JOHN CALABRIA: A BOY WHO FOUND HIS WAY

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VITTORIO DE BERNARDI S J

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AUTHOR: VITTORIO DE BERNARDI S.J.

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A boy who found his way.

"Fr. Calabria is one of the rarest priests in our century. A man who gave himself to charity in a paradoxical way, trusting so much in providence, living in absolute poverty and with a marvellous charity".

(St. *Pope Paul vi.)*

Preface

Fr. John Calabria is a historical surprise. Those who ignored him, beginning from his first employer, followed by his teachers and the important people involved in his story, have been set aside in the shadows, while he at first sight so unaware, looks today as a real giant, as one of the men who gave a push to the entire century.

It is not easy for me to get into his personality, as he was very humble and always hiding himself, but at the same time so deep and full of spiritual life. Those who were acquainted with him, all unanimously say that beyond his natural gifts, beyond the very person reflected something which could not be reduced to human frame. That imponderable special presence marked the typical charism of a man of God.

The sayings and events are only a rind. Something of his spirit, his charism is still lasting and we have touched it with our hands in his

daughters and sons who transmit that flame to our time.

The facts and stories collected hereafter could appear even commonplaces, but we hope that something of Don Calabria a spark of his spirit comes to our readers with a precise message: the trust in the providence.

This message so valid, in fact never as badly as now, because the same humanity that presumed to ban it from history, today doesn't see in providence another salvation from the tragedy menacing the entire world.

The message of Fr.Calabria to the youth *(to them these pages are specially addressed)* is this: Trust in your vocation. When a young person has found the way thousands more will find their way with him.

Fr. Vittorio De Bernardi S.J.

Go, and become a Priest.

"Go away; to become a priest, you aren't good for anything else!" The excited employer shouted at the young John and with a slap threw him out of the door. With his apron folded under the arm, John took his way home chewing bitter thoughts: oh yes, this time he had done something wrong, once again he had stained a diploma which was to be framed in spite he was dedicated and really careful in his work. But what to do when his mind was flaying away and perhaps the glass in his hands was falling into pieces? He felt that he was not good for that job, that's all.

For the moment he had to return jobless. How his mother would take it? After her husband's death she was living in misery together with her three children.

Anyway, he intended to become a priest and this was clear to everybody. Not the way his last

employer was, but a priest sacrificing himself, completely dedicated to humanity and its difficulties and problems, in order to make better and save the humans. Why to worry for glasses and frames when, outside, the world was in fire, there was a great poverty and misery and above all there were abandoned pale and worn out children wandering around the world seeking for food and love?

John knew that his mother would understand him. With these thoughts he came home and stepped in. Mum Angelina didn't need many explanations: The unusual re-entry time and the apron under her son's arm were speaking for themselves. Mother and son exchanged a glance in the dim light of that poor room, then mum Angelina in deep sigh: The providence will not abandon us...

John's initial misfortune

It wasn't the first time John was sent away. When his father died and he was thirteen he had to discontinue from his second year of high school and started to earn something for the family left in distress. He had been engaged as a shop assistant in a small retail shop owned by a Jewish man. But John was more worried about the employer's conversion of heart than of the work itself.

One day he climbed over a chair and delivered a sermon to his master on Jesus Messiah and redeemer, in whom all must believe to be saved. He then returned to charge several times. The master for a couple of times listened to him and when he got annoyed of it kicked him out.

Poor John, how unlucky he was to be born as a dreamer especially in a situation where everything seemed upside down!

From early childhood his family lived in great poverty. His father pulled on the burden of running the family with fatigue as a shoemaker and his ill health battered him quickly to death. His mother

had to work very hard as washerwoman and ironed to make both the ends meet. Then there was Barbara, an old woman: how she came into the house nobody knows. Most probably *because only the poor ones can pay heed to the cry of those who are worse* and open them the hearts.

Then there were Theresa, his sister, and Gaetano his elder brother. John felt this biting poverty since the day of his confirmation. The usual custom at Verona on such a special occasion was a watch as a gift to the child by the God-father. Show us your watch John, shouted his friends as they came out of the church after the ceremony showing each other their wrist watches received from the god-fathers.

John looked bewildered at his god-father not knowing what to do. His God-father came out of his embarrassment pointing his finger to the big clock on the front of Potra Lupi palace: "that is your watch".

Later on, John inactively witnessed carrying away the family belongings to the pawn shop.

He had to assist the visits of the famous gentlemen of St. Vincent de Paul Society frequenting his home and he never forgot the day when one of them went to uncover and peep into the pot on the fire to check what was inside; and another on one occasion humiliated his daddy on his smoking.

