

FR. GIACOMO (JAMES) CAMISSASSA
FAITHFUL SERVANT OF THE CONSOLATA SHRINE
AND OF OUR MISSIONS

It is the ... anniversary of the death of Fr. Giacomo Camisassa, faithful collaborator of Bd. Joseph Allamano, who clearly told his sons and daughters, "Don't forget this man".

To keep his memory alive is a duty... particularly of the Consolata Missionaries, Fathers, Brothers, and Sisters, not so much for what he did as for who he was. He was a priest who, in God's providential plan, was given to Bd. Joseph Allamano, so that he could fulfil what the Lord had inspired to him, especially the foundation of the Consolata Missionaries. In order to achieve this, he put aside everything that would have given him greater renown and human gratification. As a friend, he always remained next to Fr. Allamano as "second", but as a faithful collaborator, living out the spirit of service proposed by the Gospel. About him, Fr. Allamano told his missionaries, "He was living for you and for our missions, and he spent his last day thinking of and speaking about our Institute. His last words -- which, he said, were his last will -- were about unity between the Consolata Missionary Fathers and Brothers, and the Consolata Missionary Sisters.

The sentiments of the last days of his earthly life... are a guarantee of his continuous concern for our Institute and his missionary work also from Heaven, and are a programme of life for all Consolata Missionaries.

Biographical notes

Giacomo Camisassa was born at Caramagna Piemonte on 26 September 1854. He, too, was a disciple of St. John Bosco, during his secondary education at the Salesian Oratory. He then joined the diocesan Seminary and was ordained a priest for the diocese of Torino in 1878. Appointed as an "added" member to the Faculty of Theology and the one of Law, he taught Moral Theology at the Pastoral Institute ("Convitto Ecclesiastico"), adjacent to the Consolata Shrine, and for some time he also taught Civil and Canon Law. In teaching, he showed excellent ability. D. Dervieux said, "As a lecturer, he was above average. He thoroughly knew his subject matter and was able to make himself understood even by the less talented students". This agrees with other evaluations: "He was clear and precise..., concise; he did not smother truths and his conclusions with a landslide of words...; his expressions were calculated, so that his thoughts came across precise and very clear" (N. Baravalle). "The topics were deeply analyzed by him, and his practical conclusions were always very useful for our pastoral ministry" (A. Borda Bossana).

He was appointed as Vice-Rector of the Consolata Shrine and later as a Canon of the Cathedral. His death occurred on 18 August 1922.

All his ability and dedication were best manifested as Vice-Rector of the Consolata Shrine and Pastoral Institute, and later of the Consolata Missionaries, next to Fr. Allamano. Fr. Joseph Allamano had been his spiritual director in the Seminary and had a chance to know him well. When Fr. Allamano was appointed Rector of the Consolata Shrine and Pastoral Institute, he wanted Fr. Camisassa as his first collaborator. Together they undertook their work on 2 October 1880, and remained together for 42 years (till Fr. Camisassa's death), sharing undertakings, preoccupations and ideals. They immediately started a series of activities that filled their lives and benefitted the Consolata Shrine, the diocese of Torino, and the whole Church, especially through their commitment to Mission. All Fr. Allamano's undertakings were also Fr. Camisassa's undertakings. And these were many and of many kinds, first of all, the renewal of the Consolata Shrine with the vast works of restoration, extension, and decoration. In 1889, Fr. Camisassa founded the magazine "*La Consolata*" ["*The Consolata*"], in order to spread devotion to Our Lady Consolata, inform people about the activities of the Shrine and the works of restoration in preparation for the Centenary Celebrations of 1904. It was perhaps the first Marian Magazine which became one of the first missionary magazines. It was directed with real ability by Fr. Camisassa for a number of years.

It was used for programmes and plans for developing the devotion to Our Lady Consolata, for promoting the knowledge and appreciation of Fr. Joseph Cafasso until his Beatification, and for informing about the foundation of the Consolata Missionaries: Fathers and Brothers first, and then the Sisters.

