

Rogationists of the Heart of Jesus
Daughters of Divine Zeal

Saint Hannibal Mary Di Francia
VOCATIONS, PASSION OF HIS LIFE

Rome

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Introduction

“The problem of priestly vocations – and even both male and female religious vocations – is the fundamental problem of the Church. It is a test of its spiritual vitality and the condition of such vitality. It is the condition of its mission and of its development.”¹ With these words John Paul II, in his homily on May 10, 1981, closed the 2nd International Congress for vocations. This was also the belief that led Saint Hannibal M. Di Francia to spend his whole life for the cause of vocations. He wrote: “Imagine for a moment that the Priesthood, like the setting sun, were turned off. Would not the whole world be in darkness? Where would be the worship of God, the sacraments, the Most Holy Eucharist, the Word of God, Faith, Charity? All would perish. Imagine for a moment the opposite, i.e. that the Earth were full of elected Ministers of God, numerous priests and saints; so numerous that they would correspond to one for every hundred inhabitants of the globe, so Holy that they would equal the ancient Apostles: wouldn’t this be the sudden salvation and happiness of all souls, no one excepted? Inscrutable judgements of God! The Almighty

¹ L’Osservatore Romano, Homily, May 10, 1981.

wanted to connect the abundance of worthy Workers of the mystical harvest to the prayer for obtaining it! He gave it as a command to the Apostles and the disciples, and he repeated several times saying: *Messis multa quidem Operarii autem pauci: rogate ergo Dominum messis ut mittat Operarios in Messem suam.*² “In this Divine Word that Jesus Christ ‘was saying’ is contained every good for the whole Holy Church, for the whole of society, for all souls.”³ And this divine word was the soul of the whole work of Di Francia, aimed at highlighting the primacy of prayer to obtain vocations. He wrote thus to the Bishop of Parma, Mons. Conforti: “One may note that ‘therefore – ergo.’ It did not say ‘Ergo you work to form Priests’, ‘Ergo you gather money’ and others, but it said ‘Pray!’ What good can we hope for with all our efforts if we neglect the great remedy pointed out to us by our Lord Jesus Christ?”⁴ However, as a concrete human being, Saint Hannibal urged everyone to join action with prayer in order to achieve the desired effect: “One should observe that in the order established by Providence, prayer and action must go together to have their effect. To pray to the Lord to send good evangelical workers and then not cooperating as one could and should is to pray in vain. Conversely, to work for the formation of priests and not to accompany it with prayer, is work lost. To desire to form priests without asking the Lord is the same as being reduced to an artificial culture of clerics. The grace of vocation comes down from above, and it does not come down if no one asks.”⁵ In the light of these brief introductory reflections we can synthesize thus the spiritual profile of Di Francia: the lack of good vocations was his agony, their promotion his passion and the propagation of the prayer to obtain them his obsession.

² *Scritti*, vol 3, pag 59.

³ *Scritti*, vol 2, pag 305-306.

⁴ *Scritti*, vol 29, pag 89.

⁵ *Scritti*, vol 3, pag 40.

The World Day of prayer for vocations

The invitation of Jesus, *Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his harvest* (Mt 9.39), implemented mainly in the form of prayer for the sanctification of the clergy, from 1920 onwards can be found in several books of some prominent figures of the Church and bishops, from one end to another of the Catholic world. Of course, in this respect, it is acknowledged even in the Papal Magisterium that has addressed with increasing frequency the invitation to pray for vocations.

Pius XI in his Encyclical “*Ad Catholici Sacerdotii*” insisted forcefully on the need to use the great means of prayer to get the gift of vocations.⁶

However, one who actually indicated the heart of the problem of vocations, from which sprang the Montinian fruit of the World Days, was Pius XII. Firstly, he, with the *Motu Proprio* “*Cum nobis*” on 4 November 1941 constituted the *Pontifical Society for ecclesiastical vocations*, to which he entrusted the task of promoting the prayer for priestly

⁶ AAS 28 (1935), 37-52. The same Pope had also treated the problem in the Apostolic Letter «*Officiorum omnium*» dated August 1, 1922 (AAS 14 [1922], 449 ff.; in in another correspondence, cfr. AAS 15 (1923), 348-349; 19 (1927), 135; *Messages of the Pope for the World Day*, cit., 8.

vocations in all parts of the world,⁷ and, then, with the Apostolic Exhortation “Menti nostrae” on September 23, 1950, he urged the bishops to take care of the problem of vocation precisely because it is “intimately connected with the future of the Church” and he exhorted the faithful to make use of the humble and trustful prayer commanded by Jesus (Luke 10: 2) as “the surest way to have numerous vocations.”⁸