After his father's death John had to pull twice a small trolley with those few worm-eaten household goods through the lane of the town looking for a new lodging.

They were driven away at first from the premises of St. Lawrence church and then took refuge in a generous family.

But now John is expelled from job: How to go about?

His mother consulted Fr. Scapini, the generous rector of St. Lawrence's church, who once took

interest to provide a shelter for that unfortunate family.

John is convinced to become a priest. Well, he will. The mother shall keep him at home and let him do some light work. But she shall provide him time to study.

Fr. Scapini will take interest on him to prepare for seminary. Thus straight away began the lessons. He had books and teachers freely, and even though the lessons couldn't be regular, at the end of the year John was judged ready for the exams. He gave them on 10th of November 1892 and was promoted.

So he was able to attend the seminary regularly as an external student. But many years gap from study, the fatigue of four trips everyday up and down to school, de-nutrition, worry about mums over work and other inconvenience made him difficult to reach up the level of his classmates.

But John trudged, and hobbled with fatigue. In spite he could begin the third year high school.

The superiors were very uncertain about his ability, and were never unanimous.

John had to go through this humiliation too; he knew their irresolute attitude on him. What to decide on this 20 year old youngster? We shall see after his military service.

THE SOLDIER CALABRIA

Once, while returning from a military march, he came to know that he lost the obturator of his gun; then he returns and within two kilometres way he collects the spread pieces; he couldn't after all find the spiral spring, a necessary piece for the gun. After many futile searches, finally he returns to join the battalion, which in the meantime awaited him. Presenting before the sergeant, he informed of what he found and what he could not. John was expecting a punishment and instead the sergeant opening his bag says "take " and gives him a new spring, that he had in spare.

But the biggest adventure happened in the Arms Square, in the presence of the highest military officers.

On the climax point when the general was about to pass for inspection on the troop, at the order to bayonets, the soldiers with sure and simultaneous rhythm execute the drill. Only one wavers, he is not able to fix the bayonets. Pass on the seconds, the soldier sweats, is more confused; his movements are clumsy and agitated; the bayonet inauspiciously shines at the sun and he senses that every eye is on him. The time moves swiftly, the commander in chief is near: are you ready: "present arms!". A gun, and his, presents in late, and on its prime, the bayonet wobbles in a dangerous manner.

In the sharp eye of the General nothing escaped. In the evening of the programme of the day of the

Chief Commander, there will be a demerit and a call to punish the "culpable" soldier.

On the following day, the soldier John Calabria is called by the commander of battalion. The Colonel reads out to Calabria the duty of the day regarding him and then says: "here is the order I have received for you; how do you feel?"

"Sir Colonel, the soldier replies humbly, but without anxiety, I have no taste for arms: leave me home; I find me so at home with my patients!..."

The colonel looked at him, silent for a while, and then said: "We shall do so the next time; well, you go!".

To the military drill we shall not see him any more. To our surprise and irony and never on the merit of military spirit, he was made even corporal in-charge!. Disciplinary talents goes to absolute zero: and it is surprising, once leading a platoon to clear out snow, turning back to the "platoon stop" and noticed that all his fellow soldiers had already disappeared, leaving him alone.

Another time he risked to be punished for the lieutenant noticed that his soldiers were not on bed, but they disguised it with pillows, bags and bed sheets. Nevertheless the physical Calabria was welcomed by all.
Even though the military look was not at all congenial, the call-up offered him all the more a vast area of activity to his personal strength: human warmth, and concern for others.

I realised - he will say - that within the soldier hides a child, who away form home still need mummy. Especially if one was sick. For his fortune, soldier Calabria was assigned to the health section of the military hospital of Verona. There everybody knew him for his goodness, for the truly maternal love by which he was lavish with those sick youngsters. He was not brilliant for his clarity, even to the extent a Nun threw on his face the

notebook in which he used to note down the prescription with his illegible writing.
He more than once risked the arrest in quarters for his disordered bed. He had no time for himself, he thought of others without reserve. During an epidemic he served so lavishly to fell sick for forty days. All, then, were around him with full of solicitude, even the officials.
Also after the military service, the door of the military hospital remained always opened to him, and he was available to do well to all.

SIGN OF CONTRADICTION

Oh, welcome back, John! How did you spend the military service? Hubbubs of the classmates gave John a bit of courage, even if the school year did not begin precisely in favour.
John knew well that the military service was willed by his superiors to postpone the difficult decision

regarding his priesthood. He sat down on his seat waiting for the lesion.

Behold comes the lecturer, and no one other than the same Rector, the then fearful role in the seminary!

O! Calabria, are you here?

