalia Antoniazzi and Rosa Sinner made their vestition and started the noviciate and Sr. Angela Tenuti and Sr. Lucia Salvestro made their profession. I confess the truth, my dearest, that on such occasions I forget my age and my aches and pains and I feel rejuvenated*

*seeing souls who consecrate themselves to the love of Jesus at the height of their youth. But I cannot help feeling an acute pain at the thought of some defections...*<sup>177</sup>

In speaking about *defections*, Maria Bollezzoli did not mention any names. Did she fear something that referred to the sisters who were prisoners? Or was she simply thinking of Faustina Stampais, who had decided some months previously to leave the Congregation when she was *assured by the Superiors in Verona*<sup>178</sup> that she would not be sent back to Africa?

Perhaps, if Faustina had awaited the arrival of Sr. Vittoria in Verona, she may have been able to leave again with her. Vittoria Paganini, in fact, whose health, unfortunately, continued to get worse, left for Africa again after three months of holiday.

With her, as well as Sr. Matilde, the young missionary, Angela Rizzardi<sup>179</sup>, would also leave for the first time.

It was a sign that the way was finally reopened, never to close again.

### **1887: Costanza Caldara, Novice Mistress**

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of June, 1887, Monsignor Sogaro left a second time for Egypt mainly due to his health. He decided to go directly to Austria in order to begin treatment, but we do not know exactly when he eventually reached Verona.

In any case, he must have been there on the following 28<sup>th</sup> of October when the first ten *Sons of the Sacred Heart* ‘pronounced their vows’. In fact, it was the Apostolic Vicar himself who gave this news to the readers of *La Nigrizia*, saying that they were happy to be authorized by the Holy Father “to realize that ardent vow of the great Apostle of Nigrizia, his well known and loved and remembered predecessor, Monsignor Comboni.”

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<sup>177</sup> Bollezzoli to Paganini, Verona, 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1887. In APMR, VI/B/3/5–541.

<sup>178</sup> See, *AMN*, 8(2004)121.

<sup>179</sup> Unfortunately, there would be no return for Sr. **Angela Rizzardi**. After exactly three years from the date when she arrived in Egypt, she died of tuberculosis leaving excellent memories of her life.

In the same message, Francesco Sogaro took the opportunity, as vocations promotion, to remind the readers that there was *also the Institute of the Sisters for Nigrizia in Verona*.<sup>180</sup>

Now, regarding this Institution, in his role as Leader of the Vicariate of Central Africa, Monsignor Sogaro considered himself to have rights and duties: the right, first and foremost, to decide who would leave for Africa and when. Therefore, he also had the duty, as a consequence, to be vigilant about formation and about the future preparation of the missionaries.

Therefore, there were two important decision which he took at Santa Maria in Organo, in the month of November 1887:

- A) The departure of four Sisters: Marietta Casella, Ginevra Tormene, Teresa Fedele and Anna Kubitscheck on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November.
- B) The appointment of Costanza Caldara who had returned from Egypt six months beforehand due to her health, as the Novice Mistress.

Fr. Sembianti in his '*Prospectus for the two colleges for the Mission for Nigrizia*'<sup>181</sup>, addressed to *Propaganda Fide* on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1885, had indicated, before Sr. Costanza, Sr. Matilde Corsi,<sup>182</sup> as novice mistress.

In reality, however, there is no evidence that Sr. Matilde was ever made responsible for the noviciate. She was, rather, the assistant of Sr. Maria Bollezzoli. In the '*Register of the consultations held in the Mother House in the year 1881–1891*',<sup>183</sup> her name appears either as '*professed, assistant or elder*', since August 1881.

Costanza Caldara, instead, is indicated as '*older sister*' in the meeting of November 14<sup>th</sup> 1887 and from the 29<sup>th</sup> of February 1888, as '*Novice Mistress*'.

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<sup>180</sup> *La Nigrizia*, VI(1888)1, pp. 12-13.

<sup>181</sup> See, AP SC Afr. C. vol. 9(1881-1885)1229.

<sup>182</sup> See, **Matilde Corsi**, in *AMN*, 10(2005)139 ff.

<sup>183</sup> See, APMR, VI/A/5/1–2979.

All this seems to indicate, therefore, even if there is no diary or other document which records this with precision, that Sr. Costanza was in fact, the first Comboni Sister with missionary experience to have, in effect, substituted Maria Bollezzoli in the important task of formator. And this had been the explicit desire of Daniel Comboni. This is proved by an extremely short note which is found in the *Register of Personnel* on page 94, and which states:

*“She returned here [to Verona] on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 87 for health reasons. By order of the Most Reverend Francesco Sogaro, she was nominated novice mistress on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 87.”*

Probably, had it depended on Fr. Sembianti, Sr. Costanza would not have been appointed as formator, or at least it would not have happened so early.<sup>184</sup>

As for Maria Bollezzoli, instead, if she suffered because of that imposition of the Apostolic Vicar, it was not because of the choice of Costanza who was always very dear to her, but for the way in which it came about. In fact, still according to Fr. Sembianti’s undated report, which we have quoted above, if Monsignor Sogaro, on his return *“to Verona in 1887 was less [...] unkind, nevertheless, even then he still treated the Superior in ways [...] which were not at all respectful and indicative of esteem”*... (see note 176).

### **Onwards, with disappointments and hopes**

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 1887, from Cairo, Sr. Vittoria Paganini wrote to Monsignor Sogaro who was absent. The bishop, in fact, had left for Suakin to visit that mission station which had been opened for about two years. But he had also gone to see if there were any signs of hope for the prisoners in Sudan. In that letter, amongst other things, Sr. Vittoria wrote:

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<sup>184</sup> According to the Rector, Costanza Caldara did not love manual work enough and she would have complained that in Verona one had to work more than in Cairo (See, Sembianti to Sogaro, Verona, 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 1888. In ACR, A/77/43/4). In reality, however, what was more annoying in Verona was the great esteem and consideration which the Apostolic Vicar openly demonstrated towards Sr. Costanza.

*“We are longing for news, which is taking time to arrive, of your journey to Suakin. We have faithfully accompanied our beloved Father and leader with our thoughts and with our most ardent prayer. And we have often exclaimed and wished that you may have the consolation of returning among us in the company of your suffering sons and daughters, that the year begun in agony may come to a happy end and that the troubled Mission may see a new era!”...<sup>185</sup>*

A new era for that beloved mission was perhaps closer than the superior of the Sisters house in Cairo could probably think.

Instead, her hope of finally embracing again another two of the Sisters who were prisoners, would never be realized. In Cairo, it was already a year and a half since the arrival of Elisabetta Venturini<sup>186</sup> was expected. She had left Omdurman in August 1885 in an attempt to flee with Giorgio Jusef Abagi.<sup>187</sup> Instead, due to a series of unfortunate circumstances, Sr. Bettina had not succeeded in this attempt<sup>188</sup> and she had had to resign herself to returning to Omdurman where she had found hospitality in the little house of Concetta Corsi and Isidoro Locatelli.

Now, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 1887, Locatelli unexpectedly arrived in Cairo ‘safe and sound’<sup>189</sup>.

*“He had left Omdurman to look for a way of earning some money in Berber, one can read in the letter quoted above, Arriving in that city, [...] he turned to a good Coptic man [...] begging for his help [...]. This man took him aside and said to him: if you wish to leave, be ready [...] Locatelli, beside himself with joy, accepted, deeply grateful for the assistance offered. He immediately wrote a long letter to our confrere, Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder telling him of what he was about to do and inviting him to come with the two*

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<sup>185</sup> Paganini to Sogaro, Cairo, 27<sup>th</sup> of December 1887. In ACR, A/31/33.

<sup>186</sup> See, Bonomi to Sembianti, Aswan, 15<sup>th</sup> of March 1886. In ACR, A/26/13/2.

<sup>187</sup> See, AMN, 11(2006)71ff.

<sup>188</sup> See, Bonomi to Sembianti, Wady Halfa, 18<sup>th</sup> of May 1886. In ACR, A/26/13/3.

<sup>189</sup> Sogaro to Canossa, Cairo, 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1887. In ACR, A/38/49/6.

*Sisters, Sr. Concetta Corsi and Bettina Venturini, to Berber where he would send people to collect them. In fact, on his arrival in Suakin, he made arrangements with the same camel driver who had brought him, to go back and collect the others. When your Eminence receives this, it could be that some of our dear prisoners are already on their way to Suakin”...*

Unfortunately, however, it did not go like that, because the escape of Locatelli from Sudan had been discovered and had provoked the anger of the Caliph, Abdulahi, the successor of the Madhi. This made any other escape attempt unadvisable for the time being. In fact, for another three years the news arriving from Omdurman would be increasingly worrying, especially news regarding the morale of the prisoners...<sup>190</sup>

### **The Malbes project is given new life**

Fortunately, it was not only worries and anxieties which filled the heart of the bishop when in December 1887, he was preparing to leave for Suakin.

He also held hopes of reviving, on his return, the dream of his Predecessor, that is, to reopen another agricultural colony for young people and Christian families; a dream which the storm of the Mahdist revolution had swept away in the damage it created.

Therefore, in this time of exile, what would later be called the project of a ‘*mission in Central Africa in miniature*’<sup>191</sup> began to take shape within him.

The practical realization of this project was not long in coming. Already in September 1888, the bishop of Sudan could write from Cairo for the readers of *La Nigrizia*:

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<sup>190</sup> “*What weighs mostly on my mind, Francesco Sogaro confided to Cardinal Simeoni, in reference to the prisoners, is the tone of the last letters which reveals a certain resignation to passing the rest of their lives there*”... [AP SC Afr. C. vol. 10(1888)178: Cairo, 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1888].

<sup>191</sup> A. BENETTI, *Gesira – Zamalek. 1888-1988*, p. 2

*“In these last few years, we have had many occasions to tell you about [...] the trials with which the unfathomable Divine Providence has put our work to the test. Therefore, it is right and just that we should now share with you a reason for great joy and for some beautiful hopes for the future of Nigrizia. We intend to speak with you about two foundations which, with the blessing of God [...], we will be able to bring to a happy ending”* (p. 129).

Therefore, regarding the first, the Apostolic Vicar wrote: *“To the many good qualities that the peoples of Central Africa already possess, they add others which need to be recognized by those who work tirelessly for their regeneration [...]. For these reasons, the Mission, guided by long experience, has worked tirelessly over the last ten years to establish small colonies made up exclusively of our students [...] who aroused the admiration of all those who had occasion to visit them [...]. But then the horrible Mahdist revolution rose up like a storm which uprooted and completely destroyed the fruits of much hard work and suffering. Threatened by the approach of the terrible persecutions, we took refuge with about one hundred of our African children of both sexes moving from Khartoum to the borders of Nubia in our mission at Scellal. Pursued even there, we finally settled in this capital city, adapting ourselves the best we could in our two communities meant for acclimatization; the girls in that of the Sisters and the boys in that of the missionaries [...]. To these whom we had brought from Khartoum, several others, taken from the Slavers both in Massaua and in Suakin, came and joined us over the last two years”* (pp. 129-30).

### **Students, Seminarians, Agriculturists**

At that point, the young people were divided into three categories: students, aspirants to the religious or priestly life and agriculturists. For the first two groups, the house in Cairo was sufficient. For the third, however, a bigger space was needed.

The search for this bigger space had begun in February 1888 with the request, *“to the government of the Khedive to sell a piece of its land for the purpose of opening an agricultural school”*.

It was an attempt which “*found a favourable reply*” and which led to the offer of an area which ‘*in all respects*’ responded perfectly to the need. “*Situated at an hour’s walk from the centre of the capital, at the extreme end of an island*” (p. 131) surrounded by the Nile, that land was very fertile and would never suffer for the want of water.

Once the stumbling block of the price to be paid had been overcome, thanks to the generosity of benefactors, stimulated especially by Fr. Geyer who had gone to Austria and Germany for this purpose, the transfer was able to start in August of that same year.

“*I can’t tell you how happy we are to be able to begin this work*”, the bishop continued, “*which we have always considered as one of the most valid methods for preparing towards the religious and civil regeneration of Nigrizia*”...<sup>192</sup>

Some months later, in December of the same year, Monsignor Sogaro could write with great satisfaction to Luigi di Canossa,

“*The colony of the Africans is already known also outside the city and since they are very united among themselves, they give example to each other. One can say that not many days pass without someone presenting himself asking to join. Oh, how much good we could still do if we had more resources available. We will have great collaborators in these dear Christians of ours whenever tranquillity returns and we will be able to return to our beloved mission stations*”...<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> *La Nigrizia*, VI(1888)5, pp.129-134.

<sup>193</sup> *La Nigrizia*, VII(1889)1, p. 4.

## The task of the Missionary Sisters in Gezira

*“The Sisters, apart from dedicating themselves to the religious instruction of the African girls and giving them some cultural education according to the abilities of each, as well as teaching them about domestic affairs, go around the nearby Muslim villages to give first aid to the children, especially those in danger of death [...].*

*In the Institute, they lavish care not only on the little African girls who keep coming, but also on the elderly and infirm women who go to them, knowing that the Sisters treat everyone lovingly” ....*

(Memorie, p. 30)

With the opening of the agricultural colony, the desire expressed by Maria Bollezzoli in her letter of the 4<sup>th</sup> of January of the previous year, and that is, to see the opening of some more communities of Sisters, began to become a reality.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August, in fact, some days after the first group of boys, a small group of girls, guided by Giuseppa Scandola and Elisa Suppi, left for Gezira.

Fr. Casimiro Giacomelli noted in his diary, *“They are going to live in the little mud huts 200 metres from our house and they will prepare food for us. The Sisters are very poor too. They only have a few blankets and some old kitchen utensils”...*<sup>194</sup>

Unfortunately, also this time there is no letter from the first Sisters to tell us anything more than this. Only Rosa Matilde Corsi, who left for Egypt on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December of that year of 1888 and was then assigned to Gezira, would give us some details later when she was requested to write what she remembered about Maria Caprini and about the period she spent in the colony after her liberation.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> ACR, A/145/8, p. 8.

<sup>195</sup> See, *AMN*, 10(2005)148-150; 195-196.

The unsigned letter written on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 1889 which talked about the numerous baptisms which took place during that period and was published in *La Nigrizia* in the following month of November, must also have been written by Sr. Matilde. (pp.166-168)

### **A chance lost for the African teachers?**

While the Apostolic Vicar was busy preparing the new foundation, the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* in Cairo had reached fifteen.

In addition, some of the African teachers whom Daniel Comboni had brought back with him from Europe to Africa between 1867 and 1869 were almost always with them.

From the documents which have come down to us, it is difficult, however, to understand what role had been entrusted, in what could be considered a reconstruction of the Comboni Sisters Mission, to the woman, and especially to the African woman for whom the Apostle of Nigrizia had reserved a leading role in the work of evangelization.

*La Nigrizia* of May 1886, in which the *Establishments of Cairo* are talked about, recalls that the houses for women opened in Old Cairo by the founder had been two: The Institute of the *Sacred Heart of Mary and the House of the Holy Family* “which was a public school for girls for young women of every rite” (p. 65). The Direction of this parish school, which was the pride and joy of Daniel Comboni, had been entrusted by him to four African teachers, among whom was Domitilla Bakita, educated in Europe (See, W. 1926–27).

But how did this school, so important to him, end up?

One can read further in *La Nigrizia*, “As the building, and its location in Old Cairo, were not very favourable, Monsignor Comboni asked the government for a piece of land in the area of greater Cairo called, *Ismailie* and he obtained it free of charge. In 1874, construction began on two houses” which began to be lived in in 1877.

“In the two houses, which within a short time could be called establishments due to their size and their ownership, our Missionaries and Sisters are now dedicated to the instruction of the African boys and girls brought from Khartoum or obtained in Cairo itself” ... (p. 66).

It is evident at this point that there is no more talk of a parish and interreligious school for girls, directed by African teachers. In some letters written to Maddalena Girelli\* by Faustina Stampais, who returned to Egypt in 1888, as a lay person, to collaborate with the agricultural community, one can read instead:

*“There are two reasons [...] to thank you for your goodness and that of the Reverend Superior, for having permitted the acceptance of the four young Africans, Giuseppina Zadelmal, Caterina Zenab, Domitilla Bakita and Elisabetta Kaltuma, into the Company of Angela Merici [...].*

*Please be kind enough to accept another four whose conduct is edifying [...], that is, Marietta Maragase [who is] alone in Helouan–les-Bains, Regina Zarifa [who is] alone in Cairo; Giulia Bakita [who is] with a French lady and Rosina Kaltuma [who is] in the mission station of Boulak in Cairo. Now and again, we see each other and we treat each other as true friends and sisters”...<sup>196</sup>*

The following year, however, Faustina would have written once again: *“Man proposes and God disposes. I was so happy to have here close by the four African women associates but: Caterina Zenab returned to Suan [...]. Domitilla Bakita, while here to look after the little ones, got sick [...]. Elisabetta Kaltuma preferred to go her own way and go to Cairo. She wants to earn a little money by washing and ironing while she still has some strength [...]. Marietta Maragase is still in Helouan –le Bains [...]. Regina Zarifa is still working each day sewing [...]. Giulia is still with an old lady and she stays with her even though she is unpaid because she was once a lady, but has become poor. Rosina Kaltuma is very dear. She is still the cook in the Mission of the Sisters and Fathers in Cairo”...<sup>197</sup>*

What can be said? Perhaps, as often comes about after the first blossoming , the good seed had to fall into the ground while awaiting a new spring time...

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<sup>196</sup> Stampais to Girelli, Gezira, 6<sup>th</sup> of May 1901. In ACR, A/27/50/1.

<sup>197</sup> Stampais to Girelli, Gezira, 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1902. In ACR, A/27/50/2.

## The school in Helouan

*“In September 1888, the Memorie remind us, Monsignor Sogaro opened a new school for girls and boys in Helouan – les Bains [...].*

*In the Sisters school Arabic, Italian, French and English languages are taught together with Music, domestic sciences and art, and all the subjects required in a reputed school”... (p. 30).*

Monsignor Sogaro continues in the same letter to the readers of *La Nigrizia* in September 1888, as follows: *“Another consoling fact is the opening of two new establishments, one of the Missionaries [...] and the other of the Sisters [...]. The foundations for the Church have been laid and it will be the parish of Helouan – les Bains and is dedicated to the Holy Family. This little city was established twenty years ago on a desert plateau around 20 kilometres south of Cairo, not far from the right banks of the Nile. It is full of small villas [...]. Already a number of foreigners are arriving from various parts of Europe. A Muslim gentleman built a mosque. Only the holy sign of our Redemption had not yet appeared publicly. The lack of religious services and of a Christian Institution for the youth was sorely felt.*

*Moved by the prayers of those Christians and encouraged by His Excellency, Monsignor Apostolic Delegate of Egypt, [...] trusting in God, I took on this new commitment”... (pp. 135-136).*

In December 1888, writing to Luigi di Canossa, Monsignor Sogaro expressed his satisfaction with the development of the two new establishments begun recently.

He specified, *“In particular, the girls’ school run by our Sisters<sup>198</sup> continues to grow every day in number and in fame. In order to satisfy the desires of the local families, some of whom are Muslims, I undertook to*

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<sup>198</sup> The first to go there were Vittoria Paganini with Francesca Dalmasso who would then remain there as Superior.

*employ a local Catholic teacher<sup>199</sup> who, knowing the Arabic language to perfection, assists us admirably in achieving our goals”...<sup>200</sup>*

Yet again, direct witnesses from among those personally involved in the origins and the organization of such an important undertaking which would, in effect, become the province of Egypt, are missing. Only in the month of May, 1889 would *La Nigrizia* publish the report of “*one of the Sisters teaching in Helouan*” which was addressed to *the Reverend Mother Superior in Verona.*”

That report describes the happy event of the first Holy Communion of some of the adolescents and makes a note of the presence of *Reverend Mother Vittoria* who would remain there until the following 16<sup>th</sup> of June and concludes as follows:

*“The 21<sup>st</sup> of April 1889 will be an unforgettable day for us. Who knows the depth of feeling that may have been awakened in some tepid souls at witnessing such a moving service. The relatives of the young girls will have been moved [...] because they frequent the Church more now [...].*

*Here is the description, Reverend Mother [...] [of] the first holy feast celebrated with our school girls: So, we have shared with you our happiness certain that there with you, all the beloved Sisters of Verona have also shared in our joy”... (p. 70).*

On Maria Bollezzoli’s part, no comment on the opening of the school has come down to us. However, what she wrote to an aspirant from Bergamo on December 13<sup>th</sup> 1888 could be considered meaningful:

*“How is the teacher, Miss Pegurri? Could she not send to the Mission some of her well instructed students and even better, those with a licence to teach? Please find out from both parties”...<sup>201</sup>*

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<sup>199</sup> We still do not know the true identity of that *local Catholic teacher*, but the two names suggested are Virginia Mansur and Marietta Maragase.

<sup>200</sup> *La Nigrizia*, VII(1889)1, p. 3.

<sup>201</sup> To the Aspirant, Amalia Caffi. In APMR, VI/B/1/7–1517, p. 6, letter 19.

Her interest seems evident. Without some young women prepared as teachers who might join the Congregation, how could the school be maintained?

### **In the Austro-Hungarian Hospital, *Rodolfo***

*“In December 1888, the Pie Madri began to give a service in the **Prince Rodolfo** hospital, opened in that year by a society of Austrian citizens in honour of the Emperor, Francesco Giuseppe [...]. Currently [1902] there are nine sisters in service. Theirs is a charitable work towards the poor and infirm, not only bodily, but also spiritually. Quite often, they have seen their zeal rewarded. Nevertheless, it is a difficult task, given the diversity of the religions professed by the patients. Some even have no religion”...*

*(Memorie, p. 31)*

On his part, Fr. Sembianti seemed to be in perfect agreement when the Apostolic Vicar communicated his intention to accept that service which had been proposed by the Austro Hungarian Consul:

*He replied, “Here, we consider a sign of Divine Providence the offer made, which was really more of a plea to accept, the service of spiritual and bodily care at the Austro Hungarian hospital. This, together with the other services undertaken, apart from offering an opportunity to do good to souls, may also give us a chance to find vocations. May God enlighten us in putting a solid foundation to these works so that good effects will be the result [...] We are all agreed [male and female Superiors] about the need of having Rules for the assistance at the hospitals”...<sup>202</sup>*

Monsignor Sogaro did not waste time. He wrote to Luigi di Canossa on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1888, “I am happy to share with you that the Lord has

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<sup>202</sup> Sembianti to Sogaro, Verona, 16<sup>th</sup> of November 1888. In ACR, A/43/77/13.

opened up a new field of work for the Sisters”. He went on to explain:

*“On Sunday the 2<sup>nd</sup> of this month, the inauguration took place of the Austro Hungarian hospital which is called, S. A. I. R. the hereditary Prince Rodolfo. We were asked to provide some Sisters for the spiritual direction. Already since last Tuesday, four Sisters have established themselves there”...<sup>203</sup>*

*“May the Blessed Virgin, under whose auspices we have begun this work, bless it, so that while it may bring spiritual and temporal benefits to the poor and those suffering, it might, at the same time, give rise to numerous new vocations. Certainly there are some pious young people here who, while desiring to consecrate their lives to the service of the Lord and to the Missions, don’t have the courage to cross deserts and live in savage lands. Perhaps they will find a space here to live out their zeal for the glory of God and the wellbeing of souls”... (p. 5).*

There are some statements here which, to tell the truth, sound a bit ambiguous. What *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* would those be who “ *while desiring to consecrate their lives to the Lord and the Missions*, didn’t have the courage to go to challenging missions?

And how would this point be presented in the proposed new text of the *Constitutions and Rules of the Religious, Pie Madri della Nigrizia*?

It is a point which we shall take up further at a later stage.

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<sup>203</sup> *La Nigrizia*, VI(1889)1, p. 5. “*There are four of us here*, Sr. Matilde Lombardi confirmed on the same day writing to Fr. Sembianti, Sr. Bartolomea, Sr. Ginevra, Sr. Annunziata and myself” (ACR, A/31/26/6: Cairo, 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1888).



## 7.

### The Apostolic Visitor in Egypt

*“As a remedy to all the unfortunate things that have happened in the past and to avoid more serious things which we have good reason to fear, we ask this Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide to reflect on whether it is not better to remove Monsignor Sogaro from the post he holds and substitute him with a new Apostolic Vicar, who could be found among his Missionaries themselves, and whom we would make known to this Sacred Congregation.”*

(Luigi di Canossa, June 18<sup>th</sup> 1889)

The year 1889 marked the beginning of a particularly delicate, rather than just difficult, period for the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* who were in Egypt. Not only, in fact, was the anxiety and worry for the Sisters who were prisoners<sup>204</sup> ongoing, and not only did they experience the discomfort of having to do their apostolic work ‘in the territory of others’, that is, outside of the mission territory which had been entrusted to them, but unfortunately, they also witnessed the relationship between the Apostolic Vicar of Africa and the superiors in Verona become increasingly strained.

The Sisters had always had difficulties in their relationship with Francesco Sogaro, ever since he had arrived in Africa for the first time and had gone to Khartoum in March 1883. Having grown in the school of the Founder, the young missionary Sisters had sought, however, to discern

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<sup>204</sup> Monsignor Sogaro wrote to Luigi di Canossa on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1889, “Yesterday evening, the lieutenant major of His Excellency the Sirdar brought us two letters from Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder” who complained because the mission had not exchanged a promissory note of 5,000 francs which he had signed. The letter continues, “Now he tells us that, in reality, he had received not 5,000 francs, but only 2,000 and he had been obliged to give these to the Greeks who were taking care of the Sisters and who were threatening to throw them out unless they received the money they had requested.” (ACR, A/38/49/19a).

about the suitability, or lack of it, of the Leader, thinking about the present situation and the necessity of the mission.

In fact, the letter which they had sent to Luigi di Canossa on December 16<sup>th</sup> 1885, immediately after Monsignor Sogaro had returned from Rome after his episcopal ordination, underlined especially, despite the doubt expressed by someone regarding the involvement of the person most interested in such an initiative, that the Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa had been able to demonstrate constant zeal and intelligence regarding the deeply tried mission which had been entrusted to him, and that he also took great care to ensure that the young Sisters would be formed in that *“spirit of solid virtue, spirit of true missionaries which made them capable of the great and holy undertaking of saving souls.”*

In this attitude of theirs, one could say that, even afterwards, they were coherent. Despite the great lack of correspondence, especially on the part of the Sisters, which characterized this period of our history, a letter of Sr. Giuseppa Scandola, addressed to Fr. Sembianti has come down to us. It reveals how Vittoria Paganini, the superior in Cairo, refused to be drawn into a certain type of correspondence which the Superior in Verona tried to solicit from the missionaries present and working in Cairo.

Sr. Giuseppa wrote on January 26<sup>th</sup> 1888, *“This morning, the Reverend Mother received your letter but as she has urgent work to do today, she is unable to respond and has asked me to do so [...].*

*Mother is sorry about your displeasure for her omission and she humbly asks your pardon. With regard to the Reverend Fathers, she says that she cannot but speak well of them. We hear them every morning celebrating the Holy Mass and preaching every Sunday evening [...]. In fact, Mother and I hope that when His Excellency, Monsignor, will have completed the most important business, he will assign a priest as confessor [...].*

*Reverend Mother thanks you very much, and we do too, for the booklets [...]. She thanks you even more for the observation you have made and she says that she will be more precise in what she can be, reserving, as I said, for heaven, all that is not good to put in writing. However, you good Father and dear Mother [Bollezzoli] may always advise her as she accepts with pleasure your corrections and advice.*

*We did not know that Monsignor [Sogaro] had gone to Massaua because, from the day he left, we have not received any letter from him.*<sup>205</sup>

However, it seems that the attitude of the young Sons of the Sacred Heart who had been sent to Cairo from 1887 onwards, was quite different.

***Old Missionaries and Sons of the Sacred Heart:  
two courses of water which could not merge?***

The first *Sons of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, strongly desired by Monsignor Sogaro himself who had worked personally to ensure that the Institute of Missionaries for Nigrizia could be transformed into a religious congregation, first arrived in Egypt in December 1887.

The Jesuit Rector in Verona, Fr. Pietro Frigerio, writing to Fr. Angelo Colombaroli, the designated Superior of the house in Cairo, stated “*You four must remember that you are the first fruits of the congregation which Monsignor Sogaro wishes to establish in his vicariate and, therefore, you must behave so virtuously that you can be presented as models to those who will come after you. You, in particular, he recommended, have the duty of ensuring, with docility, but also with strength when required, that the Rules in which you were educated during the noviciate are put into practice. Then if, as is usual at the beginnings of Congregations, difficulties arise, or doubts regarding the Constitutions and the Rules, [...] write to Fr. Asperti for advice*”...<sup>206</sup>

The difficulties and doubts, foreseen by Fr. Frigerio, must have, unfortunately, arisen almost immediately “*because of, one reads in the Cardinal’s declaration - of January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1894, the discrepancy in the lifestyles of the old missionaries and those formed recently by the Jesuit Fathers in Verona*”.

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<sup>205</sup> Scandola to Sembianti, Cairo, 26<sup>th</sup> of January 1888. In ACR, A/31/38/9.

<sup>206</sup> Frigerio to Colombaroli, Trento, 15<sup>th</sup> of December 1887. Type written transcript in ACR, B/225, p. 4.

From here arose “*complaints and great tension between the Apostolic Vicar and the old missionaries on the one hand and the Superiors of the Institute in Verona and the missionaries formed by them on the other*” (n. 13).

### **Discomfort and Incomprehension also in the Apostolic Work**

Before returning to this conflict which was brewing between the Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa and the Superiors of the Veronese Institute, to which this missionary territory had been definitively entrusted,<sup>207</sup> it could be useful to listen to the voice of one of those missionaries who, with Daniel Comboni himself, had been on the mission field from the beginning.

The letter of Fr. Leone Hanriot to Cardinal Simeoni on July 27<sup>th</sup> 1891, when the dispute was already very advanced and one could already intuit the conclusion, is an interesting one, even though it is not free from polemics. It is a letter which one would hope might have been taken into consideration, especially by those who, a few years later, would be able to return to the Sudan as ‘owners of the land’. In it, we read:

*Your Illustrious Eminence,*

*I have long hesitated in writing, but seeing the loss of many African souls from our mission<sup>208</sup>, in the end, I decided [to do so].*

*Three years ago, we bought a piece of land, fifty hectares, close to Cairo so that we could create a colony of Africans who were already Christians or were becoming Christians. The work began with fifteen young people who were well instructed and were baptized together with three or four families. The African children stayed in the house in Cairo. For a year and a half, it was the old missionaries who directed the colony **under the supervision** of His Excellency, Monsignor Sogaro, and the number of Africans increased*

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<sup>207</sup> See, APF NS, vol. 73(1893-1900)332: Prot. N. 7656, May 1894.

<sup>208</sup> Some time before this, in October 1889, the first denunciation, from Fr. Lorenzo of Jerusalem, had arrived at *Propaganda Fide* about the “*flight*” from the colony of “*Africans belonging to the Mission of Central Africa.*” [AP SC Afr. C, vol. 10(1889)620].

*so that, when the new missionaries, those who are said to be religious, formed by Fr. Asperti, received the colony from us, there were 30 or 31 young Africans who were either already baptized or were well disposed catechumens together with 52 families.*

*From that moment until yesterday, when three young Africans left because they were discontented, the number has diminished by **half**, despite the fact that one of our old missionaries got some of those young people to return and about five or six couples to enter. If things continue like this, to the point that it is taken as a sin if they grow, they will take the same route and either they will be sent away or they will go by themselves, discontent.*

*I cannot understand this great decrease in the Africans which is so marked since they have been placed under the direction of these new religious.*

- 1) Might it be because they do not know about youth and about African youth in particular?*
- 2) Might it be because they consider the Africans turbulent by nature and an obstacle to the practice of their famous rules, or their daily routine, so much so that they try to get rid of them?*
- 3) Might it be because the African Christians under their direction and those who were not yet Christian and were a bit Islamized, since they had grown with Muslims for years, became more badly behaved? After having declared to the old missionaries that they wanted to become Christians, they never missed instruction. Yet, when the pigs were killed, they asked for a little pork. The new missionaries interpreted this fact as a return to Muhammad's law once more. So, under the new missionaries they have changed idea and, tired and discontent, they spoke badly of the Christians and were sent away.*
- 4) Might it be because they want to make the Africans too perfect and like novices of their new Congregation, which would be a utopia?*
- 5) Might it be because of their spirit; a spirit of independence from the **the Head** of the mission, generated through lack of true humility? Perhaps God wants to make them understand that it is necessary to depend, at least to ask, or listen to advice.*
- 6) Might it be because they don't have a missionary vocation but only a religious one, because they have been formed in such a way by Fr. Asperti?*
- 7) Might it be because they are not able to make themselves loved by these Africans, as the old missionaries were, and were therefore able to scold and correct? This is something that the religious are not able to do because they are not loved.*

- 8) *Might it be because they accept too easily the gossip of certain spies among the Africans?*
- 9) *Might it be because the devil is stronger over the Africans with them than with the old missionaries?*
- 10) *Might it be because their system, and the changes made by them are less appropriate than the system of the old missionaries?*
- 11) *Might it be because their formator, Fr. Asperti, wants, from Verona, to govern every act, every movement of those students of his **against the desire of the Bishop, leader of the mission?***
- 12) *Might it be because the religious are more numerous, better nourished, better served and supplied and have better accomodation than we old missionaries?*

*I don't know. I really don't know. But what I know perfectly, because it is clearly visible, is that before, the number of Africans was growing and now it is diminishing every month. I know that under the direction of the old missionaries they were happier and now there is a general discontent.*

*The colony is in the same place under them as it was under us, but nevertheless, the Africans who are not yet baptized and who came from the mission, end up in the claws of the devil who held them before. And those Christians scattered around the city of Cairo, how will they be able to remain good Christians and save their souls in the face of so many dangers?*

*Then, if these **Aspertian** religious will be able to find good reasons to prove that this domination of African Christians is something good, it will be better for them, **but not for the Africans**. In the meantime, I have written and whatever the result of my letter might be, I thought it better to send it to Your Eminence to quieten my conscience [...].*

*I am your devoted servant in the Sacred Heart,*

*Leone Hanriot,  
Apostolic Missionary*

*P.S. I feel that Monsignor Sogaro wishes to write to Your Eminence.*"<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Hanriot to Simeoni, Cairo, 27<sup>th</sup> of July 1891. In APSC, Afr. C, vol. 10(1891)805-805.

