

ST. PAUL'S CHURCH AND THE CONGREGATION OF THE ORATORY IN ASTI

St. Paul's Church, with its solemn architecture and the majestic simplicity of its lines, is one of the many houses of worship that the Congregation of the Oratory has erected in Italy and other parts of the world.

It was constructed according to the design of an Oratorian from Asti, Fr. Francesco Antonio Massirio, under the direction of the master builder Goggia. The church replaced a former house of worship for the Congregation, the old church of St. Paul, "facing south on the wide street that leads to the Porta di San Quirico"¹, where the Fathers served until 1733, when the parish priest, Fr. Urbano Isnardi, left in order to fulfill his wish that the church be entrusted to them for the purpose of establishing their community headquarters there.

Blessed on 21 February 1794, the new edifice was consecrated on 21 September of the following year by Bishop Pietro G. Arborio Gattinara. The solemn celebration was preceded by a series of spiritual exercises in dialogue, "perhaps the first in the Diocese"², preached to the people by the bishop of Saint Jean de Morienne, Monsigneur Brichentou and his vicar general.

Incisa writes, "The church is eight-sided and completely decorated. In addition to the high altar that is dedicated to St. Paul, there are three other altars: near the sanctuary on the Gospel side is an altar dedicated to St. Sebastian, then one dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary, and in the passageway leading to the sacristy there is an altar dedicated to St. Anne. On the Epistle side is the altar dedicated to St. Philip Neri. Above the door, inside the church, there is a painting of St. Paul on the Areopagus. The ceiling was painted by Golzio di Moncalvo; along the entablature are paintings by other, lesser known artists."

When Incisa recorded this description in 1806, Napoleonic law had suppressed religious communities and confiscated their goods³, and the Fathers of the Oratory had already been forced to leave their church in 1802, only seven years after its inauguration. Following the fate of so many other Oratory communities that were shattered by these subversive laws in various parts of Italy, including the Congregation in Asti, they had to trust only in their own abilities, through the system of total autonomy then operative among the houses of the Oratory; they did not revive the foundation. The 'citizen priest' Giovanni Battista Bajino, a member of the Congregation and the last Oratorian curate, remained as parish priest on his own, separate from the Congregation, in accordance with provisions given on 13 Fructidor, year X of the French Revolution (31 August 1802).

The Congregation of the Oratory was in Asti from 1696 when, in the last decade of the 17th century, the Cathedral Chapter added St. Philip Neri as co-patron of an old chapel in the Cathedral, with the permission of the noble family Pelletta, which for years had been the chapel's patrons.

The foundation found itself in the midst of the phenomenal expansion of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri in Italy and abroad during the 17th and 18th centuries⁴. In Piedmont alone, twelve Congregations of the Oratory were begun in this period of

time. Already in 1598 the *Sainte Maison* had been established by St. Francis de Sales at Thonon, in territory belonging to the Duchy of Savoy, by Clement VIII's bull *Ad instar Oratorii S. Mariae in Vallicella de Urbe*. This was followed by Casale (1613), Murazzano (1646), Turin (1649), Fossano (1649), Chieri (1658), Savigliano (1674), Carmagnola (1681), Demont (1693), Asti (1696), Mondovi (1704), Crescentino (1730), Villafranca (1737), and Biella (1742)⁵.

A warm supporter of the development of religious institutes during this period in Asti⁶ was the Cathedral canon Carlo Giuseppe Marino⁷ who in 1695 obtained permission from Bishop Innocenzo Migliavacca⁸ to bring the Congregation to the city. With the help of Count Rovero San Severino di Revigliasco and Canon Marcantonio Curione, Dean of the Collegiate Church of San Secondo, he purchased a house adjacent to the Seminary college.

In 1696 the Congregation in Turin transferred Fr. Agostino Defera to Asti. He, Canon Marino, Father Maggiolini and other priests initiated the community's life there. The Fathers served the Seminary church⁹ until 1698, when they built a small chapel within the enclosure of their property. In 1705 they prepared to build the Oratory, dedicated to the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The beginnings were not easy, because the house was not well-suited to the needs of a religious community and its activity, and especially because it was in an out-of-the-way place. Furthermore, in 1706 the Bishop constrained the Congregation to give monks from the monastery of Sant'Agnese shelter in their house for six months, an uncomfortable arrangement. These monks had been in danger of being abused by French troops who were besieging the city.

