

PREFACE

In His goodness and mercy, the Lord has blessed me, showering countless grace and blessings upon me.

He has called me from nothingness into life within a loving and caring family; He has called me to faith in a humble but fervent Christian community. He has called me to holiness and strengthened my calling through the living examples of several "hidden saints."

The Lord has blessed me with a special vocation to religious life and to priesthood in the Society of Divine Vocations.

Very early in my life, I felt God's calling to the priesthood; my parish priest made me aware of the reality that to become a priest I needed money and that my parents, with eleven children, could never afford to pay the seminary tuition. I had not been aware of my poverty; I only knew that I wanted to be a priest!

"The only way you can ever make it is by going to Pianura," my Pastor said to me back in 1953.

"I want to be a priest and I will go wherever I have to in order to become one." Thus God, without my knowing it, put me on a path that would cross Fr. Justin's.

God called me, and my parents disposed me to recognize and accept my vocation, but it was Fr. Justin with the Vocationary and Vocationist Fathers who enabled me to follow my calling. On September 15, 1953, accompanied by my father and my pastor, I went to Pianura. Soon I fell in love with Fr. Justin. I was fascinated by his smile and sweetness. I was motivated and inspired by his simple yet highly spiritual meditations. Knowing Fr.

Justin and living in the Vocationary during the last two years of his earthly life was for me one of God's most cherished graces.

Yet when I was living in the vocationary or Pianura, I did not quite realize the singular privilege of living with such a man of God. Yes, I enjoyed and still remember many of his meditations-exhortations; I loved to serve his Mass; and I enjoyed the candies that he sometimes gave us. His smile, his blessing hand upon my head, and his wish-greeting - "Become a saint" – are engraved in the depth of my being.

As I grew older, I came to appreciate more and more Fr. Justin's love for God and for vocations. As I kept cleaning Fr. Justin's room for several years after his death, I felt that I was breathing his own spirit.

In the United States, I have gladly undertaken the task of translating some of Fr. Justin's writings; this work of translating has given me a special opportunity to restudy and rediscover the depth of his spirituality, the heights of his union with the Blessed Trinity and the power that emanates from his life and his writings.

For several years I had been thinking and wishing to write a biography of Fr. Justin so that English-speaking people could have at least a glimpse of this servant of God. Although I deemed that a biography of Fr. Justin would be absolutely necessary for the growth of the Society of Divine Vocations in the United States and throughout the English-speaking world, I kept putting it off, blaming my lack of time, the unavailability of source and my limited knowledge of English.

In the spring of 1985, I received a phone call: my younger brother, Floriano, had a brain tumor, and had been hospitalized in Varese. Alarming news kept coming; I could do nothing but pray and ask my confreres and friends to do the same. I entrusted him to Fr. Justin, asking that he...now face to face with Jesus, would intercede for my brother.

On the morning of April 3, 1985, as I woke up, I heard myself talking aloud: “ I promise you, Fr. Justin, that if my brother will get well I will publish your biography in English.”

Had I dreamed of him? I only remember my promise. That same morning, Sr. Antonietta Cioce, S.D.V., was glad to inform me that she had dreamed that I was saying a Mass of thanksgiving to the Blessed Trinity in honor of Fr. Justin because my brother was well. That very day, Floriano was operated upon, and the operation was successful.

My brother is now doing well; he has resumed normal life and doesn't show any trace of his cancer. Now I am returning the favor by sharing the treasure of Fr. Justin's life with all my English-speaking friends.

This biography is by not means complete, and it is not original. Everything written in this book has been previously published; most of it is only a translation. The main source for this book are: *L'Apostolo Delle Divine Vocazioni, Un prete di ieri per la Chiesa di Oggi, Fatti Santo and Spiritus Domini, as well as Fr. Justin's works Ascensione and Spiritus Orationis, Devozionale and Costituzione.*

I hope that through these pages many may come to know appreciate and imitate the life, work and holiness of this servant of God, and that this reading may inspire you to discover, accept and follow your vocation to become a saint and sanctifier.

Fr.Louis Caputo, S.D.V.

Newark, New Jersey

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INTRODUCTION

On May 2, 1948, Cardinal Luigi Lavitrano, Prefect of the Congregation of Religious, appointed by Pope Pius XII to be protector of the two Vocationist congregations, went to Pianura for his first visit to the two Mother Houses. The small town of Pianura exulted over the visit of the Cardinal – a first in its history – and the joy was multiplied by the fact that the visit was also a tribute to that most humble and illustrious son of Pianura, Fr. Justin.

That night, when the festive ringing of the church bells and the joyful acclamation of the people had quieted down, when the echo of the musical concerts and the fireworks had vanished, Fr. Justin's mother, Giuseppina Simpatia, privately called her other priest son, Fr.Ciro, and confided to him a secret that she had carefully kept in her heart for many years but now could hide no longer.

Before Fr. Justin's birth, a priest of Pianura, Fr. Salvatore Di Fusco, well known as a confessor and spiritual director, had fallen seriously ill. One night, when everyone was expecting the death of the pious priest, a miracle took place. The Blessed Mother appeared to him and said: "Have no fear, you shall recover because today in Pianura a

child is being born; he will be named Justin and he shall be a glory for the Catholic Church.”

To the astonishment of relatives and friends, Fr. Di Fusco did indeed recover. Thankful to the Blessed Mother, he had a painting made of the vision; this painting is kept in the Mother House of the Vocationist Sisters in Pianura.

In one of his first outings after his miraculous healing, Fr. Di Fusco visited the Russolillo family. While they were congratulating him on his unexpected and sudden recovery, he was congratulating them for the birth of their third boy.

On hearing that the child’s name was Justin, the lucky priest exclaimed, “Then he is the one!” and told Fr. Justin’s parents about the vision and his miraculous healing. Fr. Di Fusco lived and died with the certainty that he was the one. Every year thereafter, Fr. Di Fusco celebrated January 18 as the day of the annunciation of Fr. Justin’s mission as servant and apostle of divine vocations.

HIS BIRTH

On January 18, 1891, Giuseppina Russolillo gave birth to her third child. On that day Pianura woke up under a blanket of snow; there had never been so much snow. It stayed on the ground for twelve to thirteen days. Some old houses collapsed under the weight of the snow. Relatives wanted to postpone the baptism in order to prepare a fitting celebration. Justin was the third boy



and he was so different from the others that midwife, with confidence, holding the newborn baby in her arms, said to the mother, “This son is not like the others; who fathered him?”

“God forgive you, my dear!” said Giuseppina, smiling; she was not offended, having interpreted very well the meaning of the remark. “He is fruit of heaven and not of earth.”

The first impression remained unchanged; wherever he went, with whomever he dealt, Justin was seen and perceived always as a man of God, a heavenly creature living on earth.

The next day, Giuseppina wrapped the newborn baby in a shawl, called her husband, Luigi, and very resolutely said: “The Lord gives us children for His glory and not so that we may have parties. Let us have this baby baptized at once.”

Without hesitation, Luigi Russolillo gathered his family and led them to St. George's church, shoveling a path for them through the deep snow as the little group moved along.

During the ceremony, the midwife noticed that the child, who had been quiet during the preliminary prayers, smiled beautifully when the holy water was poured on his forehead.

"Listen to what I'm telling, you!" she prophesied to his mother. "This boy will be a priest, and from this moment I expect a Mass for my soul."

INFANCY

From the very early years of his life, it was clear that Justin was not cut out for trade, not even for a profession; he had a mission. His precocious intelligence, his absolute docility and his singular devotion kept announcing him as a future priest. He was very witty. At the age of three, he asked his uncle Giuseppe: "Why do we refer to the dead as 'the good souls'? Does one become good after death?"



"No," explained the uncle, "You must be good during your lifetime; after death, people call us 'good soul' out of compassion; only God knows the truth."

According to a popular Neapolitan belief, very intelligent children live a short life; the Russolillo's neighbors used to say, "He is too intelligent, he cannot live too long." Half pleased and half resentful the mother would reply: "Why should only the stupid live a long life?"

His grandmother, Giuseppina Scherillo, a very educated lady, quickly put an end to these questions with a golden sentence: “Let me tell you where this child was. He was in the mind of God!”

Justin was full of life. While a neighbor and family friend was artfully handling her spindle, he would quickly grasp and pull it. “Don’t touch, don’t touch” the old lady kept saying to him.

Mockingly, he used to repeat, “Don’t touch, don’t touch.”

Losing her patience, the old lady would add,: “Blessed Mother, take him!” The impertinent little boy would reply: “Take her!”

He was quiet only when he was allowed to celebrate or preach to the elderly ladies, who would repay him by teaching him embroidery, crocheting and knitting. Later on, he was an expert in distinguishing and appreciating handmade embroideries. He was welcome in every kitchen of the neighborhood; he visited many families and was not choosy about food – he ate everything.

THE IDEAL

Maria, Enrichetta and Giovannina, Justin’s paternal aunts, were teachers, and they helped his mother a great deal in raising and educating him. They would take him to class with them, where he acquired his first notions of education while rendering small services.

One day, on the way back from school, Justin was walking alongside his aunt Giovannina

carrying under his arm the attendance book and class register; Rachele Marrone, who was walking on the other side, asked him, “Justin, what will you be when you grow up?”

“A priest!” he responded very quickly.

“Then I will be a sister and I will even come to confess to you, but ... I wouldn't like having big penances.”

“You can relax, I will only give you as penance forty days of fasting on bread and water only, and fifteen decades of the rosary everyday...”

Giovannina kept smiling and wishing him well. The little boy already had a good reputation for his austerity.

THE MISSION

When **Ciro Varchetta** left the little town of Pianura to go to the seminary, his mother and relatives, with tears in their eyes, were saying their good-byes while the young boy was wiping his own tears as he departed on a horse and carriage. Justin, who was present at the scene, commented: “Why do you cry? I wish it could be me going there now!”

Fr. **Giorgio Mele, S.D.V.**, testified that, as boys, he and the first followers of Fr. Justin, while witnessing the acceptance of the seminarians, used to cry, saying, “We will never have such a chance. Will anybody perform a miracle for us so that we can go?” But those

seminarians they watched leaving did not become priest! Their place was taken by seventeen young men of Pianura who became priests thanks to Fr. Justin's work.



After Justin completed the first three years of elementary education, aunt Giovannina gave him private classes to further his education. She had been raised with her uncle, Msgr. Scherillo, a humanist and archeologist well known throughout Europe; he greatly influenced the culture and education of his favorite niece. A popular saying at that time was: "In the Scherillo home even the cats are intelligent." Aunt Giovannina was, therefore, well prepared for the task that she was freely undertaking. Only in Latin did she ask help, turning to Fr. Orazio Guillaro, pastor of Sr. George's Parish in Pianura. Justin never missed a lesson. Sometimes, when his aunt was too busy, tired or sick and she tried to skip a class, with good manners he would plead, "Aunt, let us have at least a fifteen-minute class." He progressed quickly in his studies and soon the time came to send him to the seminary – but who would pay? The Lord, who later blessed the Russolillo family, making them prosperous, wanted Justin to experience financial difficulties, so that he could understand the distress of the children of the poor, who, called to the priesthood, face the obstacle of their poverty.

At the time, the Baron Lorenzo Zampaglione, owner of a larger part of the real estate in town, was known as a charitable man. Every year, on the recommendation of his pastor, he would provide a dowry for many young girls who were contemplating marriage.

Mrs. Russolillo and her son Justin went to his house in Naples and confided their difficulty to him. Justin, with his frail health, could not work in construction as his father did; it would have been a crime to waste such beautiful intelligence. “Let him become a shoemaker!” the Baron answered them abruptly. Red with embarrassment and his eyes filled with tears, Justin remained speechless.

Coming out of the Baron’s house with determination and tenderness, his mother reassured him, saying: "Don't be afraid. Mother will make you a priest at the cost of her own eyes." The family agreed with the mother. His father and his uncles accompanied Justin to the minor seminary of Pozzuoli. That very day the seminary faculty was giving a placement test to the candidates for their school. Justin took the test and then waited with his family to see the test scores. Justin scored high and was admitted to the second year of high school. Even years later, in his old age, Msgr. Colonna kept telling everyone about Justin’s alertness and promptness: “There has never been, in my experience, another similar case.”

IN THE SEMINARY

Soon the new seminarian attracted the esteem of the superiors, the admiration of the teachers, and the affection of the other seminarians and of all the seminary employees.

The Bishop used him as his assistant both in Pozzuoli and throughout the diocese.

The great esteem that he enjoyed helped him to overcome the two obstacles to his ascent to the priesthood – his frail health and his poverty. At a certain point, the superiors suspected that Justin might have tuberculosis, yet they did not want to dismiss such a promising young man. They gave him two rooms with a balcony overlooking the Mediterranean Sea and did their best to hasten his recovery.

Poverty, already understandable in a Christian family that kept growing every year (the Russolillo's had ten children) became alarming when Mr. Russolillo fell from a scaffold while supervising some repair work at the City Hall of Pianura. The accident left its scars for the rest of his life. The first symptoms of cataracts, which grieved him greatly in the last years of his life, appeared at the same time.

Justin's mother regularly visited her "special son," and his brother Vincenzino, whenever possible, accompanied her; a little donkey was their only means of transportation. The good mother kept asking the Lord for the strength needed to walk from Pianura to Pozzuoli, about eight miles of road that was very dusty and sunny during the summer, muddy and deserted during the winter. Once, on her way to the seminary, she fainted and remained a long time in the shadow of some chestnut trees, trying to recover her strength. On that occasion, Giuseppina was unable to hide the distress of her poverty from her son and hinted at the possibility of having to discontinue his studies.

Trusting in God, Justin prayed and cried. He cried so much that the superiors noticed and reported it to the bishop. In a conversation with Mrs. Russolillo, the bishop became aware of their financial situation. The firstborn in the family had interrupted his studies to help the father and the second born, Vincenzino, followed his example. Their aunt Enrichetta,

who wholeheartedly helped her nephew, died at a very young age. The bishop was convinced of their real need and pleaded with his friend, the Baron Zampaglione, who this time willingly committed himself to pay the monthly tuition, which mailed directly to the seminary.

STUDIES

Justin was always the best student in his class, and on every exam he scored very high. He was appointed “prefect” of the younger class both so that he might be sheltered from the roughness of the senior class and, much more, so that he could be entrusted with their formation.

Since the seminary school was not recognized by the state, Msgr. Zezza, who appreciated the ability of Justin, wanted him to pass the state exam for high school and college. In his first state, in 1905, a bitterly anti-clergy professor failed him in French; when Justin took the exam again in September of the same year, he passed with the highest possible score. The second state exam was a real triumph.

Mr. Russolillo did not have the money to pay the fee for the examination, and it was the last possible day. He was owed some money by a gentleman in Pozzuoli, so he went to the creditor to collect it, but the creditor refused to listen to him. Luigi Russolillo appealed again to Baron Zampaglione, who also this time was very happy to help.

The “Umberto Primo College” was renowned for its high standards. Justin went to the exams wearing his clerical attire, which was not a positive recommendation, since at that time the Masonic liberals had absolute control of the Department of Education in Italy. The “little priest” disarmed everyone by responding promptly, accurately and modestly to their questions. One of the professors said, “Young man, get rid of that garb; you may have



a brilliant future ahead of you.” The president of the examining faculty was the first one to congratulate Justin. All the professors shook his hand admiring his intelligence and his virtue. For achieving an “A” average in all subjects, he was refunded the student fee paid for the exams. The bishop was very happy and proud of Justin’s outstanding success, which reflected well on the whole seminary, and praised and kissed him. Justin’s pre-theology year followed, then four years of theology. Since the bishop used to exempt all those who scored very high in dogmatic theology from the exams in moral theology, Justin never had to take them.

He completed his last two years of theology, 1911-1913, at the Regional Seminary of St.Pius X in Posillipo, Naples. The seminary was staffed by the Jesuit Fathers. He was one of the first six students there. Since the huge seminary building was not totally completed, for a while, the seminarians lived in the house of the Jesuits; thus Justin had the first real experience of religious life. As the first prefect of that seminary, Justin harmonized beautifully firmness and sweetness. Later on, Fr. Justin used to say of this

first period of seminary life in Posillipo: “It was like a family.” He completed his theological studies, receiving a gold medal award.

Fr. Antonio Stravino, S.J., rector of the seminary, used to repeat to Fr. Saggiomo, S.D.V.: “Justin is a saint who should be canonized while alive. Holy mother Church should make an exception for him.

CATECHETICAL APOSTOLATE

Justin was like a pearl who shone better when surrounded by restless children. The little ones gathered around him as butterflies gather around a light that shines in the midnight. He welcomed them with joviality. Using some construction beams, he made benches for his little friends; he would seat them on the improvised benches and teach them catechism. Sometimes the catechism questions took interesting turns. “Who created you?” Justin once asked a young boy.

“Mom and Daddy.”

“Why?” insisted Justin, smiling.

“To cut the grass for my little cow.” Justin’s heart melted and he was motivated to always do more, seeing such crass ignorance in religious matters. Catechism in all its forms, from the most basic to the most elevated, was his favorite weapon in spiritual battles, for the achievement of spiritual good; the teaching of catechism became his constant passion.

Msgr.Cafiero, Rector of the Seminary of Naples, met Fr. Justin shortly after his ordination and inquired about his daily schedule. When he heard: “In the afternoon, teaching catechism,” Msgr.Cafiero incredulously interrupted him, asking, Every day?”

“Every day!” confirmed Fr. Justin.

“Finally I have found a priest who teaches catechism every day!” exclaimed Msgr.Cafiero.

Even while serving in the army, he kept up his mission of teaching catechism. He wrote to his aunt Giovannina: “Please, I beg you, transmit privately and as secretly as possible a renewed plea to all the teachers of Pianura, asking their cooperation for the teaching of catechism after school. This has seemed to me to be God’s will and as such I am addressing it to you.” (Letter dated August 26,1918.)

After the foundation of the Vocationary, Fr. Justin directed his students to read every morning the Catechism of Perseverance written by Abbott Gaume.

The sisters on one particular occasion were worried and distressed that, because of the cold temperature, the dough was not rising and that they would not be able to bake the bread on time for dinner. They were apologizing to the founder for the anticipated delay and he answered them, “Call two hundred children into the room, teach them catechism, and the heat of their bodies, and much more of their hearts, which you will light up with the love of God, will make the dough rise.”

Later on the bishop of Pozzuoli asked him to write the diocesan by-laws for the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. Many member of the hierarchy, religious and lay people were greatly impressed and moved by his splendid presentation at the Catechetical Convention of the Archdiocese of Naples and by his lecture at the diocesan synod of Teggiano. Maybe someday a special book should be written on Fr. Justin as the apostle of catechism. He taught catechism with such dedication and ability that his audience kept growing every day. Everyone who attended his classes, would proselytize others, saying: “Do you want to come to Fr. Justin?” He used to alternate the teaching of catechism with songs; with a well-attuned voice he used to teach simple tunes, and then he would recognize games and competitions in which he himself would take part. With great and fascinating ability, he used to read passages from the Bible or from the lives of the saints. Often he organized outings. It was like a well-disciplined small army. He had up to two hundred children who would march in perfect order, singing some songs that he himself had written. One song went like this:

“Jubilant brethren – with angels and saints

With the heavens and the stars – let us sing to the Lord

Our most beautiful songs – that come from the heart

Glory and love to God our Redeemer

Who in His great heart – embraced us all

And in His sorrow – saved us all.”

THE ECSTATIC



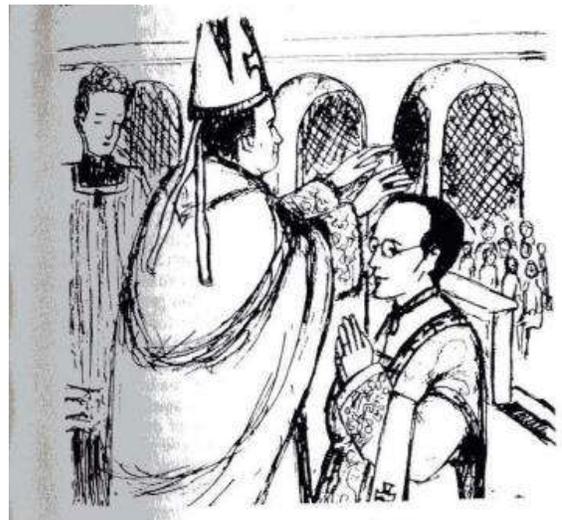
His little friends gathered around him the way a flock of pigeons gather around those who feed them. The more children flocked around him, the happiest was Justin , and he kept giving of himself to them.

In the church he used to concentrate on his prayers and he used to pray for many hours every day. Mr. Vincenzo

Bavarella, who often saw him immersed in prayer and meditation, said: “A good day is pre-determined by its morning; here is one who wants to achieve the best success.”

Some elderly ladies of Pianura had scruples about having missed some Masses, because while in church they were contemplating Justin in prayer!

One day, when he was entertaining himself with the Lord longer than usual, a group of restless children entered the empty church and caught him suspended in mid-air. At such a sight, the children, astonished, started screaming out of surprise and fear; hearing them, Fr. Salvatore Di Fusco came out of the sacristy and saw his beloved godchild in ecstasy. He quietly led the



children out of the church; then, full of fear and awe, he hid himself. Justin slowly descended; as soon as he came back to his senses, he sweetly calmed the impertinent children and strongly recommended that they not talk about what they had seen. The news, however, spread around quickly; the low credibility usually enjoyed by children and the modesty of the young ecstatic contributed to quieting down the curiosity of the people. Fr. Justin, growing in age and in virtue, hid with impregnable humility his talents and charismas, eluding the curiosity of those people who consider these external manifestations to be the essence of Christian holiness.

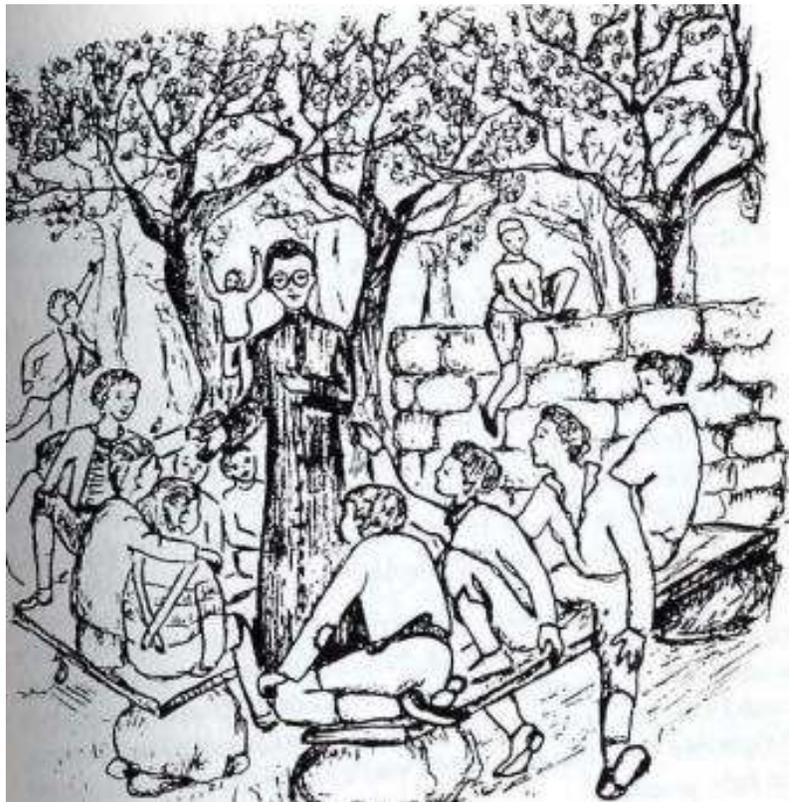
PRIESTHOOD

As time went by, the anticipation for the priestly ordination of Justin kept growing. On September 3, 1913, writing to his aunt Michelina from Sorrento, he expressed his thoughts thus: “You should ask all those good people who teach catechism to the children in their homes and, if possible, to all the grammar school teachers, to bring all those boys and girls to Holy Communion on the day of my first Mass.... this is the most beautiful gift that could be given to me, all the rest means nothing.” On September 11, he started a spiritual retreat in preparation for his ordination. He had received the minor orders, or “ministries” as they are called today, on September 22, 1906. He became sub-deacon on July 28, 1912, and finally was ordained a deacon on March 22, 1913, in the chapel of the seminary of Pozzuoli, the same chapel in which St. Francis De Gironimo, the Apostle of Naples, had been ordained. On all these occasions he had always asked for the prayers of his relatives and friends; for his priestly ordination. A providential rain, the night before

his ordination, was interpreted as a sign from heaven. A persistent drought for over three months had rendered the unpaved roads of Pianura impassable. The procession escorting the newly ordained would have been moving in a dense cloud of dust! Around midnight a heavy rain restored fields, beasts and people alike. The Russolillo's were still awake then, making last-minutes arrangements for the following day. "Tomorrow will be a very happy day," said the jubilant mother.