A little over two weeks later, we don't know whether spontaneously or by agreement, Fr. Daniel Sorur\* also wrote to *Propaganda Fide*:

*“If I were not afraid of exceeding the limits required by the oath in the content of my letters, I would wish the Sacred Congregation to inform itself on various points which seem to me to be important for unity among the Missionaries and the purpose for which this Apostolic Vicariate was erected among the Africans.*

*1<sup>st</sup> The bond between the new Missionaries formed in religious life and the old missionaries could be closer so as to co-operate in the aim of our vocation as well as in the absolute and total submission towards the Apostolic Vicar who is their Superior by right and is also recognized as such by the latest ones. The reason is that these new Fathers, in many cases, do things for which, at the end of the day, the Apostolic Vicar is responsible. For example, many African boys have been sent away by these Fathers or have left of their own accord due to some disagreement. The Bishop was not made aware of any of this.*

*2<sup>nd</sup> It would be desirable that they occupy themselves more with the spiritual growth of these boys than with their own, without, however neglecting this, adapting their rules to the real capabilities and the moral weakness of the people they are dealing with.”* <sup>210</sup>

Evidently, it is not appropriate for us to report here the details of the conflict which at a certain point the Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa faced irrevocably with those who were at that time the Superiors of the Institutes for Nigrizia in Verona.

The tone and the content of the two letters cited above help us to understand clearly enough to what point the conflict had already reached...

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<sup>210</sup> Sorur to Simeoni, Helouan, 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1891. In APF SC, Afr. C. vol. 10(1891)840-841.

## The intervention of Luigi di Canossa

While on their part the Jesuits responsible for the male Institute in Verona insisted with the young missionaries leaving the noviciate that they should observe the rules even in their minute details,<sup>211</sup> Fr. Sembianti was preparing a report, addressed to *Propaganda Fide* and signed by the Bishop of Verona and dated the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 1889, regarding “*Monsignor Sogaro and his method of governing the Mission.*”<sup>212</sup>

One can read in the premise, “*This report has two parts: The **first part** makes known to this Sacred Congregation, Monsignor Francesco Sogaro and his way of working and it does this through some letters and accounts of the old Missionaries and Sisters. The **second part** presents letters from the young missionaries, that is, the religious nurtured and formed by the Reverend Jesuit Fathers in the Institute of Verona and who are now in Africa.*

[...] At the end of the report, the Cardinal is informed that, *there is an **Index** from which he can choose those points which he believes to be more important for getting to know the true state of affairs.*

*He who took on the difficult task of re-writing and co-ordinating this information is ready, in case His Eminence may desire it, to make available the original letters from which the extracts have been reported as well as to confirm through an oath that he did not add anything of his own except what can be found in the column, **Observations.***”

Now, when one reads the following text, the impression is that, more than a report, it seems to be a document elaborated in order to defend a thesis: that is, the necessity “*of removing Monsignor Sogaro from the position he holds and substituting him with a new Apostolic Vicar*”, preferably one from among the *Sons of the Sacred Heart*.

Unfortunately, the tone of this piece of writing is not always serene. Polemical issues are not lacking, and, if one makes a careful comparison, it

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<sup>211</sup> “*I would like to see the new Congregation consolidated with an extremely precise observance both here and in Cairo, Fr. Voltolina\* wrote to the Superior there, as we see in the history lived out by all Institutes in their beginnings*” (Voltolina to Colombaroli, Verona, 24<sup>th</sup> of April 1889. Typed transcript in ACR, B/225, p. 5).

<sup>212</sup> See, Canossa to Simeoni, Verona, 18<sup>th</sup> of June 1889. In APF NS, vol. 174(1889)335-368.

can be said that some extracts from the letters used have not been cited with precision, but rather, interpreted or even misrepresented. We feel, therefore, that it would be inappropriate to quote the text in question, but we shall instead give voice to the Sisters who are mentioned on several occasions by the author.

### **The position of the *Pie Madri* in Egypt**

After Luigi di Canossa had turned once more to *Propaganda Fide* on the 26<sup>th</sup> of November 1889, so that they would persuade “*the Holy Father [...] to use his authority in order to [...] remove Monsignor Sogaro,*”<sup>213</sup> he took at least two other immediate steps:

- A) He asked Monsignor Guido Corbelli, Apostolic Delegate in Egypt, to “*be kind enough to take on the delicate responsibility of verifying the truth of the facts in question as well as adding anything else he thought might be appropriate and useful*”.<sup>214</sup>
- B) He invited Monsignor Sogaro to come to Rome for a personal meeting.

Evidently, informed of what was taking place, and probably wishing to speak for themselves, the superiors of the Sisters houses in Egypt addressed the following letter to the Cardinal Prefect of *Propaganda Fide* on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1889:

“*Your Eminence,*

*We, the poor signatories of this letter, humbly prostrate ourselves at your feet and, having understood that our beloved Father and leader is coming to Rome, implore your Eminence to grant us a grace; that is, to comfort our leader and help him to remain faithful to this beautiful work of the Lord. We feel that we must make this prayer with gratitude as he has saved us from many serious dangers and has strengthened in us the spirit of religious abnegation and has developed our poor Institute.*

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<sup>213</sup> APF NS, vol. 174(1893-1900)415-416.

<sup>214</sup> *Propaganda Fide* to Corbelli, 3<sup>rd</sup> of December, 1889. In APF Lettere (1889)835-835v.

*Moreover, his presence is absolutely essential for the education of the Africans, as it is difficult to find others who have that strong hand and strong love which is necessary in order to overcome the difficulties which can be met in educating the Africans.*

*We thank your Eminence in advance and humbly kiss your ring with profound veneration and consider ourselves the most respected and devoted daughters of your Eminence,*

*Sr. Giuseppa Scandola, superior in Cairo  
Sr. Matilde Lombardi, superior at the A. H. Hospital  
Sr. Matilde Corsi, superior in Gesira  
Sr. Francesca Dalmasso, superior in Helouan Les  
Bains  
Sr. Vittoria Paganini, superior of the Pie Madri  
della Nigrizia in Egypt”<sup>215</sup>*

### **The first reaction of Giuseppe Sembianti**

The first to react to the letter of the Superiors of the *Pie Madri* in Egypt quoted above, was their director in Verona, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti.

Even if questionable, the piece of writing which follows is of some interest as it reveals quite well how Fr. Sembianti considered the young missionary Sisters that he was supposed to have formed and prepared for the mission. In fact, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1889, he wrote to Monsignor Jacobini, the Secretary of *Propaganda Fide* as follows:

*“Most Reverend Excellency,  
From letters which I have received lately from Cairo, it seems that I must presume (as it is not stated clearly) that the Sisters there might have written to Propaganda in the last few days in favour of Monsignor Sogaro. Given that this is the case, even if they wrote spontaneously, something which it would be reasonable to doubt, I have to*

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<sup>215</sup> APF NS, vol. 174(1893-1900)421.

say that, from what I know, they must have been induced to do so by:

1. *Feelings of compassion towards Monsignor Sogaro*
2. *Ignorance about the facts which concern all the Work [...]. I speak about ignorance of the facts because it is a habit of Monsignor Sogaro to say to the Sisters, 'Don't believe anyone. Listen to this poor old man, because things stand as I say they do'.*
3. *Fear that, if Monsignor Sogaro is not present, the Work will collapse and they will find themselves unprovided for.*
4. *The attachment that they now feel towards Monsignor Sogaro, due to the attention that he gives to them related to their particular needs as women, taking even in this, as in many other things, the hand of the Superior; attention that was always given to the Sisters [...] and which has now, in the last months, increased. Perhaps he intuited what he was going to face in Verona.*
5. *Finally, a greater trust given to and received from the Sisters, since he realized that he did not enjoy the trust of the Missionaries.*

*These last two things in themselves [...] would be enough to make those poor women forget all that they suffered at his hands in the past and which they would consign to oblivion just for the sake of a spirit of virtue.*

*The defect then of a full knowledge of the facts which took place and their smallmindedness, make them incapable of an objective judgement which gives a correct idea of the past and of what might come in the future. When questioned, they answer basing themselves on what they feel at that moment, especially on their feelings of compassion. In addition, even if they remembered something from the past, they would not say it, perhaps for no other reason than for fear of damaging or hurting Monsignor Sogaro or for fear of his anger”...<sup>216</sup>*

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<sup>216</sup> Sembianti to Jacobini, Verona, 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, 1889. In APF NS, vol. 174(1889)436-437.

## Too many gaps in the correspondence of the Sisters

The letter cited above, to tell the truth, continues at some length, also because it recalled some extracts of the correspondence attributed to the Sisters. But we have no possibility of verifying this as, at least until now, these letters have not come down to us.

At this point, one cannot help but ask: why would Giuseppe Sembianti be interested in destroying so many letters? <sup>217</sup>

In another piece of writing which, four days later, Sembianti himself addressed to Vittoria Paganini and Matilde Lombardi, the Superior of Verona continued as follows:

*“I am returning to the letter of Mother Vittoria on the 11<sup>th</sup> of the last month, together with another one from Sr. Lombardi which arrived later [neither of these letters have come down to us]. I am not writing to make you bitter and neither to scold you. I intend only to explain to you that which you have shown you don’t understand [...].*

*What a terrible world this is! In 1883 and 1884 with letters, and at the beginning of 1885 orally in Cairo, I defended the Sisters and [what I said] was **not believed** by Sogaro and I was scolded and threatened with a case at Propaganda Fide. In this year of grace 1889, I inform the same Sisters that Monsignor Sogaro has taken things to such a point that the whole work is in danger [...] and the Sisters **don’t believe me**, and they jump up to protest that these dangers don’t exist and they kick up a fuss even in Rome and take trouble to ensure that **that remedy** should not be used [...].*

*Poor Sisters! [...] They believe, as if it were Gospel truth, **whatever** their beloved Father, their true, affectionate Father tells them. (Well, he is that for you, I don’t know since when, but he is not like this for many others, especially for your old Mother, for whom he has very little consideration. Don’t deny it. I know what I am saying to you). I repeat, you believe him [...].*

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<sup>217</sup> He told Fr. Rolleri, at the time, *“I will burn all your letters in which you don’t speak of business because with these I should make a copy and I would not be able to do this. Whatever I have to destroy, write it on separate sheets”* (Sembianti to Rolleri, Verona, 20<sup>th</sup> of November 1883. In ACR, A/28/27/19).

*But there is something else in that letter of Mother Vittoria which needs to be clarified. Poor sisters! You speak at moments when you don't know anything even about yourselves, and when you speak, you say things that you would not mention at other times. "I love the Institute too much to feel resentful". This is what Sr. Vittoria says. And Sr. Lombardi, when I told her last October that she seemed to be seeing the mission in a bad light, replied to me, "Well, as long as the work does not collapse". Both of you, in different words, say that you love the work, and who knows how many times you have said it, and I believe that you love the work. But to say this after I have revealed to you what you know, means that I have to tell you, and for goodness sake don't be offended, that you love the work **for yourselves**, and not for the work **in itself**, not for the Lord, because you would both approve that the work can stand on the edge of that precipice towards which it is headed, **as long as** your true, affectionate, beloved Father remains!*

*Don't think that I find any joy in writing these things to you. On the contrary, I find it difficult, and I suffer. I write because you induce me to, because of the wrong and false ideas that you have and because I feel it is my duty to enlighten you and help you to see the truth [...].*

*And Sembianti has gathered the proof [...] from **writings and accounts** of the missionaries and the Sisters [...].*

*Now, Propaganda will judge. Sogaro is there [...]. Be calm and quiet. Propaganda and the Pope will do things in their way, and they will open the eyes also of the Sisters in Africa [...].*

*Fr. Sembianti*

*P.S. If Mother Vittoria thinks it is good [...] she can give this letter of mine to Sr. Giuseppa to read. I feel that Cardinal di Canossa will write to you some things that are necessary for your Congregation."... <sup>218</sup>*

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<sup>218</sup> Sembianti to Paganini and Lombardi, Verona, 26<sup>th</sup> of December 1889. In APF NS, vol. 174(1889)448 ff.

## **The Position taken by the Bishop of Verona**

*“Therefore, I am resolved to do whatever I can, if the Lord gives me life, to settle, with norms already drafted by the Holy See, the two Congregations which are destined to provide workers for the Mission”...*

(Luigi di Canossa)

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 1889, therefore the day after Sembianti had written his letter, *the Reverend Mother Vittoria Paganini in Cairo*, received the following letter from the bishop of Verona in which he told her:

*I have been following the affairs of the Mission of Central Africa for many years and you well know that our sorely missed Monsignor Comboni used to share with me his sufferings and consolations, the latter of these being always fewer in number. Even since Monsignor Sogaro has been the leader of the Mission, the affairs of this work have been communicated to me; affairs which, on the whole, are not at all consoling, with the exception of some small and partial fruits.*

*There are many causes of this. But I will not list them here. However, one serious cause is the fact that there was, and there is still, no understanding of the need for organization and direction to be given to the personnel who work on the mission. The Lord gave us the grace of settling the two Institutes in Verona from which the workers for the Lord’s vineyard now come, well prepared in virtue and zeal for the wellbeing of souls. However, when they arrive on the mission, they seem to come to a halt, falter and become confused and their action is greatly weakened. This is because they do not find in Africa that help and support that they would receive from those who formed them. Rather, they pass, as if in another category of thought, to a direction which is not in conformity with the one they had previously. And what else could possibly come from such a passage and alteration but chaos and confusion and other damaging consequences?*

*I already know so much that I have to fear that, if we continue at this rate, all that we have achieved at the cost of much sacrifice, in terms of lives and money, will be destroyed and a lot of damage done to the poor Africans.*

*Therefore, I am resolved to do whatever I can, if the Lord gives me life, to settle, with norms already drafted by the Holy See, the two Congregations which are destined to provide workers for the Mission, getting some help for this purpose, from the Fathers who are in charge of the two houses here.*

*To this end, we have done some work in Rome and now we are still in dialogue. In my capacity as **first and immediate Superior** of the Congregation of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia, so that the work begun for a holy purpose might not falter, I order you and all the Pie Madri della Nigrizia who are in Africa, neither to write to Monsignor Sogaro, nor to read any letters he might send to you or any other Sister, but to return these directly to me in Verona still sealed.*

*At the same time, I inform you that from this point in time, I nominate as **Superior General** of all the houses of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia, the very Reverend Mother Maria Bollezzoli, actual Superior in Verona.*

*I also nominate you Vicar General for the houses that are in Africa, and, as such, you will write frequently to the General Superior, informing her about discipline, the observance of the Rules in the houses in Africa and you will also keep her informed about the behaviour of each single Sister, so that through you the others are regulated by the Superior General so that the whole Congregation will have the same single orientation.*

*You will inform all our sisters in Africa about these orders and dispositions of mine by reading my letter [to them]. At the same time, you will tell them that all of this is in line with the requirements of the Holy See and with the practice of all the religious Congregations which are well regulated and that I have the right to require it from them.*

*Later on, I will instruct you about other matters, which I know that you and the Sisters are not aware about, and this is detrimental to your Congregation.*

*For now I conclude, sending all of you my blessing.*

*Affectionately, in the Lord,  
† L. Cardinal di Canossa, Bishop”<sup>219</sup>*

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<sup>219</sup> Canossa to Paganini, Verona, 27<sup>th</sup> of December 1889 APFN, vol. 174(1889)450–451.

## The explanations of Fr. Sembianti

The following day, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti wrote once more to the newly elected Vicar General.

*“Very Reverend Mother Vittoria,*

*the Reverend Mother here has received a copy of the letter which his Eminence, Cardinal di Canossa sent to you yesterday.*

*In his, the Cardinal forbids you and all the sisters, in the present circumstances it is understood, to write to Monsignor Sogaro and to read his letters.*

*Such an order from His Eminence could seem, in fact will seem, strange, and contrary to your Rules, where it is written that everyone is free to write to **the Leader** [...]. [But] the Bishop of Verona can suspend the practice of a rule which was given by him, and he can also **change it**. While the leader [Sogaro] is also a bishop [...] he can not of his own will **suspend or change any of your rules** [...].*

*Therefore **you and all** [the sisters] are obliged to obey, with regards to writing to Monsignor Sogaro, the orders of His Eminence di Canossa, which he indicated to you in the letter sent to you yesterday, [...] [ and you must obey] until such times as His eminence withdraws this last order [...].*

*Therefore, I repeat, your vows, whatever formula you might have used, bind you to the Bishop, and now Cardinal of Verona, and you must obey in **everything** which is in your Rules, and in any changes which he judges opportune made to the same rules.*

*These things are not from my own head, but from men who are knowledgeable [...] I write them to you so that you may have a clear conscience with regard to the orders of His Eminence di Canossa”... <sup>220</sup>*

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<sup>220</sup> Sembianti to Paganini, Verona, 28<sup>th</sup> of December 1889. In APF NS, vol. 174(1889)441.

## Appeal to the Holy Father

Vittoria Paganini was not at all reassured by the intervention of Fr. Sembianti and so she turned to Fr. Fuojols, Superior of the Jesuit community in Cairo, for advice. He suggested making Leone XIII aware of both the letter of Luigi di Canossa and those recently received from the superior in Verona. So it was that, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 1890, the Vicar General of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* addressed herself to the Holy Father, telling him:

*“Most Holy Father,*

*Prostrate at the feet of your Holiness, the least of your servants comes to implore, in the name of the Sisters in Africa, that light which, especially in the present very painful circumstances, she cannot find by herself.*

*Is Monsignor Sogaro not nominated by Your Holiness as our legitimate Superior?*

*I have received a letter from His Eminence, Cardinal di Canossa, which I have attached here together with others from Most Reverend Father Sembianti so that Your Holiness may be gracious enough to let me know what I should do and how I should act.*

*While awaiting a response from you, I implore Your Holiness for a special blessing for myself, my Sisters and for the Africans. I dare to sign with deep daughterly veneration*

*of Your Holiness*

*unworthy daughter and servant,*

*Sr. Vittoria Paganini*

*of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia”* <sup>221</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Paganini to Leone XIII, Cairo, 9<sup>th</sup> of January 1890. In APF NS, vol. 174(1890)446.

## **A detailed examination by Monsignor Corbelli**

Monsignor Guido Corbelli, as we have already seen, had been given the responsibility by *Propaganda Fide*, to verify discreetly how things really stood between Monsignor Sogaro and the Sons of the Sacred Heart. In the end he had requested permission to confer personally with all those involved. This permission was granted on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 1890, that is, a week after the appeal made by Sr. Vittoria Paganini to the Holy Father.

The result of the canonical visit which the Apostolic Delegate gave priority to carrying out immediately, can be found in the report sent by him to the Prefect of *Propaganda Fide* on the following 27<sup>th</sup> of January. In this report we read:

*“Most Eminent Prince,*

*As soon as I received the letter of your Eminence ( no. 6299) on the 16<sup>th</sup> of this month, I went to Cairo to clarify all that has been referred to this Sacred Congregation regarding the conduct of Monsignor Sogaro towards the religious and the Sisters of the Institute of Verona for Nigrizia.*

*On the very day that I arrived in Cairo, I began to set up a detailed examination, going first to the house of the male Religious and then to the Sisters’ house to hold separate preliminary meetings with each of them.*

*In communicating the results of my research to Your Eminence, I feel that it is desirable, in order to achieve greater clarity, to repeat here the principal points of the accusations against Monsignor Sogaro, joining to them the relative responses. At the end, I will give my own humble opinion with regard to these matters.*

- 1- It is said that Monsignor Sogaro prevents the religious [...] from observing their own Rules. **Reply:** Monsignor has never directly prevented the religious from living according to their Rules. On the contrary, he has encouraged them with appropriate observations.*
- 2- Monsignor says that the Rules are made only for Verona. **Reply:** Monsignor, who has experience of the mission and its needs, has sometimes reasonably said that the Rules of the Institute are made by people who do not know the territory, the needs and the circumstances in which one finds oneself, or can find oneself, in the mission. Therefore, it is impossible that these Rules be observed in Africa integrally, as they are observed in Verona.*

- 3- *Monsignor assumes the right of authority over individual religious so much so that the authority of the religious superior is rendered nominal. **Reply** As those religious are the creation of Monsignor and are there for the needs of the mission, he believes that he may dispose of them according to necessity, without asking permission every time from the superior. Everyone realizes that it would be humiliating and inconvenient for the Apostolic Vicar, who lives alone, to have to depend on the superior of the religious for every small service. In addition, by confession of the same religious, Monsignor, for some time now, goes to the superior for almost everything.*
- 4- *Monsignor has often placed for long periods a lay religious alone, in a mission station of secular missionaries, in circumstances that did not allow him to fulfill his religious practices. **Reply** – If the religious, lay people in particular, are also for the economic advantage of the mission, they will have to do some manual work as the need arises. Monsignor, who knows this work better than any other, because he directs it alone, needs to have some space in this. In sending a religious to a particular house where there are only lay missionaries, this religious is not, thus, prevented from observing his Rules. Perhaps however, because of urgent work, he might have to leave aside some pious practice which is usually constantly observed in community.*
- 5- *The quick tempered character of Monsignor, which is feared by everyone, prevents the aforementioned missionaries, but especially the Sisters, from telling the truth about their state. **Reply** - In the first place, it seems that Monsignor is not so quick tempered as some would like to make out. There is even less to suggest that it is this disposition of his character which is the reason for which the religious and the Sisters are fearful of telling the truth about themselves. They have reported that their freedom to act and to speak has never been hindered by Monsignor and if someone withheld himself in some particular circumstances, it was more out of reverential fear than servile fear. All are agreed in admitting that for some time now Monsignor has changed considerably with regard to the vivacity of his character.*

*This, Eminent Prince, is what I have been able to gather from the meetings held by me with the religious and the Sisters of the Veronese Institute in Cairo.*

*At the same time, it has been clearly demonstrated, like the light at midday that:*

*1 – the Rules of the religious and the Sisters are not, in fact, suitable for mission territory, and much less so for Central Africa.*

*2- the authority of these Institutes should be totally in the hands of the Apostolic Vicar until such times as they increase and extend.*

*At present, various people assume the right of being the **immediate** Superior. His Eminence di Canossa assumes this right in his capacity as Protector. The Jesuit, Fr. Asperti, assumes it in his capacity as superior of the Institute in Verona. Monsignor Sogaro assumes it in his capacity as founder and also as the person who has to share daily life with the religious who are placed at the disposition of the mission.*

*The situation with the Sisters is the same. His Eminence di Canossa writes that they must obey him alone. The Stigmatine Priest, Fr. Sembianti , director of the Sisters in Verona, writes to tell them not to obey Monsignor Sogaro, but only His Eminence and himself. Instead, Monsignor Sogaro demands for himself authority over the Sisters, because they were founded by the Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa and in the formula at their profession, they profess obedience to the Apostolic Vicar **pro tempore**. In the meanwhile, even the Rules have been so confused that they can generate doubts and serious anxiety.*

*3 – In the future, the superiors will have to be individuals who have lived for some years in the mission referred to above and who know the spirit and the needs required to live it.*

*4 – If the actual Apostolic Vicar is to be retained, it will be necessary to change the Superiors in Verona, both Fr. Asperti [...] and Fr. Sembianti [...], and perhaps also the superior in Cairo, Fr. Colombaroli who, according to me, has been the cause of dissension. Otherwise, things will only get worse” ...<sup>222</sup>*

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<sup>222</sup> APF NS, vol. 174(1893–1900)393-394.

## 8.

### **The result of the Apostolic Visit: The revision of the Rules**

*“5<sup>th</sup> of January 1891: the work of writing the new Rules begins. 16<sup>th</sup>: the work is completed. 5<sup>th</sup> of February: His Eminence di Canossa sends the new Rules to Rome for approval.”*

(From the *Cronaca* (diary) of the Mother House of the Sisters)

If we read attentively the report of Monsignor Corbelli quoted above, we can see how the principal protagonists of a destructive controversy had been able to act and bring things to the point at which they arrived, because of the lack of clear **Rules** which would be more than appropriate for a missionary Institute for Africa. This was a need which the Founder had always felt, even if he did not manage to put this across to Sembianti (See W. 6174-75; 6472-73; 6999) on time, that is, before he died.

Now, in 1890, *Propaganda Fide* did not intend to wait any longer. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of March, after numerous conversations with the Apostolic Vicar of the Sudan, they informed the bishop of Verona that, at least for the time being, *“His Holiness, having taken everything into consideration, deemed it wiser to permit Monsignor Sogaro to return to Egypt as that mission had been for a long time without a Superior [...]. Having ensured in this way the return of the Apostolic Vicar, to whom many observations and indispensable reprimands had been made, the letter continued, [...] stable and adapted Rules should now be drawn up for both Institutes in which, the limits within which they should exert their competences should be pointed out to the Superiors and the members of the Institutes and also to the Apostolic Vicar so as to prevent any further disputes and diturbances.”*<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Simeoni to Canossa, Rome, 14<sup>th</sup> of March, 1890. In APF Lettere (1881-1892)160.

The Bishop of Verona responded to that letter four days later.

*Most Eminent and Reverend Prince,*

*The day before yesterday, I received your respected letter of the 14<sup>th</sup> of this month (N. 1050), and yesterday, Monsignor Sogaro turned up here unexpectedly! He asked pardon of me for everything, and I told him that I had nothing against him but I only had the wellbeing of the Mission of Africa at heart, a mission of which I accepted to become the protector when asked by Cardinal Barnabo in 1867.*

*It is not useful here that I demonstrate to your Eminence how much I have done on other occasions to obtain **stable Rules**, approved and sanctioned by this Sacred Congregation for these Institutes.*

*Imagine, therefore, Your Eminence, with what great pleasure I shall receive the outlines you have mentioned. As soon as I receive them, we shall study how to propose regulations which it will then be my duty and my pleasure to submit to this Sacred Congregation [...]. Let us hope that the same will be done in Africa. Monsignor Sogaro promised me expressly that he would do this.”<sup>224</sup>*

### **A proposal of collaboration from Cairo**

After that short visit of a few days to Verona, during which, according to the *Cronaca* (diary) of March 19<sup>th</sup> 1890, he also made an official visit to the Mother House of the Sisters<sup>225</sup>, Francesco Sogaro returned to Egypt at the end of the month.

Evidently, he knew that, in Verona, work was beginning on the new text of the Rules which *Propaganda Fide* itself, just like the founder in his time, hoped would respond more appropriately to the particular needs and circumstances that could arise in Africa.

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<sup>224</sup> Canossa to Simeoni, March 18<sup>th</sup> 1890. See, AC, XXXIII(1995)2, pp. 84-85.

<sup>225</sup> “*It seems to me that they were very happy*, he wrote afterwards to Cardinal Simeoni, *and we arranged to send other two Sisters who will arrive this week*”... [Sogaro to Simeoni, Cairo, 28<sup>th</sup> of March 1890. In APF NS, vol. 174(1890)628].

The Apostolic Vicar of Sudan, who desired to be able to express his opinion<sup>226</sup>, but also to ensure that the editors of the new Rules would have that missionary experience which in Verona was lacking, suggested to Luigi di Canossa that they could invite at least Vittoria Paganini, recently nominated Vicar General of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* in Africa. With this intuition, he wrote to Verona on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 1890:

*“As soon as I returned [from Italy] I told the Superior here that it would be good if she went to Verona, [...]. The superior found it difficult to decide, as can happen to whoever is at the head of a big family where the needs are many and the personnel is scarce. Added to this, there is no formal invitation [...]. A word from your Eminence and also from the Superior would suffice” ...*<sup>227</sup>

This was a suggestion which seems to have been accepted.

### **Sr. Vittoria Paganini in Verona**

In fact, as we can see from the circular letter of Maria Bollezzoli which follows, the Vicar General arrived in the Mother House in Verona on the 10<sup>th</sup> of August 1890 accompanied by Maria Caprini.

Unfortunately, however, Sr. Vittoria was unwell. She had undergone a serious operation in Cairo on the previous 1<sup>st</sup> of July<sup>228</sup> and had been

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<sup>226</sup> In fact, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March, 1890, he wrote to Fr. Sembianti as follows: *“I would be very pleased if the colour and the quality of the habit to be adopted in the mission by the Sisters were to be studied there. I will tell you frankly: it seems to me, also from what I saw in Massaua where the missionaries of San Vincenzo who don’t wear black, but the men white and the sisters grey, that black would be no longer suitable”*... (ACR, A/39/34/40).

<sup>227</sup> Sogaro to Canossa, Cairo, 20<sup>th</sup> of June 1890. In ACR, A/38/49/29.

<sup>228</sup> *“Now I will tell you something about the Superior here, Monsignor Sogaro wrote to Fr. Sembianti on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July 1890. Dr. Beker hopes that he has cut out even the roots of this last cancer and a proof that he has managed to do this is seeing this parasitic mass, in the volume of the flesh removed, [...] which is intact”* ... (ACR, A/39/34/43).

assured that everything had gone well and she was fit enough to undertake the journey. Instead, after only a few days in Verona, her illness returned stronger than ever, obliging Sr. Vittoria to make a definitive choice; either to die in Italy, or return to Africa as soon as possible.

Deeply saddened, the General Superior wished to send the following letter with Sr. Vittoria on her departure. It was addressed to all the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* in Egypt.

*Dearest Sisters in Jesus Christ,*

*Now your beloved superior, Mother Vittoria is returning among you. She had come here temporarily so that we could discuss together the new Rules which the Congregation of Propaganda Fide has ordered that we prepare, entrusting the task to His Excellency Cardinal di Canossa. At the same time, it was hoped that she could gain some improvement in her poor health. We have not spared any attention or treatment to achieve this end, and if the outcome does not correspond to my deepest desire and that of all the Sisters, we can neither say that it has failed. Now, I am asking you to lavish on her the most attentive and loving care so she might be able, if it is the Lord's wish, to be well and to continue to work for the greater glory of God, for your good and for the good of the poor Africans.*

*I would so willingly have accompanied her myself to Cairo, and I would have been greatly consoled in seeing all of you once again before closing my eyes to the sleep of death which will not be far off now. His Excellency, our Monsignor, had invited me to come. He knew that you too would have loved to have a visit from me, but my age and the state of my health make it absolutely impossible. So, I am making up for this by sending you in my place Sr. Costanza, who, while passing the winter there to gain some benefit for her health, will also carry out an official visit. Welcome her, therefore, as you would welcome me, with benevolence and love. Open up to her in trust and transparency, sharing with her your every need. By doing this, you will be carrying out your duty as docile and sincere daughters, faithful subjects and Religious who have a sense of belonging to the Congregation, and all of this will be to the great advantage and merit of each of you, and it will also be for the true good of our congregation.*

*I cannot close this letter of mine, without encouraging you to be faithful to the devotional practices which are common to us. Don't omit or neglect any of them, but carry them out worthily in the way that spiritual practices would merit as they are daily nourishment for your soul. If this nourishment is lacking, or we don't receive it in a worthy way, the spirit weakens and falls increasingly into defects. Be charitable towards each other, with that charity which excuses all and bears all and does not feel resentment and is not upset with anyone and forgets all offences that might be received from others and shows itself serene and loving with everyone and humbles itself and asks forgiveness from all.*

*So, dear daughters in the Lord, this is what I encourage you to do. If you do it with great diligence and perseverance, you will have great rewards.*

*Your most Affectionate Mother in the Lord,  
Sr. Maria Bollezzoli<sup>229</sup>*

As we have already seen, the visitor delegated by the Superior General would have found four communities in Egypt: Cairo, Gesira, *Rodolfo* Hospital and Helouan with a total of twenty Sisters. Another four missionaries, Teresa Grigolini, Concetta Corsi, Caterina Chincarini and Elisabetta Venturini, were still prisoners in the Sudan. The first two, however, even if at different moments and in different circumstances, had entered into the sacrament of marriage and, as a consequence, had left the Congregation.