Yes. Fr. Scapini told me to come for theology. The rector kept quite. Walks back and forth, finally gives the verdict, in sharp voice:

It is better that you may repeat the eight. Yes, you shall go back to High School.

John Calabria gets up, gathers his books, moves out timidly from his seat, pay reverence to the rector and teacher and proceeds in silence towards the high school classroom.

His knees are trembling, but have the courage to open the door and surrender to the other class, who watches him in wonder.

Final year of high school results were not encouraging in Greek exam.

The backbone of John, Fr. Scapini comes to support the situation.

You gave him a six? He asked, after the exam in Greek, the teacher his old friend.

No, I couldn't give. He does not deserve.....

Possible!...Possible? Exclaimed the desolate Fr. Scapini.

I repeat you I could not give him....

New excitement of Fr. Scapini.

Then the examiner exclaims:

I did not give him six but I gave him a seven because he merited.

The two friends embraced each other and they went to have a light drink the speciality of Fr. Scapini for grand occasion.

But the difficulties did not get over.

They had to decide if Calabria should dress in clergy man or not, and the rector remained perplexed, the professors divided.

Then on the final sitting mediated Fr. Scapini:

I do not know a student more devout, humbler and more obedient than Calabria. No one else more than he deserves to put on the sacred habit. If you decide contrary I leave on every responsibility: You will have to answer in the tribunal of God for this vocation!

The firmness and the authority that Fr. Scapini enjoyed brought victory, and John Calabria could use the sacred habit and begin theology.

But the difficulty did not stop yet.

Later on how many scholars would run to Fr. Calabria for advice even on very complicated issues!

And what intelligence would be revealed as priest thanks to the extraordinary gift of counsel that all recognised in him in the difficult art of guiding souls.

But in the meantime, he had to face theology.

His intelligence was concrete, intuitive and not "scholastic".

Hence Theology made him perspire.

Luckily, he had an acute memory, and finally he did succeed.

The final exams he did with the ex rector, who became the Bishop of Verona: and the future Cardinal Bacillieri.

On his turn the theme is drawn. John began the show in Latin: First point, from the Sacred Scripture ..... and exposed the reasons.

Second point, from the Fathers of the Church ..... The explanations flew one after another in a wonderful way.

And now comes the third point, that has two parts .....

Enough - the bishop interrupted, amazed of that knowledge.

And it was Providence, because John did not prepare the third point, had no idea of what to say. It became the proverb: "Calabria falls always on his feet", thus he was accepted to priesthood.

ON THE PROPER TRACK

During his study in the seminary, the student Calabria was schooled by professors because he used to waste time in charitable activities and apostolate at the cost of his study.

In reality it wasn't so: while others used to spend their free time for recreation he rightly used it to catechise the children and console sick.

In this he gave equilibrium to himself to proceed in a life of student hood that never gave him satisfaction.

He was not a theoretic person at the tastes of scholastics without these "escapes" of apostolic nature that would slow him down.

He felt real with practical life, and vibrated in a special way for charity works.

By natural tendencies he was a very active person especially with the weakest.

Thus, in academic days he continued attending the military hospital, and with his confessor he studied

a project to help the sick people, with such regulations, precise duties and even indulgences given by the Bishop the pious association gave comfort to the poor and sick.

He engaged also in catechising children in the parish of St. Lawrence.

And how willingly they followed him!

To understand the activity of the young cleric enough this episode.

There was in the parish a reckless Protestant boy. Hair flown into the air, disorderedly dressed, unhearing to any control, revealed to be a very generous person.

He became a friend.

He was taken to the oratory, to catechism, to the Holy Mass and he was even enrolled in the altar boys list.

Protestant.

At home they knew that the boy was attending the church but did not give importance to that until one

day during the Lent not seeing him back home for supper, his daddy walked furiously to the oratory.
He is not there.
Then decisively enters into the church. He was making the way of the Cross.
In the dim light of the church nobody noticed the presence of the intruder.
But there in the group of the altar boys, a boy who held the candle, did not leave it unnoticed the entrance of that man.
The candle he threw on the floor and the boy ran fast towards the sacristy.
He unvests the white cloak and away!
Arrives home before his father.
After some years Goffredo that Protestant boy was baptised by the Bishop.
John saw that youngster was meant for great things.
In fact after two years, experiencing the trace of priestly and religious vocation he joined the school boarding of the Stigmatine Fathers in Trent. He

became then a religious, priest, held very important responsibilities in his Congregation and died after living and witnessing an exemplary and holy life.