"This is the first miracle of our new pastor!" exclaimed the neighbors who were helping Mrs. Russolillo, and notwithstanding the protest of the mother they continued saying: "He must be pastor!"

On September 20, 1913, in the Cathedral of Pozzuoli, through the laying of the hands by the Most Reverend Michael Zezza,



Justin was ordained priest. That morning, before the ordination, Fr. Justin, with the permission and approval of his spiritual director, made a vow of charity through which he committed himself to the foundation of the religious family of the "Servants of the Saint", which was later established as "Society of Divine Vocations."

After the ordination, while relatives and friends were getting organized to escort the new priest to Pianura, Fr. Justin's parents went to thank the bishop. The mother said, "... we hope to thank you again in the near future also for the ordination of our son Michael."

"Oh, no! Michael is not Justin!" remarked the bishop. Relatives and friends had already noticed and expressed similar feeling comparing the behavior of the two brothers at the parish liturgies. Michael was very intelligent, a bundle of nerves and fire. He later became a well known-surgeon and taught at the University of Naples.

Twenty-two floats, in addition to the horses and carriages, escorted the newly ordained Justin. The festive and jubilant procession attracted the attention and admiration of the people from Pozzuoli to Pianura. As the fireworks started in Pianura, the people crowded the roads and enthusiastically welcomed the new priest.

The procession was starting its entrance into the church when all of a sudden crowds of people were seen running toward Naples Street. "What happened? An accident? A fight?" asked Justin's family. It would have been pitiful on such a joyful day. But there was nothing wrong. Running potable water had finally arrived in town and the fountain was pouring out its first water. It was a new sight and new experience for the people of Pianura, who up to that date had had to use only water drawn out of wells.

Was it a mere chance? It might have been; however, there is not better symbol of the spiritual water that for many years Fr. Justin would provide to thirsty-souls: the clear, pure and fertile water of the Word of God.

THE SEED OF HIS CHARISMA

Since 1910, Justin's activities had begun to be eminently *Vocationist*. One day, years afterwards, Fr. Giacomo Vaccaro, S.D.V., asked Fr. Justin what to answer to people inquiring "Answer this way: It started from a priest who taught catechism every day." Then he added, "While teaching catechism you will encounter young men and, discovering vocations, you will start to cultivate them." A similar answer was given by Fr. Justin to Don Arsenio, a Brazilian bishop who retired to live the hermitic life at the Camaldoli. "How did the idea come to you?" asked the bishop. "It has come to me through the teaching of catechism, continuous teaching of catechism," replied Fr. Justin.

In 1910, Justin organized a group of the "fedelissimi" (the most faithful); he initiated them into the study of Latin and love for religious life. Fr. Gillet had an expression: "Our relatives are the friends that God has given to us; our friends are the relatives that we choose for ourselves." Throughout the school year, with permission of the superiors, Justin received the visits of these acquired relatives. Many admiring seminarians would go with him to the visiting room, some out of mere curiosity, others to offer candies or cookies (one of them offered several copies of the Bible) and others to be edified. Some of the seminarians promised to consecrate themselves to the future foundation. They, however, never kept their commitment.

The group of "fedelissimi" did not miss any of Fr. Justin's ordinations. For his first Mass they rented a horse and carriage exclusively for themselves and they were third in line in the procession, right after the immediate family. The priestly ordination of Fr. Justin should have opened for them the opportunity for community life, and indispensable

prelude to religious life; by now these generous young boys knew everything about novitiate, vows, studies and activities. They were disappointed when Bishop Zezza assigned Justin to the seminary. In the month of October 1913, the pious pilgrimages of the “fedelissimi” started again from Pianura to Pozzuoli. The formalities were slightly different, but the purpose of the visits remained the same: I.e., to become priests in the future religious community.

To alleviate the hardship of the ten-mile walk, often they used the services of Mr. Basil Polverino’s donkey, a patient beast that on good days moved quickly from Pianura to Pozzuoli; on bad days it would stubbornly park itself on the ground, expecting to be lifted up by the boys. On account of its bad humor, this poor beast died more from the beatings it used to get than from old age; this donkey had some successors who were named after it: “Uncle Basil’s donkey.” To spare his children the hardship of going back and forth and consequently wasting time, Fr. Justin started some efforts to have them live close by with the Capuchin Fathers; the problem, however, was solved by Divine Providence: a few months later, due to his poor health, Fr. Justin was reassigned to his home town.

THE DAWN OF THE VOCATIONARY



On April 30, 1914, Fr. Justin and his group of twelve “fedelissimi” started their first experience of community life, in the Russolillo’s home. Fr. Justin’s family was very understanding and cooperative.

Mr. Russolillo welcomed them as his own children and soon started making some plans to enlarge Fr.

Justin’s apartment for them.

It was a short honeymoon. Aunt Michelina was the cook and Fr. Justin would put on his white apron and serve them at the table. At night, after they had gone to bed, he would mend their torn clothes.

The thrill lasted fifteen days; the bishop visiting the parish church in Soccavo sent for Fr. Justin and ordered him peremptorily to dismiss the children, thus terminating their first experience of community life.

The good father suffered greatly for the foundation; he suffered even more knowing how the news would affect the first members of his religious family. Before returning to Pianura, he visited the Scherillo family; there an aunt to whom he had opened his heart gave him a wooden cross.

Aunt Michelina and the aspirants, unaware of the bishop's order, waited for Fr. Justin so they could have dinner together. He ate with them and was as peaceful and jovial as ever. At the end of the dinner he took the cross, and asked everyone to kiss it. Then, with meekness and persuasion, he announced: "We are children of the cross; we must sacrifice our will to the will of the superiors, as Jesus sacrificed his to the will of the Father."

On July 16, in a plea addressed to St. Pius X, Fr. Justin explained his program in order to obtain approval and encouragement. The Holy See, as usual, acted through the diocesan chancery, and it seemed that the outcome would be rather favorable. The bishop, however, through Msgr. Dell'Isola, who later became Bishop of Cava, renewed his opposition. Why? It was certainly his concern for Fr. Justin's poor health and concern also for the aspirants, all from very poor families. The bishop's denial may have been also influenced indirectly by Fr. Justin's mother who, having three young daughters, was concerned about people gossiping.

The blow was hard! In order to alleviate it, when the bishop went to Pianura to bless the fountains, he asked to see the group of aspirants, and offered to admit one of them to the seminary. Fr. Justin chose Salvatore Polverino, who had already completed grammar school.

The other aspirants continued to gather around their father and teacher in their native Pianura. Fr. Georgia Mele, S.D.V.,

used to recall some of the lessons received in the "pagliarella" (hut) in the Russolillo's



garden. “What did you eat today?” Fr. Justin would ask with fatherly care, and George would answer: “Potatoes.”

“And what else,” Fr. Justin would continue.

“Zucchini!” Their good humor alleviated the hardship of instruction for minds that had not been trained to learn and to retain knowledge. Whenever he was invited to participate in formal processions or solemn high Masses, Fr. Justin would graciously decline, declaring, “My mission is to teach young boys.”

VOLUNTEERS OF JESUS

In addition to the small group of aspirants to the priesthood, Fr. Justin also cultivated a larger group called the “Volunteers of Jesus”; they wore tri-colored ribbons on their arms with the image of the Sacred Heart. They were a group of militants, precursors of “Catholic Action.” Their task was to protect public morality, foster and encourage participation in catechetical instruction and receive Communion daily. They would intervene wherever they saw obscene pictures, whenever they heard obscene language, whenever they discovered sinful relations or situations.

The group leaders would commit themselves to wake up the others early in the morning so that they would not miss Holy Communion; likewise, they would lead them in good order and punctuality to the vespertin liturgies. They also guided them to march orderly and devoutly in the processions. On feast days, Fr. Justin used to shelter them from the

dangers of the street, leading them on outings and organizing games in which he was both umpire and pacifier. He used to initiate the older ones into a social apostolate. For example, he wrote a short letter to all the barbers and invited them to his house to agree on a convenient hour for Sunday Mass. He invited the men to perform a section of “popular union of Italian Catholics”; in this enterprise, one of his first objectives was to solve the problem of public transportation, which was indispensable for the workers who had to commute to the city every day.

THE SLAVES OF MARY

On the eve of his entrance into the Vocationary, George Mele went around saying his good-byes to relatives and friends. At one of his visits, two young ladies, Rachele Marrone and Antonietta Costantino, remarked to him: “Only men must become saints? Tell Fr. Justin that we too wish a program of life to better serve and love the Lord.” Very quickly George went to Fr. Justin with the message and came back with the answer: “Come and you will get it.”

The answer seemed kind of vague to Rachele, so she persisted: “Do I have to go alone or with others?”



Through the same messenger the answer came: “Come with the others.” Miss Marrone had organized a select group of young girls who would gather in her home to pray, work and have some recreation. She was very successful in inspiring and motivating the group through appropriate exhortations and para-liturgies. Each one of these young ladies became a catechist for her

neighborhood; this is the group that she was referring to. A week later, they were invited for their first meeting with Fr. Justin. The future Sister Rachele was in church, making the Stations of the Cross, when the message-invitation was delivered to her. She was at the fifth station – Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross for Jesus. It seemed that Jesus was inviting her to relieve Fr. Justin of the heavy cross he was carrying.

At the meeting, Fr. Justin invited them to strive for Christian perfection, and he pointed out to them the life of love as the only way to achieve it. Concluding, he said: "Pray that the Lord will send you someone capable of directing you." Rachele answered for the group: “The Lord has already sent us our guide; you will direct us.”

Fr. Justin accepted their request that he direct this group. After intense spiritual preparation, on August 15, 1914, in his own home before an image of the Blessed Mother, he consecrated as “Slaves of Mary” the first twelve ladies. One of them later commented, “Coming out of that experience I felt like the apostles coming out of the cenacle after receiving the Holy Spirit.” Each one of them was given and accepted the

task of multiplying the Slaves of Mary. The growth exceeded every expectation. On March 25, 1915, after a month of intense preparation, the Slaves of Mary mobilized the town of Pianura; on the feast of the Annunciation, they organized groups of people from every neighborhood and at the same hour all these groups started moving in an organized fashion toward the Church of the Holy Rosary. They marched in procession, praying and singing. The various small groups came together, forming a big army that couldn't fit into the small church; there were more people outside than in. A new wave of spirituality was pervading Pianura.

SOLDIER

At age of twenty, Justin, as a seminarian, had to register for the draft and, as it was customary in Italy, he also had to undergo a physical examination by army doctors. He was not drafted because of his frail health. The following year he underwent another army physical examination and for the same reason he was rejected.

Then came the war. All those who had not been drafted for health reason were mobilized on March 14, 1916. Fr. Justin, who was in this category, had to report to the army. The head of the examining commission ironically and maliciously asked him, "How many months of starvation have you undergone to reduce yourself to this condition?" Fr. Justin did not react to the poisonous insinuation but all those who knew him protested for him. He was drafted and, after a short period of training, was



assigned to the military hospital of Sacramento. The uniform they gave him was much too large. One of his colleagues, reminiscing, said that it looked like a sack on him.

Fr. Justin's health could not withstand the rigors of military life. On the day of departure for the front, the commander of the unit, convinced that the soldier Russolillo would not have made it to the station under the heavy load of the backpack, hired a young boy who was very happy to march next to the soldier carrying his pack. A few soldiers complained about the special privilege given to Fr. Justin, but the majority of them felt sorry for that skinny priest. One of the soldiers on the first march was overheard saying, "If I should ever decide to go to confession, I would go only to him."

With the military unit Fr. Justin experienced some very hectic days but also days of peaceful rest. On June 9, 1918, he wrote: "I am an assistant to a doctor in a section with three beds and no sick people," on August 5, 1918, he wrote: "I am so busy that you could not believe it. There are one hundred beds here and I am the only attendant."

The military bishop, having come to know the charity, abnegation and industry with which Justin was fulfilling his duty, gave him a solemn and public recognition.

Certainly Fr. Justin wasn't happy to join the army, even though he loved Italy very much.

He was greatly grieved by the profanities of the soldiers around him. Many times he would go to bed early so he would not have to listen to their blasphemies and foul language, but some of the soldiers would purposely raise their voices and abound in profanities, knowing well that this would bother the poor priest. He was also grieved realizing that the war would delay the realization of his mission. "Oh, how I cherish the

sweet hope of returning for good to my ministry and to the beautiful school which also is a part of my priestly ministry. Blessed be God forever and ever,” he wrote in a letter on August 5 1918.

There were several encouragements and occasions for Fr. Justin to get out of the army. Fr. Angelo Ziccardi, S.J., being with Fr. Justin at weapons training in Pozzuoli, would very willingly shoot in place of Fr. Justin at target practice. Fr. Justin didn't even want to touch the gun. After marching back to the barracks, the same priest, seeing Fr. Justin changing his tee shirt, was astonished to see that Justin was such a frail human being. He advised the servant of God to go for sick call and realized that Justin was unwilling because he knew that the army doctor would easily descend into profanities and blasphemies. Fr. Ziccardi, who was a professor of philosophy at the Pontifical Seminary, insisted, “Actiones sunt suppositorm.”: “You are not accountable for the outbursts of that crazy guy.” Fr. Justin was convinced and he reported to the doctor for a checkup. When the doctor saw him naked, a walking skeleton, he bust out with the filthiest expressions against those who drafted that “spider”; the doctor sent him home, recommending that he be discharged at once. Unfortunately, he was not discharged but was called back.

Another opportunity came when a special law allowed soldiers with a bachelor degree to become Quartermaster Officers after passing physical examinations. Fr. Justin tried to take advantage of this new law but was rejected by the medical commission because he was too weak. Naturally, there was no logic in the decision of the medical examiners. If he was unable to withstand this light work, how could he withstand the much heavier labor he was already engaged in? His relatives appealed to her majesty Queen Elena to

intervene and correct the injustice. Consequently, he was called to Florence for another physical examination and, this time, he was dismissed from the army on account of poor health, when the war was about to end.

A short note in Fr. Justin's spiritual diary, written only a few months before his death, may give us an idea of how he felt about his military service: "9-30-54. Anniversary of my liberation from military service."

THE TWO RELIGIOUS ORDERS

The unpleasant experience of military life could not force Fr. Justin to neglect the groups of people that he was guiding. As long as Fr. Justin was in Naples, the "fedelissimi" bravely walked from Pianura so that they could serve his Mass and could continue to receive Latin classes and exhortations on the practice of virtues. It was Fr. Justin's ideal and dream to make of every employee, professional, politician and head of state a true religious of God; he dreamed of families, cities and countries becoming true religious of God according to Jesus Christ. Fr. Justin combined words and actions. One day he went to a barber shop to get a haircut. At the end, the barber sprayed and meticulously combed his hair. Fr. Justin let him do it but afterward, as soon as he walked out of the shop, with his hands he ruffled up his hair again. "What a sin!" exclaimed the future Fr. Saggiomo, "It looked so good."

"Vanity is sin," Fr. Justin corrected him.

From time to time even the young ladies who had started the journey toward perfection would arrive in groups at Vomero where he would say Mass for them in the Convent of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary and exhort them to persevere in their holy ideal. Often he was given leave to go home. The first time he went to Pianura in his military uniform, he was surrounded by many friends who were both curious and mortified at seeing him in that attire. Large groups of people always formed by his house to celebrate his homecoming; naturally, the first and the noisiest were always the “fedelissimi.” Often he would celebrate Mass at 4:00 a.m. before returning to the army base, and boys and girls would crowd the church at 3:00 a.m.

He was home when he heard the news of the defeat at Caporetto; the troops had been decimated and humiliated and now needed reinforcement; he had to go. The “fedelissimi” found out the hour of his departure and decided to be there both for their own and his consolation, bringing as gifts bags of food for the long journey. That afternoon, Giovannina, Fr. Justin’s sister arriving at the house of aunt Michelina, found her petrified by grief, surrounded by the boys in tears and the various bags of food; they had arrived too late for the departure.

From the front he would write letters addressed to the “Souls of Pianura who are militating toward the heavenly country.” During that time he wrote and sent a handwritten booklet of Devotions for the month of May.

Unexpected fruit of this long agony caused by the war was the project of founding the Vocationist Sisters. Fr. Justin had always been thinking about the Vocationist Fathers so much that when Fr. Francesco Sepe, S.D.V., wanted to know about the origins of the

community he answered, "I cannot be precise about the time, but I can assure you that the thought was born with me." On another occasion, Fr. Justin said, "I could show you the seminary room where I made a vow to found the congregation."

When the Vocationist Sisters later on went to work in the seminary of Pozzuoli, Fr. Justin confided to them, "I am very pleased that they gave you the rooms in which I made a vow of founding the congregation." This clearly indicates that his dream had become a duty and, anticipating the possible difficulties, he had committed himself to its realization with a vow.

He had not thought of founding a religious community for women; in fact, he had explicitly renounced such a project. The pious Christian ladies, he thought should have supported the Vocationary and the work of the Vocationist Fathers without being "religious." As a matter of fact, when Bishop Farina of Troia, founder of the Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, visited him in Pianura, he jokingly asked: "Who has perverted you to found the sisters?" The two had discussed the issue several times together; on the example of St. Ignatius he had always been against founding a religious community of sisters. In Mestre he saw the sisters of St. Bartolomea Capitanio working hard in the hospital and he convinced himself that in order to solve the logistic problems that would face the religious community of men, it was necessary to have a religious community of women. Mary and Joseph are needed to raise the Baby Jesus who lives in those who are called to the priesthood. During one of his visits to Pianura, while he was in the army, he announced: "Non est bonum hominem esse solum," which means: "It is not good for man to be alone."

From Florence he wrote to the Ferraro sisters, “I am thinking of you for a project that we want to realize together in order to please God.” More explicitly he wrote to his sister Giovannina, “If God wants to use me for a religious congregation of sisters (as I have in mind) you could be the first or one of the first.”

THE PIOUS UNION

With the approval of the bishop and the permission of the pastor, the Pious Union was



officially established February 1, 1919; its goal were to promote sreligious education of children, the missionary formation of the faithful, and to cooperate with the work of the Society of Divine Vocations, still in its embryonic state. The parish church was crowded; the liturgical celebration of St. Ignatius Martyr offered the inspiration for the exhortation: “To be host with the Host.” He divided the members of the Pious Union into three different categories:

the “Effectives,” who were given a ribbon of the liturgical color as their emblem, the “Aspirants,” who were given a lace of the liturgical color, and the “Aggregates,” married women, who were given a cockade of the liturgical color. The Miraculous Medal completed the three distinctive emblems.

Throughout his life, Fr. Justin kept fostering a spirituality in complete harmony with the liturgy; he thought that the various colors – white, red, green and purple – remind us of

and nourish the official spirituality that flows from the sacrifice of the cross. The Pious Union was given the task of establishing centers of prayer in every section of the town in preparation for the consecration to the Sacred Heart. The Pious Union and the fervor it caused kept increasing every day. The young priest would intervene only for the final arrangements. Colorful decorations, lights and religious songs gave special vitality and vibration to every street until late at night. Every street or section of it consecrated to the Sacred Heart was given a special religious name, such as “Of the Sacred Heart,” or “Of the Seven Spirits Assisting at the Throne of God...”

Fr. Justin elected twelve members of the Pious Union from the group of the “Effectives” and, with the blessing of the pastors, sent them two by two for the apostolate into the various suburbs of Pianura. Parents gave maximum freedom to their daughters on account of the high esteem they had for the young priest; they knew that their daughters were safe when they were following Fr. Justin to Masseria Grande, where he was chaplain, or to Torre Caracciolo. These young ladies wanted to make sure that they would not miss any of his sermons. The young men in town were not so happy about this excess of devotion. Even Fr. Justin’s brothers, maybe instigated by the local clergy, showed some reservations. Francesco, the older brother, felt a need to warn his mother. “Mother, please watch after Justin!” They did not doubt him, they were only afraid that he might get into trouble with some unscrupulous young men; they did not need to worry, however – the candor of the pious priest dispersed every shadow of doubt.

THE PASTOR

Above the parish church of Pianura there were some large rooms; the young ladies of the Pious Union used to gather there to pray and to work for vocations. Everything was going smoothly until the pastor's sister started to influence her brother against them. There followed moments of tension and hints of eviction.

Fr. Justin kept asking the young ladies to pray a lot. He was not much distressed by the fact that he had to look for another place as he was distressed by the unbending opposition of the bishop to community life. In July 1920, Bishop Farina invited him to the city of Troia



and offered him the position of director of the diocesan seminary plus a convent where he could freely develop his work for vocations.

In the meantime, the Bishop of Pozzuoli had been promoted to head the Archdiocese of Naples; but Bishop Ragosta, who had been appointed apostolic administrator of the diocese of Pozzuoli, did not want to lose Fr. Justin. The providence of God intervened through an unforeseen and painful happening: suddenly, the pastor, Fr. Giosue Scotto, died of pneumonia. Soon, a self – appointed committee was and one morning the city of Pianura was seen decorated by multicolored billboards proclaiming, “Long live the Pope. Long live the Bishop. Long live Fr. Justin, pastor.” Fr. Justin did not appreciate the unrestrained zeal and was grieved by the episode. He had no intention of seeking the pastorship, both because he wanted to maintain the necessary freedom for the realization

of his plans and out of respect for his Confirmation sponsors, Fr. Salvatore Di Fusco, who was aspiring to that position.

The bishop saw the solution to the “Russolillo Case” in convincing Fr. Justin to seek the pastorship of the vacant parish; he sent Msgr. Csusa to Pianura to talk and convince Fr. Justin to apply for the pastorship. His affirmative decision was welcomed with unprecedented expressions of joy. On September 20, 1920, after having spent a week in spiritual retreat with the Dominican Fathers, Fr. Justin was installed as pastor of St. Georgio’s parish in Pianura. Fr. Justin ascended the pulpit and began his pastorship announcing his motto, which was also printed on the holy cards prepared for the occasion: “The son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life for the ransom of many.”

After the ceremony, a large crowd escorted him home. Present at the installation were, among others, Jesuits and Camaldolesi priests –from both active and contemplative life – representing the happy union that Fr. Justin would realize: “Contemplative in action and action for contemplation.”

FR. JUSTIN’S FAMILY

The Mother

In trying to introduce Fr. Justin’s family, the first place naturally goes to his mother.

Giuseppina never tried to hide her preference for Justin. The other children did not resent

this; they knew he deserved it. Fr. Justin, on several occasions, admitted that he had taken after his mother. In his early childhood Justin did not spend much time in his home. He was constantly visiting his uncles and aunts, who were always happy to welcome him, and that is why when he was home he was particularly welcomed and spoiled. One day Giovannina, who was a little jealous of the attention her brother was receiving, said to her mother, “Why do you make all this fuss over this stranger?”

Her mother corrected her, saying, “No, daughter, Justin is my child like you are. He is your brother and you must love him.”