John XXIII was also along this line, and, in addition to numerous interventions on the topic of vocations, through the *Pontifical Society for ecclesiastical vocations*, he urged the institution for Italy of “National Day for ecclesiastical vocations.”⁹ The Pope’s dream was to extend the proposal to various Episcopal Conferences so that the initiative would reach a level of harmony throughout the Christian world, something in fact that took on a unified form with his successor. Indeed, after just seven months of Pontificate, Pope Paul VI, on a Saturday, April 11, 1964, the eve of the second Sunday after Easter, called the good Shepherd Sunday, addressed the faithful throughout the world, with a radio message, saying: “Pray the Lord of the harvest to send workers to his Church (cf.. Mt 9: 38) (...) From the soul may the heartfelt invocation to the Lord spring out, according to Christ’s invitation. Yes, today as in the past, “the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few” (Mt 9: 37) (...) Therefore, may this Sunday, which, in the Roman Liturgy takes from the Gospel the name of the good Shepherd, see merged into

⁷ AAS 33 (1941), n. 13, p. 479.

⁸ AAS 42 (1950), 617-702. See also the Encyclical «Mystici Corporis» of June 29, 1943 (AAS 35 [1943], 242).

⁹ Cfr. Dompieri G., *Giornate sacerdotali, per le vocazioni, per il Seminario, Esperienze circa le vocazioni ecclesiastiche*, in *Seminarium* 12, 1 (1961), 96-102; Idem, *Giornate diocesane e parrocchiali, Esperienze sulle vocazioni ecclesiastiche. Primo Congresso nazionale italiano*, in *Seminarium* 12, 2 (1961), 275-280. The initiative has been regularly repeated in 1962 and 1963, see also *Celebrazione della Seconda Giornata nazionale per le Vocazioni in Italia, Pontificia Opera per le Vocazioni*, in *Seminarium* 15, 2 (1963), 305-308.

a single throb of prayer numerous arrays of Catholics around the world, to invoke from the Lord workers needed for his harvest. And in order that this world day of prayer for priestly and religious vocations have the resonance that it deserves, we wanted to address Our encouraging Word to all our most beloved children, so that none would be remiss regarding a duty so serious and sensible.”¹⁰

In the opinion of accredited scholars of Paul VI, it seems there were no particular contingent to urge the Pope to take such an initiative, if not a concretization of the concern of his whole life, present since the years in which he worked in the Secretariat of State (1937-1954) and even more so during the period in which he was Archbishop of Milan (1955-1963). Certainly, the data he was receiving regarding the problem of vocations were daunting. With the institution of a World Day, however, Paul VI did not want to touch only the problem but highlight it permanently. One should not miss the fact that the initiative arose fully in council climate, after the promulgation of the constitution on the Liturgy “Sacrosanctum Concilium”, which placed the liturgical prayer at the heart of Christian life.

The first World Day of Prayer for Vocations was celebrated, then, on April 12, 1964, but, even if loaded with theological sense, had no great resonance, indeed for many Christian communities it passed almost unnoticed. Gradually, over the next few years, thanks to the forceful action of some religious congregations including the Rogationists and the Daughters of Divine Zeal, it has attracted attention until its insertion in relevant form in the pastoral activity of the Catholic Church.

The World Day of Prayer for Vocations is undoubtedly to be considered first fruits of the Montinian pontificate, culmination of a path of the Magisterium which was started years before.

¹⁰ *Teachings of Paul VI*, II, Città del Vaticano, LEV, 1964, 240-242.

The Role of Hannibal M. Di Francia

After this brief summary it is natural to ask what is the role and importance of Saint Hannibal Mary Di Francia (1851-1927) considering that other members of the ecclesiastical world and of the Magisterium have tackled the problem of vocations on the basis of invitation-command of Jesus “The harvest is great and the workers are few. Pray the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his harvest.”

Let’s say right away that the great merit of Di Francia was to have “discovered” and have worked hard all his life to spread this request-command of the Lord. But in some ways, despite having had a good resonance, the consideration that it had was not adequate to efforts.

Fate that those ahead of their times usually have.

Years after his death, John Paul II acknowledged that “from the providential intuition of Di Francia arose in the church a large movement of prayer for vocations.”¹¹ In this regard, in a speech on May 16, 1997, he emphasized also a detail: “It is not without a providential coincidence that May 16, 1897, day when a hundred years ago the first three young men formed by blessed Hannibal Di Francia entered

¹¹ *L'Osservatore Romano*, Homily for the Canonization, May 16, 2004

the novitiate, was precisely the fourth Sunday of Easter, the Sunday of “the good Shepherd.” In this same Sunday, the Servant of God Paul VI, my venerable Predecessor, established the “World Day of prayer for vocations.”¹²

The same Pontiff enrolled him first in the register of the Blessed calling him “authentic forerunner and zealous master of modern vocation ministry,”¹³ then canonizing him he gave him the well-deserved title of “distinguished apostle of prayer for vocations,”¹⁴ with which he is entered in the Proper of the Mass.