THE SONS OF JOUST

This happened providentially to orient definitively John Calibre into the right track of charity.
It was a late evening of November, in 1897, and the seminarian Calabria was returning after his visit to a sick boy.
Reached at the small entrance of his house, he saw through the dim light a heap of rags: he bent down to it and heard the breathing, it was a sleeping kid. He shook him very gently and recognised him that little beggar of six years who along the old palace street used to beg with performance of a trained mouse to draw a lottery number of the "planet of fortune".

How many times John had halted at him to say a good word and give alms!

He had become a friend and the kid had trust in him.

What are you doing here at this hour? He asked.

They thrash me and beat me on and on!

Who beats you? And why?

They say that I am good for nothing.... They want me to collect much, fetch more money every day home, otherwise they beat me. Even today I was beaten and I escaped....

The sob is stopped and that suffocation did burst out into tears.

Come with me, John told him. And he stretched out his hands and lifted the child and with the other hand the kid held tightly his cage with the mouse.

Mum Angelina did not make any lamentation.

The poor supper kept ready was divided into two.

Then fixing a bed on three chairs John settled the child there.

He was happy with the straw pallet.

Then early morning John sought advice of Fr. Scapini.

What shall we do?

We should be cautious to collect information....

The legal responsibility cannot be ignored.

Fr. Natale, John's confessor, added to ask for a "sign".

And the sign occurred: A dress for the child, gift of a Jew.

And another help, in cash...

It was concluded that the child was part of a band of gypsy, who was probably kidnapped from the coast of Ligurian sea coasts and presumably for this reason it was seen wise to inquire of it.

They later on found an arrangement for the child.

He was the seed of a great plant.

This was the beginning of a grand Opera for many boys in difficulties.

ROOTED FROM ABOVE

Human works begins with a great base and ends in a point; while God's work begins with a speck and expands progressively.

The works of the humans are like pyramids that places on earth and God's work begins with just a tiny tip.

We have the roots from above: Fr. John used to repeat.

His works, which would become well expanded, had had very humble and tender beginning.

The first six years of priesthood Fr. John spent in various good works that enriched him with precious pastoral experience.

Above all at his confessional was more approached. People sensed the saint, they lined up to him for his blessings, consolation. When there was a

difficult patient, a person at death bed, he was called.
And the Cardinal of Verona, his old seminary rector, just after few years of John's priesthood, entrusted the responsibility of confessor of the seminarians!
One day Fr. John, during the leisure between two period, happened to be in his old professors zone, among whom Mgr. Grancelli.
And with his cap in his head, tried to pass by along the walls but they spread out and compelled him to pass through the middle.
While all confused, he was passing in between that line of cultural aristocrats a voice reached him.

"The cardinal has entrusted me to be the confessor in the seminary", replied Fr. John very humbly.
Then Mgr. Grancelli proclaimed the biblical passage "the stone ignored by the builders became the corner stone...."

TRUST IN GOD

In the continuous pastoral contacts it became evident to vision the conditions of many boys and youth ignored by their families and abandoned to themselves often in hunger and vices.

He had special care for the chimney - sweepers who came from the hill sides during the winter.

For the children and youth, he sought a place and an arrangement under the care of some institutes, but he could not succeed always. Then he used to take them to his house for weeks and even months, entrusting them to his mother or to some good individuals of the neighbourhoods.

He began with a very lively child in 1906. The worry these kids made to his mummy Angelina were such that she fell sick very seriously.

John had fear of loosing her. He shared this with his closest friend and benefactor the Count Francis

Perez, who too as Fr. John had high desire to arrange the abandoned children.

Now who will spend time for them?

But how he could with mummy in such a condition?

Finally, Fr. Calabria decided: If Lord wants that I take up the mission for the Poor kids, return mummy full health at least for one year.

Against every prediction mummy is healed and the kids continued to have residence in his house.

One, three .... Six.

In that house he couldn't arrange all.

They found a spacious house.

On 26th November 1907 the first group of seven "good children" entered in the street Case Rotte, the first house of the future Opera.

Wicked criticism of "common sense" in the mean time galloped in the city according to the ritual necessity of lives of every founder:

He went out of his head!

He hadn't anything else to think!

And the like malicious judgements naturally arrived also in the seminary.

Reached then the news that Fr. Calabria was about to take the house in San Zeno in Monte.

His old professor of Dogmatic theology met him on the way and he was questioned:

What do you have in to do Fr. John?

To open such a huge house? Without means? Think of it before you begin, because you will bring discredit to the whole clergy of Verona. Be calm, do the priestly ministry, and don't keep in your head such stories to do many things!

You Professor taught me the dogma...., Replied Fr. John very calmly.

Yes, I remember.....

And you taught me the thesis of Providence .....

Yes ....

Well, Professor: I try to apply in life that thesis. Please help me with your prayers!