His very precarious health caused serious concerns to the good mother. She kept multiplying her efforts to do anything within her power to strengthen the health of her precious son. The following episode could be an indication of the fact that her preference for Justin was not only a natural instinct but the result of supernatural esteem. When Justin was about five years old, his mother feared losing him, and so entrusted him to St. Vincent Ferreri and made him wear a tiny religious habit in honor of the saint. Justin was miraculously healed; the mother kept the habit and used it as a guarantee of God’s blessings in the most difficult situations not only for herself but also for others. When things were too complicated and there was little hope, people would send for Giuseppina, saying, “Please come, you always bring good luck.” Many of the people never knew that the happy mother was hiding the little habit of her son under her own clothes and by touching it everything seemed to run smoothly.

His love for his mother clearly appeared when he had to go to war. At the front Justin felt homesick for his mother. He had made his last will and testament in case he should die and he had appointed his sister Giovannina as the executrix. From Giovannina he asked for a picture of his mother, writing, "I have never said *'I want'*, but this time I say it." He instructed her to pay for the picture with the little money he had left and, as a more convincing argument, he enclosed his own picture. He was unrecognizable, especially since he was not wearing his eyeglasses; Giovannina fainted from emotion when she saw the pictures. In order to please her favorite son, the mother overcame her natural reluctance and for the first time in her life had her picture taken.

For the occasion of Fr. Justin's ordination, his brothers remodeled his apartment completely. His mother and sister were eager for the honor of taking care of his room. Inevitably, every morning they would find in a corner one of two mattresses. His mother's appeals were unable to convince him to sleep on both mattresses. Finally, she got her way when, getting smarter, she made one mattress out of the two. He used to warn his brothers and sisters, "We shouldn't cause any disappointment to mother; she has so many worries already." Whenever, in her absence, something broke, he would make sure to have it fixed before she came back.

Giuseppina followed with motherly care the beginning and the growth of Fr. Justin's religious family; she would have been very happy to offer all her children to the Lord. She used to call Fr. Justin's boys "my children" and she treated them like her own children.

After every trip Fr. Justin would visit his mother. "Should we go to visit mother?" he would ask the local superior or the priest who was accompanying him; he was doing so in order to be faithful to the ascetic practice of depending always on someone else's direction.

After the death of his father, he gave his mother a piece of cloth to make her mourning clothes. Every Sunday he sent someone to pick her up by car and take care her for Mass to the Vocationary where she could reach the chapel without having to climb any steps.

The Lord called her to her heavenly home on February 10, 1951. The saintly woman, from her bed of agony, kept looking at her son, who remained in the corner of the room. At a certain point, as if he were afraid of distracting her from the attention owed to God and to eternity, he changed his place; his mother's eyes followed him and then he cried and walked out. His older brother, who was rough but very affectionate, knowing that Fr. Justin used to eat his meal at 11:00 a.m., asked him to go home. Obedient as ever, he did go home, but before leaving, he announced, "Mother will go to heaven at noon." As a matter of fact, as the bell was ringing for the noon Angelus his mother expired. They ran to inform him; he opened the door, and before they could talk, he himself murmured these words: "My mother has passed away." He withdrew to his room to pray and cry.

The previous year, on January 11, 1950, he had been able to receive the visits of confreres and friends who were expressing their sympathy for the death of his father; now he could not receive any visitors. On June 6, 1955, writing to a confrere who had lost his mother, he expressed himself thus: "...expert of such a pain wholeheartedly I unite myself to your sorrow and to your prayers. We are sure that our mothers will continue

from heaven their most loving care and they will assist us in loving more our common mother Mary Most Holy. Courage in the Lord.”

Aunt Michelina

On his father’s side, Fr. Justin had six uncles and aunts. Michelina was like the Cinderella of the house and chose not to get married. We could summarize the influence of his father’s family in this way: the grandmother educated him to holiness, Giovannina initiated him to the studies and aunt Michelina assisted him in the apostolate.

Michelina received the ribbon of the Pious Union as an “Effective” member and honored it with her very devout life. She became a happy intermediary and the faithful messenger of her nephew. Her house became a cenacle of meetings, conferences and lectures. Even after her death her house was used as a training center for young girls, a meeting place and a nursery school.

Fr. Justin used her services to ascertain the vocation of the first disciples without embarrassing them. On one occasion Fr. Justin had casually asked them, “Do you want to become priests?”

“No” they answered in chorus. Fr. Justin was greatly disappointed and asked his aunt to find out the reasons for their “no.” It had been a misunderstanding; Salvatore Polverino cleared it for the group, saying, “If you follow Fr. Justin, someday you will wear the stole.”

At the time of their first attempt at community life in 1914, she joyfully used all her provisions for the Vocationary where she was cook, counselor and, at times, defender. Shortly after Fr. Justin had been appointed pastor, on October 18, 1920, the community life officially started again in the parish house. Aunt Michelina became the housekeeper. She enlisted the help of the boys with a weekly assistant and a daily helper. The elder boys were fulfilling the function of corporals. The younger ones were the daily helpers. The corporals assisted in the preparation of the meals, while the daily helpers served at the table. The work was often alleviated by good benefactors who would send in pre-cooked meals. From time to time some of the helpers would help themselves, or make little transgressions for which she would patiently correct them and then she would murmur, "Poor me, among so many bosses and under-bosses. How could I, a poor old lady, count for anything?"

Every morning, before starting her service, she would go to Mass and receive Holy Communion. She used to spend many hours in prayer. Often she knelt up to three hours meditating on the agony of our Savior.

She shortened her life for the Vocationary, artfully hiding her sufferings. Only when Michelina was on her deathbed did Fr. Justin's mother discover a physical condition that had afflicted her for many years. She had suffered in silence, offering her pains for vocations and for universal sanctification.

When Fr. Justin visited her for the last time, she lamented, "I am tired. I feel the pangs of death."

“Courage,” answered Fr. Justin, “a little more and then....paradise.”

At about noon she said to all those who were around her, “I would like to thank all of you for the charity that you have had toward me and now I want to say good-bye to all of you before leaving for eternity,” She died at the first toll of the noon Angelus. Fr. Justin and the aspirants of the Vocationary cried visibly when she died. She had been like a second mother to Fr. Justin and all the aspirants.

Sr. Maria Giovanna

Fr. Justin had five brothers and four sisters. Giuseppina, the second sister, seemed to be more inclined toward religious life. Fr. Justin seemed to cultivate for a while the secret desire of enlisting her in his project of founding the religious community of sisters, but God had chosen Giovanna for that task.

Giovanna took care of decoration his apartment before the ordination; Fr. Justin appreciated her good taste and expressed his gratitude to his sister; his room remained as she had set it, with the exception of the mirror, which Fr. Justin wanted removed from his room. There was an implied understanding between the two that he would not enter his room while she was cleaning it and that she would not enter at any other any other time. Only once, when he noticed the meticulous attention of his sister in making his bed and smoothing the sheets and covers, he intervened and ruffled up the bed, saying, “Hey, how much time you waste!”

Giovanna used to help her mother in taking care of the house and also assisted her brother in the Pious Union. Religious life, however, did not enter her mind at all. Fr. Justin, however, was preparing her for the future mission of the co-founder of the Vocationist Sisters. Every morning, for example, Fr. Justin used to get up very early and he would tap at her door to invite her to meditation. If she was not present at his conferences, he would wait for her; at times, he would ask his father if Giovanna was coming to his lectures. If his father would say that she was busy helping her mother, he would plead, "Let her come at least for fifteen minutes." Mr. Russolillo, who always granted his son's wishes, would let her free.



The brothers were not as cooperative as the father. Since the older sister Maria had passed away and Josephine had gone to the United States, Giovanna became indispensable in the house and they kept discouraging her from following Fr. Justin. Michael, for example, once said to Giovanna, "Don't go with Justin. He is capable of boiling a big pot of potatoes and feeding you with them six days per week."

When late at night they would hear some specific noises in his room, they would invite her to listen by the door, saying, "Do you hear how he scourges himself? You will have your share, too."

In 1922, she felt clearly her religious calling; generous and docile, humble and patient, at age twenty-seven she went back to school to finish her basic education and to pursue her studies in early childhood education.

God's Providence granted a special gift to the congregations of the Vocationist Sisters by placing at the side of the founder as future Mother General Fr. Justin's own sister; thus he was able with greater freedom and frequency to deal with the sisters, to guide and correct them. On October 3, 1930, with thirteen other sisters, Giovanna pronounced her religious vows. Soon after the community received diocesan approval, Giovanna was appointed Superior General by the Bishop of Pozzuoli, and she was reelected Superior General by the sisters after the apostolic visitation which had lasted from August 1945 to November 1946. She remained in that office until her death on May 5, 1969. When Fr. Justin died, the Vocationist Sisters had over fifty houses in Italy, France and Brazil, with over five hundred sisters.

Fr. Ciro

Fr. Ciro was the opposite of his brother. He was a husky, nontalkative, hard worker and very much talented in mechanics. Francesco, the oldest brother, saw Ciro as an ideal engineer, while Justin saw him as the ideal missionary; while Francesco was putting pressure on him on account of his authority in the family as firstborn, Fr. Justin was praying silently. For a while Ciro tried to appease both of them by combining his studies with a trade as a plumber.

One day, Fr. Justin invited Ciro to repair the metal doors of the church. At 1:00 p.m. he ate with the aspirants of the Vocationary and afterward stayed with them to listen to the spiritual reading done by his brother. Ciro was fascinated. The following day he continued his work and continued also his experience of religious life. A thought came to his mind; it disturbed him and then conquered him – he wanted to remain forever. He confided his thought to his brother. To make sure that his judgment wouldn't be influenced by his family ties, Fr. Justin referred Ciro to his spiritual director, Fr. De Francesco, S, J., for the testing of his vocation. In his letter of request to Fr. De Francesco, Fr. Justin purposely neglected to identify the young man at length. The vocation exam lasted three hours and its conclusion the good priest assured the young man that he was really being called by God and encouraged him to pursue his vocation. At the end, Fr. De Francesco asked him his name. When Ciro identified himself, the priest asked if he were related to Fr. Justin. "I am his brother," Ciro said.

"You could have told me from the beginning. He himself could have written it to me," remarked the examiner.

Ciro continued, " My brother has preferred not to influence your judgment."

On the evening of January 2, 1921, Fr. Justin read the written reply and evaluation of Fr. De Francesco and, without showing excessive enthusiasm, he told Ciro that he needed his father's consent. Ciro went home and patiently waited to remain alone with his father; his sister Orazio was already studying for the priesthood but he later left the seminary to become a lawyer. If Ciro did leave home, his father would remain without help in his construction business.

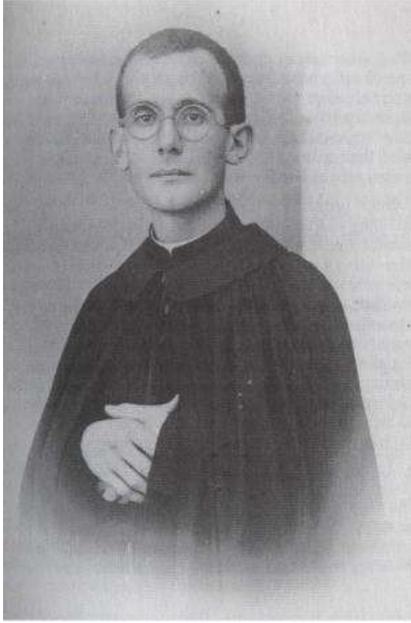
After a moment of reflection, Mr. Russolillo said, “ Go where God calls you!”

Carmela promptly intervened, saying, “Dad, don’t pay any attention to him; Ciro doesn’t like to work; he is only trying to avoid work.”

The following morning Ciro got up a half hour before anyone else, as was his custom; he got out the family horse and harnessed it to the wagon. When his father and brothers were ready to leave, he gave them the reins and the whip, wishing them a good trip as they started off toward Naples; everything was as usual but then, instead of following them on foot as he usually did, he went to the Vocationary.

Fr. Justin submitted Ciro to a second vocation exam with Fr. Arsenio, a Camaldolese monk, and to a third one by Msgr. Csusa. Justin was very happy and felt reassured by their positive evaluation and immediately initiated Ciro into the study of Latin. On the evening of January 3, coming back from Naples, the older brothers inquired as to why Ciro had not joined them; when they heard about his decision to become a priest, they threatened to remove him from the Vocationary, by force if necessary. Their father intervened, saying, “ Leave him alone. I gave him permission.”

Ciro brought up to his new life the fervor of a neophyte. Rigorous fasting and excessive penances weakened his good health; he wore the habit of an old beggar and he fixed up a dark room for himself by the entrance to the rectory. The brothers blamed Justin for Ciro’s behavior and labeled him an eccentric.



In 1923 he was drafted and had to serve in the army through 1924; for him that was like walking on a bed of hot coals.

He served in Libya and there, for the first time, he came in touch with non-Christians; his stay in Libya strengthened his priestly ideal and developed in him the consciousness of his missionary vocation. He used to send every last penny to Fr. Justin for vocations (many other vocationists did the same during their military service). At the end of his military service he continued his studies with renewed

enthusiasm.

Once ordained a priest, Ciro took on the mission of rebuilding old and decayed monasteries; Mercato Cilento is his most outstanding success. The abandoned and decayed Carmelite monastery, after many years of hard work and heroic efforts, became once again center of study, prayer and apostolate. Pianura, Altavilla, Anagni, Marsiconuovo, Monte Tabuno, and Montesardo have all seen this priest working as mason, carpenter and mechanic at the same time. It was a normal everyday thing to see this priest drawing designs, climbing scaffolds, and handling easily the mason's spatula and level, and at other times stretching himself under trucks and cars, repairing mechanical problems.

In 1953, he finally left Italy to go as a missionary to Brazil. The Bishop of Amargosa entrusted to him two large parishes; to visit them, he needed three months travel on horseback. In 1954, he came to the United States, trying to study the feasibility of

establishing a religious house. After Fr. Justin's death, he returned to Italy to continue his favorite mission of rebuilding abandoned or decayed monasteries and churches.

PARISH APOSTOLATE

The parish apostolate of Fr. Justin centered on three main activities: the banquet of the Word of God, the banquet of the Eucharist and the family apostolate.

In the ministry of the Word of God he was untiring. For years and years the people of Pianura had the opportunity of enjoying his preaching every morning and every evening after the morning Mass – which he always celebrated at 4:30a.m. – and after the evening devotions. While preaching he would sit on a chair on the Gospel side of the altar and would comment on the divine words of the Old and New Testaments. During his talks to the congregation, which consisted of Vocationist aspirants, sisters and lay people, a lighted candle was kept on the altar to symbolize the presence of the Holy Spirit.

He was familiar with the classic and modern schools of spirituality; he used to read and assimilate spiritual books and magazines both in Italian and in French, yet his presentations were so original that those who were listening to him thought he was reading from books invisible to poor mortal beings. He was translating into simple words God's message of eternal love. He was anti-conformist. His exhortations were made alive not by the rising and lowering of his voice, nor by gestures, nor by the art or the eloquence, but by the Spirit. He disliked thunderous preaching. He used to instruct the Vocationist priests not to accept invitations to preach any panegyric unless it was

preceded by at least three days of spiritual preparation. On one occasion, he was really pressured to conclude with the traditional invocations and blessings; he ended the sermon by simply saying, “I bless all that God blesses, I condemn all that God condemns.”

One evening two Jesuit priests, by chance, stopped in at the church while Fr. Justin was preaching. They listened attentively and at the end they asked, “Is anyone writing this down? You shouldn’t let these treasures go unrecorded.” Several Vocationist students and sisters tried to take notes while he was preaching. Fr. Ugo Fraraccio, S.D.V., for several years took accurate notes of Fr. Justin’s sermons. Fr. Justin himself reviewed many notebooks of Fr. Fraraccio and published them in *Spiritus Domini*, the ascetical monthly magazine of the Vocationist Fathers. Various volumes of Fr. Justin’s talks have been published, thanks to Fr. Fraraccio’s notes.

Reading his sermons today we can perceive at least the fragments of that unequalled wealth of knowledge and spirituality; Fr. Justin comes out as a star that from a distance of many light years announces its approach to our horizon.

The fact that he was preaching the Word of God so thoroughly and continually did not stop him from inviting other preachers, especially in preparation for Easter. In the first year of his pastorship he invited a Spaniard, Fr. Panadez of the Claretians. On the first day of the priest’s visit the participation of the people was very poor. The next day, at the hour sermon, the pastor, holding a big cross in his hands and escorted by some altar boys with candles and bells, made the rounds of the town; in front of recreation centers and wherever people gathered, he would pause and with a firm and vibrant voice exhort them,

“Brothers, come to the sermon! Come. It is the hour of God’s mercy! Take advantage of God’s grace.”

From his childhood to his death, Fr. Justin had the Eucharist as the magnetic center of his life. He was the apostle of daily Communion. Undoubtedly, for thirty or forty years Pianura was the town with the highest percentage of people receiving Holy Communion daily.

Every morning at 4:00 a.m., the first Vocationist Sisters used to make the rounds of the town, knocking at the various doors to gather the children and lead them to church; sometimes they also helped these children by washing them



and combing their hair. As they arrived at the parish church they would occupy the whole center aisle first and then the side aisles, forming a bright cross; every child was holding a lighted candle. Amid the signing of Eucharist songs and the rosary- like recital of short prayers, the pastor was thrilled to give Jesus to them.

The sisters, naturally, made the greatest sacrifice, especially during winter, walking through those dark streets traveled only by stray dogs; they would be frightened now and then.

As usual happens, when the novelty wore off, some families started to grumble: “Is it possible that we cannot sleep in peace... my child has a cold... this is a real pain

now...this is disturbing the peace...” Periods of slack were followed by periods of great participation. The pastor was always vigilant in reacting the enthusiasm of the sisters and of the families as well. It looked like the end of the Mass would signal a waking-up time for the rest of the town because the roads were alive with the sounds of children.

The workers would receive Holy Communion before reporting for their jobs and there were times when a thousand people received Communion in a single morning.

Every morning a priest would make the rounds of the town bringing Holy Communion to the sick and shut-ins. On the first Friday of the month, Holy Communion was brought to the sick in the most solemn way: a procession of hundreds of people singing and praying devoutly.

The three sisters who were assigned to making the hosts could not make enough to satisfy the need, so they had to ask for help and buy some in Naples. From accurate accounting it appeared clear that Sunday collection was not sufficient to cover the cost of buying the hosts. Fr. Justin had to buy several large ciboria that could hardly fit into the tabernacle. The more ciboria he would empty the brighter was his face.

Faithful to his mission of searching and cultivating vocations to the priesthood and religious life, from the very beginning Fr. Justin understood that the vocation apostolate had to begin with the family apostolate. Vocations are more easily discovered and followed in a family united by the love of God. One of his first concerns as pastor was that of revalidating several invalid or non-religious marriages. In the aftermath of World

War I there were several cases in which poor widows would endanger the salvation of their souls by simply living with another man so as not to lose their pension.

Several evenings, escorted by two young men who were acting as witnesses, Fr. Justin would go to the houses of such couples and would bless their union with the “marriage of conscience.” Often, to avoid any shadow of mortification or embarrassment for the family, he would bring a bottle to toast the newly acquired grace of the Sacrament of Matrimony, and where there were signs of real poverty he used to discreetly give some financial help.



On the night of July 25 and 26, 1930, Pianura was greatly shaken by the rumbling of an earthquake that caused some damage to the parish buildings and shook up all the people in town. Some people asked Fr. Justin if he was afraid during the tremor. Smiling, he answered:

"Afraid of what? When I realized that my bed was dancing I prayed: ‘ Lord, grant that my parishioners will take advantage of this lesson.’” He was referring in a special way to a sick man who was living in concubinage and who died unrepentant soon after. This was, perhaps, the greatest pain of his priestly life.

THE VOCATIONARY

One day, Fr. Antonio Chiaro, pastor of Soccavo, asked Fr. Justin, “What do you do in Pianura?”

“I make priests... and what do you do?”

“I am a pastor,” answered Fr. Chiaro. “Well,” continued Fr. Justin, “It is the duty of the pastor to make sure that the young men who show signs and indications of religious vocation should be preserved from the influences of the world.” Fr. Justin was referring to Article 1353 of Canon Law; with great originality he developed this theme at the Eucharistic Congress of Anagni in 1943. The Bishop of Anagni and all the participants in the Congress were so enthused about it, that they had it printed and distributed to everyone free of any charge by the organizers of the Eucharistic Congress.

The lament of St. Pius X had fallen on the soul of Justin as a young seminarian, as a seed falls on fertile soil. Since the seminaries were empty and the monasteries deserted, Fr. Justin created the vocationaries, real nurseries of vocations where bishops and religious orders would be able to get the selected tender plants and transplant them into their seminaries and novitiates.

In preparation for Easter, in 1926 Bishop Petrone addressed a pastoral letter to the faithful of the diocese of Pozzuoli. In it the bishop lamented the scarcity of priestly and religious vocations: “ The problem is very serious, it affects all Catholics.... History teaches us that the absence of priests is the worst punishment that God



may inflict on a certain area or people... Let us help religious and priestly vocations in every possible way!

“It is appropriate here to mention the very beautiful activity created by the exemplary zeal of our Pastor of Pianura. The so-called ‘vocationary’ which houses no less than fifty young men, who with loving care are prepared and directed to the seminary or to religious orders. Oh! how I wish that we had several such holy centers of Christian education and formation!”

Fr. Justin became precursor of the pre-seminary and apostolic schools. The students in the vocationary were familiarized with the holy founders of various religious orders; they were acquainted with their pictures and biographies. Fr. Justin used to explain to them the spirit and the work of the various holy founders. He used to solemnize their feast days and facilitate contact with the various religious orders. Naturally, many young men appreciated the work of Fr. Justin and asked the honor of becoming his cooperators and, consequently, Vocationist Fathers.

Fr. Francesco Sepe was the first priest to join Fr. Justin. Other priests from Pianura and neighboring towns assisted him by volunteering their services as teachers and spiritual directors in the vocationary.

Applications for admission to the vocationary became more numerous everyday. The parish hours, notwithstanding the multiple adjustments and enlargements, was inadequate to accommodate all the students. The terrace was transformed first into a wooden

dormitory and later into small garden became the dining room. Even the attic was transformed into a dormitory.

Still it was necessary to find better accommodations. The sisters, as true Vocationist, several times gave up their house to accommodate the new recruits. Fr. Justin would timidly hint to the sisters that he had so many applications from young boys who could become priests someday, and the sisters would get the message and, without being asked would make the sacrifice of finding new accommodations for themselves. This happened once, twice, three times... things couldn't continue that way! What was needed was a huge vocational built for that purpose. Not even the sanctuary of the parish church was large enough to accommodate all the aspirants of the vocatioary. They would crowd around the altar of God as living garland. Mr. Di Fusco, a very devout man who was the faithful administrator of the parish goods and who was used to the blessedness of solitude, joyfully, suffered the discomfort of so many boys in prayer. When he died he left everything he owned to the Society of Divine Vocations.



Sr. Clare Loffredo contributed to the solution of the problem by purchasing a large piece of land and donating it to the founder for the construction of the vocational, which became the Mother House of the Vocationist Fathers.

The site preparation was done in haste, and in placing the first stone the founder had it covered by the rosary beads of all those who were present; he wanted the rosary as the foundation of the new building. The student became construction workers under the guidance of the builders. Many men volunteered a half day's work every Sunday and holiday.

Every Sunday large groups of young ladies, under the guidance of the sisters, would happily transport the construction material to where it was needed. Their reward was a piece of candy, a medal or a holy card. Even when these rewards were not available, they would faithfully return the following Sunday.

Every day, generous, pious ladies helped the sisters wash the student's clothes. It can be said that every man and woman of Pianura contributed somehow to the construction of the vocationary, which very appropriately was called "Deus Caritas" (God is Love).