Canon Marino died on 8 January 1709, leaving his goods to the Congregation; he was succeeded by Fr. Defera. Giovanni Andrea Gallo, a former attorney and a good friend of Marino, held the community in high esteem and often visited the house. When he was compelled to leave due to obligations toward his aged mother, he constantly assisted the community, and when he died in 1724, he left some of his estate to the house¹⁰.

New difficulties arose due to the untried lawsuit filed by Gallo's relatives with regard to his estate. The case was transferred to the Supreme Magistrate in Turin, where it created such a sensation that news reached the Sovereign. This is how it was noticed that the Congregation had been brought to Asti without royal consent, with the result that its presence there was considered illegal. The Fathers ran the serious risk of being expelled from the city, were it not for the providential assistance of the Diocese's vicar general, Francesco Bernardino Icardi, a good friend of the Oratory community. He had lived with the Fathers for a few years, and after his death in 1740 he left his entire estate to them. He sent Urbano Isnardi, the parish priest of St. Paul's, and other influential people to Turin, to beg for safeguards and protection for the threatened Congregation. The magistrates delivered a strong refusal, but Isnardi presented the petition directly to the king. While discussing other affairs of the Diocese with the sovereign, in his capacity as pro-vicar general, Isnardi mentioned the question of the Oratorians, adroitly reminding Victor Amadeus that the Congregation had been introduced into Asti without his official consent, but with his implicit consent, since Father Sebastian Valfrè, confessor to the

Royal Family, had spoken to him about it, as could be proven by some letters in the possession of the Fathers in Asti.

In consideration of the impending III centenary of his death, it is worth mentioning Blessed Sebastian Valfrè¹¹, described with very good reason as ‘the fount of the priest-saints’ who adorned Turin and Piedmont in the 19th and 20th centuries.

He was born of a humble family in Verduno in the diocese of Alba on 9 March 1629. Despite hardships and privations, he successfully completed studies in Alba, Bra and Turin, where he worked as a secretary in order to support himself. In 1651 he joined the Congregation of the Oratory, which had been founded in Turin two years earlier by Father Pier Antonio Defera together with Fr. Ottavio Cambiani, a man who was only modestly gifted but who led an intense spiritual life. The Congregation found itself in a crisis almost from the start when Fr. Defera died on 11 September 1650 at the age of thirty-four. The project might have failed had not the subdeacon Valfrè requested admission. Formed in the spirit of St. Philip, he lived that spirit all his life until he died at the age of eighty on 30 January 1710, in his little room that was crammed full of scholarly papers (he earned a doctorate in theology from the University of Turin in 1656) and packages of clothing and other necessities for the poor. When his body was laid out in the church, all of Turin wanted to say goodbye to the priest who had trudged the streets and squares of the city for sixty years, teaching catechism and helping all sorts of poor people with the same charity that he put to service in his office of Confessor to the Royal Family. He inspired courage among those in the prisons, in the hospitals, and in the citadel and its bastions during the war¹². A man of prayer and contemplation, he drew from his fine intellectual training and fervent spiritual experience the zeal for preaching ‘to the simple’, as his first biographers recall. He met with all types of people in the streets and squares as well as in the Oratory. For forty years he taught catechism to wine merchants and their customers in Piazza Carlina. He would begin with a little group, speaking about some interesting topic and then answering questions from those who became involved in discussion. Young people were also his field of mission; among his very worthwhile writings¹³ he left behind a catechetical text¹⁴ that was used by the Church for a long time.

He was aware of the problems and needs of the city and the state. He took an active part in all the charitable projects that were flourishing in Turin, but above all he was the one who personally dedicated himself to taking care of so very many people in need. In doing so, he captured Turin’s heart. It was the soldiers on night-watch who were the first to give testimony about how he would traipse through the streets at night, hoisting the raggedy poor upon his shoulders and taking them to some shelter, or stealthily climbing the staircases of wretched houses to drop off packages of food and clothing outside their doors.