¹² *Insegnamenti*, XIII, 2 (1990), 830.

¹³ *L'Osservatore Romano* October 8-9, 1990. Fr. Di Francia was beatified on October 7, 1990 during the celebration of the Synod of Bishops on the theme “The Formation of priests in the present circumstances”, which produced the apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* in 1992.

¹⁴ *L'Osservatore Romano*, Homily for the Canonization, May 16, 2004.

An overwhelming inspiration

Let us see when and how Di Francia “discovered” in the Gospel this indication of the Lord. Let’s say right away that he was neither a priest nor a cleric; indeed, he did not even know he had the vocation. We believe that in order to fully understand his importance it is necessary to get into the dynamism of his existence.

Born in Messina in 1851, the young Hannibal lived directly those moments when united Italy was born, at the price of so much blood and conflict. Garibaldi with his thousand red shirts conquered Sicily and the Kingdom of Naples, when the College San Nicolò, where he studied, was closed. With his family he had to move to Naples in his grandmother’s house. It seemed that the world was turning upside down. He heard of priests and friars throw away their cassocks, embrace the rifle and participate in revolutionary activities.

After the formation of the new Kingdom of Italy it was decided to send him to the Academy of the Nunziatella to launch him on a military career, but, fortunately, it was understood that he was inclined for it.

The young man Di Francia was overwhelmed, like all

adolescents of any era, with many thoughts. When he went to church – he preferred the church of the convent of Porto Salvo which was quiet – he was attracted by the silence, but then he was assailed by discouragement: he saw the statue of one Saint and then another. He admired the frescos and felt the stories of those heroes, and he said to himself: ‘I can never be a Saint, for holiness is too transcendent.’

Meanwhile, churches and convents became empty and faith was persecuted to some extent. Certainly, a reason there was: often interests and politics had made the clergy not exemplary. A renewal was, therefore, necessary with holy priests who would revive and once again put the greatness of the faith forward, but they had to be saints.

What was the means?

His confessor had taught him to pray, so he began to think that only through prayer one could achieve the goal of obtaining vocations.

In this phase of interior work was the particular moment that marked his life. One day while in the Church of St. John of Malta in Messina “he had in mind this dominant thought – it is Fr. Hannibal himself who narrates it in third person – i.e. to carry on the greater good in the Holy Church, to save many souls, to extend the Kingdom of God on Earth, no half was as certain as the growth of elect ministers of God (...) and so the excellent and fruitful prayer of choice would be to ask insistently to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus to send on earth holy men and elect priests (...). This idea seemed to him very clear and indisputable.

Later he was surprised and struck upon reading in the Holy Gospel those divine Words: ‘the harvest is great, but the labourers are few: pray therefore the Lord of the harvest, to send out workers in his harvest.’”¹⁵

¹⁵ *Scritti*, vol. 2, 143.

He was surprised that none of the preachers known until then, none of the many devotional manuals ever examined, ever beckoned to what Jesus had ascertained, indicating clearly its solution.

This intuition-inspiration, “at the beginning of his spiritual life” when the call to the priesthood was not yet mature in him, was considered “as an internal addressed to him, to make himself its Apostle and propagator,” wrote his biographer and successor, Fr. Francesco Vitale.¹⁶

Zeal or fixation?

Father Hannibal was fully aware of his eagerness to draw the attention of the whole Christian world on this subject, to the point that, with his usual bit of irony, he had to write in his *Funeral speech*: “For the *Rogate* let us not say anything: for it he devoted himself either for zeal or fixation, or both.”¹⁷

In his turn, one of the censors theologians of his writings had pointed out: “even here we must take his too much modesty with a grain of salt: it wasn’t for fixation, it was for zeal. He was so affected by the need, for the Church, to have many worthy workers and by the effectiveness of the evangelical remedy in order to implore them, that, to realize it, he moved, one may well say, heaven and earth.

That argument was the reason of his life, the dominant theme of his writings, the characteristic of his work. To this end he procured the blessing and membership and spiritual collaboration of the Prelates of the Holy Church (Supreme Pontiffs, Cardinals, Bishops, Superiors General of Orders and Religious Congregations).¹⁸

What Jesus had said was ultimately the program that

¹⁶ Vitale, 42, 43.

¹⁷ Vitale, 759.

¹⁸ *Positio super Scriptis*, Roma 1959, 30; Tusino, MB, I, 544.

inspired him throughout his life and his charitable activities towards the neighbor. Prayer and charity formed the two themes on which he wanted to focus his own existence.

But how does one others understand it? Talking about it, writing about it, acting always. And he did so such that even after a long time his words resonate with a surprising actuality.

And not only this. After the disastrous earthquake of Messina on December 28, 1908, when Pope Pius X made him a gift of a wooden church, he wanted to place on the façade: “Rogate Dominum messis.” It was the first church dedicated to the prayer for vocations. It was the First of July 1910.