At Fr. Justin's death, the vocationary was standing tall and solemn as Pianura's largest and most visible building. It was in this vocationary that Fr. Justin prayed, taught, preached, suffered and governed the Society of Divine Vocations. It is in this vocationary that his mortal remains await the day of his glorification and future resurrection.

THE SUPERIORSHIP OF THE BLESSED MOTHER

The first five Vocationist Sisters gathered in community life in three rooms rented in the Caleo Building on the evening of October 1, 1921. The night before, the founder had

invited them to parish house and, after an inspiring exhortation assigned different tasks to each and every one of them; he gave them an alarm clock and a bell, he blessed them and finally dismissed them with his usual challenge: “Become saints.” The first five Vocationist Sisters moved into an empty house. The very first night there was a power shortage and they didn’t even have a match or a candle, and so the first mortification was that of having to beg.

The first sisters considered the Blessed Mother their superior and they used to place her statue at the head of the table. Four of the five sisters were from Pianura. They together asked Fr. Justin to appoint, as their superior, the one who was from another town; the one designated by the sisters to be their superior, however, was and remained alien to the mentality that the founder had patiently instilled in the first sisters. She regarded the austerities of their life as excessive and she considered unacceptable the goal of the order.



She used to say, “If you continue to get up at 4:00 a. m. without eating meat and without drinking any wine, you shall die of tuberculosis.... And isn’t it a utopia – the idea of working for vocations when the modest income from our work is not even sufficient to provide for our most elementary necessities?”

The other sisters would answer, “If the Lord has so inspired our founder, it signifies that we can do it. There is no greater honor than to die of tuberculosis for Jesus.”

She would insist: “Let us withdraw before the community is disbanded.”

And others would retort: “Better that we die with the congregation.”

The day that Fr. Justin made clear to the sisters his desire that “every sister should support a priestly vocation,” the poor sister superior couldn’t take it any longer and left taking another sister with her. The distress of the remaining sisters was overwhelming; they cried both for the scandal that this would cause in town, as well as for the gossip that this might generate. Their agony was made more acute by the fact that they did not know what Fr. Justin’s reaction would be. Humiliated and confused, they asked the mediation of aunt Michelina. Fr. Justin commented: “The weaker is the man, the stronger is God’s hand,” and immediately he began to comfort his spiritual daughters. “Often the Lord does what we do not understand or dare to... similar happenings have occurred in every religious foundation...” He talked at length on this same line of thought. Up to that day, Fr. Justin had never accepted any drink or food in the sister’s residence, but on that occasion, to ease the tension, he interrupted his talk, saying, “....give me a cup of coffee: I’ve been talking so long...” The sisters smiled and were reassured by the gesture. It was the calm after the storm.

There remained, however, the difficulty of electing a superior, because the first sisters had grown up together more as blood sister than friends, and none of them seemed to possess outstanding or exceptional talents. The number of sisters had grown at that point to twelve, and Fr. Justin insisted that there should be a regular election; thus, Sister Clara Loffredo was elected superior. Fr. Justin, in accepting the result of the election, stressed the fact that the Blessed Mother should always be considered as the real superior of the Vocationist Community.

On May 30, 1926, Fr. Justin wrote the following to his spiritual director: “The eleventh of May, without any preparation on my part, without any association of ideas that might have led me to it, sweetly, with intimate, unshakable certainty, it was infused into me (allow me this terminology) the firm belief that the Blessed Trinity was assigning the Blessed Virgin, in a very special way, really unique, as our immediate Superior, present and active in our midst, in all our missions, in all our present and future houses, the only and the most sufficient Superior.”

Since that date, every year on the eleventh of May, the Vocationist Fathers and Sisters celebrate the Superiorship of Mary in all their communities; in every house they have a special room, the Room of the Blessed Mother, as a small oratory where they can visit and entertain themselves in conversation with the celestial superior.

As a sign of their belonging to Mary, at the time of the first profession they all add to their names the name of Mary; they used to carry visibly around their neck the rosary of the Virgin Mary with the Miraculous Medal.

To the many beautiful titles of the Blessed Mother, Fr. Justin added this one, “Our Lady of the Divine Vocations.” As all graces come through the Blessed Mother, so all vocations come through Mary: She will assist those who are called in the process of ascertaining and following their vocation. The Bishop of Pozzuoli granted fifty days of indulgence to those who pray with devotion: “Our Lady of the Divine Vocations, pray for us.”

Another title under which Fr. Justin used to inculcate an effective devotion to Mary, while reminding us of the real mission of Mary in our lives, is: “ Our Lady of the perpetual Visitation.” Mary is constantly on the go, visiting her children, bringing Jesus to them.

The special devotion of the Vocationist Fathers and Sisters to the Blessed Mother and her Superiorship of their communities is for them a source of encouragement and pledge of God’s blessing in all their endeavors.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

It is often said that in God’s works financial problems are the least important. It may be so, but they are often the most painful.

The first aspirants managed to be self-supporting. They used as their dormitory the large rooms above the vestibule of the church. They were acting as security guards protecting the machinery and the works of the Pious Union; thus, they had the double advantage of justifying the community life which had not been authorized as yet, and at the same time receiving a modest compensation. Fr. Justin and other diocesan priests used to teach them in the evening. They would also clean the church and serve as altar boys. In that way they were able to at least buy their own books.

The young ladies of the Pious Union, which later became the Vocationist Sisters, gave their savings and began asking for alms in order to provide for the growing needs of the

vocational and its aspirants. They would go throughout the roads of Pianura dragging the donations they had collected – bundles of wood, containers of vegetables, huge baskets of fruit – without embarrassment, sometimes threatened and often ridiculed.

Mr. Giuseppe Marrone, the father of the Sister Rachele, blessing his daughter as she joined the community and anticipating the difficulties they would have to face, told her.

“Don’t ever be discouraged. If the Lord will bless the institution, persevere... otherwise our doors are always open.” Her older brother, however, tried to discourage her to the point of threatening to kill her and labeling her a gypsy, a cheap laborer and a beggar.

It may be impossible for us to measure the sacrifice of these heroic young ladies who, against hope, risked everything for an institution that didn’t have the charisma of indefectibility. In the event of failure, they would have fallen with the institution into the abyss of ridicule on the part of the townsfolk.

In her enthusiasm for Fr. Justin’s work, Immacolatina Marrone raffled off her only piece of jewelry – a silver chain, which was in vogue at the time, and she personally handed to Fr. Justin the income of nine lire in an envelope. In thanksgiving she received from Fr. Justin a rusty thimble and a small package of needles. He asked her, “Do you know what this means?” You must always work for vocations without ever getting tired.”

Maria Melissari, a noble character and fervent soul, directed an embroider and tailoring shop, all for the vocations. Later on, she gave up her own house for the growing number of aspirants and she went to live with her sister. Later on she became a Vocationist Sister.

Another group of young ladies established a Sunday Fine Arts Center and Gift Shop. Every penny was given to Fr. Justin for vocations. God's providence was always present in the new institution. Critical times abounded, but they were always overcome by the industry of the sisters who trusted in the intervention of Divine Providence.

There are many examples of God's tangible hand at work. On one occasion, the sister in charge of the kitchen had nothing to cook, yet she knew that after school, at 1:00 p.m., the boys would want to eat. At noon she placed the pot on the fire and went out – in God's name. She walked through Duca d'Aosta Street hoping that some generous person would offer some food, but she did not receive any assistance. On her way back, as she passed by the house of Fortunato Cioce, she noticed that he was at the table with his children. She hesitated for a moment, and after greeting them, she made him aware of the pressing need of the community; immediately he gave her everything needed for the meal.

Almost every day, Fr. Justin used to receive small offerings through the mail, which he passed on to the sisters in the kitchen. One day, he received only ten lire and he remembered that he had promised them to a parishioner for a charity case. Giving the ten lire to the sisters, he said, "I received only ten lire; do the shopping and... bring them back!" In the kitchen the sisters all smiled. One of them went to the usual grocery store to buy the necessary food to prepare the meal.

The owner of the store, seeing the sister, said, "I am really glad to see you, sister. I have to give you these packages – I did not have time to deliver them. I would really

appreciate it if you could take them.” There was a full meal... and the ten lire were returned to Fr. Justin!

Another time, the sister had an opportunity to purchase coupons to obtain some dough at a nominal cost. On the last day that the coupons were available, the sisters had no money whatsoever, and so Sr. Concetta called on Fr. Justin personally to interest him in the case. “It would be a sin to lose them,” she said.

“You must not lose them,” he answered.

“But they must be paid in cash.”

“And what did you want? Did you expect to get the dough without paying for it? Pay... and bring the change back to me.”

The poor sister was totally discouraged and once left alone she began to cry. One of the boys from the vocationary saw her crying and, feeling sorry for her, piously informed Fr. Justin, “Tell sister not to be a crybaby. Tell her that tomorrow morning she should go to see Miss Anna Mele and inform her that the Blessed Mother has granted her request.”

The good sister went as an ambassador of joy to the pious young lady, who joyfully and gratefully gave her 20,000 lire, with which she paid for the dough and brought 170 lire back to Fr. Justin. Accepting the change that the sister had given him, Fr. Justin admonished her: “The Lord has never abandoned us. Learn to have more faith.”

Sr. Rosa Vassallo, who had spent all her life working in the kitchen, affirmed that they learned to expect a miracle of God's Providence everyday. All the sisters who worked in the Vocationary had learned how to trust in Divine Providence.



In a letter to the sisters who were working in the kitchen of the Mother House in 1935, Fr. Justin wrote, “I have just learned that the whole community was left without breakfast this morning. This must not happen again.

When there is no money, that does not mean that God is condemning us to fasting. It is an

indication that the Lord wants to provide for us in other ways; the way of charity through the mediation of our sisters. Please, do not condemn the community to fasting...it is now fourteen years that we have been living in this way and the Lord has always helped us through the good will of our sisters. Strengthen your faith and increase your bravery through prayer. I do not expect that you keep going from door to door. Appeal to one provider today and to another tomorrow in the name of the pastor, and much more, in the name of God who, in the end, will always pay all debts.”

He often reiterated the same thought both in words and in writing. In a letter of October 31, 1939, he wrote: “As prescribed by the Constitutions, put yourselves in the place of St. Joseph and of the Blessed Mother to foster the growth of the Child Jesus in the chosen ones of the Divine Vocations...So, I beg you to carry yourselves this daily cross without trying from time to time to place it on the shoulder of the priests, who are already

carrying the cross of teaching, the discipline of the house, and other crosses which are not readily visible. May Jesus increase His divine love in us.”

Sr. Concetta, thinking that an electric dough mixer would be beneficial and financially advantageous, wanted to buy one. Fr. Justin admonished her, “Buy it without making any debts; look, I cannot give you any money... and please don’t talk about it to anyone.”

The sister informed the community benefactors and with help of their generosity she was able to purchase the machinery. When the director of the vocationary saw the truck delivering the huge box he asked, “What is that? A piece of furniture?” The mixer devoured 250 pounds of dough every night and the sisters happily shaped the dough, baked the bread and distributed it.

ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

“Contemplation for action and action for contemplation.” This was Fr. Justin’s rule of life; he practiced it and taught it to his followers. No one could look at him without perceiving in him a man immersed in contemplation. Many a priest who saw or heard him remember the aura of spirituality and contemplation emanating from that frail, almost transparent figure wrapped in a large mantle, which seemed to hide his body.

The Mother House, the Vocationary Deus Caritas (God is Love), was the center of his spiritual and apostolic life. His bedroom was located on the third floor, a very simple, small room that was both bedroom and study. His bed was a folding cot; he used to fold it every morning so that it looked like a piece of furniture. Close to his room was located

the “room of the Crucifix” in which he used to meet on a rotating basis with the various groups of the community for recreation, spiritual reading and often to distribute candies or other goodies. Nearby were the library, the “room of the Blessed Mother,” and the chapel. The physical surroundings fostered a sense of silence and sacredness.

He used to get up at 4:00 a.m. every morning; he divided his day between ministry and prayer. He never let a day go by without two hours of meditation, one hour of predication, one hour of religious study and one hour of spiritual reading. He wanted the Vocationist Fathers and Sisters to follow this pattern in their spiritual life.

His ministry consisted mostly in preaching, teaching and administering the sacraments. He never tired of giving lectures and retreats to priests and sisters. Spiritual direction was a very important activity; several bishops, priests, brothers, sisters, politicians and ordinary lay people sought him as their spiritual guide. He believed in universal sanctification, and spiritual direction was the most effective way of leading people up the ladder of Christian perfection.

He wrote that every Vocationist should have three items: a watch to sanctify time, a suitcase to remind us that we are always ready to move at the command of the superiors, and a pen to write down divine inspirations. Among the most precious treasures Fr. Justin left to us are his “agendas” or spiritual diaries. Every day, often several times a day, he wrote in his diary inspirations or comments. He wrote several books of spirituality, titled *Ascension*, *Spiritus Orationis*, *The Offertories*, *The Devotionals*, *The Book of Religious principles*, *The book of Religious Practices*, *The Piety of the Seminary*, *Heaven of Heavens*, and *Constitutions*. For many years he was the director and almost only writer

of the periodical of the congregation, *Spiritus Domini*. Precious volumes may come out when and if all his letters can be gathered together.

Most of Fr. Justin's writings are in the form of prayers; prayers that contain his theology and philosophy of life. They are a true dialogue that express his total and constant immersion in the mystery of the Trinity in his ascensional journey toward the divine union. His writing in numbered paragraphs, and the alternating choral reading of his prayers, help us to better experience conversation with the Lord. His writings, his prayers, cannot just be read, they need to be studied and meditated on; at times they may seem repetitious, but they all contain a beautiful, musical rhythm, poetic expression, vivid imagery and, most of all, vehemence of feeling. A profound analysis of his writings can give us the best picture of the depth, height, universality and seraphicity of the Servant of God.

The Eucharist was the real center of his life. Even his bed and his desk were situated in such a way that he would be always looking at the nearest tabernacle. Jesus in the Eucharist was his best friend and confidant. How many times a day did he visit the Eucharist? The first



and last activity of the day was a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. He wouldn't leave the house nor enter his room, coming back, without first stopping to visit the Blessed

Sacrament. Many nights during the years 1954 and 1955 I personally saw him in the chapel on the third floor of the vocationary. I started going to the chapel there – when I expected the chapel to be empty – helped me greatly appreciate the importance of the Eucharist in my life, and to capture some of his spirit.

He was untiring. He had taken the vow of never wasting time, and I am sure that he kept it as he kept the vow of charity, the vow of servitude and the religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. In *Spiritus Orationis* he prayed thus:

“Since life must be consumed – and with the passing of time all creatures must corrode – I want to consume it in your sacred fire, in the Holy Family and in the church, at the service of God and of the souls.”

“With your grace I want, I must, I can be proportionately always more active and consecrate myself to laboriousness with all my being at all time.”

“I consecrate myself to the most intense and continuous manual work, teaching, preaching, writing and ministry, organization and directions and – above all – to holy meditation.”

“I consecrate myself to intense laboriousness, as the first and greatest penance that you yourself, O Infinite wisdom and goodness, taught humanity after original sin.”

“I consecrate myself to laboriousness in order to better imitate your Holy Family, better assimilate the life of the church and better cooperate with the life of your grace within me.”

How could Fr. Justin be at the same time founder and director general, teacher, preacher, spiritual director, pastor, catechist, and writer, and a fully contemplative man? His union with God was the secret of his almost limitless activity; the closer one is to God, the more he sees with God and the more he operates with God, for nothing is impossible with God.

VIRTUES

Fr. Justin's soul was like a garden full of beautiful, marvelous flowers emanating a sweet fragrance of holiness. When Fr. Justin was three years old, a teacher-friend of his aunt Enrichetta raised him in her hands and kissed him. Squirming and twisting to get out of her arms, he cried aloud. His aunt had to plead with the friend to please put him down or otherwise the little boy would get sick. From that day on, every time this lady would get near him, he would run and hide behind his aunt, holding on to her. As a grown-up he would categorically affirm: "Many need to do violence to themselves in order to stay away from women, I need to do violence to myself to get close to them."

Penance was the armed guard that kept watch over his purity. Mr. Simeoli, only a few years younger than Fr. Justin, revealed that one day while he and some of his friends were prying into his desk they discovered a very strange penitential instrument – a hair shirt; they did not quite understand what it was but they were appalled at the sight of it and quickly placed it back. Even his brother Ciro, before entering the vocationary, had discovered some chains (another instrument of penance) in his desk. Ciro had no idea what they were used for and thought that he could use them to play cops and robbers.

When Fr. Justin became aware of the fact, he quietly took them back. More than once while preaching, these chains would break loose from his arm. He would let them slowly and discreetly fall into his hand and then hide them in his pocket. Only the most attentive listener would notice some of these movements. The first aspirants of the Vocationary practiced many of these penances. They learned how to make and use some of these penitential instruments.



He never insisted on corporal mortifications. The greater mortification for the Vocationist must consist in liturgical modesty and continuous work. “The Vocationist,” he used to say, “Should never have time to think of himself.” He wanted a vocationary attached to every parish so that, in addition to the parish ministry, the pastor could dedicate himself to the work teaching and of assisting the young candidates, without any possibility of idleness.

When he was asked for a very short and practical guide in the life of mortification, he suggested, “Avoid any unnecessary glance, any unnecessary word, any unnecessary thought.”

Prayer is our first greatest occupation. Fr. Justin wanted the Vocationist to pray all the time and everywhere; entering and leaving the house, going up and down the stairs, inside and outside the house. He wanted endless, complete rosaries, offering of the Most

Precious Blood and acts of love; he wanted the entire day to be filled with the thousands and thousands of short prayers – all these in preparation to higher forms of mental prayer and contemplation.

He was used to an hour of meditation every morning; when he heard from Fr. Piccirelli that the need to prolong meditation is the measure of one's spirituality, he decided to have a second hour of meditation in the afternoon. Often, he was seen standing with open arms absorbed in contemplation before the crucifix. At times he was overheard pleading, "My Jesus, it is enough, it is enough. Have mercy!" Many times he was seen coming out of his meditation room with his eyes filled with tears.

His life of prayer was fostered and made easier by his humility, a humility that was edifying and discerning at the same time. It was common opinion that it was sufficient to look at him and discover his humility; by listening to him, people had the certainty of his virtue. Why didn't he ever react to those who were causing him pain or persecuting him? Why didn't he try to conquer them to his side through the irradiation of his supernatural strength? He had chosen for himself the motto of the prophet Isaiah: "In silence and hope shall be your strength." Those who lived with Fr. Justin were so aware of his humility that they failed to ask any questions or take any notes that might interfere with this pearl of virtue.

A lady who had heard of his reputation of holiness and wisdom went to Pianura to consult him. She did not know him. She met him in the church and said to him, "I would like to see the saint."

“Do you want to see our saint? Come with me” he answered, and he escorted her to the statue of St. George, Pianura’s patron Saint.

Humility is not weakness, it is not giving up. The superior must first be a physician and then a surgeon. Amputation is an extreme remedy. He knew how to cure with limitless patience, but whenever he realized that there was incorrigibility, he did not hesitate to cut. Once he dismissed a student from the vocationary, escorted him to the gate and soon after rang the community bell and called the community together to sing a hymn of thanksgiving.

He saw God in his neighbor. In a short note to the superior of the vocationary he wrote: “Please do me the charity – but do it soon – fix at my expense the window of the room in which the blind Rosina suffers. With this cold the poor lady may die! Have it fixed right away. Thank you.” In a similar note he wrote: “Please distribute alms to the poor for me – 3,300 lire to 33 poor, 100 lire each. Do so every Wednesday in honor of St. Joseph.”

Well aware of the evangelical teaching, “Give and it shall be given to you,” he was very generous with the poor. On one occasion, his sister Mother Giovanna had just come back from collecting offerings for the needs of the vocationary. She had collected 10,000 lire; without even touching the money, Fr. Justin gave orders to Fr. Vaccaro, who just happened to be present, to give 7,000 to the sisters in the kitchen and 3,000 to the poor.

At times his generosity toward the poor led some of the Vocationist into the temptation of complaining . One Wednesday the superior of the sisters of the vocationary fell victim to such a temptation. She complained, “He thinks of others and doesn’t realize that we have

nothing.”

That same day, a farmer came in with a truck and unloaded an extraordinary abundance of provisions. Fr. Justin was informed of this, and against his custom, went personally to escort the benefactor to the sister, who met the founder with joyful reverence. “Next time do not complain,” he admonished them sternly. The poor superior was so embarrassed that she would have loved to disappear!

Many times when Fr. Justin had no money, he would ask the superior or the treasurer of the house to give alms to the needy. One day, he asked Fr. Esposito, who was accompanying him: "How much did you give him?"

“Fifty lire!”

“And what can the poor man do with fifty lire?”

Fr. Esposito said, “I didn’t have anything else” ; he shook his head murmuring, “That is not good; that is not good.”

“Our poverty must not be considered a hindrance to the practice of the corporal works of mercy,” Fr. Justin often said. What about the sick? “To cure them,” he used to say, “sell even the ciboriums, if necessary.”

What about sinners? If virtue had not restrained his tongue, he would have been an outstanding humorist. The whip of satire in his hand would have skinned a person and turned his flesh into pieces. He was very quick to grasp the funny side of the people, things and situations, but he used to remain silent. A sad smile or an extra candy were

often the proof of his unbending aversion toward sin but not toward the sinner. He once briskly ended his speech by saying, “If we do not have love for our neighbor, the rigors of divine justice will fall upon us.” He said it with such strength that his listeners were astounded.

His profound sense of recollection did not render him dull. His soul was vibrating with the presence of good and beautiful things. Spontaneously he used to elevate himself from the natural to the supernatural; every person, place or situation could become a practical inspiration for ascetic exhortations. He was always serene and happy; during recreation, he always enjoyed any good joke. When he was home as a seminarian, often while in his garden, the little chickens would climb all over him. Remaining immobile, he would left



them climb up on his shoulders and, at times, they pecked at his teeth. As a priest he had a special predilection for doves. At 11:00 o' clock, with meek gestures of his hands, he would invite them so that he could feed them; the doves would fly all over him and often would take food from his hand.

He was very sensitive to nature and loved flowers. He personally cared for some plants and flowers on the balconies of the chapel and on the terrace of the vocationary. One day, as he was passing by his sister's house, he called her aloud. It was a strange novelty to hear him call someone loudly, so his sister and her daughter ran breathlessly to see what the problem was. He showed them some gladioluses thrown out with trash. "Can't you see that they are still alive?" said. "They are like living creatures. Please, remove the dead flowers and place the others in water." To an aspirant of the vocationary, who every morning, when cleaning his room, kept moving a plant of begonias without paying attention to its position, Fr. Justin said: "How cruel you are! Can't you see that this plant needs the sun? If you keep leaving it there, you will make it die!" He was often seen admiring flower beds and talking with the flowers about the beauty of God; he was uniting himself with the flowers in exalting and praising the beauty of Creator.

INFIRMITIES

Every spiritual director and counselor seems to agree that suffering is the seal of every virtue. Fr. Justin suffered both physically and morally. In the first part of his life physical

sufferings abounded; in the second part moral sufferings prevailed. Both physical and moral sufferings affected his health and hastened his premature death.

He was so tiny at birth that the doctors did not give much hope for his survival, and he remained extremely frail all his life. At the end of his first year of seminary, he came home sick. His aunt Michelina used to accompany him to the outskirts of town so that he could breathe healthier and fresher air in the open fields. On one of these outings, while conversing with his aunt, he met a Franciscan friar who improvised some popular verse: “You shall suffer plenty up to age fifty-five; but you shall do plenty of good for the church.”

At that time, aunt Michelina did not talk about the prophecy of the inspired Franciscan brother, but later on she revealed the episode to the first members of the Vocationist family.