The esteem in which he was held at Court, where the Duke had especially entrusted the spiritual formation of his children to Fr. Valfrè’s care¹⁵, gave him the opportunity to develop programs of social and political action. This was extensively researched by Giovanna Olgiati for her doctoral studies at the University of Rome¹⁶. As one of the Duke’s most trusted counselors, he reminded him in writing that justice should come before charity, and in this way Bl. Sebastian exercised a

profound influence on Savoyan society at a time tormented by war, legal conflicts, and difficult relations with the Jewish and Waldensian minorities.

Urbano Isnardi's appeal on behalf of Fr. Valfrè had a healthy effect upon the king, over and above the legal basis of his testimony; the sovereign did not give approval for the Congregation in Asti, but he tolerated its existence, and seven years later, on 22 December 1728, the Fathers received Royal Letters of Patent and the authority to own the property that they had at the start of their troubled adventure. Public celebrations of thanksgiving were held in the church, attended by Bishop Giovanni Todone.

As has been stated earlier, Isnardi stepped down from the pastorate of St. Paul's Parish and handed over its care to the Oratorians. And Fr. Valfrè had an important part to play in this important moment in the life of the Congregation. While he was a seminarian studying in Turin, Urbano Isnardi had accompanied one of Fr. Valfrè's relatives home, and this encounter remained clearly impressed on his memory. After talking about other subjects, Valfrè asked his visitors, "How is the new Congregation in Asti doing?" To the reply, "It's going as well as can be expected," "Father Valfrè added that it was a good sign when the Congregations of St. Philip encountered the greatest difficulties they could endure at the start, given the uncomfortable situation in which they found themselves, stuck between the Seminary and the rough work sheds of the Bishop's Palace with no room in which to expand, and a lot more difficulty than that because [...] it wasn't open to the neighborhood and there was no one from the city living in that place".

When told about the city parishes, he said that "if the Congregation of St. Philip in Asti is going to have a better chance to cultivate souls, it needs to have one of those parishes". Told that that was all but impossible, since all eight parishes were traditionally entrusted to religious orders or to Curial officials, Valfrè shrugged his shoulders and said: "God's will be done; but that Congregation can't make a lot of progress unless it has some pastoral ministry. Where it is at present isn't a nice place, and as a rule the Congregations of St. Philip don't settle down in the place where they've begun to live".

Isnardi remembered these words when, in 1716, he received the parish of St. Paul along with the appointment as pro-vicar general. At the end of the following year, with the consent and support of Canon Icardi, he became vicar capitular upon the death of Bishop Migliavacca, and he began to ask that St. Paul's be given to the Congregation. His plan was realized sixteen years later: on 30 June 1732, Charles Emmanuel sent to the bishop his letter of consent. In June 1733, Clement XII's papal Bull *In supremo militantis Ecclesiae fastigio* confirmed the agreement. On 14 November the Fathers began to administrate the church, and the annexed house became their headquarters from that moment.

We conclude these brief notes with a mention of the Oratorian bishop Paolo Maurizio Caissotti¹⁷, who was bishop of Asti for twenty-four years (as has already been mentioned in footnote no. 5), from 1762 to 1786.

He was born in Turin in 1726, the son of Francesco Antonio Caissotti, Count of Chiusano, and Maria Teresa Orsini of Rivalta. He attended the Royal Academy

between 1736 and 1742, graduating in both civil and canon law from the University of Turin in 1746 and then obtaining his degree in theology in 1750, being ordained to the priesthood the following year. Shy and modest by nature, he declined a canonry; a few months later he entered the Congregation of the Oratory in Rome¹⁸: “. . . he went, as he put it, to bury himself in the Congregation of the Oratory in Rome and to return to ecclesiastical studies in the school of those distinguished personages for which Chiesa Nuova was so famous”¹⁹. He helped out in the hospitals of Rome, and took on responsibility as Prefect of the Oratory until February 1762, when he was nominated bishop of Asti and consecrated by Cardinal Niccolò Acciaioli. At first he had refused the appointment, claiming that he didn't feel capable of carrying out the duties well. Only through the intervention of Pope Clement XIII was he convinced to change his mind. A few years earlier, in 1748, Fr. Giovanni Battista Baratta (1691-1748) from Fossano, a member of the Congregation of the Oratory in Rome, had been chosen as bishop of Novara.