The goal was truly achieved when on April 3, 1921, he placed the first stone of the new Church in masonry, which was the Temple of the Evangelical Rogation,¹⁹ current minor basilica in Messina. For this building he studied the iconographic program and every detail, so that it would become a reference model for those who wanted to dedicate a church to the Divine Command.

¹⁹ Cfr. Vitale, 483-485.

The Realization

On March 19, 1887, with the entrance to the novitiate of the first four young women, Father Hannibal had started what would become his female Congregation. Tentatively called “Little Poor of the Heart of Jesus,” he had devised for them an emblem with the Sacred Heart surrounded by the inscription: “Rogate Dominum messis”.

It is not uncommon that the Lord intends for founders many trials and some particular crosses, often long, always bitter, like that of incomprehension on the part of one’s bishops. It is one of the means chosen by Providence to hone their virtues.

Fr. Hannibal, in fact, considered an atrocious suffering his not having obtained the confidence of his ordinary, Msgr. Letterio D’arrigo Ramondini, successor to the Card. Giuseppe Guarino at the helm of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Messina (1898-1922).

The year 1897 was the year of a very hard test: all his pastoral and charitable activity was going to be dissolved. Faith sustained him, but he had one regret: “in our undertakings, when everything should be in an uproar there remains no other comfort than the resignation to the

Divine Will, that makes every thing good, although we don't understand. But in my case there was a circumstance which rendered this cup even more bitter: namely, that I should resign myself to seeing dispersed the seed of an Institute dedicated to the blessed purpose of that heavenly mandate: *Rogate ergo Dominum messis, ut mittat operarios in messem suam*; the need to fold this sacrosanct Banner in which shines the most tender expressions of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, and to which the salvation of souls can be linked through the shortest and surest way.²⁰

a. *The Resource-Idea*

The year 1897 was a critical year and at the same time fruitful. It was the occasion of what will be a bright idea, but let us make Fr. Hannibal narrate it himself: "The present moment was increasingly becoming more difficult, intricate, daunting. And behold a beautiful idea, which we would call idea-resource, flashed for a moment in the mind of the priest initiator:²¹ but it was itself the daughter of a *great Word of the Gospel*, of an *idea* still larger, more sublime, that the Spirit, which blows where he wants, seems to have inspired, Himself, many years before the Pious Institute started, since the beginning of a spiritual youth. Let us call it *evangelical revelation, divine idea* (to attenuate it would not be humility), which anticipated and accompanied the poor priest initiator in the difficult undertaking, and that we have considered and consider as the basis on which stands the Pious Institute."

This was the *idea-resource, daughter* of the *Rogate*. But who could be interested?

Fr. Hannibal reasoned in these terms: "If there are people in the world to whom, above all, that divine Word: *Rogate*

²⁰ *Preziose Adesioni* (ed. 1901), Preface, 8-9. Several excerpts from the Preface to the various editions of *Preziose Adesioni*, will be cited, especially those of 1901 and 1919.

²¹ Thus how he identified himself out of humility by expressing in third person.

ergo Dominum messis, ut mittat operarios in messem suam, is of interest, they are the Bishops. By preference, they feel the need to have for themselves Priests [...]. They have seminaries, where they gather the clerics, and they are immensely pressured that the clerics become elect Priests, and they can never become one if with all means that they use, all their labors, schools and industries, the incessant prayer commanded by Jesus Christ is not united [...]. If such a prayer is neglected, if such a command is neglected, all the toil of the poor Bishops and Rectors of seminaries, generally, is reduced to a kind of artificial culture of priests. [...]

The bishops therefore cannot not take to heart this Pious Institute; if I ask them a very effective help, they can not refuse it to me. But what help? [...]

I will implore them to a *purely spiritual contest of prayers and blessings in the most solemn act of our holy religion, namely the great Sacrifice of the Holy Mass.*"

b. *The Sacred Alliance*

Having done that, Fr. Hannibal sent a circular letter of invitation to various Bishops of Sicily.

The first to respond were the two Blandini brothers: Giovanni, Bishop of Noto, on November 22, 1897, and Gaetano, Bishop of Agrigento, on January 16, 1898. Therefore, the date November 22, 1897, was assumed as the beginning of what will be the *Sacred Priestly Alliance*.

Mons. Genuardi Gerlando, Bishop of Acireale, called this Mass, *Apostolic Mass*, definition which was very pleasing to Di Francia who wrote "we adopt this beautiful name."