Fr. Justin seemed to go from one crisis to another, but he always overcame them. At the beginning of community life, during the winter of 1922, he suffered an exceptional health crisis. One evening, as the aspirants went to sleep in the rooms above the church, Fr. Justin, not feeling well, withdrew to his room. Soon afterwards, two aspirants, who were sleeping in the room next to his, overheard him painfully utter, “O my good Jesus! Virgin Mother! O my St. Joseph!” Alarmed, they knocked at the door and, not getting any response, they entered his room and found him fainted on the floor.

Michael Fontana, who was only fourteen at the time, picked him up as if were a feather, placed him on the bed and woke up the others in the house. Fr. Sepe pleaded, “Let us

pray that the Lord will not leave us orphaned,” and he started the litanies of the saints and all the students joined in with tears in their eyes.

They also called his mother, who understood the problem as soon as she saw her son. She whispered to him: “ You must eat, my son, you must nourish yourself, dear son. I have endured so many hardships and pain to bring you to this point!” The crisis had been caused by excessive fasting and by the extra load of work he was carrying.

As time went on did not have more need for this type of mortification; instead he would be filled with bitter disappointments and pain caused by malicious slanders, misunderstanding and infidelities of vocations.

Another serious crisis was caused by heart problems in 1931. He had to spend a long period of rest in Baia, where he remained a guest of the Vocationist Sisters. He agreed to stay only as a result of the pressing insistence of the physicians. Later on, he wrote to his sister Giovanna that a similar case should never happen again, neither for himself nor for anybody else in the community.

Every crisis would cause consternation and panic in the community, in his family and in the town. He had several times repeated that there should be no need for alarm since he wouldn't die before the congregation would be solidly established.

One night, Bro. Salvatore Ricciardi was awakened by dense smoke and by an irritating smell of burning clothing. He got up quickly to inspect the place. The smoke was coming from the founder's room. He forced the door and could clearly see that the founder's bed was in flames and that he was lying in the midst of it. The fire had burned the mattress,

the sheets, the blankets and even part of Fr. Justin's pajamas and yet his body had not been touched! How could he have survived this fire? The stench of the burnt mattress infested the house for several days. The fire had been caused by an electric heater.

Confused and mortified by what had happened, Fr. Justin simply remarked, "Mercy, my Lord! How much damage I have caused!" Seeing the fire, someone rang the church bells to alert the townspeople – there were no firemen at the time. Many people ran to answer the appeal of the bells and then stayed for a special high Mass of thanksgiving. The Vocationist Sisters kept the burnt mattress and his burnt clothing as a special relic.

In 1936 he suffered his most dangerous crisis up to that point; he even asked for the last rites. Fr. Nicola Verde administered the Anointing of the Sick and the Viaticum. In his first sermon to the community after he recovered, he began with the example of King Hezekiah who, on his deathbed, with his tears had obtained from the Lord twenty years extension to his life. Everyone thought that Fr. Justin had made a mistake; they all knew that after that sickness of King Hezekiah the Lord extended his life fifteen years and not twenty (Cf. 2 Kings 20:6). The twenty years extension was correct for him! He died exactly twenty years later.

Fr. Justin was not easily impaired by his physical weakness. He always observed what he had written for the community: "The common sickness must be cared for without confining oneself to bed." Two bishops who were concerned about his health and visited him on different occasions – one in Baia and other in Pianura – exclaimed with almost identical words: "Who is sick? We are the sick ones." This was not surprising for those who knew him He seemed to be a master at hiding his sickness.

Shortly after his ordination, Fr. Justin was invited to partake in a funeral procession; it was a status symbol to have several clergymen march in a funeral procession. The priests and religious were given financial remuneration for such participation. He graciously declined because he didn't feel well. Soon afterwards he was called to go and assist a dying person. He went right away, despite the fact that his mother tried to stop him. She said, "You just refused to go to the funeral because you do not feel well."

Spontaneously he answered, "Mother this is not the case of earning two lire but of saving a soul."

The spirit dominated the flesh, which could not resist the power of his will. He wrote: "Every sick member of our community must consider himself and be considered as a real treasure.... treasure for the whole community and for the people among whom we live... treasure for the apostolate of his sufferings in union with the Jesus crucified." In this sense, Fr. Justin was a real treasure, a hidden treasure.

THE TRIAL

While in the army, on June 9, 1918, he wrote to his aunt Giovanna: "It is good that you know that your internal status is very appropriate for the purification of the past, for the sanctification of the present and for the glory of eternity. If you are on the cross, do not try to descend from it before death and resurrection." He was on the cross himself and his agonies used to last seven years each. Physical sickness would not have consumed him so quickly without the presence of moral trials. When crosses and difficulties were affecting

his person he used to handle them easily. At times, he could completely ignore them; but when the congregation was affected, he used to suffer and groan: “The sorrow in my heart is so great it almost crushes me” (Mt. 26:38). In 1934, when the Congregation for the Religious forbade him to admit anyone else to the profession of the vows and to priestly ordination, he suffered the agony of a father who sees his child condemned to slowly die. He himself solicited the first two apostolic visitations of 1941 and 1946. He defined them as being “precious” but he feared that they might alter the nature and purpose of the congregation, which was not his.

Fr. De Rosa, returning to the Mother House of Pianura after preaching a course of spiritual exercises, was totally unaware of the second apostolic visitor; he reported to Fr. Justin about the results of his preaching and asked permission to go back to preach another retreat. Almost casually, Fr. Justin smiled and interrupted, saying, “By the way, I have no authority whatever anymore. We have an apostolic visitor who is also superior general, a Franciscan priest.” Noticing the astonishment on Fr. De Rosa’s face, he add, “This is a grace of God; a son of St. Francis will understand.” He was talking peacefully as if the happening concerned others and not himself.

In 1939, Fr. Justin had confided a mysterious dream to Fr. Saggiomo. The two of them had been caught in a tremendous storm of rain and wind; a whirlpool suddenly formed in front of them and was about to draw them down when a short, unknown priest freed them from danger and saved them; then, how strange it was! They had the impression that the short priest was a cardinal and that he was accompanying them to Rome, willing to

present them to the Holy Father. Fr. Saggiomo wanted to make sure that others in the congregation knew about the dream, and he shared it with them.

In 1945, Cardinal Lavitrano was appointed prefect of the Congregation for the Religious. A group of Vocationist went with Fr. Justin to visit Cardinal Lavitrano in his native land of Ischia. On the way back from that visit, in the presence of the other priests who were aware of the dream, Fr. Saggiomo asked the founder, “Is this the priest of the dream?”

“He is the one!” responded Fr. Justin. On April 10, 1947, the cardinal personally presided at the general chapter assembly of the Society of Divine Vocations in which the founder was reelected superior general. The following year the Holy Father appointed Cardinal Lavitrano as “the Cardinal protector of the two Vocationist Congregation.”

An appropriate pruning always gives new vigor to the plant, but it is painful nonetheless. On September 22, 1953, the founder wrote to a confrere: “In this time of tribulation, let us share one another’s pains and let us find comfort only in comforting others. Remember, with the help of God’s grace we do not ever intend to renounce holiness, union with God! In this our peace.”

The frequent and painful skin rashes, the serious circulatory disorders, the last malignant tumor are not strictly a physiopathological phenomenon. One day, Fr. Justin said to his secretary, “The doctors will never be able to understand or cure my sickness.” Many times he repeated that he always had St. Alphonse in front of him. It might have seemed and absurd pessimism. The sequence of events proved him right.

In the last year of his life he could have affirmed with the psalmist: “My tears are my bread day and night.” The abundance and the bitterness of the tears did not extinguish the flame of love that bound him to the Lord God, to the church, to the superiors, to his institution in general and to each one of its members in particular. The following statement may reveal the unlimited heroism of his obedience: “A martyr is not only one who confesses God before man, but also one who confesses man before God.”

At the entrance of a long, dark tunnel, a locomotive seems to be running out of gasoline. Will it get stuck and leave everyone in the dark? Fortunately, it seems to be on solid tracks and is guided by an alert and experienced engineer; it shakes and squeaks but painfully pulls the cars out of the tunnel and, exhausted, cannot go any further. In a dark moment for the community, Fr. Justin felt like he was coming to the end of his rope; fortunately, he was on the track of the Divine Will and was guided by the Spirit of God; his firm and humble trust triumphed.

“I feel painfully alone,” he said. Surrounded by a dark fog, a man burdened by a heavy load of physical and moral tribulations keeps advancing toward the peak of an impervious mountain. As he ascends the mountain, the soil, weakened by underground tremors, gives away under his feet and landslides roaringly crash down into the valley. He is shaken by a dark premonition. Heaven seems to respond, “Keep going, keep going,” and as he continues to ascend the scary mountain, he hears voices of condemnation and unheeded excuses. Of himself he asks why; the voice above orders, “Keep going, keep going.” Now in the darkest obscurity he hears groaning and cries for help; he seems to distinguish some well-known and dear voices. Crying, he asks who it is

and the Almighty God responds, “Keep going, keep going!” This seems to be the history of Fr. Justin. It would be foolishness to try to assign blame or responsibility for the destiny of the founder. We should repeat with St. Alphonse: “ O how worthy of love are you, O Divine Will!”

SERVANTS OF VOCATION

"O my God and my all, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, here I am since you have called me! I adore the divine, eternal vocation with which you draw all souls and mine to you."

“Not only once, but perpetually you have called me from nothingness to life, from among the living to faith, from among the Christians to religious life, to a state of continuous, higher holiness."

“In your calling me I see the evidence of your adorable predilection, the proof of the inexpressible esteem that you have for me from among the possible, the living and the Christians.”

Vocations were the center and heart of Fr. Justin’s life; they were the secret of his holiness, the inspiration of his apostolate, the goal of all his activities. Life, faith and holiness are general vocations addressed to every living person. Priesthood, religious life, marriage, service to the poor, caring for the elderly, educating the youth, etc., are special vocations in the sense that they are not given to everyone. The more special vocations are added to the general ones, the more precious and meaningful one’s life becomes.

The appreciation for his own vocations automatically led Fr. Justin to have an “inexpressible esteem” for the vocations of others; this esteem, which becomes first veneration and then service, made him “The Apostle of the Divine Vocations,” as he was appropriately called by his first biographer, Fr. Mario De Rosa, S.D.V.

The love for vocations inspired Fr. Justin to coin new words, such as “vocationary and vocationist”; for the same reason he wrote *The Clergy and the vocations*, *The Young Clergyman and the Apostolate*, *Piety of the Seminary* and many articles in *Spiritus Domini*, in addition to the *Ascension*, *Rules and Constitutions*.

Love naturally leads to service; if we love, when we love we want to assist, to help; we want to be useful. It is this love for vocations that led Fr. Justin to become the Servant of the Divine Vocations.

With simplicity and love, Fr. Justin used to instruct the youngsters that were gathering around him; he prayed and played with them. In the beginning of the community life, he also used to cook for them, serve them at the table and at night he used to patch their torn clothes. In addition to preaching, teaching and supervising them, often he would help his little friends with their homework.

One of my class mates, Fortunato Cioce of Pianura, had been told by the rector of the Vocationary in 1954 that he could not wear short pants. Fortunato kept telling his mother but the tailor took his sweet time. One day the rector, tired of seeing him in short pants, put him out of the class. Fr. Justin happened to pass by, saw Fortunato and asked why he was not in class. On hearing the cause of his punishment, he simply smiled and invited

the boy to follow him to his room; he gave the boy a pair of his own pants and sent him back to his class. Mrs. Cioce still keeps those pants as a special relic and as a proof of Fr. Justin's love for vocations.

Fr. Justin gave undivided attention to any candidate, religious, seminarian or priest that visited him. One diocesan priest said, "Fr. Justin greeted me with such great joy that I felt I was the most important person he ever received. Later I realized that everyone who met him felt the same way."

When the vocationary was still in its infancy, every night Fr. Justin would pass through the dormitories, and often with the tenderness of a mother, he would fix the blankets and cover the little ones. Fr. Fraraccio recalled that many times Fr. Justin took the blanket from his own bed and gave it to whoever asked for it.

One of the first occupants of the vocationary recalled how his pastor introduced him to the vocationary: "Do you want to become priests? I know a saintly priest who accepts any boy desiring to become a priest at no charge. Completely free!"

When Fr. Justin received the pastor's inquiry he simply answered, "Tell him to come at once!"

Another aspirant arrived at the vocationary without first receiving word that he was accepted. Fr. Ugo was explaining to the boy that the house was full and that there were no beds available; he was trying to convince him to return home and wait for notification of acceptance. Fr. Justin, overhearing the conversation, said "Look carefully, you will find another bed!"

“But, Father Justin,” replied Fr. Ugo, “where?”

Fr. Justin responded, “Dear Fr. Ugo, we know that at least two more beds could be made available. ...mine and yours.”

The vocationaries founded by Fr. Justin are special seminaries in which are gathered all who show signs of vocations, and through a life of prayer, study and sacrifice they are helped to ascertain their vocation first, and then they are assisted in selecting a diocese or a religious order. Fr. Justin was serving not only those who wanted to be Vocationists.

In 1927 he wrote: “So far the vocationary has sent some candidates to the Dominicans, Franciscans, Augustinians, Jesuits, Salesians, Saverians and the Priests of Charity ... Oh, how we rejoiced to hear that the superiors are happy with them! Currently, at least fifteen are getting ready to follow them. We would like to present a larger group every year to each and every religious order! They are our greatest love.”

Fr. Pasquale Buccella studied in the vocationary of Pianura from 1925 to 1927. He left the vocationary to join the Salesians. When in 1982 he was asked, “why did you leave Fr. Justin to become a Salesian?” he answered : “In the vocationary we used to get many missionary magazines. I read them often and began to desire to be a missionary. At that time the process of beatification for Don Bosco was going on; Fr. Justin read to us the life of that servant of God with such enthusiasm that three of us decided to join the Salesians. Fr. Justin personally handled all the paperwork for us.”

Stressing the point that Fr. Justin did not feel disappointed when a candidate joined another religious community, Fr. Buccella stated: “Fr. Justin was really interested in

cultivating vocations, but everyone was free to join any religious order. He was happy to present us to another religious family, and he used to help us in this.” Fr. Buccella concluded that he has never forgotten Fr. Justin and that often he went back to Pianura for visits and counseling. “With Don Bosco, Fr. Justin is always alive in me,” he said.

The first name chosen by Fr. Justin for his religious family was “Servants of the Saints,” and saints for Fr. Justin are all people, every human being, because he believed that everyone is called to holiness, and that is why in addition to being the “Apostle of the Divine Vocations” he also became the “Apostle of Universal Sanctification and Divine Union.” Priests, brothers and sisters are instruments and promoters of universal sanctification and Divine Union.

In a prayer to the Blessed Trinity, Fr. Justin described his vocation: “O adorable Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit! You make me understand that you want souls very loving and faithful to you, who will dedicate themselves to convey and explain your vocations to faith, to holiness and, in a special way, your divine vocations to religious life and to the priesthood.

“You want loving and faithful servants, who out of pure love will dedicate themselves to gather, grow, form, educate and sanctify the chosen ones of the divine vocations entrusted to them, as you entrusted the child Jesus to St. Joseph and to Mary, the Virgin Mother.”

“Here I am, O my Lord; send me to promote, gather, form and sanctify the chosen ones of your divine vocations to the priesthood and to religious life, O Adorable Trinity!”

“In your pure love, you will unite me to you, O Divine Spirit Sanctifier, in consecrating and transforming each chosen one of the divine vocations into another Jesus.”

“Unite me to you, O Jesus! With you, in you and for you, O my Jesus, I embrace this cross of fire, which is the work of the divine vocations, with all the bitter disappointments caused by incorrespondences and incomprehensions.”

“Grant that I may be only an insignificant veil through which you, O Lord, are with them deal with them, let them grow in your heart, and form them with your own work and mission. Amen.”

To better understand this “cross of fire” I would refer the reader to “*Spiritus Orationis*, chapter VI, titled “Tears,” Only God knows how many tears, how much sweat, how many humiliations, sleepless nights and agonies afflicted this Servant of the Divine Vocations.

In an outburst of confidence to God, he said: “Now I cry, you know it, because I am tired... because I am so poor ... so lonely in this world... and a cold like that of death closes my heart to its life.

“Now I cry, you know it, because I see dying in me and around me so many things that I loved, so many people without whom I could not survive, and all my being is mined all over by death!”

“I cry, my Lord, because I would like to be for them a living proof and symbol of your love and relationship with them. Oh! How I would like to be for them an effective, irresistible stimulus to untie them to you, but I do not succeed!”

“But they do not know and do not understand and with the poison of sin separate themselves from your soul and heart and mine, O Jesus- Love, trampling over us after having cut us to pieces.”

“These tears that I am shedding, my Lord, seem to be of blood!” Tears of blood were shed whenever a vocation was betrayed. The new Constitutions of the Society of Divine Vocations express thus the teachings of the founder: “Imitating the mercy of the Good Shepherd, the Congregation intends to rehabilitate in the divine love each and every inactive priest and former religious.”

Indescribable sufferings were caused to the founder by his effort to bring back to the love of God, to their consecrated life and to their ministries those vocations that had gone life astray. Dozens of ex-priests and ex-brothers have passed through our communities. At least thirty of them have been rehabilitated with great joy for the good father. I myself have been taught by three priests who had been rehabilitated; one of them was my spiritual director for a long time. While most of the rehabilitated priests and brothers went back to their dioceses or religious communities, some of them preferred to be Vocationist. With particular veneration I personally recall Fr. Petruzzelli, who after several year of prison on account of a serious crime committed while he was a member of another religious order, was conquered and redeemed by Fr. Justin’s charity. I can still visualize this frail, elderly priest, with the rosary beads in his hand, smiling at everyone and projecting an aura of humility and inner peace. The rehabilitation of Fr. Petruzzelli, on account of his notorious past, greatly upset some of his former confreres, especially one who was occupying a very important role with the Congregation for the Religious in

the Vatican; hence, a lot of negative static, numerous, unpleasant innuendos and some persecutions.

Another well-known case is that of Fr. Ciaolino, who after having killed the provincial of his order and after many years of prison had become the object of numerous articles and some novels because of his licentious life. Every Italian has heard or read something about this scandalous ex-priest. Somehow Fr. Justin got hold of him and brought him back to the Father's love, even though the priest was never rehabilitated to his priestly status. He was sent to our community in Gorga (Rome) where he was known as "Professor X." He was an excellent teacher, exemplary for his life of prayer and mortification. The people of Gorga held him in high esteem and after his death considered him a saint. For many years, lay people went to pray on his grave and adorned it with flowers, without ever knowing the real identity of "Professor X."



EMBLEM OF THE VOCATIONIST FATHERS

The emblem summarizes the spirituality and apostolate of the vocationist Fathers: service to God's people in Parishes, Schools and Missions, and continuous ascension to the Blessed Trinity (triangle), with the Holy Family (heart, star and lily), in the Triumphant, Militant and Suffering Church (circles).

THE SPIRIT OF FR. JUSTIN

It may be humanly impossible to penetrate his soul. You look at the bright point and it looks like a star; you look at it better and it appears as the center of a system; you look at it even better and you discover a metropolis of stars.

Fr. Justin affirmed that the venerable Catherine Emmerik was his sister, the twin of his soul. Only those familiar with the German mystic can perceive the real content of this statement. He has taken with him to eternity the secrets of his soul.

In his book *Spiritus Orationis*, after listing the supreme charisms granted to the saints, he asked for them for himself with this condition: “That no one will ever find out, neither before nor after my death. I am happy that it will not be known, not even in heaven; I know that you can do it in such a way that only you and I know about it. Even better, grant that not even I be aware of it, neither in time nor in eternity, as long as you grant them to me and I may render a greater glory to you, since what I really want is to honor you and please you.”

Those who will study with dedication and persistence his writings may be able to reveal, at least partially, the wealth of an unexplored world. Those who desire to have an idea of his spirit should examine the emblem of the Society of Divine Vocations in which are evident three triads; the Blessed Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), the Holy Family (Jesus, Mary and Joseph), and the Holy Triumphant, Militant and Suffering Church. He summarized it thus: “Perpetual ascension to the Divine Trinity with the Holy Family within the Church.”

The Catholic Church, the Holy Family and the Blessed Trinity were the unique and triple center and axis of his interior life and his apostolate – devotion and obedience to Mother Church, imitation of the Holy Family, union with the Most Holy Trinity.

The ever growing desire for most intimate union with the Blessed Trinity led him every night to kneel before a confessor, even if this were the most recently ordained priest, to receive the purifying and invigorating absolution.

In the first and greatest mystery of our faith is found the soul of his life of prayer, of his preaching and of his work. He wanted to build a temple to the Divine Trinity and he left a design for such a building in which one can admire the originality of his imagination and the unusual grandiosity of the project. To the Blessed Trinity he has directed the perpetual adoration of the community. In honor of the Blessed Trinity in every community Mass the Vocationist sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” and to the Blessed Trinity they offer daily hours of meditation, religious study, and ministry of the Word of God in its catechetical format.

MEMORABLE DAYS

Pianura is a large village separated from the City of Naples by the mountain of the Camaldoli; it is very close to but out of sight of the sea, situated in the crater of volcano, and is part of the City of Naples. It could never have anticipated the memorable days and glory that it would experience through the work of its best citizen, Fr. Justin. Once Fr. Justin began his Christmas midnight message with the text of the Prophet Micah: “... And you, Bethlehem, are by no means the least town in Judah”; he applied it to his native town, which he always loved, and, stressing God’s blessings for his town, he predicted its

future glory. The star of the Society of Divine Vocations was shining over Pianura, and to it people shall come.



On many occasions the life of Fr. Justin and of his institution was deeply intertwined with the life of the town. Of particular significance to the community and to the town were happenings such as ordinations, the opening of new missions and special

visits.

In 1926, the first two Vocationist priest, both from the town of Pianura, were ordained priests – Fr. Salvatore Polverino and Fr. Giorgio Mele. Twenty- two floats provided the greatest parade up to that date in Pianura. The whole town was invited to share the excitement and happiness of the two former farmers – laborers elevated to the dignity of the priesthood. Throughout the streets of Pianura every group would joyously shout to the newly ordained, “Best wishes of holiness,” while people were showering them with a dense rain of confetti and rice.

Similar celebrations were repeated in 1928 for the ordination of Fr. Giuseppe Di Fusco, in 1929 for Fr. Saggiomo, in 1930 for Fr. Palmieri and Fr. Basilio, and in 1931 for the ordinations of Fr. Diodato, Fr. Fontana, Fr. Vivenzio, Fr. Baiano and Fr. Ciro.



On March 19, 1928, Pianura with the Vocationist community celebrated the opening of the first residence of the expansion. The people were proud of them, and in saying good-bye to the new community, they blessed them and sent them on their mission as heralds of the

congregation and of the town. Later on, on April 29, 1950, the town united itself with the first three Vocationist to leave on a mission to Brazil – Fr. Fraraccio, Fr. Torromacco, and Bro. Prisco. After having participated with the community in the liturgical celebration in church, a large crowd of people, filled with veneration and admiration, escorted them to the Port of Naples, where three Vocationist embarked for their new mission... a mission that would make known the town of Pianura, cradle of the Vocationist Fathers and Sisters.

Of particular significance for the whole town were the visits of Cardinal Lavitrano and Cardinal Alvaro Da Silva. The visit of Cardinal Lavtrano caught the town almost by surprise on a clod and windy day, April 10, 1947. The town of Pianura understood the importance of the occasion and improvised a great reception. Mr. Vincezino Marrone,

interpreting the feeling of the people with a fiery sermon, put together the red cape of the Cardinal and the black mantle of the founder of the Vocationists.

In 1953 Cardinal Alvaro Da Silva, Archbishop of Bahia in Brazil, was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the people and conquered their souls with his kind personality.

April 14, the feast day of Fr. Justin, was celebrated as a local holiday in the town of Pianura.