Caissotti's episcopate was distinguished by the calling of a pastoral visitation in 1768, the renunciation of the bishop's income in favor of the State in 1784 (obtaining, along with an annual financial payment, the title and dignity of Prince for the bishops of Asti), the celebration of a diocesan Synod in 1785, the construction of a new seminary building, and the employment of the architect Bernardo Antonio Vittone for the reconstruction of the apse of the cathedral between 1764 and 1769.

He showed himself to be a charitable and generous bishop: he provided dowries for poor girls, and more than once he personally took part in distributing food and money to the hungry populace, pawning the silver plate from his private chapel and selling even the silverware and furniture from his dining room. In 1775 he started “the Work of Educating Beggars”, and in 1784 the institute for fatherless children, later called the “*Opera Pia Caissotti*”, expanded later on by Monica Maillard and Carlo Giacinto Alfieri, respectively the mother and stepfather of Vittorio Alfieri.

He died in Asti on 8 August 1786, and his embalmed body was interred in the cathedral.

The name of Bishop Caissotti is listed, along with those of Bishop Marc'Antonio Balbis Bertone of Novara, Bishop Giuseppe Andoja of Tortona, Bishop Michele Casati of Mondovi, and Bishop Gian Battista Orlié di St. Innocent of Pinerolo, as bishops who opposed the tendency toward mildness expressed especially by the Society of Jesus. All of these prelates were 'labeled' as Jansenists, but if one understands that term, in this context²¹ it does not mean adherence to a doctrine that the Church condemned, but a statement of moral rigor that was opposed to the mainly Jesuit tendency to promote particularly lax teachings and use principles based upon probabilism²² in the confessional.

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¹ S. G. INCISA, *Asti nelle sue Chiese ed iscrizioni*, appendix to vol. 31 of the *Giornale d'Asti* (photolithographic copy of the Cassa di Risparmio, Asti, 1974), p. 124. Stefano Giuseppe Incisa (Asti, 1742 - Asti, 1819) was born of a humble family, attended the old episcopal seminary in Asti, and in

1771 was ordained a priest by Bishop Paolo Caissotti. Following in the tradition of previous Asti chroniclers, from Ogerio Alfieri to Ventura and Provenzale, he reported the city's daily events in his "*Giornale di Asti*", integrating them within a broader vision of Italy and Europe from 1775 to 1818. Being an educated man, he understood the fundamental importance of historical information, above all on the local level. His work consists of 43 volumes of manuscript, one per year (1776 through 1818). More than a few pages from the year 1819 refer to the period between 1 January and 5 July. Every book has one section devoted to the historical record, noting weather reports for the city and the surrounding area, the trends in prices for merchandise, the transit of troops or important people, and events of national importance. In another section can be found various documents collected by Fr. Incisa (posters, and civil and church circulars). An appendix is added to the volume for 1816, the outcome of the work which the priest completed that year. The manuscript (of the appendix), which he titled "*Asti nelle sue chiese ed iscrizioni*", consists of 187 pages and is a collection of all the inscriptions that Incisa 'discovered' in the city's various churches up until that time (1806). Architectural drawings for the city's churches, along with brief written comments, are also included. The historical importance of these documents is obvious, given what happened to so many buildings that have by now disappeared. At the beginning of the 19th century, Napoleon's oppressive policies regarding the Church were being felt in Asti, and Fr. Incisa noted that with deep concern. Already in the first years of the century five religious houses and easily dozens of religious communities had been suppressed. In this situation it seems plausible that the author wanted to hand on to posterity the nineteenth-century picture, before its eventual further destruction.

² A. BIANCO, *Asti ai tempi della Rivoluzione e dell'Impero*, Asti, 1964, p. 407.

³ The list of suppressed religious institutes may be found in G. VISCONTI, *Diocesi di Asti e Istituti di vita religiosa. Lineamenti per una storia*, Asti, 2006, p. 286.