This is part of the painful chapter of the Mahdia which we came to know about only in December 1891 when Caterina Chincarini and Elisabetta Venturini were liberated.

The Apostolic Vicar of Sudan, on his part, continued to do everything possible, as can be seen from a long letter addressed to Luigi di Canossa on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November 1890<sup>230</sup>, to maintain contact with the prisoners and, especially, to make attempts to achieve their liberation.

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<sup>229</sup> Circular letter to the *Pie Madri* in Egypt, 12<sup>th</sup> of October 1890. In APMN, VI/B/1/4–1500.

<sup>230</sup> See, Sogaro to Canossa, Cairo, 27<sup>th</sup> of November, 1890. In ACR, A/38/49/31.

## 1891: the first attempt at a new edition of the Rules

After the departure of Vittoria Paganini and Costanza Caldara from the Mother House, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti was practically the only writer, for the Congregation of the Sisters, of the new Rules requested by *Propaganda Fide*.

In order to give a first push to Verona, Cardinal Simeoni had had a letter sent to Cardinal di Canossa as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> of April 1890:

*“For the rules of the male missionaries, keep in mind those of the missionaries of Saint Calogero of Milan for everything regarding government and administration. For what regards the spiritual life, much useful material could be taken from the Belgian missionaries of Scheut [...].*

*For the Sisters instead, as they could, in time, have houses in various Apostolic Vicariates, it would seem appropriate to base oneself on those [Rules] for Religious Congregations which are destined for the mission but have a Superior General. If necessary, I will send you a copy of the Constitutions, approved recently, of the Soeurs de Notre Dame de Montreal as soon as the sample copies reach the Archives of this Sacred Congregation.”*<sup>231</sup>

And on the following 6<sup>th</sup> of June: *“Now I have received from Monsignor Archbishop of Montreal the Constitutions of the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame of that city. I am hurrying to send them to Your Eminence with this same post. I have strong faith that your Eminence will add to the many strong proofs of your affection and interest for the mission of Sudan another most important one, that is, the commitment to writing up these Rules which will give the Veronese Institute, to which that mission is commissioned, a solid basis.”*<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Simeoni to Canossa, 19<sup>th</sup> of April 1890. In APF Lettere (1890)246.

<sup>232</sup> APF Lettere, vol. 386 (1890)381.

## Unsatisfactory work

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of January 1891, the *cronaca* (diary) of the Sisters Institute informs us that the work began in *Santa Maria in Organo* on the first draft of the new Rules. Rather quickly, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti concluded the work eleven days later, that is, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 1891. He sent the work to Luigi di Canossa accompanied by the following piece of writing:

*“Most Reverend Eminence, I present to you the Rules of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia. They were compiled according to the outlines which his Eminence Cardinal Simeoni sent to us and some other [texts] already approved by the Holy See. There is very little in the text which is original and this was suggested by the experience lived by the same Religious for thirteen years in Africa.*

*The text has turned out to be quite bulky – 80 printed pages 22x10 – because the intention was to make available to the Sisters a manual, so to speak, which would instruct them in minute detail, - [exactly contrary, therefore, to what had been suggested by the Founder (See W. 2640-41)] – considering that this could be advantageous to them, in view of the great distance that separates them from the Mother House, to which they would always have to look for and await explanations and answers to doubts, which could arise from a more restricted and concise version of the Rules. More detail in the Rules will go a long way to providing a remedy to this setback and will help the Sisters to act in greater confidence and tranquillity.*

*The places in which these Rules are original, either entirely or in part, are the following: 1a Part I [Purpose of the Institute]; Chapter X [Tertiaries<sup>233</sup>] of Part III; Chapters I [organization of government], VI [works of the Institute], VII [ecclesiastical Superiors] of Part IV; Parts V [temporal goods] and VII [feasts of the Institute; the deceased and reading of the Constitutions].*

*I shall accept willingly and with gratitude any changes that your most Reverend Eminence considers it opportune to make and then I will send the*

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<sup>233</sup> The most ‘original’ proposal in the text presented seems to have been that regarding the Tertiaries destined to form a **second class** of *Pie Sorelle della Nigrizia*. In mission countries, in fact, it would have been possible for the Institute to admit ‘local young women and widows’ who would have occupied themselves with ‘the tasks appropriate to helper Sisters’ who would also assist ‘if they were able to, in catechizing the Africans.’

*manuscript to His Eminence, Cardinal Simeoni, whom, I shall humbly ask to present it to your Most Reverend Eminence by letter”...<sup>234</sup>*

In fact, on the following 4<sup>th</sup> of February, the bishop of Verona sent the booklet to Rome so that it could be submitted “*for examination and for the wise decisions of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide*. He assured, “*I, together with these superiors, am always at disposition to carry out whatever we will be asked to do*”<sup>235</sup>

The last news that comes down to us about this first draft of the new Rules, which was even printed and distributed among the Sisters, is from the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 1891, when the Secretary of *Propaganda Fide* had a letter written to Luigi di Canossa:

*“I am honoured to inform your Reverend Eminence that the Rules of the masculine Institute for Nigrizia, sent to me here by Your Eminence, have already been submitted for examination to the Commission responsible for that revision, after which they will be subjected to the judgement of the General Congregation. However, the Rules for the Sisters’ Institute which have also arrived for Propaganda will not be able to be submitted for examination until the Rules of the missionaries have been finalized”...<sup>236</sup>*

After this however, it seems that nothing more came of that first attempt and in 1895, the work had to be started again.

### **The desire for a single direction for all the Congregation**

In re-reading two letters which Mother Maria Bollezzoli sent to the Sisters in Egypt, after the text of the new Rules had been sent to Rome, one has the impression that, in Verona, there was a concern: the concern, that is, that in the houses in Egypt there was a tendency to organize community life in a ‘different’ way from the Mother House. Something, in fact, which would have been perfectly normal.

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<sup>234</sup> Sembianti to Canossa, Verona, 17<sup>th</sup> of January 1891. In ACR, A/38/46/3.

<sup>235</sup> Canossa to *Propaganda Fide*. In AP SC Afr. C., vol. 10(1891)748.

<sup>236</sup> APF, Lettere, vol. 387(1891)121.

In the first letter, dated the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 1891, the Superior of Verona attached a copy of the decree which Leone XIII had emanated on the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 1890 and addressed to all the Religious of Italy and the world. As Maria Bollezzoli herself would then underline in her following letter on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, this decree prohibited *'in the clearest of terms'* that the Superiors might require *'in any way whatsoever, an account of the conscience of their subjects'*.<sup>237</sup>

Now, in that circular letter of April 14<sup>th</sup>, therefore, the writer should have, if she had desired to make any comments, kept herself in line with that pontifical document which she was sending. Instead, and one cannot really understand the reason for this, she gets drawn into an opportunity which presents itself; the opportunity, that is, of recommending to all, *'uniformity of action, even in small things.'*

*"Always remember, she admonished, that you are daughters of the same family, members of one body; and even if you are living in separate residences in different places, you are like each other, as daughters of the same Mother, the Congregation, and you will be united in the manner of making up one body [...]. Always be on your guard, she insisted, against innovation and singularity which would be sources of disorder and an obstacle to religious virtue. Uniformity with the Mother House in all things is like a seal which guards the spirit of the Congregation"...*<sup>238</sup>

Some time before this, also Luigi di Canossa, in his letter to Vittoria Paganini on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 1889, already quoted, recommended the Provincial Superior to be vigilant so that the *'behaviour of each single sister'* might be regulated *'by the General Superior, so that the Congregation [might have] one single direction'*.

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<sup>237</sup> Bollezzoli to the Sisters in Egypt, 15<sup>th</sup> of May, 1891. In APMR, VI/B/1/5-1497.

<sup>238</sup> Idem, 14<sup>th</sup> of April, 1891. In APMR, VI/B/1/4b-1496.

### **But which criterion for that ‘direction’?**

Among the accusations which Giuseppe Sembianti had made against Francesco Sogaro, at the height of the controversy, was one, not totally unfounded,<sup>239</sup> that the Apostolic Vicar was seeking, in some way, to get rid of the the Sisters’ Congregation.

Once the dispute had been settled with everyone in peace, at least for the time being, Monsignor Sogaro had arranged for the Superior in Cairo to be invited to Verona, in the Spring of 1890, so that she could participate in the work of writing the new Rules to be presented to *Propaganda Fide*.

Now, according to what two Sisters said to the Apostolic Visitor during the canonical visit to the Combonian communities in Egypt in January 1890, the Apostolic Vicar considered that it was time to substitute Mother Maria Bollezzoli with Sr. Vittoria Paganini. The reason, according to Giuseppa Scandola and Maria Caprini, was obvious: coming from Africa and with experience in Sudan, where the missionary work had been started by Daniel Comboni himself, and also in Egypt, Sr. Vittoria was the person most suitable to govern the Congregation in its second chapter of history, because she was capable of giving to all the sisters a **single direction**, but one which was oriented not so much to the customs of the Mother House in Verona, but rather towards the Mission and its needs.<sup>240</sup>

One can imagine that Maria Bollezzoli would have been more than happy to pass the rudder of the little boat to hands more expert than her own in the missionary field. Sister Death however, had disposed differently...

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<sup>239</sup> Monsignor Sogaro wrote in an undated letter, which can be situated in January 1890, “*It would not be a bad thing to review [the Rule] in such a way as to remove, once and for all, every occasion for displeasure regarding the Sisters. In fact, to simplify things further, I would propose studying the possibility of joining our sisters with the Canossians*” [APF NS, vol. 174(1893-1900)442-443, Prot. N. 318]. See, Sogaro to Sembianti, Rome, 13<sup>th</sup> of March 1890. In ACR, A/39/34/38.

<sup>240</sup> See, E. PEZZI, 1987, pp. 258-259; See, *AMN*, 10(2005)197.

## Death of the Provincial Superior in Egypt

*“Only one day, only that I desire, when Africa will live and I will die. And, flown to the womb of God, with the Africans embrace the palm”...*

(Vittoria Paganini, 1883).

The desire of Sr. Vittoria, to die in Africa and for Africa, was realized, too early her Sisters felt,<sup>241</sup> on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July 1891.

From the letters which Monsignor Sogaro used to send regularly from Cairo to Verona, one can see how, unfortunately, the condition of the patient, after the two operations she had undergone, continued to deteriorate in that first half of 1891. Maintained on drugs by the doctors until the previous December, Sr. Vittoria resisted, with ups and downs, often with severe pain, but admirable in her patience, until the month of July, when finally, she could rest in peace forever.

Some days later, Maria Bollezzoli wrote to all the Sisters:

*Dearest Daughters in the Lord,*

*What we have feared for some months now has, unfortunately, come about. My dearest daughter and your Superior, Sr. Vittoria, has completed her crown and she has gone to present it to the Divine Spouse, Jesus. It would seem to us that, as it is usually said, the presence and work of our beloved Sister is necessary in view of the needs of our little Congregation, but the Lord found that the time had come to put an end to her sufferings and admit her to enjoy the prize. Let us humbly bow our heads in our sorrow and let us also adore the divine dispositions.*<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Sr. Francesca Dalmasso wrote from Cairo to Costanza Caldara, “*Dearest, pray and make the novices pray a lot for Mother Vittoria. Tomorrow she will be operated... Will it go well? We are in the hands of God. Let Him do whatever is better for us; indeed it would be a great tragedy for us should it be otherwise.*” (Cairo, 20<sup>th</sup> of June 1890. In APMR, VI/C2/7–2813).

<sup>242</sup> Who, more than any other seems to have felt the loss of Mother Vittoria, was, without a doubt, Costanza Caldara. Not only was it she, in Cairo, who used to write poems and letters on the occasion of the feast day of the superior (see, APMR, VI/C2/8/8-1171), but often during her life, she would remember the anniversary of her death. It is very probable that she was the author of the **Necrology** published in *Nigrizia* in the month of September 1891 (pp. 121-129).

*The soul of the deceased was tried and purified for a long time with a martyrdom of suffering borne with great edification, and arriving before the Divine Judge, she will have been found, hopefully, worthy of being introduced to enjoy the sweet embrace of Jesus her Spouse. Nevertheless, you will have celebrated the Mass for her soul [...].*

*I cannot end this letter without warmly inviting you to live in peace and in unity. You know how our dear deceased Sister cherished these things and with what insistence she inculcated them in you. Never forget that it is in peace and tranquillity that virtues are aligned and grow. But your souls will never be tranquil if you are not always humble, bearing with each other, if you are not meek in your words and works, obedient without criticizing those who are above you, and if you do not love each other disinterestedly, in God and for God alone. Only in this way will you enjoy tranquillity in your souls and true peace will reign among you and you will enjoy its sweet fruits. I invite you, dearest daughters, to exercise these things with gratitude towards your deceased Superior, so that you too may present yourselves to the Divine Judge, and that moment will come soon, with a rich handful of merits.*

*As soon as possible, the Superiors will appoint the Sister who will have to substitute the deceased Sr. Vittoria in the office which she held. In the meantime, be docile and submit fully to your respective superiors and you will have the blessing of the Lord” ... <sup>243</sup>*

### **The liberation of two of the Sisters who were prisoners**

With the death of Vittoria Paganini, the missionaries which the Congregation of the Comboni Sisters had lost in Egypt now counted three. Two years earlier, Angela Rizzardi had died of tuberculosis and in 1885, the very young Leopolda Sandona died suddenly. Now, in the same way that Sr. Leopolda had offered her life for the liberation of the missionaries who were prisoners in the Sudan and, two months later Maria Caprini and Fortunata Quasce were freed, we can note a certain similarity here in the case of Sr. Vittoria.

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<sup>243</sup> Bollezzoli to the *Pie Madri* in Egypt, 24<sup>th</sup> of July 1891. In APMR, VI/B/1/7-1499.

Precisely about the days in which she was dying, Monsignor Sogaro would write later, “*I was able to send an Arab from the tribe of the Ababde secretly. He had already visited our prisoners. He went with such a well organized plan which instilled a great hope in us that it might be blessed by the Lord with a happy outcome*” ... <sup>244</sup>

That plan had really been devised so well that, on the evening of the following 29<sup>th</sup> of November, Giuseppe Ohrwalder, Caterina Chincarini and Elisabetta Venturini were able to leave Omdurman helped by the dark cloudy night and also, we might say, by the curfew imposed by the Caliph Abdullahi, successor of the Mahdi, after the popular uprising which had taken place on the previous 24<sup>th</sup> of November.

Finally freed, after more than nine years of imprisonment, they reached Cairo on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1891.

A very emotional Apostolic Vicar communicated, “*This morning, Reverend Fr. Ohrwalder, Sr. Caterina Chincarini and Sr. Elisabetta Venturini arrived*” ... <sup>245</sup>

Maria Bollezzoli immediately wrote to Caterina and Elisabetta, “*I rejoice with you for the very special grace granted to you by the Lord. [...] It is a great grace! Thank God with all your hearts; the God who kept you alive and brought you out of slavery*” ... <sup>246</sup>

Unfortunately, the short letter of Monsignor Sogaro, written on December 21<sup>st</sup>, also informed that for the other two prisoners, there was no more hope of liberation. Concetta Corsi had, in fact, died of typhoid on the previous 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, just two months before her liberation. <sup>247</sup>

Teresa Grigolini instead was now “*married to a certain Demetri Cocoremba,*” we can read in the letter of Monsignor Sogaro quoted above,

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<sup>244</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni, Cairo, 7<sup>th</sup> of August 1891. In APSC Afr. C. vol.10(1891)837-838.

<sup>245</sup> Sogaro to Simeoni, Cairo, 21<sup>st</sup> of December, 1891. AP SC Afr. C., vol.10(1891)891-892. See, AMN 11(2006) dedicated to Caterina Chincarini and Elisabetta Venturini.

<sup>246</sup> APMR, VI/B/3/1–544: 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1891.

<sup>247</sup> See, AMN, 10(2005)105.

and she would have to wait until the end of the Mahdia (1898) to be able to leave Omdurman.

The Apostolic Vicar immediately anticipated, however, *“There are very serious reasons why her conduct is not to be condemned. She is much more a victim worthy of compassion, in that her behaviour was always innocent and exemplary.”*

Therefore, on the following 16<sup>th</sup> of January, Monsignor Sogaro addressed himself to *Propaganda Fide*: *“Coming now to the contents of the letter, and that is, to the marriages contracted by the ex Superior of the Sisters and by Brother Giuseppe Regnotto\*, who had also married a catholic girl, Mariam, I have to add that neither one nor the other were under the obligation of vows. The first because the Sisters made vows for three years and these expired in 1882 when they were taken prisoner, after which they did not renew their vows. The other had only taken an oath and the time limit of this oath had also passed.”*<sup>248</sup>

### **1892: Election of the second Provincial Superior in Egypt**

*“In obeying, keep your eye not on the person who governs you, but on the authority with which that person is vested; an authority which is given to her by God.”*

(Maria Bollezzoli)

After the death of Vittoria Paganini on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July 1891, Giuseppa Scandola had been asked to substitute her temporarily until the election for the new provincial superior. In the meantime, in Verona, the General Superior exhorted the Sisters to proceed in the way of virtue, cultivating particularly the spirit of faith.

She wrote to them on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 1892, *“It had been my intention to write to you last January to wish you a Happy New Year full of*

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<sup>248</sup> Sogaro to Persico, Cairo, 16<sup>th</sup> of January 1892. In APSC Afr. C., vol. 10(1892)900-901.

*merits for heaven. But the Lord prevented me from doing so through an illness from which I have now recovered, even if not completely.* <sup>249</sup> *Nevertheless, I don't want to delay any further in writing to you, and while I thank the Lord for having kept you all well until now, I encourage you to use well the time that is still left to you [...].*

*Have great esteem for the spiritual aspects of the Rules and practice them in the way that the Saints did, with great faith and pure conscience, recollected and in union with God [...].*

*Be lovers of obedience. Don't fall under the weight that your own will feels in bending itself to that of the Superior [...]. In obeying, keep your eye not on the person who governs you, but on the authority with which that person is vested; an authority which is given to her by God. In keeping to this norm, you will obey easily and happily”...<sup>250</sup>*

Less than one month later, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March 1892<sup>251</sup>, according to the *Register of Personnel* (p. 4), the Provincial Chapter which took place in Cairo confirmed Giuseppa Scandola in the service of Superior. It was a choice which was unanimous at the beginning, but which revealed itself, as time went on, difficult and painful, not least for the person chosen.

The following year, the General Superior exhorted the superiors in Egypt, “*Sustain and support the Mother Provincial and do this especially in critical circumstances or when a subject displays difficult behaviour at home and is cause of discord. Then, if it so happens that either for the good of the individual, or for the good of the Congregation, some extraordinary measures need to be taken, consult among yourselves, write me a letter signed by all five of you stating the case and which measures you feel would be necessary in order to obtain a change in the person, restore order and*

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<sup>249</sup> In the *cronaca* (diary) one can read, “*The Most Reverend Mother General has been seriously ill for some days now, so much so that we have feared for her life [...]. Today she is starting to get better through a special grace from the Holy Countenance to whom she promised to embroider an image if she would get well*” (6<sup>th</sup> of January 1892).

<sup>250</sup> Bollezzoli to the Sisters in Egypt, 25<sup>th</sup> of February 1892. In APMR, VI/B/1/8–1501.

<sup>251</sup> This date is confirmed by Sr. Giuseppa herself in the letter written to her nephew Agostino on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 1892: “*In your prayers, remember also this miserable sinner, your Aunt, Sr. Giuseppa who, from the vigil of the feast of St. Joseph, March 18<sup>th</sup> has a great cross to carry.*” [AMN, 3(2002)98].

*re-establish that peace which nurtures the good spirit and heals the wounds of this life” ...<sup>252</sup>*

However, despite all the support that she received from Verona, Sr. Giuseppa did not feel at ease in carrying out this service which, according to her, was a service which was beyond her capabilities and for which she did not feel cut out.

Having asked more than once to be relieved from this service, she was finally substituted in 1896 by Francesca Dalmasso.

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<sup>252</sup> Bollezzoli to the superiors in Egypt, 31<sup>st</sup> of May, 1892. In APMR, VI/B/1/9–1502.

## 9

### **The necessity of making the Institute stable before defining the confines of the Vicariate**

From “*what I have been able to gather from the meetings held by me with the religious and the Sisters of the Veronese Institute in Cairo*, one can read in the report written by Monsignor Guido Corbelli on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1890 about the canonical visit he made and which we have already partially quoted, *it has been clearly demonstrated, like the light at midday that:*

*1 – the Rules of the Religious and the Sisters are not, in fact, suitable for mission territory, and much less so for Central Africa.*

*2- the authority for these Institutes should be totally in the hands of the Apostolic Vicar until such times as they increase and extend.*

*3 – in the future, the superiors will have to be individuals who have lived for some years in the above mentioned mission and who know the spirit and the needs of the mission.*

#### **First obstacle to be overcome: settling the disagreement between the Institute of Verona and the Apostolic Vicar <sup>253</sup>**

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 1891, as we have already seen, the bishop of Verona received from *Propaganda Fide* the communication that “*the Rules for the male Institute for Nigrizia had already been ‘submitted for the examination of the commission responsible for such revision’, while the Rules for the ‘Sisters’ Institute which have also arrived at Propaganda Fide, would not be taken into consideration ‘until after the Rules of the missionaries had been finalized’.*

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<sup>253</sup> To have a clear idea of the cause and development of the dispute which arose between Monsignor Sogaro and those responsible for the Missionary Institute, see AC, XXXIII(1995)2, pp. 72-92: *Ponenza Cardinalizia sull’Istituto Veronese per la Nigrizia*, 22.1.1894.

After this, on the part of *Propaganda Fide*, there was silence for about two years. It seems that what broke that silence was “*The Fathers, Scholastics and Brothers of the Congregation of the Sons of the Sacred Heart resident in Cairo and in the Mother House in Verona*” who wanted to clarify two issues:

a) If the members of the Congregation, at least for the time being, were obliged to recognize as the highest authority the Apostolic Vicar of the Sudan, this could no longer be Monsignor Sogaro (Sogaro also did not want them).

b) If he would remain in his position, the Sons of the Sacred Heart were ready to serve “*under another Apostolic Vicar in any mission on earth*”.

In fact, they were tired of not having at their disposition “*an area of work*” because “*for many years now the mission in Sudan*” if it still remained, was “*almost inactive in Cairo, and so the Congregation could not grow and develop*”...<sup>254</sup>

### **The response of *Propaganda Fide***

Practically in the same post, Cardinal Ledóchowski sent to the Bishop of Verona his reply. It is a very interesting document in which *Propaganda Fide* confirms its intention not to abandon the work begun by Daniel Comboni in the mission of the Sudan. However, conditions were being put in place, as can be revealed by a reading of the text which, amongst other things, says:

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<sup>254</sup> See, *Lettera degli Alunni della Congregazione di Verona* to the Most Eminent Cardinal Prefect, from Cairo, dated the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1893 and printed in *Ponenza Cardinalizia sull’Istituto Veronese per la Nigrizia*, 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 1894. From AC, XXXIII(1995)2, pp. 88-89.

This letter, suggested to Roveggio by Fr. Asperti, (see, ACR, A/41/6/91: 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 1893) had been motivated by the fact that Monsignor Sogaro, in the month of July 1892, had shown himself to be contrary to the approval of the Rules of the Sons of the Sacred Heart, since, according to him, they did not merit recognition (see, Sogaro to Ledóchowski, undated, but registered on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 1892. In AP SC Afr. C., vol.10(1892)954-955.

*“This Sacred Congregation, as your Eminence well knows, has been occupied for some time with the state of the Mission in the Sudan which is now reduced to the minimum with its missionaries driven into Egypt. It is our desire now, if possible, to restore it and let it begin a new life. To this end, Monsignor Sogaro was invited to transfer his residence, as soon as circumstances might allow this, within the limits of his Vicariate. And since this [Vicariate], erected in 1846, was not closed within certain limits, this Sacred Congregation intends to establish with as much precision as possible, the confines of the Mission [...].*

*However, the Vicariate of the Sudan will not be able to produce consoling spiritual fruits, unless this African Seminary, of which your Excellency is the zealous Protector, will provide it with suitable missionaries, and unless the animosity which has arisen between the Superiors of the seminary and the Apostolic Vicar himself, will cease. Your Eminence, in his desire to remove these lamentable disagreements, made an urgent request to this Sacred Congregation for the approval of the Rules of the Institute considering this step an appropriate way to contain both the superiors of the Seminary and those on the mission within the limits of their respective duties.*

*However, the commission delegated to examine the Rules of new missionary Institutes has seen fit to suspend the examination of the Constitutions of the Institute both because the work was just beginning and the necessary experience is lacking and also because of the dispute between the Fathers directing the Institute and Monsignor Sogaro [...].*

*Your Eminence will easily be aware that the cessation of the disputes between the Apostolic Vicar and the Superiors of the Institute is the necessary condition for the wellbeing of the Mission in the Sudan. Therefore, I ask Your Eminence to please give me some wise advice about the measures that could be taken by this Sacred Congregation in order to reach the agreement desired”...<sup>255</sup>*

After having been consulted in this way, Luigi di Canossa did not hesitate to express his thoughts clearly. Since this unfortunate situation was largely due to the *lack of aptitude* of Francesco Sogaro to *direct that poor mission*, the only solution would be to begin seriously to think about the possibility of his substitution...<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> APF, Africa Sudan, rub. 8, 1893: Prot. P.F. n°. 5113, 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1893.

<sup>256</sup> See, AC, XXXIII(1995)2, pp. 86-88: Canossa to Ledóchowski, Verona, 29<sup>th</sup> of March, 1893.

## The confines of the Vicariate are finally redrawn

During the following months of 1893, *Propaganda Fide* continued to listen to all the interested parties. But it became increasingly clear, however, where the balance of the scales was falling. In the end, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 1893, it was decided that part of the territory, which had been removed from the Vicariate just before Daniel Comboni died (see w. 5398; 6976) so that it could be joined to the territory entrusted to the White Fathers of Cardinal Lavignerie in Uganda,<sup>257</sup> would be returned to the Vicariate of Central Africa.

This resolution, approved by Leone XIII on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 1894, was made public by *Propaganda Fide* with the decree of the following 15<sup>th</sup> of January.

A week later, through the *Ponenza* – Cardinal’s declaration - of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 1894, the bishop of Verona was informed that, having resolved the question of the borders of the mission, *a resolution would now be taken on the form to be given to the Institute in Verona, of which His Eminence di Canossa was the zealous Protector.*<sup>258</sup>

In other words: would the heirs of Daniel Comboni be religious or secular missionaries?

The response, at that point, was so obvious that *La Nigrizia*, in the month of March 1894, communicated already the conclusion of the whole process to its readers, summing up briefly the various stages. Under the title, ***Grace upon Grace***, we find written:

*“Whoever has followed the unfortunate affairs of the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Africa in the last twelve years, must certainly have felt a painful sadness in seeing that Mission which used to extend as far as Cordofan, reduced now only within the area of Egyptian dominion [...]. Providence took advantage of this state of affairs, caused by the Mahdist revolution in the Sudan, to strengthen even further the personnel of the mission. Monsignor Sogaro, in October 1885, changed the form of the Institute of the African Missions in Verona to the religious Congregation of the Sons of the Sacred Heart of Jesus [...].*

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<sup>257</sup> See, Sogaro to Simeoni, Cairo, 1<sup>st</sup> of June 1886. In AP SC Afr. C., vol. 10(1886)31-31.

<sup>258</sup> See, AC, XXXIII(1995)2, p. 92.

*While this small plant was growing, various disputes arose regarding the borders of the Mission of Central Africa [...].*

*The year 1893 was spent by the Sons of the Sacred Heart and all the members of the Mission in prayer and hope. 1894 arrived [...]. Then on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February, the Religious Sons of the Sacred Heart began a very fervent month of Saint Joseph, determined to get the graces they desired from the saint. And they obtained them completely! [...]. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, precisely on the vigil of the feast of Saint Joseph, the news arrived that the Holy Father had signed the decree of Propaganda Fide approving the transformation of the Veronese Institute of the Missions of Central Africa to the Congregation of the Sons of the Sacred Heart, and approving quod substantiam its Rules”... (pp. 33-34).*

### **Resignation of Francesco Sogaro**

The process, however, had not yet come to an end. Decision was reached about the dispute which had already gone on for too long, only at the plenary meeting of *Propaganda Fide* on the 28<sup>th</sup> of May 1894. It was known then that the Vicariate of the Sudan would be entrusted to the *Sons of the Sacred Heart*, while Francesco Sogaro would have to withdraw in order to allow them full freedom in organizing the new bishopric which, for the time being was based in Aswan.

Francesco Sogaro, who was also in Rome at the time and was informed about how things stood, understood that, at this point, it was better to adapt and collaborate. In fact, on the following 14<sup>th</sup> of June, he addressed to the Cardinal Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, the following declaration:

*“Having been informed by your most Reverend Eminence that this Sacred Congregation intends to make some modifications to the organization of the Vicariate over which I preside, I beg your Eminence to present to His Holiness my intention to renounce my position so as to facilitate the implementation of the changes that you intend to make. At the same time, I ask you to express to him my heartfelt gratitude for the benevolence which he has always demonstrated towards me.”<sup>259</sup>*

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<sup>259</sup> Typewritten copy in ACR, B/225, p. 81.

Needless to say that Verona, especially the male Institute, was fully satisfied with this outcome. A glance at the correspondence between Fr. Roveggio and the two Jesuits, Fr. Asperti and Fr. Mogni\* during this period would suffice to demonstrate this.

No document has come down to us from Maria Bollezzoli. In her letters of 1894 addressed to the Sisters who were in Egypt, this argument is never mentioned, except in a letter of August 6<sup>th</sup> 1894 which she wrote to the Provincial responsible, Sr. Giuseppa Scandola:

*“Dearest Daughter,*

*In these days, the need has arisen to consider certain issues regarding our Institute and I feel it is necessary that the Sisters from Africa also be present.*

*I think it is better that you remain in your position in Cairo, while Sr. Lombardi [Matilde] and Sr. Francesca [Dalmasso], whom I would willingly see again, especially Sr. Francesca after her many years on the mission, should come [...].*

*Therefore, prepare for Sr. Lombardi and Sr. Francesca to leave on the first steamer. Cardinal Canossa also wishes this [...].*

*Let us pray for the well being of our mission and for each single member so that all may be united as one heart.”*<sup>260</sup>

Considering the date of this letter cited above, one can easily understand why Luigi di Canossa, in agreement with the Rector of the male Institute, Giacomo Mogni,<sup>261</sup> preferred Sr. Matilde and Sr. Francesca, rather than the Provincial Superior, to come from Egypt. Sr. Matilde, who had been the Superior of Rodolfo Hospital<sup>262</sup> for the past five years and an avid supporter of Monsignor Sogaro, had already complained to him about his writing “*about our issues, while we were totally unaware of anything. Fears and hopes follow each other and sometimes the first overtake the second*”...<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Bollezzoli to Scandola, 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1894. In APMR, VI/B/1/10–1503.

<sup>261</sup> See Mogni to Roveggio, Verona, 12<sup>th</sup> of October, 1894. In ACR, A/41/19/31.

<sup>262</sup> See *La Nigrizia*, XII(1894)4, pp. 98-103.

<sup>263</sup> Lombardi to Sogaro, Cairo, 18<sup>th</sup> of May 1894. In ACR, A/31/27/1.

The fears of Sr. Matilde, then, had become “*suffering and sadness*” when she had known, from the interested party, that the resignation of the Apostolic Vicar was now a reality; a reality which she, however, found difficult to accept because when she thought about all that had happened, she felt “*her heart sad and exasperated*”.

She assured, “*I have not lost my religious vocation and even less so my vocation for Africa, but in an Institute in which there is always criticism, censuring and snooping, one cannot progress in virtue [...]*”.

Monsignor, Sr Matilde asked at the end of that same letter of the 8<sup>th</sup> of July 1894, *I don't merit or expect that you write to me, but I wish you to do so very very much*” ... <sup>264</sup>

### **A welcoming atmosphere for the new leader**

That Francesco Sogaro might maintain a certain correspondence with the Sisters in Egypt was precisely what the bishop of Verona wanted to avoid<sup>265</sup>. We don't know how the dialogue with the two Superiors went. However, it must have gone quite well if both of them were able to return to their communities some weeks later. Paolina Heke and Elisa Mutinelli left with them for the first time.

Maria Bollezzoli sent with them a circular letter, the tone of which was quite strong, even severe.

*“Dearest Daughters in the Lord,*

*It has been some time since I sent a letter for all of you to read together and I don't wish to delay any further [...]*”.

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<sup>264</sup> Lombardi to Sogaro, Cairo, 8<sup>th</sup> of July 1894. In ACR,A/31/27/2.

<sup>265</sup> See, Canossa to Ledóchowski, Verona, 19<sup>th</sup> of May, 1895. In APF NS, vol. 174(1895)335-336.