LISTEN TONIGHT; I DISCOVERED THE GOSPEL !

"I must talk to you".

"Any misfortune?"

Mgr. Chiot hurries up to San Zeno in Monte and found Fr. Calabria enshrined and says:

"I must tell you one thing very important".

"One thing very important?"

"I read the whole gospel".

"What is strange. Which priest hasn't red the gospel?"

"I too red it, preached it, but yesterday after a very fitter day, I took the gospel and read everything, and also the Acts of the Apostles, all in one nought. And I had an unusual sensation: What a grand thing is the gospel! I remained surprised, wondered, listen ... listen ...."

And he turned pages signed with pencil on the margins.

" Listen ... Do not worry for food: the birds do not sow nor reap, and my Father feeds them. Do not worry for the dress: The lilies of the field do not knit the cloth and dress up better than a queen".
In another page he had signed the Beatitudes.
Showed me underlined the saying ...." If you have faith as big as a mustard seed you will tell this mount: move on there and that will move at your indication".
Thus began the decisive event of the life of Fr. Calabria with his friend Mgr. Chiot: the discovery of the Gospel. He has marked up the paradoxes of the gospel, said paradoxes because it is so with the logic of the world as to seem unrealisable but the saints, for them, they have won the world.
The paternity of God had very deeply conquered his.
It was the intuition of grace that had laid foundation and guided right from this hour this entire life and that of the Congregation.

THE HANDS OF PROVIDENCE

The number of orphaned kids and boys increased and humanly he didn't know how to handle them. But providence began to meet Fr. Calabria in unthinkable ways. One morning an old lady, so much emaciated, that Fr. John, even before she approached him, takes out a coin in his hands from the pocket for alms.

No, No...Reverend. I do not need: the old woman told him. I must give you something for your boys, and this all I have.... and she entrusted him thousand lire bank note, which was worth very high a sum.

Poor people and ordinary families went to him in groups to help him.

The sellers of Erba Square began to reach him vegetables and fruits collected from the sellers for the "boys of Fr. Calabria".

Often Providence came in his help in miraculous ways. Coming down one day from San Zeno in Monte Fr. Calabria meets a gentleman.

"Exactly you! I was coming to meet you at St. Zeno. Tonight, my wife did not sleep, nor let others sleep because of you!"

The Father in the meantime showed the normal curiosity to learn how he could be involved in this matter, the other continued:

"Since a long time, we had decided to reach you an amount, but we had no intention to bring to you so early. Yes, we thought: at our death, but last evening my wife insisted to give you that soon. Because she said at present Fr. Calabria is in need of it. Here is that money. It is an account of thirty thousand lire.

"It is truly the providence" confirmed Fr. John and told the needs he had in mind those days just thirty

thousand to conclude the maintenance of the Church.

PRIMARY DEVELOPMENTS OF THE OPERA

When the house became small for the growing number of children, he thought of buying a spacious building that dominates from the hills the city of Verona situated along the river Adige.

He entered there and established the "General quarters" on 6th of November 1908.

From there the Poor Servants of Divine Providence worked and extended to other cities and reached far, very far.

First and foremost, Costosa of Vicenza, Este of Padova, then St. James' Vago, to Negrar, ... reached Rome, Ferera, Naples, in Calabria, and Sicily Island.

Finally crossed the borders of the nations and reached India and Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina,

Paraguay, Colombia, Angola in Africa, Philippines and Russia.

Every foundation is a story of faith, of providence. When Fr. Calabria found strong difficulties he used to put a "mine" that is a medal of St. Benedict: this gradually worked and removed into air all the barrier.

Evidently an Opera so extensive cannot sustain without the hands of collaborators generous and ready for sacrifice.

And here together with the orphaned kids and youths the Providence sent to Fr. Calabria courageous persons enriched with virtues, such as the Count Francis Perez, who was already fascinated to his charity works, Fr. Desenzani and many others in no time became hundreds.

Not without travail Fr. Calabria gave them a rule of life which much before the II Vatican Council was giving equality of rights to priests and laity, united

in one single bond of love in the institute of Poor Servants of Divine Providence.
Then started the sisters, great figures of women engaged in every type of charity with the name the Poor Servants of Divine Providence (Sisters).
Everything began to expand in his hands, and also his heart rejoiced.