⁴ Cf. E. A. CERRATO, S. Filippo Neri. *La sua opera e la sua eredità*, Pavia, 2002, pp. 172-175.

⁵ Decimated before the Napoleonic storm, then by the Kingdom of Savoy's laws of suppression and confiscation (which were later on applied in the Kingdom of Italy), only three of these survived and continue today: Turin, Mondovi and Biella. It is worth remembering how much Piedmont received from the Congregation of the Oratory, but also how much the Congregation received from Piedmont. Some of St. Philip Neri's first followers were from Piedmont, and others lived in the Roman Oratory after the foundation's decline (cf. E. A. CERRATO, *Piemontesi nell'Oratorio di Roma*, in *Annales Oratorii*, 5 (2006), pp. 13-48). Another Piedmont native was Fr. Agnelli from the Oratory of Savigliano, a contemporary and friend of Bl. Sebastian Valfré, and author of *I Pregi della Congregazione dell'Oratorio*, which helped form generations of Oratorians in every part of the world. Also from Piedmont was Ven. Giovanni Battista Trona (1682-1750) from the Oratory of Mondovi, a man dedicated to the instruction of the people and the reform of the clergy, and author of the excellent work, *Catechismo di Mons. Casati* (named for the bishop who published it). Trona was an adviser to Charles Emmanuel II and esteemed by Benedict XIV and many bishops of Piedmont. Two Piedmontese bishops came from the Roman Oratory: Bl. Giovanni Giovenale Ancina (bishop of Saluzzo from 1602 to 1604) and Paulo Maurizio Caissotti (bishop of Asti from 1762 to 1786). The Servant of God Fr. Giulio Castelli (1846-1926) was from Piedmont; he gave the original inspiration for the Oratorian Confederation that was eventually established in 1942. Two blessed who are venerated throughout the Oratorian world, Sebastian Valfré and Giovenale Ancina, were from Piedmont. Finally, three of the six Procurators General of the Congregation of the Oratory elected since 1948 have been from Piedmont.

⁶ Cf. G. VISCONTI, *op.cit.*, pp. 211-280.

⁷ Grateful thanks are given to Fr. Delio Porcellana, the present parish priest of St. Paul's, who provided a copy of the manuscript *Origine e promozione della Congregazione dell'Oratorio in questa città d'Asti* (Archivio della Parrocchia di S. Paolo), from which we have derived the notes that follow. The manuscript is undated, but it predates 1761 because Canon Isnardi is mentioned as being alive at the time. Cf. also G. VISCONTI, *op.cit.*, p. 264.

⁸ Innocenzo Migliavacca (1636-1714), bishop of Asti from 1694. Cf. G. VISCONTI, *op. cit.*, pp. 240-250. His relationship with Fr. Sebastiano Valfré is also documented in three letters that Migliavacca wrote to him, kept in the Archive of the Oratory of Turin (455).

⁹ This was the first seminary, opened in 1574 by Bp. Domenico Della Rovere in a house attached to the old church of S. Ilario. It was suppressed in 1565, then reopened by Bp. Caissotti, who in 1762 commissioned Benedetto Alfieri, chief architect of King Charles Emmanuel III, to design a new

building (completed in 1775). The building included an outstanding library founded by Bp. Giovanni Todone in 1730, one of the most important and remarkable legacies of books in Piedmont. In order to provide more space for the building, the adjoining houses of the Oratorians, as well as the ancient church of S. Sisto, were demolished.

¹⁰ The names of other priests of the Congregation between 1740 and the suppression are found in documents from St. Paul's Archives: the provosts Giuseppe B. Gillio, Francesco A. Massirio, Giovanni L. Muzio; and Fathers Ferrante G. Cotto, Giovanni F. Mossano, Gaspare Ferreri, Filippo I. Baronis, Giovanni D. Coffano, Giovanni M. Goria, Francesco D. Musso, Giuseppe A. Negri, Giovanni G. Bajino, *et al.*

¹¹ For more old biographies, *cf.* C. FAVA, *Vita e tempi del B. Sebastiano Valfrè*, Torino, 1984; A. DORDONI, *Un maestro de spirito nel Piemonte tra Sei e settecento. Il padre Sebastiano Valfrè, dell'Oratorio di Torino*, Milano, 1992.