Having received the membership of twelve Bishops of Sicily, Fr. Hannibal decided to extend the invitation for the *Apostolic Mass* to the Bishops of the peninsula and to the Cardinals. In addition, having recorded a good reception, he considered useful to gather and publish their letters of

accession in a pamphlet titled *Valuable Accessions*, with a long preface about the origin of the Institute and the motivations of the pious practice. It was October 14, 1900.

c. The Pious Union of the Evangelical Rogation

The *Sacred Alliance* was to draw the attention of the hierarchy and priests on the Divine Command of Jesus to pray for vocations, but, for Di Francia, it was also a “duty of every Christian,” especially with regard to the devout and pious souls, and consecrated souls. With this intent extended to all the faithful he founded the *Pious Union of the Evangelical Rogation of the Heart of Jesus*, erected with a decree of the Archbishop Msgr. Letterio D’arrigo on December 8, 1900, with a seat in Messina, in the oratory of the Motherhouse of the Rogationists.

Fr. Hannibal, at this point, with the collaboration of his Institutions tried as much as possible to spread and promote it in various dioceses. The bishops, forceful with the approval of the Ordinary of Messina, did not have difficulty to introduce it in their dioceses, so that the *Pious Union* became widespread in Italy, in various parts of Europe and the Americas.

The beautiful prayer “Lord Jesus, Master of the mystical Harvest, send workers to your Harvest,” and one of the most beautiful prayers composed by Fr. Hannibal: “Compassionate heart of Jesus,” were translated into Polish by the noblewoman Mary Iastrzebska in 1896, and shortly thereafter in German by Fr. Stefano Leone Skibnierski. The whole booklet of prayers to obtain vocations was translated into French “by a holy old man of the Cathedral of Amiens,” the Can. Joseph De Brandt, on the occasion of the Holy Year proclaimed in 1900.

Of course, Fr. Hannibal thought even of a leaflet of propaganda and on June 26, 1908, feast of the Most Sacred

Heart of Jesus, he launched the periodical *God and Neighbor*, as organ of the *Pious Union of the Evangelical Rogation*, of the *Sacred Alliance*, and *St. Anthony’s Bread*. This means of connecting facilitated the establishment of branches of the Pious Union, creating the zealots among the oblates and the readers.

Di Francia, however, knew that to achieve real universality, it was necessary that the Supreme Pontiff owned the initiative with an official act and he began to work in this direction.

The “workers of the harvest”

Passionate, excited and thankful to the Lord for his vocation, Saint Hannibal tried by all means to promote primarily priestly vocations and vocations to special consecrations. “Asking workers to the Holy Church – he wrote – means first asking the Lord priests according to his heart. Secondly, men and women re-religious.” However, ahead of his times, he claimed that the workers of the harvest of the Lord are all Christians called to listen to God’s project on their lives. So he wrote: “The divine Word is always a sublime synthesis that combines countless mysteries, and from which you can draw multiple salutary applications. That divine *Rogate ergo Dominum messis ut mittat Operarios in messem suam*, not only has to be considered in relation to the Priests, but it is to be considered as to how the Highest pushes with his divine Grace to operate a good more or less effective in his Church, in the great harvest of souls. Because there are those who sow and reap, those who water with tears and the seed that sprouts, those who joyfully return with handful of harvests, those who separate the wheat from the chaff, those who preserve it in barns, those who distribute it, so in the formation of eternal salvation of souls there are

several agents in different walks of life and social classes.”²²

Particularly, he stressed the importance of the vocation of the rulers, educators, teachers and parents: “This prayer is also valuable because the good Lord gives enlightenment and special grace to all parents who have in their hands the great harvest of future generations so that they know to build their children with good example, know how to keep them away from the dangers of the soul, they grow them with holy education, and introduce them to success, to that God who, for this purpose, has given these children to them.”²³ Finally, it must be remembered that the vocational pedagogy of Di Francia pointed to the personal involvement of those who pray for vocations. He said that those who pray for vocations to the Church must first commit themselves to “do it as good workers of the harvest.”²⁴ It is evident that to pray to God to obtain vocations questions personally the one who asks them, being able and having to give first of all their availability. In this way each person who prays for vocations can become the response and the immediate fruit of that prayer.

²² *Scritti*, vol 43, pag 111.

²³ *Scritti*, vol 43, pag 112.

²⁴ Cfr *Scritti*, vol 52, pag 33.

The Requests to the Popes

Leo XIII

On June 13, 1884, Di Francia had addressed a letter to Leo XIII where after describing his apostolate among the poor and orphans, he kept saying: “At the same time I present to Your Holiness a Prayer recited daily by the Communities of children to implore from the Most High God good workers in the Holy Church, precisely the most holy word of Jesus Christ our Lord: *Rogate ergo Dominum messis, ut mittat operarios in messem suam* [Mt 9, 38; Lc 10, 2]. I beseech Your Holiness if you would give holy Indulgences and the Plenary indulgence at the recitation of the Prayer.” The Secretary of State, Cardinal Mariano Rampolla del Tindaro, had replied: “His Holiness, having read the letter, couldn’t but be pleased with the charitable works which you initiated and promoted, and, for this, he renders to you the deserved praises, moving you to continue in their realization.”