On April 14, 1948, at 4:30 in the morning, while Fr. Justin was celebrating Mass for the novices, over fifty students from the vocationaries of Perdifumo and Mercato Cliento entered the chapel. Mass had already started; noticing the long line of young boys walking into the church, the founder understood what was going on and tears filled his eyes. After the Gospel he addressed them, saying “You have come very early wearing your best uniforms in order to make this feast day more beautiful; on account of our poverty we cannot wear this uniform every day, but our Lord has clothed us with the precious habit of His grace, and you must take every effort to wear this habit every day without ever changing it, because it is the most beautiful one. It dresses us with the candor of the angels whose smile you are...” Soon after Mass he received them in his room; his eyes were clearly showing his happiness; he embraced and covered with his mantle Fr. Anella, who had given him such a pleasant surprise, and was deeply touched when the youngest of the boys offered him a small lamb. In the afternoon, the children ascended the stage and entertained the founder, the local community, and many friends and benefactors. One of the folk songs they had improvised and practiced on the truck on the way to Pianura went like this:

“We have come from Cilento
On a speedy 26
Out of love for you
Who are our father
We have left at midnight
Without any hesitation
So that we could see you here
On the Tabor of the altar!”



At the end of every line the audience would join in singing enthusiastically: “We are valiant young men – loyal and dear to you, O father; the Lord has called us – to follow you to heaven!”

The example became contagious. All the other houses of the community admired the initiative and it was repeated and enlarged every year.

Busses brought to Pianura priests, sisters, students from the vocationaries and friends, admirers and faithful of the parishes staffed by the Vocationist

Fathers. The streets and squares of Pianura, beautifully decorated with posters, banners, and flags, were so crowded that all traffic to the city had to be stopped. Congratulatory notes, cards and telegrams, flowers and gifts kept piling up in the room of the founder.

The town of Pianura kindly allowed the community to celebrate the founder's feast during the day, reserving the evening for their celebration.

On the eve of St. Justin's day, the parish used to have a holy hour of adoration.

Approximately twenty priests would hear confessions of

parishioners who were preparing themselves to receive Holy Communion knowing that this was the greatest gift they could give to their saintly pastor. On the feast day of St. Justin, the parish liturgies were celebrated with great solemnity, as on a major holy day. In the evening, once the workers had come back from farms, factories or offices, they formed a parade with musical bands and banners of all religious and civic organizations. They moved toward the vocationary and from there they escorted Fr. Justin to the parish church, amid songs and the applause of the beloved people. Hundreds and hundreds of torches lighted their way and artificial fires brightened up the skies.

Even though Fr. Justin was not keen on external manifestation of esteem for himself, on this occasion he would please the people and join them. He concluded the day by imparting a spiritual message and Benediction from the steps at the entrance of the church, since it was not large enough to accommodate the exceptional crowd.



HIS PRECIOUS DEATH

During the spring of 1955, the Vocationist Fathers and the parishioners of Pianura noticed an extraordinary increase in the activity of Fr. Justin. Even though he was sick with sores all over his body, he dragged himself from one street to the next distributing catechisms. “Carry it in your pocket as you carry the rosary. Read it in your free moments. Teach it, kiss it.”



He reserved for himself the daily Lenten sermons and the devotional months of May and June. At times, people noticed him leaning exhausted on the altar, but he kept on. The people perceived that some kind of calamity was about to come upon Pianura; they felt that the good pastor was trying to propitiate the Most High; they had witnessed so many crises, so many ups and downs in the health of Fr. Justin, that they were in no way expecting that the end was so near.

In December of 1954, Fr. Justin was affected by a very severe case of shingles, causing skin rashes, lacerations and boils all over his body, even on his head. He never recovered from this illness. In June, 1955, his health further deteriorated with excruciating stomach pains and an enlarged spleen; edema developed on both feet, making it very painful for him to wear shoes or to walk, the right foot being

much worse than the left. His physician and friend Dr. De Simone kept insisting that he should be hospitalized, but his constant answer was: "I am okay, I am okay." Only in order to please and obey his doctor did he agree to consult the well - known Dr. Cataldo at the beginning of July.

On June 9, which was the Feast of Corpus Christi, he insisted on participating in the traditional procession, carrying a rather heavy monstrance through the streets of Pianura; the joy of carrying Jesus was hiding his pain, but those who knew him noticed his fatigue.

Dr. De Simone visited him on July 16 and spoke to him at length, suggesting absolute rest. On that day, Dr. De Simone diagnosed for the first time that Fr. Justin was suffering from advanced leukemia. The good doctor was so concerned about Fr. Justin's health that he felt the need to call the Vicar General, Fr. Ugo Fraraccio, who was in Rome. With a voice choked by tears, Dr. De Simone said, "Fr. Justin has only fifteen days to live."

Fr. Justin was preaching a week- long retreat to the Sisters of the Sanatorium in Naples. Fr. Fraraccio related that he waited for him on the evening of the seventeenth, and seeing him get out of the car with great pain offered him his arm. Fr. Justin quickly said, "No. No, thanks. I am alright." They had a rather long conversation and Fr. Fraraccio recommended that he rest and take care of his health. The founder humbly asked Fr. Fraraccio's permission for the last trip of his life: " At the end of the spiritual exercises, I would like to go for a short while to Mercato Cilento where I could enjoy some fresh mountain air and at the same time, maybe, I could be of some help to our students." (The novices were in Altavilla Silentina and the professed members were on vacation in nearby Laureana Cilento.)

Fr. Fraraccio answered him, “if you think that that will help you, go as soon as possible, but should you notice any deterioration in your health, please, come back as soon as possible. You know well the lack of good medical services in that area.”

On July 20, escorted by Fr. Castiglione, Fr. Justin left for Altavilla. His stomach pains must have been more excruciating than ever, since on that same day he wrote a letter to Dr. De Simone revealing the intensity of his pains. He spent some time with the novices and the sisters in Altavilla, and on Thursday, July 21, he proceeded to Mercato Cilento. The healthy mountain air of Mercato Cilento helped him and he spent a week there.

On July 27, he went to visit the philosophy and theology students who were on vacation in Laureana with Fr. Di Pierno. The students welcomed him with extraordinary joviality and Fr. Justin was extremely amiable with all of them; he allowed all the students, and even the sisters, to kiss his hand, which was very unusual for him.

He must have felt the end was near; on the twenty-eighth he decided to go back to Pianura. He insisted on passing through Cava to greet the Vocationist Fathers and Sisters at the Annunziata and then went on to Naples; but before going to Pianura, he insisted on visiting the Parish of Bellavista and then the Vocationist residence in Via Manzoni to greet all the religious of those communities. The events of the following days confirmed to all the religious of these communities that the founder had purposely gone on this last trip to say his good- byes to all of them.

The confreres of the house of Pianura , seeing him such a poor state of health, immediately called his brother Dr. Michael Russolillo, and Dr. cataldo; both of them

insisted that he should be hospitalized . Fr. Justin, however, humbly but persistently asked them to do whatever they could there in the religious house. A blood test was taken on July 31 and Dr. De Simone's diagnosis was officially confirmed: Fr. Justin had leukemia.

On August 1, Fr. Albert De Fusco asked Fr. Justin if he would consent to go to a hospital. Fr. Justin answered, "If it is really necessary, I will."

Fr. De Fusco and Fr. Mancuso hastened to get in touch with Dr. Russolillo with news that Fr. Justin would go to the hospital if asked to do so; Dr. Russolillo answered; "Now it is useless. Fr. Justin is practically already dead."

Aware of his condition, Fr. Justin allowed Fr. Castiglione to remain at his bedside on a chair close to his desk. During the night, around 2:00 a.m. on August 2, Fr. Castiglione awakened and noticed Fr. Justin sitting on the bed. He asked if he needed anything. His answer was, "Last night you did not give me absolution, do you remember? Give it to me now!"

Around 9:00 a.m. on August 2, Fr. Justin said to Fr. Esposito, "Today is St. Alfonso's feast day. Please go in my place to wish a happy feast day to the Bishop of Pozzuoli."

Since Fr. Justin's physical condition kept deteriorating visibly moment by moment, from Pianura the priests called Rome to inform the Vicar General and the other confreres of the situation. The Vicar General and Father Di Pierno left immediately and arrived in Pianura in the evening.

Dr. Russolillo tried a blood transfusion. Fr. Alfieri, who was present, tried to distract Fr. Justin with some jokes; Fr. Justin allowed them to do whatever they wanted but was becoming delirious. At a certain point, he turned to his brother and asked, “Why should you continue to torture me this way? It is all useless.”

In the small room of the founder were gathered the Mother General of the Vocationist sisters, who was also his blood sister; Sr. Concetta and Sr. Angelina, and several Vocationist priest. Fr. Fraraccio recalled that Fr. Justin’s very last words were: “I bless you all, sons and daughters.”



Around 6:00 p.m. he entered into agony, and from then on he didn’t give any signs of hearing and did not respond to any question.

His breathing became more and more labored. To alleviate his pain he was given an injection, but there was no visible relief.

At 8:30 p.m., Mother Giovanna Russolillo said to Fr. Fraraccio, “What are you waiting for to give him the Anointing of the Sick? Don’t you see that he is waiting for that?”

Fr. Fraraccio related that he started the sacred rite after having tried to get the attention of the servant of God. “I don’t think he heard me. He was in deep agony. When I touched his eyes for the anointing, he opened them immediately. His natural modesty reacted at the touch. He saw – he understood. I whispered with my lips, ‘Extreme Unction.’ He

smiled, gave a light hint of approval and closed his eyes again. In opening the palms of his hands in the proper position for the anointing. I had the impression that he was accommodating me. After the sacred rite and after the recitation of the prayer for the dying, Fr. Adinolfi pleaded aloud several times, 'Fr. Justin , bless us.' Then he placed a crucifix into Fr. Justin's hand and moved his hand in the form of a blessing."

At 9:00 p.m. Fr. Justin seemed to relax and rest and his breathing became smoother. His face regained its usual tranquil and smiling look. He died peacefully at 9:10 p.m. on August 2, 1955.

The first news concerning the worsening of his illness reached the people almost simultaneously with the news of his death. On the evening of August 2, 1955, as the toll of St. Giorgio's big bell started to spread the sad news of his death, the people were deeply shaken and almost instantaneously they turned off their radios and closed the stores and recreation centers. A crowd of heartbroken confused parishioners moved toward the vocationary. The noisy town of Pianura had suddenly become silent.

The Vocationist Fathers could hardly lock the gates; they had to ask the help of the police to control the crowd. The silence was suddenly broken by the people's cries: "We want to see our pastor." The police were having difficulty trying to contain the crowds.

To avoid possible disorder, in a few minutes the Vocationist Fathers prepared his body and displayed it in the church of the vocationary. Men and women, young and old alike mourned for him as one mourns a father, brother or friend.

The committee for St. Giorgio's feast day had an emergency meeting and decided to suspend the traditional feast in honor of their patron saint and spend the money they had collected for the funeral of their pastor.

On the morning of August 3, telegraphs, telephones and radios spread the news out of Pianura, and then began the procession of people coming from every town and city of southern Italy.

The parish church was decorated for the occasion, and on the evening of August 3 welcomed the body of the one who had been its pastor for thirty- five years. The church was not large enough to accommodate the flocks of people who wanted to contemplate the man of God in the serenity of his death. Lines had to be formed and people were only allowed to pass by.

As people were passing by, many of them were touching his body with handkerchiefs, rosary beads and other devotional items that they wanted to keep as a relic. For two days and two nights the flocks of people kept growing. Bishops, senators, assemblymen, authorities, sisters and brothers, well known and simple people paused reverently by his body to show their love and respect and to be reminded once more that only holiness lives forever and makes people great.

On Friday afternoon, the city traffic came to a complete stop; there was no possibility of admitting any more busses or private cars into the town – so many had come from near and far for his funeral. Over one hundred policemen helped to control the



crowds as the procession with the open casket slowly advanced through the streets of Pianura. The saintly pastor, dressed in purple vestments and with the chalice in his hands, passed through the streets of the town for the last time.

Was it a funeral or a triumphant procession? The precious drapes that decorated every window and balcony, the continuous outpouring of flowers thrown from the balconies onto the casket, and the kisses that grown-ups and children threw to his body gave much more the idea of a triumph than a funeral.

Who had given orders that the bells should ring festively? No one! The young men from the bell tower had the impression of observing the most exciting feast and the three bells kept ringing joyously; on the streets the tears of his spiritual children, the funeral notes of the band, and the banners at half mast expressed the harsh reality of the event. In the small, neat cemetery of Pianura everyone was hunting for flowers. There were fifteen garlands of white flowers; not one flower was left by the end of the funeral. His body was buried temporarily in the local cemetery and was later transferred to the church of the Mother House on April 14, 1956.

FAME OF HIS VIRTUES

The people of Pianura, as well as the Vocationist Fathers and Sisters, enjoyed special treatment by professionals, politicians, clerks and business people on account of their relationship with Fr. Justin. People used to envy them because they had such a saintly pastor and father! The fame of his holiness, which was widespread during his life, is now much larger after his death.

The following are only a few of the extraordinary of miraculous happenings that took place through the intercession of Fr. Justin.

In 1949, Annamaria Longobardi was seriously ill. Four doctors gave discouraging diagnoses. Finally, a fifth physician, Dr. Angarano, was called in as the last hope. Visiting the poor child, this doctor said, "It is too late! It is capillary bronchitis; in twenty- four hours she will either be over it or dead."

"You mean there is nothing at all that can be done?" pleaded the parents/

"We may try the aromatic bath; if the baby reacts, we will save her, otherwise..." The child did not react. At 2:00 p.m. she went into a coma.

In desperation the child's father ran to Fr. Justin. He pushed past all those trying to stop him and directly to the founder's room. "Why are you so alarmed?" asked Fr. Justin, before he could talk.

“Annamaria dies!” the father chokingly cried. The two went together to the house. The people who were crowding the room made a path by the bed so the two men could get closer. Fr. Justin with his finger tickled the chin of the young girl, who started to smile and move her hands. Fr. Justin said a prayer, left a miraculous medal under her pillow and walked out.

On his way out, Fr. Justin noticed a statue of St. Anthony with a light in front of it and said, “On some occasions you should not ask God’s favors through saints who are already in heaven, but through those who are not there yet. They may be more interested and more sympathetic.” The next morning the girl was completely healed.

Sr. Martilde Della Greca was sent to Mercato to better recover from a long sickness. However, instead of recovering, she took an unexpected turn for the worse on account of bronchial pneumonia. Friday night she was given the last rites. The priest who had administered the sacrament, convinced of the imminent transition, did not move from her bed. On Saturday afternoon, Sr. Agnes had the idea of sending a telegram to Fr. Justin informing him of the situation and asking his blessings for the dying sister. The telegram was not delivered until Monday morning! The relatives and the other sister shared the long agony of the dying sister. Suddenly, on Monday, July 26, 1942, at 9:00 a.m., Sr. Matilde regained consciousness; she sat up on the bed, made the sign of the cross and began the song of the Blessed Mother: “My soul magnifies the Lord...” It was the exact hour in which she had been blessed from a distance by the founder.

Apolito Alessandrina, also of Mercato Cilento, gave birth to a set of twins. The boy died soon after birth and the girl was barely surviving. Alessandrina’s friends urged her to

bring the baby to Fr. Justin and let him bless her. She overcame her initial hesitation and shyness and, after wrapping the baby, who weighed less than a pounds, she went to Fr. Justin.

The poor mother was embarrassed and ashamed because she knew that the deterioration of the baby's health was due to the fact that she was unable to nurse her; at that time and in that place baby formula was unheard of. With the baby in her arms she approached Fr. Justin and pleaded, "Father, please bless this creature of mine who doesn't take milk."

Very quietly and smilingly he paid a compliment to the mother and then breathed three times on the baby. Then he added, "Go home and nurse her. The Lord has granted you the grace." The mother went home and for the first time was able to nurse the child, who continued to be breast- fed until she was twenty- two months old.

There are many prophecies uttered by Fr. Justin which have already been proven true. During the war, Fr. Justin provided serenity and peace to many families. There were so many people approaching him for information about their dear ones that someone in the house felt the need to have a special book in which were summarily taken the information of the missing person and Fr. Justin would put some special signs or remarks next to each one.

Once, a young boy went to the church of Mercato very early in the morning. "My mother asks that you say a prayer for my two brothers who have not given any news from the front for a long time now," he said.

Fr. Justin placed his hand on the boy's head and asked,

“What is your name?”

“Vincenzo Cerone.”

“Did you receive Communion this morning?”

“No”

“Then receive Holy Communion and offer it for their souls.”

The innocent boy was happy to deliver the message – which naturally he had not understood – to the mother who understood the sad reply and began to cry. Not long afterward the mother was notified that both her children had died.

Mrs. Assunta Rispoli asked Fr. Salvatore Polverino to go purposely from Cava to see Fr. Justin and ask news of her son. Fr. Justin listened and then answered, ‘Get a piece of paper and write: ‘ You will be getting some happy news.’”

A month passed by and the good lady was beginning to lose hope when a friend of her son came home and gave her a very short handwritten note from her son, written on a piece of paper bag: “ Mother, in a few days we will have the joy of embracing each other. Your son, Vincenzo.” Assunta, in haste, informed Fr. Polverino and fainted at his feet.

“ I see them,” Fr. Justin explained. “Why shouldn’t I give some consolation to so many desperate mothers?”

Especially extraordinary is the case of a woman from Lustra; she went to Fr. Justin to ask news of her husband who had been classified as missing in action for several years

already. Fr. Justin, without even seeing the lady, sent this message: “Go home quickly because your husband is one his way there.”

On her way home the lady was met by her children who were looking for her. “Hurry home, Mother,” they said. “Dad has arrived.”

Even more amazing is the case of a lady from Vatolla who, after receiving a telegram announcing the death of her son, had gone to the vocationary to make arrangements for the funeral. She wanted to consult “the saint.” Fr. Justin simply sent this message: “Her son is alive and is about to come home.”

The poor soul, heartbroken at the message she had received, bitterly and facetiously remarked : “ What a saint!” The reality confirmed Fr. Justin’s prophecy ; instead of a funeral, a Mass of thanksgiving was offered.

One day, Fr. Justin was explaining to his sister the reasons that had forced him to expel a professed member of the Vocationist Fathers; Sister Giovanna, who had in vain pleaded with him several times to expel a sister from the community, saw a parallel between the two cases and, while externally listening to him, internally she was regretting the denial given to her. He interrupted himself and rebuked her sternly, “No, it is not the way you think. The case is totally different.”

While preaching a week- long retreat to the Sisters of the Infant Jesus in Sezza Romano, he helped one of the sister to overcome a serious spiritual crisis; the sister kept desiring the rosary beads that the founder was wearing around his neck, which were part of his religious habit, but she was too shy and embarrassed to ask. At the conclusion of the

retreat, saying their good- byes, the sisters all kissed his hand he said to her, “Do you want my rosary beads? Here they are.” He removed them from his neck and gave them to the sister, who blushed because her secret thoughts had been made known, but was happy for receiving them.

The husband of Christina D’ Angelo died suddenly in an accident on his job. The wife accepted the reality and kept trying to resign herself to the will of God. However, she was constantly tormented by this thought – was he saved? Did he have time to invoke God’s mercy? One afternoon, while walking on Miano Place, Fr. Justin saw Christina, who, that particular day, was tortured and depressed by those thoughts; they greeted each other and then Christina began, “ Father, a bad thought...”

He interrupted her quickly and resolutely: “Stop. Don’t even say it! When one dies in an accident, the Lord is more merciful. He is okay. God bless you.” Christina remained confused for a while but greatly consoled.

Stories of miraculous healings have been constantly reported since Fr. Justin’s death. While prudence may counsel us not to talk about these events, the hope nourished by these very facts delights our hearts.

Carmen Di Costanzo, three old, in September, 1955, suffered excruciating pains in the right leg. Soon she became feverish and her leg became contorted. The x- rays showed osteomyelitis of the fibula. She was brought to the hospital and her was put into a cast.

On the cast the worried parents tied a handkerchief that had belonged to Fr. Justin.

Waking p the following morning, the little girl said, “Mother, Fr. Justin loves me.” They

didn't pay too much attention to those words. Thirteen days later, for financial reasons, they took the baby home and once again, waking up in the morning, the girl said, "Mother, Fr. Justin loves me; last night he told me that my leg is okay."

The mother simply retorted, "You don't even know who Fr. Justin is."

Without hesitation, pointing her finger at Fr. Justin's picture hanging on the wall, she said, "He is that one."

The mother, surprised and touched, asked, "How was he dressed?"

Carmen looked around but did not seem to see what she was looking for. Suddenly, she ran to her bed, removed the covers and, pointing to the white sheets, she said, "Like this."

They took off the cast and with great joy discovered that the leg was completely healed, notwithstanding the fact that vivacious little Carmen, against all the recommendations of the doctors, had kept walking and jumping on it.

A little boy, also three years old, Pasquale Di Vicino, Playing near a big and deep pool of water, fell into it. Luckily enough, his uncle happened to be passing by at that very moment and was able to rescue him from the water. The child was anything but scared. As the saying goes, bad news is carried by the wind. The mother had been informed of his fall into the water before the rescue was accomplished and ran in a state of shock toward her child and embraced him and said, "My child, the shock alone could have killed you!"

Pasqualino promptly answered, "I was not afraid. Fr. Justin was holding me." The little boy, who had seen Fr. Justin passing by and had received some candy or holy cards from him, had deeply engraved in his mind what Fr. Justin looked like.

We have been hearing about many miraculous healings that have taken place through the intercession of Fr. Justin. He has been particularly effective in helping young children and victims of cancer.

Particular impressive is the story of the healing of a young girl, Elena Galdi, whose father was a professor of mathematics at Howard University in Washington, D. C. Elena had been between life and death for two months as a result of an internal infection and a hole in her lungs. The doctors decided to try surgery although they felt there was little or no hope. It was at this point that Professor Giovanni Paolo Galdi decided to go to Fr. Justin's tomb. Recalling that day, he said, "It was on a Monday, August 27, that I went with my wife and my other two children to Fr. Justin's tomb. There I explained the situation to my family. We all cried and pleaded aloud for a miracle from Fr. Justin. On the way out of the church, my son asked me, 'Daddy, when will the miracle take place?'"

"Without any hesitation I answered, 'It has already happened!'"

On August 29, Dr. Mori closed the small tube they had inserted in Elena's lungs; He expected her lungs to be crushed and that the girl would die of suffocation! Instead, she regained consciousness and mobility, showing signs of comfort and relaxation. More x-rays were taken and, miraculously, her lungs did not show any imperfection; they were totally healed! Elena grew into a peaceful child, happy to live in God's grace.

Concetta Vasallo wrote that after serious surgery she was bleeding profusely from her throat and mouth. She was terrorized, and in her panic she prayed with faith, through the intercession of Fr. Justin, to be freed from the dreaded sickness. That night in a dream she saw Fr. Justin, who smiled and touched her throat with his finger, saying, “ The cause of the bleeding is here; relax.” She woke up immediately and told her mother about the vision. The next morning Dr. Fussolillo and Dr. Fumo could only marvel at the miraculous healing!



Olga A. de Aciar of San Juan, Argentina, was in intensive care and rejecting the blood transfusions and vomiting continually. Fr. Pugliese, S. D.V., sent her a holy card of Fr. Justin, suggesting that she ask for his help. While her doctors had given up all hope of recovery because of complications with her colon and liver, she continued to recite the prayer written on the back of Fr. Justin’s picture! She recovered quickly and completely to the amazement of her physicians. “Since then,” Olga said, “I have been enjoying good health. I continue to ask Fr. Justin for his help so that he may help me to do God’s will.” Her story has been verified by Dr. Gayetano M. Berenguer.

As we look forward to the happy ending Fr. Justin’s process of canonization, we can only pray with this favorite formula: “ O my God and my All! Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

May your will be done, your love may reign, your glory shine always more in me and in everyone, as in yourself, O my God and my All!”