*This time, I wish you to be vigilant regarding the vow of obedience, which is generally the one which costs us more, and in which we most often fail [...].*

*Regarding obedience, I feel it my duty to impose something very special. And it is this. If it so happens that there are differences of opinion among the Reverend Fathers of the mission regarding the mission itself, or regarding the new leader, I order all the Superiors and subjects, under obedience, not to take sides and not to get involved, neither through conversations nor in writing or in any other way, and to even avoid listening to anyone who wants to talk about such things [...]. All of you must wait for me to tell you what it is convenient to do, or not to do. Apart from being Religious, you are also missionaries and that means that you must be full of charity towards God and towards your neighbours.*

*Love of God consists in the exact observance of the divine law and of the obligations of our religious life and to achieve this, we need a great capacity for self forgetfulness [...].*

*The missionary must be full of love towards God and neighbour. And your first neighbours are your Sisters [...]. Love one another by speaking well of each other, [...]. Do not gossip about anyone [...].*

*I will stop here for now. I most warmly recommend that you practice what I have told you. I shall keep other things for another time.*

*I leave you now in the peace of the Lord and I wish you well.*

*Your most affectionate Mother in Jesus Christ,  
Sr. Maria Bollezzoli <sup>266</sup>*

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<sup>266</sup> Circular letter, Verona, 19<sup>th</sup> of October 1894. In APMR, VI/B/1/11-1504.

***“We women cannot make things go the way we would like them to”...***

However, two months after having sent the circular letter quoted above, the Mother was forced to intervene again, with another letter reserved for only the Superiors. The new piece of writing carries the date of the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1894 and can probably be understood better if we keep in mind two previous letters from Fr. Mologni, written from the male Institute in Verona to Fr. Roveggio.

In the letter of November 2<sup>nd</sup> one can read, *“The news you give me about the Sisters is regrettable. But I already foresaw this. You will have informed the superior in Verona. If not, inform her so that she can find a remedy, if there is one to be found”...*<sup>267</sup>

Some days later, he insisted, *“If you hear anything new regarding that business between the lay missionaries and the Sisters, do me a favour and keep me informed.”*<sup>268</sup>

Evidently, there must have been some information if on the following 13<sup>th</sup> of December, Maria Bollezzoli felt that she must address herself to her *“Dearest daughters, Mother Giuseppa, Sisters Lombardi, Caprini and Dalmasso”*, saying:

*“Don’t be surprised if after [...] my letter of the 19<sup>th</sup> of October [...], I now remind you, the Superiors, of one of your duties [...].*

*I have heard more than once the complaint that there is no unity among our Sisters in Africa. This is a cause of great suffering for me and I believe I am not wrong if I say that the cause of this disunity is gossiping [...].*

*Your discussions must be animated by charity, and express esteem for everyone, especially the Superiors both near and far [...].*

*All that I have said in this letter about gossiping, about the Sisters and the Superiors, should also be understood about the Fathers and their*

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<sup>267</sup> Mologni to Roveggio, Verona, 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 1894. In ACR, A/41/19/33.

<sup>268</sup> Mologni to Roveggio, 17<sup>th</sup> of November, 1894. In ACR, A/41/19/34.

*superiors. It is always the same vice and there is always the same guilt. Neither Superiors nor subjects must set themselves up as judges of the missionaries and they should also not get involved to agree or disagree with this or that. Seek to do good in the tasks assigned to you and don't take on thoughts or troubles that don't belong to you. But ask God to bless all things through prayer and faithfulness to your duties [...]. Be persuaded that we women cannot make things that depend on the authority of Superiors go the way we would like them to, and only in attending to our duties we will be pleasing to God and to men [...].*

*I hope you will welcome these recommendations of mine which I share with you as your affectionate Mother for your good and the good of the whole Congregation "...<sup>269</sup>*

Today, some of the affirmations made by Maria Bollezzoli in the letter above would probably cause some perplexity. For this reason, it is good to re-read the text keeping in mind another letter written by Mother Bollezzoli the following year and which we shall see in due time. It will carry a date which she herself wanted it to have and which is full of meaning for us: **the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 1895.**

### **Laveno: A second community in Italy**

It seems a little strange that Maria Bollezzoli, in the circular letter cited above, did not mention even minimally, the new community opened in Italy exactly one week beforehand. Fr.Mologni, however, did speak about it with Fr.Roveggio in the month of September 1895, without, however, expressing whether he agreed or not with that initiative.

*"Three Sisters have been asked for a nursery in the area of Milan and it seems they will be sent," he wrote.<sup>270</sup>*

In fact, they did go and in the *Cronaca* ( diary) of the Institute one can find the note: *"12<sup>th</sup> of October, 1894: Sr.Carolina [Milani] and two companions [Margherita Carollo and Angela Demai] left for Laveno to assume the direction of a nursery."*

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<sup>269</sup> Bollezzoli to the Superiors in Egypt, 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1894. In APMR, VI/B/1/12-1505.

<sup>270</sup> Mologni to Roveggio, Verona 15<sup>th</sup> of September 1894. In ACR, A/41/19/25.

That is all there is, even although it is quite a significant piece of news. It would be interesting to know, for example, if that decision had been taken keeping in mind the new version of the Constitutions regarding the aims of the Congregation; or whether the recent disposition of *Propaganda Fide* with regards to the *Sons of the Sacred Heart* and the mission entrusted to them was an indication that something would change, in the very near future, also for the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*.

There was also the fact that, during that year of 1894, those responsible for the Sisters' Congregation had authorized seven new professions, while the group of novices was no less numerous. All of them, evidently, could not remain in the Mother House in Verona.

It is also true that, unfortunately, two of the young people, Bona Dellagiacomina in the Mother House and Maria Felicita Jureska in Cairo, died prematurely. But it was already evident that, for the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, the time had come to take into consideration their own autonomy.

**Antonio M. Roveggio: A Son of the Sacred Heart  
second successor of Daniel Comboni**

*“In 1895, His most Reverend Excellency, Monsignor Antonio Roveggio, a member of the Congregation of the Sons of the Sacred Heart, was elected the Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa and titular bishop of Amastri to occupy the place left vacant by Monsignor Sogaro [...]. That election was a great honour to the young Congregation of the Sons of the Sacred Heart and it filled the whole mission with joy. Mother Maria Bollezzoli also rejoiced with all her daughters”...*

*(Memorie, p. 32).*

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1895 news arrived in the Mother House of the Sisters that in the Roman *Ponenza* – Cardinal's declaration - of the previous 21<sup>st</sup> of January, the new Apostolic Vicar of the Sudan had been nominated. Of the three names suggested by Cardinal di Canossa, Roveggio, Colombaroli and Heymans, the members of the commission had chosen the first in whose presentation one could read, *“Fr. Roveggio, born in Cologne*

*Veneta on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 1858 had studied in the seminary of Vicenza attaining the result 'cum laudabilis successu' Even if he had not attained any academic qualification and he had never taught, he had, however been a missionary in Egypt for seven years, and had lived an 'experientiam bonam.' The candidate spoke French and Arabic and knew also Latin. He had held the office of spiritual director for three years and for four he had been Superior of the Congregation in Africa 'cum satisfacienti successu' ....*<sup>271</sup>

After this choice had been approved by Leone XIII on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January, the minutes of the decree were drawn up on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 1895. Two weeks later, *Propaganda Fide* communicated the news to Luigi di Canossa so that he could make it public. At the same time they informed him that the new Apostolic Vicar had been promoted to become the titular bishop of Amastri (see, *ivi*, pp. 159-160).

Maria Bollezzoli wrote to the newly elected [Vicar] on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 1895, "*Most Reverend Excellency, grateful to the Lord for the nomination of your Excellency as bishop and Apostolic Vicar of the Sudan, after thanking you, I would like to offer you my sincere congratulations.*

*The weight which Divine Providence has desired to place on your shoulders is a heavy one, but the good Lord who has given it to you will also provide you with all the special graces and help that you need in order to carry out your service well. To this end, even though poor, we shall raise our prayer every day so that the Lord might make the zealous actions of your Reverend Eminence for the good of many souls produce many fruits and comforts. This is the sincere wish I make for you in the name of all the community" ...*<sup>272</sup>

*La Nigrizia*, which, since the month of March, had been preparing its readers, informing them about the withdrawal of Monsignor Francesco Sogaro, made known the nomination of Antonio M. Roveggio in the May 1895 issue, starting on page 66.

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<sup>271</sup> See, AC, XXXIX(2001)157.

<sup>272</sup> Type written copy in APMR, VI/B/2/1-516.

## **The new Apostolic Vicar and the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia***

After the decision was taken that the episcopal ordination of the second successor of Daniel Comboni would take place in Verona, Antonio M. Roveggio arrived from Cairo in the first days of April 1895. We can read in the *Cronaca* (diary) of the Sisters April 7<sup>th</sup> – *He came on his first visit*".

From that date onwards, finally the notes of the Sister writing the diary were complete. Therefore, we know that on, *The 9<sup>th</sup> – the above mentioned Apostolic Vicar, the most Reverend Fr. Antonio M. Roveggio gave the vocational examination to three novices: Marietta [Bonetti], Adelinda [Fontana] and Santa [Zumerle] and to the postulant, Pia [Marani].*

The writer informed again that *On the 21<sup>st</sup>, Easter Octave, the most Reverend Monsignor Antonio M. Roveggio is consecrated bishop. The service took place in the cathedral of this city (Verona). The person who consecrated him was His Excellency Reverend Monsignor Bacilieri, assistant bishop of his Eminence, the most Reverend Cardinal Luigi Marchese di Canossa, diocesan bishop of Verona. He was assisted by the bishop of Trento and the bishop of Vicenza.*

What our diarist did not record, instead, was the Combonian hymn which rang out with enthusiasm that Sunday evening in the new house of the men's Institute in San Giovanni in Valle. Published in its entirety in *La Nigrizia* in the month of May (pp. 74-77) the song contained also the following verses:

*“Ancor ricorda l’Adige / le gesta d’un guerriero,  
Benaco il vide nascere / e vanne ancora altiero  
A’Alpi, la Senna, il Rodano / sanno chi fu Daniel.*

*Sul campo di sue glorie / cadde pugnando il forte,  
Ed il suo estremo anelito / fu, O nigrizia o morte;  
Poi sull’altar qual vittima / il capo reclino’*

*Ah dalle stanche ceneri / quel grido ancor risuona,  
Oggi l’udi’ ripetere / Eroe, la tua Verona.  
E sulle lande d’Africa / presto risuonerà’.*

*Che di Daniel lo spirito / nei figli non e’ morto.  
Anzi fra loro un emulo / un generoso e’ sorto,  
Che di quel grande il labaro / ardito impugnerà’!”*

## **In Aswan with the daughters of Comboni**

In 1884, when Antonio Maria Roveggio decided to enter the Veronese Missionary Institute after having completed all his studies at the diocesan seminary of Vicenza, Daniel Comboni had already been dead for three years. This does not mean, however, that he had not known him personally, because whenever the Apostle of Nigrizia was in the area of Verona, he always went to visit the seminary in Vicenza. Therefore [Roveggio] knew the thought of the Founder regarding women.

During his noviciate, he probably never had any contact with the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, but he found himself alongside them both in the Sacred Heart of Mary Institute and in the agricultural colony of Gesira after he was sent to Cairo with the first group of the *Sons of the Sacred Heart* in December 1887.

Therefore one can say, and this is important, that the then Fr. Roveggio knew personally all those who were the missionaries of Comboni and who, from 1887 onwards were in Egypt. Particularly meaningful is the fact that when in 1894 Aswan began to be talked about as the new place of residence of the bishop, Apostolic Vicar of the Sudan, there was no doubt in Fr. Roveggio's mind that together with the Fathers, the Sisters also had to go.

In fact, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1895, the rector of the Mother House of the men's Institute in Verona wrote to him, "*I heard someone mention that you are thinking of taking also the Sisters to Aswan. I don't know if it is true [...]. In order to assure that things run well, and so as to proceed with greater security, discuss the issues there with the consultant Fathers, but if they are really important matters, they are not to be carried out without receiving our agreement here*" ... <sup>273</sup>

Was this perhaps one of the reasons for such frequent visits on the part of the new bishop to the Mother House of the Sisters after his arrival in Verona?

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<sup>273</sup> Mogni to Roveggio, Verona, 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1895. In ACR, A/41/19/41.

The *Cronaca* (diary) records that Monsignor Roveggio was present in *Santa Maria in Organo* on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 1895, and then again on the 26<sup>th</sup> to celebrate the morning Mass with the community. He returned again twice in the month of June after his journey to Austria to meet the authorities, first among them the Emperor Francesco Giuseppe who, until then had ‘protected’ the Austro Hungarian mission in Khartoum. His final visit was on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July to greet the Sisters before returning to Africa.

The sisters community in Aswan became, in fact, a reality on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November of that same year. Those who went as the foundresses of that community were Francesca Dalmasso, who had been Superior in Helouan, Maria Caprini, Fortunata Quasce and Erminia Cavaleri who had professed in September of 1891 and had left for Egypt the following month.

It is interesting to note how, of the four sisters assigned to the new community, three of them came from the Sudan and had known the Founder personally.

Maria Bollezzoli let the bishop know, “*It is with great pleasure that I have learned of the opening of the Sisters house there and I ask the Lord that he guides them in such a way that they might be a consolation to Your Excellency and make themselves rich in merits at the same time*” ... <sup>274</sup>

### **New criteria of suitability established?**

Of all the visits of the new bishop to the Mother house of the Sisters during his time in Verona, the visit on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 1895 stands out as being of particular importance. That day, we can read in the *cronaca* (diary), “*There was an important meeting with His Excellency Monsignor Antonio M. Roveggio for the good running of the Congregation*”.

The diary does not say more than this, but in a letter of Roveggio himself to Maria Bollezzoli, written less than two months later, one reads:

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<sup>274</sup> Bollezzoli to Roveggio, 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1895. Copy in APMR, VI/B/2/3-515.

*“As I write this letter, I am feeling a little displeased and this is the reason. When I was in Verona, one day when we met in the parlour with you, Fr. Sembianti and Sr. Costanza, we agreed together for the good of the Sisters Congregation in Africa, to recall to the Mother House certain subjects who could have difficulty in regular observance and charity and in creating that unity among the Sisters which is so necessary for religious communities. On my return to Egypt, I gathered more precise information about this from the local Superiors and I could confirm that in some communities, and especially in some subjects, obedience and charity not only leave much to be desired but are also almost completely lacking.*

*So, I asked Sr. Giuseppa to write to you so that you could recall, as we agreed, these Sisters to Verona. But Sr. Giuseppa excused herself saying that she had received different orders from the Mother House. [...].*

*You could tell me that the Sisters in Egypt are not under my jurisdiction<sup>275</sup> and I should not get involved in this. This, in fact, would be my own desire. Nevertheless, as the Vicariate has to think about maintaining them, it seems to me that I could require them to live as true religious and not be a scandal to the people of the mission [...].*

*I ask you therefore, Reverend Mother, to take those steps which you deem necessary in order to re-establish regular discipline in those Religious in Africa who would need this. Otherwise, I will have to take other measures”...<sup>276</sup>*

In this specific case, the measures requested were taken immediately by the superiors in Verona, so much so that the following month, Ginevra Tormene, Teresa Fedele and Diomira Vaj returned to the Mother House. However, one could ask, at this point, if the Founder would have acted in this way or if he would not have sought, before arriving at such a decision, to recuperate for the mission, at least one or other of the three who had demonstrated desirable personal qualities for competent and efficacious apostolic work.

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<sup>275</sup> Finding themselves outside of the territory assigned to the Vicariate of Sudan, the communities of the Comboni Sisters in Cairo, in Gesira and Helouan found themselves, in fact, under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Apostolic Vicariate in Egypt, while the community of the *Rodolfo Hospital* found itself in the area assigned to the Apostolic Prefecture of the Egyptian Delta.

<sup>276</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Cairo, 10<sup>th</sup> of August, 1895. In APMR, VI/B/4/2–1743.

Without dwelling here on the particular circumstances of these three *Pie Madri*, who had to leave the mission field in September 1895<sup>277</sup>, there were other cases, such as that of Fortunata Quasce<sup>278</sup>, also provoked by the sometimes questionable zeal of Monsignor Roveggio, which can leave us feeling perplexed. This, all the more so because there was the precedent, very serious and still not fully resolved, of the conflict created in Egypt since 1888, among the *secular missionaries*, or *elders* and the newly founded Congregation of the *Sons of the Sacred Heart*. As we have already seen, there had been then, amongst other things, also the reactions of the Sudanese Christians who were guests in the agricultural colony. These reactions should have been a clear message to the young apostles, who were just as fervent as they were inexperienced.

On the other hand, it would be difficult for Monsignor Antonio M. Roveggio, who was continuously nurtured spiritually by the Jesuits, Asperti and Mologni, to realize the need, in carrying out his service, first as superior and then as bishop, to look at things from a different perspective rather than from only a religious one.

As we have already pointed out, evangelization did not mean that the norms of a noviciate had to be applied to the new Christians who could not bear them. It would not have been desirable, therefore, that the **Plan** of Daniel Comboni for the regeneration of Africa be substituted by the Rules and Constitutions of a religious congregation. The **regeneration of the African peoples** was the goal of the Combonian activity and therefore, it should have been the Rules of the same Religious, who were not the only evangelizers, which should have kept in mind and adapted themselves to the specific goal of that mission.

When Monsignor Corbelli, at the end of his canonical visit, underlined that the time had come to have the Rules and that the superiors of the Combonian Institutes must have missionary experience, one supposes that he also intended, just as the founder had in his own day, that this experience would pass into the Rules. Instead, unfortunately, those who prepared those

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<sup>277</sup> See, numbers 25, 30 and 33 of *AMN*, 21–A/2 (2012) dedicated to the ‘Biographical Anthology’.

<sup>278</sup> See, *AMN*, 9(2005)133 ff.

Rules and supported them, and here we have to include also Maria Bollezzoli herself, were people who had never been to the mission.

### **10<sup>th</sup> of October 1895: a historical day for us**

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of September, our *Cronaca* (diary) reports, “*His Excellency, the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda, Miecislao Ledochowski writes to His Eminence, Cardinal di Canossa of Verona that the Rules of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia will be examined by the special commission for revision next November 1895*”.

On the same day, still in the *Cronaca*, we can read further that: “*The Most Reverend Father Director, Giuseppe Sembianti, gives to each sister a copy of the Rules, newly printed, common to the whole Congregation*”.

The diary does not add anything else, leaving the impression that, it seemed to be still only ‘*the Reverend director, Fr. Sembianti*’ who governed the Sisters’ Congregation. Instead, starting from the day that the text of the new Rules was sent to Rome to receive approval, something must have changed if Maria Bollezzoli, in sending ‘a copy of the Common Rules’ to the Sisters in Egypt, accompanied the text to be considered by the Sisters with the following circular letter:

*Verona, 10.10.1895*

*Dearest Daughters in the Lord,*

*Our small congregation now begins a new way of conducting itself which should have been followed from the beginning, because this is what is desired by its nature as a Religious Institute [...]. I will not enquire here into the reasons why we have proceeded in a different way, but I thank the Lord and invite you to thank Him with me because we can finally proceed in the way desired, as I said, of a religious congregation and of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide.*

*And what is it, you might ask, that Propaganda wants [...]? [It wants us] to have the Constitutions and the Rules which direct the members of the Institute in the practice of the holy vows and help them to acquire religious virtues which regulate the government of the entire Institute in its different parts, so that both Superiors and subjects, wherever they find themselves, form one body, one family with the Superior General at its head. And from*

*her, all receive direction and to her, they are fully subjected and dependant with the exception only of that which the Sacred Canons have reserved for the bishops in whose dioceses or Vicariates the religious find themselves [...].*

*With the exception of those things which are the responsibility of the bishops, everything else depends on the Superior General who governs the Congregation [...] helped by the local superiors and by her Council [...]. In order to live out her service satisfactorily, it is necessary that the Superior General knows her subjects well, both their positive and their negative aspects and not just in general but in the particulars, as if she had them under her eyes and could listen to them with her own ears. So, it will come about that the General Superior will be able to help, even from afar, all the single Religious, by admonishing or encouraging according to need. She will be able to assign offices and change them according to what she thinks will be to the greater glory of God. She will be able to send from Verona those subjects whom, when considering the good of the Congregation, she feels it is appropriate to do so. She will be able to recall subjects from the mission to the Mother House, either to attempt changing their behaviour, or to assign them a more useful position in the Congregation.*

*In reality, we have always had Rules, but incomplete and insufficient for the needs of the Congregation. Now, however, we have a set of printed Rules, circulated better [...] which determines the style of governing, assigning to each office its own parts and which explains the relationships we have with the different Superiors and the way of preserving and giving stability to the Institute regarding morale and resources.*

*Let us receive these Rules as a blessing from the Lord [...]. If some doubts arise for someone regarding the Rules, she may ask an explanation from the Superior who, in case of need, can ask an explanation also from me. [...].*

*The customs are not printed because they can differ from country to country. I wish you every blessing from the Lord and I leave you in His holy peace.*

*Your Most affectionate Mother in the Lord,  
Sr. Maria Bollezzoli”<sup>279</sup>*

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<sup>279</sup> Circular Letter, 10<sup>th</sup> of October, 1895. In APMR, VI/B/1/14–1507.

## **An innovation with many consequences**

No copy of that “*booklet with the rose coloured cover*”, of just 36 pages with 53 articles regarding the “*Common Rules for all the Congregation*” which Sr. Elisea Pezzi<sup>280</sup> talks about in the second volume of her History of the Institute, has come down to us.

The booklet, that is, which was sent to all the Sisters, including those in Egypt, so that they could appreciate it. However, we do have a copy of the text which we can assume was that sent to Rome to be examined. Practically, it was the same as the one sent by Luigi di Canossa in 1891 enriched now, however, with some initial “historical notes” which change the date (omitted) to 1894.

The first two paragraphs of those notes are interesting and worthy of note as they were obviously dictated by who was there at the beginning, and did not want to lose the memory of all that had come about at the time of the foundation. Therefore, in them we can read:

*“The Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia, placed under the protection of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, had its beginnings in Verona in 1872 through the work of His Excellency, Monsignor Bishop Luigi di Canossa and of His Excellency, the sorely missed Bishop Daniel Comboni, Apostolic Pro Vicar of Central Africa.*

*This foundation aimed at procuring religious Missionary Sisters for the African women of the Mission entrusted to Monsignor Comboni, and this is where its name, Pie Madri della Nigrizia, comes from” ...<sup>281</sup>*

However, the formula proposed for ‘*the aim of this Institute*’ in the new *Constitutions and Rules of the religious Pie Madri della Nigrizia* was different. In fact, in articles 1 and 2, we read:

- 1. The Religious of this Institute have chosen for their patron the Immaculate Virgin Mary and, inspired by the sentiments of compassion and tenderness of her heart for every unfortunate situation, take the name of Pie Madri della Nigrizia.*

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<sup>280</sup> E. PEZZI, 1987, p. 347.

<sup>281</sup> APMR, VI/A/6/8–3005.

2. *[...] they intend, as the aim of their Institute, to dedicate themselves [...] not only to their own well being and perfection, but also the health and well being of their neighbours, especially in the Missions in Africa particularly of Egyptian Sudan, through the Christian education of women, assistance to the sick and other works suitable to their profession."*

Now, since that text had already been printed in the month of March 1895, one can understand why, already foreseeing the reactions, there was an attempt, in a certain sense, to prepare for this. Our *Cronaca* (diary) in fact, which usually gives only very little information, unexpectedly dwells, in the following month of April, on commenting the visit of Monsignor Roveggio and the Reverend Father Luigi Albuzzi from Milan on the afternoon of the 22<sup>nd</sup> at 4 pm.

This latter, at a certain point addressed the community with a *'fervent speech'*, during which, among other things, *"he even said that in whatever place obedience takes us to, in Africa or in Europe, we will all have the same merit and recompense as missionaries because we work for the same aim of benefiting souls."*

In those circumstances, the community of Laveno had already been opened and, like Sestri Levante in its time, would contribute only indirectly to the specific aim of the Congregation. As could be seen just a short time later, it would not be only the communities opened in Europe that would cause problems to arise, but also those wanted in Egypt by Monsignor Sogaro to employ all the personnel who, because of the Mahdist revolution, had had to leave the Sudan.



## 10.

### **Administrative Separation**

*“Even although not many days have passed since I had the honour of writing to you, nevertheless, on receiving now from Fr.Carcereri a copy of the agreement between myself and the Reverend Mother General of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition [...], I cannot but express to your Eminence my sincere satisfaction, and assure you, at the same time, that I will always take very special care not only to meet the needs of these excellent African daughters of St.Joseph and to continue to cultivate in them the spirit of their vocation and direct them wisely towards the spiritual benefits of this vast and laborious mission. In addition, I will also make sure that they never lack for anything that each and all might need [...] even if it might be necessary to double the amount already established by the agreement. These good Sisters put their lives on the line in the same way that we do, and they consecrate themselves entirely for the glory of God and for the wellbeing of unhappy Nigrizia. Therefore, they have the right to all the help possible in terms of fatherly care. With the help of the Lord, this will never be lacking on my part” ...*

(Daniel Comboni, 14<sup>th</sup> of September 1874)

#### **A delicate and painful process of growth**

After the historical letter of Maria Bollezzoli on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 1895, a proof that our still ‘*small Congregation*’ was finally entering a new chapter of its history, is the frequency and the tone of the letters which this same Superior General, now effectively in service, wrote from this date onwards.

In the first, for example, of the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 1895, Mother Bollezzoli addressed the communities of Gesira and Helouan, asking them to accept in a spirit of faith, the change of their respective local superiors, Francesca Dalmasso and Maria Caprini, who were assigned to the new community of Aswan.

She reminded them, *“It has pleased the Lord for the mission to extend its territory and for the Sisters to have a new house in Aswan [...]. In these circumstances, the sower of darnel, our enemy, could insinuate himself to our damage. Therefore, I have thought it wise to warn you with this letter of mine against his snares.”*<sup>282</sup>

In the following letter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1895, regarding the *Rodolfo Hospital*, the General Superior gave proof once more of her sensitivity and prudence, by asking the observations and advice of Monsignor Roveggio, even although this activity did not fall under his jurisdiction, before signing the agreement about the presence and work of the Sisters in that Institution.

On the other hand, as the Apostolic Vicar of the Sudan was now one of the *Sons of the Sacred Heart*, it was important that the successor of Daniel Comboni continue to maintain the same sentiments of the founder towards the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, allowing the growth of this women’s branch, without considering it detached from the original trunk. This, all the more so, because the precedent had been created for the future Constitutions and Rules for the Sisters which, one could already notice, were deviating from the original aim.

Antonio M. Roveggio, in fact, had not yet been ordained bishop when Fr. Mogni wrote to him, *“I think it would be good that while you are in Rome you should speak with the Cardinal Prefect also about the Sisters. I think you already know that they are now printing their Rules. In those Rules, there is one which would establish a dowry for every postulant who enters, but then there is another which says it is left up to the decision of the Superior about the dowry. The fact is, that almost all are accepted without the dowry and this is why there are so many vocations and I don’t know how*

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<sup>282</sup> Copy in APMR, VI/B/1/15-1508.

*capable they are of meeting the needs of the mission. Then, they are a burden on the same mission for their maintenance.*"<sup>283</sup>

During the following months of October and November, Fr. Mogni returned twice to this same topic, writing to Monsignor Roveggio, "Now I would like to say something else to your Excellency which, in reality, would not be my business, and it regards the Sisters. I have obtained a copy of their Rules, and in the first which establishes the aim of that Congregation, I find things, to tell you the truth, which I would never have thought to find. For example, it states that the aim of this Congregation is the missions in Africa and then only it is written that this is especially in Central Africa. It adds that orphanages, even in Europe, can be accepted. If this is the case, I don't know if we can use the offerings given for this mission in particular to maintain an Institute which has a different aim, or which is not fully for that mission [...]. I am telling you this [...] because, now that the business of the secular missionaries [ of Comboni] has been concluded, it would be really good if this could also finish" ...<sup>284</sup>

### **After such a premise, one could expect what happened next**

We don't know exactly the tone of the replies given by Monsignor Roveggio to these questions raised. We know only that on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 1895, Fr. Mogni seems to have become more cautious, even though he had still not given up.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 1895, he wrote, "Regarding the separation of the administration of the Sisters, as I have said in other letters of mine, I approve entirely your point of view, [that is], that the issue is **premature**. It can be done, but in due time. Nevertheless, it is good to insist [...] that noone be accepted without at least part of the dowry. It seems to me that this needs to be sustained because by doing so, as well as by stopping an

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<sup>283</sup> Mogni to Roveggio, Verona, 26<sup>th</sup> of March 1895. In ACR, A/41/19/54. The two Rules mentioned above by Fr. Mogni, were, in fact, included in the Rules approved in 1897 (See, Ch.VI, 5).

<sup>284</sup> Mogni to Roveggio, Verona, 21<sup>st</sup> of October 1895. In ACR, A/41/19/80. See, Mogni to Roveggio, Verona, 16<sup>th</sup> of November 1895. In ACR, A/41/19/82.

*overwhelming increase in numbers, gradually they will be able to put aside an amount of money in such a way that in the future they will manage by themselves”...<sup>285</sup>*

We don't know whether Maria Bollezzoli knew about the tone of this correspondence and how, on the part of the men, there was an attempt to slow down the influx of young aspirants towards the Sisters' Congregation, precisely when, it could already be seen, the Mahdia was about to come to an end and the doors of the Sudan would finally be reopened. In February 1896, however, she felt it appropriate to send the following letter to the new bishop, telling him:

*“I feel it is my duty to inform your Reverend Excellency how the Lord visited us also this year calling to Him our dearest Sister Carlotta<sup>286</sup> [...] She had such a good character, was wise and capable and could have been a great help in the congregation. She would have been sent to Cairo last Autumn had the three consultant doctors, among them a distinguished professor, not advised against this [...].*

*I heard that in Helouan they would have needed help [...]. It seems that someone would be needed also for the hospital so that one or other of those who are there at present could be changed. I would be grateful if your Excellency would tell me something about this” ...<sup>287</sup>*

The bishop replied on the following 3<sup>rd</sup> of March, “*Regarding what you ask me, about increasing the number of Sisters in Helouan and in the hospital, as I am planning to go to Cairo in the next few days, I think it is better for me to wait before giving an answer about this” ...<sup>288</sup>*

## **Meantime in Rome, work continues on the Rules**

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<sup>285</sup> Mologni to Roveggio, Verona, 6<sup>th</sup> of December 1895. In ACR, A/41/19/86.

<sup>286</sup> During 1896, unfortunately, as many as five Pie Madri died. Apart from Carlotta Vecchietti, Bartolomea Benamati, Maria Caprini, Beatrice Kutscha and Dorotea Felicetti also died.

<sup>287</sup> Bollezzoli to Roveggio, 15<sup>th</sup> of February 1896. Copy in APMR, VI/B/2/4–517.

<sup>288</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1896. In APMR, VI/B/4/4–1745.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 1896, Cardinal Ledóchowski informed Luigi di Canossa that the commission in charge of reviewing the Rules of the Institute of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, needed, *in order to conclude its work*, documents which would confirm the state of “**personnel, discipline and economy of the Institute**”.

The Cardinal assured, “*As soon as your Eminence will make them available to me, I will send them immediately to the commission.*”<sup>289</sup>

Now, from what we can see from a draft conserved in our archives, it was Mother Bollezzoli who was entrusted with the task of preparing this document requested. Written with disarming sincerity, one can read in it:

### ***State of the Personnel of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia***

*This little Congregation, set up through the care of our sorely missed Monsignor Daniel Comboni in 1872, has not developed much due, first of all, to the numerous deaths in Central Africa and later to the Mahdist, or Dervish, rebellion in the Sudan, which suggested to us to slow down in our acceptance of postulants.*

*Despite these facts, today, this Congregation, numbers 65 people divided among Professed, Novices and Postulants and they are distributed as follows:*

#### ***In Italy***

- a) *In Verona, where there is the Mother House and the Noviciate, there are 30.*
- b) *In Laveno, in the diocese of Milan, there are 4 Sisters and they they direct a fee paying nursery school.*

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<sup>289</sup> Ledóchowski to Canossa, 11<sup>th</sup> of March 1896. Copy in APMR, II/1/1a/2-5180.