Very serious difficulties seemed to overturn man at times his great family, but Fr. Calabria knew that the Congregation is not his: The providence might sustain it in the midst of every tempest. Together with the charitable works for orphaned youths, Fr. Calabria took to his heart the great interests of the Church, establishing much before the Council an ecumenical centre in the Abbacy of Maguzzano, at the lake Garda, aiming support to the Union of Medical Missionaries of Italy that sends voluntary doctors to help the less developed, sustaining vocations for priesthood and religious life without

difference in orientation supporting every initiative of pope, Bishops, and of the Church.
In the tempestive years of Second World War Fr. Calabria was a prestigious and charismatic name, his words were accepted as prophecy and the protagonists of the life of the Church were his friends, like Cardinal Scüster of Milan who used to write him asking advice and who consoled him in sickness.

A SUIT OF ITS KIND

For expressed desire of Fr. John the local newspapers mainly of Catholic inspiration, abstained from talking about him and his activity.
But a newspaper of totally different current wanted to give a taste of humanism at the expense of charitable initiatives of Verona clergymen, including Fr. John Calabria.
The anticlerical article was entitled as "the faith Industry". Fr. John besides other accusations was

presented as an exploiter of "the industry boys of the street" who by ownership and buildings of true and proper establishment where the boys worked has made a strong and enviable financial status, through his interest and initiatives, true example and stimulus for the industrials of Verona. .....

Friends, priests, authority of every kind came forward to Fr. Calabria and pressed him to file a law suit against this defaming.

Fr. Calabria thanked them one by one but took his time, reflected and prayed, then decided.

He presented to the editorial board of the newspaper and asked for the journalist.

"Are you the author of the article against me?"

"Yes, but... truly"

"Don't worry, I came to thank you, see you have given me a very precious service ....if until today I were uncertain on God's will regarding the Opera for the youth, your article gave me a clear idea that it is God's will that it may proceed so.

Finally, everyone will know that it is fully Lord's work and Fr. Calabria can ruin everything.
To thank you for this light tomorrow I shall offer the Holy Mass for you".
The poor article writer first remained in amazement and exclaimed in confusion and humiliation: "thank you.... sorry... you know, our job..."
That journalist became his intimate admirer and friend. Later on he used to come up to San Zeno in Monte to meet Fr. Calabria.

THE PRECIOUS COIN

On his usual way from St. Lawrence's to St. Stephen's Church, he used to meet without fail a poor man to whom he habitually gave in alms a coin.

Having known of this Fr. Scapini observed: that man did not merit your alms because in the evening he wasted it in drinking.

Fr. John without hesitation continued his charity. For some months, every day, he extended one hand and another one bosomed, leaving a small coin. One day the old man did not present in his usual place and passed many days.

The coin went to another hand.

The memory of the old man disappeared, and confused among many faces of poor who Fr. John used to meet along the road and in the corridors of hospitals and clinics. It was rightly in one of these visits that retraced him in a very providential way. Fr. John reached the hospital camps and a Nun met him and said "rightly I was looking for you. Here is an old man already very serious, who does not want any other priest but that young priest, who used to give him alms every day. But how to trace him, that we cannot even get details. You try..."

Fr. John was led to the infirm, bent to him. They recognised each other. "He is here" told the old man to the onlookers. "It is exactly he, the priest who loved me", and to you Fr. John, "I want to confess". He received Sacraments and died in peace with God. The small coins given out in alms for God's love, earned an immense value in Lord's eyes, even managed to "but" a soul for eternity.

WORDS AND DEEDS

One day a very famous advocate of Verona informed Fr. John the desire to discuss with him on religion. Fr. John wasn't a type to discussions; he knew that the debates help for almost nothing. He postponed the meetings for some times until one day, in agreement with the director of the psychiatry hospital, for a visit to some recovered patients, and informed the advocate the availability to discussion and meeting. On time came the lawyer and Fr. John requested him to accompany him for a visit he had to do, and the other agreed. They reached in the hospital and made rounds in wards for more than an hour. Fr. John at times stopped to talk, consoled by a fatherly look those who could not express in other ways than signs, to shake hands with those who extended him hands. Around him expanded serenity.

It was evident the joy and expectation of that meeting with the priest.

Coming out of that place of pain, he turned to the advocate and told, "If you believe, now we can discuss".
Reverend, replied that man, "I don't need any more discussions, I had enough".
The facts were more eloquent than words.

THE MYRIADS OF THE OPERA

Father, we can't make it any more. We have nothing, no one come to help us.... Fr. Calabria listens in silence the words of the house superior, and then remains in deep silence.
He opens the eyes and tells the Superior of the community:
Here the providence tests you in a very serious way. I have nothing to give you; I shall send you this poor boy that is worth the blood of Christ.
Accept him in His name with love. "He is a myriad".
And another orphan boy is entrusted...

Another occasion entrusting a mentally handicapped boy to the brother superior of Negrar hospital he told them: Receive him dearly. These are our Myriads! Fr. Calabria knew how precious is a person mainly how precious a heart in God's grace is.