PART II

Society of Divine Vocations

ITS BEGINNING

Once, Fr. Justin was asked: “When did you start to think about the foundation of the Society of Divine Vocations?”

After a short pause he answered, “well, I think that the idea was born with me.”

During his philosophical and theological studies, Fr. Justin often read and meditated on the appeals of St. Pius X and other ecclesiastical authorities on the vocation crisis that was affecting the church at the beginning of this century. He could very clearly see that the “harvest was plenty, but the laborers were few.” The young seminarian Justin Russolillo must have asked himself many times: “What can I do to bring more laborers into the Lord’s vineyard? Why is it that fewer and fewer young men are eager to serve the Lord?”

He soon came to the conclusion that vocations were not lacking but that promoters of vocations were scarce. God had been calling and is still calling! These reflections, plus the

fact that twice he came very close to the point of dropping out of the seminary because his parents were unable to pay the tuition, were the real beginning, the seed of the Society of Divine Vocations.

During his vacations, Justin started to organize the young boys of his neighborhood and of his parish for catechetical instructions and recreation. The young boys of Pianura used to flock around Justin and often walked from Pianura to Pozzuoli, about six miles, just to see him.

The morning of September 20, 1913, the day of his priestly ordination, Fr. Justin made a vow to found a religious congregation for the “cultivation, service and apostolate of God’s vocations to faith, to the priesthood and to holiness.”

Fr. Justin was happy to discover the blossoming signs of religious and priestly vocations in many of his boys. Some of them started to pressure him... they wanted to be priests and they had no money!

On April 30, 1914, Fr. Justin gathered a group of twelve boys who wanted to be priests, but who were too poor to pay the seminary tuition. His parents Luigi and Giuseppina, were very happy to welcome these twelve young men into their home, and cared for them as for their own children.

The experiment lasted only fifteen days. The Bishop of Pozzuoli, concerned about Fr. Justin’s poor health and lack of adequate facilities in the Russolillo’s home, ordered Fr. Justin to discontinue his experiment and send these young men back to their homes.

How could he break the news to them? After his meeting with the bishop, Fr. Justin went to see one of his aunts; he opened his heart to her and she gave him a cross of knotty wood. He went back home, served dinner as usual to his boys and then showed them the cross, saying... “We are children of the cross, let us embrace the cross ...” Shortly after this attempt, the bishop went to visit the parish of Pianura and offered to accept one of Fr. Justin’s boys into the seminary. Salvatore Polverino was selected and became the first Vocationist to be ordained a priest.

During World War I, Fr. Justin was drafted into the army and had to leave his family and his boys but kept in touch with them by letters and occasional visits. While in the service he developed the plan of founding also the Vocationist Sisters, who, as good mothers, would assist in the formation of the future priests.

In March, 1917, Fr. Justin wrote to Cardinal Gasparri asking his advice on the “project of founding a new religious family dedicated to free education for vocations.” While he was awaiting an answer, he was called by the vicar general of the diocese, Msgr. Dell’Isola, who jokingly said, “Justin, did you write to Rome saying that you want to found a religious congregation? Do you possess all the extraordinary signs?”

“No,” answered Fr. Justin quickly, “but the ordinary signs are all there!”

“Well.” continued Msgr. Dell’Isola, “if Bishop Zezza is reassigned, consider it as an extraordinary sign.” Bishop Zezza, who at first had not given consideration to Fr. Justin’s ideas, later became Archbishop of Naples and a great friend and supporter of Fr. Justin and his communities.

THE FOUNDATION

Bishop Farina, who was a sincere admirer and spiritual counsellor of Fr. Justin, valued his project. In July, 1920, he officially invited the founder to realize it in the diocese of Troia. He offered Fr. Justin the direction of the seminary and, for his congregation, an old convent. At the same time, the Diocese of Pozzuoli became vacant and Bishop Ragosta, who was appointed as temporary administrator of the diocese, urged Fr. Justin to accept the pastorship of St. Giorgio's Church in Pianura. Fr. Justin presented his plan to the bishop, informing him also of the invitation and opportunity offered by Bishop Farina. Bishop Ragosta suggested that he realize in Pianura what he intended to do elsewhere. The bishop felt that the pastorship would be a help rather than a hindrance to the foundation of the religious community.

Fr. Justin was installed as pastor on September 20, 1920, and, with the bishop's blessing, the Society of Divine Vocations officially opened its doors in the parish house of Pianura on October 18, 1920. A few, but selected, young boys formed the first group of candidates.

While the vocationary was becoming a reality, the first tow "boys" that Fr. Justin had sent to the minor seminary were being admitted to the major seminary of Posillipo. In 1921, the Rev. Francesco Sepe, a diocesan priest, joined Fr. Justin, thus becoming the first Vocationist after the founder. Fr. Sepe was a tremendous help both for the parish and for the vocationary which, by this time, already had twenty-eight students. On March 4,

1922, informing the bishop about the progress of the new community, Fr. Justin wrote: “It has been a year since with caution you have allowed us to accept into the community a diocesan priest and those young men we had been training both spiritually and academically. Divine Providence has kept our religious family, which consists of twenty people, from having to make debts and at the same time enabled us to increase the attention and the expenses for the improvement and upkeep of the parish.” He was particularly happy to inform the bishop that several of the young men “after serious reflection and guidance had privately consecrated themselves to religious life and to continue the development and expansion of the pious institution, which was aiming at promoting God’s glory in their sanctification and the sanctification of their neighbors, through a greater cooperation with the works of the church, with the free recruitment and formation of vocations for the diocesan and religious clergy at the service of the bishop in the seminaries, and at the service of religious orders in the apostolic schools.” In the same letter Fr. Justin asked the Bishop’s permission to separate those preparing to become members of the Society of Divine Vocations from those who intended to join a diocese or another religious order. He also included the first rules, which he wrote for future members of his congregation, requesting the bishop’s approval and permission to publish them, since applications for admissions were multiplying and coming from every part of the country. The need for such a permission was also prompted by the fact that Fr. Justin had received further offers of buildings and assistance in other dioceses while at the same time Divine Providence was offering the opportunity of “purchasing a building in Pianura for the growth of the foundation.”

A pious soul of Pianura, who later became Sr. Maria Clara Loffredo, bought a piece of land on the outskirts of town and donated it to Fr. Justin for the construction of the vocationary. Fr. Palmieri happily told his colleagues at the vocationary that while he was on the mountain of Camaldoli Fr. Justin had asked him to look down toward Pianura at the huge vocationary and at the many priests who were praying their breviary. Fr. Palmieri, who was assimilating the simplicity and fervor of his master, kept looking intently but couldn't see anything. Only later did Fr. Palmieri understand that the creative spirit of the founder was seeing God's plans for the community.

Simple people joined the students in the material construction of the future Mother House. The generosity of many benefactors provided the financial needs for the purchasing of the building material.

The first group of students moved into the vocationary as soon as the first floor was completed. They were like a big family united by a spirit of prayer and sacrifices and by the great calling they had received.

The large group of young ladies who were aspiring to religious life under the leadership of Rachele Marrone were contributing with their labor and donations to the construction of the vocationary. They were also working for the religious education of all the youngsters of the parish. The "pious union" in 1921 became the first group of Vocationary Sisters.

On Pentecost Sunday in 1923, the Most Reverend Giuseppe Petrone, newly appointed Bishop of Pozzuoli, approved the first by-laws of the Congregation with the following

words: “We approve, on an experimental basis, the by-laws of the Society of Divine Vocations, praying and wishing for an ever greater revival of interest and enthusiasm to have good workers in the Lord’s vineyard; there has never been a greater need for vocations than today.” The first blessing and approval was cause of great joy for the founder and for his pupils. Those by-laws, which consisted of twenty-one articles, were further developed to include the complete program of the congregation and with the permission of the same bishop were published in 1924.

The Congregation for the Seminaries, which had been following the foundation of the new religious order and was noticing its growth with the increasing number of candidates and the priestly ordination of Fr. Polverino and Fr. Mele, requested a copy of the by-laws consisted of thirty-three articles; the Congregation for the Religious had words of blessing and approval for the same. The Congregation for the Religious, with a letter dated June 28, 1926, answered the Bishop of Pozzuoli, who had requested canonical approval for the Vocationist community: “The Sacred Congregation, having examined everything, deems it convenient that the institution continue as a simple, pious association. It is not contrary, however, that the members of the two branches of the Vocationist Fathers and Sisters – branches that must be independent from each other – live in a community life with rules and constitutions according to canon law and that they pronounce private vows. Later on as the institution will produce fruits that would prove their consistency and validity, a new edition can be submitted to obtain the permission mentioned in the article 492 of canon law.”

On the feast of the Ascension, 1927, Bishop Petrone approved the first text of the constitutions, consisting of 110 articles. In his document of approval the bishop wrote :
“We approve the constitution of the Society of Divine Vocations trusting that the Holy Spirit will fertilize with his grace the small seed thrown with trepidation into the furrows of the church.

It might seem strange that the most reverend bishop had some trepidation in granting the seal of approval to the new religious family. Some of his hesitation might have been caused by malicious slander and false accusations raised against the vocationary. The devil could not leave undisturbed the beginning of something destined to produce great fruits of sanctification. The bishop himself had great admiration for Fr. Justin and great trust in his new institution, and that is why with a formal decree of canonical erection he approved the Society of Divine Vocations on May 26, 1927.

LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

Soon after the canonical erection, the Society of Divine Vocations opened its novitiate in the house at Pianura, which shortly after was transferred to a modest house in Baronissi donated to the community Bishop Farina.

In 1928, the first novices pronounced their religious vows and the small family was blessed with the priestly ordination of Fr. Giuseppe Di Fusco. With the canonical erection's decree, the bishop appointed Fr. Justin superior general of the congregation.

The fact that the superior general, Fr. Justin, assigned some of his priests to serve outside of the diocese of origin caused some apprehension to the bishop and complicated the relationship between the congregation and its ordinary. As a consequence of the expansion of the community, the bishop discovered that his decree of canonical erection was issued without previous permission from Rome and invited Fr. Justin to transfer the Mother House of the congregation to the jurisdiction of another bishop.

There were moments of trepidation and worry in the small community. Fr. Justin intensified his prayers to Almighty God that there might be new light on his way. On December 6, 1928, he appealed to the Cardinal Archbishop of Naples in whose diocese was located the house of formation for the students of philosophy and theology. Fr. Justin wrote in his diary: "After four days of waiting in the cardinal's waiting room, I was admitted to have an audience with him. He showed a lot of kind understanding and my petition was accepted. I was directed to make arrangements with the vicar general and thus we passed from the Diocese of Pozzuoli to the Archdiocese of Naples. Two months later, I was called by the vicar general and told on behalf of the cardinal that I should move to another diocese, another bishop.

"On that same day I was welcomed with the community by the Bishop of Vallo, who just happened to be in Naples that day. From that moment he became the ordinary of the congregation, and in his hands, in Vallo, during the Mass celebrated in the bishop's chapel on January 18, 1928, my thirty-eighth birthday, I pronounced my religious vows."

While the congregation was enjoying the blessings and kindness of the Bishop of Vallo, incorrect information about the Vocationist and their activities was being sent to Rome.

On February 20, 1929, the Congregation for the Religious wrote to the Bishop of Pozzuoli asking information about the Vocationists. Bishop Petrone, answering with charity and truthfulness, stated, “The vocationary is a blessed institution that could be called a nursery for the first preparation of young boys to the seminary or religious orders. I have received many young boys in my seminary coming from the vocationary and they are all well trained and on their way to the priesthood. For the opening of similar vocationaries in other dioceses – and many bishops are insistently requesting to have them in their dioceses – are needed priests who could serve as superiors and as teachers. From here the real need for the pious Society for the Divine Vocations, which is in a stage of formation, depends on the approval of the Holy See. I have given all my support for the vocationary and for the pious society; before any official approval I had requested the constitutions, which were forwarded by me with relative documents to the Sacred Congregation for the Religious. I have examined, trimmed and reduced them and I have returned them to Pastor Russolillo, who wanted to have them reviewed also by other bishops who show interest in his work.” Of the Vocationist Sisters, Bishop Petrone said, “They are groups of pious women who, with prayers and work, help the vocationary.” After giving a report of the excellent functioning of the vocationary in Pianura , he assured the Holy See of “the goodness and docility of Pastor Russolillo, who would blindly obey whatever will be ordered him by the Holy See and by the Archbishop of Naples, where he was transferred with the main center of his activity, and where can remain the Mother House of the pious society, if and until it please Divine Providence.”

Concerning the accusations against the vocationary – that people dismissed from other seminaries were being accepted without the consent of the superior authority – the

Bishop of Pozzuoli explicitly affirmed that as far as he knew there had been no such abuses and stated: “There are no elements expelled from seminaries or in any way accepted against the opinion of the proper ecclesiastical authority.” He added: “I have ordered, however, to be always more prudent and strict on this point... as far as I am concerned I am thankful for some excellent young men that have joined the diocese and are now in the major seminary. I also already have some priests in the diocese who without that first assistance received in the vocationary might never have made it.” Again he insisted concluding his letter to the Congregation for the Religious : “The good Father Russolillo deserves the greatest trust on account of his exceptional uprightness, piety and zeal.”

The Most Reverent Bishop of Vallo was extremely helpful in that delicate situation. On August 29, 1930, he wrote to the Sacred Congregation for the Religious: “I am expressing in all truthfulness my opinion on Fr. Justin Russolillo and on his institution, the Society of Divine Vocations and Vocationist. Fr. Justin Russolillo lives an exemplary life and is filled with great zeal for the glory of God and for the well being of the church. He was born in a middle-class pious and honest family; the family is constantly helping him in all the good works that he plans and realizes. One of his brothers has joined him in the priestly life and one of his sisters has become a Vocationist Sister; his parents receive Holy Communion every day.

“Fr. Justin Russolillo” realizing that in our dioceses there is an insufficient number of sacred ministers and that many who want to become priests cannot do so for lack of financial means, has conceived and given life to the above – mentioned institution, which

offers great hope currently the institution has approximately on hundred fifteen students in its vocationaries.”

“He receives the candidates that show manifest signs of vocation in the service of the Lord, he trains them for three years of junior high, leaving them free to embrace that state of life to which each one is more inclined: as religious in any community, as diocesan priests or as good citizens.”

“To obviate the great difficulty of lack of spiritual directors for minor and major seminaries, the pious founder hopes to prepare his candidates for this important and delicate task. At present he and his priests, whenever requested by bishops, are always willing to assist with periods of spiritual retreats for our seminaries.”

“Charity is the means of support for so many people. He already has seven houses and various pieces of land; I myself have given him a beautiful house with a large yard and garden and a second house completely furnished. Many bishops keep requesting the privilege of having the providential institution in their dioceses; the founder hopes to be able to please them all. In his houses are formed young boys from all these dioceses of southern Italy, especially from the religious provinces of Campania and Salerno.”

“On my part, for having welcomed them in my diocese, I hope with God’s help a great booming of many good ministers of the Lord, in the footsteps of the priests that are presently members of the institute; they are endowed with untiring zeal and spirit of sacrifice.”

The support of the Bishop of Vallo was the necessary spiritual reward that the Lord was granting to the Vocationists in the first moments of trial so that it might appear always more clearly that the institution was a work of God and that these trials were only God's seal of approval.

While Fr. Justin and his community were growing under the patronage of the Bishop of Vallo, the Archdioceses of Naples granted permission for the opening of the house of formation for the students of theology, near the pontifical seminary of Posillipo. The Bishop of Bovino entrusted to the Vocationist Fathers the shrine of Our Lady of Hope with the attached monastery, and the Bishop of Cava dei Tirreni offered to the Vocationists the parish of the Annunciation with the attached monastery, which later became house of novitiate. In 1930 in Pianura, the Vocationist Fathers had their first general chapter assembly in the church of the cemetery. The constitutions were revised and explained and the superior general and his council were elected.

Fr. Justin instructed his religious to “never excuse themselves unless explicitly ordered to do so.” He practiced this himself and this practice of humility and mortification might have contributed to some of the agony and pain that affected the founder and his foundation. While the founder and the community grew in love and service of the Lord, humbly and silently suffering on account of false or exaggerated accusations, the Abbot Fausto Mezza, OSB, intervened in favor of the Vocationists with the Bishop of Pozzuoli. He may be considered a real savior for the community; he pointed out to the Most Reverend Bishop how the devil was using people and circumstances in a relentless effort

to destroy this great instrument of salvation. With unbiased objectivity and eloquence, the good abbot defended the innocence of the congregation.

Fr. Justin, meanwhile, for the third time asked the bishop to accept his resignation as Pastor of St. Giorgio's Church both on account of his poor health and of his many obligations as superior general of the Society of Divine Vocations. He wanted to establish his residence in the house of novitiate in Cava dei Tirreni or in the house of formation in Posillipo. Fr. Justin also asked the bishop to appoint as his vicar in the administration of the parish Fr. Mele, if by any chance the bishop could not accept his resignation.

The bishop was convinced that he and nobody else could assign or reassign the Vocationist Fathers. In his conviction that his faulty decree of approval invalidated the same, the bishop proceeded to assign the Vocationist priests of Pianura where and how he deemed most convenient for the needs of the diocese.

On September 23, 1930, Fr. Justin went personally to Rome and he humbly presented a written request to the Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Religious and was assured of the validity of the decree of approval and erection given by the Bishop of Pozzuoli without permission from Rome; he was assured that as superior general he had the right of assigning the religious priests wherever he deemed appropriate. The Congregation for the Religious, however, did not give a written reply to Fr. Justin and the good father, as usual, entrusted the whole affair into the hands of God with the certainty that time and the intervention of good people would dissipate any shadow of darkness.

The Most Reverend Fausto Mezza, OSB, seems to have been the angel sent by God to defend and protect Fr. Justin. Writing to the Bishop of Pozzuoli after having stated that he had attentively studied Canon Law concerning the foundation of new religious communities, Abbott Mezza stated “(1) The foundation of Fr. Justin was a true religious congregation of diocesan right. As a matter of fact: (a) It was your Excellency who gave the approval that rendered Fr. Justin’s foundation a religious congregation of diocesan right. A lack or previous authorization from Rome does not invalidate the approval of the ordinary. In the worst case only a validation would be needed from Rome, validation which would be easily granted since the society has already applied for the Canonical approval from the Apostolic See; (b) the Congregation for the Religious, in a letter of last July to Fr. Justin, while suggesting the opportunity of waiting a little more for the Pontifical approval in order to allow for the development of the society, declared that it would reexamine the request when the society would be further expanded to other dioceses. This means that Rome already acknowledges that the society is a religious institution of diocesan right. (2) A religious congregation of diocesan right according to Canon Law is not to be taken in its strict interpretation, as for example the Oblates of St. Charles for the Diocese of Milano or the rural missionaries of the Diocese of Genova (they are an ecclesiastical association indissolubly attached to the diocese of origin). The diocesan approval is the first canonical recognition giving the new congregation the right to expand to other dioceses. (3) Your Excellency, in approving the Society of Divine Vocations, did not attach any clause limiting the activity of the same society to within the boundary of the Diocese of Pozzuoli; it was also expressly stated that until the society would be ready to proceed to a canonical election, Fr. Justin would remain its superior general. No one can deny to a superior general of a community – even if it is only of

diocesan right – the freedom to dispose of its subjects to provide for the needs and the growth of the same congregation. The authority of the bishop in this case – if he had understood it properly – is a kind of protective authority in order to supervise and foster the growth of the newly formed congregation, to make sure that it would fulfill its apostolate and grow in compliance with Canon Law. (4) Article 492, paragraph 2 Canon Law states that a congregation of diocesan right will remain of diocesan right until it receives the Pontifical approval. Such a congregation remains totally subject to the jurisdiction of the ordinaries. Then, not only of the ordinary of the diocese of origin in which it is started, but “Ordinarium,” that is, of the individual ordinaries in whose diocese the congregation has expanded; each ordinary for the houses which have been opened in his diocese. (5) Article 495, paragraph 1, states that a religious congregation of diocesan right in order to establish houses in other dioceses needs the consent of both the ordinary of the diocese in which a new residence is established as well as from the ordinary of the diocese of origin; the consent of the ordinary of the diocese of origin “sine gravi causa ne deneget” (should not be denied without a serious reason). From this article it clearly appears that in order to open a new houses in other dioceses is needed the consent of the bishop of origin; the assignment of the subject is not the duty of the bishop but of the Superior General of the congregation. (6) Finally, it is worth noticing that for the greater good of the Society of Divine Vocations, your Excellency transferred the patronage of the same to the Bishop of Vallo, As a matter of fact, a house opened in our diocese was opened precisely with the consent of the Bishop of Vallo, who presently is acting as the ordinary of origin. Now why in order to move the subjects form one house to the other should a different procedures, be followed? (7) Allow me to call to your attention, my dear bishop, the fact that the Society of Divine Vocations – regardless of its

immediate or distant future – cannot be judged by its first steps, which are shaky and limited, as has happened for all religious orders that today are spread throughout the world. The goals the society hopes to achieve cannot be imprisoned in these painful happenings of its beginning. Presently, it seems that the society is not giving its contribution, or better that it does not contribute in the way you would like to the Diocese of Pozzuoli; but now the society must guarantee its existence and spread its roots: *Primum esse, deinde Philosophari*. Someday, God willing, this congregation will bear to the church a much larger contribution. It will always be known that it was born in the Diocese of Pozzuoli and that you were its first and most beloved father.”

Most of the misunderstandings were then cleared between the Bishop of Pozzuoli and Fr. Justin in a meeting held in the fall of 1930. On June 2, 1931, the congregation for the Religious, upon request from the Bishop of Vallo, granted the validation of the decree of canonical erection granted by the Bishop of Pozzuoli and soon after, the congregation, which had always retained its Mother House in Pianura as the main center of its activities, was returning with the blessings of the Bishop of Vallo under the patronage of the Bishop of Pozzuoli.

In the same year the congregation received the special blessing of the priestly ordination of nine new Vocationist priests. With these priestly ordinations the congregation was able to accept the college of St. Pietro and the following year the congregation accepted the parish of St. Michael in the diocese of Anagni. On June 21, 1932, the founder was granted a private audience with the Holy Father, Pius XI.

With a sense of deep gratitude and faith, Fr. Justin asked the Holy Father to bless the two religious congregations of the Vocationist Fathers and Sisters and their work for vocations and for the rehabilitations of those who have betrayed their calling. The Holy Father asked Fr. Justin if he had heard of Msgr. Scherillo, and Fr. Justin was pleased to inform him that he was the monsignor's nephew; the Holy Father continued by saying that he knew very well the dear monsignor and, pointing to a book by Fr. Justin, *Spiritus Orationis*, a copy of which had been sent to him previously, the Holy Father said that the title *Spiritus Gratiae et Praecum* might have been more appropriate. The blessing of the Holy Father came really abundantly on Fr. Justin's foundations and on all those who were following with interest their progressive development.

In 1933, the Second General Chapter assembly was held and with letters of commendation from twenty bishops it initiated the process for Pontifical approval. The request for approval addressed to the Holy Father was signed by the entire general council and was completed by the approval and recommendation of Bishop Petrone.

CRISIS

March 30, 1934, was the first occasion of a Vocationist priest leaving this earth to begin the Vocationist family in heaven. Fr. Antonio Palmieri, who was director of the Seminary of Orte, died suddenly. The entire community and the City of Orte suffered a tremendous loss. Naturally, the founder felt the loss more than anybody else; Fr. Justin had been his teacher and was his spiritual director. Fr. Justin himself said that Fr. Palmieri, with his

permission, had taken the vow of the third degree of charity, that is, he had committed himself by vow to avoid even the voluntary imperfections. With the guidance and example of Fr. Justin, Fr. Palmieri had also taken a vow of never wasting time.