Having launched the *Sacred Alliance* and printed the booklet of the *Precious Adhesions* and the prayers for vocations, on June 13, 1901, Di Francia considered the time ripe to forward the request: he turned to Card. Mariano Rampolla, Cardinal Secretary of State, asking him to

interecede with Leo XIII to obtain a papal letter of blessing “in honour of the Divine Word that shapes our whole decor,” saying among other things: “In order to greatly propagate the prayer to obtain good evangelical workers, I turned to the Prelates of the Holy Church, Bishops, Archbishops and Cardinals, as those strongly affected vividly by the mission of the good evangelical workers, and are in a position to evaluate the great importance of the Divine Word.” Unfortunately the answer did not correspond to expectations, as we can deduce from the conclusion of the letter of the following June 29: “In everything be glory to the Most Holy Heart of the Divine Founder of the Holy Church, Jesus Christ our Lord and to us all remains the humiliation of not having merited that the sovereign goodness of the Most Holy Father would bless in us this sacred mission to propagate everywhere the prayer to obtain good evangelical workers to the Holy Church.”

Pius X

On January 28, 1904, Di Francia turned to the Card. Merry Del Val, Secretary of State of the new Pope Pius X. Having had a positive response on his part regarding the prayer for vocations, he asked that he would be patron with the Holy Father of the special Rogation, to consider if it was really an ancient evangelical mission but always new, timely and profitable, or rather a mere illusion, and he added: “Could Your Most Venerable Eminence add that the Bishops of Italy, largely, and prominent Cardinals of the Holy Church, and Generals of Religious Orders, with most encouraging letters have praised this propaganda; they have accepted a sacred spiritual alliance with our minute Institutions, to which they grant unique spiritual graces and blessings.”

The reply of the Secretary of State did not make one wait very much: “Adhering gladly to the desire that Your Lordship expressed to me in your letter on the 28th of this month, I did not hesitate to inform the new Pontiff of the pious association

of priests that exists in Messina in order to pray to God to grant good workers to the Church. I am pleased, then, to indicate to you that his Holiness has strongly welcomed the fact that the Association was accepted favorably by so many and so significant characters in the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, who recognized in it the way to echo the command of Christ: *Rogate Dominum messis, ut mittat operarios in messem suam* [Mt 9, 38; Lc 10, 2]. Uniting, therefore, with pleasure his prayer to the prayer of those members, His Holiness gives to you and to them the Apostolic Blessing.”

Then, in the hope of being able to elevate the Pious Union universal from the diocesan to universal level, on October 5, 1904, he wrote another synthetic but very detailed letter to the Pope, which reaffirmed the concepts already outlined in other circumstances. But for it he had only expressions of praise and blessings.

Conscious that, if he continued to present the initiative alone, with difficulty, he might have obtained a concession for the whole Church, he thought to take another tack. Since he did not pass a chance to sensitize the Church hierarchy and laity, he participated in the XVI International Eucharistic Congress, held in Rome on June 1 - 5, 1905, as official representative of the Archbishop of Messina speaking on *the Eucharist and the Priesthood*. He did the same thing at the Eucharistic Congress of Catania.

Fr. Hannibal took the opportunity of these two meetings to make a proposal: to present an assembly petition to the Pope in order that in the Litany of the Saints were added a verse imploring vocations from the Lord. Needless to say that the motion was received with great favor (expressed unanimously in both cases!), but then nobody moved concretely.

Having obtained a private audience with Pope Pius X on July 11, 1909, he requested that privilege to the priests of his Institutes: “Your Holiness may willingly and graciously

accommodate that in the recitation of the Litany of the the Saints in our Institutes, or it may be done also elsewhere by the Priests of our Institutes, after the verse: *Ut dominum apostolicum et omnes ecclesiasticas Ordines in sancta Religione conservare digneris*, one may add: *Ut dignos ac sanctos Operarios copiose in messem tuam mittere digneris, Te rogamus, exaudi nos.*”

The Pope, seated, signed the request with these words: “We grant; however, only in the Institutes to which the appeal refers. July 11, 1909. Pope Pius X.”

In a draft dated September 1910, Fr. Hannibal, after thanking the Pope for having corresponded to his request, became spokesman of some Prelates and Bishops, asking that the verse could be introduced, wherever one wanted, in the Litany of the Saints. There was no reassuring response. This, however, did not discourage Fr. Hannibal. On the contrary, he prepared a petition that was translated into Latin and sent not only to most of the Italian Bishops, but also in various parts of the world and to all Superiors General of religious Orders and Congregations, together with a circular letter with the request formula to be address to the Pope, duly signed, to be returned to him in Messina. He, then, would forward them to the competent Dicastery.