*In Egypt they are 31 with 5 houses or residences.*

- a) In Cairo, five Sisters run a home for elderly African women.*
- b) Near Cairo, in a place called Abbadia, there are 6 Sisters who direct the Austro Hungarian Hospital.*
- c) In the agricultural colony, also nearby, there are 10 Sisters.*
- d) A Helouan les Bains, not far from Cairo, there is a school where there are 7 sisters.*
- e) In Aswan, Nubia, there are another 4 Sisters in a school.*

#### **State of Discipline in the above mentioned Congregation**

*Regarding this point which is so important, I can verify that the instruction imparted in the Mother House has been more than satisfactory in the past, and even better now, since it has been perfected. I remember the expressions of praise which the deceased Monsignor Comboni often used about these same Sisters who were already on the mission field. After he died, and when the terrible events of the dervish rebellion began, we have to regret some defections, not through lack of wisdom, but rather, due to the inhuman frightening experiences to which they were subjected, to the point of being unable to reason objectively.*

*After all of them withdrew to Egypt, they conserved that good spirit and remained faithful to their religious observances giving proof of abnegation and spirit of sacrifice in the different tasks in which they were engaged.*

*There was, in reality, a moment in which one could have desired in some of those who were in Egypt, a greater attachment to their superiors in Verona; that is, at the time when the Apostolic Vicar, Monsignor Sogaro, was changed. But then everything settled again and now there is harmony and unity among them. Their commitment, as you know, in observing the Rules, which they received, printed, a few months ago, is laudable and they desire them to be approved.*

#### **Economic situation of the above mentioned Sisters**

*From the moment that our dearly missed Monsignor Comboni was entrusted the mission of Central Africa, he arranged for two houses to be bought in Verona with offerings given from various sources for the mission; one for the missionaries and one for the sisters. The Pie Madri della Nigrizia still live in the same house.*

*From the beginning of the Congregation until now, from the few dowries brought by the personnel and with the humble gifts received, we have been able to scrape together 45 thousand lire. This sum which now gives us a profit of 4% constitutes the entire patrimony of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia.*

*The Mother House was always, and still is, maintained with funds from the mission and it costs, on average, between twelve and fourteen thousand lire each year.*

*I take this opportunity to propose to the Commission in charge of reviewing the Rules of this Institute, some modifications to the same”... <sup>290</sup>*

[**Note:** The modifications suggested do not appear in the Rules which were subsequently approved].

**August 1896: Proposal from Cairo of a  
'completely separate administration'**

Fr. Angelo Colombaroli\*, when he returned to Cairo in the month of April 1896 as the general procurator of the mission, knew perfectly well the thought of the Jesuit, Fr. Mologni, regarding the future administration of the Sisters' Congregation. A three month stay in the Mother House in Verona, therefore, had been more than sufficient for him to understand how to take up this topic with Bishop Roveggio himself, who would be 'coming to Cairo' to meet him on his arrival.

From what we can see happening after this, it can be established that Fr. Colombaroli could be the person to take up this topic with Maria Bollezzoli, especially as he would be appointed Superior, starting from the community of *Rodolfo* Hospital, of the Sisters in Egypt. And, as we know, the argument of the day regarding that community, was precisely administrative by nature.

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<sup>290</sup> APMR, II/3/3a/1–5271.

Therefore, Fr. Colombaroli thought it would be good to let Maria Bollezzoli know that, in case he became “*Superior of these Sisters, he would, in conscience, require that they manage by themselves and that they have a completely separate administration from the missionaries, because it did not seem to him convenient to continue with the same state of affairs, which, leaving aside any judgement about its being for the greater glory of God, nevertheless [was] contrary to the spirit of the Constitutions and Rules of the Congregation. I ask you to ponder this feeling of mine, the future superior of the Sisters added, and if you share it, I will happily accept the responsibility in question. But in that case, I ask you to inform immediately the relevant authority so that a cheque may be released for you for the houses here in Egypt which serve the mission of Central Africa.*

Maria Bollezzoli asked Monsignor Roveggio, for whom she copied this passage of the letter quoted above, “*Now what do I have to reply? Please be good enough, Reverend Monsignor [...] to tell me something about this*” ...<sup>291</sup>

Without losing any time, the bishop answered from Aswan: “*It was always my deep desire that both our Congregations would walk, as soon as possible, on the way marked out by our own Constitutions and Rules. One very important point of these, without a doubt, is the Administration. Until now, I felt the time had not yet come [...], but since I see that others are also engaging with this matter seriously, I am happy for this separation come about. However, if we do this, it needs to be complete [...]. Therefore, I ask for time to be able to reflect on this calmly*” ...<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Bollezzoli to Roveggio, 6<sup>th</sup> of August, 1896. Copy in APMR, VI/B/2/6–504.

<sup>292</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, 18<sup>th</sup> of August, 1896. In APMR, VI/B/4/9–1750.

## Hard times for the new Provincial

It is very probable that, having received the response of the Apostolic Vicar, Maria Bollezzoli and her council decided that the moment had arrived to accept the request of Giuseppa Scandola and to indicate a new provincial superior for the communities in Africa. In fact, four days after having nominated Giuditta Prada as her fourth assistant,<sup>293</sup> the Superior General had a letter written to Francesca Dalmasso.

*“I have to notify you that, in agreement with His Excellency, Reverend Monsignor Antonio M. Roveggio, I have decided to nominate a new provincial, especially because the present one, Sr. Giuseppa Scandola, has held this responsibility for almost six years and, more than once, she has asked to be relieved.*

*Therefore, yesterday, I met with my counsellors, and after having prayed and considered the matter before God, we then had a secret vote and your name was declared unanimously.*

*Therefore, from the moment you receive this letter of mine, you are the Mother Provincial of all our Sisters who are in Egypt and Aswan, and as such, you have all the authority which comes with this office”...<sup>294</sup>*

It was not an easy task which awaited Francesca Dalmasso. After having arrived in Cairo in the second half of September, she was probably still organizing the transfer of the provincial house to the house in Helouan in accordance with the agreement made previously between Mother Bollezzoli and Monsignor Roveggio<sup>295</sup>, when a letter was being sent from Aswan which needed to be evaluated and weighed up before leaving the Womens’ Institute of *the Sacred Heart of Mary*.

In that letter, in fact, the bishop wrote to the “*Most Reverend Mother Superior*” in Verona, saying:

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<sup>293</sup> The General Council, at that point, was formed by Costanza Caldara, Rosa Zabai, Teresa Marini and Giuditta Prada.

<sup>294</sup> Bollezzoli to Dalmasso, 31<sup>st</sup> of August 1896. In APMR, VI/B/1/17–1510.

The next day, Maria Bollezzoli wrote personally to Sr. Giuseppa Scandola to communicate to her what had been decided. In addition, she got her secretary, Angela Demai, to write a circular letter to all the Sisters in Egypt.

<sup>295</sup> See, Bollezzoli to Roveggio, 28<sup>th</sup> of July 1896. In APMR, VI/B/2/5-518.

*“I am writing to you in order to hear your opinion about this affair.”<sup>296</sup> As our Sisters in the community in Cairo don’t have an occupation in that house which is adapted to the aim of our Institute [...], I thought of removing the religious in that house and distributing them among the other communities [...] and then the house in Cairo could be rented to the good advantage of the mission.*

*Not wanting to do this without hearing first your opinion about it, I would be grateful if you could express it to me at the earliest”...<sup>297</sup>*

### **The position of Mother Francesca**

One could say that, in this case, Maria Bollezzoli was not ‘diplomatic’ enough as she hurried to respond that she, not knowing personally *any of the houses* in which the Sisters in Egypt stayed, had *no difficulty* with what was being proposed. She knew however, that the house in Cairo was the best one and therefore, *‘preferable to the others’* according to Mother Francesca, as the provincial residence. The Superior in Verona, therefore, asked His Reverend Excellency *‘to be good enough to hear’* whether the provincial superior was of the same opinion of proceeding with *this project*, saying that *she felt* that there would be no obstacle.<sup>298</sup>

According to Sr. Francesca, instead, and Fr. Angelo Colombaroli and Costanza Caldara herself agreed with her, that *before implementing this project*, renting the building and sending the Sisters to the other

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<sup>296</sup> That ‘*affair*’, in reality had been suggested to him by Fr. Mogni who, on the previous 15<sup>th</sup> of September, had written to him: “*Coming now to the affair of the Sisters, I thought about it a lot. I spoke with Fr. Geyer, who also thought about it a lot [...]. What seems necessary to Fr. Geyer [...] is that a kind of contract be made between the Apostolic Vicar and the Sisters [...]. In addition, it seems that the greater difficulty regards the house in Verona [...] Fr. Angelo told me when he was here, that by renting the house which the sisters in Cairo live in now, money could be made to maintain the house in Verona”...* (ACR, A/41/20/37).

<sup>297</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 6<sup>th</sup> of October 1896. In APMR, VI/4/10–1751.

<sup>298</sup> See Bollezzoli to Roveggio, 20<sup>th</sup> of October 1896. In APMR, VI/B/2/8-519.

communities, one would have to keep in mind that *having a house in the city would be providential* for various reasons.

For this reason, Maria Bollezzoli wrote once again to Monsignor Roveggio: *“If your Reverend Excellency believes it is useful to rent that house where the Sisters live and are present, I would ask you [...] to buy another property in another area of the same city where they could open a school [...]. This would be really good”*.<sup>299</sup>

In the meantime however, while on one hand there was this thought about the house of the Sisters in Cairo, on the other hand, work had already begun to draw up the **agreement** which would establish the conditions for the administrative separation of the Sisters' Congregation from that of the men. The Apostolic Vicar wrote to the General Superior, *“You will receive the said agreement from the Superior of the Sons of the Sacred Heart, to whom I have posted it. After you have accepted it and signed it, I ask you to send it back to the same Superior who, in turn, will send it on to his Eminence di Canossa, who in turn, as Protector, will send it with his vote to His Eminence the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda for his confirmation”*...<sup>300</sup>

The text in question, handed over to Maria Bollezzoli, already signed by Monsignor Roveggio, read:

***Agreement made between the Mission for Central Africa and the General Superior of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia***

*The Mission for Central Africa and the Superior General of the Congregation of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia have agreed on the following:*

*1. The Superior General will provide the Apostolic Vicar for Central Africa with the Sisters required for the already existing feminine Institutes and for those which will be set up in the future in the mission. They will be provided on the request of the same Apostolic Vicar.*

*2. The mission will supply the Sisters in the Vicariate with a place to live and appropriate furniture and it will also carry out the necessary repairs.*

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<sup>299</sup> Bollezzoli to Roveggio, 7<sup>th</sup> of November, 1896. Copy in APMR, VI/B/2/8–520.

<sup>300</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 16<sup>th</sup> of November 1896. In APMR, VI/B/4/11–1752.

3. *Food, clothes and all the other things necessary for the personal needs of the Sisters will be provided by them. The mission will pass 1.50 francs (1.50 cents) a day, to be paid monthly, for every sister employed in the mission on the request of the Apostolic Vicar. The Superior General is free to keep some additional Sisters in the houses of the Sisters, but these will not have any recompense from the Mission.*

4. *Any recompense which the Sisters receive from the schools belongs to the Mission.*

5. *The expenses for travelling to the mission and for moving from one mission to another are covered by the Mission when this is for Sisters requested by the Apostolic Vicar. Every reduction that the mission might obtain in these journeys, is to the advantage of the Mission and not of the Sisters.*

6. *The Mission is responsible for the upkeep of orphanages, nurserys, etc. The Sisters are responsible for the direction and the administration of these in the name of and at the expense of the Apostolic Vicar and they work under his direction.*

7. *The Superior General assigns to the single stations the Sisters requested by the Apostolic Vicar seeking to satisfy his desires regarding the quality and instruction of the Sisters. The Apostolic Vicar will be able to ask that a Sister be changed or be substituted by another and the Superior General will take the request into consideration. In the event that the Superior General wishes to recall or change a Sister, she will first notify the Apostolic Vicar.*

8. *The Superior General will be able to freely manage the sisters. The Apostolic Vicar does not want to interfere in the governance of the religious communities, except in those cases which, as the local bishop, are his right, according to the Canons.*

9. *The Sisters are obliged, whenever the local Superiors ask them, to do the laundry for the missionaries and the children of the orphanages, to repair and sew new clothes, underwear, etc and to take care of the vestments and linen of the church and the sacristy. For this work, the local Superiors will pass all the necessary items such as material, soap, wood, etc. They will also pay external persons hired to help with this work, but they will not give any money for the personal work of the Sisters.*

10. As the sisters employed in the Austro Hungarian Rodolfo Hospital in Cairo are bound by another agreement made with the Charitable Society of that Pious Institute, they are to be considered excluded from the conditions mentioned above.

*Regarding the Mother House of the Sisters  
– Pie Madri della Nigrizia –  
resident in Verona, it is agreed that:*

1°. *The Mission will provide the Mother House with a cheque for 11,000 lire (eleven thousand) for six years, beginning in the year 1897 (ninety seven) and ending in the year 1902 (nineteen hundred and two). The above mentioned house will have the obligation of maintaining also the four ex Benedictine Sisters, who live in the same convent, in all that they need.*

*During these six years, the Mother House will not be able to ask for anything other than the sum mentioned above which will be payable in two installments in January and July.*

*After six years, if the Mother House is still not able to maintain itself with its own funds, the mission will give it some further help, to be established and agreed upon between the leader of the Mission and the Congregation of the Sons of the Sacred Heart, for another six years.*

*At the end of this second six year period, any help given in any form to this House on the part of the Mission will cease.*

2°. *The Mission leaves as property of the Mother House, the convent in which it is presently installed, with the furniture and the garden as they are now, without any obligation on the part of the Mission to do any repairs or work.*

*Aswan, 16<sup>th</sup> of November 1896.*

*The Superior General*

*For the Mission  
Monsignor Antonio M. Roveggio  
Apostolic Vicar”<sup>301</sup>*

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<sup>301</sup> Copy in APMR, VI/A/4/5–2814.

## **A rather unpleasant surprise**

*“As your Excellency anticipated in your previous letter of the 16<sup>th</sup> of November, the Superior informed the Apostolic Vicar, “I received the agreement from Fr. Mogni [...]. I read it first alone, and then with my counsellors. But both to myself and to them, it came as a great surprise. First of all, as I had been led to believe, I would have hoped to receive first a draft, so that I could also examine it [...]. Instead, I received the agreement already signed by your Excellency with your invitation just to sign it. I had also hoped that I would be permitted to consult with the Mother Provincial Francesca for those parts that regard the Sisters living in Africa [...].*

*For these reasons, I ask your Excellency to pardon me, if before signing this agreement, I wish to decline this responsibility and ask advice of persons in authority and with experience, and, in particular, Reverend Fr. Sembianti [...]<sup>302</sup>.*

*In the meanwhile, I present to your Excellency some observations [...]. Regarding the Mother House, I remember having already made two observations: The first was that the experience of eight years convinces us that the sum necessary to maintain all the Sisters currently living there is a cheque for 12,500 lire – twelve thousand five hundred. The second observation is that I had pointed out that this cheque should be ongoing until such times that the Mother House will have funds to maintain itself.*

*Now, these two observations have not been considered in the agreement, while both of them, and especially the second, are of vital importance and in fact, the life or death of this Congregation depends on them, especially the second. I would have also desired that, given the current shortage of priests and the difficulty of getting offerings for the Mass, the house of the Sons of the Sacred Heart of Jesus would assume the commitment of providing us with daily Mass [...].*

*Regarding the Sisters living in Africa, I would have liked to know if all those who are already there are considered as having been requested by the Apostolic Vicar, given the tone of Article III. And whether, among them, there are sick sisters or some who are chronically weak. In addition, in Article VIII it is stated that the Superior General will be able to freely*

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<sup>302</sup> Fr. Sembianti had been substituted two months previously by Professor, Fr. G. Battista Pighi\*.

*assign all the Sisters. I have to understand if, as was the case in the past, she can temporarily send a Sister from one house to another, recall her to Verona, substitute her for reasons of health, or to give assistance or for other legitimate reasons known to the Superior General? And if the journeys are long, will they be covered by the Mission? And if the General Superior deems it necessary to visit the houses in Africa?*

*Before presenting to your Excellency these and other observations, I would have liked to hear personally the opinion of the Reverend Fr. Sembianti, but the departure of the post makes this impossible.*

*In the meantime, I ask your Excellency to bear with me if, in considering a matter of such importance, I would like to have some clarifications. I trust that your Excellency would wish to arrange things in such a way that will assure the life of my Congregation, especially out of respect for the dear memory of our sorely missed Founder who loved it very much”...<sup>303</sup>*

### **Advised not to sign**

Ten days later, Maria Bollezzoli took up her pen to write once more to Monsignor Roveggio:

*“I am returning once more to the agreement which your Excellency sent to me. As it was my duty before signing, I wished to take advice from people who witnessed the birth of this Istitute for Nigrizia, people who heard from the mouth of our sorely missed Founder himself, Monsignor Daniel Comboni, his intentions in founding it, the promises made and the guarantees given by him to the first Sisters and their families, people who always nurtured a special affection for the entire work. Now, these people have advised me not to sign this agreement, or any other which has the same aims as this one, as they maintain that in signing such an agreement this Institute would be detached from the Mission from which it was born, something, if it happened, that would change the nature of the Institute and would jeopardize the rights already acquired by the Sisters both here and in Africa. In the light of such observations, you must understand, Your Excellency, how perturbed I am. On the one hand, I am sure that your Excellency has no intention of causing even minimal damage to us, but on*

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<sup>303</sup> Bollezzoli to Roveggio, 4<sup>th</sup> of December, 1896. Copy in APMR, VI/B/2/10-505.

*the other hand, the advice of these people in authority, leaves me perplexed and I am persuaded to take the advice they offer. Therefore, I ask you to pardon me, your Excellency, if I find myself obliged not to sign the agreement which you sent to me” ...*<sup>304</sup>

### **The intervention of Luigi di Canossa**

*“Monsignor Comboni always treated the two Institutes, which are two branches of the same plant, in the same way” ...*

(Luigi di Canossa, 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1897)

If there was one person in Verona who could affirm to have ‘witnessed the birth of the Institute for Nigrizia’ and to have heard ‘from the mouth of the sorely missed founder, Monsignor Daniel Comboni his intentions of founding it, the promises made and the guarantees given to the first sisters and their families’, this was, without a doubt, Luigi di Canossa.

Requested by the Cardinal Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*<sup>305</sup>, who in turn had been approached by Monsignor Roveggio so that he might give his opinion about the agreement, the Bishop of Verona felt that it was important, ‘in order to respond adequately, to begin by giving some history’. And he began to remember, putting in writing:

*“I. It was twenty six years ago that the deceased Monsignor Comboni, Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa, founded here in Verona two Institutes for the Mission; one of male Missionaries and one of Sisters whom he called after their aim, ‘Pie Madri della Nigrizia’. He provided each group with a house and both one and the other equally assumed the responsibility of maintaining [these] with money from the Mission and with charitable donations given by the Propagation of the Faith of this Sacred Congregation of Propaganda and by various other societies of the Austrian Empire and the city of Cologne.*

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<sup>304</sup> Bollezzoli to Roveggio, 14<sup>th</sup> of December 1896. Copy in APMR, VI/B/2/11-506.

<sup>305</sup> Ledóchowski to Canossa, 10<sup>th</sup> of February 1897. See, typed copy in APMR, VI/A/17-2815.

*II. Up until the revolution of the Mahdi in the Sudan, these missionaries had already been present in the Sudan, in Kordofan and Darfur as far as Gebel Nuba, where there were important stations. In these places, the Sisters worked alongside the Missionaries. Some of them, both men and women, were taken prisoner by the Mahdi, as your Congregation is aware.*

*III. Both in Verona and in Cairo, Monsignor Comboni built two houses next to each other, one for the Missionaries and the other for the Pie Madri, divided by the Church which was placed in the middle to facilitate both these twin Institutes. All the expenses were undertaken by the mission which always treated in exactly the same way the two Institutes, which are two branches of the same plant.*

*IV. The Superior of the Mission for Central Africa resident in Verona constantly provided for not only the maintenance, travelling and care of the Sisters, but also for the good governance of their house, the acceptance of the postulants, the conduct of the novices and spiritual direction at the Sisters' house.*

*V. When the Reverend Jesuit Fathers were called to direct the house of the Missionaries, they did not want to occupy themselves with the spiritual direction of the Sisters, so this continued to be provided by who, until last Autumn, had previously governed the house of the Mission. But in all this time, nothing new was introduced regarding the maintenance of the Sisters' house. It was always sustained by the Mission in conformity with the way Monsignor Comboni had founded it and with the commitments assumed by Comboni himself towards the Sisters, their families and the benefactors of the mission.*

*VI. It was last year in 1896 that the new Apostolic Vicar, Monsignor Roveggio talked with me about an agreement that he had in mind to make with the Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia. I answered him that, if he wished, he could draft a format and then present it to me, because I wanted to study it and ponder on it seriously, just like the one which, on first seeing it, I found included quite many and quite serious difficulties. This was my only response, after which, I heard nothing more from Monsignor.*

*VII. The winter of this year arrived and I fell ill.*

*Near Christmas time, I heard from my Auxiliary bishop, Monsignor Bacilieri, that Monsignor Roveggio had sent, through Fr. Giacomo Mogni of the Congregation of the Jesuits, Rector of the male Missionaries of Central Africa, to Mother Bollezzoli, not a format or a project to examine and to submit for examination to her Superiors and to me, but the agreement itself in its final form with the authentic original signature of Monsignor Roveggio, to which he insisted almost by surprise, that the Mother Superior should add her own. Had she done so, she would have agreed with her eyes closed, to other people stripping the Sisters' Institute of its rights only by saying 'haec mea sunt'... veteres migrate coloni'. Still from my own Auxiliary bishop, I came to know that the Mother Superior, after having consulted the priest who had been directing the Institute previously, declined to sign the paper presented to her and at the same time wrote respectfully to Monsignor Roveggio the reasons for her refusal. One of the principal reasons was that it seemed to her that if she were to accept the agreement, this would be equivalent to signing for the suppression of the Institute.*

*VIII. This observation seems correct to me. In fact, the sum proposed in the agreement by Monsignor Roveggio reduces itself to the following: assign to the Institute of the Pie Madri 11,000 lire yearly for this six year period; to commit to assigning another indeterminate amount for a second six year period, and after that, to remain free from any commitment.*

*Now, the average number in the Institute of the Pie Madri in these past years was 34 people. The annual sum to be paid proposed by the Reverend Apostolic Vicar for the first six year period, 11, 000 lire – eleven thousand, would amount to 86 cents a day for each Sister. That figure is below the need of a religious house and it obviously excludes the hope of being able to save anything.*

*The dowries of the young aspirants cannot be counted on either because, in these times in which we are living, these are very minimal and in many cases, non existent, especially for this Institute which is destined for the Missions. Therefore, if the project of Monsignor Roveggio were to be accepted, in six years time or less, the Institute of the Pie Madri will have to close due to lack of resources with which to maintain the Sisters, the novices and the aspirants who are already there and all of whom were accepted on the assurance that they would be maintained at the expense of the mission.*

*IX. It was referred to this Sacred Congregation that the Pie Madri della Nigrizia have a reserve fund. It is true. They have approximately 48,000 lire which the Institute with some small dowries and with savings could accumulate over the 26 years of its existence. But part of this fund has already been earmarked with my approval. The Pie Madri are here in Verona in a house which, due to its size and position, is not very healthy, while the male Institute built for itself from the foundations a new house in a good position. Therefore, the Sisters need to provide a house for themselves close to Verona so as to be able to create a place for the Sisters unable to go to the Missions and also where they can send those sisters who need rest and good air from time to time, especially in the Autumn. This is all the more necessary since, in latter years the Sisters used to go in the Autumn to a house in the country owned by the Mission. To tell the truth, they did not go frequently. But now, with the proposed agreement, they have no hope of being able to use that villa in the future. (Last year, they were not given the possibility of using it). On the other hand, I wish they could be provided with a house in a healthier place, where the health of the Sisters can benefit and at the same time, they could do some good in a needy parish of mine. For this reason, the Superior of the Pie Madri is trying to buy a house in the countryside [Fumane] in this diocese of mine, and a good part of the above mentioned fund is reserved for this.*

*X. It was referred to this Congregation that the Pie Madri assume the direction of other works of charity outside Central Africa and does not give but a small number of subjects to the service of the mission. I will tell you how things stand: the Pie Madri have assumed, since three years ago, the direction of one sole nursery school in Lombardy. They took on this commitment so as to engage two Sisters who were considered not healthy enough for the mission, or it is more correct to say who, in the service of the mission ruined their health. To these two, a third one, who changes regularly, is added so that she can learn how to teach. Now, two of these who were added find themselves already on the mission. I would add that these three Sisters are maintained entirely and paid by the work entrusted to them and that, in any case, some months ago, the authorities were informed that the Sisters would be withdrawn next September and they would not be replaced. Regarding their service to the mission, first of all, I would observe that every request made by the Apostolic Vicar for Sisters has always found*

*a response and currently, there are thirty two Sisters, all of them called by the Superiors. I don't think this can be considered a small number when one reflects that it is those Sisters who are suitable that are sent to Africa, while those who are sick or who for other reasons are considered a weight on the mission, are recalled to Verona.*

*Having made these general observations, permit me, your Eminence, to briefly summarize here my proposals:*

*I - It seems to me fair and appropriate that the Institute of the Pie Madri, without any innovation, continue, with regard to the Mission, in the same relationship as when it was founded and in which it found itself from the beginning until now. It is a matter of rights acquired which cannot be disregarded.*

*II - If this does not seem appropriate, then the Mission should guarantee the Institute a sum of money each year, which would be sufficient, in terms of the amount and the duration of years, to assure sufficient means to sustain it and provide as many subjects as possible for the Missions in Central Africa.*

*I cannot close this long letter without bestowing a word of well merited praise on this house of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia which, for the good spirit that reigns in it, its perfect observance and the reciprocal charity among the Sisters, seems to me to correspond fully to its foundation.*

*And with this, I most humbly kiss your hand and joyfully declare myself,*

*of your Reverend Eminence,  
Most humble and devoted Servant  
Luigi Cardinal di Canossa, Bishop<sup>306</sup>*

*Verona, 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1897*

*Verona, 7<sup>th</sup> of March 1897*

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<sup>306</sup> Type written copy in APMR, VI/A/4-1805.

## Agreement suspended, but separate administration

Foreseeing that the response of *Propaganda* would not come very quickly, Fr.Mologni suggested to Monsignor Roveggio, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 1896, that, nonetheless, it would be good to advise *‘the Superior that starting from the new year’* 1897 *‘a completely separate administration’* would begin, and *‘to obtain the money’* necessary for the maintenance of the house, it would be necessary to approach the Apostolic Vicar directly, keeping in mind *‘the sum of the cheque [...] which had been proposed to them in the agreement, that is a yearly sum of eleven thousand lire’*...<sup>307</sup>

Showing himself to have accepted both suggestions, Monsignor Roveggio wrote a first time to Mother Bollezzoli on the 19<sup>th</sup> of December 1896 to tell her:

*“Regarding the complaint that you make to me about not having sent first a format of the agreement to be stipulated between your Congregation and the Mission of Central Africa, I would like to say that this failing should not be attributed to any bad intention, but rather to my lack of experience.*

*[...] In the meanwhile, however, I believe it good in the Lord’s name, that with the beginning of the new year 1897, when you will be in need of money for the upkeep of your community, rather than approach the Reverend Superior of the missionaries house, you will ask the Apostolic Vicar directly”*...<sup>308</sup>

Therefore, approximately six months later, he comunicated clearly, *“Regarding the amount that you ask me, I inform you that the Mission for now, that is, until such times that Rome makes a decision about this dispute, will place at disposition of your community, one thousand lire a month, which includes any ordinary and extraordinary expense. It is not necessary that you send me the receipts”*...<sup>309</sup>

Between the first and the second letter, however, something decisive had taken place, because *Propaganda Fide*, in the month of February 1897, had finally approved the *Constitutions and Rules* of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*.

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<sup>307</sup> Mologni to Roveggio, 10<sup>th</sup> of December 1896. In ACR, A/41/20/50.

<sup>308</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 19<sup>th</sup> of December 1896. In APMR, B/4/12–1753.

<sup>309</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 15<sup>th</sup> of June, 1897. In APMR, B/4/18-2810.



## 11.

### **Approval of the Rules: First General Chapter of the Congregation**

#### **Decree**

*“With the aim of obtaining the conversion and salvation of those in the Missions in Africa, and especially Central Africa, a Congregation of Religious was founded in 1872 through the work of the most Reverend Monsignor Daniel Comboni, titular bishop of Claudiopoli and Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa, under the name of Pie Madri della Nigrizia. Through special rules, they consecrated themselves for their own sanctification and for the purpose mentioned above. That Institute, through the grace of God, prospered for the mission and has now asked this Sacred Congregation for the approval of their Constitutions. This matter was referred to the examination of the commission, which under the leadership of His Eminence Cardinal Gazzella, is in charge of the revision of the Rules of new Istitutes which are dependant on this Congregation. After diligent study, this commission, having carefully considered also the recommendation letters of His Eminence, the bishop of Verona, who testifies to the apostolic zeal of these Sisters, finds that it must approve the purpose and spirit of the above mentioned Institute, grant it the Decree of Merit and, at the same time, approve its Constitutions for five years ad experimentum. However, some modifications have been added and are contained in the appendix. The Holy Father by Divine Providence, Leone XIII, in the Audience held today with the undersigned Archbishop of Larissa, Secretary of this Sacred Congregation, has approved this decision of the commission, and therefore, has ordered this Decree to be issued.*

*Issued in Rome at the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide,  
On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1897.*

*M. Card. Ledóchowski, Prefect.  
A. Arch. Di Larissa, Secretary”*

It is interesting how the decree, which is to be found at the beginning of the text of the Rules, first in Latin and then in Italian, begins by highlighting the aim of the Congregation which *Propaganda Fide* had formulated and registered in Article 1 of Chapter 1. To this, however, was added, “*Hospitals, Orphanages, Kindergartens, and similar works, also in Europe, can be accepted when these have no negative effects on the Mission*”.

There are no writings of Maria Bollezzoli which communicate to the Sisters such an important event. Only the *Cronaca* (diary) of the Institute, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 1897, reports, “*The decree of approval of our Rules is read to us by the Reverend Professor, Fr. Pighi in the absence of the Most Reverend Superior, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti*”.

The same *Cronaca* informs us further that, in the following month of July, “*the reprinting of the rules was terminated and the Reverend Mother*” gave them to the Sisters of the Mother House. In the same month, on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Maria Bollezzoli gave a copy to Luigi di Canossa, the bishop of Verona and Cardinal Protector, to his General Vicar, Monsignor Peloso and in addition, she posted two copies to Monsignor Gaudenzio Bonfigli, the Archbishop of Alexandria in Egypt and to the Reverend Fr. Durel, Apostolic Prefect of the Egyptian Delta. Finally, the *cronaca* also reported that the *Constitutions and Rules* were posted to the Superiors of the communities in Egypt, while the sisters received only an extract of the *Common Rules*.

### **The reactions of the men**

It seems, however, that even before the Sisters, it was the Superior of the Mother House of the male Institute who was informed that Rome had approved also the *Constitutions and Rules* of the Sisters and therefore, also viewed the text.

In fact, Fr. Mologni, not without irony, wrote, “*Yesterday, Cardinal di Canossa sent them to me, together with the decree of approval. I observed them and the corrections are very few. They left everything that I would have desired be at least modified, such as: the aim of the Institute is to dedicate itself to the wellbeing of the souls in the missions of Africa, to be able to open hospitals, schools, orphanages, etc, in Europe; the authority of*

*the Superior to decrease the dowry when the aspirants are poor, etc. I am very disturbed by the first of these, but then reflecting on it, I find no reason to be disturbed, but I find it even more necessary now to establish an annual sum for them so that they can do whatever they like, as long as Sisters for the missions are not lacking. The mission field assigned to their zeal is very vast and even if there were 14,000 of them, like the Jesuits, there would be work for all of them, because the field of their action is, we could say, the whole world. Two areas are mentioned in the Rules: Africa and Europe, and the other three are not excluded. Great things therefore!”...<sup>310</sup>*

Perhaps encouraged by this letter from Fr. Mologni, who certainly never imagined himself to be a prophet, Monsignor Roveggio also took up the pen and addressed the following letter to Maria Bollezzoli:

*“Reverend Mother Superior,*

*It is some time now that I have felt it my duty to write to you [...] about a point which you will perhaps be not too happy about; but the financial accounts of January and February of this year which you sent to me on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of last month made me decide to overcome any sense of repugnance or reluctance [...].*

*So, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November last year, you were sent an agreement to be drawn up between your Congregation and this Mission for Central Africa, in which the Administration of both would be separated [...]. Regarding this agreement, you [...] answered me: “As it is my duty, before signing, I would have liked to consult some people who saw this Institute for Nigrizia come to birth [...]. Now, these people have advised me not to sign this agreement or any other which has the same aim, as they retain that it would be to remove, in a certain sense, this Institute from the mission from which it was born; something that would change the nature of the Institute [...]”.*

*This is from your letter. Now, I ask you to reflect on these words of yours with me, or rather on this advice that you got from the people you consulted about this.*

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<sup>310</sup> Mologni to Roveggio, 2<sup>nd</sup> of March, 1897. In ACR, A/41/20/61.