A GREAT SERVANT OF PROVIDENCE

Fr. Calabria was convinced that the providence cannot be absent.

How often he used to meditate the words of the Gospel "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well."

And he believed it seriously.

And he wanted his sons might have the same faith.

"We must hurry to return back to practice the pure resource of the Gospel.... Either believe or do not

believe; if you do not believe tear up the Gospel", he used to say insistently and decisively.

To inculcate in his sons these convictions Fr. Calabria, like other witness of providence, returns back to very concrete facts.

Once he sent a priest on the terrace to beat an empty bucket and people thought that was to attract the bees, instead it was to invoke providence and it came.

Another occasion he send a brother to knock with the finger knuckle and in a short while the providence reached generously.

The history of the Opera, Fr. Calabria is all knit with similar events, and also his sons adopt the same method of their Father.

One day during the last world War, for example there was no salt at home.

The brother treasurer sent a boy to pray in the church to invoke providence.

The boy went, prayed, but salt did not reach. Brother then sent another and a third.

At the gate came a poor man to ask for a pinch of salt.

Brother went to the kitchen and asked the sister. There is almost a glass full, and this will be enough for the poor man. He received and thanked them. Now salt is fully out of stock. Then comes a phone call that informs them to go and collect a sack of salt from a particular shop.

All Freely!

One day Fr. Calabria was without money and had to pay the shop the bills very urgently.

He was very punctual in paying them on time.

He went to search in the letter box and there were fifty lire. With a brother he went out to "sow" among the poor, convinced that the providence will help him fully.

And it happened. He came back and found what was necessary!

Another time he wanted to give a lesion of providence to the novices. And he gave them ten lire each.

I came to refill, he told them, and the noviciate is the place of refilling. The providence protects us in a miraculous way...

As they came out of the chapel after a visit to the Blessed Sacrament he told them: I gave you a small gift....

Yes, they replied, ten lire each.

Look, he added, you multiplied it and gave to the Master seven hundred and fifty lire, which in the mean time was brought by a benefactor. This recourse to providence did not excuse them from hard work. "The primary providence is a head on the shoulders, he meant to say, and even the birds the Lord gave wings and beak".

But beyond every human diligence, he and the Congregation has to announce the world the forgotten pages of the Gospel on providence.

Special goal of the Congregation he wrote in the constitutions "is to revive in the world faith and trust in God, Father of all humans, through total abandonment to the divine providence" for all that

is concerned for material things necessary to life, according to Lord's teaching. "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well"

"The poor Servant is sure that he will never want for anything because God is always faithful to his promises"

"The Spirit of abandonment in the providence of God the Father exclude from our part:

The demanding of fees or remuneration for the hospitality of youngsters or any needy person or any service in their favour, when they cannot give anything. Instead to such least ones should be given our preference.

Any type of publicity either in view of material advantages or for the growth and fame of the Congregation is forbidden.

Promoting collections, seeking for benefits, lotteries and the like, public recognition and assuming any such attitude that can cast a shadow for the action of the Divine Providence."

And again in article ten of the Constitutions Fr. Calabria expresses the total radically of his faith in providence.

Nothing should obfuscate the certainty that the Father thinks of his sons.

"The Congregation should not posses estates, except those necessary for the free functioning of their activities. Thus, also they should not accumulate money or other wealth with the hope of enjoying the fruit and create human security: all that providence shall send, shall be spent for the poor the Lord has entrusted us or given away in charity towards the needy"

I FEEL THE LORD LOVES ME

We are on 3rd December 1954.

Fr. Calabria is suffering since years.
Now he is at the end of his life.
Next morning Radio announces the message to the entire world about the health of Pope Pious XII.
Fr. Calabria is informed of it by one of the assistants: Father we must pray for the Pope, because he is very ill. Fr. Calabria opens the arms, raises up his look to heaven and in a feeble sound exclaims: Willingly I offer my poor life for him, and then prayed in silence.
And in an instance, he says - it is heard!
The afternoon is more peaceful.
Seems taken up with a thought that consoles.
And later on with great peace serenity breathed:
"I feel that the Lord loves me much".
Also the thought of heavenly Mother gives him trust, and almost taken up with youthful enthusiasm that surpassed the present, he began to sing that famous song:
Quando penso alla mia sorte - when I think of my fate,

che son figlio di Maria - that I'm a son of Mary,
ogni affanno, o Madre mia, - every worry oh my Mother,
s'allontana allora da me. - goes away from me.
Sweetly he sleeps on 4th December1954 and will rise only in God's light.

THE DICTIONARY OF ST JOHN

Love:

Believe, important is to know and do God's will: love!