Thus he gathered about eight hundred adhesions, which he sent to the Sacred Congregation of Rites. At the time its Secretary was the future Patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Pietro La Fontaine (1860-1935).

We prefer to entrust the conclusion of this story to what was written by Fr. Teodoro Tusino: “Unfortunately the hopes of the Father were frustrated: it was not a matter of numbers, but of mindset: the novelty was not considered appropriate; in fact, the Sacred Congregation of Rites on February 20, 1913, responded: *Dilata*, namely that the thing was not taken into consideration. Monsignor Canori, conveying the negative result, sugarcoated the pill communicating on

the part of Monsignor La Fontaine: “The Lord wants that you pray and to get more adhesions», and he stressed these words.”²⁵

Benedict XV

This “misadventure”, now among many, did not absolutely stop Fr. Hannibal. On November 11, 1914, he was received in audience by Pope Benedict XV, who “was pleased with a mission so important that this tiny, among all the Works of the Holy Church, has taken”, but he did not obtain more.

After the sad period of the First World War, on December 1, 1920, Di Francia tried again informing Benedict XV on the dissemination of the *Pious Union* and asking to have a papal *Brief* for the first approval of the association in Messina: “The members admitted free of charge and without any obligations of conscience, which number around twelve thousand so far, take to heart to pray daily to the Infinite Goodness in order to send to his Church Priests and good workers of the mystical Harvest numerous and holy. [...] To ensure that this spirit of prayer, commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ will increasingly spread and propagate considering the current serious necessity of the Holy Church and peoples, the undersigned petition implores the Charity of Your Holiness to grant the *Brief* to the said *Pious Union*, raising the Seat of Messina as the first center of the association, with the faculty of aggregating other centers, for the participation of spiritual goods.” It was a way to draw attention to the prayer for vocations, but also this time it did not obtain any concrete result. Then, he asked again on April 26, 1921, lamenting to the same Pontiff the absence of prayer for vocations in the manuals, though there was one for the sanctification of the clergy, and suggested how one could encourage greater awareness in Christians to pray for vocations. Some days

25 *Biographical Memories*, IV, 122.

after (May 4), Fr. Hannibal, accompanied by two Rogationist priests and two Daughters of Divine Zeal, was also received in private audience by Pope Benedict XV. Here is what happened borrowing the words of Fr. Francesco Vitale who was present at the audience: “The Holy Father was very pleased by the progress of the Evangelical Rogation and the Anthonian Works, and he wanted to enroll as Member to the Pious Union of the Rogate, calling himself with a happy and for us very consoling phrase: ‘I am the first Rogationist.’” And about ten days later he sent a handwritten parchment with which he praised and blessed the Institution...

It seemed that Di Francia would not succeed in any way to get the attention that the prayer deserved, when a news rekindled hope: the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide had obtained the inclusion in the Major Litanies of the verse for the conversion of infidels. Fr. Hannibal wondered: “But how can this can happen if you do not multiply the number of missionaries? And how can this increase if you do not fervently do that which Jesus Christ commanded when he said: ‘*Rogate ergo etc.*?’”

Pius XI

In a letter to Pius XI on 6 November 1923, sure enough, Di Francia repeated his request and on January 2, 1924, he turned to the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, Card. Antonio Vico, asking him to reconsider the inclusion in the Major Litanies also the verse for vocations, because, he noted, “it seems that these two verses are closely connected with each other, and one calls the other.”

Meanwhile, Fr. Hannibal continued the propaganda; he gathered new adhesions, which he sent to Rome, but obviously the matter was not part of God’s designs.

This was the last attempt by Di Francia to obtain that the prayer for vocations would be upheld as the official prayer of the Church.

As a zealous worker he had sought that this prayer would be an “ecclesial work par excellence and generator of copious fruits for the Church and for the world” (John Paul II, May 16, 1997), but he could not see the realization of this dream that he brought to work tirelessly for forty years since on the First of June 1927, the Lord called him to himself.

Conclusion

“One sows and another reaps” (Jn 4, 37), it is written: Saint Hannibal Mary Di Francia, faithfully following the Lord’s mandate, has sown, leaving the Lord of the harvest to decide when and how the seed should give its fruit. And he gave it when the “right” times are ripe in the light of God.

The whole work of Di Francia could be summed up in the words that John Paul II pronounced on the day in which he canonized him (May 16, 2004): “If one loves me, he will keep my word’ (Jn 14, 23). In these evangelical words we see outlined the profile of Hannibal Mary Di Francia [...]; He sensed the urgency to realize the evangelical command ‘Rogate ergo... Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest.’ (Mt 9, 38) To the Rogationist Fathers and the Daughters of Divine Zeal he left the task to work with all forces so that the prayer for vocations would be “unceasing and universal.” This same invitation Fr. Hannibal Mary Di Francia addresses to the young people of our time, summarizing it in his habitual exhortation: ‘Fall in love with Jesus Christ.’ From this providential intuition arose in the church a large movement of prayer for vocations.” From this large movement was born the great “Family of the Rogate”

which includes member diocesan priests, the Rogationist Missionaries (Association for consecrated laywomen), the Union of Prayer for Vocations and the Priestly Union of Prayer for Vocations, different International lay Associations (Rog Families, L.A.V.R., E.R.A, Former Students) and numerous other associations and local groups.