*All the reasons you advanced for not being able to accept the agreement are reduced to this: That the Institute is for Nigrizia [...] that, therefore, accepting that agreement (or let us say more precisely, that article about the annual amount to be given to the Mother House for an indeterminate period, as you say in your letter quoted above) would be to dismantle the Congregation and change its nature, and therefore, the consequence can be only one, that the Mission should continue to maintain the Institute as it has always done in the past.*

*These are your reasons, and they would be justified and reasonable, if you could demonstrate to me that your Institute has always maintained the same aim for which it was founded by Monsignor Comboni. But I think it will be difficult to do this. Let us take the book of the Constitutions and Rules approved recently by the Holy See. In Chapter 1, number 1, it is written: “The aim of this Congregation is to [...] dedicate itself to the conversion and wellbeing of those souls in the **missions of Africa, especially Central Africa. The Mother House can accept to direct hospitals, orphanages, kindergartens and similar works in Europe**” As you can clearly see, we no longer have here an Institute for Nigrizia, or for the Mission of Central Africa [...] but we have an Institute substantially changed in its nature and aim. The intention of the Founder was that it would be for Nigrizia, that is, for the Mission in Central Africa. Now it is for all of Africa and all of Europe [...].*

*Therefore, I declare frankly that this Institute, with its first Constitutions has substantially changed its aim. First, it was for Nigrizia, that is for Central Africa, and as such, the Mission maintained it. Now, it has to embrace all of Africa and all of Europe. Therefore, it is no longer just that this Vicariate has to think about maintaining the Mother House of said Institute [...]. Therefore, either the Institute has to return to the original aim for which it was founded, and then the mission will continue to maintain it as it did in the past, or, if it desires that new life, which it can have if it likes, then it must, however, maintain itself. The mission of Central Africa will maintain all the Sisters who are now working on the Mission, and all those who, on the request of the Apostolic Vicar, will be sent there later. However, it cannot take care of maintaing the Mother House [...]. Therefore, it is useless that you send me the bills for this house, because this is no longer the responsibiliy of the mission.*

*That established, I inform you in advance, that if it has any debts, it is not up to the mission to pay them off, as they are not made for the mission or with the permission of the mission and have nothing to do with the affairs of the mission” ...<sup>311</sup>*

## **A Thousand Lire**

How Maria Bollezzoli could have felt on receiving such a letter is easy to imagine. Even Fr. Mogni found it, in fact, “*a bit too strong*”<sup>312</sup>, so much so that he remained uncertain for a while about whether to give her the letter or not. In the end he decided [to do so], informing Monsignor Roveggio afterwards.

*“Your letter to the Sisters caused a great stir among them and in those around them,”* he wrote on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May. He added that the letter had not been understood “*in its true sense*” and that he had spoken also with Fr. Pighi, the current Superior of the Sisters and then he concluded:

*“Now, it is better, even temporarily, to mend this issue. It is clear that we cannot abandon [them] by withdrawing assistance without any notice. Therefore, as I presumed it was the will of your Excellency, I told Fr. Pighi to inform the Superior that until a resolution is reached she will continue to receive a cheque of one thousand lire **each month** [...]. Therefore, I ask your Excellency to continue with this payment for the time being” ...<sup>313</sup>*

Once again, the suggestion of Fr. Mogni was accepted in every detail, added into a letter on the following 25<sup>th</sup> of May. Maria Bollezzoli, who on the 31<sup>st</sup> of May 1897, had addressed herself trustingly to the generosity of the Apostolic Vicar because she found herself ‘without even a cent’, received the following reply:

*“I have received your letter of the 31<sup>st</sup> of last month and first of all thank you for your wishes for me on the occasion of my feast day [...].*

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<sup>311</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 5<sup>th</sup> of April, 1897. In APMR, VI/B/4/17–1802.

<sup>312</sup> Mogni to Roveggio, 20<sup>th</sup> of April 1897. In ACR, A/41/20/67.

<sup>313</sup> Mogni to Roveggio, 4<sup>th</sup> of May, 1897. In ACR, A/41/20/69.

*With regards to the amount you ask, I inform you that the Mission for the meantime, that is, until Rome makes a decision about this dispute, will make available for your House one thousand lire per month, including in this any ordinary and extraordinary expense. You don't need to send me the receipts" ...<sup>314</sup>*

### **Convocation of the First general Chapter**

Even if the Constitutions had not prescribed it, the General Superior of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* was in great need, at that point, of convoking the Sisters, especially those in Africa, in order to see what should be done to overcome the critical situation full of unknown elements for the future of this Congregation which was still very young. So, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 1897, after having spoken with Monsignor Roveggio, Maria Bollezzoli wrote to the Provincial Superior in Egypt:

*Reverend in Christ, Mother Francesca Dalmasso*

Cairo

*As the Lord has granted us the grace to have our Rules approved, it is our duty to observe them faithfully, also in those parts which regard government, at least in the measure that the scarce number of members of the Congregation permits. With this aim, I have decided, after having asked for light from the Lord and counsel from the ecclesiastical Superiors, to convoke the General elective Chapter in May 1898 in the Mother House in Verona. It will later be my duty to establish the day on which this Chapter will open. But, once you receive my letter, I ask you to inform all the Sisters of your Province that next May the General Chapter will take place, so all are invited to pray, together or in private, as mentioned in Chapter III § 2, number 1, of the Constitutions, for a good outcome from the Chapter.*

*May the Lord assist us and bless us, now and always" ...<sup>315</sup>*

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<sup>314</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 15<sup>th</sup> of June, 1897. In APMR, VI/B/4/18–2810.

<sup>315</sup> Bollezzoli to Dalmasso, 14<sup>th</sup> of September 1897. In APMR, VI/B/1/20-1513.

## **First Perpetual Vows in the Mother House**

In the meantime, thanks to the approval of the Constitutions and Rules, the *Cronaca* was finally able to report that on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, feast of the Immaculate Conception, “*for the first time final vows were made in the Congregation.*”

*The Reverend Mother General, Maria Bollezzoli and the professed sisters, Costanza Caldara, Rosa Zabai, Giuditta Prada, Teresa Fedele, Anetta Giamella, Angela Tenuti, Angela Demai and Caterina Pezzo made their final vows.*

*All the other professed Sisters renewed their temporary vows as usual. The Mass was celebrated by the Reverend Father Colombaroli.*

*At the second Mass there was the profession of the two novices, Leonardelli Cattina and Erspan Mary. The Reverend professor Fr. Pighi presided. In preparation for the feast there had been a three day retreat with sermons. It was give by Reverend Father Voltolina.”*

The Jesuit, Fr. Voltolina was in Verona substituting Fr. Giacomo Mogni who had died on the previous 4<sup>th</sup> of August. From that moment, unfortunately, the correspondence between Roveggio and Mogni was interrupted. It was the only correspondence of that period which provided a regular and precise source of information.

## **Immediate preparations for the Chapter**

Five months later, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 1898, having examined the situation of personnel in the Congregation, the General Superior of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* addressed to the Cardinal Prefect of *Propaganda Fide* the following ‘appeal’ in view of the forthcoming General Chapter:

*Most Reverend Eminence,*

*The need to organize the different offices of our Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia and the convenience of doing so, in conformity with the Constitutions and Rules approved by this Sacred Congregation ad experimentum for five years, through the Decree of February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1897, encouraged me to convoke the General Chapter next month in May, and I did this after having heard the opinion of the older Sisters, our Eminent Protector, Cardinal di Canossa and of our Apostolic Vicar, Monsignor Antonio Roveggio.*

*However, since our Institute was founded recently, and is already divided into several Houses according to the needs of the mission, I fear that the number of Sisters who have both the aptitude for the various offices and the requisites necessary according to the approved Constitutions, might be very few. Therefore,*

*I appeal*

*Humbly to this Sacred Congregation to dispense, for this time, the General Chapter from keeping to what is required by the Constitutions, regarding the age, years of religious profession, and presence in the mission, of the Sisters to be elected, so that the General Chapter may nominate those most suitable to hold these offices of the Institute.*

*Trusting in grace, I thank you in advance and I kiss your hand and with great respect, I profess myself,*

*of your illustrious and Reverend Eminence*

*Verona 24<sup>th</sup> of February 1898  
Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia*

*Respectful and Devoted Servant,  
Sr. Maria Bollezzoli,  
Superior of the Mother House<sup>316</sup>.*

The reply received from Rome was the following:

*“This Sacred Congregation has decided not to accept the request in the way that you have made it. Instead, we invite you to have the Chapter and nominate [Sisters] to these offices. When this has been done, if there is a need for dispensation from the Sacred Congregation for any Sister, you may present the case, indicating exactly the office, the years of profession, etc of the single Sisters for whom you ask the dispensation” ...<sup>317</sup>*

Therefore, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 1898, the General Superior of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* addressed the following letter to all the communities:

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<sup>316</sup> APF NS, vol. 127(1898)235-237.

<sup>317</sup> Ledóchowski to Bollezzoli, 9<sup>th</sup> of March 1898. APMR, VI/C1/3-2038.

*Dearest Daughters in the Lord,  
Mother Provincial, Superiors and Subjects = Pie madri della Nigrizia = in  
Africa*

*You are already aware that I, after having consulted all the Ecclesiastical Superiors, have decided to hold the General Chapter of our Congregation here in the Mother House of Verona in the coming month of May. Since I gave notice of the Chapter, you have raised prayers to the Lord so that it may be blessed. But if you have been doing this until now, I ask you all the more, now that the opening of the Chapter is approaching, to pray more fervently and insistently so that the Blessed Lord and His Immaculate Mother may shed abundant light not only on those who will be members of the General Chapter, but on all those who even remotely in the domestic and provincial Chapters have to contribute to the good outcome of the General Chapter.*

*After these recommendations, I would like to counsel you to guard against a temptation which the enemy of our true well-being and our souls might attempt to stir up. The temptation with which the devil insinuates himself in these cases is to persuade you and make you hope to be given by the general Chapter some responsibility or particular office, or to be confirmed in the one you already hold.*

*I appeal to you therefore, not to allow yourselves to be caught up in the clutches of the tempter, neither in relation to years of religious life, nor to superiority in age of this sister over that one, and also not regarding natural gifts, abilities, intelligence which you feel she might have. Think [...] that the Saints, and before them, Jesus, the spouse of our souls, have taught us with words, and even more so with examples, to seek the lowest, most humble places, and to love not to be taken into consideration [...]. Let us remember all this and so thwart all attempts and plots of our enemy [...]. Let us abandon ourselves fully to the dispositions of the Lord, confident, even sure, that what He will carry out will be the best for each one of us and for the entire Institute.*

*Let us pray, therefore, with fervour to the Lord, that He may guide us with his light and assist us always to perfect His most holy will in everything we do. I ask of Him his blessing on each of you and I leave you in the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.*

*Your Most Affectionate Mother,  
Sr. Maria Bollezoli <sup>318</sup>*

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<sup>318</sup> APMR, VI/B/1/21–1514.

## The Chapter in action

### Situation of the Congregation at the time of the First General Chapter – 1898

**Italy:** General Superior, Maria Bollezzoli

Mother House and Fumane: Ballerini, Caldara, Demai, Erspan, Fedele, Fontana, Garonzi, Giamella, Giongo, Leonardelli, Marini, Mutinelli, Pezzo, Prada, Salvestro, Tenuti, Tolmer, Vecchietti, Zabai.

In addition to the twenty professed Sisters, there were 11 novices and four postulants.

**Egypt:** Provincial Superior, Francesca Dalmasso

Communities: Cairo, Gesira, Helouan, Rodolfo Hospital, Aswan

Members of the province: Berlanda, Bertram, Bonetti, Bragio, Carli, Carollo, Casella, Cavaleri, Chincarini, Corsi, Dalmasso, De Biasi, Galea, Gandolfi, Hartman, Heke, Kubitschek, Lombardi, Marani, Mascalzoni, Quasce, Scandola, Scudella, Sinner, Tinazzi, Tormene, Suppi, Vaj, Venturi, Zanolli, Zorzi, Zumerle.

**Deceased:** Bertuzzi, Caspi, Colpo, Pesavento, Andreis, Sandona', Santa Corsi, Rizzardi, Antoniazzi, Paganini, C. Corsi, Valle, Dellagiacoma, Jureska, Vecchietti, Benamati, Caprini, Kutscha, Felicetti.

**Left:** Conte, Stampais, Grigolini, Milani.

One can read in the report, *“On the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1898, the General Chapter began, presided by His Excellency, Reverend Monsignor Bartolomeo Bacilieri, auxiliary bishop of His Eminence Cardinal di Canossa, bishop of Verona and chancellor of the Curia, Professor Father Emilio Ferraris and the delegate of the house, Monsignor Giovanni Battista Pighi.*

*In accordance with what was established in the Constitutions, those who participated at the Chapter were the Reverend Mother Maria Bollezzoli, General Superior, the Vicar General, Sr. Costanza Caldara,*

and the other general assistants, Sr. Rosa Zabai, Sr. Teresa Marini, Sr. Giuditta Prada and Mother Francesca Lombardi Provincial and Sr. Matilde Lombardi, delegate.

His Excellency, Reverend Monsignor President, after the proclamation of the Veni Creator and three Hail Marys, read the list of those electing, and having registered their presence, declared the Chapter open. Then came the moment for the election of the secretary. After having distributed and then collected the ballot papers, Sr. Teresa Marini was elected by the majority.

At this point, Monsignor President declared that he felt it opportune that, this time, given the restricted number of those present at the Chapter, the nomination of the two scrutineers could be omitted and this task of verifying the name of the single sisters elected would fall to the delegate and this system would be effective for all elections made during the present Chapter.

After this, the Bishop announced that the election of the Reverend Superior General would take place on Friday the 10<sup>th</sup>, but for unforeseen reasons this was transferred to the 11<sup>th</sup>. He then declared this first session closed and recited the Agimus and a Hail Mary. Then everyone signed this report” ...<sup>319</sup>

### **Election of Maria Bollezzoli**

“On the following 11<sup>th</sup>, the Chapter members gathered [...], one can later read in the report of that day, Monsignor President, after the proclamation of the Veni Creator, called our names and assured himself that all were present and then had the ballot papers distributed. After each one had voted, Monsignor President verified the number of the ballot papers and then read out loud the name on each of them. There were four votes for the Reverend Mother Maria Bollezzoli and three for Sr. Costanza Caldara. Therefore, he proclaimed as elected, Mother Maria Bollezzoli. Immediately, the chancellor of the Curia wrote out the decree of election [...] while the Chapter Delegates paid their respects to the General Superior. After this, Monsignor Bishop went to Church with all the community to recite the Te Deum” ...<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> APMR, VI/C1-2040.

<sup>320</sup> APMR, VI/C1/1/6-2041.

After the election had taken place, it was communicated to *Propaganda Fide* that “*The whole Congregation gives heartfelt thanks to the Lord for this nomination since the rare virtues and wisdom which always distinguished the Reverend Mother are a sure pledge that under her direction and good example, we will be animated and guided in the precise observance of our Rules and Holy Vows*”...<sup>321</sup>

Luigi di Canossa echoed this in responding to Fr. Pighi. “*We were also particularly satisfied to learn from your letter of the 17<sup>th</sup> that, in the recent General Chapter of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia the Reverend Mother, Sr. Maria Bollezzoli, was re-elected to the office of Superior General. Her gifts of mind and heart persuade us that this is for the good of her beloved Cogregation, and that she will continue to work diligently, as always, for the redemption of the poor Africans, preparing for Central Africa pious and intrepid missionaries*”...<sup>322</sup>

### **New composition of the General Council**

“*On the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1898 the General Chapter had a session in which it proceeded to the election of the four General Counsellors [...]. After praying the Veni Creator, Monsignor President checked that all the Chapter members were present. He commented on the appeal that the General Superior had made to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda to obtain a disposition from some requirements established in the Constitutions for election to various offices [...]. After distributing the lists of all the professed Sisters, and the ballot papers, the voting took place for the first counsellor, or the Vicar General. Monsignor President verified that he had all the ballot papers and then he read aloud the name that each one contained. He declared that Sr. Costanza Caldara was elected with four votes out of seven.*

*In the same way, Sr. Teresina Marini and Sr. Rosa Zabai were also elected, each with four votes out of seven.*

*Proceeding then to the straw ballot for the fourth counsellor, none of those voted for achieved sufficient votes [...]. The third time, Sr. Luigina*

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<sup>321</sup> Marini to Ledóchowski, 15<sup>th</sup> of June 1898. In APF NS, vol. 127(1898)238.

<sup>322</sup> Canossa to Pighi, 19<sup>th</sup> of June 1898. In APMR, VI/C1/1/15-2052.

*Gandolfi was elected, but not confirmed because she lacked the age and number of years of profession required by the Constitutions. The Reverend Mother wrote immediately to the Sacred Congregation in order to obtain the necessary dispensation ”...<sup>323</sup>*

### **A new Provincial Superior for Africa**

Continuing with the work, *“On the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 1898, the General Chapter members gathered to elect the Mother Provincial [...]. After having recited the Veni Creator and three Hail Marys, and after Monsignor President had observed that all the Chapter members were present, the lists and the ballot papers were distributed and a secret vote took place, the result of which was considered null. The second time, Sr. Anna Capraro was elected provincial superior having gained four votes in favour”...<sup>324</sup>*

Therefore, it had not been an easy process of voting. Looking at the dates, one can see how one month had already passed since the arrival of Sr. Francesca Dalmaso, at that time the Provincial, in the Mother House. Therefore, there had been a lot of time in which to confer about the real situation of the African province and, naturally, also about the desirability, or lack of it, of re confirming her responsibility. Sr. Francesca had been elected only two years previously and Monsignor Roveggio, despite everything, had admitted to Maria Bollezzoli,

*“I can and must say that, on the visit I made to each house, I was very consoled and edified by the good spirit and the life of sacrifice of these Daughters of yours, who, with true disinterest and great love, sacrifice themselves for the wellbeing of souls”...<sup>325</sup>*

One could expect, therefore, that the Chapter would pronounce itself for the continuation of her mandate.

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<sup>323</sup> Report of the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 1898. In APMR, VI/ C1/1/8-2043.

<sup>324</sup> APMR, VI/CI/1/12-2048. For everything regarding **Anna Capraro**, see number 29 of AMN, 21-A/2(2012)109-122.

<sup>325</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 18<sup>th</sup> of January, 1898. In APMR, VI/B/4/22–1761.

Instead, this did not happen. If the Apostolic Vicar expressed himself satisfied with the ‘daughters’, he was not equally satisfied with the ‘Mother’. He did not like her firmness in defending the rights of the Sisters’ Congregation or the personal rights of the Sisters. Not only this. Mother Francesca, in fact, had shown that she was determined to maintain the provincial residence in the Institute of the *Sacred Heart of Mary*, set aside for the Sisters by the Founder himself. In addition, she had also refused to send the last sisters who had arrived to this or that community before they were ready. Remembering the will of the Founder in this regard, Mother Francesca did not intend to deploy the young sisters in challenging tasks before they had learned Arabic in a satisfactory way.

Even if he knew very well that she was right, nevertheless, Monsignor Roveggio complained with Maria Bollezzoli, especially when the Provincial Superior had refused him one more Sister for the house in Aswan.<sup>326</sup> Evidently, the bishop preferred to have as an interlocuter someone more docile, and in this sense, Anna Capraro would, without a doubt, be preferable. Maria Bollezzoli, on the other hand, had given him to understand that she too was of the same opinion. In fact, she wrote to him on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June 1898, communicating the results of the Chapter, as follows:

*“The day before yesterday, we also elected the Provincial and Sr. Anetta Capraro was elected. However, it was decided unanimously that, before she begins her service, she will come to Verona for some months in order to be instructed on how to act, and to grow in her bond, if necessary, with the Mother House. It is extremely necessary that the Superiors be oriented towards the same spirit of union and charity. This necessity became clear in a particular way during this period”...*<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> See, Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 24<sup>th</sup> of March 1897. In APMR, VI/B/4/16–1757.

<sup>327</sup> Bollezzoli to Roveggio, 21<sup>st</sup> of June 1898. In APMR, VI/B/2/31-531.

## Conclusion of the Chapter

One of the points which, without a doubt, 'in that period' had caused difficulties, had been the issue of the provincial residence in Egypt. Maria Bollezzoli knew all too well what the will of the Apostolic Vicar in this regard was, and she was decided not to return to this argument. Having overcome the stumbling block in the Chapter, where her council held the majority, she would let the newly elected Superior know that, on her return from Verona, she would go to reside in Gesira.

This is what was communicated, in fact, to the whole Congregation in the following circular letter which announced the conclusion of the Chapter.

*Dearest Sisters in the Lord, Superiors and Subjects:*

*The General Chapter which had been convoked for last May, and for extrinsic causes had to be held in June, has now concluded, with the help of the Lord, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of this month of June.*

*I believe it is my duty to communicate now to all of you what was concluded and established.*

*I. In conformity with what is established in the approved Constitutions, the Chapter elected those who have to take on the responsibilities indicated in the Constitutions.*

*Reverend Mother Maria Bollezzoli was elected Superior General.*

*Sr. Costanza Caldara was elected the Vicar General and first counsellor.*

*Sr. Teresa Marini, Sr. Rosina Zabai and Sr. Luigina Gandolfi were also elected General Counsellors.*

*Sr. Anna Capraro was elected Provincial [Superior].*

*The Superiors are, Sr. Francesca Dalmasso in Helouan.*

*Sr. Giuseppa Scandola in Aswan.*

*Sr. Matilde Lombardi at the Hospital.*

*The Superior of Gesira, desired also by his Reverend Eminence, Monsignor Roveggio, is the provincial, Sr. Anna Capraro.*

*Sr. Angelina Demai was nominated the Novice Mistress.*

*The general bursar was not nominated as the Institute still does not have its own administration [...].*

*II. The General Chapter considered also some observations about some of the Rules; observations which in due time will be presented to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide for approval, and at that time they will be made known to you.*

*So, this is all that took place at the General Chapter and to which we are all under obligation to submit ourselves with docility [...].*

*On receiving this letter, I invite each of you to offer for 15 consecutive days, Holy Communion and good works in order to thank the Lord for all that took place in the Chapter.*

*May the Heart of Jesus be our help and comfort in life and in death.*

*Your most affectionate Sister in the Lord,*

*Sr. Teresa Marini*

*Secretary of the Chapter”<sup>328</sup>*

**Among the ‘observations about some Rules,  
was there also the problem of the aim [of the Congregation]?’**

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 1898, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti wrote from Trent to Sr. Francesca Dalmaso as follows:

*Reverend in Christ, Sr. Francesca,*

*Your letter of the last 15<sup>th</sup> of January provides me with an opportunity to express some of my thoughts and ways of seeing things which I hope you will read willingly.*

*I - You write to me: “According to our approved Constitutions, it is evident that our Congregation changed, in part, its aim; that is, it diversified from the intention that our Founder had when he founded it.”*

*You write this basing yourself on what is written in Chapter 1, number 1, second paragraph of the Constitutions.*

*Now, I respond to you: The aim of our sorely missed Founder in founding your Institute was **precisely** that which is expressed in the Constitutions quoted above. This is proved by:*

*1 - The fact that Monsignor Comboni himself opened a house of Sisters in Sestri Levante in 1880 with the aim of opening a school. It is a fact that in May 1881, in order to favour this project of his and on his order, I accompanied Sr. Costanza, who is qualified to teach, to Sestri in order to begin a school.*

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<sup>328</sup> Marini to the Congregation, June 1898. In APMR,VI/C1/1/18-2051.

2 - A letter from Monsignor Comboni, written in Khartoum and dated 13.9.81, to Sr. Matilde Corsi, Superior of the Sisters in Sestri, in which, after having said that I had done well to withdraw the Sisters from there due to what that priest Tagliaferro was doing, he wrote: Take courage! We will find other Institutes. Certainly, he meant other houses in Europe.

3. I myself heard Monsignor Comboni talking about opening houses in Genoa, because he said that there was money there and there would be benefactors and vocations.

He well understood that the houses in Verona alone would not give enough subjects for the Mission and, in order to have more, and also more money, he was determined to increase the houses in Europe. He was not able to realize these projects because he lacked personnel and resources and most of all, his life was cut short.

The above quoted Constitution, therefore, does not change or modify the aim and the intentions of your Founder, but it makes them explicit and goes towards what the Founder wanted to do but could not do.

The project of Monsignor Comboni was adopted by Monsignor Roveggio for the missionaries. In fact, what is the purpose of this apostolic school in Trento, maintained almost entirely, except for a few offerings we have here, by the Mission? The aim is to procure personnel for the Mission. The same can be said of the house in Bressanone, a good part of which is also maintained by the Mission. You can say what you like, but this has to be done in order to have personnel for the mission so as to be able to extend ourselves further in the Vicariate when times will be more tranquil.

And, what is valid for the Missionaries, is also valid for the Sisters. There is a difference however. In order to have a missionary, the Mission has to spend money for 6, 8 or even 10 years or more. But to have a Sister, three years are sufficient, and then she lives on her own earnings in the school or the nursery or in a hospital, either in Europe or in Africa, and then what is left over contributes to forming a fund for the Mother House. In this way, your Institute could develop and the mission would have, we could say, both 'thread and spool'. That is, it would have Sisters for its needs and gradually the weight of maintaining the Mother House would be alleviated.

II – But here, you too highlight the opposite and you write: “The Mission has every reason to refuse nurturing those subjects who are not useful to its aim.”

*I reply repeating once more what is said above, that those subjects would serve, or, similarly, they would be a gain for the Mission.*

*1. – They would create many vocations. Can you see that in the short time that the Sisters were in Fumane, as many as **seven** girls, from Fumane and the nearby villages, asked to come to the Mission. Your Institute is not well known and the more houses you have, the better you will be known and the more you will grow. Also in Egypt, I believe you would have local girls already accustomed to the climate and the language, something that would be an immeasurable advantage for the good of the Mission.*

*2 - They would be a gain by living from their own earnings and freeing, with time, the Mission from ongoing expenses for the Mother House.*

*III – I continue to quote your words: “From here arises the need for separation and this, according to me, seems the easiest option. From the offerings, given for the Missionaries and the Sisters, dividing them, we have a right to have something; a fund, and not a subsidy, for the Mother House in such a way that it would be assured. Here in Egypt, we are left free with the few works that we have and these subsidise the Sisters on the Mission and this is enough.”*

*It is true that the separation of the administration would be good, but, only on the understanding that the upkeep of the Mother House, you call it the nursery of the Sisters and the houses of the Institute, is assured. You say that, for the Mother House, you have a right to **a fund**. I would really not know if you have **the right** to a fund, in the same way that I don't believe that the Mission would be able to create [this fund]. Do you know that, with interests **now** in Italy at 3.5 %, and soon 3% and then 2.5%, 350 thousand lire would not be enough for a fund for the Mother House? In addition, I inform you that when the agreement was proposed, the request was to have either a fund sufficient for the upkeep of the Mother House, or a sufficient annual subsidy **which would continue until such times as** the Mother House would be able to maintain itself **with its own** [resources], and not just for six years as was being proposed by the other party [the Missionaries].*

*IV – “Here in Egypt”, you write, “we are left free with the few works that we have and these subsidise, etc.” I reply: If many Sisters are not prepared, opening houses, as I have already said, the time will come when you will not be left **free** in Egypt and neither will you continue the works you have there. Consider this case, which, more or less, could happen soon. Imagine that stations are opened beyond Aswan. Then more Sisters will be required, and where there will be two Missionaries, at least four Sisters will*

*be required. But, if a good number of extra Sisters are not prepared on time, those who are in Egypt will have to go to the interior, and not those who are weak and unhealthy, but those who are healthy and able for the needs of the mission stations. The Institute will not be able to refuse, because its aim is to provide Sisters for the mission. In this case, who will sustain the activities in Egypt? You will say, as it was said to me: Before they take Sisters to the interior, 15 years will pass! I don't believe it! But let us suppose that 15 years do pass and in these 15 years how many Sisters now alive, will be dead or will have become elderly and not able for the mission in Egypt and in Verona? So, you see, if in 98 or 99 a mission station of the missionaries will be opened in Dongola or Berber, the following year, Sisters will be required there too. So, we return to the same point, that the number of houses needs to increase, if for nothing else, just to increase the number of Sisters so that in each house there can be some extra Sisters.*

*V - You write that you have heard that the subsidy which the Mission passes at present to the Mother House **can invalidate** a point of the Constitutions. Which point? And how would it be invalidated? I can't see that. Rather, since it has been written that the subsidy will continue until such times as Rome **comes to a decision about this dispute**, there might be a case for the General Chapter of next May forwarding a motion to Propaganda that this decision be taken soon, and in consideration of the good reasons that you have and which you should also present to Propaganda too. In other words, make an appeal to Propaganda for the upkeep of the Mother House to be guaranteed definitively.*

*VI - I wrote to you once, that Propaganda, in April last year, **had done justice**, and I meant that, also Propaganda, when it was fully informed about things, **rejected** the proposed agreement, which seemed to the Sisters of Verona **absolutely unacceptable**. This was based first of all on the substance, because it would have meant that the Mother House could have survived very poorly **for only six years**, after which, it would have had to close. In second place, it was unacceptable also for **the way** in which it was proposed as it required the signature of the Reverend Mother General, without leaving her any time to confront with you who were in Africa, or even to bring the matter up with you by correspondence! It would seem incredible, but I heard all of this first hand in Verona in October 1896. This did not come from Monsignor Roveggio, who was not informed about how things actually stood.*

*From your letter, it seems that you believe that Propaganda was not informed about the refusal to subsidize the Mother House. I can tell you that they were informed, and **immediately**, after which they gave the reply that the two Institutes of Verona should **go ahead** just as they are, just as before, maintained by the Mission.*

*VII – You close your observations by writing: “We see and believe that it was a grace from the Lord that the agreement was not accepted, especially for us in Egypt”. I would say, instead: it was a grace principally for the Mother House and therefore, for the entire Institute, and in second place for the houses in Egypt. This, because, what would have happened to the houses in Egypt if the Mother House would have had to be closed, that is, if, in other words, the Institute had been suppressed? [...].*

*By writing, **especially for us in Egypt**, I believe you intend to allude to the fact that, the Mother House would have preferred a daily allowance for each of you rather than retain the money left over from the hospital and the schools in Helouan. But what could the Mother House think if, at the time when the agreement was proposed, in Verona **nothing whatsoever was known** regarding the gains you had from those activities? And further, it was forbidden to speak with you, writing about the agreement? From this you should learn **how important it is** to keep the Mother House informed about **everything**.*

*In the General Chapter, after the elections have taken place, affairs of the Congregation are discussed, as is mentioned in the Constitutions. Therefore, I believe that it would be good to see, to think ahead if, in your opinion, and that of Sr. Lombardi and others whom you might wish to ask, there could be something [...] which seems opportune to you to propose to the general Chapter [...].*

*Excuse me if I have taken the liberty of suggesting these things. I am doing so to facilitate you, so that you might go to the Chapter well prepared [...].*

*To you, and to all, many greetings and best wishes. Pray for me to the Sacred Heart whom I ask to bless you and me.*

*P.G. Sembianti F.d.S.S.”<sup>329</sup>*

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<sup>329</sup> Sembianti to Dalmasso, Trent, 6<sup>th</sup> of February 1898. In APMR, VI/A/4/36-165.

## The Case of the Tertiaries, or Assisting Sisters

One reads in the text of the Constitutions and Rules presented in 1894 for approval, *“In mission countries, the Institute admits local young women and widows, with the title of tertiaries who take up those tasks appropriate to Assistant Sisters and help, if they are able, to catechize the Africans. They will have two years of postulancy and two years of Noviciate after which they will make their vows, like the Sisters, but from year to year.”* (First part, n° 7)

Now, in the approved Rules *“ad experimentum”* for five years, nothing is said about tertiaries. Yet, in Egypt, they actually existed, as the letter which Monsignor Roveggio wrote to Maria Bollezzoli on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1898 proves:

*“Here in Aswan, there is a good young girl named Maria Mocarrez, commonly known as Set Ruma. She is a Syrian Catholic of about 35 years of age and for some time now she has been asking to become a Religious in your Congregation. She is good, but she is oriental and, as she knows only the Arabic language, it would be very difficult for her to do the Noviciate. At first, I was contrary to this idea. But then, thinking about it, as she knows Arabic and could be a great asset for this girls’ school, I have changed idea, and I was wondering if in some way she could be accomodated. Would it not be possible to accept her, not as a Sister, but as a lay Sister, or a tertiary? She would be happy about this.*

*I believe she would be capable of some religious formation. And perhaps Sr. Giuseppa would be able to offer this. In that case, a few suitable rules would need to be made for her, and instruction be given to the Sisters on how to keep her in community. My idea would be that, on entering the Congregation, she would continue to teach, not at home, but in the town centre, to be able to have the Copts who, on the pretext that we are now a little bit out of town, and therefore a little far, instead of attending the Sisters’ school, go to the Protestant school instead”...<sup>330</sup>*

In return, Maria Bollezzoli replied: *“For this girl, Maria Mocarrez, having seen from your respected letter her good qualities and the valid help*

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<sup>330</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1898. In APMR, VI/B/4/26–1765.