The founders of religious orders usually have a heart bigger than the ocean and unlimited charity and sweetness and an exceptional empathy for those who are in trouble. Fr. Justin, who preferred always to work in humility and in silence, at times may have given the impression of superficiality and satisfaction with any type of behavior. The reality was that the vocationary came into being after the war and even more than the average institution was suffering the consequence of worldwide depression. As Fr. Justin himself expressed it: “The vocationary was like a boat caught in a big storm at the same time faces also the unlucky situation of being in the midst of an endless number of shipwrecked who, in desperation, are concerned only about their salvation, try to hold on to it, rendering the situation even more precarious.”

In his zeal for vocations among the poor, the underprivileged and the troubled, and his particular interest in saving or rehabilitating those vocations that had been betrayed, Fr. Justin kept opening his heart and his houses to all those who were appealing to him. Since he did not have enough cooperators and adequate housing for this delicate work of rehabilitation, he was ordered by the Holy See to halt its entire operation.



Holy Mother Church certainly approved and rejoiced for the apostolic zeal of the good father, but in order to prevent the possible abuses or scandals came to the tragic conclusion of prohibiting further admission to the novitiate, to the vows and to the ordinations. Deeply troubled by the arrest of progress that this injunction might have caused among the members of the community and, even more, afflicted for having been cause of involuntary disappointment to the higher authorities, Fr. Justin offered and asked the confreres to offer everything to the Blessed Trinity and immediately started to repair the broken net. He began by reordering and straightening the discipline in every house and then pleaded to the most reverend bishops to take under their protection the religious family and become the advocates of the Vocationist family before God and before Mother Church.

After consultation with and the approval of Bishop Castaldo, who had been appointed Bishop of Pozzuoli, the founder sent the following plea to the Congregation for the Religious and for the Seminary: “It is now over one hundred days that all of us Vocationists, priests, clerics, professed and novices are living in the most serious affliction that may hit a religious family; we are in constant pain for having been involuntary cause of disappointment to the highest ecclesiastical superiors and for having exposed the congregation to a condemnation of slow death.” He continued reassuring the cardinal that the community was continuing to work in the various fields of apostolate entrusted to them by the various bishops and that the community was intensifying its “life of prayer, of action and sacrifice to obtain mercy and forgiveness from the Lord and from his representatives.” He then humbly submitted to the cardinal the report concerning the

Society of Divine Vocations as a tribute of devotion to Holy Mother Church. At the same time, the founder assured the superior authorities that their dispositions had been accepted “with complete obedience of mind and heart” and that the Vocationists “wanted only the most perfect fulfillment of the Divine Will manifested to them through the sacred pastors.”

In the same letter, Fr. Justin continued: “We have the impression that several accusations have been made against the community by some members who have been expelled. These young men who were asked to leave certainly were not willing to blame themselves and admit honestly that they were out because they did not have the academic qualities or because they did not have enough will power or even worse had been guilty of some serious infraction. It is easy for them to slander the institution of which they have benefited.”

Fr. Justin lamented the reality that lack of adequate housing had not permitted a clear separation among the various groups – the members of the congregation, the aggregates, and those who were in the rehabilitation program – this had contributed to the mentality that the congregation was a mixture of undesirables.

“The reality is that we (the Vocationist) profess a true devotion to every divine vocation, and because of this we have tried to rehabilitate some priests or brothers who had been expelled from other religious institutions and did not intend to abandon their call; they are guests in our houses for the time needed to find an honest way of sustenance and proper housing. In the meantime, we do our best to give peace to their minds and to their spirits, which are naturally troubled, and we dispose them to humbly recognize and follow the

Divine Will.” This apostolate for the rehabilitation of vocations that have not been followed or that have been betrayed is a real apostolate and real Christian charity. The saintly founder often took the risk of helping troubled priests and religious “in order to give them a chance to find an honest systematization in the world and not to help them to reach the priesthood through unconventional ways,” as unfortunately some had gratuitously asserted. In the same letter the pious founder also stated that “many, seeing the large number of children provenient from poor families in our vocationaries, think that we elevate them all to the priesthood en masse, and they are afraid that someday there will be too many priests coming from among the poor, who, on account of severe poverty in their families, may be a hindrance rather than a help in the service of souls.” Naturally, they were unaware that “the specific goal of the vocationaries is to educate the youth to an intense Christian piety and make them religious of God according to Jesus, regardless of the state of life they will embrace.” After clearing other aspects concerning the general discipline of our schools and the government of the congregation, Fr. Justin concluded: “ It seemed to be our duty to humbly present these considerations of ours in order to receive proper encouragement and counsel. We acknowledge our deficiencies, which ordinarily are due to the inevitable hardships of the beginning of all good institutions. We will always consider as a special divine favor the dispositions of the ecclesiastical authority, because they tend only to purify and strengthen this congregation, which is still so imperfect; this effect cannot be obtained without the obedience of every law of the church.”

From December of 1934 to November of 1941, the congregation was in a state of purification that was mortifying and vivifying at the same time. The students of

philosophy, with great difficulty, to please the Bishop of Pozzuoli, began to attend classes at the diocesan college in Pozzuoli, first, they were going by bikes and later by public transportation. The students of theology transferred from the house of Possilipo to Anagni; morning and evening they had to walk over two miles from the seminary to our religious residence. This going back and forth of our students was causing unnecessary stress, distractions and waste of time. On June 27, 1939, the founder pleaded to the Holy Father, Pius XII, “for the grace to reopen the admission to the novitiate and to the vows so that we may not have to witness the agony and death of the congregation and its activities. Since it has seemed to us that the remote cause of the punishment inflicted upon us five years ago was connected to our ‘unattainable vastity of program,’ we propose to reduce our activities to parishes, vocationaries and missions, if it so please your Holiness.” On July 2, 1941, the Congregation for the Religious appointed Fr. Baldini of the Servants of Mary as apostolic visitor for the congregation. This appointment was like a dawn of hope.

TOWARD THE LIGHT

Fr. Baldini visited the main residences of the congregation and was very happy to report to Rome about the spirit of prayer, sacrifice and industry of the Vocationist Fathers. He had been edified by their humility and total obedience to the painful dispositions that the church had inflicted upon them. As a consequence of this first visit and initial report, the Holy See authorized the reopening of the novitiate, the admission to the vows and to the sacred ordinations. At the time of this visit of Fr. Baldini, the community and the world

were suffering the painful interruption World War II. In 1943, Naples was constantly being threatened by air raids and communication among the houses of the community was becoming more and more difficult. Fr. Justin wrote thus to the apostolic visitors: “We are in serious apprehension for this house of Pianura, which stands out in town, Up until now we have been sustained by a special strength coming from the Lord. Now I find myself deeply concerned and suffering for these young men for whom I am responsible. I don’t know where to find a secure place for them. Should I find the possibility of housing them in a secure place, and should I find a way to transport them, I think I can assume your authorization even for the novitiate. Naturally, I will keep you informed of everything. I trust in Divine Providence that I might not be forced to take such a step.”

In November, 1943, Italy was a theatre of war, and Pianura – including the vocationary – was real military camp for the Allied forces. The air raids from the Allied forces were now replaced by the air raids by the Germans. It was



impossible to continue any form of religious life in that atmosphere. The Allied command had occupied the vocationary and established in it their temporary headquarters. Helped by the ingenuity of Fr. Ciro, who improvised a means of transportation, Fr. Justin and a part of the community moved from Pianura to Mercato Cilento. In Mercato, Fr. Justin continued to take care of the formation of the novices and took advantage of the forced exile to rewrite the Constitutions in two volumes. Informing the apostolic visitor of his

action and his work about the Constitutions, he stated: “The fear of death has greatly helped me to complete the writing of the rules and Constitutions according to the wish and command that you have expressed several times.” An unpleasant episode that took place during the war darkened the precious visit of Fr. Baldini. A brother who had come to the Vocationist Fathers from another religious order and who, after a short stay with us, had been dismissed, succeeded in being ordained by the Bishop of Anagni with false documents. Considering also the frail health of the apostolate visitor, the Holy See tried to provide a better assistance for our community and appointed Fr. Cuomo, OFM, as apostolic visitor and Superior General of the Vocationist Fathers and Vocationist Sisters. Undoubtedly, Holy Mother Church wanted to assist and strengthen the young community. The assignment, however, of an outsider as superior general caused much more harm than good. At the completion of Fr. Cuomo’s term, the Holy See appointed the vicar general, Fr. Giorgio Saggiomo, as an interim superior general. Fr. Saggiomo established a school of theology in the vocationary of Pianura and opened the first residence of the Vocationist Fathers in Rome. Fr. Saggiomo, following the desire of the Congregation for the Religious, prepared the community for the regular election of the superior general and his council. A general chapter was celebrated in the house of Possilipo on April 8, 9 and 10, 1947. Cardinal Lavitrano presided and proclaimed the reelection of Fr. Justin to the position of superior general. On January 3, 1948, the Society of Divine Vocations became a religious order of pontifical right and was entrusted to the patronage of Cardinal Lavitrano.

NEW HORIZONS

Under the direct guidance of Rome, the Vocationist communities treasured the wise guidance they were receiving, trying to be always more deserving of all the special favors granted to them. In 1949, the congregation purchased a new house in the city of Rome, the capital of Catholicism, and once again the community started the procedure to obtain the Decretum Laudis or final approval. Fr. Justin received the precious assistance of Fr. Manzo, S. J., who helped to give new impulse to the theological studies and to the reorganization of the novitiate house in Pianura.

During the Holy Year of 1950, Fr. Justin was received in private audience by his Holiness Pope Pius XII and once again implored the Holy Father's guidance and blessings for the growth of his religious families.

The opening of the new house in Rome, which had been a cause of great rejoicing, became a real thorn in the life of Fr. Justin and certainly might have contributed to the acceleration of his death. During the Holy Year, the house was used to house the pilgrims coming to Rome from all over the world. In 1951, it became a house of formation for the students of theology who were commuting to the Pontifical Gregorian University.

In the exuberance of this new vitality in Rome, Fr. Saggiomo, in his capacity as general treasurer, began a long, painful series of unfortunate mistakes. He started with the enlargement of the house and then began the construction of a beautiful new building. Fr. Saggiomo failed to inform Fr. Justin of the debts he was undertaking for the new construction. He was taken advantage of by many unscrupulous investors who gave him

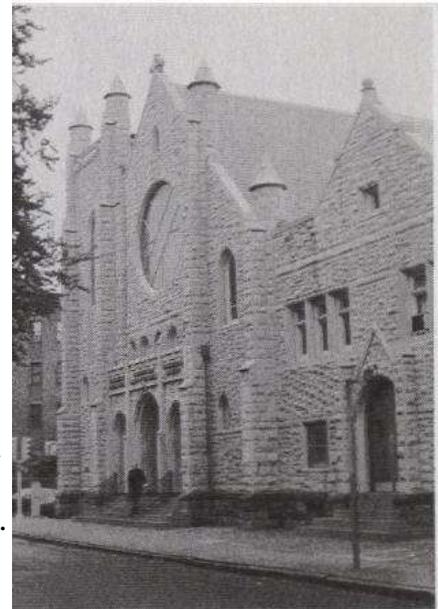
the impression of being real benefactors of the community. In his desperation to make payments for promissory notes he had signed, he arrived at the scandalous procedure of borrowing money at forty, eighty and ninety- six percent interest. It resulted in financial collapse! The community found itself in debt for over \$1,000,000.

Holy Mother Church tried to help first by assigning Fr. Poli as a new apostolic visitor and then by appointing a special pontifical commission to handle the financial disaster, in order to prevent bankruptcy.

Even though the founder had been unaware of the accumulation and multiplication of these debts he had not authorized, he was nonetheless held accountable for them.

When the general elections were held in 1954, Rome definitely wanted someone else in Fr. Justin's place in the office of superior general. It was the apostolic visitor who aware of the affection and loyalty of all the Vocationist Fathers to their founder, sure that Fr. Justin would be reelected, suggested that they leave to the founder the title of superior general but that the vicar general should really have all authority to administer the congregation.

Fr. Justin was reelected superior general, receiving the totality of votes, and Fr. Ugo Fraraccio was appointed vicar general with all rights and duties of the superior general. The founder agonized painfully for his religious family and his agony was further aggravated by the fact that the love and charity of his confreres were trying to hide from



him the fact that the vicar general was really in charge of the community. Having no other recourse, Fr. Justin offered himself as a victim for the salvation of the community.



His death happened in the midst of this serious financial crisis and certainly his prayers and his offering of himself had a lot to do with the happy solution to the problem. The discouragement and confusion that followed the death of the founder were soon overcome with the help of his powerful intercession in heaven. The financial crisis was brought to a happy ending. The community grew, especially

in Sicily, Brazil and the United States. On January 18, 1968, the Vocationist received the final pontifical approval and rededicated themselves to the founder's original goal of humbly and assiduously working in the search and formation of every vocation to life, faith and holiness and to the priesthood and religious life, especially among the poor and the underprivileged.

FR. JUSTIN'S CHARISMA

On Saturday, July 9, 1983, Pope John Paul II, in his address to the participants in the General Chapter of the Vocationist Fathers, summarized the charism of Fr. Justin and of his congregation in these words: "... an important reason for my satisfaction is the consideration of the relevance and the great usefulness of your charisma in the church; the research and promotion of vocations to the priesthood in particular and to the religious state in general; of preference among the humble classes of people, not only and not so much for your institute, as for the dioceses and for every other religious institute, with generous intent, besides, to obtain from God, in a spirit of love and reparation, the rehabilitation and the return of those who, after putting their hand to the plough, may have turned back.

"I need not speak at length to emphasize how much consolation and hope your holy intentions give to my heart as Universal Pastor of the Church. I want only to exhort you to continue on with the commitment of all your strength, in the certainty of the church's full support and the powerful assistance of the Holy Spirit, who during the course of history always knows how to stir up, for those who want to listen to him, the necessary initiatives to meet the spiritual needs of the moment.

"The central point of your spiritual strength must always be, as for every religious family, the original inspiration of your founder; the soul, heart, the intentions of Don Giustino Russolillo; his great and very fervent love for the principal mystery of Christianity, the

Trinitarian mystery, the contemplation of which came to be a mystical experience which, for its authenticity an intensity, was the source in him of the most fervent and fruitful charitable action, which led him to be totally consumed in the holy ideal of the promotion and education of holy vocations...

“In assessing the needs of mankind, Fr. Justin established this progression: More than anything else the church needs saints for universal sanctification; in the present plan of salvation of clergy is needed; in order to have clergy there must be vocations; for the formation of vocations there must be seminaries... for the service of every soul in everything, there is the small Society of Divine Vocations with its vocationaries. I could summarize the charisma of Fr. Justin and of the Vocationist Fathers in the simple words ‘vocation service.’”

From the very beginning in preparing the “general idea of the Society of Divine Vocations,” Fr. Justin declared that “it is established for the cultivation, service an apostolate of God’s vocation to faith, to the priesthood, to holiness.” During the month of April, the Vocationists offer the Most Precious Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ to the Blessed Trinity in order to obtain “internal an external perfection of the work of the divine vocations to faith, to priesthood, to holiness.

In 1937, starting the publication of *spiritus Domini*, the periodical of the Society of Divine Vocations, Fr. Justin began a study of vocations, saying: “Everything is divine vocation in the world; vocation to life, vocation to faith, vocation to holiness.” Then he continued: “Everything being and every status worthy of being corresponds to divine vocation... in general sense when we say, ‘divine vocation,’ we intend vocation to faith

and to holiness, and in a more particular sense, we intend vocation to religious life and to the priesthood.” The *Constitutions*, revised and approved by the Holy See in 1948, simply state: “The special goal is the search, especially among the humble classes, of priestly and religious vocations and their formation in the vocationaries that constitute the characteristic work of the congregation and the special field of its activity.” The Second Vatican Council justifies and stresses the importance of the various religious communities, stating that each one of them has its own function, mission and charisma. The various religious orders differ from each other on account of their various goal or vocation in the church.

Again, in the book of *Religious Observances*, Fr. Justin wrote: “Since the greatest need of the souls, and consequently the greatest service that can be rendered to them, is the good religious and the saintly priest, the Vocationist will always consider as his central and main activity and apostolate, the research, cultivation and the service of the divine vocations to religious life and to the priesthood”; this is our vocation!

In order for the work of the Vocationist Fathers to be effective and unique, it is necessary that it be rendered in the spirit and attitude of service. In an elevation to the holy founders, Fr. Justin prayed thus: “I would like to belong totally to each and every one of you, O holy founders. I would like to dedicate myself completely to each and every activity and religious family in order to embrace all the good done in the church and render to the Blessed Trinity all the adoration rendered by every religious order... O holy founders, I cannot be a child of each one of you... but please accept me as your servant.

May the Lord, through his intercession, grant that I may render humble service to each one of you in your religious families and enterprises.

Fr. Justin expressed the same feeling in his presentation of *Spiritus Domini*: “One can be a son only in one religious family; the servant and worker, however, can render service to more families and thus, in a certain way, he can belong a little to everyone rendering this service with our blood, with our spirit, with our life.” That is why in the *General Idea* Fr. Justin declared: “With a sacred allegiance the Society of Divine Vocations considers itself essentially and positively places itself at the service of the clergy and religious orders, committing itself especially and freely to the local church to search out, prepare and present to them good candidates.” It recognizes all priest and religious as its good masters.

In the book of *Religious Observance* Fr. Justin stated: “Every direct general, in the first year of his term, will renew his spiritual allegiance of unilateral service with all religious orders of pontifical right. The provincial director will do the same but only with the orders having residence within the province.

In a prayer of consecration to the Blessed Trinity, Fr. Justin said: “I think with devotion and veneration to the holy church in which I live, and in order to enrich myself always more and better with the goodness of the church... I constitute myself as perpetual servant of the holy church and I swear servitude to the church and its representatives, the sacred pastors... servitude of faithful and caring cooperation to all parochial, diocesan and pontifical activities.”

The first name given by Fr. Justin to the Vocationist Fathers was “Servants of the saints.” The supreme rule of the religious is to “follow Christ”; Fr. Justin took very seriously these words of Jesus: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.” Jesus Himself is the servant of God, the suffering servant! The idea of serving God and His people is something very sublime, glorious and happy. In considering ourselves as servants of God, we see that by first becoming servants we will later be children, brothers, parents and spouses of God. In order to understand the idea of service we think of the Blessed Mother, who declared herself the “servant of the Lord” at the very moment she was elevated to the supreme dignity of Mother of God, as if she were saying: “Now that I am the Mother of God I must – with Him and like Him – guide all people to the promised land with my service.” We think of Jesus, God from God, but also “servant of God” as He is called in the Scriptures through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah. St. Paul said that Jesus took the form of a servant and emptied himself to death on the cross. In *Ascension*, Fr. Justin stressed that Vocationist should make his own all the characteristics of the servant as they are found in the Old and New Testament.

On August 21, 1924, Fr. Justin wrote in his agenda: “I made a vow of chastity, poverty, obedience and servitude.” This fourth vow became a characteristic note of the Vocationist. On July 16, 1917, Fr. Justin wrote in his spiritual diary: “Servant of saints! Not only in my words, but in my thoughts, in my feelings and desires; a real servant! The least, little, humble, vigilant, hard-working, sacrificed servant of the saints, that is, of everyone, servant in your own eyes and in the eyes of the people and in the eyes of God!” In *Religious Observances* Fr. Justin further developed the idea of servanthood: “The holy church, the sacred family, the divine trinity are the triple-unique center and axis of the

interior life and apostolic action of their triple-unique mission as servants of vocations, servants of the church and servants of Divine Union.”

We can be sure that Fr. Justin was consumed by his ardent desire of serving vocations. All the problems, agonies and martyrdoms that he suffered in his earthly life were caused by his limitless dedication to assist, help and save vocations. We have already seen that Fr. Justin took the word “vocation” first in its general meaning of vocation to life, to faith, to holiness, and then in its special meaning of vocation to the priesthood and religious life. His global vision of everything being a vocation made it practically impossible for Fr. Justin to restrict his activities.

Many outsiders, as well as apostolic visitors, tried in vain to curtail the vast field of activities of the Vocationist Fathers. It may be good to conclude these pages by trying to understand what a vocation really is. Fr. Justin stated: “This calling of God – is it an invitation, a suggestion, an order? Oh, how necessary it is to know it in order to regulate oneself properly with the Lord. The divine vocation is not an invitation, is not a suggestion, is not an order; it is simply a calling through which the Lord attracts my attention and wants me to turn toward Him in order to listen to Him. The first thing is to turn, to listen, to be interested in the suggestion, order, mission...

“If a friend or a superior should call me (and has become aware of the fact that I have heard him!) and I do not even turn toward him, he would certainly be offended, since my attitude could not be attributed to anything else but disregard for the friend or insubordination to the superior, and ordinarily this may be the beginning of a break in the

relationship, the beginning of hostility. Listening to God's voice always requires a commitment; for this reason, at times, we prefer not to listen...

“Those who have felt the divine vocation (in whatever way, shape, form or time) can never excuse themselves from answering with the false pretext that they actually do not feel it any longer.”

“Again, when you answer yes and do so because you were attracted by its beauty, you saw the convenience, it seemed a real necessity for your own realization, for the good of the church, for the glory of God... why now should you say no?”

“St. Paul assumed us, ‘God does not change His mind about whom He chooses and blesses.’ The Lord does not have second thoughts. In the act of the first religious oblation the Vocationist says: ‘You have called me to be all yours in a perfect way and on a sublime level and that is why I leave the world, my country, my family and its interests, I leave myself and every form of egotism in order to follow and imitate, serve and love in all my life, my Lord Jesus Christ, in this His family of the Divine Vocations to the divine ascension for the union with you, O Blessed Trinity.’”

“ ‘ You have not called me specifically to life of greater spiritual activity in prayer, in penance, in good works; nor wanted to specifically separate me from the world, from my family, from my own self; instead you have specifically called me to you, to be with you, to follow you and love you, to unite myself to you and become one with you.’”

“That my life with you is a life of prayer, of penance, of universal separation is a more or less direct consequence of your calling to live with you.”

“Why all this? In order to become soul-daughter-mother-spouse of the Blessed Trinity.

“I think with veneration of this religious society which you have established, gathered, transformed, that you have wanted in the church so that souls may find that special cultivation of the relationship of your spouses. Consequently, I unite myself to this religious family of yours and I swear fidelity to my vocation and my mission in it; I want to persevere in it and bear fruit in it both in time and in eternity because you have called me to it, because in it you want to grant me your Divine Union.”

“ ‘In order to reach the relationship of spouse of the Blessed Trinity, I must reach it in this religious family, I must become a part of that galaxy, I must form a group of outstanding and well- determined stars.’”



I would like to conclude with Fr. Justin’s words contained in the *Consecration of the Society of Divine Vocations to the Adorable Trinity*: “May your Divine blessing and protection, O Adorable Trinity, make this Society of Divine Vocations, to the divine ascension for the Divine Union worthy of your predilections and complacencies- as your tabernacle in the Militant Church-as your throne in the Triumphant Church-as one of your instruments in the work of universal sanctification.”

INVITATION TO HOLINESS

What is your calling in life? Regardless of your vocation, status or profession, your most important, your highest calling is your vocation to holiness. Jesus tells you:

“Come follow me”;

“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”;

“Live on in my love”;

“Live on in me as I do in you”;

“What good is it to gain the whole world if in the process you lose your soul?”

God made us for Himself in His own image and likeness, to live with Him, to be with Him in this life and throughout eternity.

Our success and real, lasting happiness depends on our level of union with Him. “No more than branch can bear fruit of itself apart from the vine, can you bear fruit apart from Me.”



Will you ever be a saint? God wants you to be a saint, the church and the world need you to be a saint, but only you can make it happen by accepting God’s love and cooperating with the action of the Fathers, the Son, the Holy Spirit, who are with you, in you.

Make it happen. Become a saint. This is Fr. Justin’s wish and prayer for you. This is God’s calling to you. This is the very reason of your existence.

Be a saint!

Amen.

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