Thus Fr. Hannibal became the “eminent apostle of the prayer for vocations,” an example to those who pray to obtain vocations in the Church.

Brief History

July 5, 1851

Hannibal Mary Di Francia was born in Messina, the third of four children. On July 7, he was baptized in the church of St. Mary of Providence (Parish of Saint Lawrence).

1868

At the age of 17 he obtained the permission from his confessor to receive the Eucharist daily. In the same period, , while praying before the Blessed Sacrament in the church of St. John of Malta in Messina, he understands the need to pray for vocations. He has what could be called the “Intelligence of the Rogate.” Sometime later, he found in the Gospel (Mt 9.38 and Lk. 10.2) the command of Jesus: “Rogate ergo Dominum messis ut mittat operarios in messem Suam.”

November 1869

He felt, in an extraordinary way, the call to the priesthood and chose the ideal of life to serve God in the Neighbor. One day he would declare: “My vocation was sudden, irresistible, absolutely sure.”

December 1877 - January 1878

The deacon Hannibal M. Di Francia met in an alley of Messina, the beggar Francis Zancone, who lived in the degraded “Avignone Quarters”. That providential encounter gave birth to all the charitable works of Fr. Di Francia.

March 16, 1878

He was ordained priest in the church of the Holy Spirit in Messina and began his ministry of human, social and Christian promotion among the poor of the “Avignone Quarters”.

Towards 1880

Not finding it in any books of devotion, he himself composed the first prayer for vocations. This prayer was recited every day by the poor of “Avignone Quarters”.

September - October 1881

St. Hannibal established the first workshops, out of some houses he bought in the Avignone Quarters. He then started the process of education of youth, that will eventually develop into colleges, institutes, laboratories, training centers.

September 8, 1882

Saint Hannibal officially opened the first female Orphanage in the Avignone Quarters.

November 4, 1883

Start of the first male Orphanage in Avignone Quarters in Messina,.

July 1, 1886

Thursday, Octave of Corpus Christi. With the consent of the Archbishop, Saint Hannibal renders sacramental

the first Chapel in Avignone Quarter, after two years of fervent expectation and intense preparation. A year after, he established that this event should be perennially remembered, thus giving rise to his Institutions, to what is called up to now as the “Feast of July First.”

March 19, 1887

Birth of the Female Congregation with the entrance to the novitiate of the first four young girls. The emblem that distinguishes them is a heart in cloth, stitched on their habit, with the inscription: “Rogate messis Dominum.”

October 1887

Mrs. Susanna Consiglio sent to Fr. Hannibal the first offering of 60 lires, to fulfill a vow made to St. Anthony, who spared her loved ones from cholera epidemic. Thus, initiated the providential establishment of the “Bread of St. Anthony” for the orphans of “Avignone Quarters”.

May 16, 1897

Birth of the Male Congregation with the vesting of religious habit of the first three Brothers. They wear the emblem, sewn on the cassock, that distinguishes them: a heart printed on canvas with the inscription “Rogate ergo Dominum messis ut mittat operarios in messem Suam.”

November 22, 1897

Saint Hannibal instituted the “Sacred Alliance” to raise awareness among the Clergy on the need to obey the “command” of Jesus “Rogate ergo messis Dominum, etc..” and to encourage them to be zealous in spreading the prayer for vocations.

December 8, 1900

Saint Hannibal instituted the “Pious Union of the Rogation of the Heart of Jesus” in order to spread among the faithful the prayer for vocations.

September 14, 1901

The Archbishop of Messina, Bishop Letterio D’Arrigo, approves the final names of the two religious congregations: the “Rogationists the Heart of Jesus” and the “Daughters of Divine Zeal of the Heart of Jesus.”

December 28, 1908

At dawn, at approximately 5:20, a violent earthquake destroyed the city of Messina. Forced to seek refuge outside of Messina, he started the development of the Institution in all of Italy.

July 30, 1926

The Congregation for Religious, sent to Archbishop Angelo Paino, Archbishop of Messina, the Nulla Osta for the canonical erection of the two religious Congregations.

June 1, 1927

At 6.30 am, Father Hannibal died peacefully, assisted by Fr. Francesco Vitale and some Rogationist Religious.

October 7, 1990

Pope John Paul II proclaimed him Blessed.

May 16, 2004

Pope John Paul II enrolled him among rank of the saints.

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