Untiring activity

As the administrator of the Consolata Shrine and of the Missionary Institute, Fr. Giacomo Camisassa had a chance to manifest all his capacity for organizing, and his technical and financial ability that were seen and admired by everybody. Those who knew him, remember him as a great organizer, extraordinarily active and hard-working, exceedingly enterprising, and gifted with great technical practicality. With the competence of an expert, he oversaw the planning and execution of the various works. Fr. Gays wrote, "He was a technical artist in the execution of works. Architects, engineers, painters, decorators, marble-workers, masons, builders, notaries, accountants, lawyers, and professional workers in general, had to recognize his expertise. Easily and quickly he would jot down plans, write reports and articles, balance accounts, pay bills, and review accounts. He had experience of everything, and he wanted to understand everything. He studied building plans, calculated the dimensions of rooms, their right proportions, comfort, good look, hygiene, solidity, and cost. He examined the materials to be used, the size of water and gas pipes, window frames, door locks, as well as the quality and style of clothes, room furniture, and the packing of crates". With his methodical attitude, constancy and ability in any kind of work, he studied plans, organized the works in the least details, and prepared everything meticulously and precisely, so that success was assured.

This attitude of his was precious for the shipping to Kenya of what was needed by both missions and missionaries. Everything had to be first divided and weighed, so as to be carried on shoulders, and then to be put together again following his instructions. A result of this patient work of his was the setting up of the first saw-mill in the middle of a forest in Kenya, with its water turbine, various sawing machines, etc., that could produce prefabricated houses. After his visit to Kenya (1911-1912) on behalf of Fr. Allamano, he designed a tractor that could work on the slopes of the Kenyan hillsides, where the Consolata Missionaries were living. His design was approved and patented by the Government Patent Office in Torino first, and then also in Germany.

It was to be expected that, when a man like this was overseeing the various works being done, uneasiness would arise... He would give orders, ask for a work to be re-done in the proper way, introduce some changes, etc. (...)

"His days were really busy," Fr. Gays wrote, "but they were productive: no time was wasted, and the mistakes made were few".

Indeed, dedication to work was characteristic of Fr. Camisassa. Before entering the Seminary, the very young Giacomo worked in the workshop of his godfather, a blacksmith, who said of him, "I never had anybody else like him, so intelligent and hard-working". Later on, when he was with Fr. Allamano, he was responsible for organizing all the activities they had planned together. His motto could have been "Let's work; let's work!", together with Fr. Allamano's principle, "The good must be done well" and for a spiritual motive. Together with this, as Fr. Barlassina said, there was another characteristic: "Without offending poverty and the religious spirit, but with a sense of art, gentleness, and good taste, which rendered what was done more dignified, more gratifying for people and, at the same time capable of elevating hearts and minds to God". Also in this, Fr. Camisassa was faithful to Fr. Allamano's intention of providing in the best possible way for the needs of his missionaries, so that their energies could be saved for their apostolic work, and their service would be more joyful, in spite of the very difficult situations in which they often worked.

Tenacious will

Fr. Allamano once said, "Be strong; persevere in your vocation. Fr. Camisassa, our beloved Vice-Rector, had a tenacious will all his life. A prelate once told me 'I have always admired the constancy in that man. He wasn't easily swayed by others, neither by gossip, nor by anything else. He went straight ahead'. And do you think that we never encountered any difficulty? Hardships were innumerable and of every conceivable kind. If we had come to a standstill, or even only felt discouraged at every obstacle that stood on our way, the Shrine would still be the way we found it, and the Missionary Institute would still be in the world to come". Fr. Allamano said this because this is a characteristic of the spirit he instilled into his Missionary Institute. He wanted his Missionaries, both men and women, to be "energetic, active, enterprising, full of good will, constant and persevering". Such was Fr. Camisassa! After the above praise of Fr. Camisassa, Fr. Allamano concluded, "I wish that this same praise could be said of each one of you. Don't forget this man; even more, pray that you may receive some of his energy" (cf. SL 52-53).