¹² *Cf.* F. BOLGIANI – G. F. GAUNA – A. GOBBO – G. GOI (ed.), *Oratorio e laboratorio. L'intuizione di san Filippo Neri e la figura di Sebastiano Valfrè*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2008, pp. 37-104.

¹³ *Cf.* A. DORDONI, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-166, which is a rich bibliography of his writings. Almost all of his works were published after his death. The manuscripts include 13 volumes of sermons, numerous letters, tracts, reports, memoirs, and moral indexes.

¹⁴ *Compendio della Dottrina cristiana per facilitare la pratica d'insegnarla e d'impararla. Dialogo tra il Maestro e lo Scolaro*, Torino, 1769; found in an Appendix to C. FAVA, *op. cit.*, pp. 317-344.

¹⁵ Even after they married, the Princesses Maria Adelaide (who went on to become the wife of Louis Duke of Burgundy) and Maria Luisa (the consort of Philip V of Spain) remained in contact with the priests who had taught them. Their correspondence reveals the delicacy of their souls and the profound formation they had received; Fr. Valfrè's replies are true jewels of spiritual direction.

¹⁶ G. OLGIATI, *Il Beato Sebastiano Valfrè, d. O. Sua azione sociale e politica*, Torino, s.d. ma 1966.

¹⁷ *Cf.* G. VISCONTI, *La diocesi di Asti tra Ottocento e Novecento*, Asti, 1995, pp. 27-36; V. MAZZAROLLI, *Paolo Maurizio Caissotti, vescovo di Asti 1762-1786*, Asti, 1974; P. STELLA, *Caissotti di Chiusano Paolo Maurizio*, in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, XVI, Roma, 1973, 383-385.

¹⁸ *Cf.* C. GASBARRI, *L'Oratorio Romano (1595-1895)*, Roma, 1963, p. 190.

¹⁹ C. PAGANI – B. VEJLUVA, *Annali Ecclesiastici di Genova*, 8 giugno 1799, III, 90.

²⁰ *Cf.* G. BOSIO, *Storia della Chiesa d'Asti*, Asti, 1849, p. 175.

²¹ *Cf.* P. STELLA, *Il Giansenismo in Italia, Piemonte*, 1/II, Zurigo, 1970.

²² Something that contributed to a sharp turning-point in rigorism was the circulation of St. Alphonsus Mary Ligouri's *Opera Omnia*, printed by Marietti in Turin at the instigation of Ven. Pio Brunone Lanteri (1759-1826). He was a Jesuit, formed in the school of Fr. Nicola De Diessbach (1732-1798), and he remained in Turin after the suppression of the Society of Jesus. Lanteri started a discussion group that studied in particular St. Alphonsus' moral theology in order to combat the rigorism that was widespread in Piedmont at that time, being taught in the University of Turin. A member of the group was the theologian Luigi Guala, the first director of the 'Convitto Ecclesiastico' ('Boarding-House for Priests') in Turin. A young priest from Castelnuovo d'Asti, who was born there on 15 January 1811, joined the group in 1833; this was the future St. Joseph Cafasso, the first link in a remarkable chain of great priests from Castelnuovo who moved to Turin for study and pastoral ministry. This chain continued to include Don Bosco and went on with Bl. Allamano and others. With Cafasso's membership, the group that had originated as a school of moral theology became a school of priestly life. The pastoral models set before the young priests were St. Francis de Sales (who had so many connections with Piedmont) and Bl. Alphonsus Mary Ligouri, who inspired the priests in the *Convitto* to teach moral theology. With Ligouri's example, and the teaching and practical pastoral guidance offered by Cafasso, a great equilibrium between God's mercy and a healthy sense of sin was achieved. The institution that Guala and Cafasso began made a decisive contribution toward the qualitative and pastoral improvement of the clergy of Turin and the Piedmont in general in the 1800's.

-- translated by Fr. Timothy E. Deeter