Beware:

Beware of enemy's art: would wish to ruin Lord's wonderful design on each one of you.
May you be guided by the Lord, under the protection of the heavenly Mother

Bounty:

Be good and you will always be young
be good and you will always be rich
be good and you will always be happy.

Charity: Is like the Sun penetrates everywhere

Devil: Satan is not afraid of mediocrity, but can do nothing with a generous person.

God:

God holds his eyes fixed on you: awaits for you, expects that you be closer to Him, then to entrust you great deeds.

Almsgiving:

Eucharist is God's food for humans,
almsgiving is humans' food for God.

Trust:

We shall trust in the Lord, in a world that moves away from God, put on in us the flame of faith that always clears up the path for others.

World:

We must look at the world as if scattered of precious pearls: they are the souls awaiting for God.

Orphans:

They are our myriad's.

Gold:

Supported by the crutch of gold, the Gospel will not make long way.

Poor:

There are poor to offer salvation of the rich.

Providence:

The providence is your head on your shoulder. Even to the birds the Lord has given wings and peck. But above all "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well".

Redeemer: If the redeemed might live like redeemed it is easier to believe in the Redeemer.

Service: In God's kingdom the greatest is the one who serve.

Treasures: Our treasures are the abandoned persons, rejected, dismissed, old, ill, sinners...

Gospel: Learn to be a living gospel. The world is in need of this alone.

Either believe or do not believe; is you do not believe tear away the gospel.

Zero: Zero and misery, good conditions!

CHRONOLOGY CALABRIA AND THE OPERA

1873 Birth of John Calabria in Verona at the lane of Disciplina 7.

1897 The son of joust.

1901 Priestly ordination of Fr. John Calabria.

1907 The first home: at the lane of Case Rotte, Verona.

1908 Begins the house "Buoni fanciulli" of San Zeno in Monte.

1909 Enters in the Congregation the Count Francis Maria Perez.

1910 The first sister: Angelina De Battisti.

1914 House of St. Benedict, in Verona, for children in sisters care.

1919 House of Costozza.

1920 Study house of St. Benedict.

1920 Este (Padova) patronage house.

1920 Sanctuary of Madonna di Campagna in Verona.

1930 Study house, Nazareth, Verona.

1930 Aspirants house for brothers at St. Benedict.

1932 St. Toscana house for Sisters.

1932 Diocesan approval for the Congregation.

1932 St. Philip Neri parish in Pianeta Sachetti, Rome.

1932 St. Sebastian's parish in Aquila .

1933 Sacred Heart's house at Negrar.

1934 Mission in Hyderabad, India.

1935 Apostolic visitation of Abbot Emanuele Caronti.

1935 Old age home St. Pancrazio, Verona.

1936 Outskirts of Tor Marancia, Rome.

1937 Suburban Gordiani, Rome.

1937 Noviciate of Ronca (Verona).

1937 Italian Medical Missionary Union (UMMI).

1938 Abby of Maguzzano, Brescia.

1942 St. Pious V, house in Rome.

1944 Bomb on San Zeno in Monte.

1944 House of Ronca, Verona.

1946 Origin of External Brothers.

1948 Patronage for the day scholars, Verona.

1949 Pontifical approval of the Congregation.

1949 House of St. Mathias, Verona.

1950 House in Milan.

1951 St. James' Spirituality centre, Verona.

1951 Boys Town, Ferrara.

1951 Study house at Grottaferrata, Rome.

1952 Diocesan approval of Sisters.

1954 4th Dec. Death Fr. John Calabria.

1956 Technical centre, Via Roveggia, Verona.

1959 Mission in Uruguay.

1962 Mission in Porto Alegere and Farroupilha, Brasil.

1965 Missionaries of the Poor (sisters).

1968 House in Naples. (prison, parish).

1968 Calabria, Italy (parish).

1969 Spain

1970 Nigeria

1972 Bologna (prison, social work).

1972 Argentina (parish, social and professional centre).

1972 Hospital and parish, Mato Grosso, Brazil.

1974 Sisters in Brazil.

1979 Opera Don Calabria for ex-prisoners, Naples.

1980 Uruguay, Montevideo.

1980 Colombia.

1982 Angola, Africa.

1983 Feira de Santana, Brazil.

1984 Sao Luis, Professional centre, Brazil.

1985 Parish and social work, Paraguay.

1988 Beatification of Fr. John Calabria.

1990 Philippines

1991 Russia

1993 Philippines - Samar Formation house

1994 India - Nagpur.

1995 Chile - for street children.

1998 Canonization of Fr. Calabria.

2006 Kenya,

2020 Papua New Guinea.

And the OPERA grows in God's Providence.