*she could be on the mission, I would actually be quite pleased if she could be accepted into the Congregation as a Tertiary. Now, if your Eminence believes it to be opportune, have her enter with our Sisters and let her continue the school where and how your Eminence sees fit. Sr. Giuseppa will be able to be the novice mistress of the new aspirant and may the Lord grant success to the new postulant. With the first post I will write to Sr. Giuseppa because today it is impossible for me to do so. Meanwhile, she can think about what she did in Cairo with the Tertiaries there and whether the same thing can be done in this case”...<sup>331</sup>*

In the end, no more is said about that young Syrian ‘who was asking to become a Tertiary’ in our Congregation, both because her mother was against the idea, and also because she herself could not make up her mind. The need, however, of ‘associate members’ of the Congregation who would be able to collaborate more closely in carrying out the various missionary activities, is one which has never ceased to make itself heard.<sup>332</sup> This is an argument which would merit a deeper and more complete study.

#### **Post Chapter: Costanza Caldara is sent to Egypt**

*“In order to achieve greater unity with the Mother House, I believe it would be very good for the houses to be visited from time to time by the Superior General, or if she is unable to go, by someone delegated by her and entrusted with her same authority”...*

(A. M. Roveggio, 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1898)

Immediately after the official closure of the first General Chapter of the Congregation, Maria Bollezzoli made arrangements to act on this suggestion, the most important suggestion that the Apostolic Vicar of the

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<sup>331</sup> Bollezzoli to Roveggio, 1<sup>st</sup> of April, 1898. In APMR, VI/B/2/29-511.

<sup>332</sup> On the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1915, for example, Sr. Lavinia Vecchiotti wrote to Teresa Baroni, in the name of the Superior General, “Now, do you still nurture the desire to re-enter our Institute? Listen, Maria Teresa, the Reverend Mother would receive you again if you accept to enter to become a Representative Sister (Mandataria)”... (Vecchiotti to Baroni, 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1915. In APMR, VI/C2/6-1121.

Sudan had given her lately: to make herself present, even by means of a representative, in all the communities of the Sisters in Africa.

*“It would have been my desire to come to visit you myself, she wrote to them on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1898, but my age and the state of my health unfortunately don’t permit me to do this. Therefore I delegate Sr. Costanza Caldara, my first assistant and Vicar General, to make this visit and I give to her all the authority and the rights which I myself hold” ...*<sup>333</sup>

In reality, this step had now become indispensable. It was no secret to anyone that in Egypt preparations had been taking place since 1896 for an offensive to reconquer the Sudan. Dongola, in fact, had been occupied by the Anglo Egyptian troops in the month of September. The same happened in Berber in August of the following year. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of April 1898, exactly two months before the opening of the General Chapter, the allied army defeated a Mahdist army of 12,000 men along the banks of the Nile at Atbara. Therefore, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of July, the decision was made to move southwards towards Khartoum. The decisive battle took place on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September in Karari, northwest of Omdurman.

In this way, that ‘immense tragedy’ which had embittered and marked them for the rest of their lives, and which Giuseppe Ohrwalder had written to his companion prisoners about, came to a conclusion.<sup>334</sup>

Costanza Caldara had been in Egypt for about a month and a half by then. It was up to her now, as the Founder had foreseen,<sup>335</sup> to take hold of the rudder of that little boat in a very particular and delicate historical moment, because she would have to move and work on two fronts: the

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<sup>333</sup> APMR, VI/B/1/22-1515.

<sup>334</sup> See, Ohrwalder to Chincarini and Venturini, Suakin, 19<sup>th</sup> of April 1898. In APMR, VI/Pp/5/1-1812.

<sup>335</sup> See, Positio, p. 1255. **N.B.** According to Fr. Joaquim Valente da Cruz, (27.11.07), in the secret Archive of the Vatican, *Fondo Congregazione dei Religiosi*, one can find all the materials that refer to our Rules in the event of someone wishing to research this area.

return to the Sudan of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, and the administrative separation of the two Combonian Congregations, always defined by her as '*twins*'.

These would be two difficult tasks, but she was confident. She knew that while the founder guided her from heaven, the Mother followed her from Verona...

## Epilogue

### The Mother takes her leave

*“I will leave with the Superiors the task of being precise in trying to attain the aim of the Institute which is to provide the Mission with personnel able to give their contribution to the best of their abilities”*

(Maria Bollezzoli, 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1898).

Maria Bollezzoli wrote that brief testament three years before her death, but perhaps she had hoped that she would have managed not to be confirmed in her position at the General Chapter. Instead, this obviously did not happen. The Mother knew, however, that the moment had come for a decisive turnaround for the young Congregation which Daniel Comboni had entrusted to her. She also knew that she could not be the person to guide the ongoing journey. By appointing Sr. Costanza Caldara as her delegate in Egypt, she was also discreetly and wisely passing to her the responsibility of preparing the new day [of the Congregation].

*“Go, therefore, my Daughter, she put in writing on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 1898, confident in the protection of the Lord and of Mary Immaculate, and with their help, you will do great things for the Institute”...<sup>336</sup>.*

After Sr. Costanza had left her, in that same month of July 1898, Maria Bollezzoli continued to follow her with her thoughts, her heart and her pen. From Verona, in fact, she participated intensely in all that was happening across the sea:

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<sup>336</sup> Bollezzoli to Caldara, 7<sup>th</sup> of July 1898. In APMR, VI/B/3/4-1516.

She wrote to Sr. Costanza on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 1898, “*I heard about the liberation of Khartoum, and they say that Grigolini is also free. Is it true?*”

And to Monsignor Roveggio six days later: “*I heard with great satisfaction how the way to Khartoum is already open, thanks be to the Lord. Let us hope that it won’t be long before we might return there and take possession of that soil soaked in much sweat and where the remains of many heroes who gave up their lives lie in rest*”...<sup>337</sup>

Then the Apostolic Vicar informed her, “*This is the news I have about Khartoum. Our buildings have been entirely destroyed. Only two small rooms remain in ruins. Even all our possessions have been taken away. The tomb of poor Monsignor Comboni was respected [...]. I have already asked permission to send two missionaries to Khartoum*”...<sup>338</sup>

**Regarding Grigolini,  
“tell her I have never condemned her”...**

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 1898, Maria Bollezzoli commented to her Vicar, “*His Excellency wrote something to me about poor Grigolini. Poor soul!*”

Twenty days later, more explicitly, she wrote to her once again, “*I can only say that I did not answer you about Grigolini because I did not know*

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<sup>337</sup> Copy in APMR, VI/B/2/33-532.

<sup>338</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 27<sup>th</sup> of September 1898. In APMR, VI/B/4/36-1781. In the letter cited above, Monsignor Roveggio does not mention who had informed him about the tomb of Daniel Comboni being **respected**. Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder, who had obtained permission in October 1899 to return to Khartoum, wrote instead, “*The tomb of Monsignor Comboni is no longer recognizable except for a little pile of bricks that has been placed on top of it. Until a short time ago, there was also the obelisk which the friends of Monsignor Comboni had had erected on his tomb. This obelisk and another tomb of missionaries were destroyed recently. After two days of digging, we could find only some remains of the bones of the African Hero which we gathered up with great veneration and carried them with us to Aswan*” [La Nigrizia, XVII(1899)11, p. 167]. See, in this regard, R. BALLAN, *Gli Ultimi Giorni di Vita di Comboni: le Vicende dei Suoi resti Mortali*, in *Note Mazziane*, April–June 2007, p. 72.

*what intentions Monsignor had<sup>339</sup>. But now, knowing, through Sr. Giuseppa, how he has arranged for her to stop over in Cairo with her family, I entrust her to your charity and ask you to speak words of comfort to her if you can. Greet her very much from me and tell her I have never condemned her. On the contrary, I have felt compassion because, had we found ourselves in similar circumstances, we don't know what we would have done"...<sup>340</sup>*

One can read in Sr. Giuseppa's letter, enclosed, "*She was advised badly. The Lord permitted it. She says frankly and sincerely, and in tears, that the Sacrament [...] was celebrated well and therefore, is valid before God. She understands that it cannot be undone [...]. She is resigned. She will not disturb the Sisters or the Mission. She will remain quietly on her Cross*" ...<sup>341</sup>

About a year later, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September, Maria Bollezzoli wrote again to Costanza Caldara:

*"I return this extremely moving letter of poor Grigolini. Poor soul! What a long martyrdom...! If you write to her, greet her for me. Tell her I have not forgotten her and tell her to be resigned to the divine will. Her suffering must be written in letters of gold in the great book of life"...<sup>342</sup>*

### **Many requests for admission, but few resources**

In Autumn of that year of 1898, with the end of the Mahdia and the increasingly concrete hope of seeing the way of the Mission reopened, the problem of vocations was growing worse for Maria Bollezzoli.

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<sup>339</sup> Monsignor had in those days made known clearly to Sr. Costanza his thought regarding Teresa Grigolini. See, Roveggio to Caldara, 21<sup>st</sup> of October 1898. In APMR, VI/C2/7/9-1786.

<sup>340</sup> Bollezzoli to Caldara, 26<sup>th</sup> of October 1898. In APMR, VI/B/3/14-492.

<sup>341</sup> Idem, 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1898. In APMR, VI/B/3/15-493.

<sup>342</sup> Idem, 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1898. In APMR, VI/B/3/21-500.

From the beginning of the year, she pointed out to Roveggio, *“If it will please the Lord to bless this poor community so that it can accept aspirants to prepare them well, we will not find ourselves in such dire need”*<sup>343</sup>.

Roveggio, however, showed himself to be inflexible:

*“Regarding what you ask me, that is, to accept promising postulants, but without the dowry, he answered her with the next post, I believe it is better, in as much as it is possible, to stick to the Rule.”*<sup>344</sup>

This meant: dispense with the dowry only in exceptional cases.

*“Pray also to Saint Joseph that he bless us through Providence”, the Mother, from Verona, appealed to Cairo, “so that we will not be lacking in vocations of young people who are quite well educated”*<sup>345</sup>.

One could say that Providence arrived once more through Luigi di Canossa. *“His Eminence has written to Rome about the agreement regarding the subsidy to be paid to the Mother House, Luigina Gandolfi informed in January 1899. His proposal was to use first of all the interest on capital (and this, as you know, had been suggested also by Reverend Father Colombaroli) and then for the rest to be provided by the Administration. He also proposed that limits should not be placed on personnel. Propaganda has replied that it approves the first proposal, but that it cannot yet pronounce itself on the second one”*...<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Bollezzoli to Roveggio, 31<sup>st</sup> of January 1898. Copy in APMR, VI/B/2/24-512.

<sup>344</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 18<sup>th</sup> of February 1898. In APMR, VI/B/4/24-1763.

<sup>345</sup> Bollezzoli to Caldara, 30<sup>th</sup> of November 1898. In APMR, VI/B/3/17-495.

<sup>346</sup> Gandolfi to Caldara, Verona, 9<sup>th</sup> of January 1899. In APMR, VI/C2/7/13-60.

## A first administrative agreement

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of January 1899, Monsignor Roveggio arrived in Verona and on the following day, he went for a visit to the Mother House of the Sisters.<sup>347</sup> Fruit of that encounter between the Apostolic Vicar of Sudan and the Superior General of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, could very probably have been a first administrative agreement stipulated between the Sisters and the Sons of the Sacred Heart. In fact, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February, Maria Bollezzoli sent to her Vicar a copy of the text of that agreement, where one can read, amongst other things:

*“The house of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia will provide for its own upkeep with the fruits of its capital and from any eventual money remaining in its dependant houses. The Administration of the Sons of the Sacred Heart, who will control the administration of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia until such times as they are able to maintain themselves without needing to be subsidized, will provide for the remainder of its needs.*

*The Sisters of the Mother House cannot be reduced by the Sons of the Sacred Heart to less than forty in number”...<sup>348</sup>*

*“I like the second point of the agreement very much”, Costanza replied, “So, the Sisters in the Mother House cannot be reduced to under forty in number [...] Deo Gratias!”...<sup>349</sup>*

In concrete terms, administrative control by the Sons of the Sacred Heart regarding the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, was supposed to translate itself into an annual cheque on which the Superior General should be able to count. Instead, unfortunately, once Monsignor Roveggio left Verona, that cheque seemed very hard to come by. *“I don’t know if, in the course of this year just begun, they will be able to give us the cheque agreed upon”,* Mother

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<sup>347</sup> In the **Account** of the activities of the Mission during the year 1898, which Monsignor Roveggio had published in *Nigrizia*, much is said about the *Pie Madri* [see *La Nigrizia*, XVII(1899)2, pp. 17-21].

<sup>348</sup> Copy n APMR, VI/A/4/44-2817.

<sup>349</sup> Caldara to Bollezzoli, Aswan, 20<sup>th</sup> of February 1899. In APMR, VI/4/41-27.

Bollezzoli commented to her Vicar on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 1900. “*And when will it be? Let us pray.*”

The main problem for her continued to be that of vocations. The following week, still writing to Sr. Costanza, she wrote, “*I remind you that we have continually said that the Mother House should always have a good number of subjects. To tell you the truth, vocations are not lacking, but resources are lacking. It would be desirable that everyone would have a dowry. So what can we do? I hope that the Lord who sends a vocation to many whom we have never seen and don’t know, will also send the means necessary to be able to receive them*”...<sup>350</sup>

“*Do you want to know how many aspirants are waiting for the door to open for them? Twelve. May Saint Joseph bless us with Providence*”...<sup>351</sup>

### **That difficult beginning of 1900**

From what we can understand, a particularly critical moment for the Sisters’ Congregation was what Maria Bollezzoli had to face in the first half of 1900.

Fr. Angelo Colombaroli, who had been the Superior General of the Sons of the Sacred Heart since the previous 21<sup>st</sup> of June, had let her know that, as he did not have money to subsidize the Mother House of the Sisters, they could use to that end all the savings from the community of Helouan and from the *Rodolfo* Hospital<sup>352</sup>. These were savings which the Superior General, on her part, had already invested to buy a house in Helouan next to that already occupied by the girls’ school.

Worried, and also embittered, the Mother in Verona, shared with Sr. Costanza: “*This means that for the meantime, we will have to suspend the*

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<sup>350</sup> Bollezzoli to Caldara, 13<sup>th</sup> of January 1900. In APMR, VI/B/3/25–456.

<sup>351</sup> Idem, 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 1900. In APMR, VI/B/3/30-457.

<sup>352</sup> “*I was very displeased*”, Monsignor Roveggio let it be known, regarding that proposal, “*about what the Reverend Mother Costanza told me [...] that is, that the Father General acts financially towards this House in quite a disgusting way*”... (Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Cairo, 16<sup>th</sup> of May 1900. In APMR, VI/4/47-1794).

*acceptance [of the aspirants] and then we will begin to put some off, so the House in Verona will go towards extinction”...<sup>353</sup>*

One can observe that it is a rather pessimistic vision. However, we have to keep in mind that her state of mind was probably also influenced by the news of the progressively worsening health of Luigi di Canossa.

The Cardinal Protector of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, who, more than anyone else, knew from experience and from direct participation, the origins and nature of the Combonian Institute, died, in fact, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 1900.

*“I am reopening [the letter] in this moment”, one can read in the letter which Maria Bollezzoli was writing, “At 11.45 our Cardinal went to paradise. What a loss!”...<sup>354</sup>*

Less than one month later, the Mother would be crying once more for another death which was particularly painful for her: Sr. Rosa Zabai, her friend from youth who had preceded her to *Santa Maria in Organo* by two months, and who had become a faithful companion in her darkest hours, died suddenly on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April. The impression of those remaining must have been of a growing and relentless void which was created around them.

Was it at this point that she had a premonition that her own death would not be long in coming?

*“I am now very tired,” she confided, amongst other things, to Sr. Costanza in a letter written on March 9<sup>th</sup> 1900. “It is painful for me to sadden you with these words, but I really need a heart that understands me”...*

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<sup>353</sup> Bollezzoli to Caldara, 9<sup>th</sup> of March 1900. In APMR, VI/B/3/31-458.

<sup>354</sup> Idem, March 12<sup>th</sup> 1900. In APMR, VI/B/3/32-460.

## **A sudden departure when the doors of the Sudan are re-opening**

*“Already since Autumn 1900, Mother Bollezzoli [...] used to allude now and again to her end which would be near, and she took care to settle everything and put in order even the smallest things”...*

*(Memorie, p. 34)*

When she died so discreetly, in the way she had always lived, one could say that Maria Bollezzoli, despite everything, left the Congregation thriving and ready to take up once more the journey, interrupted by the Mahdia, which the Founder had marked out for his daughters.

From the first days of January 1900, in fact, Monsignor Roveggio had been able to return to Omdurman with two Fathers and a Brother. He had then written to the Superior General, *“As soon as we find a house, we shall open a school for the sons of Christians who live here [...]. Then, as soon as possible, that is, when we will have found the house, we will get the Sisters to come, so that they can take care of the women and girls whose needs are no fewer than those of the men”...*<sup>355</sup>

This project would begin to be realized starting from November of the same year.

Something also got unblocked regarding the financial situation of the Congregation, starting from the second half of 1900.

In response to a request from Fr. Colombaroli, the Secretary of the Prefect of *Propaganda Fide* addressed the new bishop of Verona so that he could learn from him whether the annual sum, set at 8,400 lire could be sufficient as a subsidy to be passed to the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* until the end of the dispute<sup>356</sup>. According to Monsignor Bartolomeo Bacilieri, however, that sum would not be sufficient, and therefore, he answered:

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<sup>355</sup> Roveggio to Bollezzoli, Omdurman, 12<sup>th</sup> of January 1900. In APMR, VI/4/45-1792.

<sup>356</sup> See, Veccia to Bacilieri, Rome, 5<sup>th</sup> of July 1900. Copy in APMR, VI/A/4/68-4904.

*“The Mother House is inhabited by approximately 40 people between professed Sisters, Novices and Postulants. And, except in extraordinary circumstances, its expenditure is between 13,000 to 14,000 each year. Last year, the expenditure was 13,639.00 lire. I draw your attention to the fact that it is very rare that the young postulants pay their board and lodging and bring a dowry. Further, the needs of the house will increase when elderly or sick Sisters begin to return from the Mission [...].*

*Finally, I inform you that the Constitutions for the Sisters of Nigrizia were approved by the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda for a five year period which will terminate in February 1902 and at that point, they will have to be presented again with those modifications which seem appropriate based on experience.*

*Therefore, I would propose that, until the end of the current five year period, the same relationship might continue between the General Administration and the House of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia, and that is, that they continue to be paid an annual subsidy of 12,000 lire. This is also the opinion of Monsignor Roveggio”...<sup>357</sup>*

### **Announcement that the Reverend Mother is infirm**

In the month of February 1902, when those modifications requested to the Rules approved for this five year period should have been presented, Maria Bollezzoli was no longer alive. She had died very discreetly on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 1901.

*“It has been announced that the Reverend Mother is infirm”,* Costanza Caldara wrote one week previously to Francesca Dalmasso who was in Omdurman with Maria Bonetti. Therefore, she added, *“I am informing you of this so that you might pray to the Lord that His will be done perfectly in us, and if it pleases Him, He might still keep our Reverend Mother alive.”*<sup>358</sup>

Instead the will of the Lord was other than this. *“That which we feared would happen, the Lord has allowed”,* the same Sr. Costanza wrote ten days later, *“Fiat and always Fiat! May our sacrifice (of each and all of us) be*

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<sup>357</sup> Bacilieri to Propaganda Fide, 30<sup>th</sup> of August 1900. Copy in APMR, VI/A/4/69-4905.

<sup>358</sup> Caldara to Dalmasso, Gesira, 16<sup>th</sup> of April 1901. In APMR, VI/H8/2b/13-1006.

acceptable to His Most Sacred Heart and may it be a blessing for the Sudan! Certainly for us, it is a great loss[...]. Here, we experience an emptiness which is only made lighter by reflection on the fact that it is the will of God” ...<sup>359</sup>

“The Very Reverend Mother Maria Bollezzoli, General Superior, is no more”, *La Nigrizia* echoed. On the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, in the same holy way that she lived, she fell asleep in the Lord, leaving her desolate daughters in the deepest grief” ...<sup>360</sup>

### **General participation**

“On the Thursday morning”, one reads in the *Memorie*, “the funeral was held with the Office for the Dead and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Numerous priests, among them the Reverend Monsignor G. Battista Pighi, ecclesiastical representative of the Institute, the Most Reverend General Superior of the Sons of the Sacred Heart, Reverend Father Sembianti with all the religious Missionaries [...] attended to accompany her to her final resting place. She was buried in the private tomb of the Institute, into which five Sisters had preceded her.

Honoured prelates and distinct personalities sent statements of condolences to the Institute, among them, His eminence Cardinal Bacilieri who was actually in Rome to receive the emblems of Cardinal and who, at the same time was nominated by His Holiness, Protector of the Congregation; His Eminence Cardinal Mieczslao Ledochowski, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide; His Excellency, Reverend Monsignor Antonio M. Roveggio, [...] Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa; His Reverend Excellency Monsignor Francesco Sogaro, [...] the illustrious Mr. Ottavio Marchese di Canossa [...]; The illustrious Miss Teresa Countess Ledochowska, founder and Superior General of the Sodality of St. Peter Claver [...]; the honoured Comboni family [...] as well as many others [...] who would be too many to mention.” (pp. 36-37)

“It is a beautiful thought”, the *Memorie* underlined, “that precisely on the day of her burial, down in Central Africa, for which the deceased

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<sup>359</sup> Caldara to Lombardi, Verona, 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1901. In APMR, VI/H7/3g/1-970.

<sup>360</sup> *La Nigrizia*, XIX(1901)5, p. 82.

*Mother had prayed so that our Missionaries could return, [...] the holy Sacrifice of the Mass was being offered for her in the first station finally re-opened.*

Was it a happy omen and a sure pledge of a fruitful missionary period? She herself, in fact, shortly before dying, had revealed it:

***“I came into the Institute for obedience, and because I knew this to be the will of God. From the very first moment, God and the Institute were the goal of all my thoughts and I consecrated all my energies to them”...***

*(Memorie, p. 36)*

*“In this way, the life of this woman which had been an intense apostolate of goodness, came to a close. If the Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia founded by Comboni lived; if the violence of the events that swept over it did not crush it in their devastating fury; if for Unhappy Nigrizia the fruitful work of many Christian virgins vowed to the Lord until death was never lacking; let us not forget, that great merit is also owed to this strong woman, Maria Bollezzoli.*

*Let us bow reverently, moved before this humble worker in the holy vineyard, and at the foot of the Cross which rises victorious over mysterious Africa and which gathers round it a crowd of people redeemed so numerous it cannot be counted, close to the name of Daniel Comboni, let us also engrave the name of Maria Bollezzoli. Her work continues still, for within the sacred walls of the Institute in Verona, her spirit hovers, immortal, and it will continue as long as her daughters conserve in their hearts, under the pure veil of humility, the memory of her examples and her teaching”<sup>361</sup>.*

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<sup>361</sup> *Nella Luce di un cinquantesimo*, p. 70.



## Chronology\*

### 1881

**October 30<sup>th</sup>:** Fr. Giovanni Losi is nominated the interim superior for the Vicariate of Central Africa.

### 1882

**July 19<sup>th</sup>:** The community of Cairo returns to Verona because of the disorder which has erupted in Egypt.

**August 4<sup>th</sup>:** The community of Khartoum leaves the city to take refuge in Berber.

**September 7<sup>th</sup>:** The Mahdi attacks El Obeid and then besieges the city. The Missionaries and the Sisters take refuge in the fortress.

**15-16<sup>th</sup>:** The River *Adige* bursts its banks in Verona resulting in a great flood.

**In Africa:** The personnel in Delen try to escape but they are betrayed and are held as prisoners. They are all forced to leave the mission which has been looted and follow the Mahdists to the camp of *Boga* close to El Obeid.

**22<sup>nd</sup>:** **Francesco Sogaro** is nominated the successor of Daniel Comboni.

**October 8<sup>th</sup>:** Fr. Francesco Giulianelli returns to Cairo to re-open the missionary Institutes.

**16<sup>th</sup>:** The personnel of the mission return to Khartoum from Berber.

**December 8<sup>th</sup>:** Fr. Giovanni Losi does not authorize the renewal of vows, or the oath, for the Sisters and the lay brothers in El Obeid.

**21<sup>st</sup>:** With the return of the Sisters, the Sisters community in Cairo is re-established. The superior will be Costanza Caldara.

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\* In this volume, we shall limit ourselves to the essential elements of the chronology since there is a more detailed chronology in *AMN*, 17(2010).

## 1883

**January 19<sup>th</sup>:** El Obeid is seized by the troops of the Mahdi. On the same day, Monsignor Sogaro arrives in Cairo.

**22<sup>nd</sup>:** The Sisters are authorized by the Mahdi to be reunited with the survivors from Delen.

**February:** The Consul Hansal makes a first attempt to pay a ransom for the prisoners.

**March 6<sup>th</sup>:** Monsignor Sogaro reaches Khartoum with other missionaries.

**April 3<sup>rd</sup>:** A bundle of correspondence with letters from the prisoners reaches Khartoum.

**May 13<sup>th</sup>:** Suppi, Dalmasso and Conte leave Khartoum on the orders of Monsignor Sogaro.

**July 20<sup>th</sup>:** Fr. Hanriot gives information about the negative reactions of the Mahdi regarding the ransom.

**September 8<sup>th</sup>:** General Hicks leaves Khartoum with an army of 12,000 men.

**November 4<sup>th</sup>:** Victory of the Mahdi. General Hicks dies and the army is destroyed.

**December 11<sup>th</sup>:** The missionaries and the Christians in Khartoum leave the city, recalled by Monsignor Sogaro.

## 1884

**January 22<sup>nd</sup>:** The fugitives from Khartoum reach Scellal and are welcomed by Monsignor Sogaro.

**31<sup>st</sup>:** Gordon Pasha meets the Apostolic Vicar in Scellal to discuss together what could be done to free the prisoners.

**March 29<sup>th</sup>:** The first escape attempt of the missionary prisoners fails. They depart for Rahad.

**April 12<sup>th</sup>:** '*A day of mourning in Rahad*'. The Sisters, prisoners in Rahad, live a tragedy.

**28<sup>th</sup>:** Berber also falls into the hands of the rebels.

**May 12<sup>th</sup>:** Scellal is threatened by the rebels. The refugees from Khartoum leave again.

**June 14<sup>th</sup>:** All the personnel from the mission in Khartoum arrive in Cairo.

**October:** The prisoners settle in Omdurman, the new capital city of the Mahdi.

**17<sup>th</sup>:** Fr. Domenico Vicentini leaves Cairo and goes towards Dongola in an attempt to trace the prisoners.

**November:** Fr. Vicentini makes a contract with a messenger who will go to the Sudan.

## 1885

**January 26<sup>th</sup>:** The fall of Khartoum. Teresa Grigolini receives the messenger sent by Fr. Vicentini. She asks for 16 camels to be sent in order to attempt their escape.

**February 26<sup>th</sup>:** Fr. G. Sembianti visits the community in Egypt.

**April 13<sup>th</sup>:** The rector returns to Verona. Monsignor Sogaro appoints Fr. Vicentini as general administrator and superior of the houses in Cairo.

**June 4<sup>th</sup>:** Fr. Luigi Bonomi escapes from El Obeid.

**August 2<sup>nd</sup>:** Monsignor Sogaro is consecrated bishop in Rome.

**12<sup>th</sup>:** The new bishop visits the Mother House in Verona.

**28<sup>th</sup>:** A monument to Daniel Comboni is inaugurated in the cathedral in Verona.

**October 7<sup>th</sup>:** Maria Caprini and Fortunata Quascè flee from Omdurman. They arrive in Cairo on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November.

**28<sup>th</sup>:** The Jesuit Fathers, Frigerio and Asperti, assume the direction of the Combonian Institute which is beginning to be transformed into a Religious Congregation.

## 1886

**April 26<sup>th</sup>:** Vittoria Paganini leaves for Verona due to her failing health. She is accompanied by Matilde Lombardi and Marietta Casella.

**27<sup>th</sup>:** Faustina Stampais decides to leave the Congregation.

**July 26<sup>th</sup>:** Sr. Vittoria returns to Egypt with Sr. Matilde Lombardi and Sr. Angela Rizzardi.

## 1887

**January 23<sup>rd</sup>:** Episcopal jubilee of Cardinal Luigi di Canossa.

**May 15<sup>th</sup>:** Costanza Caldara returns from Egypt.

**November 15<sup>th</sup>:** Costanza Caldara is appointed novice mistress. Teresa Marini becomes a general counsellor.

## 1888

**August 22<sup>nd</sup>:** Giuseppa Scandola and Elisa Suppi are transferred to **Gesira** with the refugees from the Sudan in order to open an agricultural colony. Fortunata Quasce goes with them.

**September:** A new community is opened in **Helouan**. The superior is Francesca Dalmasso.

**November 4<sup>th</sup>:** Another community is opened in Cairo with Matilde Lombardi, Bartolomea Benamati, Ginevra Tormene and Annunziata Hartman, in order to give a service in the Rodolfo Hospital.

## 1889

**December 27<sup>th</sup>:** Luigi di Canossa appoints Maria Bollezzoli as "*General Superior*" and Vittoria Paganini as "*Vicar General for the houses in Africa*".

## 1890

**January 9<sup>th</sup>:** Vittoria Paganini writes a letter to Leone XIII.

**16<sup>th</sup>:** Monsignor Corbelli, Apostolic Delegate in Egypt, begins the canonical visit to the communities of the Missionaries and the Sisters in Egypt.

**April 19<sup>th</sup>:** Cardinal Simeoni requests that the **Rules** of the two Congregations, *the Sons of the Sacred Heart* and the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, be drawn up.

**August 10<sup>th</sup>:** Vittoria Paganini (invited) and Maria Caprini arrive in the Mother House.

**October 15<sup>th</sup>:** Costanza Caldara returns to Egypt accompanying Vittoria Paganini who is gravely ill. She is delegated by the Superior General to visit the communities.

## 1891

**January 5<sup>th</sup>:** The new Rules to be presented in Rome are prepared in the Mother House.

**July 19<sup>th</sup>:** Costanza Caldara returns to Verona after the death of Sr. Vittoria.

November 29<sup>th</sup>: Caterina Chincarini and Elisabetta Venturini flee from Omdurman.

## 1892

**March 18<sup>th</sup>:** Giuseppa Scandola is elected the Provincial Superior in Egypt by the Chapter.

## 1893

**February 22<sup>nd</sup>:** *Propaganda Fide* sends a letter to Luigi di Canossa regarding the new borders of the Vicariate and also the need to have the Constitutions approved.

**November 26<sup>th</sup>:** The Superiors gather in Cairo to discuss the Rules.

**27<sup>th</sup>:** Sogaro accuses Sembianti of '*frequent and substantial changes*' made in Verona to the Constitutions and Rules of the *Pie Madri*.

## 1894

**January 15<sup>th</sup>:** After having established the new borders, *Propaganda Fide* entrusts to the Sons of the Sacred Heart, the Vicariate of the Sudan.

**May 1<sup>st</sup>:** *Propaganda Fide* invites Monsignor Sogaro to submit his resignation.

**28<sup>th</sup>:** Fr. F.S. Geyer is nominated the Apostolic Administrator of the Vicariate.

**August 26<sup>th</sup>:** Dalmasso and Lombardi arrive in the Mother House after having been called there by the bishop.

**October 12<sup>th</sup>:** Opening of a new community in Laveno (Varese) with Carolina Milani, Margherita Carollo and Angela Demai. They will be engaged in a nursery school.

## 1895

**January 21<sup>st</sup>:** Antonio M. Roveggio is appointed Apostolic Vicar of the Sudan.

**June 19<sup>th</sup>:** Monsignor Roveggio holds a “*short meeting*” in the Mother House with Maria Bollezzoli and Costanza Caldara.

**September 16<sup>th</sup>:** Rome communicates that the Rules of *the Pie Madri* will be examined in the month of November. Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti gives each Sister a copy of the text of the “common rules”.

**November 14<sup>th</sup>:** Opening of the community in Aswan with Francesca Dalmasso, Maria Caprini, Fortunata Quasce and Erminia Cavaleri.

**December:** Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti asks to enter the Congregation of the *Sons of the Sacred Heart*.

## 1896

**August 6<sup>th</sup>:** “Separate administration” begins to be talked about.

**30<sup>th</sup>:** Sr. Francesca Dalmasso is appointed Provincial for the Sisters in Africa.

**October 6<sup>th</sup>:** Monsignor Roveggio proposes renting the house of the Sisters in Cairo to the financial advantage of the mission. The Provincial opposes this.

**20<sup>th</sup>:** After the departure of Fr. Sembianti for Trent, Fr. Gian Battista **Pighi** is indicated by Canossa as the ecclesiastical superior of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*.

**November 16<sup>th</sup>:** Monsignor Roveggio sends a copy of the administrative agreement, already signed, to Maria Bollezzoli. A decision is taken to close the house in Laveno.

**December 16<sup>th</sup>:** Bollezzoli writes to Roveggio telling him that she will not sign the agreement as it stands.

## 1897

**February 22<sup>nd</sup>:** *Propaganda Fide* issues a **decree of merit** of the Congregation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* approving for five years the Constitutions and Rules.