All for God's glory

Fr. Camisassa should not be admired only for the characteristics mentioned above, even if they are those that could be more easily seen. Fr. G. Barlassina, in his talk given on the first anniversary of Fr. Camisassa's death, already warned about this danger that would restrict his personality very much. "An external, superficial onlooker might have seen in our Co-Founder only a marvellous and untiring activity. However we, who had the privilege of being close to him, could detect and admire his great virtue, which was not inferior in the least to his technical ability and constant activity". Fr. Camisassa's robust spiritual character can be known from his "Rules of Life", which were concisely summarized by Fr. Domenico Fiorina (when he was Superior General) as follows: "Faithfulness to duty was his greatest witness to his union with God. We could see this faithfulness in him constantly, until the end, without any hesitation or distinction, straight, full of dignity, and -- I would almost say -- of sovereign quality. If, at times, he could seem impatient and quite demanding in regard to the work of his collaborators, this was due to his *forma mentis* [way of thinking...] that did not allow any hesitation or carelessness in people consecrated to the Lord". One of his written resolutions was "to belong totally to God". And in his "Rules of Life" we read, "I want to think only of you, my God, and to work only for you." For him these were not only written resolutions: he committed himself to live them out in his search for sanctity, watchfulness on himself, and commitment to priestly life, "abandoning (himself) into God's arms and into the arms of the B. V. Mary". One of his contemporaries said, "His personality could be summarized in these words: a man of faith. Faith was his supreme virtue, which formed his judgements and reasoning, perfected his knowledge, and gave validity to his teaching" (P. Baima).

"Brothers and friends"

Frs. Allamano and Camisassa lived for 42 years in unbroken and fruitful collaboration and friendship. Fr. Allamano was the inspiration, the leader, the one who received from the Lord the charism of seeing needs and what to do about them. He was the soul that set everything in motion, the Father who oversaw the moral and spiritual formation of his children, the Founder who was passing on a charism and the spirit with which to live it out. Fr. Camisassa always recognized this gift of his superior, together with his sanctity (which he always affirmed), and put the whole of himself with devotion, fidelity and love, at the service of Fr. Allamano's plans.

He was happy to be a "weak collaborator of that saintly man (Fr. Allamano) whom all of us are fortunate to call with the beloved name of 'Father'". This was not sentimentality nor servility, which were not part of Fr. Camisassa's strong personality. It was a deep conviction, and the acknowledgement of God's plan that led the two of them to be together for a common work.

Fr. Camisassa's collaboration was not limited to the material aspects of their work. The documents that are in our archives prove the precious contribution that the intelligence and priestly heart of Fr. Camisassa gave in regard to letters, reports, and regulations. Both he and Fr. Allamano stated that

they worked together on all plans, letters and documents through long reflections, "nights of prayer" and "years of work".

Fr Allamano always acknowledged the competence and collaboration of Fr. Camisassa, by stating that all they were able to do was the work of both of them. In regard to the foundation of the Missionary Institute, Fr. Allamano stated that he wouldn't have been able to accomplish it without Fr. Camisassa; and even in the documents he always mentioned Fr. Camisassa next to himself as Founder.

However, as Fr. Camisassa's contribution was not limited to material aspects, so Fr. Allamano was not only a "spiritual" man. He was certainly acknowledged as "an excellent formator of the clergy and of souls in general, a wise counsellor, an authentic apostle, one who inspired great works and 'rules of life', a promoter of Christian perfection, all for souls and all for God". But he was not only a "spiritual" man, unacquainted with practical matters and practical life. "It would be a serious mistake to think of Fr. Allamano as a purely interior man, loving his quiet, and withdrawn in himself. Those who knew him are convinced that he was quite another man than such" (A. Bertola). He was able to contribute also to practical decisions, by adding to his friend's (Fr. Camisassa's) technical competence other broader aspects: good reputation, dignity, understanding of people, care for their human and spiritual growth, prudence. In this way, Fr. Camisassa's ability was "married" to Fr. Allamano's heart.

This was possible because, in spite of their different personalities, works, and sensitivities, there was a great mutual respect of each other's responsibilities and qualities. There was no jealousy, no spirit of selfishness, no competitiveness. Their successes belonged to both of them. None of them was looking for his own glory. (...) Their sharing of ideas was constant. Fr. Gays said, "Very frequent were their conversations (or, as they called them, 'two-men conferences'). We can say in all truth that, for very many years, their breaks after lunch and supper were all taken up by this. They would leave the dining room and go to the Rector's office, where Fr. Allamano sat at his desk and Fr. Camisassa stood next to him, at times leaning against the bookcase. Their immense work of many years came from there: it was there that they planned, discussed, examined everything and reached decisions. During these conversations, Fr. Camisassa would not hesitate to freely present his proposals, discuss matters to clarify them, and offer his remarks on what Fr. Allamano was proposing. But, if and when Fr. Allamano took a decision, that would become his decision as well, and he would unfailingly put it in to practice. I believe that there has never been a more complete identity of ideas, a stricter union of wills, and a closer consensus of minds, than there was between them. Between the two of them there was, most of all, a great mutual affection: they were brothers and friends, much more than just co-workers. They built up their friendship day by day, through dialogue, confidence, trust, and absolute sincerity. At Fr. Camisassa's death, Fr. Allamano could say, "We have been together for 42 years, as if we were one. We have always loved one another in God". He also revealed that he had offered his own life to the Lord, so that his friend's life might be preserved, as he thought it was more necessary than his own. And he added, "If we did something good, it was for the very fact that we were so different; but we promised each other to always tell one another the truth, and we kept this promise. If we had been alike, we would not have seen each other's faults and would have made many more mistakes".

Perennial heritage

The consideration of the relationship that existed between Bd. Joseph Allamano and Fr. Camisassa strengthens our conviction that Our Lord united them for the fulfilment of his plans. Fr. Camisassa cannot be considered "Founder, as Fr. Allamano was...; he is our Co-Founder, not because of the tremendous amount of work he accomplished, nor because our Founder honoured him as such, but because God prepared these two men and united them, so that the first could, with the indispensable help of the second, undertake the work He wanted of him... and lead it to a happy fulfilment" (Fr. G. Gallea).

The foundation of the Missionary Institute was inspired by God to Bd. Joseph Allamano. But it was part of the same plan of God that "this foundation could be accomplished with the active and positive presence of Fr. Camisassa" (Fr. D. Fiorina). This is the motive that lies at the root of the obligation that the Consolata Missionaries (founded by Bd. Joseph Allamano) have: not to forget Fr. Giacomo Camisassa. "As God wanted these two worthy priests united in the great work they accomplished, so they are and will be united in our memory and affection" (Fr. L. Sales).

The life-together of Frs. Allamano and Camisassa exalt the great value of friendship. When Fr. Allamano invited Fr. Camisassa to collaborate with him at the Consolata Shrine, he wrote, "See, my dear, the two of us together will do some good. I am certain I will have the fortune of sharing the many travails I shall have to face, with a person whom I love much and from whom I have received many signs of affection".

Because of their mutual affection, which grew with time, they "together" could do a lot of good. In their relationship they actualized what Holy Scripture says: "A faithful friend is a sure shelter; whoever finds one has found a rare treasure. A faithful friend is something beyond price; there is no measuring his worth. A faithful friend is the elixir of life" (cf. Sir 6:14-15). From their friendship a great benefit resulted for the Church in Torino, especially for the Consolata Shrine, for the evangelizing mission of the Church, and for all the people helped by the work of the Consolata Missionaries. The priestly friendship of two priests from Torino continues to produce good fruit, and remains as an example to be remembered. The message that Fr. Camisassa still addresses to those who want to commit themselves to working for God's Kingdom, consists in total dedication without reservation, constant and tenacious, and in sincere and generous collaboration that excludes any personal interest. He himself, when already old, could say, "I am consoled by the thought that I have never done anything for myself, but only for God's glory".

The above are the requirements needed to achieve something that is really and truly valid.

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From: "Giuseppe Allamano, dalla Consolata al mondo", Luglio-Dicembre 1997.