**28<sup>th</sup>:** Luigi di Canossa intervenes in the question of the administrative separation.

**April 5<sup>th</sup>:** Roveggio sends Maria Bollezzoli a very harsh letter regarding the agreement.

**May 18<sup>th</sup>:** The purchase of a house in Fumane (VR) using the funds of the Sisters is concluded.

**July 16<sup>th</sup>:** Maria Bollezzoli gives the Rules to the community of the Mother House.

**September 4<sup>th</sup>:** Maria Bollezzoli communicates that the first General Chapter will be held in May 1898. The sisters are withdrawn from Laveno.

**October 12<sup>th</sup>:** Opening of the community in Fumane (VR).

**December 8<sup>th</sup>:** **Perpetual Vows** are made in the Mother House for the first time.

## 1898

**June 7<sup>th</sup>:** Official opening of the first General Chapter.

**11<sup>th</sup>:** Maria Bollezzoli is confirmed as the Superior General.

**14<sup>th</sup>:** Costanza Caldara is elected first assistant and Vicar General.

**July 12<sup>th</sup>:** Costanza Caldara, delegated by the Superior General, leaves for Egypt.

**September 3<sup>rd</sup>:** End of the Mahdia.

## 1899

**February 11<sup>th</sup>:** First administrative agreement between the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* and the *Sons of the Sacred Heart*.

**June 21<sup>st</sup>:** Fr. Angelo Colombaroli is elected the first Superior General of the *Sons of the Sacred Heart*.

**October:** The mortal remains of Daniel Comboni are exhumed in Khartoum.

**November 4<sup>th</sup>:** The mortal remains of the Founder are buried in the Cathedral in Aswan.

**December 7<sup>th</sup>:** The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the vestition of the first *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* is celebrated.

## 1900

**March 12<sup>th</sup>:** **Luigi di Canossa** dies in Verona.

**October 22<sup>nd</sup>:** Francesca Dalmasso and Maria Bonetti leave for the Sudan.

**30<sup>th</sup>:** A community is opened in Omdurman.

## 1901

**April 2<sup>nd</sup>:** Last note of Maria Bollezzoli to Costanza Caldara.

**14<sup>th</sup>:** Sr. Costanza is recalled urgently to Verona...

**23<sup>rd</sup>:** Maria Bollezzoli dies at 5.10 am.

## Index of Names

**Arabi'** Ahmed Pascia (1839-1911), Egyptian. After the ascent to the throne of Prince Tawfik, in 1879 following the forced abdication of his father, Ismail, Colonel Ahmed Arabi' emerged as a great sympathizer and active collaborator of the Nationalist Party, of which he became the leader in 1881. Promoted to General and nominated Minister of War in January 1882, Arabi' elaborated a political programme which aimed at excluding foreigners from every form of government and from all financial control in Egypt. This programme which was favoured by the army could be summed up in the slogan: *Egypt to the Egyptians*. In practice, Arabi' sustained an anglophobic policy, one which was not approved by the Khedive. After the events which took place in Alexandria in June 1882, which provoked armed intervention by England and France, he led the Egyptian resistance and favoured the capture of the Khedive himself. Repudiated and declared a rebel by the Sultan, Abdul Hamid, he was defeated by the English in September 1882 and deported to Ceylon. He obtained a pardon in 1901 and returned to his homeland where he retired to private life.

**Asperti**, Samuele (1818-1896). He came from the Jesuit Province of Lombardy and was defined by his biographer, L. Mazza, "*father and founder of the Sons of the Sacred Heart*". On his arrival in Verona, in 1885, he was entrusted by Monsignor Sogaro with the formation and spiritual direction of the future *Sons of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*. In particular, he directed spiritually, until the end, Antonio Maria Roveggio, who in 1895 became the second successor of Daniel Comboni. Gravely ill and involved in polemics with Sogaro himself, Fr. Asperti left Verona in 1893. He retired to Mantova to a nursing home of the Jesuit Fathers where he died on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 1896. *La Nigrizia*, in July of that same year, wrote a long necrology about him (pp. 108-110).

**Astori**, Laura M. Maddalena (d. 1876) She was of Venetian origin and was the Superior of the Institute of the Benedictine Sisters, Daughters of the Sacred Heart of Mary. She arrived in Verona in 1846 to open a school for poor girls in Cantarane Street. In 1865, she had transferred the boarding school to *Via Santa Maria in Organo*, buying the building in her own name due to the imminent laws of 1866 regarding the suppression of religious

orders. When Daniel Comboni decided to buy the convent in 1872, he accepted the clause of maintaining Laura Astori and her companions until their death.

**Bonomi, Luigi** (1841-1927). Ordained in Verona in 1864, he was the curate at Montorio (VR) when he entered the Institute of the *Missioni per la Nigrizia*. Having reached Cairo in September 1874, he left the following month for Central Africa. After the Fathers of St. Camillo withdrew from the Vicariate, he remained faithful to Comboni, who appointed him as his representative in Khartoum during his last journey in Europe. He was imprisoned during the Mahdia, while he was superior of the community of Delen. He was helped by Licurgo Santoni in 1885 to escape from El Obeid. Three years later, Monsignor Sogaro, on the request of the Holy See, sent him to Eritrea as chaplain of the Italian troops. He died in Asmara, where he is still remembered with great veneration, after having called there also the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*.

**Canossa, Luigi** (1809-1900). Born in Verona, Luigi di Canossa entered the Company of Jesus in Modena, where he was ordained a priest in 1841. After having abandoned the Company of Jesus, he returned to Verona on the advice of doctors and was elected a canon in the cathedral in 1857. Indicated as the successor of Bishop Riccabona, who had been transferred to Trent in 1861, Luigi di Canossa was consecrated bishop of Verona on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 1862 and was later created Cardinal in 1867. He was very sensitive to the question of the missions and as early as 1860, he had suggested to Fr. Nicola Mazza a “Plan” for preparing “on African shores” young African men and women ready to return then to their own countries as missionaries. He was the founder of the institution of the *Pia Associazione del Buon Pastore* (1867) which had to be suspended in 1868 but which was reactivated again in November 1870 when “*he assumed the mandate of being the head and president of the whole work*” (W. 4887) so as to favour the birth of the two Combonian congregations. When these passed to the jurisdiction of *Propaganda Fide*, Luigi di Canossa was indicated as their Cardinal Protector and he retained this role until his death.

**Colombaroli, Angelo** (1863-1922). He was from Dolce’ in Verona and he was ordained in 1887 in Verona when he made his religious profession among the *Sons of the Sacred Heart*.

He left for Egypt in November of the same year and was superior and procurator of the mission in Cairo. The first General Chapter of the Sons of the Sacred Heart in 1899, elected him General Superior of the Congregation.

**Dichtl**, Giovanni (1857-1889). He was originally from Stiria and entered in Graz on the 30<sup>th</sup> of September 1876. He left for Africa in 1879, as secretary of Daniel Comboni who ordained him in Cairo on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 1880. Assigned to Khartoum, he remained always faithful to his bishop, the Father who had *generated him for Africa* (Dichtl to Simeoni, June 29<sup>th</sup> 1884), whom he always loved and never forgot. After the death of Comboni, whom he assisted until his last breath, Fr. Giovanni Dichtl continued to take care of all the correspondence, especially of that in Arabic. In 1882, when the Superior left Khartoum for the first time with all the personnel, Fr. Giovanni remained alone, until his health was seriously undermined by too much work and Fr. Sogaro decided to call him back to Europe in May 1883.

He remained in Verona for two years as an Arabic teacher and then he went back to Stiria where he recovered well. He wrote, amongst other things, a volume of 452 pages on Sudan in German. He was recalled to Africa in 1885 to collaborate in the liberation of the prisoners but he had to return quickly due to his failing health. He spent his last year of life as chaplain of the Servants of the Sacred Heart of Himmelhof close to Vienna where he died a holy death. His necrology was prepared by Canon Mitterrutzner and published by *Nigrizia* in the month of March 1889.

**Frigerio**, Pietro (d. 1900). He was a Jesuit and the first rector of the newly founded Congregation of the Sons of the Sacred Heart in Verona from 1885 to 1887 when he was replaced by Fr. Voltolina. Fr. Frigerio was the editor of the first draft of the Constitutions and Rules of the Religious Institute but he was unable to complete the work due to his being transferred. He died, in fact, in the home of the Jesuits in Trent in 1900.

**Geyer**, Francesco Saverio (1859-1943). Born in Bavaria, he entered the Missionary Institute in Verona in November 1880, eight days after the last departure of Daniel Comboni for Africa. He did not, therefore, know Comboni personally. Despite this fact, the student was entrusted by the rector with the task of writing his first biography which was published in Verona in 1882.

Ordained in the same year by Luigi di Canossa, he left immediately for Africa where, together with others, he collaborated in attempts to free the prisoners of the Mahdi. On his return to Verona in 1896, he decided to enter the Congregation of the *Sons of the Sacred Heart* and he made his religious vows the following year. Fr. Geyer was appointed superior in Bressanone, where he remained until 1903, when he was nominated successor of Monsignor Roveggio, as the Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa. Returning to Africa immediately, Monsignor Geyer directed the Vicariate for almost twenty years – until 1922 – developing it considerably. He sent numerous reports to *Nigrizia*. After his resignation, he returned to Germany where he continued to carry out pastoral activities until his death.

**Girelli**, Maddalena (1838-1923) and Elisabetta (1839-1919). Born in Brescia, they were educated in the college of the *Vergini di Castiglione delle Stiviere* (Mantova). On return to their family in 1856, they refused offers of matrimony and consecrated themselves to God with a vow of chastity. Elisabetta wanted to become a Sister, but her own sister dissuaded her, also because the family needed them. Finally Elisabetta was persuaded that God wanted her in the world and she established three fields of action: the spiritual formation of youth, charity to the poor and assistance to young people in danger. It is in this context of vocational discernment, shared also by Maddalena, that the rebirth of the *Compagnia di Sant'Orsola can be situated*. The Pious Union of the Daughters of Saint Mary Immaculate had its beginnings in April 1864 and in June 1866, the *Compagnia di sant'Orsola* was revived.

Daniel Comboni maintained correspondence with the two Sisters from 1870 till 1881 and he greatly admired their spirit. He adopted the books on the Sacred Heart and on St. Joseph compiled by Elisabetta, who was particularly distinguished as an author of books on spirituality, for his missionaries. (see, Mario BEDESCHI, *La Compagnia di sant'Orsola Figlie di Sant'Anna di Brescia, l'Opera delle sorelle Girelli*, Brescia, 2003)

**Giulianelli**, Francesco (1831-1898). He was originally from Rome and was ordained in 1876 and given 'on loan' to Comboni from the PIME. In September 1881, he was nominated Administrator of the mission of Central Africa and of the houses in Egypt. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 1881, after the

death of the bishop, Cardinal Simeoni confirmed Fr. Francesco Giulianelli in this position until such times as new dispositions would be given (See, ACR, A/13/51/1). It was certainly not easy for him to face the situation which was emerging for the Combonian mission with the beginning of the Mahdia in Sudan. However, when he was recalled to Rome by his Institute in 1884, Monsignor Sogaro did not make any attempt to keep him. He was entrusted with the Shensi matter after the outbreak of war between France and China. He was nominated Apostolic Administrator while awaiting the nomination of the first Apostolic Vicar of that region. Fr. Francesco Giulianelli remained in Shensi as procurator until his death. (see, *Le Memorie* of G. Pennacchi, rector of the Mastai College and the Archive of the PIME in Rome.)

**Gordon, Charles G.** (1833-1885). He was an English official of the Engineers Corps who, after having been English Consul in Galatz, served in Egypt. In 1873, the Khedive nominated him Governor of Equatoria, until 1876 when Gordon himself stepped down.

In 1877, Gordon was nominated Governor General of all of the Sudan and entrusted with the particular task of suppressing slavery. “*Gordon Pascia*”, Comboni wrote, “*is the terror of slavery. [...] He favours me greatly and always comes to see me. He has decided to entrust the government hospital in Fashoda to our Sisters of Verona*”... (W. 5389). It was Gordon too who placed at the disposition of our Sisters, who had to journey from Khartoum to El Obeid, both the steam boat and the camels necessary for the journey. (See W. 5538).

Gordon renounced his position in 1880, but had to return to the Sudan in 1884 to proceed with the evacuation of the Egyptian troops after the defeat of general Hicks.

He was once again nominated Governor General, but with a role which was not at all clear, and he found it impossible to defend Khartoum from the attack of the Mahdists in January 1885. He himself was beheaded on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January and he left a diary about the siege of Khartoum.

**Hanriot, Leone** (1847-1894). Originally from Namur (Belgium), he entered the Institute in Verona in 1878 and was sent to the mission of Kordofan. Superior in Khartoum after the death of Daniel Comboni, he retreated with all the personnel of the mission on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December 1883. From December 1885 till October 1887, he remained in Suakin, Aswan at Wadi Halfa, in order to remain in contact with the prisoners and

favour their escape. He was Superior in Gesira from the end of 1889 till 1894. He was then sent to Massaua, where he died some months later.

**Hansal**, Martin Ludwig (1823-1885). Born in Moravia, he transferred to Sudan in 1853, following Monsignor Knoblecher for whom he acted as secretary. In 1862, he was nominated Austro Hungarian Consul, with the particular mandate of following the problems of the Catholic mission, which was under the protection of the Austrian government. The consul, in fact, would always demonstrate himself "*a true friend and servant of the mission*" (W. 3201). Surprised in Khartoum by the Mahdist attack on the city, he was killed in January 1885.

**Hicks**, William (1830-1883), British soldier. He began his career in India in 1848. In 1867, he moved to Africa, where he took part in the Anglo Abyssinian war. In 1883, without having ever been in the Sudan, he was put in command of the expedition which was sent to stop the advance of the Mahdists, who were already in control of El Obeid. In the month of September 1883, this expedition left Khartoum but it never reached the capital of Kordofan since General Hicks and his 12,000 men were massacred in the woods of Kazgil.

**Kirchner**, Matteo (1826–1912) born in Bamberg, Bavaria, he was ordained in 1849 and was a member of the missionary expedition of 1854 to the Vicariate of Central Africa. "*He was a most worthy and untiring missionary who knew five languages, amongst which, Arabic which he had studied in Rome [...]. After only a short time in Khartoum, he was a great help to the mission which had also begun to gather its fruits*" (G. BELTRAME, *Memorie di un Viaggio sul Fiume Azzurro nei Sciangallah*, Verona, 2010). In 1857, he was sent by Monsignor Knoblecher to visit the stations of Holy Cross and Gondocoro ( see W. 2121) where he led the missionaries from the Mazza Institute. In 1858, on the death of the Pro Vicar, Ignazio Knoblecher, he was indicated as his successor. Discouraged, however, by the death of some of the missionaries, whom he was unable to substitute, with the permission of *Propaganda Fide*, he handed over the Vicariate to the Franciscans of Stiria in 1861. He withdrew to his diocese of Bamberg where he became parish priest in Schesslitz, but for some time (1873-76) he was

also a delegate to the Parliament of Berlin and a member of the Centre Party (See, *La Nigrizia*, XXX(1912)3, p. 48). His relationship with Daniel Comboni was always very good (See, W. 650 ff).

**Lavigerie**, Charles M. (1825-1892) was ordained a priest in 1849 and became bishop of Nancy in 1867 and then later, Archbishop of Algeri with the task of facilitating the co-existence of Christians and Muslims in Algeria. Having thus, in a certain sense, discovered his missionary vocation for Africa, he founded the two Congregations of the White Fathers and the White Sisters.

Daniel Comboni met with him in Paris more than once. When he learned that the Apostolic Prefecture of the Sahara had been entrusted to the White Fathers, he wrote to Lavigerie informing him about his *Plan for Africa* but he received no response. From 1878 till 1881, both Comboni and Lavigerie were questioned by *Propaganda Fide* regarding the *International African Association* established by Leopold II of Belgium. In response, Lavigerie sent to Cardinal Franchi a plan for the evangelization of equatorial Africa, territory already assigned to the Vicariate for Central Africa. There were many then who expressed some reserve about this way of proceeding, (see the comments of G. Romanato in this regard, 1998, pp. 299 ff), but it was no use, as one can see on pages 815 ff of the *Positio*. It was only in 1893, when the borders of the Vicariate of Central Africa were reviewed, that Uganda was once again included.

**Losi**, Giovanni (1838-1882). He was from the diocese of Piacenza and he entered the Missionary Institute of Verona in 1872 and left for Africa in September of the same year. He was superior first in Delen and then in El Obeid. Twenty days after the death of Daniel Comboni, he was nominated the interim General Superior of the Vicariate, despite the fact that he was known to be one of the worst slanderers of the deceased bishop. Daniel Comboni, while appreciating him very much as a missionary, was often perplexed about him, as can be seen from the *Writings*: 2426, 3685, 4226, 6168, etc). The testimony of Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder on the occasion of the death of Sr. Maria Colpo is also interesting (see, *AMN*, 10(2005)39 ff).

**Mansur**, Virginia. She was born in Kasbaia, Lebanon in 1854. When she was still a child, she was entrusted to the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition after her father was killed. At the age of 15 years, she wished to

be taken by them to Marseilles to enter the noviciate in order to avoid a marriage imposed on her by her family. In 1873, after having made her religious profession as a sister of St. Joseph, Sr. Anna left first for Egypt and then for the Sudan where she remained until 1879. At that point she left the French Congregation and asked to enter the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*. In the Writings of Daniel Comboni, the events of the life of the ex Sr. Anna, as she was called in religion, are well documented, especially for the period starting in March 1881. Given the importance that she assumed during the process for the beatification of Daniel Comboni, an Appendix in volume 21-A/2(2012) of *Archivio Madri Nigrizia* is dedicated to her.

**Maragase**, Marietta (1848-1905). She was a slave of Nuban origin who was rescued in Cairo by Fr. Nicolò Olivieri and entrusted to the Sisters of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, in Cremona until she had completed her education. On her return to Africa with Daniel Comboni in 1869, she was sent away from the Institute in Cairo because of her conduct. She then decided to return to El Obeid, perhaps in the hope of finding her family of origin and she managed to reach El Obeid in 1880, in the company of Raffaele Alfieri from Naples, who left the Sudan, however, when the situation became dangerous. Finding herself alone during the Mahdia, she proved to be extremely generous and courageous towards the missionaries and in particular towards the Sisters, so much so that she was given the name '*Combatti*' [which means 'fighter']. There were rumours, however, that she was able to do as much as she did, thanks to the fact that she had entered into a relationship with a *faki* and she had pronounced the formula of adhesion to Islam (See, ACR, A/39/34/8: Sogaro to Sembianti, Scellal, 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1884).

She managed to leave the Sudan with her adopted daughter, Sciarfa in 1887 and they could be seen together in the colony of Africans at Gesira in 1888. She died in Helwan on August 13<sup>th</sup> 1905.

**Marzano**, Vincenzo (1854-1913). He was originally from Naples and entered in Verona after having been a Dominican. Daniel Comboni ordained him in Khartoum in 1878.

Assigned to El Obeid, Fr. Vincenzo was fully committed to the construction of the new Church. He returned to Italy in August 1881 and in January 1883 he went back to Africa with Monsignor Sogaro with whom he was unable to collaborate. He returned to Europe when the need arose to accompany Fr.

Giovanni Dichtl who was ill and he left the Vicariate of Central Africa for good in April of that same year.

**Mologni**, Giacomo (1848-1897). He was originally from Bergamo and he had entered the Company of Jesus in 1879 and left Italy immediately for France and then for Spain. On his return to Italy he had asked to be sent to India but because of his health, already weakened due to fever from malaria, he was only given permission to conclude his studies in Poland. In 1890, however, he obtained permission to leave for Romania where he remained for about three years. In 1893, he was asked to move to Verona as superior and formator of the young *Sons of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*. It was under his leadership, therefore, that the dispute with Monsignor Sogaro was resolved. Sogaro was then replaced as Apostolic Vicar by Monsignor Antonio Maia Roveggio. In 1895, Fr. Mologni opened a second noviciate in Brixen and later, an apostolic school in Trento. Officially, he was the first Superior General of the *Sons of the Sacred Heart*, after the approval of the Rules. After the death of Fr. Asperti, he gave a more open and apostolic structure to the Institute, thus contributing to the reconciliation of a certain disassociation between being Religious and being missionary which had developed under his predecessor, Fr. Frigerio. He always expressed himself contrary, however, to the presence of the Sisters in Africa. In 1896 he became ill with hepatitis and his condition worsened despite all the medical treatment he received. He died while still in service on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1897 [see, *La Nigrizia*, XV(1897)8, pp. 113-122.

**Muhammad Ahmad = Mahdi** (1843-1885). He was born in the region of Dongola and came from a family which claimed to be descended from that of the Prophet Muhammad. When his parents transferred to Khartoum, the boy had every possibility of deepening the study of the Qur'an which was something he had always desired to do.

When, in 1871, he moved with his brothers to the island of Abba, to the South of Khartoum, the young man already possessed the title *Sayh*. This authorized him to open his own school and teach his own thinking or doctrine, which he had developed during his stay in Berber and then also as he came into contact with the realities he encountered during his itinerant preaching all over the Sudan.

In 1880, after a memorable encounter with Abdullahi at-Ta'aysi, whom he indicated as his successor, he began to apply to himself the characteristics of the Mahdi, revealing to his disciples and friends that he had also had visions

containing revelations, of which the third, in 1881, was the decisive one. The 'Holy War' provoked by his Mahdia began in that same year of 1881. El Obeid, the capital of Kordofan, was conquered in January 1883. Khartoum instead, fell two years later. He established himself at Omdurman, the new Capital of his kingdom and he died only five months later on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1885.

**Ohrwalder, Josef** (1856-1913). He was born at Lana in Tyrol and entered the missionary Institute in Verona in 1875. He was ordained in Cairo at the hands of Monsignor Comboni and in 1880 left for Central Africa with a first destination at El Obeid and a second at Delen. He was on the Nuba Mountains when, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 1882, he became a prisoner of the Mahdists together with all the other personnel of the mission. All that he lives after that is known through his *Memorie*, published for the first time in English in 1892 and translated into Italian the following year. They were published by EMI only in 1998 under the title: *I miei dieci anni di prigionia...* Returning to the Sudan after the end of the Mahdia, Fr. Ohrwalder was Parish Priest in Omdurman where he was known for his holiness. He died there suddenly on the 7<sup>th</sup> of August 1913.

**Pighi, Gian Battista** (1847-1926). He was a professor at the Major Seminary in Verona and was chosen by Monsignor di Canossa, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 1896, as the ecclesiastical superior of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*. Fr. Vianello, who knew him well, wished to remember him at his death with the following eulogy: *"He is a shining star of the Veronese Church but is now disappearing; a star encircled by that serene and irreproachable light with which he always shone. The radiant examples of holiness and the distinguished works of theology which he leaves us with, will speak loudly of him. We bow reverently to kiss the remains of a special friend of our Institute, sure that from heaven he will generously assist and help us just as much or even more than he did while still on earth. We have reason to hope for this, because the bonds which unite us with him were always holy and intimate. He was one of our best friends and an enthusiastic admirer of our Founder, Comboni. He has been the ecclesiastical superior of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia for approximately thirty years and for twenty five years he*

*has shared the secrets of his delicate conscience with the missionaries”... (see, CAPOVILLA, A., P. Federico Vianello, p. 379-380).*

From 1913 till 1923 he was Vicar General of the Diocese of Verona. His niece, Rosa Pighi, became a *Pia Madre della Nigrizia*.

**Pimazzoni**, Francesco (1856-1883). This layman from the parish of *San Paolo* in Verona entered the Institute in 1879 and left immediately for Africa. Daniel Comboni, who took him to Khartoum, called him his future secretary, also because he spoke Arabic well. On his return to Cairo in 1882 due to ill health, he was recalled to Verona by Monsignor Sogaro who ordained him. He left for Africa again with Monsignor Sogaro and was assigned to Khartoum where, unfortunately, he died on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 1883. Everyone had very beautiful memories of him.

**Regnotto**, Giuseppe (1849-1926). Originally from Bosco Chiesanuova (VR), he entered in Verona as a layman in 1876. He left the following year for Cairo and then for the Sudan. Luigi Bonomi held him in great esteem, as did Comboni. He was in Delen when, in 1882, he became a prisoner of the Mahdists with the rest of the community. From El Obeid, where he was detained until 1886, he was then transferred to Omdurman, and remained there until the end of the war. Released by Fr. Losi in 1882, from the oath that bound him to the Institute, he later decided to marry a young Abyssinian Catholic, Maria al-Kal. The matrimony produced four children and so “Beppo” remained in the Sudan for the rest of his life at the service of the mission, even after the end of the Mahdia. He died in Khartoum on the third of June 1926.

**Rolleri**, Bartolomeo (1839-1902). Originally from the diocese of Piacenza, he entered in Verona in 1868 and left for Cairo the following February where he became a good friend of Stanislao Carcereri. In March 1873, Daniel Comboni entrusted to him the direction of the Institutes in Cairo. Until the month of February 1875, Rolleri still spoke of Comboni as ‘*his beloved Pro Vicar*’. Comboni himself confirmed this in a letter to Cardinal Simeoni: “... *from 1868 till 1875 he was one of my consolations*”... (W.6094). However, starting from October 1875, for reasons which remained obscure to the Founder, his attitude changed so much that Comboni even wrote to Faustina Stampais, “ *Among those who have fought against me in these terrible years, the most ferocious was my dear Fr.*

*Bortolo Rolleri, whom I forgive with all my heart*” (31<sup>st</sup> of December 1875). Clearly aligned in favour of the Camillians, Rolleri continued to oppose Comboni, even when he stayed for a time in Verona in 1880. He was assigned to Khartoum in December of the same year, but unable to stay there, he returned to Cairo. He left the Institute in 1888 and entered the Congregation of the Scalabrinians.

**Roveggio, Antonio Maria** (1858-1902). He was ordained in the seminary of Vicenza in 1884 and entered in Verona in December of the same year. He made his religious profession with the first ten novices of the *Sons of the Sacred Heart* in 1887.

He left for Egypt at the end of the year and for six years was the confessor and spiritual director of the Sisters and Missionaries in Cairo. In 1895, after the resignation of Monsignor Sogaro, he was appointed Apostolic Vicar of the Sudan and had his headquarters in Aswan since it was not possible to return to Khartoum.

Both in Aswan and later in Omdurman, Monsignor Roveggio wanted to have the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* so that they could undertake apostolic activities with women. He was making ready a house for them also in Lul when he died unexpectedly on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 1902, just 43 years old. The cause of his beatification is currently in process.

**Santoni, Licurgo A.** (1846-1914). He arrived in Egypt with his father while still very young and he remained for approximately 35 years. In 1865, when the Viceroy Ismail brought the postal service under the state, Santoni was also employed. In 1878, he accompanied Gordon in Sudan and organized the postal service of the military expedition of 1884-85, becoming the director, for twenty years, of the postal service in Upper Egypt and Nubia. Having lived in various places, he can be considered very knowledgeable about the country, and therefore, his work, “*Upper Egypt and Nubia 1863 – 1898*” is of particular importance. He was on very friendly terms with the Catholic Mission and he was a sincere admirer of Comboni and of the Comboni Missionaries and he played a decisive role in their favour during the Mahdist imprisonment. He received the title of *Cavaliere* from the Italian Government for getting personally involved in the liberation of Fr. Luigi Bonomi. He retired in 1898 but for some years he still acted as the general secretary of the Khedival Geographical Society.

**Sembianti, Giuseppe** (1836-1914). He was originally from Vervè in Trent. He entered the Congregation of the Stigmatine Fathers in Verona in 1862 and was ordained in 1865. He was first of all Director of the Stigmatines in Verona (1875) and then superior of the house in Bassano del Grappa (1877). From there, he was called in December 1879 to assume the position of director of the Comboni Institute in Verona. For five years, Fr. Sembianti was both Rector of the seminary of the African Missions and also of the Congregation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*.

With the latter he continued until 1897, while from 1885 he was the procurator for the newly conceived Congregation of the *Sons of the Sacred Heart* which he would enter only in 1896. He transferred to the house in Brescia in 1895 and remained there until his death on June 14<sup>th</sup> 1914.

**Sogaro, Francesco** (1839-1912). He was a Religious of the Stigmatine Congregation and originally from the diocese of Vicenza. He was parish priest of S. Giorgio in Braida, Verona when, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 1882, he was nominated by Rome as the successor of Daniel Comboni for the Vicariate of Central Africa.

He left Italy as soon as he could and reached Khartoum in March 1883, but was unable to take up residence there due to the Mahdist rebellion. It was from Cairo, in fact, that he followed all stages of the war, working very hard for the liberation of the prisoners and opening in Gesira an agricultural colony for the refugees from the Sudan.

After he presented his resignation in 1894, he was made titular Archbishop of Amida and assigned an annual pension. He was also nominated Secretary of the Commission of Cardinals for the Oriental Rites, Secretary of the Sacred Congregation of Indulgences and, in 1903, President of the Academy of Ecclesiastical Nobles, replacing Merry del Val when he became the Secretary of Pius X. He died piously in Rome on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 1912, fully reconciled with the Institute in Verona.

**Sorur, Daniele** (1860-1900). Oriundo from a Denka tribe, he was made a slave around 1871 during a raid carried out by the Gialabba and the Bagarra on his village. He was sold in the market in El Obeid and remained a slave for approximately two years until he was able to escape by jumping over the compound walls. He took refuge in the mission where he was received by Monsignor Comboni himself who accepted him as a catechumen and gave him his own name. Comboni took him to Italy in 1876 and the young man

was admitted to the *College of Propaganda Fide* and later ordained in Cairo by Monsignor Sogaro on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May, 1887. After taking his oath to the mission, he was sent to Suakin for two years and then chosen to accompany Fr. Geyer for two years of missionary animation in Europe. He returned to Africa in 1891 and was assigned by Monsignor Sogaro to Heloan les Bains. He died of tuberculosis in 1900.

**Vicentini, Domenico** (1847-1927). He was a Religious of the Stigmatine Congregation from Verona. He was requested by Monsignor Sogaro, on his departure for Africa, for a temporary service to the mission. When he arrived in Khartoum in December 1883, he had to leave immediately again with the others, and he was given the task of remaining as close to the new border of Mahdist Sudan as possible, so as to maintain contact with the prisoners, provide for their necessities and make every possible attempt to free them.

Recalled to Verona by his superiors, he then asked to enter the Congregation of the Scalabrinian Missionaries in 1900, and he became their Superior General in 1905.

Apart from his correspondence, an important diary of his, written in Cairo between 1885 and 1886, (AGS, DE/03/07) during the period in which he was the Superior of the Combonian Institutes, has come down to us.

**Voltolina, Antonio** (d. 1906). He was a Jesuit and he became Rector in Verona, after Fr. Frigerio, from 1887 till 1892. It was he who blessed the actual site of the Mother House of the Institute and it was he who completed the draft of the Constitutions and Rules. In 1897, after the death of Fr. Mogni, he was called once again to direct the Institute of the *Sons of the Sacred Heart* for another two years. On his death, *La Nigrizia* wrote the following necrology about him in February 1906:

*“The Reverend Father Voltolina had the most intimate and holy relationship with the Institute of the Missionaries of Africa in Verona and with the Congregation of the Sons of the Sacred Heart.*

*He was superior twice [...], and during this time, he dedicated himself in his enlightened and prudent zeal to procuring in every way, the good of the Institute. Through his holy life, his wise direction and his just counsel, he always worked to instil in his Sons that good spirit with which he himself was filled. The sweet aroma of his virtues will live long among all those who knew him and it will always be an ongoing stimulus to imitate his examples”... (p. 32).*

## **Abbreviations and Acronyms**

[come nell'originale italiano]

## **Bibliography and Sources of Research**

[tutto come nell'originale italiano]





## **Illustrations**

Monsignor Francesco Sogaro (1839-1912)  
First successor of Daniel Comboni  
in the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Africa  
(From: *La Nigrizia*, January 1883)

Maria Bollezzoli greets those departing in 1882.  
On her right, Leopolda Sandona'; on her left, Costanza Caldara  
Giuseppina Gemila and Rosima Kaltuma also go with them.

1885: *La Nigrizia*, III(1885)6, p. 165 announces the liberation  
of Maria Caprini and Fortunata Quascè

August 1888: A community of Sisters is opened in Gesira  
with the refugees from the Sudan

August 1990: Vittoria Paganini with Maria Bollezzoli  
in the Mother House for the preparation of the Rules

December 1891: Liberation of Caterina Chincarini  
and Elisabetta Venturini with Fr. Ohrwalder and little Adila

1894: The new borders of the Vicariate of Central Africa  
From: *La Nigrizia*, XIII(1895)2, p. 64

Monsignor Antonio M. Roveggio  
second successor  
of Daniel Comboni

1896: Monsignor G. Battista Pighi  
Ecclesiastical Superior  
of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*

1894: Last photo of Maria Bollezzoli  
with the community of the Mother House

The photo of the cover page dedicated by *La Nigrizia*, XVIII(1900)3, p. 33  
on the occasion of the death of the Cardinal Protector

Chapel of the Mother House: urn containing the mortal remains  
of Maria Bollezzoli, first General Superior

## **ARCHIVIO MADRI NIGRIZIA**

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